

The Importance of Being Digital

Lorella Viola

*Linguistics and Digital Humanities at the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C2DH),
University of Luxembourg, Luxembourg*

1. Abstract

For the past twenty years, digital tools, technologies and infrastructures have been playing an increasingly determining role in framing how heritage is understood, preserved, managed, maintained, and shared. Perhaps the most official indication of the undeniable shift towards the digital in cultural heritage was provided by UNESCO which, in 2003, proclaimed digital heritage as common heritage (UNESCO 2003). The document also officially distinguished between heritage created digitally (from then on referred to as digitally-born heritage), that is heritage for which no other format but the digital object exists, and digitized heritage, heritage “converted into digital form from existing analogue resources” (ibid.). The UNESCO’s statement has had profound implications for both the conceptualization of digital heritage and our very understanding and practices of heritage, material culture and preservation, including traditional notions of authenticity and completeness (Cameron 2021). Such profound implications are directly linked to the classic cultural heritage paradigm based on the equation “preserved heritage = heritage worth preserving”. Indeed, the acknowledgement of digital heritage and in particular of digitized heritage as common heritage has factually introduced the digital as part of concepts of what is authentic. At the same time, however, by distinguishing between two types of digital heritage, the UNESCO statement has added a layer of complexity to the original equation, the statement “digitized = preserved”. In this keynote talk, I will unpack the problematic political and cultural ramifications stemming from this logic. I will argue that the classic cultural heritage paradigm “preserved = worth preserving” implies the questionable relation “digitized = worth preserving” and the even more troubling one “not digitized = not worth preserving”. Drawing on recent posthumanist approaches (Braidotti 2019; Braidotti and Fuller 2019), I will then question the relevance of traditional notions of authenticity and completeness in relation to the digital object and I will rework such notions using the construction and enrichment of the digital heritage collection (Viola and Fiscarelli 2021) as an example of how to apply the new framework I propose.

Historically, the understanding of heritage has been dominated by Western perspectives for which grandiose sites and objects would be the sole heritage worthy of preservation (ACHS 2012). But Critical Heritage Studies (CHS) have taught us how heritage designation is not just a unanimous act of preserving the past, but “a symbol of previous societies and cultures” (Evans 2003, 334). When deciding which societies and whose cultures, political and economic interests, power relations, and selection biases have never been far away. For example, when some twenty years ago heritage institutions started to digitize huge quantities of heritage material, the semantic motivation behind it was that of preserving cultural resources from deterioration or disappearance. The direct consequences of such discourse were that 1) the digitization process was framed as a *heritagising* operation in itself (i.e., “digitizing = preserving”) and 2) any digitized content became content intrinsically worth preserving, (i.e., “digitized = worth preserving”). But because especially at the beginning, less mainstream works and minority voices were largely excluded from digitization programs, digitized material perpetuated previous decisions about what was worth keeping (Crymble 2021) (i.e., “not digitized = not worth preserving”).

HistoInformatics 2021 -- 6th International Workshop on Computational History, September 30, online.
EMAIL: lorella.viola@uni.lu



© 2021 Copyright for this paper by its authors. Use permitted under Creative Commons License Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).

CEUR Workshop Proceedings (CEUR-WS.org)

CHS have also challenged museums' rules of originality and authenticity which traditionally established them as the only accredited custodians of true knowledge. According to CHS' perspective, the significance of material culture is not eternal and absolute, but continually negotiated in a dialectical relationship with contemporary values and interactions (Tilley 1989; Vergo 1989). Unproblematized as immaterial and contextless entities, digital objects have disrupted the classic paradigm "original and authentic vs copies and reproductions" and they have been accused of undermining the authority of the original. Expanding on CHS and critical posthumanities theories, I challenge these assumptions and argue that digital cultural heritage objects are not contextless and therefore bear consequences. Building on Cameron's work (op.cit.), I maintain that any digital operation does not merely produce immaterial copies of their analog counterparts –as defined by UNESCO in 2003 --but it creates new things which in turn become alive, and therefore are themselves subject to renegotiation. This means abandoning the conceptual attachment to digital cultural heritage as possessing a complete quality of objecthood (ibid.). If however Cameron believes that framing digital heritage as "possessing a fundamental original, authentic form and function [...] is limiting" (ibid.,12), I elaborate further and maintain that it is in fact misleading. In constituting and conceptualizing digital cultural heritage, the question of whether it is or it is not authentic *truly* doesn't make sense. To conceptualize the digital object as an unfinished, situated process, I introduce a new term, *post-authentic*. In a post-authentic framework digital objects are unfinished processes that embed a wide net of continually negotiable relations of multiple internal and external actors. It is within this post-authentic framework that I describe *Chroniclitaly 3.0*, a digital heritage collection of Italian American newspapers published in the USA by Italian immigrants between 1898 and 1936. With this example, I want to add a novel reflection on both theory and practice-oriented aspects of digital heritage in museum and gallery practices, and heritage policy and management.

The first thing to be said about *Chroniclitaly 3.0* is that it is the third version of the collection, therefore, it is in itself a demonstration of the continuously and rapidly evolving nature of digital research. It also exemplifies how international and national processes and wider external factors impact differentially on the evolution of digital projects over time. For example, like its predecessors, *Chroniclitaly 3.0* has been machine-harvested from *Chronicling America* (CA), a continually updated Open Access (OA) directory of digitized historical newspapers published in the United States from 1777 to 1963. Through the funding of digitization projects awarded to external institutions, mostly universities, CA encapsulates the intrinsic incompleteness and the far-reaching net of connections, power relations, multiple actors and factors influencing digital infrastructures in general and digital cultural heritage infrastructures in particular. Thus, the existence of multiple versions of *Chroniclitaly* is in turn also a reflection of the incompleteness of the CA project. This is a clear example of how the formation of a digital heritage collection is impacted by the surrounding digital infrastructure, which is in turn dependent on funding availability and whose very constitution is shaped by the awarded institutions. A post-authentic framework recognizes that digital products and processes are unfixed and therefore subject to change so as to allow room for multiple versions, all equally post-authentic, in that they may reflect different curators and materials, rapid technological advances, changing temporal frameworks and values.

How does this relate to the importance of being digital? The immigrant press and the *Chroniclitaly* collections allow us to devote attention to the study of migration as a process experienced by the migrants themselves. Through the analysis of migrants' narratives, it is possible to explore how displaced individuals dealt with social processes of migration and transformation and how these affected their inner notions of identity and belonging. The study of migrants' narratives creates in this way a collective memory of migration constituted by individual stories. In this sense, the importance of being digital lies in the fact that this information can be processed on a large-scale and across different migrants' communities over time; moreover, as records are regularly updated, observations can be continually enriched, adjusted, expanded, recalibrated, generalized or contested. It is only through these spatial temporal correspondences that the past can become part of our collective memory and, by preventing us from forgetting it, of our collective future.

Abby Smith Rumsey said that the true value of the past is that it is the raw material we use to create the future (Rumsey 2016). Understanding digital heritage as post-authentic entails that great emphasis must be given on the processes that generate the mappings of the correspondences. A post-authentic approach recognizes that these processes are never neutral and incorporate entire other systems of interpretation and management which are themselves situated and therefore partial. These processes are

never complete nor completable and require constant update and critical supervision. Due to the extreme complexity of interrelated forces at play, the formidable task of writing the past in the present demands careful handling. This is heritage, which means that it is the raw material to create the future. Post-authenticity acknowledges the relevance of transparency, traceability, and consequently, accountability which lies primarily in the acknowledgement of a collective responsibility, the one that comes with building a source of knowledge for current and future generations. Thus, the role of documentation by researchers, museums, archives, libraries must act as a means to acknowledge that the past is written in the present and that writing the past means controlling the future. Post-authenticity creates a system to meet the need for accountability to current and future generations.

Finally, the documentation of the interventions at each stage equally plays an important role in increasing awareness towards sustainability in digital research and digital cultural heritage. Today, half of the world's population (3.7 billion people) still does not have access to the Internet (United Nations 2020). Based as it is on a universal vision of digital heritage, the ongoing digital reformation of cultural heritage and cultural heritage practices faces not only the danger of being available exclusively to half of the humanity but also of yet again imposing western-centered perspectives on how cultural material should be heritagized. The importance of being digital means that curatorial workflows should be sustainable, interoperable, and reusable. In *ChroniclItaly 3.0*, this included the storage of the material in an OA repository, whenever possible the use of freely available software, a thorough documentation of the implemented steps and interventions, including an explanation of the choices made which will in turn facilitate research accessibility, transparency and dissemination.

The future of cultural heritage looks ever more digital and digitally-available repositories will become larger and larger. Thinking about digital heritage as post-authentic means fostering its reconceptualization not just in terms of what we are digitizing but also *how* and *for whom*.

Acknowledgment

This research was funded by FNR – Luxembourg National Research Fund (13307816).

References

- ACHS. 2012. “Manifesto.” Association of Critical Heritage Studies. 2012. <https://www.criticalheritagestudies.org/history>.
- Braidotti, Rosi. 2019. “A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 36 (6): 31–61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418771486>.
- Braidotti, Rosi, and Matthew Fuller. 2019. “The Posthumanities in an Era of Unexpected Consequences.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 36 (6): 3–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276419860567>.
- Cameron, Fiona. 2021. *The Future of Digital Data, Heritage and Curation in a More-than Human World*. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge.
- Crymble, Adam. 2021. *Technology and the Historian: Transformations in the Digital Age*. Topics in the Digital Humanities. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Evans, Graeme. 2003. “Whose Heritage Is It Anyway? Reconciling the ‘National’ and the ‘Universal’ in Quebec City.” *British Journal of Canadian Studies* 16 (2): 333–47. <https://doi.org/10.3828/bjcs.16.2.9>.
- Rumsey, Abby Smith. 2016. *When We Are No More: How Digital Memory Is Shaping Our Future*. Talks at Google. Google. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZJDFDscmWE.
- Tilley, Christopher Y. 1989. “Interpreting Material Culture.” In *The Meanings of Things*, edited by Ian Hodder, 185–94. London: Routledge.
- UNESCO. 2003. “Records of the General Conference, 32nd Session, Paris, 29 September to 17 October 2003, v. 1: Resolutions - UNESCO Digital Library.” 2003. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000133171.page=80>.
- United Nations. 2020. “Roadmap for Digital Cooperation.” https://www.un.org/en/content/digital-cooperation-roadmap/assets/pdf/Roadmap_for_Digital_Cooperation_EN.pdf.
- Vergo, Peter. 1989. *The New Museology*. London: Reaktion Books.

Viola, Lorella, and Antonio Maria Fiscarelli. 2021. "ChroniclItaly 3.0. A deep-learning, contextually enriched digital heritage collection of Italian immigrant newspapers published in the USA, 1898-1936." Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.4596345>.

2. Bio

Dr Lorella Viola is Research Associate in Linguistics and Digital Humanities at the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C2DH), University of Luxembourg. She holds a PhD in Language and Communication Studies from the University of East Anglia, UK. Her research focusses on how language use reveals latent assumptions and circulates implicit ideologies in media and society and how migrants are depicted in the media. She also develops Digital Humanities methodologies that bridge the gap between quantitative and qualitative methods to unveil and understand patterns in digital archives and to encourage transparency and reproducibility in digital humanities research and digital heritage practices.