

Data Mining the Humanities: The Impact of “French Theory” on Literary Studies

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Abstract—In his 2003 book, written in French under the title of *French Theory*, François Cusset examined how some of the main French thinkers of the sixties and seventies –such as Derrida, Foucault and Kristeva– influenced the development of the humanities in the American academia. The purpose of my research is to see if it is possible to follow the journey described by Cusset through the critical bibliography published about these French intellectual “stars.” Thus, I quantitatively analyze the references to the work of the authors that constitute the French Theory. Since this kind of study is seldom done in literary studies, it implies overcoming several technological and methodological challenges, such as the architecture of the main literary database, the Modern Language International Bibliography, and the lack of tools to easily obtain bibliometric indicators. However, I conclude that this approach is perfectly suitable for analyzing the circulation of ideas and for studying the evolution of literary trends.

Index Terms—French Theory, literary theory, literary trends, bibliometrics, e-humanities, digital humanities, propagation of ideas, sociology of culture.

I. “FRENCH THEORY” AND THE ACADEMIC STAR SYSTEM

In April 1996, the American journal *Social Text* published the article “Transgressing the Boundaries: towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” by the physicist Alan Sokal. Later that year, in the journal *Lingua Franca*, Sokal published “A Physicist Experiments With Cultural Studies” where he declared that his previous text was a hoax that aimed “to test the prevailing intellectual standards” (Sokal 1996b, 62). There were many reactions for and against Sokal’s gesture. The initial reaction came from France, since Sokal had mainly attacked authors that belonged to the French intelligentsia. Soon enough, the debate expanded to the USA and to other countries and reached not only the academic publications, but also the newspapers. Since 1998, several books have analysed the situation revealed by the “Sokal affair” as the event was named. Moreover, the tension continued as Sokal coauthored with Jean Bricmont (1997) a whole volume to extend their viewpoint concerning these disciplinary transgressions.

In contradistinction to the books dedicated to the analysis of this turmoil, François Cusset presented an in depth study about the intellectual transatlantic panorama. In his book,

written in French in 2003 under the title of *French Theory*, Cusset examined how some of the main French thinkers of the sixties and seventies –such as Derrida, Foucault and Kristeva– influenced the development of the humanities in the American academia. As the author explains, his goal was “to explore the genealogy, political and intellectual, and the effects [...] of a creative misunderstanding between French texts and American readers” (Cusset 2005, 15, I translate). Thus, his aim is not to judge the content of the texts but to explain “the internal organisational differences between the French and the American intellectual fields” (Cusset 2005, 15).

In order to illustrate the impact that certain French intellectuals had, and still have, on the American academia, Cusset uses the metaphor of a Hollywood Western, where Deleuze, Guattari, Baudrillard and Cixous become stars such as Paul Newman, Robert Redford, Gregory Peck and Faye Dunaway. In fact, in the central pages of his book, we can appreciate several pictures of these intellectual figures as they were visiting New York and California during the mid-seventies. Tracing back the history of the exchange of ideas between France and the USA to the pre-war period, Cusset thoroughly describes how the thinkers of the post-structuralism era were received and interpreted by the American cultural field. As the author concludes, the encounter between these French thinkers and their transatlantic readership made it possible for the “French Theory” to be born.

The purpose of my research will be to see if it is possible to follow the journey described by Cusset through the critical bibliography published about these French intellectual “stars.” Thus, I will quantitatively analyze the references to the work of the authors that constitute the French Theory. Since this kind of study is seldom done in literary studies, it implies overcoming several technological and methodological challenges, such as the architecture of the main literary database, the Modern Language International Bibliography, and the lack of tools to easily obtain bibliometric indicators. However, I am convinced that this approach is perfectly suitable for analyzing the circulation of ideas.

II. FROM PARIS TO THE WORLD

A. *Walking through the database*

At the beginning of the 1960s, Derek De Solla Price (1963) studied the behaviour of several variables, mainly, the number of scientific publications. He reached the conclusion that the evolution of science can be represented

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by the logistic function: at the beginning, we observe an exponential growth up to an inflection point; then, the growth rate diminishes until reaching a saturation level. Around the same years, Eugene Garfield created the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI): the center that would hold the archives of the main scientific publications. Nowadays, ISI Web of Knowledge contains over 23,000 journals indexed in three categories: Science Citation Index (SCI), Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), and Arts and Humanities Citation Index (AHCI). At the same time, this database is clearly the pinnacle for scientometrics since it allows the calculation of the main bibliometric indicators. Basically, there are two categories of indicators. On the one hand, descriptive indicators (Gauthier 1998) or activity indicators (Callon et al 1993). On the other hand, relational indicators reflect the interactions between researchers and disciplines. These indicators can be measured at different levels of aggregation: researchers, teams, institutes, countries, or disciplines.

All of these indicators can be easily obtained from the ISI database. However, most of the time, literary databases do not have the necessary devices for quantitative explorations. In most cases, the architecture of the literary digital libraries is such that it is impossible to obtain the number of citations or any other relational indicator. Unfortunately, at the same time, ISI Web of Knowledge is still strongly biased towards the exact sciences. Moreover, several scientometrists have analyzed the differences in terms of citation practices among the disciplines (Archambault et al 2006, Cole 1983, Cozzens 1985). Nevertheless, several bibliometric analyses of literary references have been recently published (Al et al 2006, Hammarfelt 2011, Thompson 2002). These papers indicate that, in spite of the differences across the disciplines, scientometric studies are appropriate to increase our understanding of the field of literary studies.

It is exactly in this sense that I decided to obtain bibliometric indicators and to see if these are helpful for measuring and understanding the impact that the “French

Theory” –to use Cusset’s terminology– had on the literary field. Thus, I searched the *Modern Language Association International Bibliography*, since this electronic bibliography includes more than 2,107,000 references covering over 4,400 periodical publications (Fitz-Enz, 2008). It contains articles, books, chapters, and theses. However, in the case of doctoral theses, only those published by Dissertations Abstracts International are included, thus, only those produced in U.S. universities. I interrogated the MLA database using the personal names thesaurus in order to obtain the time series associated to the main French authors identified by François Cusset: Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, H  ne Cixous, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Felix Guattari, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Jean-Fran  ois Lyotard. For all the series, I used the year 2010 as the cutting date.

B. The paths of the stars

The search tool in MLA was extremely accurate for obtaining the 11 series of references related to each of the abovementioned authors. As we can see in Figure 1, the biggest bibliography is the one referred to the work of Jacques Derrida, whereas the smallest one is the corpus dedicated to the work of Louis Althusser. As we can appreciate, the majority of the texts are published in English, with French coming only in second place. The next languages in importance are Spanish and German. Individually, on one extreme, we have the bibliography about Barthes with 60% of the sample in English and 21% in French. On the other extreme, the bibliography in English about Baudrillard’s work reaches 85% and only 3% in French.

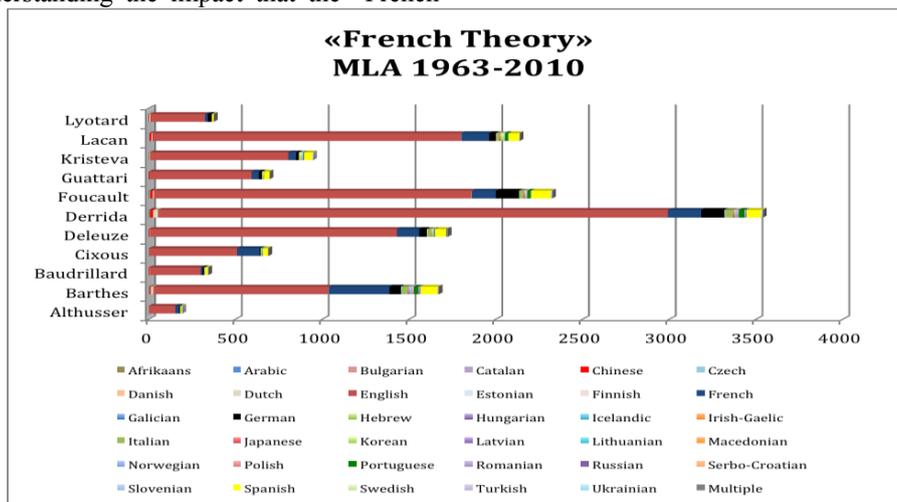


Fig. 1. Critical bibliography about the work of the French Theory intellectuals by language of publication

If we compare these results to the distribution of the references registered in the MLAIB for French literature in general, we observed that the “stars” samples are clearly skewed towards publications in English. As I searched for references about French literary history or French literary

tradition or French letters or French literature, I obtained a sample of 199,276 references. In terms of the language of publication, they are distributed as follows: 48% in French, 41% in English, 3.4% in German, 2.7% in Italian, and 1.5% in Spanish. Thus, without any doubt, the number of

publications about the French Theory intellectuals analyzed by Cusset is clearly biased towards the English language.

Moreover, if we consider the number of publications by journal, in Table 1, we observe the top 19 periodicals that cumulate 20% of the publications. With the exception of *Magazine littéraire* –actually a magazine and not an academic journal–, these periodicals are published in Anglophone countries: 11 in the United States of America, 6 in the United Kingdom, and 1 in Canada (*Mosaic* is published in the mostly English speaking province of

Manitoba). Beyond the possible English bias of the MLA database, the bibliometric indicators about French Theory unmistakably confirm the hypothesis that its reception was essentially done by the Anglophone academia.

In terms of the distribution of the samples by type of document, the main one corresponds to journal articles, followed by book chapters, books, and finally thesis. However, as I already mentioned, the thesis included in the Modern Language Association International Bibliography exclusively correspond to those published in North America.

TABLE I: THE TOP 20% PERIODICALS WITH PAPERS ABOUT FRENCH THEORY INTELLECTUALS

Rank	Journal	Total	%	Cum %	Country
1	Angelaki	189	2,05%	2,05%	UK
2	Magazine Litt éraire	141	1,53%	3,57%	France
3	SubStance: A Review of Theory and Literary Criticism	137	1,48%	5,06%	USA
4	Parallax	131	1,42%	6,48%	UK
5	Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism	125	1,35%	7,83%	USA
6	Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory	123	1,33%	9,16%	UK
7	Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature	108	1,17%	10,33%	Canada
8	MLN	102	1,10%	11,44%	USA
9	New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation	95	1,03%	12,47%	USA
10	Oxford Literary Review	94	1,02%	13,49%	UK
11	Theory, Culture & Society	87	0,94%	14,43%	UK
12	Critical Inquiry	80	0,87%	15,30%	USA
13	PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America	78	0,84%	16,14%	USA
14	Postmodern Culture: An Electronic Journal of Interdisciplinary Criticism	75	0,81%	16,95%	USA
15	Yale French Studies	71	0,77%	17,72%	USA
16	Symploktē: A Journal for the Intermingling of Literary, Cultural and Theoretical Scholarship	69	0,75%	18,47%	USA
17	Textual Practice	67	0,73%	19,20%	UK
18	Theory and Event	58	0,63%	19,82%	USA
19	South Atlantic Quarterly	54	0,58%	20,41%	USA

C. The Chronological Evolution of the series

As we can observe in Figure 2, the different series evolve at different paces, although most of them show an important increase around the mid '90s, especially, Barthes, Kristeva, Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida.

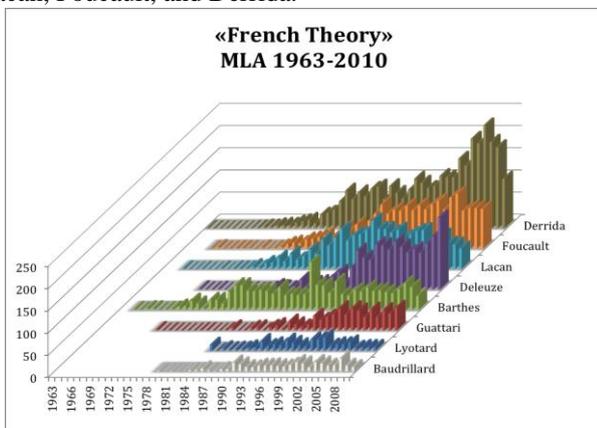


Fig. 2. Chronological evolution of the critical bibliography about the work of the French Theory intellectuals

More recently, after 2005, we also observe an increase in the number of publications dedicated to Deleuze, Foucault, and Derrida. Actually, as pointed out by Cusset (356), this late increase in the number of references to these French theoreticians corresponds to the homages rendered to Foucault on the 20th anniversary of his death (2004), to Deleuze on the 10th anniversary of his death, and to Derrida as a farewell tribute (2004). Thus, if we consider the growth in the number of references about the work of these French intellectuals, we see that, in spite of the abovementioned Sokal effect, these authors still profusely attract the attention of the American academia.

D. Concluding Remarks

François Cusset achieved a magnificent analysis of the impact that a group of French intellectuals –mostly issued from the 1968 cultural revolution– had on the American academia during the last 30 years of the 20th century. In this study, we have observed that this impact can be perfectly corroborated by analysing the references contained in the main literary bibliography, the MLAIB. Through the interrogation of this database and the elaboration of bibliometric indicators, we have been able to witness the

growth in the number of publications dedicated to the French star system since the beginning of the '60s. Moreover, we have observed that this sample is clearly skewed towards publications in English and in Anglophone countries. This data supports Cusset's hypothesis: the authors captivated by the French Theory were not the compatriots of these intellectuals, but the members of the Anglophone academia.

Moreover, this study shows that it is possible to make an efficient use of literary databases and that the quantitative analysis of bibliographic references is an effective and innovative way to bring new light to the field of literary studies.

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