

The Eye of Modernism:

Visualities of British Literature, 1880–1930

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Abstract

British fiction and poetry explodes with textual visuality in the early twentieth century: color, shape, and form, as manifested in description, impression, and image. This dissertation computationally models that visuality, using the eye as a governing metaphor: retinal cones are modeled by inferring textual color, and retinal rods are modeled through object-detection via word sense disambiguation and categorization. Findings include a 93% increase in color expressions across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a 15% increase in the proportions of object and artifacts, and revealing correlations along lines of literary genre, subject heading, and more. These correlate with historical materialities such as dye manufacture, trends in the visual arts such as post-impressionism, and movements in literature such as imagism. A model of literary description, meanwhile, finds that, while visuality increases over time, proportions of description decrease, suggesting structural decompositions in fiction, occurring in parallel with disseminations of vision.

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