

Introduction

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ABSTRACT

This forum engages with the role of exactitude in humanities scholarship. Tracing a history of fascination with this epistemic virtue, the contributions to this forum on the “promises of exactitude” explore practices and potentials of exactitude across disciplines as well as novel, innovative fields of research in the humanities and arts. Contributions include discussions of the impact of early psychoanalysis on the epistemology of the humanities, pioneering digital humanists in the historical discipline, early instances of artistic research, and a look at the environmental humanities of today against the background of the emerging discipline of forestry in the first half of the nineteenth century. What all the articles have in common is a critical stance regarding the promises of exactitude. They critically explore both methodological potentials and interdisciplinary aspirations of these four new fields of humanities research and analyze the notions of exactitude in situated practice. Ultimately, these essays shed light on the promises of innovation and societal relevance across the humanities and shift attention to issues of responsibility and accountability in the history of the humanities.

What role does exactitude play in the history of humanities scholarship? Over the past decades, the history of the so-called exact sciences has been the object of critical study.¹ However, there has been very little reflection on the fact that the humanities have their own conceptions of methodological rigor of researching, describing, comparing, correcting, or narrativizing. Between 1790 and 1860,

1. See, e.g., Wise, *Values of Precision*; Hoffmann and Witthöft, *Genauigkeit und Präzision*.

the semantics of exactitude changed and differentiated in both the humanities and the sciences.² The epistemic virtue of exact and careful conduct along with the trust in meticulous and precise methods have yielded a novel self-understanding of humanities scholarship across disciplines ever since. Not only have ideals and promises of exactitude shaped the exact sciences, but the humanities have developed a notion and practices of exactitude (and its derivatives) in their own right. This development reflects a history of fascination and cross-pollination between the humanities, arts, and sciences, resulting in the emergence of entirely new fields of research.

Following the example of the research on the history of objectivity in the sciences, we are interested in historicizing the practices, ideals, and representations of “exactitude” in the humanities across different disciplines and media.³ In four specific case studies, the essays in this forum aim to understand how exactitude is engendered, claimed, or promised in specific media and materials. They ultimately show how notions of exactitude are at work in establishing research disciplines. Instead of defining exactitude as a static category, we analyze how exactitude is manifested in working procedures, visualizations, techniques, or epistemic surroundings. It figures in language and, over time, has developed a diverse rhetorical repertoire that is subject to critical study. The different ways scholars express their notions of exactitude matter. Do they speak of precision, accuracy, correctness, or veracity? Do they believe in control or care? Indeed, scholars addressed the exactitude of their methodical conduct differently, which helped stabilize scholarly authority across disciplines and made exactitude a practical and normative notion of good practice.

EXACTITUDE IN THE CONTEXT OF NEW RESEARCH DISCIPLINES

Since the nineteenth century, humanities disciplines have been striving for autonomy. Wilhelm Dilthey famously pleaded that the humanities have an epistemology of their own.⁴ However, aiming to define their own ideals and methods of scholarly rigor, many humanists looked for orientation in the exact sciences. Their critical engagement with prevalent promises of exactitude yielded different effects within the humanities disciplines that promoted the emergence of new questions as well as the redistribution of the body of humanist knowledge. The four essays in this forum engage with promising fields of inquiry within the modern humanities—digital humanities, psychoanalysis and

2. Krajewski, “Genauigkeit.”

3. Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*.

4. Bod, *New History of the Humanities*, 256–57; Bod and Kursell, “Introduction,” 338.

its reverberations in poststructuralism, environmental humanities, and artistic research—and approach them from a historical perspective. What these efforts to introduce new approaches and perspectives share is the claim for interdisciplinary innovation. These novel fields within the humanities were also attempts to speak to contemporaneous societal issues. But their striving to social and political relevance emerged *across* the competencies of established disciplines.

The first contribution to the forum, by Antonia von Schöning, approaches the history of digital humanities by looking at a case from mid-twentieth-century cliometrics and at the debate over historiographical methods based on big data and computation. She analyzes how a cliometric examination of slavery in America blocks out the entanglement of its statistical data, which is presented as unquestionable evidence, with a history of oppression and injustice. At the same time, this study of slavery claims to acknowledge aspects of history that were misrepresented and unknown. Reintroducing the epistemic context can detail how violence has been at the core of producing knowledge that promises cures and social justice. Mario Wimmer's essay traces the reverberations of the psychoanalytic notion that “the body speaks and speech hides” in poststructuralism. He looks first at how exact recordings of hysterical bodies in the Hôpital de la Salpêtrière silenced patients' voices before turning to how this primal scene of psychoanalysis became a fundamental precondition of poststructuralist thought. Lisa Cronjäger discusses the impact of perspectives from the humanities on mapping techniques in early nineteenth-century forestry. Balancing out the cutting of trees and the regrowth of forests was the main goal of sustainable forestry and was highly dependent on the overview that maps generate. These forestry methods were inspired by aesthetic reflections on how to represent a forest in a lucid and accurate way. The case study resonates with research questions that are at stake in today's environmental humanities. Finally, Aurea Klarskov takes on an early case of artistic research by looking at Marcel Duchamp's fascination with the philosopher of science Henri Poincaré's writing on determinism and chance. She traces the artist's play with operations of chance, which are set against a visually determined backdrop, and describes them as artistic experiments. Within this intersection of science and art emerges a direct through line to the humanist discipline that we call artistic research today: the both menacing and productive qualities of the exactitude that emerges in the artist's games of chance helped pave the way for research open to ideas and methods from the humanities, the arts, and the sciences.

These case studies from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century contribute to the history of humanities in that they showcase examples of fluid boundaries between the exact sciences and the humanities. These examples from art and science, history and computing, environment and history, as well as psychoanalysis and poststructuralism are crucial for current debates on the canon of humanities. In all the

cases at hand, the claim for exactitude was instrumental in establishing novel fields of research that challenged the self-understanding of humanities disciplines.

CRITICAL ACCOUNTS OF EXACTITUDE

All the contributions to the forum discuss methodological potentials and interdisciplinary aspirations. Their common goal is to trace the promises of these new fields by analyzing the notions of exact methods and practices involved. What all the essays share is a critical stance toward these promises and their often problematic implications. They show that the practices of exactitude involved in establishing new fields of research promise a variety of things: knowledge and power, social justice and control over natural resources, innovation and originality. It is therefore crucial to take a close look at the epistemic surroundings of knowledge production.⁵ In particular, historians of the humanities should pay attention to the epistemic violence, biases, and exclusivity at the core of methods and techniques that are presented as exact.

A historical perspective on the promises and phantasms of exactitude allows for a critical reflection on practices, media, and methods today. The essays collected here analyze a dialectic of ambitious claims and disappointed expectations as a driving force in the formation of new, influential branches of the humanities.

Ultimately, this presents us with a challenging question: Since exactitude remains an ideal in research and teaching, how can we respond to and reflect on its promises and engage with it in the humanities today? To account for this issue, historians of the humanities have the responsibility to consider the conditions under which epistemic virtues such as exactitude emerge. Therefore, we suggest taking into account the history of epistemic surroundings and the renegotiations of epistemic values in order not to be blind to the power relations at play in the knowledge formation across the humanities.

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5. On epistemic surroundings, see Wimmer, "Afterlives of Scholarship." On knowledge infrastructures, see Star, *Ecologies of Knowledge*.

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