WHAT COUNTS AS CONTEMPORARY FICTION?

Scale, Value, and Field

Jim English
University of Pennsylvania
CFDB Research Assistants

Chris Jimenez  
2015

Stephanie Felt  
2014-2015

John Speck  
2014

Jake Lasker  
2013-2014
Scale and Value: New and Digital Approaches to Literary History

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plenary address by Mark McGurl

discussants: Chris Jimenez • Evan Kinley • Nirvana Tanoukh
Scale / Value
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How big is the field of contemporary Anglophone fiction?
where/when does it begin?
is it growing or shrinking?
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  which actants and practices should we attend to?
  what texts correspond to these key fractions?
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What should be the scale of our explanatory logic?
   grands récits or local narratives of historical change?
Hypothesis: The “contemporary” moment of the literary field is marked by a new regime of value with respect to temporal settings: new stakes in the choice between Now and Not Now.
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Caution: Temporal setting ≠ Genre !!!
Figure 7.7: Most Frequent Word scatterplot of two genres rated on first two principal components.
Digitization and Availability of 19th-Century British Novels

Published / Still Extant / Digitized

- 20,000 to 30,000 novels published
- 6,000 novels still extant
- 3,500 novels available in full text
Digitization and Availability of Novels Published Since 1960

Published / BookLamp / Chicago Text Lab

1,000,000 novels published

BookLamp Metadata Corpus

Chicago Text Lab Corpus
Random Samples of 2012 Adult Fiction

_Fifty Shades of Grey_ in unweighted vs sales-weighted samples
Random Samples of 2012 Adult Fiction

Top-ten bestsellers in unweighted vs sales-weighted samples

- Unweighted samples: 500
- Weighted samples: 400 (100)
Random Samples of 2012 Adult Fiction

Top 0.1% of novels by sales volume in unweighted vs sales-weighted samples
Random Samples of 2012 Adult Fiction

Top 1% of novels by sales volume in unweighted vs sales-weighted samples

[Pie chart: 495 in blue, 5 in black]

[Pie chart: 375 in light blue, 125 in dark blue]
METHODOLOGY

Using quantitative data to analyze the field of contemporary fiction

**SCALE**
- Set I comprises metadata on 1244 novels published 1960 to 2013
- Set II comprises metadata on 500 novels published 1960 to 2013
- (Other sets for comparison comprise metadata on 300 novels published 1960 to 1990 and on 900 films released 1960 to 2014)

**VALUE**
- Set I “Upper Ranges” (selected for high status) includes every novel shortlisted for major best-novel-of-the-year prize
- Set II “Everything Else” (selected for high sales/circulation) includes the top 10 bestselling novels in combined US and UK markets for each year

**METADATA**
- Metadata concerning various features of the novels is gathered manually:
  - Date, Title, Author Name, Year, Prize, Winner (Y/N) or Sales Rank (1-10), Author Identity features (Nationality, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexual Identity), Protagonist Identity features (same), Narrative Voice, Temporal Setting

**FIELD**
- Frequencies of the features, considered separately or as co-incident, are calculated for each half decade
- Significant shifts, sharp trendlines are identified
- Do the two sets shift in tandem or counter to each other?
- Is there a clear turning point when the quantitative relationships begin to align with the norms of the present?
Temporal Settings of Prize-Nominated Novels 1960-2013

Historical, Contemporary, Future

- % Historical
- % Contemporary
- % Future
Temporal Settings of Bestsellers 1960-2015

Historical, Contemporary, Future
Temporal Settings of Bestsellers (Above) vs Prize-Shortlisted Novels (Below)
Temporal Settings of Bestsellers (Above) vs Prize-Shortlisted Novels (Below)

- % Historical
- % Contemporary
- % Future

Linear (% Historical)
Linear (% Contemporary)
Prize-Nominated Novels vs Bestsellers

Percent set 20 or more years in the past

% Historical - Bestsellers
% Historical - Prestige

PERCENT

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

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