Databases, Revenues, & Repertory: The French Stage Online, 1680–1793 • Databases, Revenues, & Repertory: The French Stage Online, 1680–1793

Comment – Back to the Future

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What kind of knowledge can we gain from digital humanities projects? This is one of the questions motivating the three essays in the section on “Interpreting Data, Visualizations, and Sound” in Sylvaine Guyot and Jeffrey S. Ravel’s collection *Databases, Revenues, and Repertories: The French Stage Online, 1680-1793*. Each essay offers a different answer to this question, though perhaps the differences are not as great as they seem.

[Jeffrey S. Ravel](#) approaches this question as a historian, pointing out that the Comédie-Française Registers Project ([CFRP](#)) is merely the latest in a series of datification efforts, dating back to the eighteenth century.¹ Digitizing these data does not radically transform their content. We may witness an exponential increase in the quantity of information, but the quality of this information does not fundamentally change.

For [Jeffrey Peters](#), by contrast, the data visualizations of the [CFRP](#) represent a quasi-epistemological rupture with the kinds of knowledge we can access in the analogue world.² They are, he writes, an “opening into and of the new.” The user interfaces created by DH projects mediate between us and cultural objects, thereby radically transforming our experience of those objects.

Finally, [Juliette Cherbuliez](#) finds that the digital archive urges us to explore its absences.³ The more data there are, the more lacunae she finds. DH is interrogative: rather than provide answers, it begs questions. In her case, all the data about comings and goings at the Comédie-Française lead her to ask what they might tell us about the disappeared sounds of the theater.

To some extent, these responses to the [CFRP](#) (and to DH more generally) constitute distinct outlooks. To summarize grossly: *plus ça change*, for Ravel; *a tout change*, for Peters; and *que sais-je?* for Cherbuliez. But could it be that DH produces these three responses all at once? Rather than incompatible approaches, could they be complementary? In the remainder of this comment, I try to answer these questions affirmatively.

One of the great strengths of Ravel’s piece is that he historicizes what we like to think of, in our temporal provincialism, as a recent development. The spreadsheet may have only been around since the 1980’s, and data visualization has exploded in the past twenty years. But as historians of data remind us, some of our most cherished forms of data visualization have a venerable history.⁴ From William Playfair’s pie charts (1801)

to Charles-Joseph Minard's flow map of Napoleon's Russia campaign (1869)—to the recently rediscovered, gorgeous sociological charts of W.E.B. Du Bois⁵—visualizing data was already common in analogue culture.

The earlier endeavors to datify the registers of the Comédie-Française did not—as far as I can tell from Ravel's account—include explicit visualizations. But Ravel elegantly draws out how the tables they included already had a proto-visual quality. He quotes a book review from 1921 that described the data tables in Alexandre Joannidès's work, *La Comédie-Française de 1680 à 1920*, as depicting a “courbe devant les yeux.” Ravel's own analysis of Joannidès's table for the performances of Voltaire's plays between 1711 and 1900 highlights how they “tai[l] off precipitously after 1850,” a visual metaphor that nicely captures the pattern evident in the table itself, which almost produces a line graph. Ravel himself underscores how these print tables already function as a “user interface.”

This important work of historicization does not challenge Peters's argument, that the “interfacial” nature of the [CFRP](#) profoundly changes how we think about the artistic phenomena behind the data. Ravel's work can simply be understood as antedating the moment of this change. It did not take the shift to digital to introduce new relations between scholars and cultural objects.

Peters makes a number of additional claims, but I will focus on his argument that “graphic interface [is] a form of making and doing rather than a static mode of recognition.” This point highlights the ambiguous epistemological status of data. Like most data sources, the [CFRP](#) does not simply tell us “the facts.” Or rather, the facts that it conveys—here, financial receipts on a daily basis—do not provide us with unmediated access to theatrical reality. To make the data say anything about this reality requires “making and doing.” The data can help us form hypotheses about why certain plays fare better than others, but to test these hypotheses, we must turn to additional, external sources. In and of themselves, the data do not provide us with direct knowledge about the theater.

Where Peters ends with a reflection on the ontological status of the interface (what is the nature of the reality to which it refers?), Cherbuliez lingers on the epistemological value of the archive. What exactly can we learn from it, and, equally important, what can we not? The paragraph-long series of interrogations she offers up nicely capture her answer: digital archives do not provide us with firm conclusions, but elicit new questions. “Do comedies garner fewer sales than a tragedy?,” “Are Fridays slower than Wednesdays?,” are some of the questions Cherbuliez finds herself asking, before

settling on how the archive might help us think about the acoustic experience of theater-goers in eighteenth-century France.

As a use case of the archive, Cherbuliez's essay is particularly insightful for the methodological steps it takes. It is not what's *in* the archive that makes her wonder about sound. But only by scoping out the contents of the archive do its silences become apparent. These silences can take different forms. There may be gaps in the archives, or what Guyot and Ravel describe in their introduction to the volume as "lacunae in the historical record itself." It is when we are confronted with vast amounts of data that we can more easily identify what's missing. Another kind of silence occurs when we don't see or hear what we might have expected—in Cherbuliez's words, "when the data need another look." In some cases, this sort of silence might simply be a version of the first, but it is not always caused by a data fail. The anomalous can be mysterious, and set the researcher off sleuthing for answers. Finally, the existing data can highlight what *kinds* of other data are missing, as occurs when Cherbuliez considers daily receipts and finds herself wondering about sound.

What these three essays thus highlight, in their respective ways, is how datafication and quantification in the humanities do not necessarily draw us closer to the social sciences. Work in digital humanities need not privilege statistics. Numbers and percentages often serve as the point of departure for scholarly investigation, and do not provide the smoking gun. As Ravel reminds us, much of this work was already being conducted before the digital age. Just because an object is bright and shiny does not mean that it's new.

Footnotes

1. Jeffrey S. Ravel, ["The Comédie-Française by the Numbers, 1752-2020,"](#) in this volume. ↵
2. Jeffrey Peters, ["Looking at the Literary: Data-Driven Visualizations and the Comédie-Française Registers Project,"](#) in this volume. ↵
3. Juliette Cherbuliez, ["The Sound of Theater: Crowds, Acoustics, Oration,"](#) in this volume. ↵
4. See notably Daniel Rosenberg and Anthony Grafton, *Cartographies of Time: A Visual History of the Timeline* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010); more recently, see Paolo Ciuccarelli and Tommaso Elli, "Beyond Visualization," in Howard Hotson and Thomas Wallnig, eds., *Reassembling the Republic of Letters*

in the Digital Age: Standards, Systems, Scholarship (Göttingen: Göttingen University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.17875/gup2019-1146>. ↵

5. See Whitney Battle-Baptiste and Britt Earle, eds., *Du Bois's Data Portraits: Visualizing Black America* (Amherst: The W.E.B. Du Bois Center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst; New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2018). ↵