

FRANCO MORETTI ON SEMIOTICS AND ACADEMIC MOBILITY

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Abstract

The following interview, conducted with Franco Moretti in 2019 and 2020, begins by focusing on his experiences of working in various academic environments (Italy, USA, Switzerland), touching on the cultural differences in academic approaches more broadly. In the second part, we ask some questions concerning the quantitative approaches in humanities, as well as F. Moretti's relationships to semiotics.

Keywords: *Franco Moretti, local academic environments, quantitative semiotics, distant reading, "academic tradition"*

1. Introduction

This interview is the product of two separate texts being merged into one. The original texts consisted of two shorter interviews conducted in two different ways. One was conducted orally, by Ekaterina Velmezova, at the University of Lausanne on 13 June 2019 before the public defense of Alina Volynskaya's MA thesis *Pragmatics of the Soviet "Roman à clef" of the 1920-30s: Models of Readership and Community Networks* (supervised by Franco Moretti from the Federal Polytechnic School of Lausanne [EPFL] and Ekaterina Velmezova from the University of Lausanne). And one took on an epistolary form: several additional questions formulated by Kalevi Kull and Ekaterina Velmezova were sent to Franco Moretti by email on 22 March 2020. Franco Moretti answered four days later, on 26 March 2020. For this publication, we decided to merge the two interviews into one, selecting those items and topics likely to draw the attention of professional semioticians and historians of semiotics.

Franco Moretti (b. 1950) has lived and worked in three different countries: in Italy, in the United States and in Switzerland. This is why, as early as at the

beginning of the first interview, the question of mobility was immediately touched upon.

F[ranco] M[oretti] (laughing): Oh, mobility... I am working on tragedy at this moment, tragedy is opposed to mobility, people are stuck in one place, they cannot move.

Q[uestion]: Yes, but how did your mobility, your career mobility, influence your research? Italy, the United States, Switzerland...

FM: It influenced me in many very different ways. At the beginning, in Italy, at least forty-five years ago, when I started working as a university professor – of course, I was not a professor yet – you know, young people are a little bit like soldiers, civil servants, state employees in general, you never work in the place where you live, you are sent elsewhere. So I started in this very poor and small university in Salerno. I was from Rome, I studied in Rome, but my first year job was in Salerno and the students came from what was perhaps one of the poorest areas of Italy and, therefore, [one of the areas] with the worst schools. That is why they knew almost nothing. So that I had to explain everything. At first, I thought, it was horrible. But then I realized that it forced me to rethink every issue, from the very foundations. Because nothing could be taken for granted. So that I took nothing for granted when I started. It was a lot of work, but it was also a lot of freedom from acquired beliefs. And the second very important thing that I learned from this experience was that teaching for me should have a very strong democratic component. Everything you say should be comprehensible to a twenty-year old who is willing to think. As he, or she, was willing to think, and willing to read a couple of books, I had the duty to explain everything, so that it has given me a great contempt, for contempt is the right word for all those academic stars who created their celebrity on obscurity. That is just obscurantism, that is anti-democratic. Many of them are left-wing, much of the academic left, especially in the United States, lots of obscurity. That is just the opposite of democracy.

This was mobility number one, Salerno. Then I went to the United States. And there, [thinking back now], things were different. The Italian university didn't ask you to do anything. It's a different world, it's a different world! I mean, in theory, you have to work, but if you don't [want to], you don't work. Of course, if you are young and think you can add something to teach, but that's a different sauce.

No one would tell me you should teach this, no. When I went to the United States – I think, it was different when later I was at Columbia [University] – and when I arrived there, I thought I probably want to do work and write a book on tragedy. But in the United States, what students are interested in matters a lot, it is like a market principle. And so they made it clear – yes, I could teach something on tragedy every now and then, but they want[ed] me to teach the novel, the 19th century novel and modernism. And so my book on tragedy was postponed and postponed, because it was [a] subject that nobody really cared about much. So that was another lesson, what is that, the interest of other people. And that forced me to work a lot on the novel, which I had not expected. But it was a pleasure, I have really learned something about the genre, became a specialist which I had not been in Italy. In Italy I had done a little bit of everything, instead.

And then [there] was a movement inside the United States and going to Stanford and in Stanford I had... Columbia is in the middle of Manhattan, in the middle of New York, so you work out of your classroom, it's the street, it's dirt... As [for] Stanford, imagine a campus like this [one here] in Lausanne, ten times more abstract and empty of people. The central quadrangle at Stanford is enormous. It's like four times this building¹. And very often you work there and there are, maybe, twenty people in this enormous space which is like St Peter's square, because that's the way that the campus is built, it is a small university. This creates an atmosphere which is not good for the humanities, the humanities should be in the real world. But it is very good for abstract speculation and that is why in Stanford it became conceivable for me to do this literary lab, all this experiment²... I locked myself with twenty students in a room and we could run these experiments. Because a lab needs [...] protection from the outside world. In this respect the humanities and humanities labs don't need to be opposite things, in fact – but somehow I [...] got something in Columbia and the opposite in Stanford, so with every new step I think that what I have learned from these experiences is that every place you go creates problems, there were problems at every place, obviously...

Q: That's life itself.

¹ The Anthropole building of the University of Lausanne. (All footnotes are ours. – *E.V., K.K.*)

² See the current activities of the Stanford Literary Lab at <https://litlab.stanford.edu>.

FM: Exactly. But it also creates opportunities. And they are not obvious opportunities. You have to try and... I have also enjoyed that.

Q: Yes, so what you mean is that [a] space itself can influence research.

FM: Yes, exactly. Because space is never just space, right? It's not like a box where you put a pair of shoes. Space is a system of human and social relations.

Q: ...And it is not homogenous.

FM: It is not homogenous, not at all! So... I arrive from Verona and I realize that students' request[s make up] an important factor in the courses a professor teaches. This had never entered [the] mind of any Italian professor, it was just not a part of the system. As I said, it also created some consequences... So that I enjoyed moving. I think that mobility is good, it allows you to free yourself from habit. Today, maybe, a little less, because now the world is more homogenous. Yes, it is open, but it is more homogenous. Before it was more [varied].

Q: Do you think that today moving is not so important?

FM: I don't know... I went to Salerno, mobility number one, when I was 29. I went to Columbia [in] New York, mobility number two, when I was 40. I went to Stanford, number three, when I was 50. Now I am 69, I retired and I moved to Switzerland for family reasons four years ago. Of course, I continue to read, to study, to write...

Q: Do you find the impact of cultural differences to scientific approaches important? For instance, it seems that the interest towards nomothetical aspects of arts and humanities has traditionally been relatively higher in Eastern Europe than elsewhere. Take for example works that discuss the Zipf's distribution – the majority tends to come from that region. Or should the cultural or geographical differences in academic approaches be seen as marginal today³?

FM: This is a very interesting point. Clearly the intellectual and scientific sphere has become increasingly homogeneous in the past few decades, especially in the United States; but it's certainly still differentiated, especially in Europe. Is it merely a "residual" system of differences? I suspect so. It would be important to find mechanisms for the *production* of new differences. But I have no idea where to begin in that respect.

³ See Tamm, Kull 2016.

Q: Do you read much? Do you like to read? What do you read now? During one discussion about your book *Distant Reading*⁴ somebody said that probably you don't like to read, you just don't enjoy reading – that is why you have invented this method of distant reading: you digitalize instead of reading...

FM (laughing): Unfortunately, it has changed over time. Meaning that when I was young, I loved to read and, you know, we didn't call it canon there, but I read all the canonical things, European literature, French, Russian... I was trained in English, but actually for me German and French were at least as important as English. If not even more important, the literature. And Russian, Spanish... Then, when I started studying, when I realized how much, how large the archive of forgotten texts [was] and started coming up with methods to understand what is there, then – it's true, you can't read tens of thousands of novels or other texts. Then reading became less important, even for my academic work. But I have read... I would not say all, but all the great novels by Tolstoy, by Dostoevsky, by Balzac, Stendhal, and I reread them. Contemporary literature, for some reasons, has never been interesting for me, I don't know why. Yes, I read less now – which I am unhappy about. Right now I read a lot of plays, because I want to start working on tragedy again, I try to read contemporary novels in French, because I want to learn French a little better... But it is true that I read less in part because the work [on] distant reading has encouraged different ways of relating to literature. But it's not that I don't like to read.

Q (laughing): Sure... Here in Lausanne linguists from the Slavic Department work on the history of linguistic ideas. Of course, we have great interest in texts as such. Personally I [EV] have inherited it from my Moscow academic background: in Moscow I was formed within the framework of the Moscow part of the Moscow-Tartu semiotic school...

FM: One of my best students – no, it is not the word, he is my friend – has just finished his PhD in Tartu and an essay we wrote together must be published soon. He is Ukranian, but he went to Tartu because he wanted to see if some of Lotman's spirit is still there...

Q: Oleg Sobchuk?

⁴ Moretti 2013a.

FM: Yes, Sobchuk⁵!

Q: He was [amongst the group that] translated your book on distant reading into Russian⁶. This book is now very popular in the Russian academic world, some Russian colleagues discuss your theories very intensely⁷. Do you think that the method of distant reading could be successfully used to work on academic theories and not only on literature? The situation is very similar: we read the academic texts which are considered the most important ones, but there are so many academic texts which remain unknown, so many academic texts that nobody reads just because we have no time...

FM: Yes, that is one particular aspect of the archive of cultural studies, we speak about it in the text [I am] currently prepar[ing] with Oleg Sobchuk, applying the methodology of distant reading to the study of texts in the humanities⁸.

Q: Are there any disciplines which cannot be concerned with this methodology in principle?

FM: There are many disciplines that I know very little about. But in the past couple of years, I have learned digital musicology. Actually, musicology is now very advanced, because musical language is so formalized and even, in fact, quantified, literally. So there is digital musicology. There is – it is more difficult, but there is digital art history. There is, now, [a] quantitative study of philosophy, of philosophical language. There is, of course, literature and history, there have been studies of films, of legal studies – it seems that almost everything can be quantified. Even if, of course, it's much easier to quantify music than language, much easier to quantify language than images. So that there are different degrees, but there isn't a border beyond which this methodology cannot be applied.

Q: As to, for instance, biology, or chemistry, or physics, it is even easier with them, isn't it?

FM: Yes. They are already mathematized to [a] degree that we can only dream of in the humanities. These disciplines are very open to the methodology of distant reading.

⁵ Oleg Sobchuk received his MA in semiotics from the Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu, in 2013, and defended his PhD (*Charting Artistic Evolution: An Essay in Theory*, supervised by Arne Merilai and Franco Moretti) at the same university in 2018.

⁶ See Moretti 2016.

⁷ Here is just one example: Pilščíkov 2018.

⁸ See Moretti, Sobchuk 2019.

Q: Indeed, in the physical world, laws are precise and therefore mathematical description works very well. Also, physical sciences do not study meaning. Instead, in the world of life and culture, the regularities are mainly created or established by the life processes themselves, these are rather fuzzy and allow exceptions, and often are rather local, consciously or unconsciously conventional. Therefore, doesn't this mean that quantification and mathematization in the sciences dealing with life and culture should be fundamentally different from mathematization in the physical sciences?

FM: All historical "laws" are generalizations more than laws in the physical sense. Whether this makes them "fundamentally different", and whether this difference creates an entirely *sui generis* scenario for quantification in the social and human sciences remains to be seen⁹.

Q: As you said, it is the history of art that seems to be the most problematic in terms of digitalizing and the possibility of applying the methodology you have worked out, isn't it?

FM: Yes, images and art, [the] history of art, are the most difficult to digitalize, in my opinion, because there is no alphabet there. There is an alphabet in language, there is an alphabet in music and so on – but in art... There is no such thing.

Q: So it is the problem of code.

FM: The problem of code, yes. Or the articulation of the code, if you wish.

Q: Therefore it is a semiotic problem.

FM: Yes, it is a semiotic problem.

Q: We have already mentioned today your cooperation with semioticians. Your work on distant reading and digital humanities can be seen as belonging to (and at the same time helping to develop) general quantitative semiotics. Quantitative aspects in semiotics have been rather marginally studied for a long time, therefore here we can probably see a new growth in the field. In the recent book *Quantitative Semiotic Analysis*, edited by Dario Compagno¹⁰, your work is mentioned in this respect. Would you accept the point of view according to which

⁹ See also Moretti 2020 on the relationship between interpretive and quantitative approaches.

¹⁰ Compagno (ed.), 2018.

your work is interpreted as a step forward in the development of quantitative semiotics?

FM: In principle yes, though I am not sure that the semiotic component of my contribution was strong enough to deserve that description. I would have liked to do more in that respect.

Q: Would you briefly describe your relationships with semiotics, since your first encounter with the concept? And who are the semioticians whose work was (or still is) most interesting (or important) for you? What is your attitude towards semiotics, have you collaborated with semioticians? If yes, was it fruitful for you?

FM: In general, my relationship with semiotics wasn't a very strong relationship, because I was first under the influence of the Russian Formalists, and then of French (and to a lesser extent Czech) structuralism. At that point, there wasn't much mental "room" for other influences of the same kind. I read quite a lot of Lotman (and Uspenskij), but they never replaced the models I had absorbed earlier. I started university in 1968. And in that period, [the] mid 60s to [the] mid 70s, there was a moment when Marxism and semiotics seemed to be reconcilable and there were some giants – like young Umberto Eco, young Roland Barthes, to some extent even Lotman and Uspenskij... It was a moment when – even if I have never studied linguistics, I read a lot. From Saussure, Jakobson, etc. Even if I should perhaps be ashamed to confess this, but I've never read the Saussurean *Cours* in its entirety; what I read from Saussure I read in Italian, and I cannot say it had a great influence on my work. I think I never even quoted Saussure... However it may be, the two most important books of literary theory which I read literally in two days were Todorov's collection *Les formalistes russes*¹¹, and Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel*¹². My entire life has been an attempt to combine these two things. In the last ten years, in fact, quantitative work has increased the formalist aspect, already because you have to study language...

Q: If the reconciliation between Lukács and Russian formalism has been and is one of your deeper interests, let us ask the following question: would you agree that in Lukács' terms this problem can be formulated as a problem of harmony versus alienation between "life" and "form"? Or maybe between meaning-making

¹¹ Todorov 1965.

¹² Lukács 1920 [1971].

and rules? Do you think that the quantitative approach can somehow allow [for an analysis] and maybe help solving this problem?

FM: The way it appeared to me – half a century ago! – was more or less this: one could look at form by focusing on its internal mechanism, like the Formalists, or on its historical significance, like Lukács. (For Lukács, the meaning of “form” changes over the years, but I was interested in the early work – especially *The Theory of the Novel*.) The wager was to reconcile these two approaches and attitudes. As it happened, the vast majority of those who follow the quantitative approach have no interest in form, so the question has disappeared from the horizon.

Q: Your approach can therefore be compared with the structuralist one, in particular with your interest in formal aspects. Would you agree?

FM: Absolutely, yes. I have no problem with that. Unfortunately, what happened is that, as you know, linguistics and literary studies were very close in the 60s and 70s, but then, around [the] 80s-90s... At Stanford, I was one of those who, actually, went to the Department of Linguistics to try to meet and talk... I have realized that linguistics has changed a lot as a discipline. It is much more developed, and it is much more abstract, it is much more mathematical, it is really a more complicated discipline than it was 50 years ago. So it is not easy to recombine these things. And meanwhile semiotics as such hardly exists anymore, right? I mean, there are individuals, but there is no longer a discipline. Are there any departments of Semiotics, anywhere?

Q: Yes, of course – but not here, for example. In Lausanne, we have almost nothing.

FM: Not here, exactly. In Geneva [neither] – there they don't have anything.

Q: In Tartu, there is a Department of Semiotics.

FM (laughing): In Tartu – of course, it is the world capital of semiotics!

Q: What would you consider as your most important academic achievements? The results of your academic work?

FM: Do you like films? If you like, for instance, Stanley Kubrick, what is his greatest film? His first film was a great war film, *Paths of Glory*. Then he made a *film noir*, *The Killing*. Then he made one of the ancient mythological Roman films, *Spartacus*. Then he made *Dr. Strangelove*, dystopia on atomic war. Then

he made *2001: A Space Odyssey*... What was his greatest film? The fact is that he changed every time. If I have to shower praise on myself, I would say, I have done more or less the same thing. I started with a collection of essays which mixed high culture and mass culture: Dracula, Frankenstein, etc. Then I wrote a book on the *Bildungsroman* in Europe¹³. Then I wrote a book on the Modern Epic¹⁴. That resembles the book on the *Bildungsroman*, but it was already quite different. And it has a very different conceptual structure, because it was based on evolutionary theory. Then, my fourth book was the *Atlas of the European novel*¹⁵, which was a cartography of the European novel. The fifth [...] was *Graphs, Maps, Trees*¹⁶, which was the beginning of the quantitative method. The sixth and seventh, which appeared together, were *Distant Reading* and *The Bourgeois*¹⁷. Now I have just published a book which is drawn from five lectures from my last course, an introductory course for undergraduate[s] at Stanford¹⁸. So, every book has been different from the previous, more or less. That has been my great achievement.

Q: Probably it is like with children: you love all of them.

FM: Yes, all my toys are my favorite toys. The book on the *Bildungsroman* is the one that I love most, but I don't know whether it is my best book or not...

Q: Lina Steiner, in her *For Humanity's Sake: The Bildungsroman in Russian Culture*¹⁹, pays a great deal of attention to Lotman's semiotic approach in her analysis of *Bildungsroman*. Do you think it is relevant?

FM: Unfortunately I don't know Steiner's book; as for Lotman's semiotics, I'm not an expert, but the book in which I most used it was *The Way of the World*, also dedicated to the *Bildungsroman*. So, there may be a sort of elective affinity between Lotman's system and this great narrative form... As to my book on *Bildungsroman*, when I read it, I realize that I enjoy changing every time. I enjoy opening doors rather than creating a whole household.

Q: That's the mobility.

¹³ Moretti 1987.

¹⁴ Moretti 1994.

¹⁵ Moretti 1998 (original edition in Italian: Moretti 1997).

¹⁶ Moretti 2005.

¹⁷ Moretti 2013b.

¹⁸ Moretti 2019.

¹⁹ Steiner 2011.

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