

Marco CARACCIOLO, *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene*, University of Virginia Press, 2021, ISBN 9780813945828, 228 p.

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Whereas structuralist narratology has run out of steam for quite some time, *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene* sets out to interweave the study of narrative forms with the study of the homologous forms to be found in our natural, contingent world. What has been called the “Anthropocene” (a criticized denomination and conceptualization for the current geological epoch in the volume brought into view) gave rise to a series of alternative debates and critical approaches grounded in social sciences, philosophy, literature and others (i.e., Posthumanism, OOO, Flat Ontology, Ecocriticism, Animal Studies, Plant Studies etc.) generally consisting in displaying and analyzing the climatological and meteorological conditions of existence in the ongoing status quo, the interspecies entanglement and interconnectedness of human and nonhuman beings composing what Timothy Morton, and Marco Caracciolo too, would term the “mesh,” the agency and saliency of enmeshed, nonhuman entities in a dualistic, hierarchic and ontologically-discriminating modern tradition of thought.

Inasmuch as narrative, or broadly speaking literature, is concerned with and embedded in our current unstable, both historical and material state of affairs, be it unfolding ecological crisis, bursting natural disasters, haphazard meteorological changes, intrinsically echoing it and metaphorically examining it, these approaches easily find their way through literary studies too. In this regard, it is also the case of Marco Caracciolo’s *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene* which converges narratology and ecocriticism as methodological tools from an interdisciplinary vantage point in an encompassing manner of tackling both the inherent structure (the abstract literary form, the narrative strategy, and the occurrences of creative metaphors) of literary fiction and its ability to unveil and

shed light upon the complex system of our hazardously evolving and climatologically jeopardized more-than-human world.

Subsequently, Marco Caracciolo's methodological inquiry draws its arguments upon complex system theory (by advancing a theory of "complex narrative") via physicist Michel Baranger, econarratology, and even a sort of distant reading approach (in the sixth chapter where it comes to mapping and indexing metaphorical patterns usage and their semiotic functionality in Anthropocene fiction). Hence, this volume puts forward a theoretical project which conceives a heuristic device for developing a "narrative (theory) beyond the human" (16) in a "postclassical" phase of narratology, and which intends to exceed the world of literary form by attuning the human mind to the intricacies of human-nonhuman interrelation and "toward embracing the ecological ethics," (179) as the postscript *Coda: Thinking beyond Literary Form* suggests. Consisting of three thoughtfully divided main parts, framing seven analytically guided chapters, *Narrating the Mesh* posits by its very structure the bearing on complexity thinking scrutinizing the triad of "nonlinearity," "interdependency," and "multiscalarity" at the level of narrative forms and patterns. The key conceptualization of the form of narrative deals with its capacity of insightfully engaging "with the forms of the natural world," (7) of the intricacies of the Anthropocene, translated into literary forms and with their cognitive and affective implications for the readers.

Postulating that "form is the premise of an *ethics* of human-nonhuman relations, because seeing human societies as hierarchically superior to the nonhuman world – or as horizontally entangled with it – entails dramatically different ways of understanding our ethical responsibilities toward it" (16), Caracciolo configures a set of analyzing tools in order to grasp through the narrative dynamics, the characters' regime of representation, and the use of metaphorical language in Anthropocene fiction mirroring the enmeshment of human-nonhuman actors. The preference for Timothy Morton's conceptualization of the "mesh", instead of other slightly distinctive notional surrogates as the Latourian "network" or "collective", evince that Marco Caracciolo's methodology involves the suppression of "hierarchical ways of understanding humanity's position vis-à-vis the nonhuman, where linearity is culturally bound up with notions of human mastery and exploitation" (20) and that it decisively emphasizes the priority of accounting for nonhuman forms of existence.

The first section, titled *Nonlinearity*, tackles the theorization of complex systems as mostly having an emergent, hazardous, unintentional, and self-regulatory behavior. Supposing that narrative interlaces with the entanglements of the Anthropocene, Caracciolo's contribution employs what he denominated, after meteorologist Edward Norton Lorenz's phrase coined at a conference in 1972, "The Form of the Butterfly." This syntagm stands for the identifiable formal discontinuities in narrative temporality and causality leading to unforeseeable and unfathomable results. In fact, what "nonlinearity" provokes, whether we talk about narrative circularity or narrative discontinuity (the author proposes the analysis of circularity, or "looping temporality" in Julio Cortázar's "The Night Face Up" and Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life," and of discontinuity, or "discontinuous sampling" in Dale Pendell's *The Great Bay*), is the undercutting of teleological and technologically progressive temporality predictable to appear in prototypical fictions which favor the effacement of our human-nonhuman imbricated world evolving by means of biological and geological emergent processes.

To quote Marco Caracciolo, "[n]otions of progress and technological or social advancement in the West are bound up with this linear way of thinking about temporality and history" (60), so, by means of grasping that opposite nonlinear way of thinking in narrative, the author's enterprise turns to subverting the Western-centered sociocultural biases and modern continental tradition of thought. Highlighting that in certain literary fictions the flow of temporality entails an inherent segmentation that "challenge[s] a linear, deterministic understanding of reality" (72), the author puts into discussion four types of nonlinear narrative forms, with the last two being spatial schemata, i.e., discontinuous progression, loop, network (assigned to Richard Powers's *The Overstory*), and rhizome (assigned to Richard McGuire's *Here*), which "can challenge the linear understanding of temporal processes in a way that – given appropriate framing – can have real-world implications for readers." (75) Cortázar's "The Night Face Up" instrumentalizes a loop narrative schema by means of its "mind-tricking narrative", as Caracciolo calls it via Cornelia Klecker, in which

[t]he two story lines are interlaced throughout most of the story, but the final inversion disrupts the linearity of the pattern, turning it into far more than a formal juxtaposition: what we experience is a character gradually becoming entangled in his

dream world as his attention and anxieties shift from the motorbike accident to the pre-Columbian chase. (62)

If this is the case of a “trick” taking narrative form, Chiang’s “Story of Your Life” proposes a “strange loop,” in Hofstadterian terms, by exposing the interspecies relation between anthropomorphic subjects and alien entities. *The Great Bay* too deals with the nonhuman world, as Caracciolo observes, but through postapocalyptic lenses and highly fragmented narrative flow showcasing how “[w]ith the collapse of civilization, human communities have returned to a pretechnological state in which communication across vast distances is impossible.” (69) As the novel features a return to the prescientific state of the world, Marco Caracciolo even assumes that its temporal schemata could resemble the Eliadean “eternal return” (71). The characters get involved into the forms of natural world inasmuch as the novel minimizes the human-nonhuman axiological and ontological dichotomy and gives space for “disconnected narratives without a full-fledged human protagonist coming to the fore and driving – through his or her experiences – the narrative progression.” (72)

A framework for systematically approaching temporal nonlinearity being provided, the third chapter of this volume addresses “negative strategies” in postapocalyptic fiction, acknowledging “the postworld as a negation of the preworld” (81). Particularly, postapocalyptic fictions are conceived as “dyadic worlds” via Lubomír Doležal, recalling the pre- and the post- apocalyptic condition of existence of the world. Emphasizing both nonlinear temporality and negated/negative spatiality, Marco Caracciolo sets out to disclose what works such as Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven*, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, and Colson Whitehead’s *Zone* have to offer, each one portraying a disruptive situation, i.e., a virus epidemic, a monochromatic perspectivation, and, respectively, a zombie invasion, or complex catastrophes which exceed any anthropomorphic subject:

While it may be tempting to see humanity as an individual protagonist in this Anthropocene narrative, this move results in a gross misunderstanding of the complexity of the causal and historical processes involved: there is no human-scale intentionality behind the Anthropocene, but rather the emergent agency of industrialized societies under a capitalist system. Because of the emergent nature of the current ecological crisis, capturing catastrophe puts pressure on the human-scale

structures of narrative, a challenge that is central to the genre of postapocalyptic fiction. (93)

In the second part, Caracciolo focuses on the nonhuman turn with its consequences to literary practices and with its ethics of representation and pleads for the interdependency of nonhuman entities and literary forms, positing that “things are profoundly entangled with stories” (98). Overall, his conceptual use of “interdependency” goes even further than asserting the “storied” nonhuman, because it has to do with our complex system in which the nonhuman agency, profoundly interconnected with the human agency, has been radically crossed out by the hierarchical presuppositions of the modern Western world and by the pervasiveness of industrialism and capitalism – and so its visibility must be reconsidered and reestablished.

Although Caracciolo acknowledges that storytelling is intrinsically anthropocentric, that stories are human-made tools for a human-scale usage, he argues that narrative can urge its anthropocentric biases into self-destabilization and even achieve multiscalarity (as the third section of the volume outlines):

Broadly speaking, narrative tends to place individual human characters in the position of agents, while nonhuman realities (including nonhuman animals and natural landscapes or processes) are relegated to the position of objects: tools to further human ends, or a backdrop to human-centered events. Through formal resources, narrative can put pressure on this anthropocentric setup and foreground nonhuman agency. (99)

Drawing upon A. J. Greimas’s structuralist approach to narratology and Andrew Goatly’s “green grammar”, Caracciolo intends to take the actantial theory even further and, presumably, to develop his own nonanthropocentric theorization which would eschew both the structuralist textualization of character and the inherent human subjectivity of it by means of five grammatical devices relying on Goatly’s work in ecolinguistics. In fact, Caracciolo explores the grammatical possibilities of overcoming the traces of anthropocentrism in literary fictions as Richard Powers’s *The Echo Maker*, Jim Crace’s *Being Dead*, Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*, Jef VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach* trilogy, and Kurt Vonnegut’s *Galápagos*. At this juncture, it must be mentioned that, on the one hand, his approach seems to do

justice to nonhuman existence embedded into the very structure of narrative, but on the other, as the author himself claims, the application field of this method cannot be but limited to a small variety of fiction products. Moreover, this approach is grounded in metaphorical thinking, meaning that the reader is supposed to metaphorically assign nonhuman entities some sort of intentionality, which can be criticized as a process of anthropomorphizing the nonhuman world even though it has a “heuristic value”, as Caracciolo alleges:

Undoubtedly, attributing intentionality to nonhuman realities involves a metaphorical leap, because a powerful combination of cognitive predispositions and cultural factors (especially in a Western context) leads us to regard these realities as inert and passive. Yet the metaphorical extension of human concepts such as agency and intentionality has great heuristic value, in that it can reveal the ways in which nonhuman realities resist anthropomorphic (and metaphorical) appropriation. (112)

As the focal point of the fifth chapter targets the human mind from a neuroscientific standpoint, Marco Caracciolo inquires the patterns our human mind is the most attracted to and so infers that “we favor the patterns that most closely resemble natural phenomena” (116). In short, taking on the problem of cognition the author points to a critique of “dualisms” in literary fictions and even challenges the foregrounding of representational thinking, seemingly advocating for a “nonrepresentational” and “more-than-representational” thinking via Emily Potter. In that respect, he approaches Richard Powers’s *The Echo Maker*, Rivka Galchen’s *Atmospheric Disturbances*, and Bruno Arpaia’s *Qualcosa, là fuori*.

As the third section opens, entitled *Multiscalarity*, the sixth chapter, co-authored by Andrei Ionescu and Ruben Fransoo, discusses the use of metaphorical patterns as human-scaled devices for mirroring scientific discourses on macro-scale events such as climate change, emergent meteorological transformations, natural disasters, etc.:

In the visual as well as in the linguistic domain, the use of metaphorical language in climate change discourse is not surprising. The intangibility and multiscalarity of anthropogenic climate change (see the introduction) call for metaphorical language that is able to translate scientific models into concrete, affect-laden imagery. (139)

Besides, creative metaphors are acknowledged as “the primary stylistic form through which narrative may realize multiscalarity, one of the main features of complex systems and of the human-nonhuman mesh,” (140) which means that their specific occurrence in the larger context of a fiction and their orientation – Caracciolo observes, for example, that humans can take the position of source or target of a metaphorical pattern, – showcase how recent fiction upholds human-nonhuman interactions in a multi-scalar world. To illustrate how their quantitative metaphors mapping works, the authors provide an overview of the codes used: W (world), LN (life-nonhuman), O (objects), LH (life-human), A (abstract), P (psychology) (145), and, over the analysis, they insightfully describe the methodology of their analysis, as in the following exempla: “in the case of ‘as if they were quagmires,’ this mapping was represented as ‘W → LH,’ meaning that W is the source of the metaphor, LH the target domain” (146). Indexing the frequency of metaphorical patterns having human and nonhuman as their target domain demonstrates, in fact, how metaphors and similes can erase the anthropocentric Weltanschauung, for instance in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods*, and Ian McEwan’s *Solar*. The last chapter of the volume, *Metaphor, Scale, and the Value of Conceptual Trouble*, inquires the problem “whether anthropomorphism is a useful resource for narratives that engage with human-nonhuman entanglement.” (159) In other words, the author gives credits to processes of anthropomorphization inasmuch as they achieve the destabilization of anthropocentric suppositions by exerting pressure upon them. Hence, in Caracciolo’s acceptance, “cultivating an imagination of abstract pattern” (163), i.e., providing priority to the structural dimension of fiction products, is the key to profoundly undermining anthropocentrism in narrative fiction. His endeavor’s results articulate a salient conception which takes into consideration formal patterns, such as metaphors and similes, as disruptive tools in regards with anthropocentric thinking, arguing that “[c]reative metaphor is the formal device that best captures a challenge to an isomorphic model of human-nonhuman relations” (177).

All in all, *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene* is a considerable work elaborating a theoretical discourse which consolidates the capacity of narrative theory to adapt to our more-than-human world and even to diminish its anthropocentric naturalized assumptions. In short, this volume showcases the contemporary articulations of narratology relying on complex theory and, by doing

so, it initiates a discussion on “complex narrative”. Along its arguments, this volume provides theoretical tools for systematically approaching Anthropocene fiction: its structural mechanisms, metaphorical patterns, human-nonhuman characters networking, etc. Moreover, Marco Caracciolo pleads in his book for surpassing the isolated domain of literary studies by establishing an ecological ethics encompassing the human-nonhuman enmeshment and its interconnectedness to our intricate world. As Humanities in the present day are looking forward to achieving critical discourses capable of undermining anthropocentric thinking, *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene* comes in handy as it strives to destabilize anthropocentric assumptions by means of analyzing the inherent structure of Anthropocene fiction.