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Workshop title: The Classroom and the Archive: Teaching Film and Media History Using Digital and Physical Primary Materials

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Presentation title: “From Scarcity to Abundance: How Digitized Material Demands Academic Cooperation.”

Hi everyone,

First and foremost, I would like to thank Emily Carman for putting together this workshop and inviting me to be a part of it with such a stellar cast. My goal today is to tackle the transition from scarcity into the abundance that the sudden proliferation of digitized material brings, and there are several issues we need to discuss. Let me list a few:

One is the illusion of completion that this abundance carries. Already in 2013, Richard Abel addressed the constraints of working with digital newspapers in his emblematic essay “The Pleasures and Perils of Big Data in Digitized Newspapers.”¹ I know many of us are aware of the perils and absences when working with digital archives, but it is easy to get into the “comfort zone” researching without leaving our office. Therefore, we need to remind ourselves of this and overemphasize it to our students who are taking their first steps into archival research methods.

Another point I want to bring to your attention is the fact that even though more material is available, there are also more scholars and less time to produce knowledge. Those of us who prefer a historical approach to research, which demands extensive use of archival sources, know how easy it is to keep on digressing. We fool ourselves into finding just 'one more piece of evidence,' consequently engaging in an endless cycle of material hoarding because, let us face it, the detective work we do is much more exciting than the daunting writing process that follows. It does not take long until the amount of new material and, consequently, the new avenues of inquiry that this opens overwhelm us.

¹ Richard Abel, “The Pleasures and Perils of Big Data in Digitized Newspapers.” *Film History* 25, no. 1-2 (2013): 1-10. doi:10.2979/filmhistory.25.1-2.1.

In this contemporary landscape of seemingly full access, it is also worth asking: how does this new landscape affect our research and us? How do we handle potential overlaps between scholars we may have not even met around the globe? How do we deal with the slow publishing processes in this context?

In this context, I wanted to bring up three texts that were produced a long ago, but that should be revised under the light of this emergence and proliferation of digital sources. One is Barbara Klinger's problematization of the interminable nature of film historical research, published two decades ago.² The other historical ideas are Carlo Ginzburg's microhistorical approach to the study of history and Walter Benjamin's revisionist notion of historical debris.³ The combination of these seeming antagonist perspectives can be combined to take advantage of digital sources as pedagogical tools. More than ever, the continued emergence of digital archives and interactive platforms, and the constant feed of material derived from it make the interminable nature of historical research more evident. It is then worth asking, what is the determinant factor in deciding to stop looking for material? Well, before we had deadlines and funding to take that decision, and we all know deadlines are "negotiable."

The insufficiency of funding, an approaching deadline or merely not finding extra material would have been determinant factors to put the hunt on pause and move into producing results. Now, it becomes more challenging to refuse the temptation of making one more connection and looking at just one extra stash of material from the comfort of our homes and offices. My suggestion is for us to leave the temptations of big data aside and become, instead, even more microhistorical. By departing from narrower research foci, scholarly collaboration will provide a broader perspective to the interminable demands of history, producing new meanings. The new goal is to generate knowledge collectively.

My proposal today is to start building what I will denominate as *clusters of knowledge*, and the classroom represents an ideal setting in which we could test this idea. We can start

² Barbara Klinger, "Film history terminable and interminable: recovering the past in reception studies," *Screen*, Volume 38, Issue 2, 1 July 1997, Pages 107–128, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/38.2.107>

³ Carlo Ginzburg, "Microhistory: Two or Three Things I Know About It." John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi, trans. *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (Autumn, 1993): 10-35; Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 4 1938- 1940*, Edmund Jephcott and others (trans.), Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Eds.) (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 389-411, <http://cscs.res.in/dataarchive/textfiles/textfile.2010-11-02.7672177498/file>

training the scholars of the future not only to produce this kind of work but also to start thinking from these premises.

Let me give a small example departing from my experience as a Ph.D. student. I am now part of the Centre for Fashion Studies, despite my background in film studies. My area of knowledge is the intersections of the fashion and film industries, focusing on the role of Hollywood as a circulator of cultural capital through its intermedia capacities. Hollywood has been pivotal in developing the American fashion industry and an American fashion identity, particularly since the interwar years. Two of my colleagues are working, roughly, with the same timeframe as I am, but one is focusing on the French fashion industry through a study of Christian Dior, and the other one in Italy, through the study of the “made in Italy” label. We have been visiting archives in these three countries, and when we engage in discussion, when we tell each other something, we have found that works as a crossover, this exchange of information contributes to producing more fruitful results. For some reason, this does not work in the context of regular seminars for feedback, it just does not flow in the same way, possibly due to the performative nature of such academic setting. I believe this is because seminars are structured in an evaluative manner instead of a collaborative form.

But not everything is lost. We may not teach an old dog new tricks, but we can teach our students to build *clusters of knowledge*. The digital humanities are already designing platforms that work this way, but we need to add the human factor to comprehend that we may be confronting a paradigm shift. So, good news, we can prepare our students to think this way.

Another issue that should be should discuss is copyrights. What do we make of this proliferation of images online that digitization is bringing? At least my students, belong to the 'share and like' generation. They find something they like, post it on their fashion blogs, on Pinterest, on Instagram, and they move on. In the meantime, we go through the dreadful process of getting copyrights clearances, despite fair use, and paying for the right to publish an image in a journal that will possibly come out in a year, that we will never profit from, and that only a few people will read. I hope that everyone in the room understands that far from suggesting that our students should be chased down for their millennial practices, what needs to change is the access and use that scholars can make of archival sources for education purposes, regardless if an image is used for in-depth analysis or illustrative reasons.

Boiling down these ideas into more concrete questions of how to bring the archive into the classroom, I think our students represent a unique opportunity to begin this paradigm shift towards collaborative work in the digital humanities. They will pursue those models that we

teach them. They will be able to use these collaborative platforms that are being developed, but they also need to be aware of what these platforms are enabling through simple exercises, the possibility of building knowledge together.

Today, I brought a practical example of how to apply these ideas to build a cluster of knowledge. Let us say that a class of undergrad students in fashion studies is given the task of tracing discourses of Coco Chanel. Students, then, are divided into groups to build a *cluster of knowledge* that will focus on a timeframe between 1920 and 1960. One of them could trace these discourses in a through the Vogue archive; another one can be assigned to Harpers' Bazaar, another will look at Women's Wear Daily. Another student, with interest in film, can look at Chanel discourses in film fan magazines using the Media History Digital Library's Lantern. However, this is not all; the benefits of the *clusters of knowledge* are that the possibilities of combining are endless. One can assign a cluster for a task that exceeds the capacity of one student/researcher, and then unite it with another cluster that is functioning through the amalgamation of individual contributions. The division used for articles in these magazines can be reproduced with a focus on advertisements, newsreels, museum exhibitions ... you name it.

In a second stage, students will be invited to open a debate about the knowledge they acquired; to identify patterns, problematize and contextualize these findings by putting them in dialogue with those of their colleagues. As a final task, they will produce a paper, either separately or collectively, in which they would reference information as generated by a member of this cluster of knowledge to respect the efforts of individual research, keeping up with academic manners. These papers can have different foci, answer different research questions, also showing that different knowledge may arise from similar sources and the exchange of findings. The premise of a *cluster of knowledge* is shared knowledge, different outcomes.

As said, the possibilities are endless. This task may appear simple, but it requires more preparation and feedback on behalf of lecturers to guide students towards success. The key is to start working on new attitudes towards collaborative work from a pedagogic perspective that will adapt to the new approach to research that these new digital platforms are enabling. These are just some ideas. I would love to hear your thoughts, or what you are currently doing. What I intend to convey and call for is a change of paradigm that could enable collaborative work in the humanities at large, even—or better said, particularly—across fields and disciplines. If we are building these new platforms of collaboration, we need to start by

changing our minds in a way that is aligned with how technology is changing. That is all folks.

Keywords: pedagogy, digital humanities, digital archives, archival research, research methods.

References

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