Visually Mapping the Narrative System of Dostoevsky’s The Idiot

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ABSTRACT

This research creates a visual system for analyzing Dostoevsky’s The Idiot. I define five factors—space, time, character (individual actor), network (unique aggregate of certain actors), and narrative voice—and visually explore their dyadic and triadic relationships. Taking the dyad of character and network, I identify all named entities within the novel and describe each person to whom they are connected. I then define factors for determining the degree of closeness in each of these relationships, and represent the degree via line value; those more closely related will be connected by thicker, darker lines. Other dyads and triads rely on visualizing schemes inspired by music notation, thermal imaging, and set theory; in visualizing and representing the novel’s varied mechanisms and parts, I track the evolution of Dostoevsky’s narrative and artistic system at a bird’s eye view. The Idiot is a vast narrative universe rich in events, actors, and narratorial turns; the reader’s task is additionally overwhelmed by the novel’s sheer mass and density. The Idiot’s layered sources of complexity invite the visual approach undertaken in this study.

METHODS

I first constructed a data table of The Idiot’s characters, and marked who shared a relationship with whom. I determined the presence or absence of a relationship on the basis of whether or not two characters had conversed. Rather than aligning individuals based on family belonging or occupying a shared social space (the assumption I may or may not be present), I wanted to analyze the network of interactions and thus the true energy of the narrative system. I compiled other analyses of the text to look at how the narrative was organized along the five factors I note in my abstract. Using the software Voyant Tools, I began to explore the texture of the narrative fabric on a few levels, including frequency of characters’ appearance, distribution of characters, and the degrees of their correlation within the text.

DISCUSSION

This research began with a written analysis of the nature of belief and beliefs surrounding the nature of sin and redemption in The Idiot. I attempted to access the novel’s structure and the narrative system, which I argued then and now to be at one with its aesthetic meaning. Due to the difficulty of the task, I then looked to explore visual modes of analysis.

The process of visually and artistically exploring this text yielded a number of unexpected readings and understandings. Characters who I had not considered important were revealed to be better-connected and more communicative than originally perceived. The novel’s manipulations of time obscured significant simultaneities, such as the development of a pivotal relationship that is subtly revealed under cover of the novel’s final chaos of tragedy. Going forward in my research, I will explore different theories for the novel’s narratorial authority. This research further enabled me to engage with the growing area of digital humanities. I explored the text with Voyant Tools, and on a deeper level, began to explore how others are integrating concepts from computer science, data analysis, and other disciplines to analyze literature.