Scalar Reading

English 354

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Description:

The so-called quantitative turn in Literary Studies has introduced many new ways of reading into the study of text. But, while many of these practices diverge in significant ways, their commonality lies in their attempts to alter the scales of reading. From the incredibly minute attention that they can pay to individual words and phrases to their ability to parse hundreds or thousands of texts, these methods allow us to read at scales that, under the rubric of close reading that has dominated the academy for the past 70 years, would be impossible.

And yet, these changes are not without precedent. Many of the literary theoretical shifts that the 20th and 20st century has witnessed have changed, not only the object of study, but the scale at which the critic understands the text. From New Criticism, with its radical attention to the words on the page, to the Russian formalists and structuralists, who sought complex patterns built out of textual similarities, to the post-structuralists who, like the practitioners of Digital Humanities, operated at both ends of the text (minute differences pointing to vast patterns), these movements sought to alter the scales of critique.

In this class, we will ground our investigation into the changes in scale brought about by contemporary Digital Humanities work, through a detailed historical study of the other theoretical movements and concepts that also worked to alter the scale of analysis, from the early twentieth century to our own theoretical moment. Some work to refocus readerly attention on the text, ignoring the political, social and even publication context entirely. Others, seek to find meaning in the study of genres, or literary movements, tracing patterns across corpora of texts that are of similar sizes to the corpora used by Digital Humanists. Linguists, like Spitzer and Benveniste even sought fundamental patterns of language usage that could explain larger scale textual effects in a precognition of what, in our current moment, we understand as operationalizing.

These past theoretical movements will help us shape our approach to the Digital Humanities and the ways that it alters scale in profoundly new ways. What does Digital Humanities introduce that is new? And what aspects of quantitative analysis seek to make real the dreams of formalists and cultural critics alike? As, together, we employ the methods that we study to read at ever larger scales, we will constantly put pressure on the fundamentals of the critical work that we are doing, exploring what the text is, how it changes, and how reading at different scales offers a new, holistic approach to the object of literary criticism.
Class Praxis

In the class, we will not only read and discuss the works of 20th and 21st century criticism that take some transformation of scale as their object, but we will work together to combine these scales of readings into a single, collaborative class project. Beginning with the first class, in which we will discuss corpora, questions and approaches, we will refine our ideas, week by week, combining digital approaches that we will cover in class with the theoretical approaches that we encounter. As such, the theory we will read will be both abstract, but also immanently practical as we discuss and apply it to our collaborative project. In the end, all participants in the class will be responsible for some part of the final output of the class. Rather than individual projects, students will all contribute to the whole collaboratively, and write a brief reflection on their experience working both collaboratively, and at scale. While we will be using computational methods to explore aspects of our final project, these methods will be covered in class (and in associated methods labs), so that no prior experience with computation is required.

Presentations

In lieu of a short paper, and given the collaborative and experimental nature of the class, all students will be responsible for selecting one of the works that we will be discussing this quarter, and leading a discussion of it on the relevant day. Depending on the number of students, it is possible to work collaboratively on these presentations as well. Presenters should be prepared to offer a reading of the theoretical texts that they have selected, focusing specifically on how it fits with the class themes and collaborative project. They should pose questions to the class to spur discussion and, most importantly, lead the conversation about the relevance of the methods offered by that week’s readings to the final project of the class.

Required Texts
(available at the Stanford Bookstore)

Caroline Levine
Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*
Princeton University Press, 2017

Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*
University of Texas Press, 1968

I.A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgement*
Mariner Books, 1956

Michele Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*
Vintage, 1994
Class Schedule:

**Week 1: Scales of Meaning**

Interpretation: reading across scales/visual reading
(Readings given in class)

**Week 2: Reading Closely**

I.A. Richards, *Practical Criticism*
W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy”

**Week 3: Structures of Meaning**

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*
Northrop Frye, “Polemical Introduction” and “Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes” from *Anatomy of Criticism*

**Week 4: Reading the Whole**

Vladimir Propp, *The Morphology of the Russian Folk Tale*
Tvesten Todorov, “The Typology of Detective Fiction”

**Week 5: Scales of Language**

Leo Spitzer, “Linguistics and Literary History”
Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics* (selections)

**Week 6: Radical Attention**

Jacques Derrida, “Limited, Inc”
Homi Bhabha “Signs Taken for Wonders”
Week 7: Alternate Reading Modalities

Stephen Best and Sharon Markus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction”
Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhytm, Hierarchy, Network* (selections)
Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (Chapter 5)

Week 8 Scales of Print/Scales of Screens

Andrew Piper, *Book Was Here* (Selections)
Laura Mandell, *Breaking the Book* (Selections)
Katherine Bode, “The Equivalence of ‘Close’ and ‘Distant’ Reading; or, Toward a New Object for Data-Rich Literary History.”

Week 9 Digital Reading

Jan Rybicki, “The Great Mystery of the (Almost) Invisible Translator”
Matt Wilkens, “Genre, Computation, and the Varieties of Twentieth-Century U.S. Fiction”
Barron, Alexander, Jenny Huang, Rebecca Spang and Simon DeDeo, “Individuals, Institutions, and Innovation in the Debates on the French Revolution”

Week 10: Reading at Scale

Final Project work
The Stanford Literary Lab, *Suspense: A Study in Digital Narratology*

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Students with Documented Disabilities

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: [http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oaе](http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oaе)).

Honor Code

The Honor Code is the University's statement on academic integrity written by students in 1921. It articulates University expectations of students and faculty in establishing and maintaining the highest standards in academic work:
The Honor Code is an undertaking of the students, individually and collectively:
1. that they will not give or receive aid in examinations; that they will not give or receive unpermitted aid in class work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading;
2. that they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well as themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code.

2. The faculty on its part manifests its confidence in the honor of its students by refraining from proctoring examinations and from taking unusual and unreasonable precautions to prevent the forms of dishonesty mentioned above. The faculty will also avoid, as far as practicable, academic procedures that create temptations to violate the Honor Code.

3. While the faculty alone has the right and obligation to set academic requirements, the students and faculty will work together to establish optimal conditions for honorable academic work.