

Katrin Dennerlein/Patrick Fortmann: “Rewriting Literary History With Algorithms”

Max Kade Conference 2024 at the Department of Germanic Studies, University of Illinois at Chicago, November 14 & 15, 2024

Location: Institute for the Humanities and via Zoom

In the past 20 years, data-driven research approaches have profoundly shaped many academic disciplines. This shift has also influenced literary studies, especially with the digitization of large text collections over the last 10 to 15 years. By applying algorithms to these collections of digital literary texts, scholars can gain new insights into their structures and developments.

However, literary texts have been studied quantitatively far less frequently than non-literary texts. They present particular challenges for quantitative analysis due to their complexity, such as their fictional nature, their creative and aesthetically motivated use of language, and the unique characteristics of literary symbols. Unlike other texts, literary works often communicate indirectly through stories and images, and they tend to individualize and hybridize their style, themes, and forms.

Several key challenges arise from the distinctive nature of literary texts and the current state of research in this emerging field. These include the need to adapt text analysis tools to the domain of literature; the complex relationship between norms and deviations in literary texts; determining similarities and differences between literary and non-literary works; the difficulty of reaching consensus on how to annotate features relevant to literary studies; the lack of interpretive transparency in modern formal models; and the urgent need to build reference corpora. Achieving progress in this area requires close interdisciplinary collaboration between researchers from literary studies, digital humanities, corpus linguistics, computational linguistics, and computer science.

In recent years, several initiatives have advanced this field, including research funding programs, book series, journals and a number of important monographs. Given these developments, it is now time to assess the field and take stock.

At the heart of this discussion lies the question of how insights from digital humanities have prompted a reevaluation—or even a complete rewriting—of literary history. The primary focus of this conference is the presentation of research findings. While

methodological discussions remain important, speakers will emphasize the results of their work, demonstrating how these findings contribute to reshaping or transforming existing literary knowledge. This means either revising established hypotheses or introducing new perspectives on topics such as the formation of literary groups and movements, textual features, and the correlations between literature and historical or societal events.

The presentations will offer findings that challenge and refine existing hypotheses about literary evolution. They will explore the diverging characteristics of specific genres, styles, and themes across periods and movements. Speakers will also address how literature's cultural capital and its role in literary life have evolved, as well as how new groups and trends have emerged within literary history. Additionally, these presentations will offer novel insights into both textual features and metadata analyses. Finally, they will examine the profound impact of societal events on the production and reception of literature, offering fresh perspectives on the complex interactions between literature and its broader cultural context.

Thursday, November 14, 2024

2:00- 2:30 p.m. Coffee & Welcome

José Camacho, Director, School of Literatures, Cultural Studies & Linguistics, UIC

Susanne Rott, Head, Department of Germanic Studies, UIC

Patrick Fortmann, Department of Germanic Studies, UIC Opening Remarks

2:30-3:15 p.m. Keynote

Katrin Dennerlein, Julius-Maximilians Universität Würzburg/UIC, “Emotions in German Drama from the 17th to 19th Century: New Perspectives on Literary Evolution“

3:15-5:00 p.m. Panel I

Julian Schröter, Ludwig Maximilians Universität, Munich, “The German Novella: New Perspectives on the Nature and Historical Development of a Genre”

Matt Erlin, Washington University, St. Louis, “Geotopes: Situating Postcolonial Bestsellers in the Global Literary Marketplace”

Katherine Elkins, Kenyon College, Gambier, OH, “Is Formal Innovation Really a Key Marker of the Modern Novel?”

5:15 – 5:45 p.m. Panel II

Graduate Students in the Department of Germanic Studies, UIC – Short Presentations on

“The Language of Emotions in German Drama Around 1800: Key Words and Expressions“

6:00 p.m. Reception / Conference Dinner

Friday, November 15, 2024

8:30-9:00 a.m. Coffee & Breakfast

9:00 a.m. Welcome Remarks

Rosilie Hernández, Associate Dean, College of Liberal Arts & Sciences, UIC

Ellen McClure, French and Francophone Studies Director, Institute for the Humanities, UIC

9:00-10:30 a.m. Panel III

Jo Guldi, Emory University, “Digital Text Mining Insights: Bridging Digital History and Literary Studies”

Susan Brown, University of Guelph, “Making Feminist Literary History with Boundary Objects”

10:45 a.m.-11:45 a.m. Panel IV

Thorsten Ries, University of Texas, Austin, “Re Writing Time, Processing Time, and Literary History: On Digital’s Chronotope Shift

Patrick Fortmann, UIC, “Literary Summary from Epitome to AI: Reflections on Past and Present of a Minor Form”

12:00-1:15 p.m. Lunch Buffet

1:15-3:45 p.m. Panel V

Leonard Konle/Merten Kröncke, Universität Würzburg/ Georg-August Universität Göttingen, “The Shape of Literary Change: Insights into German Literature, c. 1850–1920”

Christof Schöch, Universität Trier, “Genre Analysis in Computational Literary Studies: The first ten Years”

Contact Information

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