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Affordances and limitations of algorithmic criticism

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Stellingen behorende bij het proefschrift

Affordances and Limitations of Algorithmic Criticism

Peter Verhaar

1. Algorithms which can quantify the literary devices that occur in texts form valuable additions to the methodology of literary criticism.
2. In the context of literary criticism, statistical analyses of large quantities of texts are useful mainly because of the fact they can lead to more focused forms of close reading.
3. As critical observations about artistic and cultural artefacts are typically interpretative and perspectival, the ontologies that underpin the data formats that are used within digital humanities research must enable scholars to capture multiple and potentially contradictory statements about these objects.
4. Literary criticism based on algorithmic processing is inherently reductive, as it is based on methods which transform complicated and multifaceted textual phenomena into a finite set of data values. Such simplifications also have a scholarly value, however, since they allow for more focused and more systematic analyses.
5. Because digital research instruments invariably reflect the methodological and epistemological assumptions of their human developers, the results of computational analyses are not necessarily more objective or more valid than the results of studies based on traditional methods.
6. Digital humanities scholars need to reduce the opacity of the algorithms that they apply to analyse cultural artefacts by developing a thorough understanding of the ways in which these algorithms manipulate and transform these artefacts.
7. To develop an understanding of the possibilities and limitations of computer-based scholarship, it is necessary to engage with the digital medium on a practical level. Practical activities, such as building a tool or designing a database, often pose difficulties that could not have been predicted or envisaged on the basis of theory alone.
8. Computers cannot of themselves add interpretation. Computational methods result in statistical artefacts which, similar to the original primary sources which are studied, need to be interpreted by human researchers.
9. The research questions of computer-based literary analyses are often determined to a large extent by existing technical possibilities. To ensure that the results of computational analyses can be relevant, however, it is important to expand these possibilities, and to manipulate the digital toolset in such a way that it can genuinely be used in support of the traditional scholarly objectives of the discipline in which they are adopted.
10. “Language itself is by nature a traffic in symbols but these symbols are plastic - an endless annoyance to the scientist but God's own gift to the poet” (Louis MacNeice)