

Franco Moretti's New Method of Reading

Why it's necessary to read at a distance

Your Work This Week

- You are going to try your hand at “distant reading”
- “Distant reading” is a way of looking at the features of a literary work without actually reading it like you would a novel
- You will instead *perform operations on the text*
- This is a scientific experiment with literature
- These notes on Franco Moretti’s work will help you understand **why** we might want to try this new method of “not reading”

Franco Moretti's New Method of Reading

The two essays by Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature” and “Slaughterhouse of Literature”

- quite difficult
- worth reading if you can wade through some of the references to world literary figures that you may not recognize.

This Powerpoint is just a summary of Moretti's work

I have summarized and paraphrased the two articles below. These summaries and paraphrases rely heavily on Moretti's language and have little of my own commentary. Page numbers refer to the texts posted in our Moodle site.

Question: How can we expand our worldview of world literature?

In “Conjectures on World Literature” Moretti is asking:
How to avoid narrow-mindedness with a world
literature?

How can we read 30,000 novels?

What does it mean to study world literature? How would we do it?

Moretti says that there are hundreds of languages and literatures.

“Reading ‘more’ can’t be the answer.”

He remarks that only one per cent of literature is “canonical,” meaning found in libraries in colleges and in textbooks.

There are 30,000 British novels. “No one has read them, no one ever will.” (Franco Moretti 55).

We need a new method

“World literature cannot be literature, bigger; what we are already doing, just more of it” (55).

The *categories* have to be different.

Max Weber: “A new science emerges where a new problem is pursued by a new method” (qtd in Moretti 55).

Not close but “distant” reading

“The trouble with close reading is that it necessarily depends on an extremely small canon....You invest so much in individual texts *only* if you think that very few of them really matter” (57).

“Distant reading: where 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.” 57

Create an hypothesis and test it by surveying ALL literature

By being able to develop a hypothesis and then survey *all* literature instead of a sample, you can create “a long chain of literary experiments”—“a ‘dialogue between fact and fancy’” (qtd in Moretti 62).

World Literature = Western form + local form + local material

Moretti discovers that world literature is a “**system of variations**” (64).

How did the form of what we know as the novel arise?

The novel is taken up and “**morphs**” across cultures in a particular pattern of **evolution**.

The development of world novels is triangular: where the Western novel form, combines with local form and local material. “Foreign plot, local characters and local narrative voice.”

A faultline occurs with a mismatch between local forms and foreign ones

The different historical and local *conditions* in different countries can be observed as a “sort of ‘crack’ in the form; as a faultline running between story and discourse, world and worldview; the world goes in the strange direction dictated by an outside power; the worldview tries to make sense of it, and is thrown off balance all the time” (65).

Two models of cross-cultural evolution: The “tree” and the “wave”

Moretti then introduces two major metaphors that guide how we have looked at cultural and linguistic influence: the tree and the wave. The **tree** is a metaphor that describes how Indo-European languages can be found across different countries. It describes the “passage from unity to diversity” (from Indo-European language to say German, Irish, English etc. p. 67). The **wave** describes a move from diversity to unity—how agriculture spread, for example, or perhaps how social media now is spreading (67).

There is nothing in common between these two metaphors but they both work.

World Literature as a permanent intellectual challenge to the local

“There is no other justification for the study of world literature but this: to be a thorn in the side, a permanent intellectual challenge to national literatures—especially local literature” (68).

Part 2: Slaughterhouse of Literature

Why do some books become so popular? Why do others disappear?

What makes a permanent best-seller?

Moretti begins by listing the first page of an 1845 library catalog. You will probably only recognize a few titles because most of them are no longer popular. He says that the history of world literature is a “slaughterhouse”—the majority of books disappear forever. **If you read 200 British novels from the 19th century you would only read .5% of all published novels. *Point five percent.***

Understanding the “great unread”

And what about the other 99.5% Moretti asks. He wants to come up with a way of thinking of the whole literary field—including the “great unread” (208).

We need a method for reading the 20,000 unread novels.

Using computers and algorithms to study literature

What is required for a larger literary history? Sampling statistics, work with series, titles, concordances, incipits or collections of opening words.

Readers slaughter literature by “keeping book A alive into the next generation but not book B” 209.

First, the market decides which novels live on into the next generation

Moretti argues that the market is the first decision maker of a book continuing into the next generation—but then academics follow. This happened with Jane Austen and Daniel Defoe (Who wrote *Robinson Crusoe*). (209)

Word-of-mouth creates “best sellers” and kills the others

Moretti says that if we look at the history of film production we see the same process. First movies are made and people go to the movies and discover what they like. Then they tell others whether they liked that movie and it is this information that produces more demand for that movie. **“Past successes are leveraged into future successes”** (211). What begins as thousands of moviegoers discovering what they like ends up with a centralized system of a market where what previously was liked is now the basis for future films. (211)

Clues: Conan Doyle discovers a popular feature

What is it that was first **discovered** and communicated among early **audiences** in the market that they then influenced future movies or books.

He takes Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's mysteries as an experiment and finds **clues** as a feature of Doyle that "quite a few of Conan Doyle's rivals use no clues at all...these writers are all completely forgotten" (214).

Clues pop up everywhere— even when they're out of place

Then Moretti notices that the idea of “clues” becomes popular—even when there is no actual need for clues in a novel. This is because the clue was popular not because it's necessary in the work. (214). “Some writers sensed that these curious little details were really popular...but they didn't really understand *why* clues were popular, so they used them in the wrong way. And it didn't work very well” (214).

Innovations are adopted unevenly and tentatively

“In times of morphological change, like the 1890s for detective fiction, the individual writer behaves exactly like the genre as a whole: *tentatively*. During a paradigm shift no one knows what will work and what won’t” (215).

Turns out that readers love clues

Moretti argues that Conan Doyle stumbles upon the use of “**clues**” as an attribute of Sherlock Holmes’ genius and superpowers. These clues then become something that the **reader** can figure out and so they lose that function for Conan Doyle and so drop out.

Clues are a “**hinge**” for the **past** (the crime) and the **present** (the investigation)

Clues are the one thing that bring together the two features of detective stories: “crime” in the past and “investigation” in the present (218). The clue is the moment when the past and present “touch” (218)—the clue then is like a “hinge” that joins the past and present of a story together, turning it into something more than the sum of its parts—a structure” (218).

Clues as a device of the slaughterhouse: killing the competitors

This is what made “clues” into a “device aimed at the ‘eradication ofcompetitors” (218) and helps explain why Conan Doyle’s novels remain in the canon as others get lost.

Clues are not the same as “symptoms”—books with symptoms bore the reader

He then tries out this experiment by reading stories that are mysteries in the *Strand* magazine to see if “clues” do in fact become widespread. He finds that sometimes mysteries replace clues with something else. They replace them with “symptoms” rather than clues, and symptoms are not as interesting as clues. And so these stories are not as interesting as Conan Doyle’s (218).

Methodological **Boldness**

Moretti concludes by asking us for a “maximum of methodological boldness” in an archive that is “ten times larger, or a hundred” (227). And indeed it is a hundred times larger since Google Books and the Open Archive have produced so many readable texts.

How You can be Bold

- This week, your job is to take a dip into some of the methods that Moretti uses to answer his big questions about world literature
- Read Paul Fyfe's article on "How Not to Read a Victorian Novel." Now that you've got a sense of Moretti's "distant reading" you'll know why it's important to "not read" a novel
- Check out Doc McGrail's instructions for "not reading" –they will break down Fyfe's method step-by-step