

Technohumanism: Interdisciplinary Arts and Humanities in an Age of Web 2.0

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In his classic 1990 essay, “The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities,” Stuart Hall is precise about the set of political, theoretical, educational, and economic circumstances that came together in Birmingham and that led to the birth of cultural studies. While some have disputed or amended Hall’s story of origins, his point about attending to the precise relationships that constitute shifts in fields is crucial, not only for cultural studies but for an analysis of any new interdisciplinary field. Fields emerge and blend carrying their histories and their ruptures with those histories. Interdisciplinarity emerges in interfaces between quite specific disciplinary formations that occur in equally specific historical moments. Once that interdisciplinary blending occurs and is formalized (institutionally or organizationally), it is then susceptible to the same evolutions, disputes, tensions, and ruptures (with consequent new branches) as the originary disciplines that formed it. In short, interdisciplines have their own rules, logics, and debates that disciplines have.

In “Technohumanism: Interdisciplinary Arts and Humanities in an Age of Web 2.0,” I will be looking specifically at the conjuncture of the arts and humanities with second-generation customizing, aggregating, and collaborative internet technologies. While there are many different ways that the arts and humanities come together with technology, this particular interdisciplinary configuration, in my opinion, offers not only great vitality and potentials for vitality for the arts and humanities, but it also offers inspiration and application for certain technologies (especially advanced visualization and sonification devices) and, beyond, offers an important test case for how interdisciplinarity functions across not just disciplinary divides but the standard divisional divides of the universities. In many universities, the arts, humanities, natural sciences, engineering, computational sciences, and information sciences occupy different divisions within the same college or, more typically, reside in different colleges altogether. Techno-artists and technohumanists have to find ways to bridge those divides, especially when their work is grant-dependent and distribution of indirect costs has to be adjudicated across different college or departmental formulae. Value and worth also have to be proven in specific ways since often it is precisely the technology that is most useful to artists and humanists (such as 3-D visualization, Virtual Reality, and haptics) that many “pure scientists” dismiss. The embrace of these technologies by humanists and artists does not necessarily make them more valued by scientists (to say the least). Similarly, the forms of artistic rendering (typically, 3-D illustration and modeling) most needed and valued by scientists is often the least esteemed by artists. What is the technohumanist or techno-artist to do?

In this essay, I am going to look at both promising developments across technology, the arts, and the humanities while also considering these issues of worth, use, and value. I will look at three or four signature programs which have succeeded in bringing together technology with the arts and humanities (often via the entertainment industry and/or the military) and will return to Hall’s essay to underscore how these moments of

exceptional valuation, even against the devaluing structures of the university, often arise from their own historical exigencies and urgencies. Among the specific areas that I will examine (or allude to) are Virtual Reality, haptics, electronic literature, serious and learning games, digital archives, noise and sound performance art and production, anime, and collaborative knowledge-building sites such as Wikipedia. In the course of this essay, I will also look at the new “field” of digital media and learning and at the creation of HASTAC (pronounced “haystack”: Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory) as exemplary historical formations at the interdisciplinary intersection of fields that, in normal universities, rarely come into contact with one another. (CND; 629 word abstract)