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Dig-it-all Tropes

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Dig-it-all Tropes

Part of the journal section “Forum: The Digital Turn: A Roundtable”

David Grant, “Dig-it-all Tropes”

[Slide 1] I am going to basically say everything that Dr. Lamberti said, only in a different key, as it were. I would much rather explore some of these theoretical things but hopefully not over anyone’s head. To start, I will try to give you an understanding of where I’m coming from in terms of looking at the turns here. Any good English major knows a turn is just a trope. So, what are some of the major turns that are going on within digital studies? I think there’s a lot of anxiety. Folks have been saying large-scale pronouncements about a revolution going on in terms of communication that we haven’t seen since the invention of the printing press. Those of you who know some of the history of that may know there’s debate over whether it was the printing press that caused things like the French Revolution or the Enlightenment in Europe, or whether it was the availability of paper. Again, a lot of these academic and historical debates are sort of beside the point, whether one thing caused another or something else. Instead there was broad, ecological, and systemic changes that really were more of an evolution. So why do we need to pinpoint one thing or another? Something I think the digital allows us to see is the more dynamic back and forth, rather than looking for a particular cause or effect. In essence, there’s a turn right there. These are the kinds of turns that I look at in my scholarship.

Recently I came across an interesting thing; that there is now a way to control cockroaches with your cellphone. **[Slide 2]** Unfortunately, it’s not on a mass scale yet, however, you never know what’s coming down the line. Now, there is kind of a dark, seedy underbelly, and the ethical implications of this are rather vast. However, the company that invented the RoboRoach[®], in their self-interest and marketing, they say that this is a way to get people interested in neuroscience. That may be the reason for this technology, or maybe it’s extermination; I don’t know. There’s some scary things in here. But I think it’s our modern day Gregor Samsa coming to the fore here. We become a bit more like the cockroach even as we put these electrodes onto its surface. We have to scrape away its exoskeleton, but we can do simple commands: left, right, forward, these kinds of things. I think this is emblematic of a lot of digital technology, if you think about other artists and the ways in which these artists have connected their bodies in order to use them along with digital technology.

[Slide 3] This is another one of those major turns that is really occupying digital humanities and digital scholarship and work at this point. For example, there is the artist Stelarc. What he did several years ago was essentially he hooked up these electrodes to his body and his body sends out these digital pings. And so his presence of the body is presence-ing in this wider, interconnected internet. It shows up in all these digital displays. I would say he’s very interested in how the body and the digital are combining. He’s really out there at the forefront. Again, we’re always looking for ways in which

the digital is connected to the body even as we ironically talk about the digital in terms of the virtual or as the transcending of the body. In fact we are becoming much more intimate rather than transcendent, and these are just some of the few cases.

So why bodies? [\[Slide 4\]](#) That's one of the big questions. Why this turn to the body? Why is the digital so interested in bodies? I would say we can trace this back to Marshall McLuhan's "Understanding Media: The Extension of Man." Just look at the very title there, of the digital apparatus, the way we have linked together cell phone, wireless transmitter, the backpack of the RoboRoach[®], the way Stelarc articulates his body along a wider host of digital wires and wider communications; this is just prosthetic extension of our nervous system. Exactly what William Burroughs did in his *Naked Lunch*; he showed that our nerves, our internal sensory apparatus has gone outside. We have externalized that sensory apparatus through digital technology and the web and the way in which digital technology migrates and connects us together. So our nerves surround us; this often causes a vertigo in the object, a blur between subject and object. We often don't know where one begins and where one ends. That is initially one of the problems as we move into this more digital world. Where does Stelarc the artist end and where does his product of art actually begin? These things are almost inseparable.

This follows the same sort of theoretical path that Bruno Latour describes. He studies the sociology of science, and he talks about how nature, society, and discourse are all blurring together. We've never been modern the way modernism or modernists have talked about it. But the natural and social discourse all come together in any instance of apprehension of events. So we have the physical and the *logos* as well as the talk about them. Dr. Lamberti today mentioned her discourse that the stories we tell are integral to these things. It is not just simply that you can be a scientist. The scientists themselves have stories about what the work is they're doing, about why their work is important, about how many lives they might be able to save by putting electrodes in backpacks on cockroaches and testing it out, for example.

But then there's the ethical, social dimensions of this. What kinds of ideologies are there? What kinds of wider impacts do we have with this kind of thing? And of course, what about the discourses that come together and bind it to make it all possible? These are our states of being, our ontology. Ontology means our way of being at any sort of moment or understanding of what it means to be something. There's always, even in the cellphone itself, a story to be told, not just the technical object.

So, all this brings out a huge focus on affect, feeling. [\[Slide 5\]](#) Aristotle's appeals are always there in any kind of encounter that we might have, be that an encounter with pings that an artist might send through electrodes or an encounter that we might have with a web text. Or even the encounter of ourselves with the technological itself. We can look at them through Aristotle's rhetorical appeals. *Ethos*, *logos*, *pathos* are roughly parallel with orality, literacy, electracy. Broadly, and this is sort of my own theory that I'm working out, is that orality has more harmonics. Orality, when we talk or as I talk to you here, I will try and make the harmonics of this really emphasize a note of ethos, "I'm credible, I know what I'm talking about. I'm wearing a nice shirt, I use big words, and I cite all the right people." There's an interpersonal thing. I can move around, I can look you in the eye, I can pick up my cell phone and accentuate my point. This is all highlighting the *ethos* of my speech because that's the rhetorical situation.

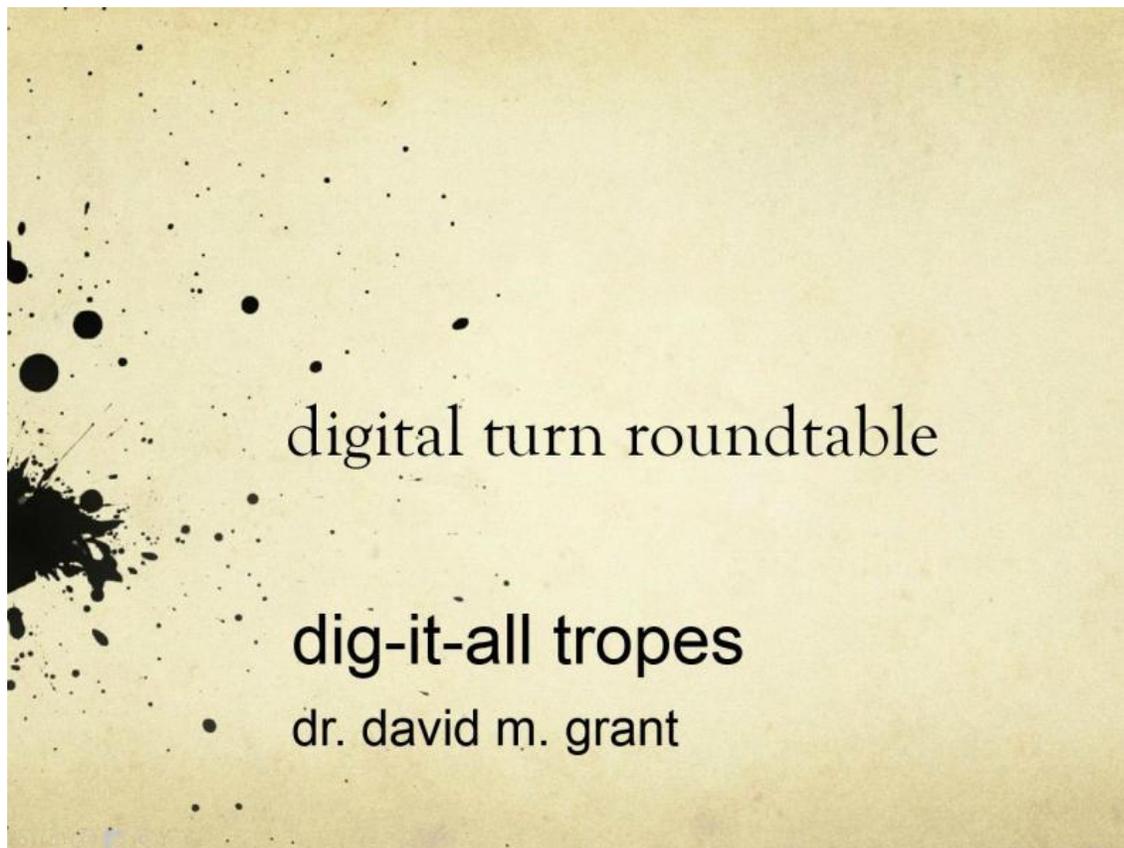
In literacy, if this goes to UNiveritas or if I should write this up for a print journal, I would accentuate those notes to reason, or *logos*, the judgment. Folks can kind of rally around it; there will be a social “yes, we can objectively look at this as a group. You did all the right things, you supported, you used the right words. You make a sound judgment.” And others will make a sound judgment on mine.

I would say we’re currently moving into a phase of electracy. It’s Greg Ulmer’s term, he’s a professor of English at the University of Florida. And following all this we can see that the *pathos*, or affect, is the rhetorical situation of web and electracy. That’s the rhetorical situation of the digital turn. It’s emphasizing affect. How many of you go online and you feel for the Philippines, you feel for those people that got leveled in the hurricane, you feel for what’s going on in Syria? We want our outrage, we want to know as the government shuts down, we want to go in and say “What did those terrible people do now?” And now it’s the Obamacare roll out? Well, how competent can they be? This drives the whole thing, but it’s not all of it. There are these other things that always go along with it. You can temper it with reason, you can temper it with character and *ethos*, but the motivating drive, the initial thing is affect.

What does that all sum up for teaching? These things of course can change in twenty years from now. We are in the middle of an evolution so its actual story cannot really be told until we get to the end. It’s like this example I gave to my students earlier when I said, “Imagine in Star Wars, if Luke, Han, Leia, and Chewbacca had sat in the trash compactor and said, ‘So, how’s this story going to be told?’” They just couldn’t do that. So, we are now sort of in the trash compactor. We have to know we’re in there with the RoboRoaches®. It’s not a bad place to be. But for teaching, we have to think about *inventio* -- or rhetorical invention in Latin -- about what can be represented? Turned another way, what can be apprehended? I use some theoretical jargon there to grasp that the apprehension of things is important because that’s part of representation. Part of the story is how one grasps it. These things will be embodied. How does this occur? What assemblages are there? What ways can we use a digital camera and microphone to apprehend a person speaking? These technical and material objects are very important when you’re composing and dealing with digital texts and their creation, dissemination, and such things.

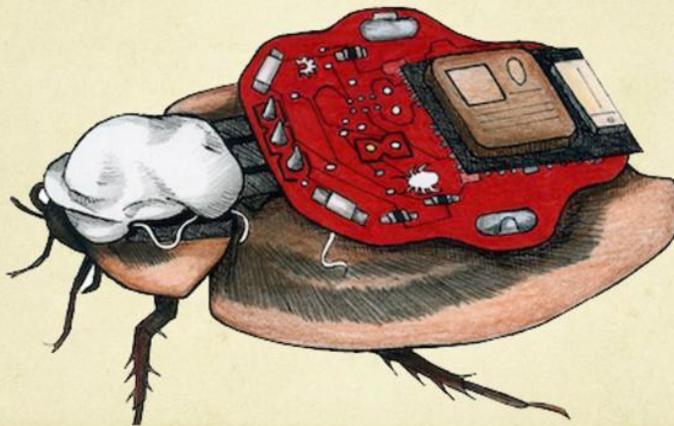
And we have to be reflective about what happens in this apprehension. Is the microphone good or is it not? Are there ways in which we add another filter? Do we need to put the video through some sort of special effects generator? Or what other kinds of mechanisms can happen during even the apprehension process? We have to think about the feeling, about the *pathos*, because every time you click on a webpage a new piece of information is generated and, hence a new feeling about that information. And that’s the same thing when we’re dealing with any kind of digital turn. What’s produced in this moment? It’s not just the text itself, it’s often texts about the text. So what kinds of things get produced? What sorts of meta-data are we giving the NSA as we go about our daily lives?

And feedback: how is this loop made? How can we get more reflective about it? Or close that loop so that students understand, “Yes, look at all these things that happen. Here’s the full range and dimension of even just a simple web page”? It’s not just the page, it’s the code, it’s the links, it’s the meta-data, it’s the ways in which people use design for rhetorical purposes. We need to help them create a consciousness about that so that they can, as Dr. Lamberti said, tell their own narratives. To do so involves these turns, these loops. It’s not about where we are but about how we turn.



Slide 1

case of the robo-roach[®]

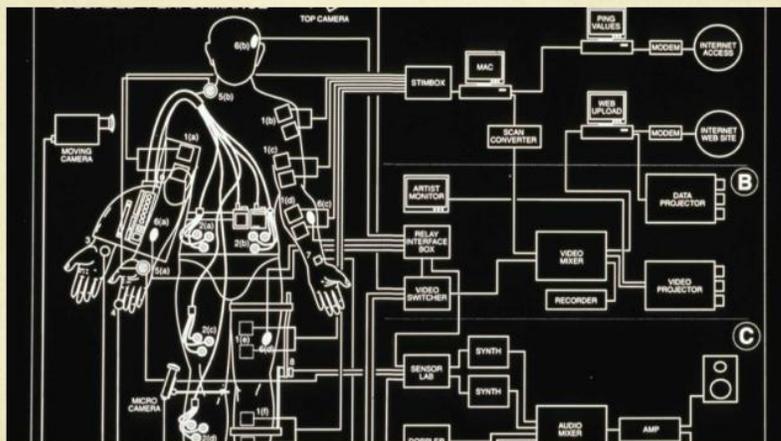


<https://backyardbrains.com/products/roboroach>

Slide 2

new composition-ists

Stelarc



<http://www.artelectronicmedia.com/document/stelarc-ping-body>

Slide 3

embodiment

- Why bodies?
- McLuhan; *The Extensions of Man*.
- Prosthetics, extensions of sensory apparatus
- Our nerves surround us

Slide 4

affect

- Aristotle's rhetorical appeals always already present
- **Orality**: ethos (character); trust; interpersonal; responsive.
- **Literacy**: logos (reason); judgment; social; objective.
- **Electracy**: pathos (affect); feeling; intuitive;

Slide 5



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