A personal account. “Be serious, leave the Digital Humanities’ groups and come back to the academic field!” frequently sounds in my ears. How many scholars involved in Digital Humanities have heard these words from colleagues? Such an exhortation might be anecdotal, but the frequency of this kind of discussion has struck me for a long time. Would a colleague in History demand to another colleague to abandon her/his work in Archaeology? Would a colleague in Philology ask to another colleague to forget her/his work in Linguistics? Would a colleague in Social History demand to another colleague to ignore research in Sociology? The list of such of questions is endless. And they raise another question about professional identity and self-conception. Are we, as scholars, only embedded in one academic field beyond the necessary affiliation to a University, a Faculty, a Department and/or Laboratory and/or Center, and sometimes to a Chair? In other words: are we only a specialist of one field beyond disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity? I am sure, many of us would answer positively, but are these respondents fully ignorant of the fields around their core-field?

From my experience, the leading scholars always respond negatively. This idea finds a parallel expression in the sociological theory of networks by M. Crozier and E. Friedberg: a “marginal sécant” (intersecting marginal). This expression denotes a person who has each of his/her feet in a different “world” without any communication between them and sometimes without any links. Such a situation allows this person to innovate, because he/she mobilizes very different knowledge sets. For example, a European or American student in business who also is fluent in Chinese has a good chance of being employed by an import-export company working with China. Why could not a well-established scholar in one or many disciplines, in one or many approaches, also presume to work in Digital Humanities? Are Digital Humanities inconsistent with the academic fields? Moreover, none field is constituted without links and relationships with its adjacent fields. Therefore, the sentence extracted from

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my personal account sounds even stranger to my ears. Nevertheless, I strongly agree that Digital Humanities cannot be a screen to hide personal gaps in a field, an approach, or a discipline; Digital Humanities cannot fill them. Digital Humanities are another “thing.”

1 A critical Assessment of DH Definitions

Part of some scholars’ suspicion around Digital Humanities comes, in my view, from the nature of the “thing.” Certainly the expression itself is in fashion, as many attempts at definition – often very different – circulate in academic circles, and sometimes it is used inappropriately, for example as a kind of label to attract funds. But a survey of references shows clearly that “Digital Humanities” (DH) has been in use since the early 2000s. This expression functions as an umbrella concept, with a wide variety of usages, from the most general to the most particular. In sum, DH corresponds to an emerging field in the humanities and social sciences, a teaching program, a set of digitalized sources, a new platform, a methodology or many methods, and simply an informatics tool, including use of basic functions on a personal computer. In this last perspective, everybody would be considered a “DHer”! The wide scope of definitions has contributed to the ambivalent image of DH in the academic domain. But after more or less fifteen years of use, the skeptical view towards DH can no longer be sustained. Indeed, it can be located with more precision in relation to the academic fields. DH as a “thing” is not out of these fields, but it has links to them which I will characterize more precisely.

Firstly, among the numerous references to DH over more than one decade, many focus on defining the term. At a minimum we can say that there is a dispute at the core of DH: are they a field? Are they a set of methods? These questions are often the main problem for the DH skeptic. However, they do not completely reflect the complexity of the debates. A better formulation is between those who view DH as a complementary field in academic research

I have in mind the seminal book of Foucault 1966, Les mots et les choses.


The works are so numerous that M.G. Kirschenbaum calls them “genre pieces” which are to be studied in the epistemological perspective (Kirschenbaum 2010).

In an article published on May 8, 2011, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, suggested that DH be considered as singular, if it is a field, or plural, if it is many methods (Fitzpatrick 2011b, <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Humanities-Done-Digitally/127382/> , last accessed February 11, 2016). In the present article, I have chosen to use the plural but without consideration of this debate.