Nodes. Edges. Plot? – The advent of social network analysis (SNA) in the literary studies, Frank Fischer

First attempts at describing character constellations of literary texts as a network graph date back to the late 1960s. Back then, and for the next couple of decades, the object of study were single texts. Further development had to wait until the digitisation of the Humanities.

The Digital Literary Studies of today look into hundreds and thousands of texts, the object of study are no longer single literary artefacts, but corpora. Corpus-based methods do not only reveal stylistic and topical developments over decades and centuries, based on thousands of texts. They also help to describe the structural evolution of social formations that can be automatically extracted from literary texts and represented as a network.

Analysing network data instead of the literary text itself calls for a whole different epistemological angle. For instance, describing protagonists based on centrality measures adds to the more traditional methods and can yield hitherto undiscovered structural evidence. Another point to consider is that literary texts are self-contained and typically present fixed plots. The space of possibilities is limited by what is written in the text, which has consequences for the interpretation of such data.

Along those lines, the lecture will introduce methods for the extraction, analysis and interpretation of social formations in literary texts using TEI-encoded drama corpora in German, Russian and Swedish as exemplary cases. It will discuss theoretical and practical aspects of such endeavours and will present the history of literature as an interesting case for social network analysis.

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