Distant Reading, Computational Criticism, and Social Critique: an Interview with Franco Moretti

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editorial review

I. LUKÁCS, THE FORMALISTS, AND THE YEARS OF FORMATION ↓
II. READING GRAPHS AND CHARTS, NOT BOOKS: THE QUANTITATIVE APPROACH ↓
III. LITERATURE STUDIES AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE? ↓

Franco Moretti in the Research Institute for Social and Economic History at the University of Zurich.

I. LUKÁCS, THE FORMALISTS, AND THE YEARS OF FORMATION[1] ↑

Ruben Hackler: We would like to begin our interview with some biographical background because it's

hard to get any information about your personal life and intellectual background. Our first questions are therefore about your educators and research methods during your studies in Rome. Who were your professors? And what did you read? What were the methods in fashion in those days?

Franco Moretti: I went to the *liceo classico*, the equivalent of gymnasium or high school, which focused quite predominantly on Latin, Greek, philosophy, history and very little on the sciences. But the most important professor I've ever had was my math professor in middle school, Emma Castelnuovo. She came from a famous family of Italian mathematicians. The faculty of mathematics in Rome is named after someone called Guido Castelnuovo, who I think was her uncle or great uncle. She was a genius, the only genius I ever met at school. I mean, who knows, I was ten to twelve years old, but she gave me a passion for geometry, for the combination of intuition and logic. And it has taken me decades to actually display that passion.

Almost up to the last minute I wanted to be a physicist. Which in the 1960s basically meant I wanted to be a scientist. Physics was *the* science, especially for someone like me who knew nothing about science. But I sensed that my math was clearly not good enough. So I studied literature. There was another complication. I could speak English very well because I had been an exchange student for a year in the US, and at the moment of choosing literature I chose English almost out of inertia. But the two literatures that have always been most important for me have been French and German. This created the somewhat strange situation that I'm not a very good anglicist, but I was prepared to be a pretty good comparativist.

At the university, probably the most important professor I studied with was Lucio Colletti. He was a professor of theoretical philosophy and a great Marxist thinker of anti-Hegelian Marxism, with great admiration for the scientific method in general.[2]

Guido Kirsten: An Althusserian?

Moretti: No, not Althusserian at all. No, no, no.

G.K. Anti-Hegel, but not Althusserian either?

Moretti: No, he was an Italian variation. Colletti wasn't a structuralist. I was very impressed by structuralism, but he wasn't. He actually was the person who first mentioned Popper to me, who got me back toward the natural sciences much later in life.

Back then Marxism and structuralism dominated the scene. For me, the key encounter was indeed those two trends, more or less those two. I remember quite clearly, it must have been in my second year of university, reading literally one after the other, an anthology of Russian formalists that Tzvetan Todorov had curated and then Georg Lukács' *Theory of the Novel*. This was the pre-Marxist Lukács and these

were the formalists, not the structuralists. But that two such completely different approaches—one formalist and microscopic and the other historico-philosophical—demonstrated that both could be possible and grand in their own way. In some respects, my entire intellectual life has been an attempt to show how the two perspectives can be reconciled.

I've always seen the formal and the sociological aspect as in need of reconciliation but not easily predisposed to it. Of course, I read Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, and in them the two methods were already more amalgamated. But perhaps for that very reason they are also weakened, because maybe a tension should remain between the two approaches.

R.H. And those texts, they were part of at least one of your syllabi?

Moretti: *Theory of the Novel* wasn't. I read *Theory of the Novel* because Lukács was *the* Marxist critic. Russian formalists were part of a course, but I think I read them for different purposes. Word of mouth was enormously important. Italy had a fantastic translation market at that time. This was a situation in which young students often—because they didn't have to work, unlike their Professors—could read the important stuff more quickly than them. Lukács in German, the Russian formalists in Russian; it was unlikely for a professor to have them read.

R.H. Did you engage in reading groups? Reading Marx, for example, or Lukács or the Russian formalists, or did you do that on your own?

Moretti: I did that on my own. Not many reading groups existed at the time. The groups that existed were political groups and maybe a political group would have an *école cadre*. Throughout my time at university, I was engaged in New Left politics, some years more and some years less. At the time there were no PhDs in Italy. So, at 22, you finished college with your dissertation. If you were lucky you got a small grant—not a post-doc, but the equivalent—and you started teaching at 22. I was still engaged in politics until '76 or so. Trotskyist groups and then in *Manifesto*, that was my political engagement.

G.K. *Manifesto*, the newspaper?

Moretti: Yeah, which also had a political group. I was part of a faction that was fundamentally Trotskyist.

R.H. Can you say what your initial motivation was to take part in those political groups? Did your parents encourage you?

Moretti: No, my parents were very open and liberal, but not left wing. They became much more left wing in course of the 70s and then the 80s, but not back then. If anything, they were a little on the conservative side at the time. They were both classicists. My mother taught in high school, my father was an epigraphist at the university, but not in Rome where I was studying. I had a very liberal-

humanistic education at home. No, it was more that your contemporaries do this, you read the papers, you think about right and wrong…

G.K. It was part of the culture at Italian universities in the '70s; they were very political, no?

Moretti: Exactly, exactly.

G.K. Then we would like to know more about your reasons for going to the US. When and why did you go there?

Moretti: In 1990. In 1972, when I was in London to do research for my dissertation, I had met Perry Anderson and we became friends. Actually, my first book came out in English: *Signs Taken for Wonders*. [3]

G.K. In '83…

Moretti: Yes. And then I wrote the book about the *Bildungsroman* in Italian, which came out in English, too.[4] In Italy, I never taught at a big university. It used to be and still is a system in which it is very difficult to move. I lived in Rome and commuted to a couple of places. First to Pescara then to Salerno in the south, but I wanted to live in the north. This was my bourgeois side. I was tired of southern Italy—of the bureaucratic Rome—and I wanted to live in Milan. When a job opened up in Verona, I took it because it gave me the possibility of an easy commute from Milan. This happened in '83, but Verona was a very small university. After a few years, I was hoping to get to a bigger place, but it was impossible to find something in Italy. In the meantime, Princeton and Columbia were offering me jobs because my books came out in English. And so I said: let's go for a few years somewhere where they want you. And then I met the woman who is still my wife, who was a student then, and so the three years became 25.

R.H. Can you say more about your meeting with Perry Anderson?

Moretti: Yes, absolutely. This, again, gives you a sign of how things were at the time. I was doing my research at the British Library, which was in the British Museum. I had brought with me to London, for no particularly reason, a bunch of Trotskyist journals that some of my friends and I had done in Italy. And, occasionally, I had been reading the *New Left Review* in the years before and I found out that their address was Carlyle Street. When I looked it up, I realized that Carlyle Street was very close to the British Museum. One day, I just knocked on the door with a few of our journals. At the time, at the *New Left Review*, there was only one secretary and then Perry and Quentin Hoare, the literary translator. This is how we met. We read newspapers and then we talked and talked.

G.K. And then he became interested in your work and…

Moretti: … and we also became good friends, which we still are. I started publishing with Verso because of a mix of personal and political attachments that were quite common back then. I continued publishing with them for the same reason.
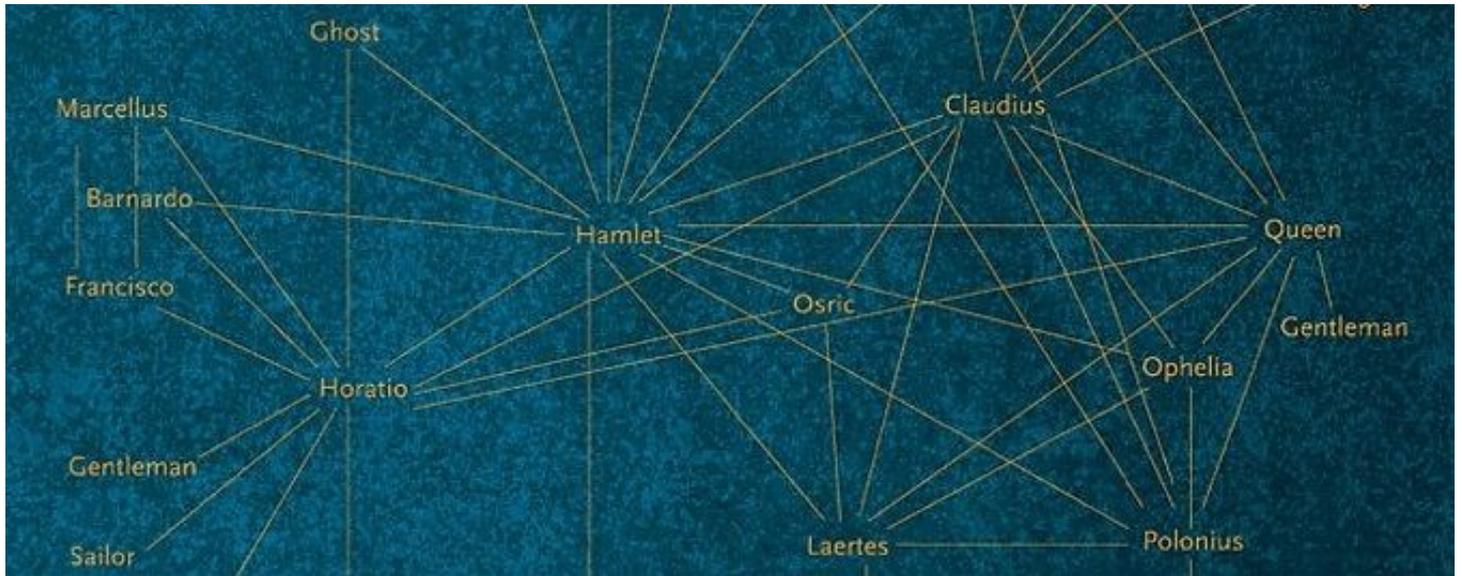
Reading literary works in diagrams, picturing the network of Shakespeare's "Hamlet" (cover detail from Franco Moretti's book "Distant Reading").

II. READING GRAPHS AND CHARTS, NOT BOOKS: THE QUANTITATIVE APPROACH ↑

G.K. We would now like to talk a bit about the methods that you've become famous for in recent years. [5] Which term do you prefer to describe your methodology: "computational criticism," "distant reading," or "digital humanities"? Or would you call it more generally a "materialist" approach to literature? What would be the advantages for one name versus another for what you are doing?

Moretti: "Quantitative" captures an important aspect of my work and also an important precedent because I was very influenced at a certain point by the Annales School, which introduced quantitative methods for social history to a large extent. "Quantitative" remains throughout and "computational" adds another dimension. It adds not only the dimension of enormously large archives, but also of algorithms that can organize the data. There are some sort of statistical operations performed on the data that have also become more and more important and which add another dimension. "Digital humanities" is simply a formula that has come to identify a large field. I use it only because everybody uses it and everybody will use it. But, frankly, I don't like it. I think it means nothing, whereas "quantitative" and "computational" mean something.

The term "materialistic" is at once precise and enormously abstract. If you reduce everything to abstract quantities it becomes a little tricky to speak of materialism because it's clearly an abstraction. It has also happened that the more these computational methods became available and produced results, or seemed

to produce results, the greater the distance from both the world system and the evolutionary approach—for which the term "materialistic" would be much more appropriate in my opinion.

Paradoxically, there has been an un-designed decrease of the materialistic component in recent years in my work. That is not very unusual: academic research takes a certain direction, especially when you end up working in different groups, with a new technology, which you cannot control. It takes you years to realize where you are going. The steps themselves all seem small and you always think OK for now, but you will turn back to the starting point, and then it becomes much more difficult than you expected.

R.H. And how about "distant reading"?

Moretti: The formula is used in the essay "Conjectures on World Literature."[6] It was a last-minute addition; originally I called it "serial reading." This term referred back to the Annales School. They talked about a serial history of the third level.[7] That was my frame of reference and then—you know how these things happen in your brain—"distant reading" occurred and I decided to get rid of "serial reading." It was really kind of a joke. But it's not a joke anymore; it became very serious business.

R.H. It occurs to me that reading is another important aspect in your work. Reading is missing in the other concepts, like "computational criticism," which sounds more like focusing on work with computers. "Digital humanities" is just an umbrella term, meaning many things. You do a lot of reading, besides working with computers, right? Or should we say interpretation?

Moretti: Interpretation, you're certainly right. The question is this: does interpretation arise from reading? Or does reverse engineering[8] inevitably entail close reading? This is an important question on which, for instance, I and just about all of my students disagree. They think that whenever we start looking carefully at sentences, at words, and at their meanings, we are doing close reading. For me, close reading is usually the activity of reading closely *a single text*, having as your object the most complex possible analysis of that text as such.

You can have very attentive reading, which, however, is thinking not in terms of text but in terms of corpora of grammars of conventions. It seems useful to me to distinguish the two activities. Both are very careful, but one is characterized by the presence of a text and the other by the presence of a series—indeed, serial reading. Using the same expression for both is more misleading than useful.

R.H. Was the practice of interpretation a basic feature of your academic training? I can imagine that your students are learning different techniques than you back then in Italy.

Moretti: Well, not that much. Even though they work with me at the literary lab, they mostly study with professors who still, to a large extent, proceed in a more traditional way. Interpretation has to do with the fact that quantitative analysis creates distributions, frequencies, patterns over diagrams, etc. Whether a

type of sentence is characterized by certain words or a certain group of words, this is—I wouldn't hesitate to say—a fact. Every researcher would find the same results, more or less. But it's not a fact that those words form a semantic cluster. This is an act of interpretation. That a semantic cluster means, for example, space, intimacy, or disgust, is another interpretation. Anyway, that kind of interpretation doesn't arise from reading a text. It arises from looking at atomistic words.

G.K. So this is already pointing in the direction of the more concrete work process we are interested in. Do you start out with a precise question and then look for a method in order to get an answer? Or is it rather the other way around: that you have a huge amount of data and then you perceive certain patterns, which give rise to the research question that you then try to answer?

Moretti: Our research usually begins with some loose or general question, and then we dive into the archive for first findings, and then we refine or change our question, and so on.

R.H. Archive here means digital archives?

Moretti: Yes, digital archives. We seldom begin with a very clear hypothesis that needs to be tested and eventually falsified. In part, because there are not that many theories in literary theory, or film theory, or cultural history, that are so well defined that all you have to do is take a piece and try to falsify it. You have to begin by constructing a theory. We've been working a little too intuitively. But that is something I don't regret: to have spent four or five years sort of meandering between different approaches, some were individual ones, others pursued by groups.

So far, we've not developed a repeatable methodology. The only thing that tends to repeat itself is the attempt to connect or reconnect the quantitative findings with already existing aspects of literary theory —narrative, stylistic. We mostly worked with novels, but recently we added dramatic theory.

That, in a sense, is another incarnation of the encounter with the formalists and Lukács. In this case, the "Lukács" has dissolved into these enormous new materials of literary history and the "formalist" is represented by existing concepts.

R.H. Do you spend more time on interpretation or on processing data?

Moretti: I don't program, so I don't process the data. I could never completely understand how long it takes these students or younger colleagues to do the programming. At times it seems like it takes them days and days of work, at times like it takes them a couple of hours or really even less. I would say that finding the data is a relatively quick process.

Okay, let me back track and show the bigger picture. Usually, our projects, from the moment of the first day to the moment of publication, take a couple of years. The data are usually, more or less, all on the table in the first three to six months. It takes much longer to find our way to seeing what are the

interesting questions that we can ask. And it takes even longer to actually go over and rewrite the whole process and understand: what was the logic we were following? Why did we make that decision? What is really important in this finding? That is the part that is most time consuming. Is it interpretation? Yes and no. It is work on the data. Not all of it is interpretive in nature. Some of it is narrative: figuring out the logic you were following in your research.

R.H. So working in the lab is collective work, right? Because you are always saying "we": "we do this, we do that." But when you look at the homepage and see the pamphlet series,[9] you have mostly single authors, just a few co-authored papers.

Moretti: We decided not to have a template. So while a couple are single authored by me, one is a chapter from a PhD dissertation by a student, and the other one is the condensed form of an undergraduate thesis by another student. But it seems to be that the real novelty is the group work of four or five people. I think all our best pamphlets are that kind.

R.H. And one condition for that is that the people stay for several years at Stanford so you can work together?

Moretti: No, not necessarily. At this point, many of them are students. A couple of people who were students at Stanford left two or three years ago, but we are still working together. We usually fly them in for a meeting or two, but most of the long coda of the work is based on email exchange.

R.H. Can you say how many of your experiments at the lab are successful? You told us in another conversation that there were unsuccessful experiments, so it would be interesting to know the ratio.

Moretti: There are various ways in which an experiment can be unsuccessful. For instance, we've had several projects that have lasted one, two, or three years. These have generated very interesting discussions, reasonably solid results, more or less complete, but have never been written. That is successful in certain respects, unsuccessful in another. Usually, each of our projects—this is why the narrative element is important—is a mix of successful and unsuccessful steps. We take many turns that turn out to lead nowhere. But, what is the ratio? About 50/50, something like that.

G.K. Have all of these texts you are working with been collected and scanned by your group? Or did they exist already in digital form?

Moretti: Almost all of them exist already in digital form. In our latest pamphlet, a whole section is devoted to the difficulties in finding a good random sample from the archive.[10] The conclusion, in short, is that the idea that just about everything is available on the internet is a myth. The idea that what is available is for free is another myth. A book library that owns the only existing copy of a 1790 novel may charge you $15,000-$20,000 to digitize the book. But maybe by trying to digitize it, they destroy

the book. I have sympathy for rare book libraries. And then there are the great sharks of ProQuest, Cengage, etc., which are for-profit organizations. They are a different story.

G.K. Can you estimate how biased the sample actually is?

Moretti: Yes, I can detail it with numbers. In the end, we generate this random sample and we already had on existing sources about one-third of the novels, we added another third that we were able to locate, and a third remained out, more or less. But, the point is that the third that remained out are the novels that were more quickly forgotten. In a sense, it's really this third we were most interested in. It's very biased in the direction of the canon.

R.H. We should have asked that earlier: when did you start to work with computers? You said you were attracted by the findings of the Annales School, but it is another thing to focus on computers as a main research instrument in the field of literature.

Moretti: I began doing it in the mid-90s when I was working on the *Atlas of the European Novel*,[11] but it was very simple statistical tables or diagrams, working with Excel on my own. It began in earnest around 2002/2003, when Matt Jockers came to Stanford. Jockers and I offered in 2004 a graduate course at Stanford entitled "Digital Data and Literary Theory." Guess how many students we had.

G.K. A few?

Moretti: One. A German student who had just landed a day or two before and who was trying to find a class. Then there were some who came in because they were blindly curious.

R.H. Is there any influence from the computer industry? You work in the Bay Area, Silicon Valley is close by. I assume there are many possibilities of cooperation with the bigger companies around you?

Moretti: We've never received money and we never have applied for it, if my memory is right. Personally, I think that it's a disaster that we live in the Bay Area because it's impossible to hire a good programmer. If they are good they would be paid 20 times more by the industry. The only relationship I've ever had with one of these giants was that one person working in a research group at Apple addressed us saying: "We are working on matters that are similar to one of the projects that you're doing at the lab. Could I come to one of your meetings?" And I said: "Of course, provided that one from our group can come to your meetings." This was received as a sort of insult, an affront, how do we dare, and it shows the mentality of those companies. They are giant corporations and they really think they are above the law. They have the right of entry and you don't. This is fascinating.

R.H. So Stanford is more like an island in that respect?

Moretti: No. The President of Stanford, who is now stepping down, he sits on the board of Google.

Stanford is very integrated, but we are not.

G.K. We know that you are not only interested in literature, but also in other media, such as film. In 2001 you published a piece called "Planet Hollywood," in which you study the export of US American films to the global market and in which you use a similar framework as in your literary studies.[12] Where does your interest in cinema come from? How did you start to write that piece or engage in that kind of research? Do you think that the methods you use to study literary history are applicable to other fields?

Moretti: That piece occurred to me as an equivalent to the circulating libraries I was studying. I may even have found that parallel written somewhere. Honestly, I don't remember now. Now video stores have disappeared, but they really functioned exactly like circulating libraries. Too expensive for people to buy videos, but cheap enough to rent them, and they were organized by genre. It was fascinating.

I think the method is particularly close for novels and fiction films. TV series are another installment. There has been work on art, on the power of the core of the art market. In art it's a little different, because usually the individual author and his works are completely crucial and enormous amounts of money play a central role.

The evolutionary approach—right or wrong—can, with little modification, appear in other fields. But moving outside the aesthetic sphere has some complications, even though we did produce this study of the World Bank, which I coauthored with Dominique Pestre, a sociologist.[13] Since the texts are written in language and I spend a lot of time analyzing language, the computational approach can produce some interesting findings.

G.K. Maybe, more specifically, about the comparison between literature and cinema: where do you see important differences between those two fields? Would you say that the evolution of film still functions in a different way than that of literature?

Moretti: I think there are differences in language and organization. The difference in language is that film works in a more complex language than literature because it's a two-sided system: visual and verbal. Plus, there are the frame, the shots, etc. The two languages can be compared relatively easily when it comes to plot structure, but when you look at style it gets much more complicated.

What could be interesting in the study of film history is the collective nature of the work. Because the film production leaves a paper trail and this could possibly teach us things about how form is achieved, which we can only conjecture in the case of literature. But I don't know if such studies exist and if they've revealed anything interesting.

G.K. Then, of course, there are many parallels between the two fields. There are also canonical

masterpieces and so many films that are no longer watched but still exist as data, so you can still at least have some generic information about them.

Moretti: Yes. I'm astonished, for example, at the sheer number of Western movies with John Wayne that have been shot and that I had never heard of.

G.K. Are you watching them for a specific purpose? Is there any analysis of John Wayne Westerns coming up?

Moretti: I don't think so, but for undergraduates I've been teaching an introduction to English and American literature from 1850 to today. I teach Dickens for the 1850s, but when I come to the 1940s I should teach a film instead of a novel. Then, of course, things are a little more complicated. I ended up teaching one class on the Western and the Film Noir as two antithetical genres. They are almost contemporary, they are both extremely successful, and they seem to function in profoundly different ways. This is, then, an interesting way of looking at a cultural system. What does it mean that the same culture at the same time produces both Westerns and Film Noir? Does it suggest something? And it's Westerns and Film Noir; it's not Westerns and Antonioni, because that would be much more of an issue of positions as in the literary field, but these are both in the same "place," speaking in terms of Pierre Bourdieu's art field.[14]

G.K. Are you interested in film theory or film studies more generally?

Moretti: I should be, but, honestly, I don't have the time. I want to catch up. All I've been reading seems extremely interesting and very much in synchrony with the way I think. But I really am not an expert.

R.H. The film scholars at Stanford, are they not interested in working with you or with other colleagues from the lab?

Moretti: Stanford is a very spread out place, so it's very easy to work half your life down there and never meet people from other departments. But, in principle, I think there could be more dialogue about questions of form and quantification between the disciplines in the future.

G.K. Let's go back to the broader transdisciplinary perspective then. From your experience, what are the advantages and limits of quantification and digital tools?

Moretti: I think there are two important possibilities and then we have to see if they become reality or not. One has to do with the archive. The great advantage of quantification is that all of a sudden millions of texts that had, for all practical purposes, disappeared, become available for research. But you have to have a good question to ask these archives. A text always speaks to us; an archive doesn't. Everything is there, but do we have good research questions? I would say no. The reason is not the fault of people who work in the digital humanities. It's the fault of literary history. In the last 30 or 40 years it has been a very

uninteresting discipline. It has not generated many interesting debates—whether of method or of substance. This is the situation in which we are suddenly confronted with millions of books and we are not sure anymore what we are interested in.

The second reason for possible optimism in digital humanities has to do with the algorithms that process the archives. The algorithms can organize data in ways that are often very surprising. This is something I say from working with younger colleagues like Ryan Heuser, a grad student who has coauthored many of our pamphlets.[15] When we are trying to imagine ways of processing the data, he comes up with very original ideas. They are original because, in the way the program is designed and the algorithm is conceived, there is half a concept, half a bridge between two concepts. There is something that we otherwise would have called intuition, which is not explicitly formulated in words, but it's explicitly formulated through the operations of the algorithms. This I find the most promising aspect of digital humanities: the way of bringing new concepts into existence, even though very often in a messy or camouflaged way. Has it happened often? Not often enough. Nevertheless, it's a new chance for conceptualization. I think it's important to pursue it.

G.K. And what, according to you, are the limits and problems of digital humanities?

Moretti: The limits and problems are, first of all, those of all of literary history and literary theory nowadays. As I was saying earlier, this is a discipline that has somehow lost the sense of its importance. Then there are limits and problems that are specific to digital humanities: so much can be generated visually in such captivating ways, in such enormously information-rich ways, that too little time is spent analyzing what can be produced. The typical digital humanities talk presents 20, 30, 40, 50 charts, diagrams, graphs, and trend lines, and spends just a few seconds on each of them. This is profoundly wrong because the point of this method is to replace the text or the excerpt as the typical object of study with charts or graphs, but then the new object of study must be analyzed with the same care as the old one. Not exactly the same care, obviously, but a comparable care. My dream is that one day there will be a diagram (for example something similar to Bourdieu's field) interesting enough that we can spend an hour analytically exploring it. Has it happened? No. Could it happen? Yes. Will it happen? No one knows.

R.H. You can get lost in the data; that is the danger of the whole enterprise.

Moretti: And then there is a very demagogic element in the presentation of results, like saying: "Here are the data. I'm not sure what they mean, but anyone can search them." You want to be open access? Fine, we've done it a couple of times with interesting results. Do it, but tell me what you think, tell me what you did it for. Don't say that you are doing this to put it at the disposal of the world. The world doesn't care about this! It may care about your ideas. I think it's becoming more and more frequent, this way of avoiding committing. Saying: "The important thing is not what I think, but what others would

think." No, no, no! You are talking. The important thing is what you think. At least that's how I see it.

Detail from Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' portrait of the French journalist Louis-François Bertin (1766–1814). This painting was chosen for the cover of Franco Moretti's book "The Bourgeois" (2013).

III. LITERATURE STUDIES AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE? ↑

G.K. The third section is more concerned with questions of society, social power, and critique. In the introduction to your piece "Evolution, World Systems, *Weltliteratur*" in *Distant Reading*, you say that in evolutionary theory and in system theory there is something missing conceptually: the idea of social conflict, which is able to change society on a large scale.[16] Have you found a way to cope with that problem?

Moretti: Not really. It still remains a problem. I optimistically thought I would start writing on tragedy as a genre of conflict, but instead I've decided to spend another two or three years working intensely at the lab. I've been thinking about tragedy on and off. That book on tragedy would be the ideal place to deal with changes in society. Tragedy is not only the genre of conflict, but conflict to the death, irreconcilable conflict. At the same time, it's a form that lends itself to a very good type of operationalizable analysis, which is through network theory. The encounter between a genre of conflict and a theory that doesn't seem to have room for conflict—that is how I want to study what happens there.

I would like to add a specification to the type of conflict typical for human societies. If we consider evolutionary theory, reshaping the whole system can also occur in animal kingdoms. But there is an element of self-legitimation, a symbolic element, which is obviously exclusive to humans. It's always a conflict in the name of something, not just conflict for survival. In fact, it's usually not survival per se, but a certain type of survival.

G.K. Rather, the distribution of resources—wealth, power, resources, and others?

Moretti: Yes, but also how the distribution should be organized. I'm very happy to work on tragedy, because it's at once a very rigorous form—as rigorous as they get in literature, unless you are studying poetry—and, at the same time, tragic conflict is not the same as social conflict. There are relations, but they are certainly not identical. Tragedy has a lot to do with social conflict of one type or another, maybe political even more than social. So I'm very eager to return to studying a form that allows me to think about that.

R.H. In this context, can you say what the relation between literature and society is? If we look at your recent book, *The Bourgeois*, you describe how French, British, and German prose in the 19th century was soaked with bourgeois values, but you make less of an effort to connect these findings to the social context of that time. Would you say that there is a direct relation between those two entities? Is literature a sort of "mirror" for society?

Moretti: Mirror was never my favorite metaphor. I would say that literature is an instrument in the way society works. In the way I've often referred to Lukács, especially in a book like *The Bourgeois*, I was thinking of literary forms—literary texts, devices, etc.—ways to solve certain perceptual, cultural contradictions. In this respect, because they were solving these contradictions, these literary forms managed to both produce pleasure and also become an articulation of the dominant culture, the dominant ideology.

G.K. Could you give us a concrete example?

Moretti: Let's think of free indirect style, which I analyze in the *The Bourgeois*.[17] In the 19th century there was simultaneously much more autonomy for individual opinions, but also the need to construct a general public opinion. So they had to find a middle way between the two. Free indirect style was a possibility to have a style that still preserved certain elements of the individual voice, but in a grammar that seemed to be a more objective than direct speech.

G.K. I can see the interest in form as a solution to social discrepancies, but you could also look at content or, for example, at certain stereotypes, and so on.

Moretti: Absolutely. Though, whenever you get one of these forms that are particularly interesting from the viewpoint of ideology—like free indirect style or genres like the *Bildungsroman* or detective fiction —it seems that the formal construction is the key to success. In the case of free indirect style, at the beginning, say in the year 1800, you can see that many writers were trying to use it, but they made all sorts of strange choices. In order for free indirect style to become so powerful as a sort of ideological weapon, it was necessary to solve a lot of microscopic problems. After a generation or so the "mistakes" have disappeared.

R.H. The example of free indirect style is compelling. But, again, is it enough for critical literature studies to deal with forms? You are interested in writings, but not in writers or publishers as social groups or in the practice of writing from a sociological perspective. Gramsci would presumably argue that the bourgeois values presented in the 19th literary were part of a hegemonic discourse, and that certain writers or other actors in the literary field were active parts in the process of spreading them.

Moretti: Well, this is part of the discussion on evolutionary theory. Why is evolution as a theory so appealing to me? Because it's a theory that explains how certain very complex structures can come into being even in the absence of intentional design, simply by accretion of changes that initially were directionless and random. Creators create, writers write, composers compose, but it's the pressure of the audience that rewards certain solutions, which then could become dominant. In the way I'm looking at history, human beings haven't disappeared. But the human beings who create have no real sense of direction. And the ones who give a sense of direction are not the ones who create.

G.K. You said that there is a need to legitimize the distribution of wealth and power positions in human societies. Is the primary function of ideology really to legitimize these positions? Then the question arises: where does the ideology comes from? Does the audience produce ideology, simply by choosing the works it likes to read?

Moretti: No, production is always on the side of the writers. The audience nudges this production in a certain direction. I would say that the final ideological formations are the result of the concurrence of writers and readers, so to speak. Perhaps this is also why ideology works. Because it doesn't fall from above; rather it emerges from an interaction. But there are two very different roles in this process: one group creates and the others selects. Even in the passivity or in the non-productivity of the audience, there is a small element of activity.

R.H. So your argument is that the audience asks for ideology?

Moretti: Yes, we know that it asks for ideology. Definitely.

G.K. What would you say is the political purpose of literary studies? Is there an agenda or should there be one? Do you define yourself, in a loose sense, still as a Marxist with a certain idea of what should be changed in society?

Moretti: Certainly as a historical materialist. But it's hard to draw any political consequences from that for the study of literature. I've never much liked the kind of literary scholarship that turned into some sort of political preaching. I thought the first task of historians ought to be to explain what has happened.

I think that the main function of literature—not the only one—is providing pleasure and, therefore, binding individuals to the existing world. As an object, it is, if you wish, the most ideological of objects.

The analysis of such objects and the way in which they function, at least in the case of *The Bourgeois*, moves almost by itself into some sort of critique. This is the big difference, in my opinion, between not only cultural critique and digital humanities in general, but also in my own work in one mode and the other. The type of social critique that goes into the *The Bourgeois* is not really apparent in distant reading or in the pamphlets.

Why? Because a book, or the work of a single author, is always like a model of the world. In order to understand how that model works, you have to analyze how that book would like to shape the world. There is always a normative component, an element not exactly of violence but of intervention, of shaping. The analyst can only understand the form if she or he also understands the formative force behind it. And that force is a social force, however mediated.

When you work in the quantitative mode with a corpus that no longer exists, you are confronted with a serious problem: a corpus is not written by anyone, it has no message and, in a sense, no meaning. Its relationship to social reality is very oblique. This doesn't mean we should not pursue it. However, I still don't understand how one can elaborate social critique out of the work on corpora.

G.K. So you are still looking for a reconciliation between your two different personas?

Moretti: Hopefully, that is what the book on tragedy may accomplish.

R.H. What type of critique are you doing? Would you agree that providing knowledge about bourgeois values gives us the opportunity to understand things better, which is a significant moment of critique? Or how would you describe the sort of critique going on in your books?

Moretti: Let me give you a couple of examples from *The Bourgeois*. I'm discussing Victorianism, partly with reference to today's American culture. I show that in the bourgeoisie, as the ruling class of capitalist times and in order to secure hegemony for the social formation of capitalism, has given up many of their bourgeois values. Instead, they started promoting again all the aristocratic and Christian values. This is not simply a historical statement. This should also be read as criticism of the inconsistency and of the renunciation of values in the name of social stability.

Another instance—it's in the Robison Crusoe chapter and in the Ibsen chapter and comes up here and there—is the difficulty of reconciling bourgeois values with pleasure. Not just in regards of the aesthetic, but pleasure more generally. I'm not sure how far one has to go for a critique to count as critique, but identifying a culture that finds no place for happiness is a pretty heavy statement.

To be sure, I'm not talking here of conflicts between different classes; all of this is immanent. *The Bourgeois* is entirely devoted to the internal view of one class. The book begins with a chapter in which the bourgeois is shown to be two very different figures that cannot be reconciled; it ends with a chapter

on Ibsen, in which, again, bourgeois life is shown to be the result of inevitable and irresolvable conflicts. This is a very important outcome: the bourgeois culture, even though it has introduced a lot of important things in human history, is ultimately doomed.

R.H. Should that be a topic for analyzing the present or would you rather say this is a historical observation?

Moretti: I think it's only an observation of the past. In the present, there is no real bourgeois culture anymore, as I've shown in my book.

R.H. Showing inconsistencies, as you do, is a sort of critique of ideology. One way how ideology works is to pretend that the world is perfectly constructed, everything fits. It sends the fatalistic message: you can revolt, but there are always people who have more legitimacy and power. Showing that this worldview is not appropriate is critique of ideology at its best.

Moretti: This reminds me of a short essay in *Manifesto*, published by Lucio Colletti: "Marxism: Science or Revolution?"[18] He basically said that the scientist describes the world as it is and takes pride in showing that there are no alternatives. In contrast, the revolutionary wants to change the world completely. This is the dichotomy at the heart of my work. There is a desire in me to understand how things are, and this is stronger than the imagination that they could be otherwise. In that respect, positive knowledge is more important to me than political critique. But I'm not saying that this is the way it should be, because, honestly, at times, I wish I were different.

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[1]The interview was conducted in Zurich on March 14, 2016. We would like to thank Beth Gharrity Gardner for the transcription and Bernard Heise for the copyediting.

[2] Lucio Coletti (1924–2001) held a professorship for history of philosophy at the Sapienza University of Rome. Until the mid-1960s, he was a member of the Italian Communist Party, but over the years he adopted more moderate positions. In the 1990s, he became a member of Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia. For a short biography, see: "Obituary: Lucio Colletti" in The Guardian.

[3] Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, and David Miller (London: NLB, Verso editions, 1983).

[4] Franco Moretti, *Il romanzo di formazione* (Milan: Garzanti, 1986), translated by Albert Sbragia as *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987).

[5] See, for instance, the discussions in Jonathan Goodwin & John Holbo, ed., *Reading Graphs, Maps, Trees: Responses to Franco Moretti* (Anderson, SC: Parlor Press, 2011).

[6] Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (January-February 2000): 54–68; also in Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013), 43–62.

[7] Pierre Chaunu, "Un nouveau champ pour l'histoire sérielle: le quantitatif au troisième niveau," in *Mélanges en l'honneur de Fernand Braudel II: Methodologies de l'histoire et des sciences humaines* (Paris: Privat, 1973), 105–125.

[8] Moretti uses the term "reverse-engineering" to refer to the idea of treating a given form as the solution to a (poetic or representational) problem, which can be reconstructed from the form of the given work in order to reveal some dimension of the past that would otherwise remain hidden. See Moretti, *The Bourgeois*, 14. For a discussion of Moretti's conception of "reverse engineering", see also Patrick Kilian "Of Trees and Genealogies: A Foucauldian Commentary on Franco Moretti", in: **foucaultblog** (2016).

[9] Pamphlets of the Stanford Literary Lab.

[10] Mark Algee-Hewitt, Sarah Allison, Marissa Gemma, Ryan Heuser, Franco Moretti, and Hannah Walser, "Canon/Archive: Large-scale Dynamics in the Literary Field" (*Literary Lab Pamphlet* 11, January 2016).

[11] Franco Moretti, *Atlante del romanzo europeo, 1800-1900* (Torino: G. Einaudi, 1997), English as *Atlas of the European novel, 1800-1900* (London/New York: Verso, 1998).

[12] Franco Moretti, "Planet Hollywood," *New Left Review* 9 (May-June 2001): 90-101; also in *Distant Reading*, 91–105.

[13] Franco Moretti and Dominique Pestre, "Bankspeak: The Language of World Bank Reports," *New Left Review* 92 (March-April 2015): 75–99.

[14] Pierre Bourdieu, *Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

[15] See, for instance, Sarah Allison, Ryan Heuser, Matthew Jockers, Franco Moretti, and Michael Witmore, "Quantitative Formalism: an Experiment" (*Pamphlet* 1; January 2011); Ryan Heuser and Long Le-Khac, "A Quantitative Literary History of 2,958 Nineteenth-Century British Novels: The Semantic Cohort Method" (*Pamphlet* 4; May 2012); Sarah Allison, Marissa Gemma, Ryan Heuser, Franco Moretti, Amir Tevel and Irena Yamboliev, "Style at the Scale of the Sentence" (*Pamphlet* 5; June 2013); Mark Algee-Hewitt, Ryan Heuser, and Franco Moretti, "On Paragraphs. Scale, Themes, and Narrative Form" (*Pamphlet* 10; October 2015).

[16] Franco Moretti, "Evolution, World Systems, *Weltliteratur*," in *Distant Reading*, 121–135, here 122.

[17] Moretti, *The Bourgeois*, 94–100.

[18] Lucio Colletti, "Marxism: Science or Revolution?" in *Ideology in Social Science: Readings in Critical Social Theory*, ed. Robin Blackburn (London: Fontana, 1972), 369–377.