

**Franco Moretti. *Distant Reading*. Verso, 2013, 244 pages, \$34.95**

*reviewed by Axel Perez Trujillo*

Considered one of the most outstanding literary scholars in the past decades due to his innovative methods of analyzing texts, Franco Moretti has recently published a collection of essays that traces the development of his quantitative and formalist approach to literature. Given the gradual emergence of the digital humanities, readers unacquainted with Moretti and his work are now offered an invaluable opportunity to engage with some of the core ideas in many of his writings and so encounter an alternative methodology that adjusts very well to the introduction of data analysis into the research of literary texts.

In this volume, Moretti selects some of his groundbreaking essays in a chronological manner so as to lead the reader from the origins of his analysis of morphological transformations in the European novel to his recent work in applying network theory to the research of plot. Prefacing the essays with his reflections on the significance of each piece in the development of his ideas, Moretti provides the reader with interesting insights into the questions and problems that has driven his work for more than twenty years. Whether or not we should consider his advocacy for a quantitative study of literature as unorthodox, his writing is vibrant, and his vision of comparative literature is striking and original.

The first essay, titled “Modern European Literature: A Geographical Sketch,” is relevant to scholars interested in spatial studies or the emerging field of literary geography, because it

explores the relationship between the European novel and geography. Already influenced by the intersection of Marxist materialism and Ernst Mayr's work on evolutionary theory, Moretti analyzes the development of literary forms in Europe, placing geography as a fundamental factor in the divergence of different genres: "The European space is not a landscape, not a backdrop of history, but a *component* of it; always important, often decisive" (13). As an archipelago of national literatures, Europe becomes a site where literary forms are given the necessary space to migrate morphologically. The idea is particularly remarkable since it suggests the overlap between time and space in the evolution of literary forms. The rise and fall of different genres is not simply the product of time elapsing, but of the effects of geography in the transmission and alteration of literary forms (39).

A smooth transition from the first essay, the second is titled "Conjectures on World Literature" and presents the concept of "distant reading" in an attempt to reinvigorate discussion of world literature as a scholarly discipline. Here Moretti introduces Immanuel Wallerstein's World-Systems Theory in order to understand the relationship between national literatures in a global context (43). Originally an approach in materialist economics that distinguishes between core and periphery, the World Systems Theory has influenced postcolonial theorists such as Enrique Dussel in Mexico. Moretti's implementation of the Wallerstein's concepts is stimulating insofar as it attempts to explain how certain literary forms gain predominance and are assimilated by national literatures. It opens up a space of analysis centered on the flux between core and periphery in regards to form in literature: "world literature was indeed a system—but a system of *variations*" (56). As such, world literature should not focus on a limited canon, but rather embrace a much larger *corpus* of texts and exercise what Moretti coins as a "distant reading;" that is, a reading "[w]here distance, let me repeat it, is a condition of knowledge: it allows you to focus on

units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems” (48-49). Needless to say, the methodology introduced in “Conjectures on World Literature” generated much polemic among literary scholars and was criticized for what many considered the audacity of a quantitative approach to literary history. Well aware of the questions raised, Moretti includes in the volume an essay titled “More Conjectures” that seeks to respond to some of the most important issues posed by his critics.

The essay “Slaughterhouse of Literature” sets the stage for deploying different models for representing and analyzing literature. It clearly manifests the influence of evolutionary theory in Moretti, for the use of trees is deployed to explain the divergences in detective fiction during the nineteenth century, placing in relief the evolutionary concept of survival of the fittest. While certain texts do survive and become canonized, many, many others do not survive the market pressures: “What happens to the 99.5 percent of published literature? This: it’s caught in a morphological dead end. There are many ways of being alive, writes Richard Dawkins in *The Blind Watchmaker*, but much more ways of being dead” (77). Moretti goes on to study the use of clues in detective fiction as an experiment to visualize how such a literary device can trace a “morphological dead end.” The essay itself sets the stage for a later book by Moretti titled *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* published in 2005.

Although Moretti for some time had been using two different frameworks for his methodology, both evolutionary theory (which accentuates the significance of divergence, of difference) and world-systems theory (which accentuates the dependency of the periphery on the core, and *vice versa*), he had yet to consider the compatibility of those two theories. In “Evolution, World-Systems, *Weltliteratur*,” he embarks on a sobering exploration of the internal tensions between the different components in his quantitative methodology. This is perhaps one of the most

surprising aspects of his essays. Moretti is quick to accept criticism and assume failures in his approach, and also to give credit where it is due. His intellectual honesty is certainly commendable. Regardless of the compromises he undertakes to tie theoretical loose ends, the result is still quite impressive: “*Form as struggle*: this is what we have here: a struggle between the story that comes from the core, and the viewpoint that ‘receives’ it in the periphery” (134). The distance from core national literatures allows for an assimilation in their periphery that introduces difference through struggle. Moretti thus offers an innovative vision of world literature in which literary forms diverge and converge with geography as a fundamental factor. Yet in order to adequately research such a system of world literature, the canon has to increase exponentially, so as to include the rest of the 99.5 percent of texts published. The consequences of Moretti’s methodology now begin to clearly point in the direction of the digital humanities and the relevance of data analysis, a course he will take in the last two essays of the volume.

In “Style, Inc.: Reflections on 7,000 Titles” he presents the reader with the initial attempt at researching a large sample of texts by focusing solely on titles of Nineteenth-century British fiction. It is one of his first entries into what he described in “Slaughterhouse of Literature” as the “Great Unread” (180). Titles of works offer the scholar a small unit of analysis that can be reproduced over a voluminous *corpus* of texts. The essay is filled with different models to represent the data scrutinized, the length of titles, the use of adjectives and proper names in titles, and even the presence of articles in titles. From what at first seems like a trivial exercise in statistics, Moretti extrapolates some fascinating interpretations, such as the emphasis of space in the titles of gothic novels (209). Once again, spatial theory scholars will find this mode of research particularly interesting. In “Network Theory, Plot Analysis” Moretti focuses on a spatial representation of character relations in plots. The quantitative formalism here becomes very pronounced. The essay

“was an attempt to do the same for plot, thus providing an essential—and still missing—piece to the computational analysis of literature” (211). What began as a suggestion for introducing “distant reading” in the study of literary forms becomes in this last essay a push for introducing digital methods in literary history. Always challenging and stimulating, Moretti’s discussion of network theory and plot analysis takes the reader to unexpected results. Yet, the final sentences of the essay and the volume clarify one issue that is central to his methodology, one that is certainly inspiring for researchers in the humanities: “But for this to happen, an enormous amount of empirical data must be first put together. Will we, as a discipline, be capable of sharing raw materials, evidence—facts—with each other?” (240). This is a provocative question, but one that stresses the role of collaboration in research, regardless of methodology. We may not always discover definitive results, but that should not stop scholars from continuing their work and sharing their findings with peers. The development of Moretti’s innovative approach to literary history is perhaps one of the most sobering and intellectually invigorating readings available.