

December 2016

Review of "Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History"

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Recommended Citation

Keefer, Jeannine (2016) "Review of "Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History"," *VRA Bulletin*: Vol. 43 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <http://online.vraweb.org/vrab/vol43/iss2/7>

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Review of "Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History"

Abstract

Jeannine Keefer provides a review of *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History*

Keywords

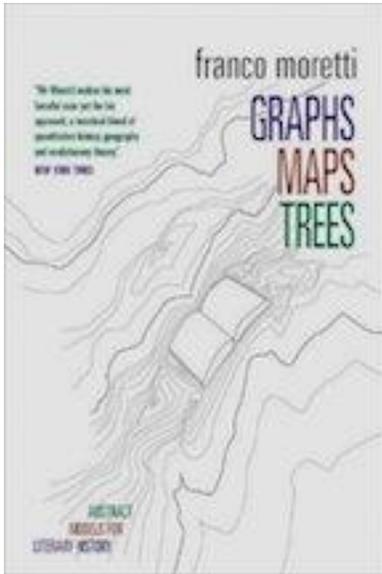
Digital Humanities

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

Dr. Jeannine Keefer is the Visual Resources Librarian at the University of Richmond and an architectural historian specializing in the built environment post World War II. Her research and teaching incorporate digital humanities methods and tools.

Franco Moretti. *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History*. London: Verso, 2005. <https://www.versobooks.com/books/261-graphs-maps-trees>

Reviewed by Jeannine Keefeer, University of Richmond



This short work by Marxist literary scholar, Franco Moretti, introduces a series of scientific approaches to the study of literature. He requests that scholars step back from the canon to engage a distant reading of literature on the global level. As implied by the title, Moretti suggests using graphs, maps, and trees (diagrams) to investigate the whole of literary history rather than solely the canon, privileging a broader reading of literary production, genre, society, and taste. It provides a new approach to plotting the historiography of the world's literature; an approach the traditional scholar may find problematic given the time honored solitary and secretive mode of humanist production.

In "Graphs," Moretti calls for cooperation amongst scholars and shared neutral data, free from interpretation. He demonstrates this with a series of graphs showing primarily the trends in British novel publication by geographic region and time. The scholar's work begins at this point to interpret this quantitative, independent to derive new meaning that often negates traditional theory. Moretti calls for more diversity in our understanding and an expansion of investigation from specific works to an entire genre.

The second chapter on maps opens with an abstract relationship and spectacle map of Mary Mitford's *Our Village*. Moretti points out that this artifact completely changes our geographic understanding of the series—moving it from a linear one to a circular one. The chapter provides a variety of map examples: abstract, literal, political, imaginary, real, etc. He uses these maps to compare descriptions of the idyll with reality, digging into the friction between fiction and the social realities of industrialization in Britain.

Moretti employs Darwin's theory in his third chapter, "Trees," to equate the evolution of literature with the evolution of language. As in the previous chapters several illustrations help him make his case. In this instance, intricate diagrammatic trees relay the complexity of tracing the morphology of forms in literature.

For the practitioner or scholar thinking about new approaches to a subject or discipline, this short text provides some insight into different ways of thinking about production and consumption from a macro level with fiction in the role of subject. This approach can help the investigator see trends and ask questions that may not be clearly evident in the accepted cannon. This text is far from comprehensive and some will question Moretti's conclusions and application of methodology. But, it provides an entry point to a different kind of thinking about theory, about historiography, and about questions in a concise format. Moretti successfully makes the case for distant reading in a way that is accessible and enjoyable. This is a good text to start a conversation about why one might consider digital humanities methodologies.