

MLA 2014 Special Session Proposal

Literary Criticism at the Macro-Scale: Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches to Authorship and Textual Circulation

Andrew Piper, Associate Professor, McGill University (presenter)

Hoyt Long, Assistant Professor, University of Chicago (presenter)

Ted Underwood, Professor, University of Illinois, (respondent)

Haun Saussy, Professor, University of Chicago (respondent)

Over the past decade, the digitization of very large corpuses of literary texts have transformed the analytical possibilities of literary criticism. In the process, they have introduced the problem of *scale* into our analytical framework. Rather than residing within a single binary framework of large versus small or close versus distant, we are interested in exploring the movement across scales. How can we successfully move between the traditional scales of textual analysis, such as close reading or historicism, and what Matthew Jockers and Franco Moretti have dubbed “macro-analysis” based on larger collections of literary data?

Our papers leverage large collections of literary data to experiment with different scales of interpretation (what we call “scalar reading”) by integrating computational methods, such as network analysis, with close reading and literary biography. The two papers, in particular, focus on questions of authorship and textual circulation across two different time periods and two different transnational contexts. In framing these questions through a dual attention to literary categories such as *style* or *influence*, as well quantitative paradigms of *social networks* and *social structure*, we want to ask how writers and texts operate within larger textual fields. How does the shape or identity of a literary environment impact individual creativity or our understanding of the meaning of a single text’s wider circulation? Here, we join recent work in the sociology of literature, such as Mark McGurl’s *The Program Era* and Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters*, in examining literature as produced through systems of social relations. Our focus on *scalar reading*, though, allows us to discern the shape of the literary field on a macro-scale and track in precise terms the diffusion of specific literary forms through *or against* such wider social structures.

Andrew Piper’s paper, “The Werther Effect: Topologies of Transnational Literary Circulation in the Eighteenth Century,” is drawn from a larger project on developing new ways of understanding the relationship between the novel and eighteenth-century writing through the use of network-based models of reading. It does so by focusing on the discursive afterlife of Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. While there has been a great deal of research on the novel’s publication history, we still lack a clear understanding of the extent to which the language of *Werther* fanned out and influenced writing across national boundaries. In this paper, Piper will present work that uses topological models to study the transnational circulation of *Werther*, specifically within England France. Combining network theory with statistical study of linguistic patterns across a corpus of roughly 10,000 texts, he is interested in examining the extent to which the language of the novel circulates within a broader environment and helps structure the literary field in particular ways. How might such quantitative models of lexical circulation, when combined with close readings of specific texts, allow us to see new

kinds of conceptual work that a novel like *The Sorrows of Young Werther* could perform during this transformative period of writing?

Hoyt Long's paper, "Trade Imbalance in the World Republic of Letters," is also drawn from a larger project. It explores the application of quantitative methods to the study of literary relations between the United States and East Asia (Japan and China, in particular) during the age of "modernism" (1915-1930). Having assembled an extensive database that catalogues the publishing records of tens of thousands of poets in hundreds of literary journals, he use this data to generate a series of network maps that visualize the modernist poetic field in all three nations on a macro-scale. He is particularly interested in the literary transactions between American and East Asian authors, and he uses the movement of texts in and out of their respective fields as a way to read these transactions at scale. What he finds is a structural "trade imbalance" that characterizes the relations between U.S. and East Asian literary systems. What does this asymmetry say about the structural conditions of literary knowledge in the early twentieth century across "East" and "West" divides? He also brings this analysis into dialogue with close readings of individual poems to consider how poets perceived and navigated this apparent "trade imbalance" and sought to intervene back into the wider system they belonged to.

Given the experimental nature of this work – and in the spirit of expanding the dialogical nature of the genre of the conference panel -- we have invited two colleagues to offer responses to the papers, with one addressing the quantitative approaches of the papers and one addressing the qualitative concerns of textual reading. The responses will thus cut transversally across the two papers' concerns, and in so doing address the larger methodological stakes of how to combine two very different modes of analysis. Ted Underwood is an ideal candidate for the first role: he has not only authored one of the more influential papers in the new field of quantitative literary criticism ("The Emergence of Literary Diction"), but also has a great deal of experience developing the computational infrastructure for such analysis. The second respondent will be Haun Saussy, a leading scholar of comparative literature who has written extensively on questions of authorship and textual circulation, especially in a transnational Asian-Pacific context. How do these papers speak to scholars who care about textual and cultural flows more generally? The responses are thus not designed to segment the discussion into purely "quantitative" and "qualitative" parts, but rather provoke a robust discussion about the possible benefits (as well as limits) of combining humanist and computational methods. Limiting our panel to two full papers with extended ten-minute responses will thus make it possible to have at least fifteen minutes of audience discussion in what we expect to be a lively debate.