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PROJECT

Murder and Form: an Analysis of Tragic Structure

Tragedy arises from a paradoxical conjunction: the most brutal of actions - conveyed by the most rigorous of forms. I would like to understand how this meeting of opposites has come into being, how it managed to survive for twenty-five centuries in very different cultures, and what it says about the foundations of social power.

I plan to work on a large comparative corpus, ranging from Greek and Roman tragedy to (more or less) the present, and to use network theory as my main analytical tool. Network theory provides a set of concepts that allow me to "translate" traditional notions like those of character, interaction, scene, and so on into a more precise system of relations (nodes, edges, density, clustering, etc.), within which dramatic structure becomes at once more intuitively visible and more open to explicit conceptual analysis. In particular, the theory is great at articulating the differences among the various "regions" of dramatic networks, offering a good starting point for that comparative morphology of tragic structures which is one of the objectives of my research.

On the other hand, what arguably constitutes the very essence of tragedy - conflict, and conflict to death - seems to escape the traditional categories of network theory: great at analyzing the growth and diversification of complex systems, those categories have less to say about what can generate a crisis within their structure. In this part of my work, I will turn to the "network semantics" recently developed by a number of us at the Stanford Literary Lab, to explore how semantic flows introduce a radical instability within dramatic networks, precipitating their self-destruction.

I am not sure how the two parts of my research - the establishment of network solidity, and the discovery of semantic instability - can be reconciled. But a contradictory research plan seems appropriate for a paradoxical form; and then, I have an entire year to figure it out.

Recommended Reading

Moretti, Franco. *Graphs Maps Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History*. London: Verso, 2005.

- *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. London: Verso, 1987.

- "Network Theory, Plot Analysis." *New Left Review* 68 (2011).

Tragedy Measured

My presentation is one of a series of projects conducted at a place that we call, with some optimism, the Literary Lab. The aforesaid consists of a dozen people, mostly grad students, who try very hard to operate like a lab - constant empirical testing, collective work, logbooks of projects, a wealth of data - and with two main objectives, namely clarifying literary morphology by providing it with a quantitative basis - tragedy measured - while exploring the new historical archive made accessible by digital databases.

Nowadays, thanks mostly to corpus linguistics, there are various ways of quantifying literary language and, more tentatively, style. But plot has proven much harder to deal with, and so, some time ago, we started applying network theory to drama as a possible starting point (we chose plays instead of novels because they are easier to formalize). My talk begins by explaining how network theory can be used to highlight certain aspects of dramatic structure, and it is divided into three distinct but interconnected parts. The first part, mostly on the Greek Chorus, sketches out a possible relationship between quantitative data and literary interpretation; the second part focuses on Hegel's theory of dramatic "collision" and on the semantic field of forces emerging from Sophocles' *Antigone*; and the third part, on Shakespeare and Racine, looks at the overall shape of dramatic networks and at the consequences for the development of style. It is from these varying perspectives that I keep returning to the same question: Can a quantitative approach change our understanding of tragic conflict in literature - and if so, of conflict in general?

Moretti, Franco ([Göttingen],2022)

Falsche Bewegung : die digitale Wende in den Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaften

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1800945515>

Falso movimento

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Moretti, Franco (London,2020)

The roads to Rome

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Moretti, Franco (Leiden,2020)

Simulating dramatic networks : morphology, history, literary study

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1752188128>

Moretti, Franco (London,2019)

Hidden in plain sight : data visualization in the Humanities

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1759917087>

Moretti, Franco (New York,2019)

Far country : scenes from American culture

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Moretti, Franco (Torino,2019)

Un paese lontano : cinque lezioni sulla cultura americana

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<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1067231129>

Moretti, Franco (Frankfurt am Main,2015)

Bankspeak: the language of World Bank Reports, 1946–2012

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=168761847X>

Stanford Literary Lab: Pamphlets ; 9

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=168761847X>

Moretti, Franco (Berlin,2014)

Der Bourgeois : eine Schlüsselfigur der Moderne

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The bourgeois <dt.>

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Moretti, Franco (London,2013)

Distant reading

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Selections::Essays

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Moretti, Franco (London [u.a.],2013)

The bourgeois : between history and literature

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