

Literature in the Digital Age: From Close Reading to Digital Reading

Video transcript

What is distant reading?

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When the Italian literary scholar Franco Moretti published his slim book, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* in 2005, this created quite a stir among literary scholars. It created quite a stir because Moretti called upon people like myself to abandon the practice they're most used to, namely close reading. Instead of embarking on painstaking analyses of the semantic and syntactic intricacies of single literary texts, Moretti called upon people like myself to mine huge databases that contained thousands of literary texts, to identify recurring patterns and large-scale historical developments across national borders, and over whole centuries. One such database that Moretti and his fellow researchers used, and that you can use, is Google's Ngram database.

Now Moretti gives us graphs, such as this one, which chart the number of new epistolary gothic and historical novels published each year over a century and 10 years from 1740 to 1850. Among other things, this map shows that genres emerge and disappear in waves. First we have the epistolary wave, then the Gothic wave, then the historical wave. What this map also shows us is the great popularity of epistolary novels – that is, novels composed entirely of letters from the mid-18th century onward, and their rapid decline toward the closing of the 18th century. Moretti also gives us maps such as this one.

This one shows the names of male protagonists of novels set in Paris, and the women are objects these male protagonists desire, here marked by stars. This map leads us to conclude that the men and the women live in different social worlds. The men live in the intellectual and artistic world of the left bank – so the bottom right corner on the map – and the women live either in the commercial, wealthier world of the right bank – that's the top part of the map, northward of the River Seine – or in the elite world with a long aristocratic history of Faubourg Saint Germain, the left bottom part of the map.

And Moretti also gives us trees such as this one. This tree shows the development of free indirect style, a specific way of rendering a fictional character's speech or thoughts, where the narrator speaks in the third person, but we can still clearly hear the character's own idiom and tone. So with free indirect style, we have a strange mixture of the narrator's voice and the character's voice.



And this tree shows that free indirect style emerged in the German literature of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and the English literature of Jane Austen, to branch off into the literatures of other nations, such as Russia, where free indirect style would give expression less to a character's social conformity than to their struggle with societal conventions. And the tree takes us from 1800 to 2000, over 200 years. But why should we embark on such quantitative analyses, and what are the graphs, maps, and trees good for? In his book, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, and in this 2013 volume *Distant Reading*, Moretti gives three main arguments for distant reading. Let's start with the first.

The first argument is this: instead of embarking on what the writer Marc Bloch has called 'years of analysis for a day of synthesis', instead of, in other words, embarking on close readings of the semantic and syntactic intricacies of single individual literary texts, literary scholars can now use the large databases at hand, scan thousands of literary texts, and identify recurring patterns and large-scale historical developments.

The second main argument that Moretti gives for distant reading is that traditional literary scholars tend to focus on a rather narrow selection of literary texts – texts written by authors considered as great authors that are well-established. You know, Goethe, Shakespeare, Melville, Balzac, all dead, white males. And distant reading, by analysing thousands of literary texts, promises to pry open the canon to also include largely forgotten works of literature.

A third and final reason for distant reading is its promise of greater objectivity. Traditional literary scholarship tends to be subjective in the end, shaped by the literary scholar's own norms, values, and prejudices. By using the methods from the social sciences and the natural sciences, and by embarking on quantitative analyses of big data, distant reading promises to give us greater objectivity and greater comprehensiveness.

And for all these reasons, Moretti is ready to make what he himself calls a little pact with the devil. In his own words, 'what we really need is a little pact with the devil. We know how to read texts, now let's learn how not to read them.'