

# [Re]Constructing Lost Realities, Possible Worlds and Future Perspectives Through Digital and Public Humanities

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## **1 Responding to the Challenges of a Scholarly Field (and Beyond)**

As our scholarly enterprise in the domain of Digital and Public Humanities turns three years old, the world just started recovering from the pandemic and slipped into a bloody war in Europe that is affecting millions of people around the globe. Whether humanists can do anything at all might be questionable, but we believe that academia is called to offer an example of scientific rigour, factual objectivity, and even outspoken courage in telling what research outcomes plainly suggest. We definitely will not restore peace at once, but at least we can contribute to strengthening society's belief in a kind of truth that is grounded in ethical principles, hard work, and deep research. In a time of easy-peasy media opinions, rampant fake news, and unrestrained web trolls, this volume is a paramount contribution to which particularly Digital and Public humanists are called to (Storchan 2022). For this reason, it is all the more enlightening to see successful coalitions under unusual constellations between dig-

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This introduction paper was mutually agreed on by the authors who acted as Editors of *magazén's* volume 2022, divided in two issues, with the help of the journal's editorial board.

ital humanists and the public press as in the case of the unveiling of identities of so-called ‘QAnon conspiracists’. These conspiracists have been claiming that a group of satanic and cannibalistic US democrats operates a global child sex trafficking ring – a theory at the very heart of a movement of believers which led, eventually, to the attack on the US capitol in January 2021. Commissioned by *The New York Times*, a team consisting of a mediaeval romance philologist and forensic linguists applied stylometric methodology developed for the attribution of authorship of anonymous works to a corpus of social media posts and tweets. Comparing the results to the style of various far-right activists they identified the profiles of subordinate figures, despite their own claims of being high profile political agents (Kirkpatrick 2022; Cafiero, Camps 2022).

Even during the various COVID waves raging through the world we resolved not to respond directly to the challenges that humankind was facing, as this would risk accommodating or even coercing scientific views into an emotionally strained debate without taking the necessary distance. On the contrary, we preferred to tackle wide topics that lay at the heart of our growing interdisciplinary field and, at the same time, offer a key to understanding the functioning of cultural and social constructs that shape the way humankind reacts to change and development.

In this sense, in the first year of this journal, 2020, we asked digital and public humanists to reflect on how, in their view, the tendency towards methodological fusion and cross-contamination shape the various research approaches that are present in our field (Fischer, Mantoan, Tramelli 2020). In 2021, for our second yearly edition, we looked beyond the melting-pot concept to understand what new balance between the forces or stakeholders involved has been reached, such as to render the consolidation phase that the Digital and Public Humanities is currently experiencing at an institutional level (Fischer, Mantoan, Tramelli 2021). For our third year, which also comes at the end of the excellence initiative of the Italian Ministry of University and Research that our centre is based upon, we then decided to shift our investigation of the field towards the research practices employed. In doing so, we are hoping to have closed the circle of a journey in the Digital and Public Humanities that started by looking at theoretical stances, in 2020, then pondering the institutionalisation process on the way, in 2021, and finally digging into the schemes and models of research that are defining our scholarly domain, in 2022.

Hence, this year’s two semestral issues of *magazén* are devoted to practical aspects in the Digital and Public Humanities, though again starting with a key concept that turns into a thematic *fil rouge*. The 2022 volume is thus entitled *[re]constructions*, focusing on the wide array of practices that prospered in our wide field for [re]configuring lost realities, [re]creating long gone dimensions, [re]building likely

scenarios, [re]considering exhibition settings, and [re]covering disappeared traces of historical and cultural value. Indeed, over the last decade the principle of [re]construction by means of scholarly expertise set the pace of many recent research projects in the field of Digital and Public Humanities (Dupré et al. 2020). Particularly digital tools and interdisciplinary collaborations provided the opportunity to [re]compose varied sources and [re]visualise research data, offering unprecedented insights into historical, societal, cultural, artistic, archaeological, and political events. Evolving research technologies and consolidated methodological approaches in the Digital and Public Humanities allowed scholars to test their analytical abilities against a set of novel possibilities to make their results public, immersive, and appreciated virtually (Beacham, Denard 2003). In this regard, Digital and Public Humanities lay at the crossroads of the kind of speculation, intuition, and invention that comes with every act of scholarly [re]construction, seen as a creative task steered by scientific rigour (Jenkins 2004).

The papers selected were submitted as a result of an international call for abstracts and subsequent double-blind peer reviews to examine the concept of ‘[re]constructions’ as a procedural and constitutional peculiarity of Digital and Public Humanities. Our authors were invited to submit contributions spanning from theoretical debates to methodological reflections, also comprising the examination of particular case studies from the heterogeneous domains of digital and public history, art, archaeology, textual scholarship, cultural heritage and GLAM studies. A true symbol of this [re]constructing attitude are the square brackets, which stand as a visual sign and signifier of the ‘gap-filling’ and ‘meaning-making’ tasks humanists always aim to accomplish in their research work. In a sense, digital and public humanists have the privilege of [re]framing their disciplines in various ways, such as: filling the gap of missing text fragments and traditions, retracing the dynamics of historical processes and events, retrieving dispersed artworks and collections, reconstructing lost archaeological sites and artefacts. With this third volume for *magazén*, we drew particular attention to the public aspects of such endeavours, given that successful [re]constructions hold firm to the principle of research dissemination and audience involvement from their very inception, rather than having public access just as a final by-product of scholarly work. In this regard, we constantly aim at upholding our mission to turn *magazén* into an open platform that fosters an international and open debate, a place for sharing and arguing such as in the public house at the time of the Venetian Republic, the so-called ‘magazén’, as should by now be familiar to our readership (Tassini [1863] 1970, 364-5).

## 2 Rescuing, Representing, and Visualising as Modes of Reconstruction

The authors chosen for the first issue of the present volume address the concept of [re]constructions analysing different case studies. The first contribution by Wouter Kreuze is dedicated to a collection of handwritten sixteenth-century newsletters from Venice which have been preserved in the State Archive of Florence. The application of digital methodologies and the analysis of large sets of metadata help to reconstruct the unknown paths of these anonymous sources and to gain knowledge about the compilation, travel times and circulation of news in early modern Europe.

The second article by Fiorella Bulegato and Marco Scotti focuses on the personal archive of Ettore Sottsass jr (1917-2007). The presented project aims at digitising and inventorying the fragmented and dispersed work of the Italian architect and designer in order to [re]construct the archive as a complete and coherent network of projects and activities and to provide free online access to objects and unpublished documents to both researchers and a wider audience.

In the third article, Martina Bürgermeister is examining the imaginative geographies of travel literature for reconstructing urban change in the nineteenth century. Transforming travel guidebooks of the city of Graz into digital topographic representations, Bürgermeister compares and analyses the perception and experiences of urban space and spatial relationships of a European city during the period of the industrial revolution in a diachronic way.

The fourth contribution by Arianna Farina reflects on a very different set of urban experiences dispersed in time. Evaluating various methods and fields of application to visualise fading Renaissance paintings on the facades in the city of Rome, she opens new research perspectives regarding the digital reconstruction of 'absent heritage'.

In the fifth contribution of this volume, Samuel Huskey elaborates on data visualisation and the representation of knowledge concerning ancient texts. He argues that representing textual data from a born-digital critical edition by reconstructing the traditional format of a printed edition can help to better understand the tradition of Latin works and to illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of both platforms.

In the last article, Torsten Roeder discusses the difficulties and opportunities of preserving *diskmags*, a special genre of electronic magazines published on floppy disks in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Roeder points out that reconstruction in terms of software emulation and hardware preservation is the basis for creating scholarly editions of the original artefacts, providing enlightening insights in the evolution of the digital culture as we know it today.

Once again, and for the third year in a row, we wish to express our gratitude to all scholars and experts involved in the making of this volume: our advisory board members, the selected contributors, the many peer reviewers, all members of the editorial board, as well as our publisher's team. Let us hope the second issue of this volume, due in December 2022, might come at a more peaceful time, when international law has been restored and humanity will be ready to embark in a process of mending and [re]construction.

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