Forum

Claire Taylor

The digital future of Modern Languages?

The digital future of Modern Languages? Digital culture and rethinking Modern Languages

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This discussion piece puts forward some thoughts on how the emergence of research into digital objects of study can be part of a productive dialogue in a broader trend of rethinking Modern Languages as a discipline. The new forms of digital communication, creative practice, literary expression and dissemination that have arisen in recent years contribute, I argue, to a rethinking of some of the assumptions underpinning Modern Languages studies. I do not by this mean to say that the advent of digital technologies is the only driver in this rethinking, but rather that the rise of new forms of digital culture comes at a time of questioning of Modern Languages, and is one of the factors in the rethinking of our discipline and its disciplinary boundaries. In other words, at the point at which Modern Languages was already in the process of questioning some of its assumptions – more on which below – the rise of digital cultural formats contributes to debates around the methodological and epistemological shifts taking place across the interdisciplinary endeavour that is Modern Languages.

The emergence and consolidation of digital forms of communication and dissemination have brought about a set of challenges and changes in a variety of ways, and much has been written about these. As far as these relate to Modern Languages, I would highlight three features in particular that have especial relevance for us as Modern Languages researchers: first, a rethinking of existing literary and cultural formats, second, a rethinking of geography and embeddedness and third, a rethinking of disciplinary boundaries.

Firstly, regarding the rethinking of existing cultural formats, as I have noted elsewhere (Taylor 2017), many of us were brought up as modern linguists to recognize key genres, understand the rules of those genres and apply the tools of analysis specific to those genres. But when texts – understood in the broadest sense of ‘cultural product’ – cease to exist within their neat generic boundaries, when, for instance, a hypermedia ‘novel’, involving text, audio, still and moving images and user interaction, the study of such texts may require skills of analysis coming from visual culture, film studies or computer game studies as much as from literary theory about ‘the novel’, and then we have to engage with multiple theories and disciplines.

It is these new cultural forms that, for many of us, have made us start to think across disciplinary boundaries and learn to negotiate new tools. As regards Modern Languages, from at least as early as the 1980s with the advent of cultural studies approaches within Modern Languages circles, scholars have been integrating new cultural artefacts and adopting new analytical models with which to approach them. The rise of digital culture, with all the questions that it raises, allows us to push these disciplinary boundaries further.

The second of the issues to find itself under pressure with the rise of the digital is the geographic and, in particular, the geographical rootedness in the nation state. There has been much scholarship on the issue of locality in digital culture; starting off with the initial hype about the Internet in the 1990s as a globalized medium inhabited by placeless individuals, the issue of locality has often been debated in relation to digital culture. Moving on from these early conceptualizations of the Internet as involving erasure of geographical place, more recent scholarship has argued instead that, whilst perhaps locality differs online, this does not mean that place is erased altogether. Dodge and Kitchen, for instance, argue that digital technologies do not erase place, but instead give rise to new spatialities; whilst they may ‘significantly disrupt the spatial logic of modernist societies’ in an online context, ‘geography continues to matter – as an organizing principle and as a constituent of social relations’ (Dodge and Kitchin 2001: 14). Indeed, as user-generated content has grown exponentially, and as a wealth of applications now allows users to refer to their geographical location, add geo-coordinates to their photographs on online platforms or link content to online maps, amongst many other possibilities, the Internet is increasingly becoming linked to offline place. The Internet nowadays, rather than being a (solely) globalized, placeless medium, in fact offers ways of allowing people to make important connections to, and reaffirm their affiliations to, their physical, offline location.

With regard to Modern Languages scholarship, this issue of locality and the digital is particularly pertinent inasmuch as it pertains to the national and the nation state. In many digital cultural works, production, hosting and consumption often traverse the boundaries of the nation state, complicating notions of local, national or regional identity. This is not to say that local, national or regional identity ceases to exist; rather, I argue, online works often allow us the opportunity to rethink these local, national and regional affiliations. Thus, often involving the research of phenomena, which transcend conventional national boundaries, digital culture studies can make particularly constructive contributions at a time in which Modern Languages as an interdisciplinary area is interrogating issues underpinning ideas of the ‘the national’ or ‘the regional’. One of the significant impacts that digital technologies have had on our conceptualization of Modern Languages as a discipline is to contribute to our rethinking of some of the place-based assumptions underpinning our research practice.

The third issue that I would like to highlight as regards digital culture and its impact on Modern Languages is the disciplinary norms, in particular, the methodological norms. Digital culture studies have required a working at the boundaries of various disciplines, and, in particular, a reaching out to social science methods. The dynamic and fluid ways in which digital content is created, curated and circulated means that those of us working in digital culture can no longer solely analyse ‘the text’ (if ever this had been a fixed category), but that we also need to analyse practices, given that flows, recirculations and repostings are just as significant as the ‘finished’ text itself. As Ken MacLean has observed, digital objects are ‘affected by the spaces through which they move’ (2009: 866), and reposting means that these objects build up unintended meanings and generate their own interpretative communities as they travel. In this way, when dealing with digital culture, we need to follow digital content and pay attention to the practices by which this content is made available, as much as we pay attention to the text itself. Again, this shift fits in a timely fashion with discussions in Modern Languages, in particular the fact that Modern Languages is currently in the process of rethinking its boundaries, forging collaborations and shared practice with social science methods and extending itself to embrace Language-Based Area Studies and studies of community languages, amongst others.

As I have noted above, these epistemological and methodological shifts have not, of course, come about in a vacuum, and in fact have taken place during a period in which Modern Languages as a discipline – or interdisciplinary endeavour – has been engaged in its own process of examining its assumptions. Since at least as far back as the rise of cultural studies approaches in the 1990s, Modern Languages had already been engaged in rethinking itself and its practices. To illustrate these three points above, I would like to take my own language area as a case study here and reflect upon the way in which Hispanic studies has increasingly opened itself to these kinds of analytical, epistemological and methodological shifts. Along with other language areas within Modern Languages, Hispanic studies has witnessed what we might term a rise of ‘meta’ discourses, evidenced by the publication of key position pieces, special issues questioning the foundations of the discipline and readers about the shape of the discipline – what Miguélez-Carballeira has termed ‘metacritical concern’ or ‘extrospective metacriticism’ (2007: 164).**1** Whilst it is not the purpose of this piece to rehearse the arguments put forth in the varied contributions to these volumes, I will briefly draw out some of the more salient points in order to illustrate how digital culture provides a particular perspective upon and contribution to these debates in regard to the three main areas I have noted.

Regarding firstly the issue of cultural formats, in the area of Hispanic studies, we have witnessed major developments that have shifted the focus of the discipline, and that have been taking place at least for half a century now. These include, as many have noted, a questioning of the ‘privileged status of literature’ (Martín-Estudillo and Spadaccini 2006: 8) and, related to this, a questioning of the canon as the apparatus by which a purported national character is reflected – a questioning that stretches at least as far back as Barry Jordan’s 1990 monograph, which critiqued, amongst other matters, the notion of the Spanish canon as comprised of self-evident ‘great works’ (see Jordan 1990: 77–79). This, in turn has led to some adjustments regarding periodicity and specialisms – in particular, the loss of prestige of the Golden Age, or, in the words of Anne J. Cruz, ‘the toppling of Golden Age studies from its place in the hierarchy’ (Cruz 2006: 83).

Secondly, and related to these shifts in the canon and in the object of study, the nation state as the guardian of culture has been challenged in a number of ways within Hispanic studies. We have witnessed a questioning of the nation and the nation state: as Volek has noted,

in the process of these changes, many old securities have been lost: the position of the cultural elites as guardians of the national project, the very project of national culture as something homogeneous and unique, the State as benefactor, and the nation itself as it emerged from the nineteenth-century imaginary.

(Volek 2002: xiv)

The nation state finds itself under pressure, but, as many have argued, this does not mean that Hispanic studies no longer exist; rather that it needs to be rethought, and new paradigms found, is argued below.

As regards the national and the nation state, a further, highly important notion that has come under pressure in Hispanic studies in recent scholarship is that of the ‘national language’ and the unity between language and territory. This notion has come under pressure both within and beyond Spain. David Castillo and William Egginton note the fading away of ‘loyalties to national languages’ (Castillo and Egginton 2006: 47), and Resina has highlighted the ‘dissolution of the hitherto unquestioned link between language and discipline or culture and discipline’ (Resina 2013: 10). Within Spain, this is particularly evident through the growing recognition of what Keown has termed the ‘plurinational reality of state culture’ (Keown 2013: 27), a fact that has changed the traditional boundaries of Hispanism, which, according to Keown, was

influenced by a vision in keeping with the imperialist designs of a whole generation of intellectuals for whom Spanish philology was synonymous with the promotion of the language of Castile and its culture and the corresponding exclusion of other tongues native to the state and their creative expression.

(Keown 2013: 23)

If such is the pressure on the notion of the national language and of the nation state within Spain, perhaps a much more important pressure comes from beyond it, with the tensions between foundational Hispanist discourses that promoted ‘the cultural unity of the Spanish-speaking world’ (Faber 2005: 66) and an increasing awareness of the diversity of Latin American cultures. Numerous scholars have cited the rise of Latin American Studies as one of the major changes that Hispanism as a discipline has faced in the last half of the twentieth century; de la Campa sees the rise of Latin American literature as one of the factors requiring the remapping of the disciplinary paradigms of Hispanism (de la Campa 2006: 24), whilst Cruz sees the emergence of the Latin American literary ‘boom’ as one of the major factors in shifts in the discipline (Cruz 2006: 82).

This loss of prestige of the centre, the shift from peninsular studies and the rise of new and diverse voices has led to the questioning of the academic discipline of Hispanism – the third in my list of issues raised by the digital. Faber notes how the very concept of Hispanism is ‘put into question by the different agendas and mutual competition between its Peninsular and Latin-American branches’ (Faber 2005: 87). All of this has led to a questioning of some foundational ideas of Hispanism: Martín-Estudillo and Spadaccini have identified

a questioning of old assumptions in connection with the imperialistic and/or colonialist dynamics that supported many of the efforts associated with Hispanism, and has allowed us to take stock of the discipline’s omission of minority voices, such as those of women, indigenous groups, or nations without states.

(2006: 8)

Indeed, as Thea Pitman and I argued in our earlier book (Taylor and Pitman 2013), Latin American digital culture is a particularly apt lens through which to view current questioning of the disciplinary boundaries of Hispanism and Latin Americanism. Noting a range of critiques of Latin Americanism, and on the area studies approach on which it draws, including Larsen’s critique of ‘the seemingly natural and spontaneous availability of Latin America as a subject for discourse’ as a neo-colonial enterprise (1995: 1), Avelar’s critique of Latin Americanism is based on ‘exclusionary practices’ (2000: 122–23) and Mato’s critique of Latin American studies as being ‘historically marked by the interests of imperial and other forms of transnational and international dominance’ (2003: 793), amongst others – we argued for a post-regional understanding of Latin America and of Hispanism. We argued that an understanding of Latin American digital culture must be worked through within this problematization of area studies, and of Latin Americanism as one strand of area studies. Digital cultural practice can be emblematic of new forms of Hispanic studies that take into account the concerns raised by scholars noted above; that is, it is not that local, national or regional identity ceases to exist, but, rather, online works often allow us the opportunity to rethink these local, national and regional affiliations. In this way, many of the founding assumptions of Hispanism are under question, but this does not mean that we can no longer do Hispanism; what it does mean is that we must be constantly aware of tensions, problems and blind spots of its discourses.

In summary, what I hope to have shown here is that, with the current debates about Modern Languages as a discipline, digital culture studies can have an enabling role to play. The crossroad between digital culture studies and Modern Languages is an area ripe for development.

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1. This is a broader trend that has become visible in Modern Languages research. Coming somewhat later – and in many ways building on the impetus created by work in Hispanic studies – examples include the volume edited by Lane and Worton (2011), which details the ways in which French Studies (and, by extrapolation, Modern Language Studies) has had to develop and rethink itself and move away from the philological, high-culture model that is the bedrock of traditional Modern Languages study.

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