On the Precipice of the Digital Cliff: Christian Wachter’s *Geschichte digital schreiben: Hypertext als non-lineare Wissensrepräsentation in der Digital History*

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On the Precipice of the Digital Cliff: Christian Wachter’s *Geschichte digital schreiben: Hypertext als non-lineare Wissensrepräsentation in der Digital History*

I should start by making clear that I am no expert on Digital History, hyper-text, or media theory. I have, however, been thinking about the Digital for some time now so this is not totally unfamiliar territory. Almost a decade ago as Director of the Center for the Humanities at Wesleyan University I led a Digital Humanities initiative which served as an incubator for innovative projects in the humanities and social sciences. During that time, I taught several seminars in the digital humanities, and worked with students and faculty to create and implement digital history laboratories and projects. In my book, *Haunting History: for a deconstructive approach to the past*, I devoted a chapter to the restrictions of analog publishing, which I think is akin to what Christian Wachter refers to as *Drucktext* and linear narrative in his book, as well as the potential for shifting to new modes of narrative and form which certainly includes hypertext, multivocal or multimodal texts, and multiple narratives so I will return to this in conversation with Christian’s book. Most recently, *History and Theory* published a theme issue in December 2022 on the topic of Digital History to which Christian contributed and we held an event at Brown University on March 3-4 to continue the conversation with the contributors including Christian.

This is all to say, that Digital History is very much on my mind and it was a real pleasure to read Christian’s book and I’m really looking forward to this discussion. *Geschichte digital schreiben* works on a number of levels and it is a testament to Christian’s scholarship that some of the topics covered are useful beyond the realm of digital history or hypertext. Here, I confess that I read a review of Christian’s book (perhaps I shouldn’t have) and I found there were two criticisms with which I disagreed. One is that the book is not appropriate for a general audience because of the technical discussion and the other is that Christian spent too much time on theoretical discussion of historical epistemology and media theory.

In regard to this second criticism, I thought the opening chapters were essential to understanding the intervention Christian wants to make in regard to hypertext and the fruitful possibility of multiple and multivocal narratives but also for understanding his later presentation of the case studies. Beyond this, and in a more general sense, the opening chapter on the epistemological issues of
historical representation rehearses some of the most important and difficult arguments in theory/philosophy of history over the nature of the past and our ability to represent it. To be sure, this opens the space in which his plea for a more robust implementation of digital history can be heard but it also stands as an account of these issues on their own. Similarly, the chapter on Media Theory does wonderful work introducing the key theoretical applications and models to someone less versed like myself while also bringing into focus the ways these apply to historical writing and representation be it analog or digital. The chapter serves as both a primer or introduction for someone like me but is also foundational for Christian’s larger argument.

In regard to the first point about the general audience...well, I may have a different sense of what a general reading public is and their level of sophistication but, even so, beyond the technical argument about hypertext, Christian’s book is also an intellectual history of hypertext providing the reader with an account of not only how it works but also how it came to prominence through figures like Vannevar Bush, Douglas Engelbart, Theodor Nelson and others. This is all to say that I learned a great deal from Christian’s book and was impressed by both the theoretical and empirical work done throughout.

Of course, it wouldn’t be a very good conversation if all I did was focus on points of agreement so in what follows I would like to address four issues, the first two in detail and the last two more quickly, as a sort of gentle...well, maybe not so gentle...provocation to draw Christian out because, to be honest, I think there is more to this book than Christian let’s on. To be blunt, the connecting thematic of what follows is that Christian’s framing argument makes quite modest claims one while the content of the book confronts the reader with something more audacious. I will try to sketch this out by following four areas of pursuit:

1. Extension vs. Change

2. The role and place of Josef Mitterer’s non-dualism in Christian’s book and argument

3. Some questions about his case studies

4. Digital History 1.0 vs. Digital History 2.0.

**1. Extension vs. Change**

Christian frames his book and his argument as a “plea” for hypertextual historiography but he does so with the caveat that the implementation of
hypertext should be seen as an extension or expansion of traditional historical narrative strategies and not a replacement of linear historical narratives. In doing so, Christian distinguishes his views from those of Jakob Krameritsch who argues that the implementation of multi-modal hypertext requires a postmodern theory of history (perhaps Gilles Deleuze?) and whose work serves as a foil throughout Christian’s study.4

In my book, Haunting History, I have a chapter called “The Analog Ceiling” which aligns with Christian’s diagnosis of the limits of analog publishing (Drucktext). My analysis differs in that I argue these analog practices force one into the sorts of linear narratives used in conventional history which reinforces a theory of history that aligns with those very linear narrative (ontological realism) for purposes of convenience rather than conviction. Our agreement continues, however, with regard to the fruitful possibilities of digital and non-linear strategies for the writing of history which in turn allow for multiple or multivocal narratives. This aligns with what I have called a theory of history polyphonic in this blog5 and elsewhere. Thus, I think there is a great deal of agreement between my assessment of print media/analog publishing (Drucktext) and that of Christian.

The place where we seem to diverge is with regard to whether the implementation of digital practices should be the impetus for a radical change in how we think about history as opposed to an extension of our current theories and methods. I don’t know the work of Krameritsch well enough to know whether I agree with him or not, but my own commitments tend toward the postmodern or at least to deconstruction and it is my view that a change in our understanding of history is inevitable. In Christian’s book, he does not want to replace conventional history, at least not explicitly, but to encourage the use of alternative tools and modes for the non-linear construction of historical work.

Here is where I hit upon my first question or perhaps confrontation. In the book, Christian speaks of a blind-spot and I think I may have detected one of his own because it strikes me that the analysis and prescriptions offered are more radical than the argument they serve. Digital hyper-text is promoted as the means to achieve non-linear, multiple histories that engage the reader as much as the author in pursuit of complex historical constructions whereas linear or classic sender-receiver models are not only questioned but shown to be inadequate for such complex histories. Much of what Christian offers is couched in the language of extension or expansion but actually asks for reconceptualization. One question that follows is about what the implementation of hypertextual strategies does to
narrative and what this then does to conventional history and/or theory? It seems to me that there is a knock on effect and perhaps even a tipping point if the sorts of changes Christian calls for in the book are enacted (cost, technical obstacles, and other material considerations notwithstanding).

It may be that I am reading into Christian’s book what I want to find, but one place where this tension between rapprochement and revision comes to a head is in his use of the “blindspot” (*blinde Fleck*). When I first read the book, I took the “blind-spot” to be the inadequacies that result from traditional linear history which necessarily reduce the complexity and multiplicity of the past event rendering them singular such that the multiplicity is no longer visible. But at other times, the “blind spot” seems more modest, restricted to the ability to determine which media is best suited to which form of knowledge investigation. I honestly don’t know which of these is Christian’s emphasis or whether the two understandings can be held at the same time?

### 2. The role and place of Josef Mitterer’s non-dualism in Christian’s book and argument

But this issue of change vs. extension/expansion leads me to my second point of engagement regarding the philosophy of Josef Mitterer which is another place where I find the content or perhaps the ramifications of the book to be more radical than the explicit argument.

In the early sections of the book, Christian works through narrative strategies of representation which could be placed under the titles of first, the correspondence theory of representation where the reality of the past event coincides with the representation of that event, and second, radical constructivism where the construction of the event in the present dictates the properties of that event in the past. In the conclusion there is a modified duality marked by the work of Johann Gustav Droysen on the one hand and that of Paul Ricoeur, Michel de Certeau, and Hayden White on the other. The point is that Christian finds both models inadequate and thus opts for the ‘non-dualism’ or ‘non-dualistic’ constructivism of Mitterer and Siegfried Schmidt.

At one level, this makes perfect sense because Christian is ultimately interested in questions of narrative or aesthetic construction rather than issues of epistemology or ontology. The non-dualistic constructivism enables him to discuss the construction of history and analyze differing strategies of representation without
entering debates about the truth status of those representations or the status of the past. It also allows Christian to work on a constructivist platform without necessarily subscribing to the epistemological/ontological commitments that radical constructivism entails. Ideally, the conclusions Christian draws from his analysis should be applicable regardless of one's particular commitments: realist or constructivist.

Christian deploys a non-dualistic constructivism in the service of a praxis oriented investigation where questions of plausibility and adequacy are paramount. In doing so, however, Christian completely avoids the epistemological and/or ontological problems about the status of the past by keeping the focus on the practical application of hyper-text for the writing of history. The issue is the coherence of the design and media rather than the relation between historical representation and reality. But this leads to an important question that needs to be answered: Is Christian fully committed to Mitterer's non-dualistic model?

I am no expert on Mitterer but, as I understand it, the power of his account is that he does away with the correspondence between the thing represented and the representation of that thing. Mitterer's basic argument is that the description of an object and the object under description are the same. The weak version of this position is that Mitterer does not want to deny or overcome the distinctions between language and reality, word and object, between what we talk and what we talk about. He is rather interested in when, how, and why these distinctions are introduced into our discourse. The strong version of this position, however, is that the correspondence of "reality" to "representation" is a faulty dualism and that the solution is an understanding that relies solely on descriptions where it is the description which changes the object described.

To be fair, I understand the utility of cutting off the intractable problem of correspondence to focus entirely on which media are most appropriate to which cases as a means of description, and non-dualism allows Christian to do this. It makes sense for the book.

But the question remains as to whether he fully shares Mitterer's commitments to non-dualism? I ask because, if so, Christian isn't actually avoiding the epistemological/ontological issues (or the debate between realism and constructivism) but committing to a third way where any difference between representation and the thing represented is dismissed. This is a fascinating position but also a controversial one that has ramifications on what "history" or "the past" is.
Under such an understanding, does it matter whether the representation is digital or analog or is it simply that Christian sees this as a means to distinguish between the different descriptors (analog vs. digital) and what they do the past (the object described)? How does Christian’s assessment of the “special epistemological status” of the past’ work in this non-dualist model? If the descriptions all take place in the present (and a future present), what, if anything, could be different about the past? Isn’t dualism reintroduced once Christian commits to the special nature of the past event which places pressure on the ability to adjudicate whether it has been faithfully represented? And how does one reconcile Christian’s argument with Mateusz Fafiński’s claim that digital facsimiles are “entities separate from the sources they aim to represent.” The very creation of a digital facsimile is a complex process of remediation”8 This is to say that in digital production the object changes so as to create two distinct and different objects. How does this metamorphosis fit in with Christian or Mitterer’s theoretical scaffold? Finally, I want to note that non-dualism is an epistemological model to which most conventional historians do not subscribe and in this sense the argument about hypertext as an extension or expansion of conventional linear history requires a total re-evaluation of those epistemological grounds.

3. Some questions about his case studies

If we turn to the case studies that Christian discusses in his book, they work well for the argument that digital history in general and hypertext in particular are an extension or expansion, not a replacement, of existing historical conventions. But one could argue that this is because these examples are all adventurous in the ways they use available digital technology but modest in terms of methodological or theoretical innovation. Of course, it is also the case that many of the examples presented by Christian (The Victorian Web, The Valley of the Shadow, Florida Memory) are early adopters of hypertext some of which are more like archives or repositories than multi-modal history.

In his article for the H&T theme issue on Digital History, Stefan Tanaka provides the example of an advertisement from the fifties about the house of the future as an analogy to the sorts of projects Christian discusses. The image is of a housewife cleaning the house of the future by washing everything with a hose. This depicts the possibility of technological innovation, but that innovation maintains the existing structure. The miracle of modern materials makes housework easy; the woman is still a housewife. Similarly, the technological innovations allow the
historian to do many things with greater ease, but the historian is still a conventional historian. In Tanaka’s words, “The ubiquity of digital media and the centuries-long acceptance of technology as improvement has obscured our ability to see technology’s tendency to also maintain the status quo.”

Again, it is not that I think one necessarily needs to follow Krameritsch’s call for a post-modern network (though I am postmodern in my leaning and this is my conclusion in Haunting History) but that the existence of digital scholarship and hyper-textual possibilities are already changing what history is even if they are being constrained by what I call the “analog ceiling.” I wonder whether there isn’t more daylight between the sorts of multiple complex narratives Christian proposes as history writing, the multivocal or nodal structures for which he advocates, and the databases presented in the majority of the case studies which do not live up to the sophistication or potential offered in Christian’s discussion of plot and narrative.

4. Digital History 1.0 vs. Digital History 2.0.

I will conclude in a hopefully more playful way by wondering about what would have happened if Christian had ranged out a little from the confines of the book. To think about where hypertext and digital history can take us. To return to Tanaka, the emphasis on hypertext is what he refers to as Digital History 1.0 where the emphasis was on building up the technology and applying it to web based applications such as on-line data bases and hypertextual publications. But Tanaka also references what he calls Digital History 2.0 which emphasizes new argumentative forms. Here we encounter different assumptions about the archive and the ways it is built and thus accessed. Different assumptions about the “author” whether in collaborative endeavors between designers and scholars or where the “author” is actually working with ready made programs or platforms that are in a sense pre-authored (Omeka and Scalar might fit this description as do many search engines). We might also think of new forms of historical engagement and argument via image, sound, or as video games. And finally, arguments produced entirely digitally by Artificial Intelligence such as those by Chatbots which are causing such panic among teachers of history. Christian touches on some of these possibilities in his book but I think it is worth considering how the development of Digital History 2.0 impacts his argument. I am especially interested in whether it might lead Christian to consider a greater epistemological shift in our understanding of what history is and who historical authors are? Here again, I think this is a logical extension of the work in Geschichte digital schreiben.
Christian has provided us with a stimulating, challenging, and incredibly insightful book and one that left me wanting more. Perhaps as a final thought experiment we could imagine how this book might have been different had it been written in the digital mode for which Christian advocates in his Drucktext. Would this have been preferable? Are there things that could have been achieved if the book had been born “digital”? Are there aspects that would have been lost in digital format? Would the argument have changed? Christian Wachter has taken us to the precipice of the digital cliff, it is our decision as to whether we jump.

This blog contribution is the revised version of the comment by the author at the Domino Talk with Christina Wachter on Geschichte digital schreiben held on 1 February 2023 at the Center for Theories in Historical Research (Bielefeld University). Further information here (URL: https://blogs.uni-bielefeld.de/blog/geschichte/entry/01_02_2023_um_18).

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Tags: Digital History / Hypertextual Historiography / Knowledge Representation

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4 Ibid., 214.
6 Wachter, Geschichte digital schreiben, 57.
7 Ibid., 300.
10 Ibid., 6.