Intersecting Fields
Proximal Reading

a network-scaled approach to digital literature analysis

Christopher B. Menadue
ORCID ID: orcid.org/0000-0003-4794-8280

Intersecting Fields Conference
01 November 2017
Townsville, JCU CASE
The application of quantitative techniques to aid text analysis in the literary humanities

From Burrow’s *Conjectures into Criticism* (1987) to Franco Moretti’s *Graphs Maps and Trees* (2005), and beyond...
Each of the New Critics emphasized his own set of concerns and priorities... even at the New Criticism’s height, the New Criticism was wrongly perceived as unified and consistent in its approaches (Gang, 2011)
Far from opening new perspectives, distant reading may actually blunt our critical faculties, inviting us to inadvertently adopt biased views of literature under the mask of objectivity. (Ascari, 2014)
Unlike most of his critics, Moretti is therefore aware that a theory cannot be falsified by empirical facts... Like any proper theory, Moretti’s is the strongest where it seems the weakest... (Habjan, 2012)
wherever you are...

proximal reading

We can change our parameters and our questions simply by reading more: more widely, more deeply, more eclectically, more comparatively. Browsing in addition to quantification; incessant rather than distant reading: the unsystematic nature of our discipline is actually its salvation (Trumpener, 2009)
degrees of separation

...and the random walk
You are going to need a bigger research group.
intersecting lines

rhizomes
slices
granules
temporality
applied digital humanities

what do we want to know?

what can literature tell us about it?

what are the limitations?
corpus text

...internally and self-referentially consistent
...defines research scope
...reader characteristics are distinguishable
science fiction as a text corpus

there is an interdisciplinary research relationship between science fiction and human culture (Menadue & Cheer, 2017)
science fiction magazines

bounded scope and unbounded content

changes in recurring themes and ideas reflect social and cultural change (Menadue, 2017)

advertising, letters and editorials: outward reading content (Scholes & Wulfman, 2010)
analysing the science fiction magazine
1. **Your research project here**
   - **Select corpus**
     - **Prepare corpus texts**
       - **Ask research question**
         - **Assess text output**
           - **Too much**
           - **Too little**

2. **Explore texts**
   - **Decide on degrees of separation**
     - **Explore too much**
     - **Explore just right**
     - **Explore exciting**

3. **Classify findings**
   - **Theme**
   - **Content**
   - **Style**

4. **Interpret findings**

5. **Tell everyone who will listen**
digital tools for non-specialists

Excel for statistics and cataloguing
Google forms for surveys
Nvivo or other CAQDAS
wordcloud generators
Summary

It's (not so) complicated

Literary corpus text is a good place to look for cultural insights.

Computers count and sort much more quickly than humans, but humans are better at interpretation.

Quantitative, empirical methods eliminate selection bias.

Qualitative analysis discovers meaning.

Integrating both is a logical approach to text analysis.
References


Figures and Images


