Reception history across languages – a challenge for the digital humanities

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The development within the digital humanities has changed the methodological landscape of literary historiography. Franco Moretti’s call for large-scale distant readings of the transnational impact of novels, genres, and the literary markets in a European or even global perspective has been influential. Many digital humanists besides him have argued that to improve our understanding of literary epochs and trends we must move beyond minor revisions of the literary canon to include “the great unread” by means of quantitative methods. Matthew Jockers warns against drawing “conclusions about literary periods from a limited sample of texts” (2013:47), and Ted Underwood argues that “digital and quantitative methods are a valuable addition to literary study” because of their ability to “represent gradual macroscopic change” (2013:159). These scholars (and many other digital humanists) have in common that they depart from large corpuses of literary texts and use statistical analysis to make general claims about literary history, at the same time (with the exception of Moretti) delimiting their analysis to texts written in English.

This paper discusses the digital humanities methodologies applied in the writing of literary history. Since the quantitative large-scale approaches to literary history have had a strong impact on literary studies, this paper aims to 1) discuss the limitations of computer aided reading (of literary texts) as a method for historiography 2) investigate alternative digital humanities methods for the for literary historiography using other data than the literary text. Digital humanities research is stamped by cultural, linguistic and economic inequalities. A digital humanist can easily investigate a large corpus of British and/or North American literature, since it is already digitized and made available in large online collections. Moreover, the large-scale computational methods are often used for analysis of (literary) texts in printed in books, which leaves aside reception documents, for example reviews in the press, letters and other manuscripts not usually available in text format, and consequently an inconvenient material for computational analysis. In the project Swedish Women Writers on Export in the 19th Century we are interested in the translations, circulation and reception of texts in different language areas – objectives requiring data much less accessible.

The hegemony of the English language and the focus on text mining literary texts are two conditions in the current digital humanities research on literary history colliding with recent developments within literary history generally: the “transnational turn” (Jay 2010) and a renewed attention to reception and circulation of literature (Casanova 2004). If we ignore reception sources and draw historical conclusions from large collections of mainly literary texts, the
literary history written within the domain of digital humanities will not be consistent with the recent development in literary history generally.

Yet, there are some projects that may serve as examples for this kind of research. In *Reading by Numbers* Katherine Bode sets out to rewrite Australian literary history through metadata and sales figures showing authorship, publishing, and readership circulation during certain historical periods. She calls her method a "form of distant reading", although she does not analyse a large corpus of texts using computational methods, but instead uses quantitative methods to analyse metadata and sales statistics. Bode has the advantage of a large bibliographic database, *AustLit*, where data on publications both in book format and in periodicals is aggregated. Likewise, the project *Global Literary Networks* at the University of Chicago has used metadata to map literary networks and circulation of American modernist poetry in Japan, China and Latin America. Both these projects show the potential of using metadata for investigating the transnational circulation of literature, in the latter case also across linguistic borders. Both had the opportunity to use already existing bibliographical sources: in the former case an authoritative database with biographical and bibliographical information, in the latter case a digitized bibliography indexing 166 modernist poetry journals in Japan (Long 2015:285).

However, bibliographies such as the one used by the project *Global Literary Networks* are rare and data on the literary circulation involving more than two countries (and languages) even more so. There is a risk that the existence of large corpuses of digitised literary texts (in English and major European languages) in combination with effective text mining methods invites a certain kind of approach to literary history, using the archives with available texts and metadata instead of finding out what is lacking in these. Adeline Koh has argued that “archives are not sites of knowledge retrieval but of knowledge production” – and in fact, “monuments of states, colonies and empires” (2014:385). The digital literary canon reproduces the canonization already existing in print, which has been questioned by postcolonial, gender, and ethnic studies already in the 1980s and 1990s. This problem, Koh argues, is even more acute in the literary digital archives than in the more broadly historical ones. It is also a problem evidently more keenly experienced from the point of view of smaller languages and research concerned with transnational perspectives, for example on reception history in Europe, with its linguistic diversity and unevenly digitised literary heritage.

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