

Module Overview

One last thing that became clear . . . was the enormous difference between the archive of the Great Unread, and the world of the canon. You enter the archive, and the usual coordinates disappear; all you can see are swarms of hybrids and oddities, for which the categories of literary taxonomy offer little help. It's fascinating to feel so lost in a universe one didn't even know existed; but it's hard to extract a rational picture from this *Walpurgisnacht* of discordant voices.

Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (2013)

Like it or not, today's literary historical scholar can no longer afford to be *just* a close reader: the sheer quantity of available data makes the traditional practice of close reading untenable as an exhaustive or definitive method of evidence gathering. Something important will inevitably be missed. The same argument, however, may be leveled against the macroscale; from thirty-thousand feet, something important will inevitably be missed. The two scales of analysis, therefore, should and need to coexist.

Matthew Jockers, *Macroanalysis* (2013)

Getting started. What happens when literary study meets big data? The module will offer a theoretical and practical exploration of a branch of digital humanities, which Moretti called "distant reading," that uses computational methods to discover and interpret patterns in large samples of literary texts. These methods have become possible with the extensive digitization of literary archives and the development of applications for analyzing these archives. Macroanalysis represents an unorthodox approach to the study of literature, searching for insights about literary history that traditional methods, using small samples of texts, cannot. The module includes lab exercises introducing literary metadata, stylometry, topic modeling, and data visualization.

Using these two passages from Moretti and Jockers, you might begin by posing some guiding questions. What literary historical insight can we gain from a systematic study of "the Great Unread," as opposed to traditional study of the canon? What are the comparative advantages and disadvantages of close reading and distant reading? How

can scholars productively combine and apply both methods to literary or historical texts?

Assignment structure. The module consists of a variable series of lab exercises with in-class and out-of-class components. Following the example of the Stanford Literary Lab, it proposes to use macroanalytic techniques to answer some important questions in literary studies, especially where traditional close reading and archival methods offer limited use. Working individually or in teams of two or three, the exercises will invite students to apply the techniques practiced in class to a problem with interrelated theoretical and technical dimensions. Two exercises can be completed in one class period. In three others, students begin working on these problems in class, complete the exercises outside of class, and then present and discuss their findings in a subsequent class.

Students' reports can consist of an in-class presentation, a written report, or both. They should include an informed discussion of the methods used to approach the problem, including any technical difficulties met, and the conclusions you reached. If students cannot answer the questions posed by the exercise, they might discuss how the data or the experiment itself could be refined, keeping in mind that literary macroanalysis is an evolving discipline, and that discovery often occurs through trial and error. In this sense, the inevitable technical glitches and frustrations can be productive.

Readings and discussion. The module includes three texts:

1. Matthew Jockers, *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* (University of Illinois, 2013)
2. Stephen Marche, "Literature Is Not Data: Against Digital Humanities," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (October 28, 2012)
3. Holger S. Syme and Scott Selisker, "In Defense of Data: Responses to Stephen Marche's 'Literature Is Not Data,'" *Los Angeles Review of Books* (November 5, 2012).

Because the module is centered on applied exercises, discussion of the readings should serve to inform students' understanding of the purposes and methods of these exercises. Applying the readings to the exercises can clarify the texts, which can frustrate students with their presumption of theoretical or technical knowledge.

In general, discussion should establish a basic understanding of the readings and suggest ways to derive useful applications and inquires from them. Discuss the main concepts in the reading, focusing on what is most relevant to module exercises. Draw connections to previous readings and discussions. Consider the practical applications of these concepts. Extrapolate from the examples and applications described in the reading and speculate about others not mentioned. What possible uses do students see for these macroanalytic techniques? Invite students to pose their own questions the class might address. They can articulate theoretical problems implied by the reading or simply seek clarity on a technique that relates to the exercises.

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