

**Review: Martin J. Gliserman, *Graphic Criticism: Semantics, Neurology and Cultural Transmission – A Study of 100 Classic Anglophone Novels*. New York: Peter Lang, 2022. ISBN: 978-1-4331-8274-7, 80.95 €.**

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Review

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*Graphic Criticism: Semantics, Neurology and Cultural Transmission – A Study of 100 Classic Anglophone Novels*, offers a new way to engage with familiar texts through data visualisation, thereby making a significant contribution to literary methodology. The book shifts between identifying longitudinal patterns in novels written and published between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, offering close qualitative readings of these texts across four semantic categories: “Raw Universe, Human Body/Being, Built World, [and] Socially Constructed World” (19). Martin Gliserman’s approach demonstrates the ways in which canonical novels continue to generate new material and provides a method of analysis which could be extended by recent technological developments in text mining. Gliserman has long held a fascination with longitudinal research and the digital humanities but does not provide a precise date for this research project; it seems much of the data collection was undertaken in the 1990s and early 2000s (xxiv and 27). The book traces literary tradition(s) and variances over time, identifying the “constraints” operating on texts and through which the writer engages with the reader (38, original emphasis). Limited to one hundred novels, one might question the selection of the corpus which was to some extent dictated by the availability of digitised texts (27), and as a result many works fell outside the scope of this project. Meanwhile, the works of several authors have been included twice across the corpus (67). Increasing the size of the sample would strengthen the statistical evidence supporting Gliserman’s longitudinal observations. With freely accessible online databases of digitised texts, one could now introduce the same “conceptual hierarchies” (13-9) to a more extensive and representative collection of novels. Furthermore, automation through artificial intelligence technologies (AI) could streamline projects such as this, allowing visualisations to be produced at greater speeds, perhaps with greater specificity.<sup>1</sup>

From the Introduction, Gliserman notes the drawbacks of visualisation techniques such as word clouds. This is because they rely on frequencies which flatten texts, as they cannot “adequately represent the entangled thickness of

<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge and thank Dr Guglielmo Maccario and Dr Abouzar Choubineh for their insights on the capabilities of AI and datamining.

the novel's semantic matrix" (6). The beautiful diagrams produced by Wordle based on Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) miss the crucial "relationships" by which words gain significance. Furthermore, "clusters of lexical items" such as those related to "FOOD", escape analytical attention as it is their collective presence that indicates the significance of the theme: a connection the word cloud is incapable of discerning (6). On the other hand, by categorising high frequency words into a semantic map, it is possible to determine (some of) the "key areas in which the text is invested and thus what it can imprint on the reader and/or where the reader can project" (6). Through this we come to the major claim of *Graphic Criticism*:

in addition to engaging/reading the story, the reader is absorbing information from different registers of the story and its language, and of particular focus here are rules of semantic distribution that indicate how a novel semantically pixelates the stories the writer composes. (12)

Visualisation becomes a way to identify this "pixelation", by "holding syntax in abeyance" (11) and locating semantic connections scattered in a narrative. Graphs and charts facilitate close and distant readings of texts, so that researchers "can see what the culture (or, the anthro-socio-politico-psycho-neuro-linguistic dynamics) demands and what the individual writer can make of and with those constraints" (21). This is a bold research agenda. However, given that scholars dedicate their careers to reflecting on just one element of the many hyphenated factors included in this definition of "culture", it is perhaps too demanding to expect *Graphic Criticism* to fully account for the ways "culture" works on and through novels.

Chapters One to Four demonstrate the development and application of semantic categorisation on the corpus so that (re)occurrences of words/semantic families in novels could be translated into meaningful graphs and charts. For this, Gliserman refined the categories defined by the *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* (HTOED). This involved extending its three sections – the historical, mental, and social worlds – to four: "Raw Universe, Human Body/Being, Built World, [and] Socially Constructed World" (19). This augmentation was justified on the principle that this allowed "semantic families that are connected to human beings to be in one semantic zone" without drawing an absolute distinction between body and mind (19). Most of the frequency data in *Graphic Criticism* is presented both chronologically and incrementally. The incremental charts facilitate thematic analysis by separating texts from their historical context and realigning them according to the prevalence of semantic families or ideas. This enables researchers to compare novels outside of periods or literary movements. Meanwhile chronological charts plot subtle changes in emphasis over time. For example, in reading for the "BODY", composed of "HEAD", "UPPER LIMB", "TORSO", "LOWER LIMB", and "SYSTEM" (28, figure 2.1) – Gliserman finds that the "proportions of the BODY remain stable for these five segments [...] over some 280 years" (31). However, by isolating one of these segments, namely "HEAD", there is a measurable decrease in references to "MIND" since the eighteenth-century (38).

In Chapter Three, Gliserman demonstrates the application of his four categories and their semantic domains through Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. In the novel, the "RAW UNIVERSE" encompasses references to sky, water, weather, and land. Each of these branches can be divided into much smaller elements. For example, when read in isolation, "trees", a part of the landscape, become materials "for building, boats and most importantly for defense" (43). By identifying where, how, and why trees appear in the novel, their wider implications in a narrative of imperialism become apparent. The titular character's manipulation and consideration of the environment or Raw Universe is paralleled and reinforced across other "semantic zones" (43). The Human Body/Being is essential to exploring the relationship between Crusoe and Friday. In fact, the text evidences a preoccupation with the "BODY" in comparison to other semantic realms, as "[i]n the area of the BUILT WORLD the semantic matrix is less dense than that of the BODY with its obsessive thoughts, intense feelings and violent actions" (44). Nonetheless, infrequent references to the "BUILT WORLD" remain significant as "objects of aggression" such as weaponry are employed across the text (44). The intersections of these semantic categories and sub-domains, builds a detailed picture of the colonial implications of the novel.

The dual function of visualisation as comparison and tracking mechanism in *Graphic Criticism* represents an interesting methodology for literary scholars. In the classroom, visualisation of textual corpuses may make concepts and comparisons between literary modes, tropes, and themes easier for students to grapple with. Indeed, Gliserman's analysis of "SKIN" in Chapter Seven, demonstrates the ways in which ideas can be compared across time and genres. For authors writing through various socio-political contexts, "SKIN" can translate into "class", "erotics", "race and power", the "grotesque", "transgression and desire", "political oppression", "racial scarring", and "intimacy" (119). The potency of the "SKIN" and the ways it changes engagements between characters, expresses connection and distress, differs significantly between authors, even those writing in similar periods.

*Graphic Criticism* reinforces qualitative observations around identity, psychology and the political impetus driving fictional texts, while avoiding simplistic generalisations. The research began as Gliserman sought an explanation for his visceral psychological and physical responses to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), which he believed might be found in the ways the body was written into the text. For example, the "HEART" is a semantically fascinating configuration of interpsychic, physiological, grammatical, affective, narrational, interpersonal, and descriptive conditions in novels (105, figure 6.6). It proves particularly important for Morrison's writing, and others in the corpus such as John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* (1748), Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). In the case of *Beloved*, "HEART" is part of the "embedded narratives" of each character and connected with the author herself, who described a sense of freedom associated with her heartbeat as she began writing the story (112).

The close reading of primary texts through a series of case studies in Chapters Five to Nine are the most engaging and valuable outputs of the methodology presented in *Graphic Criticism*. This research does not make the case for replacing close analysis or deep reading but argues that statistical analyses “often corroborate our intuitions” and “invite us to return to the texts” (80). Gliserman himself returns to several novels: F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), *Beloved* as discussed above, Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), and Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man* (1952). He finds that connection between “BROKE” and “NOSE” is significant in *The Great Gatsby*. Almost a third of references to “BROKE” are associated with Tom Buchanan, a character frequently addressed in terms of his privilege and violence in the novel, especially after he injures his mistress Myrtle. The association between Tom and violent interactions is part of a “hidden” “pattern” made visible through word maps (97). In *Passing*, a window allows Gliserman to access the “intrapsychic conflict” between Irene and Clare (142). By explicitly searching for moments involving the window, Gliserman proves this element of the so-called built world to be integral to the narrative frame as physical prop, metaphor and “transitional space” (147). Finally, audibility is at stake in Gliserman’s case study on the ways “VOICE” is incorporated into *Invisible Man*. The semantic connections to “VOICE” across the text are implicit reminders to the reader about the individual and community in a novel centred on the “unseen position of the other” (154).

Martin Gliserman’s highly readable explorations offer both longitudinal conclusions on textual traditions and “micro” analyses which shed light on the ways semantic families work in novels (20). As previously mentioned, expanding the corpus to newly available digitised texts would likely nuance observations on changes and traditions in Anglophone novels since the eighteenth-century. Nonetheless, Gliserman has provided a fundamental framework based on the *HTOED* to usefully interpret the data this could yield. The Coda makes a case for *Graphic Criticism* evidencing the “rules of language” we “unconsciously” engage in (165). While this may be a claim too far, visualisation is a useful tool to reinforce our observations or “intuitions” about texts as scholars and readers (70).