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How to cite:

Bennett, Tony (2009). Counting and seeing the social action of literary form: Franco Moretti and the sociology of literature. Cultural Sociology, 3(2) pp. 277–297.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1177/1749975509105535

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Counting and seeing the social action of literary form: Franco Moretti and the sociology of literature

Tony Bennett

Abstract

This paper reviews Franco Moretti's use of statistics and techniques for visualising the action of literary forms, and assesses their implications for the development of cultural sociology. It compares Moretti's use of such methods with the work of Pierre Bourdieu, contrasting the principles of sociological analysis developed by Bourdieu with Moretti's preoccupation with the analysis of literary form as illustrated by his accounts of the development of the English novel and the role of clues in the organisation of detective stories. His attempt to use evolutionary principles of explanation to account for the development of literary forms is probed by considering its similarities to earlier evolutionary accounts of the development of design traits. While welcoming the methodological challenge posed by Moretti's work, its lack of an adequate account of the role of literary institutions is criticised as are the effects of the forms of abstraction that his analyses rest upon.

Keywords: Form, genre, device, evolution, formalism, visualisation

In a number of books and articles penned over the last decade or so, Franco Moretti has challenged literary studies to develop new methods of analysis for reading not specific individual literary texts but large corpuses of such texts. They aim to convert

selected aspects of such texts into numerical form, and then to translate those numerical representations into visualisations borrowed from the sciences – maps, trees, and diagrams – in order to suggest new ways of probing the relations between literature and the social. As such, the seriousness and freshness of the challenge they represent is greatly to be welcomed. Yet there are, of course, some problems and it is these that I explore in what follows.

My main line of argument will be that as a consequence of what he decides to count, and of what not to count, the connections that Moretti seeks to establish between the literary and extra-literary series he is concerned with are too direct, omitting any consideration of the role of literary institutions and the social organisation of literary practices in mediating such relationships. I shall pursue this line of argument in relation to two examples. First, I compare and contrast the analytical logic that underlies his use of maps with the sociological use that Pierre Bourdieu makes of maps in his famous reading of Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*. Second, I shall query the use that Moretti makes of evolutionary trees and evolutionary paradigms of explanation to account for the mechanisms of literary change.

Before coming to either of these concerns, however, I argue that Moretti's work is best read not, as his more polemical formulations sometimes imply, as a frontal assault on literary studies from a position outside it but as, precisely, a move within literary studies in the sense of proposing new ways of defining and dissecting its traditional object of study: the organisation and action of literary form. I also return to this point in my conclusion where I suggest that, appearances to the contrary, Moretti has not done away with the version of this problematic that he takes issue

with – the concern, that is, with the literariness, the defining literary quality, that distinguishes a small corpus of texts from the rest – so much as misunderstood the angle from which it might best be approached.

'The truly social element in literature is: the form'

My quotation here might well have been taken from Moretti who, indeed, concludes his *Graphs, Maps, Trees* by indicating his continuing, albeit modified, commitment to the 'great idea' of the Marxist critical season of the 1960s and 1970s as '*a materialist conception of form* ….. form as the most profoundly social aspect of literature' (Moretti, 2005: 92). In fact, however, the quotation is from Georg Lukács (1961: 71) whose work, from *The Soul and Its Forms* onwards (Lukács, 1974), continued to be informed (no matter how much, for political reasons, he affirmed the priority of content over form) by a Simmelian concept of form as the truly social element in literature. What matters rather more here, however, is the role that Lukács's work among others – that of Lucien Goldmann, Frederic Jameson, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Terry Eagleton, Pierre Macherey and Mikhail Bakhtin – played, in the 1960s and 1970s, as one contribution amongst many to reformulating the ways in which European and Anglo-American literary studies would engage with questions of form. For these were all, in their different ways, preoccupied with questions of form, especially at the level of genre analysis as the aspect of literary form judged to lend itself best to the task of tracing the connections between, on the one hand, transformations or stabilities of form and, on the other, changes or continuities in the organisation of economic, social and cultural relationships. This was expressed in the varied accounts these theorists offered of the relations between the novel and the rise

of capitalism, for example, or of the social conditions supporting different versions of the tragic form.

James English's recent magisterial account of the history of literary studies provides a useful means of situating this moment, and Moretti's relationship to it, in a longer disciplinary perspective. From its relatively recent origins in the late nineteenth century through to the 'moment of theory', English argues, there has been a 'longstanding connection … between scholars' concern with the formal particulars of "literature itself" and their collective, ongoing struggle for recognition and security in the modern university' (English, 2008: 127). To be lifted above its earlier status as either a leisurely pursuit for gentlemen or a remedial discipline for women, working men or colonial students, literary studies needed to claim a specific object of analysis and a rigorously circumscribed set of methods for that object's analysis in order to operate both as a research discipline with specified standards of proof and as something that could be taught with definite norms of assessment. Defining the concerns of literary studies as being with the analytical dissection of the operations of literary form suited this purpose. It was particularly useful in differentiating literary analysis from philology by identifying its concerns as consisting in – to use the terms of the key disciplinary move first made by the Russian Formalists – the 'literariness' of literature as defined by its distinctive formal manipulations of the properties of ordinary language.

Interpreting Russian Formalism, Practical Criticism, and New Criticism as 'the founding formalisms of literary study' (English, 2008: 128), English traces the variety of ways in which, in the second half of the twentieth century, the reach of formalist

analysis was extended and, thereby, the institutional hold of literary studies reconfirmed, through a series of critical engagements with and transformations of these founding formalisms. As one aspect of the 'moment of theory' the sharp increase of interest in Marxist criticism that was evident in the 1960s and 1970s drew much of its intellectual force from the varied Marxist revisions of formalism that had taken place, in the 1920s, in the debates between Marxism and the Russian Formalists. However, this moment of Marxist criticism also extended these earlier concerns into a new form of rapprochement between Marxist materialism and literary studies that assumed the shape of the historicisation of form on the one hand and the attribution of formal properties to history on the other. This offered the literary text new kinds of effectivity by conceptualising its form as a force with a capacity to shape history as well as to be shaped by it.

In recalling this critical moment and, albeit in a qualified way, declaring a continued affiliation to it, Moretti emphasises the scientific and materialist aspects of the Marxist legacy by way of explaining why he now looks to scientific disciplines with which literary studies has had little connection – quantitative history, geography and evolutionary theory – to provide the intellectual resources needed to renovate both its conception of its object of study and its approach to that object. Yet, as English notes, in spite of the provocation of his critique of literary studies for its preoccupation with the close reading of texts, Moretti's abiding interests continue to be with questions of form and, in affirming his continuing commitment to the Marxist criticism of the 1960s and 1970s, the nature of form's action on the social. Moretti is explicit about this, declaring his interest as being in 'literature, the old territory (more

or less)', in which an interest in form is relocated as part of a set of concerns defined in similar terms: 'Shapes, relations, structures. Forms. Models' (Moretti, 2007: 1).

Moretti's concern, then, is to argue *for* not *against* literary studies, but to do so by drawing on the scientific disciplines to redefine how its concern with questions of form should be broached and, thereby, to lend it new forms of legitimacy and authority derived from the procedures of the sciences and social sciences. There are three main aspects to his argument here. The first consists in his proposal that literary studies should shift its concern from the 'close reading' of a selected canon of texts to a 'distant reading' of a much larger textual corpus. His interest, he says, is in the great mass of literature that is no longer read; the 99.5% of texts that do *not* survive the processes of selective filtering, from one generation to the next, through which literary canons are organised. What, Moretti asks, can count as knowledge, and how can it be produced, in relation to such an expanded conception of the field of study?

> Knowing two hundred novels is already difficult. *Twenty thousand?* How can we do it, what does "knowledge" mean, in this new scenario? One thing is for sure: it cannot mean the very close reading of very few texts – secularised theology, really ("canon"!) – that has radiated from the cheerful town of New Haven over the whole field of literary studies. A larger literary history requires other skills: sampling; statistics; works with series, titles, concordances, incipits – and perhaps also the "trees" that I discuss in this essay. (Moretti, 2000: 208-9)

There are, though, limits to the scope of the textual corpus that Moretti proposes here. For while extending the field of study beyond the canon, his attention is limited to

literary, fictional or imaginative writing whose separation and distinctness from other forms of writing he takes as a given. This is not without consequence, for reasons that I return to later.

It is not, however, the extended sphere of literary writing as such that provides Moretti with his object of study. This consists rather, as an object that can only be produced by means of scientific abstraction, in those aspects of form through which either stabilities in the organisation of literature, or its transformations, can be detected. Moretti draws much of his inspiration here from Ferdinand Braudel in proposing a conception of literary history that will place it on a par with other histories in being defined, like them, in terms of the accumulated effects of a multiplicity of actions and deeds over either the *longue durée* or more condensed periods of rapid change. While thus pinning his colours to the social sciences in terms of the means by which he constructs his object of study, he follows the Russian Formalists in seeing literary devices as one of the key aspects of literary form to be taken into account in analysing the relations between continuities and discontinues in literary history, while also following Marxist critics in the priority he also accords genre for this purpose:

> Devices and genres: two *formal* units. A very small formal unit and a very large one: these are the forces … behind literary history. Not texts. Texts are real objects – but not objects *of knowledge*. If we want to explain the laws of literary history, we must move to a formal plane that lies beyond them: below or above; the device, or the genre. (Moretti, 2000: 217)

The third aspect of Moretti's approach consists in how he views the relations between genres and devices on the one hand, and their relations to the social on the other. Rejecting the '"Platonic" idea of genre: an archetype and its many copies' (Moretti, 2000: 17), Moretti also rejects the analytical procedure that usually goes along with this of choosing a 'representative individual' that can be taken to stand for the genre as a whole and, from an analysis of its properties, deriving a general template for assessing its relations to the social. Moretti, by contrast, prefers to think of genres as much looser assemblages of a range of devices, an approach which, rather than generating any single ideal type of a genre which might then serve as a privileged locus for both formal and socio-historical analysis, conceives a genre as 'an abstract "diversity spectrum" … , whose internal multiplicity no individual text will ever be able to represent' (Moretti, 2007: 76). This eschews the procedure that defines a genre in terms of a single essential defining property that is then represented by an ideal type such that the logic that connects that instance to a specific set of originating socio-historical conditions has then to apply to the relations between all examples of that genre and their socio-historical environments – the logic, for example, of Lukacs's (1971) and Goldmann's (1969) accounts of the novel as being structured by the homology between the novelistic struggle for meaning in a god-abandoned world and the daily experience of capitalist commodity exchange as a world leached of transcendental value. In place of this Moretti proposes a more disaggregated approach to genres as forms whose elements may connect with the social in more multiple and varied ways.

This is, I think, one of the more productive and enabling aspects of Moretti's work albeit, for reasons that will become clear, one that also has its limitations. However,

having identified the respects in which Moretti aligns his concerns with those which characterise literary studies' distinctive preoccupation with questions of literary form, I now look at how this affects his approach to the relations between quantitative data on the one hand, and literary maps on the other.

Seeing like a novel

The question I ask here is: what is it that Moretti aims to make visible by converting aspects of narrative into numbers and then plotting these onto the flat surfaces of maps? I shall address this question by contrasting Moretti's use of literary maps with Bourdieu's use of a map of Paris in his analysis of Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*. For while Moretti acknowledges his debt to Bourdieu here (Moretti, 1998: 9), and while his maps sometimes rest on the same logic as Bourdieu's, there are also differences, and it is the differences that I explore here.

To begin with Bourdieu's famous map: what, according to Bourdieu, does this enable us to see? It is, he tells, us 'a structure which is quite simply that of the social space of *Sentimental Education*' (Bourdieu, 1996: 40). The social coordinates of this space are indicated by boxes with Roman numerals identify different social districts, yielding a social space structured by intersecting sets of oppositions – between, south of the Seine, the aristocratic Faubourg St-Germain to the west and the student and bohemian milieu of the Latin Quarter to the east, close to the Ile de Paris; and between, north of the Seine, the Popular Quarters in the mid-eastern zone of the map, and, north of this, the Faubourg Montmarte representing the world of art and established artists, with the business quarter of the Chaussee d'Antin in the north west

section of the map. This space – a 'structured and hierarchised space' is how Bourdieu describes it (Bourdieu, 1996: 43) - is traversed by three black lines plotting the social trajectories of the novel's principal characters: from the Latin Quarter in the south east to the business district in the north west for Martinon and, temporarily, for Frederic too; or the downward mobile trajectory from north to south of Arnoux.

This, then, is a map which aims to make visible the social universe that underlies Flaubert's depiction of the field of power in *Sentimental Education*. But Bourdieu devotes considerable effort to make it clear that this sociological vision of the social space of the novel does not allow us to see the field of power in the same way that the reader of the novel sees it; it simultaneously allows to us see more and less, to see differently. Flaubert's vision, he argues, could be called 'sociological if it were not set apart from a scientific analysis by its form, simultaneously offering and masking it' (Bourdieu, 1996: 31). The novel offers a vision of the social world that is refracted through its own specific means such that what it sees can never be said as such; it can only be felt or 'seen', but not known. The sociological reading brings to light the truth of the text precisely by saying what the novel 'sees' but not does not say. If *Sentimental Education* 'reconstitutes in an extraordinarily exact manner the structure of the social world in which it was produced …. it does so with its own specific means, that is, by giving itself to be *seen* and *felt* in *exemplifications* …. in the "evocatory magic" of words apt to "speak to the sensibilities" and to obtain a belief and an imaginary participation *analogous* to those that we ordinarily grant to the real world' (Bourdieu, 1996: 32).

These are the terms, then, in which Bourdieu works through the relations between his understanding of sociology as a form of objective knowledge and a post-Kantian conception of the aesthetic as a form of perception which, while it cannot be codified in the form of knowledge, affords a way of 'seeing' or feeling that which science knows more formally. But this distinctive way of presenting the social world through the refraction of literary or aesthetic form is not what Bourdieu tries to make visible in his map; his concern is rather to make us see objectively the organisation of late-nineteenth century French society that Flaubert gives us only in the form of a side-glancing glimpse. The sociological reading offered by Bourdieu's map aims to make explicitly visible what Flaubert's text both points to and simultaneously conceals; it 'brings to light the truth of the text itself whose specificity is defined precisely by the fact that it does not say what it says in the same way as the sociological reading does' (Bourdieu, 1996: 32-3). It forces into view the veiled realities of power that the dissimulations of the literary narrative allow both author and reader to 'close their eyes to' (Bourdieu, 1996: 33).

Bourdieu's map is not, then, concerned with the operations of literary form; to the contrary, it aims to force into transparent view precisely those underlying realities which the dissimulations of form gesture to but occlude. There are, of course, a number of difficulties associated with Bourdieu's formulations here: his exaggerated assessment of sociology's claims to be able to describe objective social structures, and his mobilisation of depth metaphors of seeing in his account of the social structure as a set of realities that operates beneath the level of visible surfaces. However, these are not my concern here which has rather been, by using Bourdieu as a counterfoil, to clarify the different strategy of visualisation underlying Moretti's work in which

narrative events from a large number of texts are plotted onto maps in order to make visible the action of their distinctive formal mechanisms.[1] He is thus clear, in introducing his *Atlas of the European Novel*, that his interest in using maps as a way of translating numbers derived from narratives into particular forms of visual presentation is formal in motivation. He treats maps, he says, as 'analytical tools: that dissect the text in an unusual way, bringing to light relations that would otherwise be hidden', and these are formal relations: 'Questions put to the form of the novel, and its internal relations: this is what my maps try to do' (Moretti, 1999: 4). In arguing that literary maps make it possible to see that literary forms are place-bound as well as bringing to light the internal logic of narrative, he argues, they address 'the usual, and at bottom the only real issue of literary history: society, rhetoric, and their interaction' (Moretti, 1999: 5).

The issues that are at stake here can be illustrated in the contrast Moretti sets up between Charles Booth's 1889 Descriptive Map of London Poverty depicting the location of the 'vicious, semi-criminal' class, and his own map showing the location of the crimes and murders in Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes short stories (1891-1927). The first of these aims for a form of transparency which is best described, to borrow from James Scott (1998), as 'seeing like a state' in which space is mapped out from above, laying it open to an omniscient view orientated to governmental intervention. Booth's map thus lays out the social to point out the connection between crime and urban deprivation. It shows some minor clusters of the criminal classes in central London (Paddington, Westminster, Soho and Camden Town) but far the greatest concentrations in the east of London, between Bethnal Green and Whitechapel. The distribution of crimes in the Sherlock Holmes stories is exactly the

opposite of this with some crimes located in the city but with the epicentre in the West End, far away from the concentrations of the criminal and vicious elements of the population. How is this disjunction between these two maps locating real crime in the east of the city, the London of poverty, and fictional crime in the west, the London of wealth, to be explained? Moretti accounts for this disjunction between real and fictional spatialities, between 'seeing like a state' and 'seeing like a novel', as a requirement of form. In the east of London, crime is a visible, recurrent daily reality with no element of mystery about it; the requirement of detective fiction that crime must be an enigma, something out-of-place, requires settings where its out-of-ordinariness can be registered.

This, then, is an example of how Moretti uses literary maps to show how, across large groups of texts, the operation of literary form can be shown to be at work, and can be made visible. He is a little clearer about the procedures this involves in his later book *Graphs, Maps, Trees* when he speaks about how maps prepare a text for analysis. 'You choose a unit – walks, lawsuits, luxury goods, whatever – find its occurrences, place them in space … or in other words: you *reduce* the text to a few elements and abstract them from the narrative flow, and construct a new *artificial* object like the maps I have been discussing' (Moretti, 2007: 53). Yet he then concedes, in response to criticisms of his earlier work, that his maps are more accurately described as diagrams since what they plot are the relations between narrative events within geometric space: that is, how close or distant they are to and from each other. That these are then superimposed on a cartographic plane with geographical coordinates does not alter the fact that what he then analyses is not the specificity of the locations he plots but their positioning relative to one another.

These are, of course, exactly the principles underlying Bourdieu's field analysis and its operationalisation via the principles of Geometric Data Analysis that he drew on in his multiple correspondence analyses, in *Distinction*, of the social space of lifestyles and, in later work, of the organisation of the fields of literary and artistic production.[2] However, this comparison serves only to highlight another difference between Moretti and Bourdieu. For whereas Bourdieu relates positions within the literary and artistic fields to positions within other fields (the economic and political fields) that are similarly relationally structured, Moretti relates the aspects of literary form he isolates for analysis to extra-literary events and forces which act on the literary more as discrete events or processes rather than in the form of connections between different systems of relations. This foregrounds the significance of the aspect of form that is selected as the object of analysis, for it is this that determines what kind of connections are to be looked for between the literary and extra-literary series. And this in turn has consequences for the kinds of account of the relations between social change and literary change that Moretti is able to offer. It is to these issues that I now turn by looking at the role that the concepts of genre and the literary device play in the accounts Moretti offers of both medium-term and short-term literary changes: the development of the English novel from 1740 to 1900, and the evolution of the detective story from Arthur Conan Doyle to Agatha Christie.

Jumps and sequences, trees and series

Genres, it is useful to recall, constitute a crucial analytical hinge for Moretti: as 'morphological arrangements that *last* in time, but always only for *some* time,' they

are, he says 'Janus-like creatures, with one face turned to history and the other to form' (Moretti, 2007: 14). Why, then, do genres arise, change, and disappear? What governs the periodicity of their development? Moretti is refreshingly opportunistic in his approach to these questions, seeking not a single principle of explanation but invoking different explanations of the dynamics of genre change as the circumstances seem to warrant. Thus, in his account of the patterns exhibited by the development of the English novel, Moretti invokes two different kinds of explanation, both of which – in contrast to Viktor Schlovsky's purely formalist account of an inner dialectic of literary development which leads from 'creative estrangement, and ends in stale automatism' (Moretti, 2007: 17) – invoke extra-literary phenomena to account for its development. What most interests Moretti about the pattern of the novel's development shown in Figure 1 is its 'bumpiness': that is, that rather than exhibiting a regular, gradual and even process of development, the pattern is one in which the form 'stands still for decades, and is then "punctuated" by brief bursts of invention', tending also 'to *disappear* in clusters', but this time in a more regular pattern, every twenty-five years or so (Moretti, 2007: 18). Moretti accounts for these regularities and irregularities in different terms: the irregularity of one genre replacing another has to do with the relations between the two genres considered in their historical context; the periodic disappearance of several genres at the same time, by contrast, implies a cause that is common and external to all of them. Thus, in the case of the disappearance of epistolary and sentimental novels around the 1790s, Moretti conjectures that this reflects their expressive inadequacy in relation of the traumas of the revolutionary years, while he attributes the disappearance of clusters of genres to the dynamics of generations: 'when an entire generic system vanished at once, the likeliest explanation is that *its readers vanished at once*' (Moretti, 2007: 20).

…… Figure 1 ……

I don't see this use of different kinds of explanation as a problem. For Moretti's purpose is not to reduce the novel to a single form and then seek some general explanation for its development; rather than existing in this form, as a single entity, the novel is definable only as *'the system of its genres'* (Moretti, 2007: 30). There are, nonetheless, some difficulties with how Moretti constructs this system. The first, concerns the manifestly different principles informing the ways in which different sub-sets of the genre are identified: sometimes in terms of specifically formal qualities (the picaresque, the epistolary novel, the *Bildungsroman),* sometimes in terms of setting (provincial novel, Newgate novel, village stories). This makes it difficult to assess how far genres sharing the same time horizons can serve as the kind of 'hinge' between literary and extra-literary series that Moretti requires since there is no way of knowing whether their mechanisms of effect are similar or were perceived as such by their contemporaries.

The second and more serious problem, though, is that he simply takes for granted the existence of the novel as a clearly separated genre system throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although I think she mistakes the nature of Moretti's endeavour by interpreting his project of 'distant reading' as a move away from the formalist concerns of literary studies (Poovey, 2008: 344), Mary Poovey's recent account of the extremely permeable relations between fact and fiction throughout most of the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth seriously questions the degree to which novels, in either their form or function, formed part of a system

clearly separated from the new forms of writing about the economy that developed over the same period. More to the point, in her account of the subsequent differentiation of these two different 'genres of the credit economy', Poovey constantly insists on the importance of the institutional factors – the social and legal regulation of publishing markets, for example – that were implicated in these processes. John Frow's account of genres points in the same direction. Reminding us that genres 'are not positive classes, defined only by their salient features, but are defined in relational terms which distinguish these features according to their place and function' (Frow, 2006: 125), he draws our attention to the fact that these relational distinctions are themselves dependent on the host of institutional forces that organise, codify and (impermanently) stabilise the relations between genres.

I shall come back to this point for it bears on a more general problem posed by Moretti's work. First, though, I want to look at an example of Moretti's appeal to the sciences for analytical models and procedures by considering his use of evolutionary theory to account for the role played by the literary device of the clue in the evolution of the detective story. Moretti distinguishes four such roles:

- First, where clues are present in the story but play no significant role in the resolution of the mystery or the development of the narrative.
- Second, where clues are present and play an essential role in the resolution of the narrative.
- Third, where, in addition to the above, clues are made visible to the reader in the course of the story rather than being made retrospectively visible in the final summary of the detective.

- Fourth, where such clues are also in principle decodable – that is soluble – by the reader, rather than this being a privilege reserved for the omniscient detective.

His purpose in doing so is to propose an evolutionary tree as a way of visualising the development of the detective story genre. For Moretti such trees are '*morphological* diagrams, where history is correlated with form' (Moretti, 2007: 69), the vertical axis charting the passage of time and the horizontal the diversification of forms effected by the relationship between the mechanism of natural selection and the processes of species variation.[3] Moretti's purpose, however, is not just to use evolutionary trees as a means of visualising changes in literary form. He also wishes to account for such change, on an analogy with Darwinian accounts of the mechanisms of natural evolution, as the result of large numbers of minor adjustments on the parts of writers to the demands of the literary market place: that is, as the unintended outcome of the accumulation of minor variations. His supposition is that the mechanism that animates this process of literary evolution is form: that form is the key determinant of what readers like and that, from a formal point of view, the operation of clues in detective fiction is crucial. They are, he argues, the point at which the crime and its investigation, past and present, story and subject, are brought together, a connecting device that makes the story more than the sum of its parts and, as such, the primary source of the reader's pleasure. Proceeding from this assumption, Moretti tells us that he expected to be able to tell the story of the form's evolution as – like Darwinian accounts of species development – one of smooth and gradual evolution from the nineteenth-century origins of the use of clues through to Holmes and then to Agatha Christie where the use of decodable clues functions as the organising dominant of the

genre – that is, as the formal device that plays the key role in organising the relations between other devices within the overall formal organisation of the genre.

But he finds that he can't: the history of the use of this device, he tells us, turns out to be jerky and jumpy. While able to trace the relations between the four uses of clues summarised above to Conan Doyle's use of decodable clues in 'The red-headed league' and a number of his other stories (Figure 2), this device then disappears from Holmes's work, probably, Moretti suggests, because it threatened Holmes's status as an omniscient seer who deciphers clues through acts of genius that are distinct from the more ordinary acts of deduction that the reader might be able to perform. Moreover, surveying English detective fiction output more generally over the period from 1891 to 1900, he finds that stories with decodable clues don't become more frequent, while those without them don't become any less frequent. It is not until much later, and apparently suddenly, that the device becomes truly prevalent with Christie and her generation.

…… Figure 2 ……

Why, he asks, should such an epoch-making device within the history of the genre have been so little imitated for such a long time? A part of his explanation for this is to call into question the validity of the evolutionary paradigm as a model for literary history by suggesting that the generation of the 1890s was too conservatively wedded to existing writing conventions to adapt to the use of the new device of 'decodable clues' and that this was therefore left to a new generation of writers who would start their writing careers working within the new conventions:

> It's a good instance of the rigidity of literary evolution: you only learn once; then you are stuck. You learn, so it's culture, not nature: but it's a culture which is as unyielding as DNA. And the consequence of this is that literary changes don't occur slowly, piling up one small improvement upon another: they are abrupt, structural, and leave very little room for transitional forms. This was a striking result of this research: the *absence* of intermediate steps. A jump – Conan Doyle. Another jump – Christie. End of story. The rest are steps *to the side*, not forward. (Moretti, 2000: 222)

This is a variant of the Russian Formalist argument that the line of literary evolution often runs not from 'father to son' but skips a generation to run from 'grandfather to grandson' or may run in zig-zags from 'uncle to nephew'.[4] Yet perhaps Moretti throws in the towel a little too quickly here. For the jerkiness he detects may be simply an effect of the limitations of the textual set that is drawn on for the purpose of such analyses. An analogy will help to make my point here. For Moretti's attempt to tell the story of generic evolution as – up to the point at which a genre takes a jump – the result of the imitation of unintended variations, with the market then sifting out successful formal innovations from unsuccessful ones, is similar to an earlier deployment of evolutionary perspectives to account for the development of cultural forms. I refer to the argument that was quite common in late nineteenth-century/early-twentieth century evolutionary anthropology which accounted for the evolution of design traits among 'primitive peoples' as, like that of natural species, the result of an anonymous and directionless process in which unconscious variation

from existing design templates was the result of what Philip Steadman calls 'inexact copying' (Steadman, 1979: 106). By accidentally breaking with the prescriptions of custom, such inexact copying produced a new template that would be copied for a while until another unintended variation was produced as a result of a later instance of inexact copying. A key aspect of this theory was that it offered a way of accounting for cultural change in 'primitive societies' without implying any conscious process of creation or innovation as attributes that 'the primitive' was judged to lack. Change was produced by a combination of accident (introducing variation into the field of design) and automatism (the unthinking copying of mistakes), and thus occurred without the mediation of any conscious agency. Yet this account too seemed to produce jumps in evolution of the kind that Moretti talks about in genres. However, given that the main exponents of this method – Henry Pitt Rivers (1906), Henry Balfour (1893), and Alfred Court Haddon (1895) – were staunch Darwinists and, consequently, were committed to the principle that cultural evolution, like that of nature, should 'make no jumps', their response was to explain such apparent saltational leaps as a result of the incompleteness of the record. Pitt Rivers's series illustrating the evolution of the ornamentation on New Ireland paddles (Figure 3) is a case in point.[5] In commenting on this sequence, Pitt Rivers says that anyone comparing the first and the last stages would not, without the evidence of the intermediate stages, believe that the last figure represented the nose of a human face. But his point is that where two adjacent figures appear sufficiently unlike one another to suggest a leap between them, this is only because the transitional forms embodying the gradual variations produced by the mechanism of inexact copying have been lost.

…. Figure 3 …..

The comparison is not an exact one. But I draw it to suggest that if, in contrast to evolutionary anthropologists, Moretti abandons his search for evolutionary continuities too quickly in favour of a 'jumpy' model of literary evolution, this might be because the intermediate steps needed to sustain more evolutionary sequences are not found simply within a specific genre but occur in other parts of the literary or, indeed, cultural field. For while decodable clues may have the interrupted pattern in the history of the English detective story that Moretti claims, we know from the accounts of Neil Harris (1973) that they have a longer and more continuous role in the 'operational aesthetic' of popular culture and from Carlo Ginzburg (1980) that they are connected to other series (art history, psychoanalysis) to provide the resources for a less jerky account of their passage from Conan Doyle to Agatha Christie if the analysis encompasses a broader textual set.

However, it is less the issue of continuity versus interrupted lines of literary development that is at issue here than the procedures through which Moretti constitutes his objects of analysis. For while Moretti shows a ready awareness of the fact that the kinds of quantification he proposes depend on the prior selection of an attribute of form in order to give the process of counting a direction and purpose, he then misleadingly construes the resulting quantifications as data that is independent of interpretation. The difficulty this evades, John Frow has argued, is that the 'morphological categories he [Moretti] takes as his base units are not pre-given but are constituted in an interpretative encounter and by means of an interpretative decision' (Frow, 2008: 142). While Moretti admits as much in advocating a disaggregated approach to the definition and analysis of genres – selecting this rather

than that aspect of generic form to see where it might lead rather than opting for an essentialist definition of genre represented by an ideal type – he then occludes the consequences of his own choices in such matters by presenting his findings as if they were objective accounts of patterns and trends.

And the literary …..?

It is worth recalling the principal methodological question that Moretti poses: that if knowing two hundred texts is already difficult, what can it mean to know twenty thousand texts? As we have seen, it is by means of this question that he organises his move from the project of 'close reading' to that of a 'distant reading' of statistical regularities and irregularities across large textual corpuses. Yet this poses another question: how is it possible, as has been my purpose here, to engage critically with such analyses? To re-read the statistical surveys of genres that Moretti draws on in constructing his objects of study? To go back and read the 20000 and more texts that those surveys assemble? To argue that the analysis should encompass even more texts? Or that it should engage with differently constituted sets of texts? All of these, no doubt, and more. My purpose here, however, has been the more limited one of trying to identify some of the theoretical and methodological difficulties that attend Moretti's concerns by exploring the respects in which his approach is similar to, yet different from, related enterprises.

I want to conclude on a somewhat different note, though, by returning to the question of Moretti's relations to the disciplinary protocols of literary studies. I have shown how, contrary to some interpretations, Moretti defines his critical enterprise as a

materialist inflection of the formal concerns of literary studies, seeking to open up new aspects of the relationships between literary form and extra-literary histories to analysis. His main methodological innovation in this regard is to produce new objects of knowledge via the visual representations – the maps, trees, graphs and diagrams – he produces by converting statistical patterns across large sets of texts into visual forms. His chief point of reference for this enterprise is the work of the Russian Formalists as the school which first, so to speak, formalised the concern with literary form that has since characterised literary studies. Moretti's positive debt to this school is evident in the close attention he pays to the action of form as represented by genres and, a key signature of the Formalists' concerns, literary devices.

Second, however, he is also concerned to overcome the notorious weakness of the Russian Formalists: that is, their inability to break out from the analysis of formal innovations and their reverberations within the literary system to connect these to extra-literary systems. It is notable, however, that the manner in which he seeks to do so is quite different from that developed by the Bakhtin school via its immanent critique of the Formalists. This school sought to develop a systematic method for relating changes in literary form to the broader social environment by interpreting form as a literary refraction of the relations of socio-verbal interaction in which specific genres are set, and locating those relations of socio-verbal interaction in the context of the hierarchical orderings of the relationships between groups and classes arising from the dynamics of specific modes of production. Bourdieu's engagements with the Formalists point in a similar direction (Bourdieu, 1996: 200-201), taking them to task for seeing literary evolution as a result of the operation of dynamics purely internal to literary systems (or, in Bourdieu's terms, the literary field) rather

than arising from its relations to other fields (the political and economic fields, or other fields within the cultural field). Moretti, by contrast, opens up the relations between literary and extra-literary histories in a more contingent and inductive fashion exploring not the relations between a holistic conception of a specific literary form as such, but the relations between an isolated aspect of form that has been made visible as an object of analysis by his techniques for converting recurrent patterns in textual sets into visualisations of those relationships. Insofar as there is a more general theory in Moretti's work, it operates at the level of his account of the mechanisms of literary change which he sees as being primarily driven by readers' pleasure in form – or, more accurately, in specific formal features relative to others – presenting this as a more-or-less constant effect of the operation of markets as the only mediation he takes account of in the relations between readers and texts.

While welcoming this approach, I have hinted at two difficulties, both bearing on the same problem. First, I have suggested that a degree of arbitrariness is attached to the aspects of form his approach isolates for analysis since these depend on the constitution of the textual sets he chooses to study, and the boundaries of these are by no means so given or clear cut as Moretti supposes. His choice of the decodable clue as the decisive formal shift in the detective fiction genre from Conan Doyle to Christie, while plausible enough, is also to some degree arbitrary. Quite a good contrasting case, for example, might be made in terms of the choice of setting – away from Conan Doyle's mainly metropolitan locations to the country house, particularly as this constitutes a reversion to an earlier moment in the history of the English novel.[6] The significance of this, though, is not just formal for the choice of the particular literary device that is to be focused on as a means of accounting for literary

histories across large groups of text has consequences for how one then wants to probe the connections between literary histories and extra-literary histories. His account of the eventual dominance of the decidable clue as a result of its purely formal appeal – assuming that it is equally a source of pleasure for all readers – is, for example, manifestly at odds with the broadly contemporaneous development of the hard-boiled detective genre in which decidable clues play a largely incidental role. The hero of the hard-boiled detective novel does not solve the case through an abstract act of ratiocination but rather, by acting on a hunch, pressures the criminal into showing his hand. Nor does the reader invest a great deal of energy in trying to solve the crime for her/himself. The pleasures of form here are different, and they initially entered into the British literary market by a different route (American pulp magazines) involving a different group of readers from those addressed by the exclusively national textual set Moretti works with in his focus on the Conan Doyle to Agatha Christie transition.

The second difficulty is that, since Moretti entirely brackets out the role of institutional factors in organising where and how, at any point in time, some formal properties and not others come to be socially consolidated and consequential, it is difficult to determine what status might be claimed for the objects of analysis he proposes. These are produced by formalised procedures of abstraction from large sets of texts rather than, as Marx posed the issue, deploying forms of abstraction capable of apprehending the concrete as 'the concentration of many determinations' (Marx, 1973: 101). It is, in the light of these considerations, unclear whether Moretti has effectively displaced what has proved to be the most specifically defining concern of literary studies. This has been concerned not with the action of form at the level of

genre or device but with the question as to whether some texts are distinguishable from others within the literary field or system by virtue of their meta-formal properties: that is, the action of form on form through the distinctive ways in which they work on, transform, lay bear, renovate, or allow us to 'see' the mechanisms of other forms of writing. Moretti's claim is that such problems are dissolved as the canon disappears into larger literary systems in being subjected to forms of analysis concerned to identify formal similarities that operate across canon/non-canonised boundaries. This does not, however, gainsay the possibility that some texts (whether canonised or not) may still exhibit meta-formal properties that distinguish them from other forms of writing with which they may nonetheless share other properties. If, as we have seen, Bourdieu leaves this aspect of the literary somehow beyond the reach of sociological analysis, Moretti also leaves it curiously untouched. This is, I want to suggest, because he misunderstands the level at which questions pertaining to the literary need to be posed if they are to be engaged with productively. This does not, to be sure, concern whether a trans-historic corpus of texts exhibits a common literary essence that can only be distilled by the close reading of the literary critic. If enough has been said to call the validity of such concerns into question (the impermanence of canons, the manner in which any critical enterprise constructs its object), there are still legitimate questions to be pursued concerning whether, in specific historical circumstances, some forms of writing are distinguished from others not in terms of a-temporal formal essences but as a consequence of how they are placed relative to other forms of writing through social processes of classification, institutional use and forms of social deployment.

This is the direction taken by Poovey's work in her suggestions for how the formal concerns of literary analysis might be 'de-formalised' in ways that would allow them to contribute to a broader project of historical recovery. The chief difficult with formalists schools of literary criticism, she argues, consists in their presentation of 'their interpretations as *dictated by form* and, thus, by implication again, as identical to the interpretation (of) any reader' (Poovey, 2008: 342). In contrast to this a-historical bias she proposes an analytical orientation that will – after a suggestion by Ian Hunter (1989) – focus attention on the 'material and generic conditions that made composition of particular texts possible' and on the functions of such texts in specific historical moments where function is understood as a 'a product of *classification*', and thus 'of *genre*, *discipline*, and *institutional position*' (Poovey, 2008: 345). While this is close to formulations I have advanced in earlier work (Bennett, 1990), it is a project to which Moretti's approach could be adapted. For there are no inherent reasons why such meta-formal processes should not be amenable to statistical probing and visual presentation; to a 'distanced' form of 'close reading' that would identify common sorts of meta-formal processes across particular sets of texts constituted on the basis of their institutional placement and deployment. Such a project would also do more to enfold the literary into social and historical forms of analysis than a stance which fails to register historically pertinent divisions in the field of writing by focusing solely on abstracted formal elements. While there are some issues that this approach illuminates, there are others that it cannot, and these include the specific forms of effectivity that are attributable to literary works in the historically mutable forms in which they are assembled, ordered and deployed. Attention to these consideration would also help to correct the formalism that underlies Moretti's own work, albeit a formalism that is displaced from text to reader in his assumption that the evolution of

literary forms is paced by a generalised and a-historical capacity for taking pleasure in form.

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[1] This, I should stress, is only one of the varied uses to which Moretti puts his literary maps. He also uses them identify the spatial distribution of different genres

and their movement, for example, from centres to peripheries. I do not address the questions posed by his use of maps in these ways.

[2] See for an account of these aspects of Bourdieu's work, Bennett, Savage, Silva, Warde, Gayo-Cal and Wright (2008).

[3] Moretti's reading of evolutionary trees tends to take the form for granted whereas, as Mary Bouquet (1996) notes, they have a complex relationship to the earlier history of biblical trees.

[4] I draw here and throughout on my earlier study (Bennett, 1979) in my remarks on the Russian Formalists.

[5] This raises an objection that I think Moretti would concur with since he acknowledges that he has not sampled any of the literature between Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie – between the 1890s and the 1920s.

[6] Indeed, in his earlier work, Moretti himself plausibly proposes a number of other formal features that might be focused on to identify the relations between the form of the detective story and social structure. He thus interprets the role of clues in the Sherlock Holmes stories somewhat differently by including in his analysis the role of Dr Watson in advancing the narrative by proposing the wrong solutions in ways that contribute to the dynamics of the short-story form: see Moretti, 1983: 130-156.