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Data Visualisation in Literature Studies (Abstract)

What may be the first data visualisation in the study of at least English literature, a timeline of plots in *Tristram Shandy*, predates the development of modern data visualisation typically attributed to William Playfair.

Nevertheless, as the explicit capture and analysis of data in literary study has grown over the past few decades, whether termed “humanities computing” or “digital humanities” or “cultural analytics,” the increasing availability of tools for data visualisation have joined data capture in prompting literary scholars to use visualisation to draw conclusions from their work, forcing as well new scrutiny and critique of data visualisation.

I argue that as data visualisation has become more available and present in literary study, it too has gotten unnecessarily and mystifyingly complex.

Drawing a brief history of data visualisation in literary study in the 20th and 21st centuries, I show that it is far too easy to pursue visualisation for visualisation’s sake, thereby failing to create what Johanna Drucker calls “knowledge generators,” settling instead for superficial figures that elucidate little.

My primary focus is on the way cartography has been brutally misused in literary study, with oft-cited monographs and articles teeming with maps that do little to demonstrate the analytical possibilities of data visualisation.

Instead, I propose a more strongly humanistic form of data visualisation, better attuned to the data sources and their internal geographies, joining rigorous visualisation and cartography with rigorous literary study, allowing data to play their central role in knowledge generation.