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Response to William Uricchio

"There's Something Happening Here":
Digital Humanities and American Studies

There is little I can add to William Uricchio's paper by way of critique, because I find myself agreeing with most of its points. Despite such agreement, however, I would like to adopt a more skeptical tone than William Uricchio about the subject at hand (for reasons that I hope will become clear in the following response). Thus, I will pick up four themes from my colleague's piece and try to play them, as it were, in a different key: (1) the notion of cultural "change," which frames his observations and proposals, (2) the issue of the Digital Humanities, (3) the question of scholarly methodology in an age of digitization, and (4) the relationship between contemporary media transformations and the practice of American Studies both within and without the United States.

1 Changes

What would we do without change? The mere idea keeps us busy. Knowledge that ours is a time of profound cultural transformation makes us restructure our universities, reorganize our departments, and rename our disciplines. Technological change forces us to replace our working tools in what seem to be ever-shorter cycles of innovation. But not only hardware is affected. Our environments as well as our pasts and futures are apparently gaining in complexity so rapidly that understanding them constantly requires new theories and methodologies which supplant each other in quick succession until the very notion of sustainable knowledge itself looks positively conservative.

And that's just in academia, one of the few remaining workplaces where some people at least can still enter jobs with the promise of life-long employment. Outside this lucky, if nervous, enclave, change has more existential connotations. Change drives our global commodity industries. The promise of change gets presidents elected. Change rules our public vocabularies in mysterious ways, so that even the term conservatism nowadays can refer to marketplace anarchists and anti-government radicals.

"There's something happening here, what it is ain't exactly clear." Thus sang Buffalo Springfield in 1967 about a Los Angeles street riot that pitted youthful demonstrators against local police forces called in to enforce the latest curfew and loitering laws: a blueprint constellation for many future scenarios of change. It may seem accidental in this context, but it appears significant to me that the very lyric that expressed hope for social progress can be easily used to paraphrase the logic of economic and technological growth industries as well, including their current impact on academic practice in the humanities. "There's something happening here, what it is ain't exactly clear": we may not know where all these shifts in the academy are headed, but we sure don't want to be left behind. As people hired for the explicit purpose of producing knowledge, we are perhaps particularly susceptible to the lures of novelty, but the thrill of living in interesting times is rarely felt without its companion emotion, the "anxiety of obsolescence" (Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence*). Whether we like it or not, change legitimizes both our busyness and our business.

Much of this has to do with media, defined by William Uricchio as "technological platforms and protocols of behavior" that both carry and reflect—both represent and accelerate—processes of cultural self-observation.[1] Thus, no matter how we define the field of media studies, no matter which theory or method we prefer, one thing seems certain: studying media can never be the simple matter of a discipline looking at some clearly defined object that exists outside that discipline. In media studies, the research domain cannot be readily separated from research practices. Media organize our knowledge and, in doing so, organize our very concepts of what even constitutes knowledge—especially new knowledge, which for reasons worth investigating often appears as the only one worth having.

But how new is new? Sometimes it turns out that the most recent novelties have been around for quite a while. As an example—quite in the spirit of William Uricchio's reminder that social media are becoming increasingly important in scholarly communication—let me refer to a video clip I recently found on the Facebook wall of a fellow Americanist. The clip shows a commercial of Apple Computer, Inc. from the year 1987.[2] In this commercial, a quarter of a century old, Apple predicts that in the year 2010, scholars and scientists will conduct their business primarily from home with the help of small touchscreen tablet computers called "Knowledge Navigators." You may have heard of them: They are little wonders of connectivity that organize your personal and professional calendars, provide instant access to recent research, and connect you to colleagues from around the world who helpfully volunteer data that you can fit into your upcoming lecture just minutes before delivering it. In fact, in the year 2011, we can watch this clip on our own "Knowledge Navigators" and stand amazed at how everything Apple predicted in 1987 about the possibilities of internet scholarship has magically come true—everything except the markedly relaxed attitude with which the scholar of the future goes about his business. According to Apple, thanks to our iPads we should all be well-rested and stress-free, with a lot of time on our hands (mostly spent on interior decoration, the clip suggests). In the video it's almost lunchtime, but the Apple professor has only three e-mail messages so far. At least in this regard, our own experience in the real twenty-first century tells a different story, one in which increased connectivity also increases the numbers of connections we have to take care of. Communicating more easily always also means having to communicate more frequently and more rapidly, a question that concerns the health of scholarly practices (something not necessarily measured by a discipline's rapidity).

As it happens, the posting of this clip on a Facebook wall often frequented by German Americanists led to follow-up posts with links to

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[1]   All quotations by William Uricchio are from the paper he distributed for the conference "American Studies Today" (John F. Kennedy Institute, Freie Universität Berlin, 3-5 November 2011).—For suggestions and critique, I would like to thank Christy Hosefelder and Jon Andrews.

[2]   It can also be viewed here:
      <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRH8eimU_20>.

even older prophecies of the future, among them a 1964 BBC clip in which Arthur C. Clarke predicted that, by the year 2000, the "incredible breakthrough which has been made possible by developments in communications" would bring about "a world in which we can be in instant contact with each other wherever we may be, where we can contact our friends anywhere on earth, even if we don't know their actual physical location."[3] Clarke is not yet prepared to discuss how such instantaneity would reshape the notion and practice of friendship itself, but certain consequences in the professional sphere seem obvious already:

> It will be possible in that age, perhaps only 50 years from now, for a man to conduct his business from Tahiti or Bali, just as well as he could from London. In fact [...] almost any executive skill, any administrative skill, even any physical skill could be made independent of distance. I'm perfectly serious when I suggest that one day we may have brain surgeons in Edinburgh operating on patients in New Zealand. [...] Men will no longer commute, they will communicate.

Spoken in 1964, two years after another media visionary published a book called *The Gutenberg Galaxy* which contained similar themes. And if we wanted to, we could go back in time even further to find past awareness of "something happening" that still seems quite new and unclear to us today.

Why am I telling you this? Because I want to suggest that perhaps we are all living in an old future. The overall sense of cultural and media change that keeps us busy has been around for some time and has been a reliable driving force behind the very transformations and revolutions it predicts. If this is true, it would be of some consequence for the burgeoning field of Digital Humanities and the ways we practice it.

2   Digital Humanities

If the culture of digitization can predict its own future with such astounding accuracy, perhaps that is because such prediction is, in the truest sense of the term, a self-fulfilling prophecy. Or, to employ a neo-

[3]   See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxYgdX2PxyQ>.

liberal formula from the 1980s that recently has come back into style to describe various crises of states and economies: the digitization of culture is "without alternative." Ultimately, there is no opting out of it, because no matter if you feel like arguing for or against the Google Book Settlement, no matter which vision of the internet you support, no matter if you have a Facebook account or buy the latest iPad or not, the digitization of culture, like the larger economic growth industries it is so closely connected with, has (sometimes through these very choices and controversies) already implemented its own future in the present.

Thus it is neither surprising nor alarming that the humanities are becoming digital, too. William Uricchio discusses the conditions and challenges of this process in a comprehensive and convincing manner. Overall, I share his optimism. It would be hard to argue that our work as teachers, historians, philologists, students of culture, etc. has not greatly benefited from the availability of ever more numerous sources of information right at our desks at home. A knee-jerk response to this praise of open access is to point out that you still need more than "a decent computer connection" to access all these sources, because the question of what is available to whom is largely dependent on the question of who can afford what (and that includes a decent computer connection). No doubt, these are important questions. No doubt, the humanities should resist a redefinition of the public sphere by corporate interests because such redefinition would endanger, and perhaps even dismantle, the types of social self-reflection that go with free public communication. In this sense, the Digital Humanities are needed as a movement and as a collective player—as a lobbying force and as a resource of practices and strategies—in a number of coming controversies about ownership, civic responsibility, and public interest.

But, speaking from within this movement, I wonder whether we are doing ourselves a favor when we frame the benefits of digital scholarship in terms of accessibility. My reservations about the current rhetoric of user-friendly availability have something to do with the perspective I sketched out above: the Digital Humanities as a self-perpetuating growth industry which enlists scholars, disciplines, competing communication ideologies, entire universities and their administrations, and even corporations and state institutions to help bring about the very changes it foresees for the future. If media are "conjunctures of technological platforms and behavioral protocols," as William Uricchio suggests, it becomes

possible to ask which behaviors—and which self-descriptions—are encouraged by the digitization of scholarly practices. If the scholarship of the future is primarily understood in terms of increased accessibility and increased interconnectedness, it is tempting to describe our way of getting there as a maverick move of self-innovation in the humanities. For me, in the context of this argument, the tipping point comes when I am told that junior researchers and PhD candidates working in the Digital Humanities have to take enormous risks because their interest in large corpora and networked forms of knowledge confronts powerful assumptions about the cultural value of print publication, individual authorship, and the self-sustaining artwork.[4]

I would like to take issue with this description, not because data mining does not constitute a break with entrenched biases in humanist scholarship—it does and this is probably a good thing—but because getting there will not be as daring a step as we like to tell ourselves it is. Should we really be worried that young researchers and teachers might be too conservative or timid to adapt digital networking tools? In view of the "proliferation of global network connectivity" (368) described so competently by William Uricchio, it seems more likely that already the next generation of scholars will make the transition to new and increasingly interactive forms of scholarly communication—with their attendant concepts of textuality, aesthetics, and knowledge production—not in a risky but in an often unselfconscious (if certainly laborious) manner. Understanding, assessing, and affecting this transition will require more than merely implementing the latest technologies and feeling up-to-date about it. If our business in the humanities has something to do with media competence (i.e., with enabling *and* sustaining cultures of reading), the sustainability of operational modes of research seems as important as the facilitation of perennially emerging ones. The rhetoric of groundbreaking unconventionality might be badly equipped for this double task, especially when it is motivated by fears of future irrelevance. Such a nervous self-image might foster compensatory enthusiasms that all-too-successfully predict the obsolescence of useful media skills.

Which skills? Let's say the ability to process communications without treating them as direct appeals of participation; the ability to encounter objects without immediately projecting user objectives into them; the ability to spend extended time with documents that are not directly addressed to us and that, at first glance, provide no place for our opinions and do not call for instant judgment; the ability to listen in a concentrated manner without thinking up the next response in a network of exchanges; the ability to *read* without the interruption of linked information.[5] Sounds old-school? I think there is no need to be worried about our future capacities to connect. These are certainly welcome prospects. But if we really are interested in unconventional, out-of-the-box, creativity-prone, self-reflective, risky reading practices in a digitized world, the shoe may soon be on the other foot. Because ultimately, the question of what it means for texts to *remain readable* is not one of accessibility alone. Without a real theory of reading—and without teaching and research practices drawn from it—the Digital Humanities might well lose themselves in a rat race of infinitely catching-up. More damaging still, they might stop reading and investigating their own discourses. So much seems clear: The extent to which the current reframing of scholarship in terms of democratic accessibility is itself interwoven with the logic of market expansion cannot be adequately addressed within a self-assured rhetoric of bold innovation that fosters, often unwittingly, exactly those connections it seeks to analyze.

The linkage of marketplace logic and current knowledge production can best be observed in the area of higher education in which the digitization of the academy is at its most advanced: in the economization of its administration. The digital university, thought by some to require a spirit of adventurous contrarianism, is already alive in the pervasive presence of institutional "quality management," in strategic benchmarking and target agreements, in the proliferation of self-sustaining evaluation and control systems, and in the statistical measurement of research output according to Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) within business management software sold by SAP and other IT corporations. What appears to be a neutral matter of administrative tools has far-ranging consequences for the nature and quality of research. That these

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[4] Even Fitzpatrick's timely and important new book on digital publishing and "the Future of the Academy" taps into this discourse of brave modernization (*Planned Obsolescence*).

[5] Compare Carlin Romano: "Reading a book requires [...] the ability to disconnect from other connections" (n. pag.).

consequences are not always encouraging, to put it cautiously, is indicated by developments in the British humanities after the inception of the "Research Assessment Exercise" system (RAE) in 1996. In the context of the less centralized structures of American higher education, Schuster and Finkelstein predicted a type of "faculty restructuring," by now already under way at many institutions, that threatens to replace academic disciplines with short-term "client services" which operate with increasingly precarious work contracts and diminishing opportunity for intellectual continuity, let alone critical independence.[6] So far, the Digital Humanities have remarkably little to say about this issue. If it is addressed at all, it is treated in a curiously defensive mode, as if the "affordances" of digital tools in the administrative and the scholarly realms were unconnected, or as if confronting their existence in either sphere would undermine some larger cause.[7] There is a name for this type of discourse that regards counter-arguments as something to be explained away or neutralized through rhetorical strategies (such as appealing to the progressiveness of one's position or labeling caveats "conservative" and "elitist"): plainly speaking, it is ideology, and this is not a desirable option for our fields. If the humanities in their digital manifestation still want to offer what can still be called critical theory, they should have an interest in enabling observer positions that are both participatory and skeptical. As long as the self-description of the Digital Humanities continues in the way it does, as a sales argument for the self-understood value of bold innovation, I fear the participatory part will come more easily than the skeptical one. More detrimentally still, participation may ultimately come at the cost of critical (self-) observation itself.

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[6] Compare also Slaughter and Rhoades; Hermanowicz.

[7] Much of this defensiveness sounds to me like saying "Software doesn't fire people, people fire people." The affirmative bias of many contemporary studies on new media may not be coincidental. Usually legitimized as a way of paying tribute to the user perspective, such populism misses the agency of techno-economic networks within any moment of self-assured usage, be it "resisting" or not. As suggested below, the interests of involved actors can be taken seriously without perpetuating their self-confirmations.—For the term "affordance," see footnote 9 below.

3   Methodology

It is not surprising that the Digital Humanities have been working towards a renaissance of empirical and positivistic methods. From Franco Moretti's enthusiasm for imaging techniques (graphs, maps, and charts) to German dreams of a futuristic, if cooly scientific *Computerphilologie* (see, for example, Jannidis), new media promise to provide us either with sharper methods for old questions or with better application procedures that generate entirely new questions. And they do deliver. If nothing else, the current revival of empiricism will heighten the rigor of humanist research and thus help to counterbalance some of the more impressionistic and partisan modes of scholarship that became fashionable in the 1980s and 90s. In this sense, digitized resource management does open up new research possibilities and this research, in turn, underlines the utility—soon to become the necessity—of further digitization. Again, however, what is self-fulfilling in terms of institutional success may turn out to be self-defeating in terms of scholarly purpose.

William Uricchio not only sketches the tremendous potentials of large-scale data-mining but also advises us to exercise caution because these are not interpretive methods: our work, he suggests, is not done until we have brought in more traditional hermeneutic tools. I agree but would like to rephrase this thought slightly. The thing to keep in mind about digitized pattern recognition is not that these research techniques are not interpretive, but, on the contrary, that they are. Data mining, content analysis, *Korpuslinguistik*—all methods in this vein are shot through with often unreflected assumptions and interpretive presuppositions, the most powerful of which may be the idea that our research material is made up of "information" rather than communicative actions. This concept of "information," in turn, comes straight out of the self-description of digital media, as William Uricchio reminds us. The same is true for the redefinition of cultural practices in terms of information. This concept and this redefinition are themselves powerful actors in the implementation of our digital futures, and they can be investigated as such. We can observe and describe, as media scholars, what is happening when communicative actions are treated as content and information. Applying algorithms to algorithms, however, is not an observer position. It is an act of perpetuating the very types of medial auto-reference and self-prediction we should be describing. This is why William Uricchio's

insistence that critical hermeneutics should have the last word is essential and bears repeating.

Regarding methodology, then, I have a suggestion to make. Again I follow William Uricchio's cue when he argues that we should pay closer attention to production cultures. This makes a lot of sense to me, especially in conjunction with his reminder that social media and digital tagging systems create possibilities of action that challenge the time regimes of media industries just as much (I would add) as they challenge our understanding of recipients, who can no longer be seen either as self-determined users or as psychological resonators, because the increasingly visible *productivity* of "using" media is rendering dubious the very concept of usage itself. For the longest time, the study of media and popular culture has been dominated by text-centered approaches (with strong investments in notions of structural closure) on the one hand and reception paradigms (with often populist assumptions about appropriation, resistance, and democratic participation) on the other. Of course, if we now pay more attention to production, we still need to recognize the findings of reception studies, which explain why transferring the *Wheel of Fortune* to a Basque environment creates a new text even if the camera angles remain the same. But perhaps media studies have reached a point at which they can leave behind the whole partisan dichotomy of production versus reception with its manifold assumptions about competing intentions and strategies. At the very least, we can "reimagine" (to use William's words) the "old logics of production and consumption" (369) if we think of cultural agency as something that is dispersed in a network made up not only of people and institutions but also of technologies, objects, forms, and their "affordances."[8] For who or what is actually acting when a producer 'follows' an aesthetic decision she has made?[9] How many former media receptions and productions are active in her choice? How many readings and writings—and how many so-called practical constraints of objects and forms that really guide the things we do—are present in a single productive decision? Indeed, is their presence not an active one? Effective in any such

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[8] Uricchio uses the term "affordance" with reference to Norman's popular 1988 study of object design. For an ecological usage, denoting the "action possibilities" of an object or environment, see Gibson 36-42 and 127-43.

[9] For a more detailed discussion of these issues, see Kelleter, "*The Wire*."

personal or corporate aesthetic choice, as in its consequences, are always other agencies, some far removed from the persons acting, some not necessarily known to them, some not even human.

I am, of course, advocating a concept of agency as developed and employed in actor-network-theory, which has been most systematically described by Bruno Latour. With regard to popular media, this theoretical framework seems particularly appropriate because popular media are inevitably multi-authored; produced and consumed in many-layered systems of responsibility and performance; always dependent on the material demands of their technological tools; and (to bring in another perspective) they frequently consist of recursively evolving parts, which is to say they frequently develop in a *serial* fashion.[10] Personal vision and intentional choices are no doubt of consequence in this regard, as are copyrights and proper names, but a television series (to name an obvious example) is never authored by just one writer, producer, or even company. By the same token, the internet is not simply a communication technology or a storehouse of texts (or even of interlinked information) but a dynamic aggregate of closely concatenated actions: both a carrier and a result of communicative evolution.[11] From this perspective, digital culture is characterized less by the tremendous size of its textual corpora or the density of their interconnectedness than by the fact that the digital production of culture, no matter whether corporate or private, is explicitly geared towards its own continuation: you produce something *in order* for someone to expand or reply—and you produce *knowing that* someone probably will. Digital texts not only allow for self-serialization, their primary goal and purpose consists in self-serialization.

Thus, digital networks inevitably complicate issues of authorship and editorial control; by necessity they foster conflicts about ownership, jurisdiction, and responsibility. Involved interests cannot but relate in a complex manner: Identifications, delineations, and codifications proliferate in social media to such a degree that, in their sum, they suggest a paradoxical situation of constant departure.[12] The concept of dispersed

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[10] On this question, see the Research Unit "Popular Seriality" (DFG-Forschergruppe 1091); <http://popularseriality.uni-goettingen.de>. Basic concepts are discussed in Kelleter, "Populäre Serialität."

[11] Compare Kelleter and Stein.

[12] On the connection of seriality and complexity, see Kelleter, "Populäre Serialität"; Mittell.

agency at the microscopic level (borrowed from actor-network-theory) but also the concept of evolutionary recursivity at the macroscopic level (borrowed from ecological and systems-theoretic approaches) seem especially suited to describe this particular type of culture, which renders the distinction between production and reception increasingly questionable.

4 American Studies

What does this have to do with American Studies? It does not need pointing out that our appreciation of groundbreaking novelty is connected in manifold ways to ideas and practices of 'America,' our quintessentially modern culture: a culture historically invested in newness and rejuvenation. William Uricchio has persuasively traced the transactions between media and America in this regard. Let me offer an additional thought that continues the argument made thus far.

When we look at scholarly groupings or national cultures—when we try to make sense either of digitized humanities or of America—the self-descriptions of these assemblages offer privileged access to their realities. What is meant by "self-descriptions"? The term should be understood as referring to communicative practices rather than collections of ideas or strategically designed ideologies: Self-descriptions do not simply legitimize or disguise conditions already in existence but help create and reproduce these conditions and their options of legitimacy and denial in the first place. For reasons worth investigating, the power of national self-descriptions is particularly strong in the United States, despite the ongoing erosion of state institutions we have been witnessing for so long now. In fact, the most remarkable aspect of this erosion process is perhaps the resilience and lingering importance of national identifications in the face of the ever more rapid globalization of markets and cultural content. William Uricchio has pointed to the power of legal definitions (still primarily controlled at the national level) and continued lags in receptions of media texts across national markets. In light of this, we can justifiably ask how American media practices succeed to mark and market themselves as 'American' at all. What, for instance, are the practical (meaning: action-bound) consequences of perceiving a movie as an American movie, even if it was made, say,

with Australian money by a European director who adapted an Asian source text? Furthermore, how does the plausibility of this perception, established against all odds, guide the movie's relation to itself, to its audiences, and ultimately to the unlikely system of national self-description from which it draws and to which it contributes?

To give an example from a recent project of mine: When we read a TV series such as *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008) within the framework suggested here, we investigate how the public reception of this media text, including its readings by American media scholars, interacts with the series' production aesthetics in a larger actor-network—or better still: in a 'work-net' of interlocking agencies—that is busy defining itself at different levels of cultural reproduction, setting in motion different actors, and deploying different, often conflicting textual practices.[13] Of course, to read public and scholarly discussions of *The Wire* as active within the serial narrative's own cultural work complicates many of the certainties put forward by the series and its observers. However, this procedure does not mean to 'expose' American scholarship's 'complicity' in this or that ideological bias of *The Wire*. Rather, it means to track how American (Media) Studies in the US participate in the activities of their objects of observation. Put more ambitiously: It means to track how American (Media) Studies and American (media) practices act as interdependent forces within a larger cultural system that still successfully calls itself American culture. The question, then, is not simply why *The Wire* has generated so much admiration among academic commentators in the United States, but what kind of shapes this admiration takes, which transactions it stimulates, which debates and assurances it enables.

Why this stress on America? It is a fact well known but worth repeating that scholars of contemporary media texts are always doing more than simply analyzing those texts, especially when they operate within and on the same environment as their texts—as is the case when Americanists from the United States produce knowledge about America. Whatever else their goals and results, these types of study are also always acts of cultural self-description and can be analyzed as such, to trace dependencies between a culture's knowledge and performance of itself. It should be noted that this question differs from asking how

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[13] Compare Kelleter, "*The Wire*."

American TV studies reverberate in other countries. This second question can be ignored in the present context because scholarly activities in non-English-speaking countries are still largely irrelevant for research practices within the United States. In the US, the field of American Studies is only rarely compelled to imagine itself open to competent outside descriptions, especially if they are phrased in foreign languages. Rather, the field tends to conceive of American Studies outside the US, not as offering the possibility of epistemologically advantaged re-descriptions, but, if at all, as part of its own transnational diversity.[14] This, however, makes it easier to investigate American Studies in the United States as an active contributor to—rather than a privileged observer of—our object of study. It provides an approach which allows us to connect America's knowledge of itself to America's performances of itself, from a perspective that does not come easily to standpoints directly involved in the work and the debates of American self-identification.

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[14]   Compare Kelleter, "Transnationalism."

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---, and Daniel Stein. "Autorisierungspraktiken seriellen Erzählens: Zur Gattungsentwicklung von Superheldencomics." *Populäre Serialität: Narration—Evolution—Distinktion. Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2012. 259-90.

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