Digital Aesthetics

Instructor: Mark Algee-Hewitt

Tuesday 1:30-4:20; 160-321

In this course we will explore the ways that literary critical concepts, particularly aesthetic concepts, can be operationalized through Digital Humanities means. While large scale textual analysis has yielded a wealth of data, much of the remaining work of the field lies in aligning the quantitative results of computational analyses with the theory and criticism of the humanities as it has been traditionally practiced. In this class, we will reverse this operation as we explore how we can move from a critical concept to a quantitative experiment that tries to isolate, investigate and, above all, quantify or measure textual features associated with that concept. Each week we will begin with a key critical theory that discusses some aspect of the aesthetics of literature, and work together to find ways of making that concept computationally tractable and yet interpretively rich. As we do this, we will also study how computational methods can help nuance or expand our understanding of aesthetic phenomena. Accordingly, our task will be twofold: first discussing the concept as something that can be quantified and operationalized, and then learning and testing the methods with which to analyze a corpus of text for that concept.

The class will take place through three phases. First, we’ll discuss the concept of operationalizing and then study how two concepts (the Sublime and Theme) have been operationalized in digital humanities work. Second, we’ll look at a collection of concepts that suggest ways in which they can be operationalized. Third, we’ll study a group of aesthetic theories that are less immediately tractable to computation.

The readings of this class will exclusively consist of the background theoretical texts we seek to operationalize. Our engagement with primary texts will be through the corpora that we will work on together as we learn the methods of quantitative experimentation. No prior experience with programming or digital humanities methods is required.

Required Texts:

William Empson Seven Types of Ambiguity
Georg Lukacs The Historical Novel
Roland Barthes Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative
I.A. Richards The Philosophy of Rhetoric
Mikhail Bakhtin The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays
Erich Auerbach Mimesis

The corpora we use in class to test each of our concepts will be given to you as electronic files at the beginning of the quarter.
Software:

All required software will be provided (and will be freely available online). You will, however, need a laptop for our class sessions.

Required software:

Gephi
Mallet
Python/R

Assignments:

In your final project, you will be responsible for the same kind of analysis that we perform together in class, operationalizing a critical, historical or theoretical method or idea and experimenting on it using one or more digital humanities methods that we learn together in class.

You will also be responsible for leading the class discussion of one of the methods or theories that we will be studying on one of the weeks of the course: these will be assigned during the first weeks of the course.

Schedule

Phase 1

Class 1 Introduction and Operationalizing

Readings:  
Franco Moretti “Operationalizing: Or the function of measurement in modern literary theory” (Literary Lab Pamphlet 6)  
Matthew Wilkens “The Geographical Imagination of Civil War Era American Fiction”

Class 2 The Sublime

Readings:  
Edmund Burke selections from “On the Sublime”  
Immanuel Kant “The Analytic of the Sublime” from The Critique of Judgement

Class 3 Theme/Motif

Readings:  
Leo Spitzer “Linguistics and Literary History”, “The Style of Diderot”  
Erich Auerbach selections from Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature  
“On Paragraphs” (Literary Lab Pamphlet 10)
Phase 2

Class 4  Narrative
Readings:  Emile Benveniste selections from *Problems in General Linguistics*
Roland Barthes *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of narrative*

Class 5  History
Readings:  Georg Lukacs *The Historical Novel*

Class 6  The Social Character
Readings:  Bruno LaTour selections from *Reassembling the Social*
Alex Woloch selections from *The One and the Many*

Phase 3

Class 7  Ambiguity
Readings:  William Empson *Seven Types of Ambiguity*

Class 8  Chronotope
Readings:  Mikhail Bakhtin “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel”

Class 9  Discourse/Rhetoric
Readings:  I.A. Richards *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*
Pierre Bourdieu selections from *Language and Symbolic Power*

Class 10  Communication/Differance
Readings:  Roman Jakobson selections from *Studies in General Linguistics*
Jaques Derrida selections from *Of Grammatology*