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Topic modelling literary interviews from *The Paris Review*

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Abstract

The interview has always proved to be a rich source for those hoping to better understand the figures behind a text, as well as any social contexts and writing practices which might have informed their aesthetic sentiments. Over the past two decades, research into the literary interview has made significant strides, both in terms of how this literary genre is conceptualized and how its emergence and development has been historically traced, the form remains somewhat neglected by literary and cultural theorists and scholars. There is also a remarkable absence of distant readings in this domain. With the rise of the digital humanities, particularly digital literary studies, one would expect more scholars to have used computer-assisted techniques to mine literary interviews, which are, in terms of dataset practicalities, somewhat ideal, semi-structured by nature, and typically available online. Such is the question to which this article attends, taking as its dataset seven decades' worth of literary interviews from The Paris Review, and 'topic modelling' these documents to determine the key themes that dominate such a culturally significant set of materials while also exploring the value of topic modelling to socio-literary criticism.

Keywords: topic modelling; The Paris Review; literary interviews.

1. Introduction

There is an enduring curiosity about artists and writers and specifically about their personalities and how they do their work. This can be read as part of a wider interest in biography, which has—aside from a mid-20th-century fascination with New Criticism[1]—long dominated literary and cultural criticism. The interview, then, has always proved to be a rich source for those hoping to better understand the figures behind a text, as well as any social contexts and writing practices which might have informed their aesthetic sentiments. Rebecca Roach's *Literature and the Rise of the Interview*—the most authoritative treatment of literary interviews—is premised on a brief account of how interviews have become a 'portrait of the social subject', a means through which we 'coax narratives that can have significant political, social, and legal consequence' (2018: 17).

Interviews are often regarded as primarily performative, even commercial, endeavours, opportunities for writers to sell themselves in an era where authors are becoming increasingly brand managed. Authors can use interviews to express their individual values, crafting stories, and rhetorical strategies designed to persuade the reader or listener of some 'truth' or essential cultural conversation within which their work is centrally positioned. John Rodden contends that the literary interview 'bridges the popular and the serious', allowing authors to craft their public selves through performance (2001: 22). This is perhaps most evident in the American literary tradition, where literary interviews have made a substantial contribution to the emergence—and ever-changing nature—of authorial celebrity (Fay 2013).

But there is value in the analysis of such performances, and, as argued by Roach, the study of literary interviews 'has much to tell us about historical conceptions of authorship, publics, inscription technologies, and reading practices, among other things' (2020: 336). For Roach, the literary interview is essential to any construction of authorship in modernity,

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operating as 'a site of contestation for the figure of the author' (2018: 17), dialogic spaces through which they can offer reflections on their own creations. And yet, despite the rich contextual insight offered by literary interviews, the form remains somewhat neglected by literary theorists and scholars. Certainly, over the past two decades, research into the literary interview has made significant strides, both in terms of how this literary genre is conceptualized and how its emergence and development have been historically traced (Rodden 2001; Lewis 2008; Fay 2013; Masschelein et al., 2014; Roach 2014, 2018, 2020). But the literary interview still suffers, as Ronald Christ puts it, from a 'phony-aristocratic contempt for the popular' (in Fay 2013: 4). Christ, as an interviewer himself,[2] is offering a biased perspective, but whatever the reason for the neglect by critics, there remain relatively few comprehensive treatments of either the form itself or of the contents of the many great catalogues of literary interviews that are now in existence.

While distant reading has been espoused in various facets of digital humanities (Moretti 2013), there has been a general lack of focus on distant readings in the context of literary interviews. With the rise of the digital humanities, particularly digital literary studies, one would expect more scholars to have used computational techniques to mine literary interviews, which are, in terms of dataset practicalities, somewhat ideal, semi-structured by nature and typically available online. More importantly, literary interviews, when analysed from a macro perspective, allow us to identify and analyse major themes within the cultural conversation of literary communities. Distant readings of literary interviews can provide insights into an important cultural question: when viewed as a collective, what do writers, when interviewed on the craft of writing, tend to talk about? Such is the question to which this article attends, taking as its dataset seven decades' worth of literary interviews from *The Paris Review*, a major American literary magazine, and 'topic modelling' these documents to determine the key themes that dominate such a culturally significant set of materials.

Topic modelling is a text-mining technique designed to extract dominant themes—or 'topics'—from texts (Blei, Ng, and Jordan 2003). In their introduction to a special issue on topic modelling published in *Poetics*, John W. Mohr and Petko Bogdanov pose the question, 'why do topic models matter?' (2013), concluding that this form of analysis can provide an effective way of summarizing the prevalent themes within large textual corpora. Despite the convincing response mounted by this special issue, there remains a relative dearth of studies in the arts and humanities which rely on topic modelling as a means of re-interrogating important matters of culture suited to analysis using distant reading, questions of canon and literary history. There are exceptions of course,[3] but considering the fervour that has surrounded topic modelling as a technique suited to cultural analytics, the fervour that has persisted for a good two decades at this stage, one would expect to find more examples of applied literary case studies.

This article attempts to follow the example set by Mohr, Bogdanov, and others, using topic modelling to computationally assess what themes and topics are consistently emphasized when some of Anglophone literary culture's most celebrated figures speak about the art of writing and the contexts which have informed their own craft, not as individuals, but as a collective profession. Rather than focusing on the utterances of individuals, topic modelling the literary interviews published by *The Paris Review* uncovers the wider semantic trends that are consistent across working, acclaimed literary practitioners. As a result, it is easy to see 'why' that matters.

2. Literary interviews as cultural conversation

Established in Paris in 1953 before moving to New York 20 years later in 1973, *The Paris Review* has long been considered one of the literary culture's 'boutique' publications, with a reported print circulation of 28,000 and a total readership of 50,400,[4] as well as a self-professed reputation for 'discovering new writers' (Stein, in Vidal 2014). The magazine's most recent media pack begins with selected praise from venues like *The Guardian* and *The Financial Times*, which have, respectively, heralded *The Paris Review* as 'an indispensable part of the literary culture' and 'the most prestigious of American literary journals'. Some of the publication's most famous contributors, figures like Jack Kerouac, Philip Roth, Adrienne Rich, David Foster Wallace, Bret Easton Ellis, Elena Ferrante, William Gibson, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Hilary Mantel, are listed, followed by a distinctly affluent set of partners, brands like Hermès and CELINE named alongside institutions such as Yale University and The New School. With an average household income of $118,000 among its readers, it is clear that the magazine is targeting a bourgeois audience, affluent members of the socio-cultural upper-middle class who typically hold the capital and influence necessary to influence canons and cultural discourse. In short, *The Paris Review* is read by those who determine—in a popular, mainstream sense—what high culture is.

Putting the literature that one encounters in *The Paris Review* aside, much of the magazine's potential to make and shift canons comes from its interview series, which started right at its beginnings when the inaugural issue

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published in the spring of 1953 carried an interview with E. M. Forster. Collectively known as the 'Writers at Work' interviews, the series is described by Joe David Bellamy, a former president of the Association of Writers & Writing Programmes and director of the literature programme of the National Endowment for the Arts, as 'one of the single most persistent acts of cultural conservation in the history of the world' (Bellamy 2019: 213). Writing in *The New York Times*, Dwight Garner remarks that *The Paris Review* interviews 'are about as canonical, in our literary universe, as spoken words can be' (2010).

But while such endorsements are evidence of the centrality of this particular series to prevailing notions of contemporary literary culture, there is something inherently dangerous in giving too much weight to a magazine that is read by a limited, privileged demographic, and has in its entire history been led by only six editors, the first of which, George Plimpton, held the position for 50 years.[5] It is reasonable to criticize studies such as this one for only serving to reify the literary canon as seen through the (arguably narrow) lens of a largely white, male Anglo-American publication like *The Paris Review*, but equally, one cannot dismiss the richness of a dataset containing self-reflections by many of the Western canon's most high-profile and respected practitioners—it is difficult to argue against the broad cultural significance of an interview series which includes E. M. Forster, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, T. S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, W. H. Auden, Elizabeth Bishop, and Toni Morrison, among a great many others.

Such significance is more suitably articulated by modernist scholar Christopher Bains, who argues:

> … the *Review* shaped and re-enunciated not only a genealogy of modernism but also its mythology. The strategic re-centering of literary discourse around the men and women themselves contributed valuable information on the genesis of individual works. To a real extent, *The Paris Review* took modernism back from the critics and universities, rendering it to the writers, giving them a central role in shaping the reception of their work. (Roach 2018: 73–74)

This sentiment is echoed by the former editor of the magazine, Philip Gourevitch, who explains the purpose of the interviews as:

> … not to catch writers off guard, but to elicit from them the fullest possible reckoning of what interests them most—their lives and work as writers, who they are and where they come from, and how they go about doing what they do all day. (Anglade 2006: 185)

However, dangerous canons might be to ambitions of literary and cultural diversity and inclusion, a set of texts which gives writers—most of whom are celebrated by critics and popular readers alike—a space in which to reflect on *their own* life and work, is a set of texts that cannot be ignored, even if the magazine which carries these perspectives appeals to a privileged demographic. As Jessa Crispin, founder of the popular but now defunct lit-blog *Bookslut*, characteristically puts it, *The Paris Review* is, to a certain audience, just 'boring as fuck!' (Dean 2016).

Of greater concern is the magazine's poor record in gender parity: as demonstrated by Sarah Fay, participants in interviews with *The Paris Review* are overwhelmingly male (2021), and from here, it is not too difficult to extrapolate other issues of representation beyond gender. Proceeding with such caveats in mind—and we do appreciate that these are serious caveats—*The Paris Review* provides a corpus that facilitates exploration of what it is that western literature's canonical writers speak about when invited to reflect on their work. There is much to be learned from such a dataset, even if the conclusions drawn only serve to affirm the position of the magazine's detractors. In essence, topic modelling the magazine's literary interviews will allow the contents of those texts to speak for themselves.

3. Methodology

At the time of analysis, the completed set of interviews published in *The Paris Review* consisted of 404 in-depth conversations with 399 different writers, published in the period 1953–2019. It is worth noting that the number of interviews increases considerably from the early 1980s onwards (see Fig. 1). The interview texts range in length from 1,284 to 17,135 words in total, with the average interview length being 6,542 words. In total, the corpus comprises 2,643,114 words of text. For the purposes of this analysis, the full text of each interview—with the interviewer's questions and any contextual information removed so as to capture what the authors speak to—is considered to be a single semantic unit or 'document'. As such, this topic model represents only what authors spoke to in their responses to interview questions.

In the field of text mining, topic modelling algorithms have been developed to reveal the underlying latent structure within a dataset of unstructured text, in the form of a set of substantively meaningful themes or topics (Mohr and Bogdanov 2013). These 'topics' provide a high-level summary of the contents of the dataset. Topic modelling is regarded as a knowledge discovery task in the sense that the composition of the output topics is generally not known in advance and the documents in the dataset do

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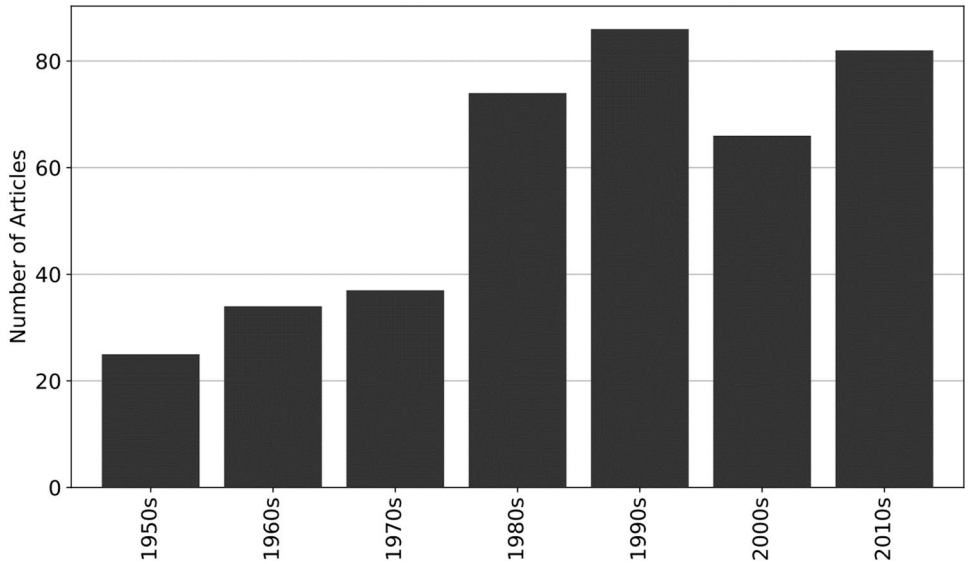


Figure 1. Distribution of interviews per decade.

not require prior human annotation. This makes such algorithms particularly appropriate for exploring large, diverse collections of texts from a 'distant reading', or macro-analytical, perspective, which can provide a means of guiding subsequent close reading of specific texts of interest (Jockers 2013). We have seen the broad adoption of topic modelling techniques in certain areas of digital humanities (Meeks and Weingart 2012), such as for the exploration of literary collections at a macro level (Jockers and Mimno 2013), and in other disciplines, such as the analysis of research articles (Jelisavčić et al. 2012) and political speeches (Greene and Cross 2017).

A variety of methods have been proposed for topic modelling in the research literature, including those based on probabilistic modelling (Blei, Ng, and Jordan 2003) and those which rely upon non-negative matrix factorization (NMF; Lee and Seung 1999). In both cases, the respective algorithms attempt to cluster words that tend to co-occur together into the same topic, while simultaneously grouping semantically related documents together in the same topic. However, matrix factorization methods have been shown to be particularly suited to identifying niche topics with specialized vocabularies (O'Callaghan et al. 2015). To the best of our knowledge, these methods have not yet been used to analyse substantial datasets of literary interviews, such as those published by *The Paris Review*.

Prior to performing topic modelling, it is necessary to apply several preparation steps to transform the original interview documents. We use standard text mining techniques to transform our documents into a 'bag-of-words' representation via *tokenization* (Salton and McGill 1983). As part of this process, we apply a dictionary-based lemmatization process, which maps different inflected forms of a word to a single word. At this point, we exclude infrequent words appearing in fewer than twenty documents and words which appear on a predefined 'stopword list' of 610 non-informative words (e.g., 'an', 'of', 'the', etc.). We then apply standard term frequency–inverse document frequency (Salton and Buckley 1987) as a weighting factor to the raw word frequencies, which helps to address the fact that some words appear more frequently than others in the interviews. After this process is complete, our original collection of 404 interviews is transformed into a bag-of-words representation with a vocabulary of 7,061 unique words. At this point, we apply standard NMF topic modelling (Lee and Seung 1999) to the bag-of-words representation.[6] For the purpose of further analysis, each interview document is then assigned to the topic for which it has the highest level of association, according to the output of NMF.

A key decision when applying topic modelling is around the user-specified number of topics k. This choice provides different granularities which can reveal different levels of detail in a dataset. A low value for k will produce a small number of coarse topics, while a higher value will result in more granular topics. In our case, we attempt to make this choice in a principled way by following the general methodology described previously by Greene and Cross (2017).

Specifically, we construct topic models using the NMF algorithm for each number of topics k in a predefined range $k = 10$ to $k = 50$. Each module is scored using the *min–max* measure proposed by Belford (2020). This measure relies upon the use of a word

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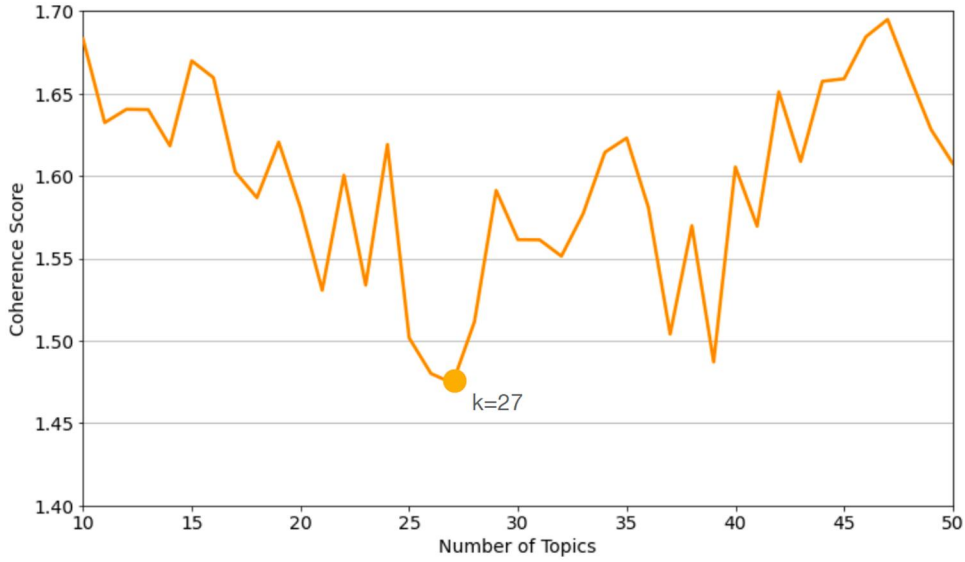


Figure 2. Plot of min–max scores for NMF topic models containing $k = 10$ to $k = 50$ topics. A lower score is indicative of a more semantically meaningful topic model. In this case, the minimum value (i.e. the best score) is achieved for the model containing $k = 27$ topics.

embedding model to measure the similarity between words. In our case, we use a *word2vec continuous-bag-of-words* model created on a dataset of 4.89 m Wikipedia abstracts from 2016. This measure allowed us to compare the different values of k from the predefined range, to identify a suitable choice. The minimum value (i.e. best score) is achieved for the model containing $k = 27$ topics (see Fig. 2). This topic model is the focus of our analysis and discussion of *The Paris Review* interviews.

4. Key themes in *The Paris Review*

Any act of distant reading should be presented with a note of caution. When conducting computer-assisted analysis of cultural materials, the temptation is to take the resulting graphs and charts and assign to them the most sensational interpretation that they might justify, however, loosely. Researchers are coming under increasing pressure to produce ground-breaking outputs, and the digital humanities, with its many analytical tools and techniques, holds much promise for those in desperate search of novelty. Topic modelling, for example, can reveal the 'hidden thematic structure in large collections of texts', they can be used to 'summarize, visualize, explore, and theorize about a corpus' (Blei 2013). There is sufficient research to demonstrate that such claims are not misplaced, but regardless, one should approach the drawing of conclusions from topic models with considerable prudence, because it is very easy, and quite tempting, to over-emphasize the significance of a largely contextless group of words. As Scott Weingart says of topic models: 'They're powerful, widely applicable, easy to use, and difficult to understand–a dangerous combination' (Weingart 2011).

The exposition of those topics produced in this study has been approached with such warnings in mind: the latent structures that we have privileged are in no way representative of all interviews published in *The Paris Review*, but rather, represent the dominant matters of concern when these interviews are viewed at a macro-level. As is always the case with distant reading, much will be lost in this process. However, treating these interviews with authors from a macroanalytical perspective allows for matters of general concern to authorship—as expressed by authors over the course of some seven decades—to be made visible. There is critical value in such a process.

It might be useful for readers unfamiliar with topic models to think of them as thematic analyses, wherein documents are represented as word groupings which can indicate ideas (i.e., 'topics') central to the corpus. For example, if one topic models *The New York Times*, they will see a topic made up of words relating to finance (stock, market, percent, fund, investors, funds, companies, stocks, investment, and trading) as well as one on sports (game, knicks, nets, points, team, season, play, games, night, and coach), which includes the name of New York teams like the Knicks and Nets (Blei 2013). These are useful as illustrative topics because they make sense; one would expect 'finance' and 'sports' to emerge as topics in an analysis of most newspapers. Of course, the fact that these topics have

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been identified as 'finance' and 'sports' is purely interpretive: topic models produce sets of words (in this case, ten words per topic), and it is through a critical intervention that sense is made of these groupings.

When implementing topic modelling on a corpus of cultural materials, it is worth remembering that the purpose of distant reading is to identify the wider, latent patterns in a set of texts, and in doing so, one loses much—a researcher who is solely interested in the specifics of an individual or small set of interviews from *The Paris Review* will find little value in topic modelling. As such, a few generic topics providing limited interpretive insight—even in the hands of the most verbose of critics—can almost always be expected. It would be highly suspicious if one modelled a publication like *The New York Times* and did not reveal topics on 'finance' and 'sports', and even more alarming were such topics unexpected. As previously mentioned, topic modelling excels in exploratory studies where the outcomes are not known in advance. Cultural critics should prioritize their own understanding and knowledge of a corpus over data-driven classifications. But there is still considerable critical utility and value in using the topic model as an exploratory technique, to confirm or validate hypotheses, and perhaps most essentially, to identify those topics that might be less expected, particularly with culturally significant datasets like *The Paris Review* literary interviews.

Figure 3 shows the topic model of *The Paris Review*, with the corresponding 'number of articles per topic' (i.e. the number of interviews a topic relates to). Foremost among the 'expected' topics are *Topic 6* (story, write, work, short, character, read, writer, fiction, life, and long) and *Topic 12* (book, write, publish, read, writer, character, life, world, reader, and editor), and as one might predict, there are also topics which relate to theatre (*Topic 3*), translation (*Topic 10*), comics and cartoons (*Topic 24*), science fiction (*Topic 16*), classical antiquity (*Topic 23*), and family (*Topic 9*).

Interestingly, there are two separate topics relating to film: *Topic 11* (film, work, viewer, sequence, movie, edit, shoot, cinema, script, and documentary) and *Topic 25* (movie, studio, director, picture, hollywood, screenplay, script, write, work, and scene). This suggests a semantic split between interviewees who speak about film as a practice and those who speak about film as an industry. Viewing the topics alongside the three most 'representative' author interviews serves to further explain this separation (see Fig. 4). Here a 'representative' refers to the document that is most similar, on average, to other documents which have been assigned to the same topic.

Looking at 'representative' articles is useful, in that it shows which interviews are 'thematically closest' to a given topic. Presenting an interview with an individual or limited group as 'representative' of a topic is problematic, as it privileges the perspective of the few in a model that was derived out of interviews with many. As such, 'representative' interviews should not be taken as speaking for the whole of a corpus, as doing so over-interprets the significance of this metric, while also potentially furthering the marginalization of specific interviewees and groups. But looking at which interviews are most 'representative' of a given topic can serve an important critical function, offering a

Topic	Top 10 Words
27	poetry, poet, poem, read, auden, write, verse, eliot, language, poetic
6	story, write, work, short, character, read, writer, fiction, life, long
2	poem, write, poet, line, poetry, stanza, lowell, rhyme, frost, long
14	write, work, read, book, writer, character, interest, sentence, reader, start
22	character, novelist, man, work, sartre, life, book, proust, art, technique
18	writer, write, man, faulkner, read, american, young, critic, literature, hemingway
3	play, theater, write, playwright, actor, audience, stage, act, rehearsal, director
12	book, write, publish, read, writer, character, life, world, reader, editor
8	yorker, editor, ross, writer, magazine, work, piece, york, write, humor
9	mother, read, father, love, work, live, school, life, sister, die
20	german, camp, war, communist, poland, regime, auschwitz, polish, language, nazi
26	woman, man, write, love, life, child, book, mother, live, husband
1	write, writer, read, life, interest, work, start, idea, word, england
25	movie, studio, director, picture, hollywood, screenplay, script, write, work, scene
4	work, life, world, sense, live, man, experience, human, simply, word
17	pound, ezra, williams, bill, read, ski, eliot, work, harvard, review
21	black, write, white, book, read, african, baldwin, work, american, jazz
13	mexico, spanish, write, mexican, latin, writer, cuban, country, revolution, live
5	ginsberg, allen, kerouac, burroughs, francisco, rexroth, miller, publish, paris, laughlin
7	hebrew, jewish, israel, israeli, jew, arab, arabic, jerusalem, palestine, write
10	translate, translation, english, russian, read, translator, italian, word, language, french
15	biography, biographer, james, write, vera, shelley, letter, shaw, archive, coleridge
16	science, fiction, write, world, technology, art, idea, future, read, city
23	homer, greek, iliad, odyssey, english, virgil, iris, pope, verse, latin
19	irish, ireland, dublin, catholic, nun, child, joyce, read, protestant, begin
11	film, work, viewer, sequence, movie, edit, shoot, cinema, script, documentary
24	comic, cartoonist, draw, strip, art, cartoon, artist, cleveland, lsd, early

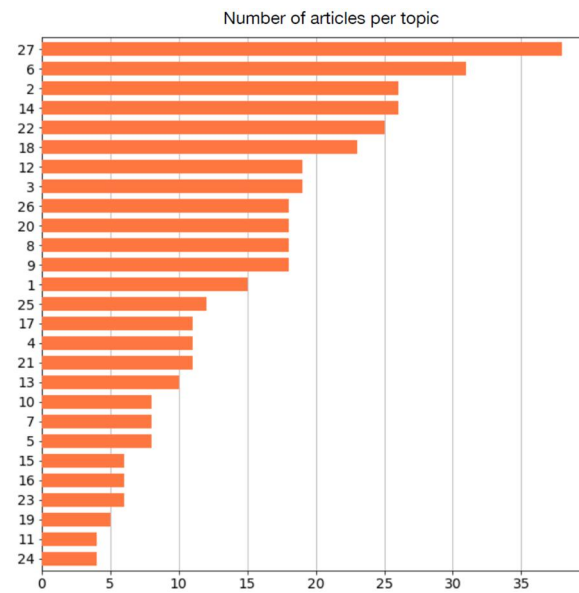


Figure 3. Topic words and number of documents (i.e. literary interviews) per each topic.

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Topic	Top 10 Words	Author 1	Author 2	Author 3
1	write, writer, read, life, interest, work, start, idea, word, england	Kadare, Ismail	Naipaul, V	Salter, James
2	poem, write, poet, line, poetry, stanza, lowell, rhyme, frost, long	Collins, Billy	Wilbur, Richard	Strand, Mark
3	play, theater, write, playwright, actor, audience, stage, act, rehearsal, director	Guare, John	Shawn, Wallace	Simon, Neil
4	work, life, world, sense, live, man, experience, human, simply, word	Winterson, Jeanette	Banks, Russell	Porter, Katherine
5	ginsberg, allen, kerouac, burroughs, francisco, rexroth, miller, publish, paris, laughlin	Kerouac, Jack	Rosset, Barney	Thompson, Hunter
6	story, write, work, short, character, read, writer, fiction, life, long	Munro, Alice	Taylor, Peter	Welty, Eudora
7	hebrew, jewish, israel, israeli, jew, arab, arabic, jerusalem, palestine, write	Amichai, Yehuda	Grossman, David	Oz, Amos
8	yorker, editor, ross, writer, magazine, work, piece, york, write, humor	Maxwell, William	Brodkey, Harold	Mcphee, John
9	mother, read, father, love, work, live, school, life, sister, die	Erdrich, Louise	Als, Hilton	Fox, Paula
10	translate, translation, english, russian, read, translator, italian, word, language, french	Pevear, Richard	Eco, Umberto	Davenport, Guy
11	film, work, viewer, sequence, movie, edit, shoot, cinema, script, documentary	Haneke, Michael	Allen, Woody	Wiseman, Frederick
12	book, write, publish, read, writer, character, life, world, reader, editor	Rushdie, Salman	Auster, Paul	Doctorow, E
13	mexico, spanish, write, mexican, latin, writer, cuban, country, revolution, live	Márquez, Gabriel	Llosa, Mario	Fuentes, Carlos
14	write, work, read, book, writer, character, interest, sentence, reader, start	Barrett, Andrea	Rushdie, Salman	Franzen, Jonathan
15	biography, biographer, james, write, vera, shelley, letter, shaw, archive, coleridge	Lee, Hermione	Edel, Leon	Holmes, Richard
16	science, fiction, write, world, technology, art, idea, future, read, city	Guin, Ursula	Gibson, William	Lessing, Doris
17	pound, ezra, williams, bill, read, ski, eliot, work, harvard, review	Laughlin, James - Part 2	Laughlin, James - Part 1	Frost, Robert
18	writer, write, man, faulkner, read, american, young, critic, literature, hemingway	Vidal, Gore	Rushdie, Salman	Salter, James
19	irish, ireland, dublin, catholic, nun, child, joyce, read, protestant, begin	Trevor, William	O'Brien, Edna	Heaney, Seamus
20	german, camp, war, communist, poland, regime, auschwitz, polish, language, nazi	Steiner, George	Carrère, Emmanuel	Rushdie, Salman
21	black, write, white, book, read, african, baldwin, work, american, jazz	Morrison, Toni	Mosley, Walter	Johnson, Charles
22	character, novelist, man, work, sartre, life, book, proust, art, technique	Gardner, John	Rushdie, Salman	Ford, Richard
23	homer, greek, iliad, odyssey, english, virgil, iris, pope, verse, latin	Logue, Christopher	Fitzgerald, Robert	Fagles, Robert
24	comic, cartoonist, draw, strip, art, cartoon, artist, cleveland, lsd, early	Ware, Chris	Crumb, R	Mccarthy, Mary
25	movie, studio, director, picture, hollywood, screenplay, script, write, work, scene	Price, Richard	Mcguane, Thomas	Dunne, John
26	woman, man, write, love, life, child, book, mother, live, husband	Gordimer, Nadine	Gornick, Vivian	Lehmann, Rosamond
27	poetry, poet, poem, read, auden, write, verse, eliot, language, poetic	Ashbery, John	Hall, Donald	Collins, Billy

Figure 4. List of topics, along with the corresponding top 3 'representative' author interviews per topic.

measure of clarity on why unexpected topics are present in the model. *Topic 11*, which contains words closer to film as a practice, is best represented by interviews with Michael Haneke, Woody Allen, and Frederick Wiseman, all critically acclaimed, award-winning directors. *Topic 25*, which seems a little more occupied with film as an industry, is best represented by interviews with Richard Price, Thomas McGuane, and John Dunne, all screenwriters for popular television series. As noted, while the presence of a topic relating to film is possible to be expected, it is significant that the model detects distinct semantic patterns within these two groupings—when treated by interviews in *The Paris Review*, there is a pronounced division between film as art and practice, and the industry which surrounds such. Some of the field's most high-profile practitioners choose to speak to craft, while others speak to commerce.

Looking at the 'representative' interviews for *Topic 16*, which we conclude relates to science fiction, brings something interesting to what might otherwise be described as an 'expected' topic (though it must be said that the presence of 'science fiction' is perhaps not expected in a topic model of a publication like *The Paris Review*): despite science fiction's frequent depiction as a genre with masculinist tendencies (Chakraborty 2022), of the three most representative interviews for the 'science fiction' topic, two of the authors are women, Ursula K. Le Guin and Doris Lessing (see Fig. 4). Jane Donawerth argues that science fiction has become a literary battleground between male authors, who have transferred the misogynies of science to the conventions of the science fiction genre, and female authors, who are attempting to re-cast women as more than just aliens and others, bringing them in from the genre's narrative margins (1997). It would seem that—certainly in how the canon is being discussed—female authors are having some (however, small) success in this regard. It is noteworthy that the word 'city' appears in the topic, reifying the centrality of the metropolis to science fiction narratives.

Beyond film and science fiction, it is unexpected to see that, in such a large corpus of interviews with so many canonical figures, 'comics and cartoons' (*Topic 24*) would emerge as a vague but nonetheless present topic. There is also much to be concluded from the absence of topics, such as one relating explicitly to gender, though it is possible that *Topic 26* (woman, man, write, love, life, child, book, mother, live, and husband) might be approached from such a perspective. There is also marked lack of topics relating to matters of techne, with the exception of *Topic 22*, where the influence of Sartre and Proust appears evident. Nation and place are important to several topics, with discussions of such typically guided by ruinous pasts and major political events. Germany and Poland are often mentioned in the context of the Second World War (*Topic 20*), the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is present (*Topic 7*), conversations inn Latin literature typically talk of 'revolution' (*Topic 13*), and Ireland is discussed in terms of 'religion', specifically, 'Catholicism' and 'Protestantism' (*Topic 19*), while the interviews further affirm the centrality of Joyce to Irish literature.

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On the matter of centrality and influence, T. S. Eliot famously wrote that 'no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone' (1932: 4). It is fitting then that he and W. H. Auden would comprise part of the most dominant semantic pattern (see *Topic 27*). Eliot's presence is less certain than Auden's, as a closer examination of the interviews reveals that authors also refer to the writings of Mary Ann Evans, who famously wrote under the pen name George Eliot. That these two influential figures share a surname has possibly skewed our findings, but, reading the interviews, it is evident that Auden and both Eliots frequently appear when the matter of influence is discussed. Auden and T. S. Eliot are referenced in the context of poetry, though they, unlike Robert Lowell and Robert Frost, are not part of what is perhaps best described as the 'poetry' topic (*Topic 2*). Eliot appears again in *Topic 17*, the 'modernism' topic (pound, ezra, williams, bill, read, ski, eliot, work, harvard, and review). This reinforces Eliot's centrality to both the modernist and wider Western literary canons. The role of Harvard University in the development of modernist literature, particularly its literary magazine *The Harvard Advocate*, is also evident. Modernism is one of only two literary movements to form its own topic, the other being *Topic 5*, the Beat Generation (ginsberg, allen, kerouac, burroughs, francisco, rexroth, miller, publish, paris, and laughlin). This is potentially a consequence of the presence of a high number of American writers and practitioners in the sample, including an interview with Kérouac himself. Still, it could also be considered further evidence of the importance of the Beats to post-war American culture and expression. Throughout all topics, the marked lack of female names is striking. While a gender imbalance in interview subjects reflects poorly on the magazine's editors, this topic model suggests that male writers and practitioners have also done little for their female counterparts, taking the opportunity of an interview in *The Paris Review* to speak predominantly of their male influences and peers.

Another finding of note includes that relating to American literature, for which there are seemingly two distinct topics: *Topic 18* (writer, write, man, faulkner, read, american, young, critic, literature, and hemingway) and *Topic 21* (black, write, white, book, read, african, baldwin, work, american, and jazz). These two topics suggest that there is a macro-detectable separation between the American literature of men and youth that centres around figures like William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, and American writing on race, greatly influenced by the author, essayist, and activist, James Baldwin, and strongly associated with jazz. In this latter topic, Toni Morrison is the representative voice (see Fig. 4).

Shalman Rushdie's interview emerges as among the most representative for *Topic 12* (ross, yorker, writer, humor, writers, funny, writing, thurber, write, hara, humorist, time, editors, magazine, man, typewriter, good, read, harris, and years), *Topic 14* (fiction, writing, writers, writer, novels, american, science, novelist, write, literary, literature, moral, time, women, read, great, form, characters, notion, and good), *Topic 18* (biography, biographer, james, vera, shelley, shaw, life, letters, coleridge, biographies, strachey, biographers, archive, subject, woolf, biographical, writing, years, boswell, and story), and *Topic 22* (life, world, sense, time, work, man, human, place, words, god, make, years, experience, art, book, question, simply, consciousness, history, and feel), all of which could be interpreted as related to the craft as writing, as well as *Topic 20* (german, war, camp, poland, polish, auschwitz, germans, regime, nazi, communist, italy, italian, nazis, camps, literature, language, man, time, germany, and czech), which relates to the Holocaust. It is noteworthy to see one particular figure's interview emerge as a representative example for such a—seemingly—diverse range of topics. Topics *12*, *14*, *18*, and *22* seem more generic, predominantly focused on matters such as the craft of writing, humour, the role of the writer, and the nuances of biography and human experience. Rushdie's association with *Topic 20*, the Holocaust, speaks to his broader engagement with historical and political themes, as well as his focus on cultural and ideological conflicts.

One approach to interpreting the outputs of topic modelling is to visualize the relationship between the topics in some two-dimensional representation, such as via a network diagram (Goldstone and Underwood 2012) or multidimensional scaling (MDS) plot (Chen, Chiu, and Lim 2016). In our context, MDS offers further perspective on the macroscopic nature of *The Paris Review* literary interviews. By plotting inter-topic and term-level distances with MDS, it is possible to interpret the extent to which different topics (see Fig. 5), as well as the terms which comprise such (see Fig. 6), are 'connected'.

A topic-level MDS plot of the interviews yields little insight. The topics cluster as expected, with considerable proximity between generic topics like *Topic 6*, *Topic 12*, and *Topic 14*; cognate topics such as the 'film' topics, *Topic 11* and *Topic 25*; while subject-specific topics, such as *Topic 20*, *Topic 7*, *Topic 13*, and *Topic 19*, each of which relates to a specific cultural context or conflict, exist as outliers. The term-level MDS plot shows that descriptors tend to cluster around a number of key themes: people, place, religion, film, form, and family (see Fig. 6). It is perhaps the absences that are most striking: matters of politics (beyond armed conflict), economics, sexuality, and

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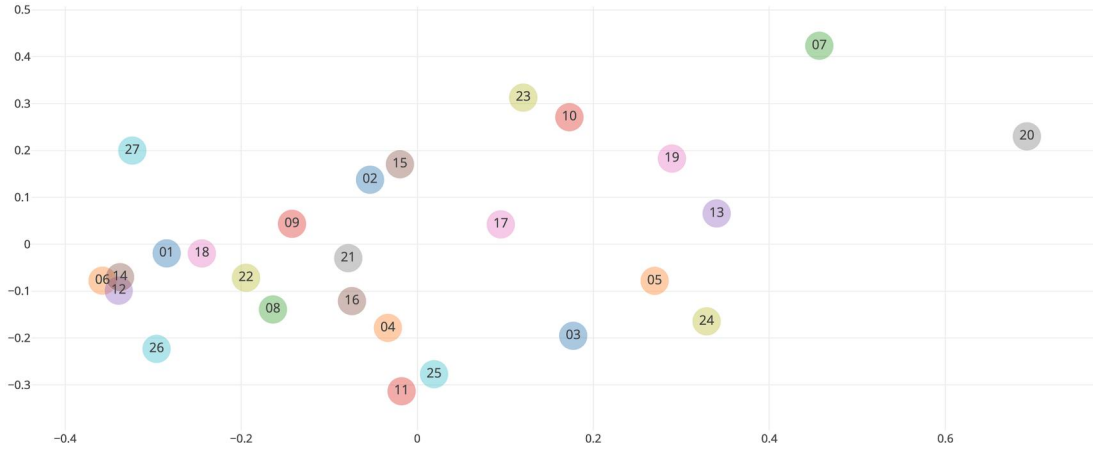


Figure 5. Topic-level scatter plot showing inter-topic distances, visualized using MDS for all twenty-seven topics in the current model. The distance between a pair of topics is calculated as the average distance between the terms appearing in their descriptors, where distances are calculated relative to a word2vec word embedding constructed on a dump of Wikipedia abstracts.

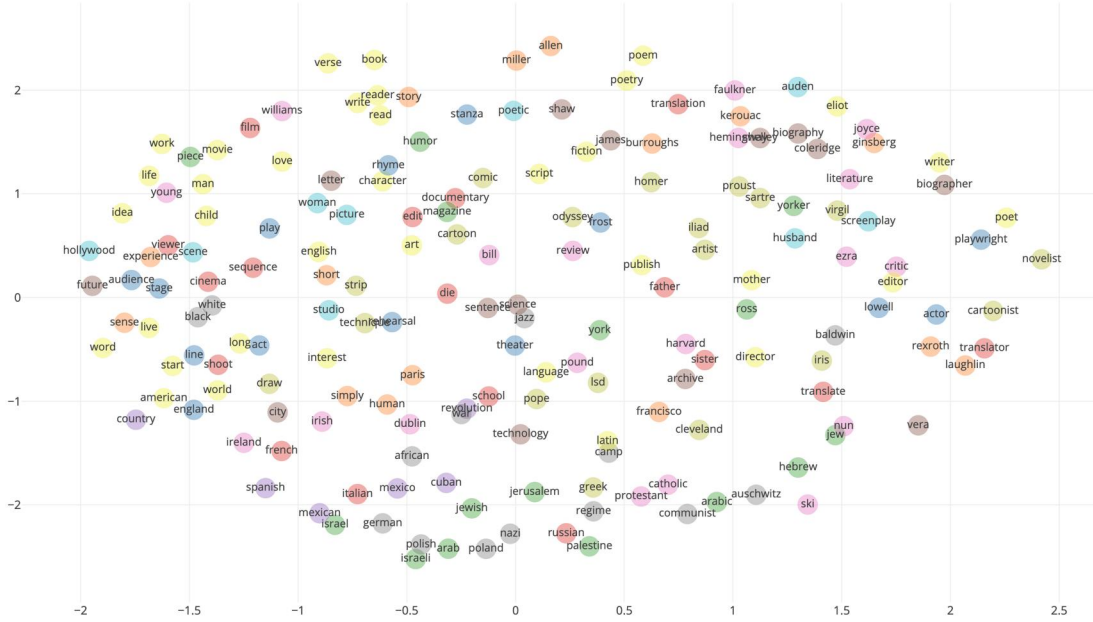


Figure 6. Term-level scatter plot showing the distances between all pairs of terms which appear in the twenty-seven topic descriptors in the current model, visualized in two dimensions using MDS.

gender do not emerge as pronounced semantic patterns within a series described as 'the single most persistent acts of cultural conservation in the history of the world' (Bellamy 2019: 213).

5. Conclusions

Literary and cultural criticism no longer lacks compelling arguments for the use of statistical evidence and computer-assisted analyses (Jockers 2013; Bode 2014; Piper 2018, 2020; Nguyen et al. 2019; Underwood 2019). Yet, it raises the pertinent questions: To what end do we employ topic modelling? What purpose does it serve when applied to corpora such as the literary interviews conducted and published by *The Paris Review*? The response to this should be clear: to supplement existing qualitative arguments with a different kind of evidence—quantitative data—thereby validating existing

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perspectives and uncovering what has previously gone unforeseen. This study realizes both possibilities, and many of the researchers in this field will find their claims of what is central to author interviews supported by parallel topics in the model presented: 'literary craft talk' (Fay 2013: 155), technique and process (Fay 2013: 174), genre (Masschelein et al., 2014), childhood and family (Roach 2014: 10), and philosophy and politics (Masschelein 2018). The topic model also shows what fades at the macro level, that is, matters that may be of concern to individual authors but which get lost when authorship is treated as it is represented across the whole corpus: working habits, subjective opinions, and personal creeds (Roach 2014: 10); illness, death and legacy (Masschelein 2018); forms of autobiography (Maunsell 2016); and literary advice (Roach 2020). In her extensive study of *The Paris Review* interviews, Kelley Lewis (2008: 21) contends that the questions 'repeatedly implied or made explicit' in examinations of the form are, as one might expect, 'who is the writer?' and 'what did the writer intend to do?' Looking at these interviews as a broader corpus, as opposed to isolated exchanges, contributes to answering such crucial questions in terms of general—rather than individual—authorial attitudes and perspectives.

From the general perspective of practitioners in the field of topic modelling, the coherence of the topics generated in this study is a testament to the approach's effectiveness in extracting thematic structures from interviews, a source seldom considered for analysis in the computational literature compared to other forms of textual content, such as news articles (O'Callaghan et al. 2015). This reinforces the conclusions drawn by Mohr and Bogdanov (2013), who attested to the utility of topic models in cultural sciences when applied appropriately. Although our findings also emphasize the importance placed by Gillings and Hardie (2023) on the role of close reading and domain expertise in interpreting the output of topic modelling.

This study also gives us some sense of how Anglo-American literary culture is generally determined by the imaginations of the canon's central figures. While that which was known long before the advent of computational literary studies has been reaffirmed—such as the influence of Modernism and the Beats—these findings present a number of associations which may be worthy of further analysis: the importance of *The Harvard Advocate*, that women speak for the science fiction genre;[7] film is divided between the directeurs and the entertainers; segregation is statistically detectable in discussions of American literature[8]; place is often referenced in the shadow of conflict, and the centrality of Salman Rushdie to the Anglo-American craft of writing and Holocaust literature. Furthermore, the absence of specific topics is telling. For example, one might expect, in a series of interviews dedicated to the craft of writing, to encounter more terms relating to the mechanics and instruments of the practice, terms like 'page' and 'manuscript', 'typewriter', and 'computer'.[9] These models show that authors interviewed within the series speak less about writing as a craft, about techne, and more about broader concepts of literature and influence; how their work fits into the wider tradition, rather than the specificities of technique. The literary interviews published by *The Paris Review* are a gateway to much more than the 'dominant themes' presented in such study, but viewed in such a way, it is clear what the magazine's interviewees have emphasized, and knowing that is valuable, even if it just confirms what was already suspected. If we are to use literary interviews to study the 'portrait of the social subject', effacing the individual seems a worthwhile endeavour.

Remember the parameters of this study: topic modelling *The Paris Review* interviews gives a quantitative overview of what topics—what concepts or ideas—have been discussed by some of the major literary and cultural figures of our time. Regardless of whether a topic is strong or weak, regardless of what the 'representative' articles for a topic might be, that these topics emerged at all, that they are present within the most dominant topics is evidence of a topic's importance to this cohort. These patterns trace the contours of several decades' worth of cultural conversation. Of course, it is also worth recalling the caveats on which this article is premised: distant reading will never truly realize its potential to disrupt the canon if it is applied solely to canons that privilege Anglo-American white male practitioners.

Still, if *The Paris Review* interviews truly are, as Garner puts it, 'about as canonical, in our literary universe, as spoken words can be', then the topics presented in this essay portray computational evidence of all that Western canon has privileged, and all that it has effaced.

Supplementary data

The complete set of results produced by this topic model, as well as the code base and metadata, are available on GitHub: https://github.com/derekgreene/paris-review

Author Contributions

Derek Greene (Methodology, Visualization, Writing—original draft), James O'Sullivan (Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing), and Daragh O'Reilly (Conceptualization, Writing—original draft).

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Notes

1. New Criticism advocates a separation of textual scholarship from all social, authorial, historical, political, and moral contexts. Developed in seminal works like *Understanding Poetry* (1938) and *Understanding Fiction* (1943), co-authored by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom's *The New Criticism* (1941), and William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's essay, 'The Intentional Fallacy' (1946), New Criticism privileges close reading of textual content over any consideration of authorial intention and external influences.
2. Incidentally, Ronald Christ was an interviewer for *The Paris Review*.
3. While this list is not exhaustive, see Goldstone and Underwood (2012), Jockers and Mimno (2013), Riddell (2014), Jautze, van Cranenburgh, and Koolen (2016), and Bozovic et al. (2021).
4. See the 2022 Media Kit released by *The Paris Review*: https://www.theparisreview.org/about/media-kit
5. George Plimpton (1953–2003), Brigid Hughes (2003–2005), Philip Gourevitch (2005–2010), Lorin Stein (2010–2017), Emily Nemens (2018–2021), and Emily Stokes (2021–present).
6. To ensure consistency in the results, we use the NNDSVD process proposed by Boutsidis and Gallopoulos (2008) to initialise the NMF algorithm, rather than using random initialization which can yield different results with each run of the algorithm.
7. It would be particularly interesting to see if this association holds across a larger sample size.
8. More complete discussions of this topic in the context of computational literary studies can be found in the work of Richard Jean So, most notably, in *Redlining Culture* (2020).
9. As one of our reviewers so aptly expressed, 'where are the pencils?'

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