How to Not Read and Why: the Promises and Perils of Literary Scholarship at Scale

Humanities Research Centre Seminar

12 May 2014, 4.00 – 5.30pm
Conference Room. AD Hope #14 Australian National University

Speaker

Dr Glenn Roe, Australian National University

The challenge of large-scale literary corpora in the humanities has led in recent years to a host of innovative technological and algorithmic approaches to the growing digital human record. These techniques—from data mining to distant reading—can offer students and scholars new perspectives on the exploration and visualisation of increasingly intractable data sets in both the human and social sciences; perspectives that would have previously been unimaginable. The danger, however, in these kinds of 'macro- analyses', is that researchers find themselves ever more disconnected from the raw materials of their research, engaging with massive collections of texts in ways that are neither intuitive nor transparent, and that provide few opportunities to apply traditional modes of close reading to these new resources. In this talk, I will outline some of my previous work using data mining and machine learning techniques to explore large-scale data sets drawn primarily from the French Enlightenment period. And, building upon these past experiences, I will then present several of my current research projects, which use sequence alignment algorithms to identify intertextual relationships between authors and texts in the 18th-century 'Republic of Letters'. By reintroducing the notion of (inter) textuality into algorithmic and data-driven methods of analysis we can move towards bridging the gap between distant and close readings, by way of an intermediary mode of scholarship I term 'scalable' reading.

Glenn Roe is a Lecturer in Digital Humanities at the ANU Centre for Digital Humanities Research, where he investigates the use (and abuse) of data-driven computational methods for literary and historical research. For the previous two years, he held a highly competitive Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship in Digital Humanities at the University of Oxford, the first digital humanities position of its kind at that institution. Trained as a French literary historian at the University of Chicago (PhD 2010), he spent eight years as a Senior Project Manager for the ARTFL Project (American and French Research on the Treasury of the French Language), one of the older and better known North American research and development centres for computer-assisted text analysis. He has published and presented widely on a variety of scholarly subjects, from French literary, intellectual, and book history, to the design and use of new computational methodologies for literary research and the implications of large-scale digital collections on humanities scholarship. Dr Roe's first monograph, *The Passion of Charles Péguy*: *Literature, Modernity, and the Crisis of Historicism*, will be published later this year by Oxford University Press.

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Enquiries

Colette.Gilmour @anu.edu.au

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