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Exploring Narrative's Anthropocene Affordances

Marco Caracciolo's *Narrating the Mesh*

Marco Caracciolo: *Narrating the Mesh. Form and Story in the Anthropocene*. Charlottesville, VA / London: University of Virginia Press, 2021 (= Under the Sign of Nature: Explorations in Ecocriticism). 240 pp. USD 34.50. ISBN 978-0-8139-4583-5

Overview

Both refreshingly buoyant in its optimism and resolutely useful in its task, *Narrating the Mesh* offers its reader original returns to key ideas and a veritable toolbox with which to build and sophisticate future projects. Some of these projects will be taken up by econarratologists – the emerging group with which Caracciolo self-identifies as having a “particular affinity” (p. 18) – but the observations about form at the core of the book will also merit engagement from narrative theorists not overly concerned with the Anthropocene concept motivating the rest of this book, and the foci of the subsequent chapters will be amenable to environmental humanists more broadly who are not committed to plumbing narratological depths. Indeed, the book makes a conscious and purposeful effort to be largely “reader-friendly” (p. 141).

Narrative as a “macroform”

Caracciolo begins the book with a back-to-basics question: What is form? This question, never as simple as it seemed, has arisen with new relevance in Anthropocene conditions where agential relationships have complexities that exceed conventional forms of understanding, including storytelling's scope and practices. Timothy Morton, for example, has characterized these human and nonhuman multi-agential conditions metaphorically as a mesh, “a *form* alternative to linear and hierarchical ways of thinking” that “suggests fragile interdependence, but also formidable complexity of pattern and connection” (p. 11). If such forms at first appear to present challenges for narrative, traditionally conceived of as linear, Caracciolo remains resolute, extending his prior thinking on embodiment and enactivism to conceptualize narrative form through audiences' responses to

the affective patterning of texts (a concept more familiar through the idiom of an “emotional arc”), which is altogether less rigid. More specifically, Caracciolo presents his argument based on narrative as a “macroform,” or category that “captures and stages forms at multiple levels” because he sees it as a practice inherently embedded in and in complex relationship with its milieu – with “milieu” including not only conventional sociohistorical contexts but also material objects and Earth systems (p. 3, 7). It is as a macroform that Caracciolo conceives of narrative’s grasp on the Anthropocene mesh; narratives, like the Anthropocene, can exhibit complex qualities of nonlinearity, interdependence, and multiscale, and these are the basis of the bridge Caracciolo builds between one and the other.

After the introduction and a first chapter that lay out Caracciolo’s argument about form, the book proceeds in three sections comprised of one to two chapters, before closing with a short coda. Each of the three sections takes on one of the Anthropocene’s complex qualities, and each chapter within the sections touches on multiple primary texts to illustrate narrative’s capacities to render those qualities. The first section tackles nonlinearity through a chapter on texts that represent butterfly effects and another on postapocalyptic fictions’ temporalities. The second section approaches interdependency through versions of mind in works where mind is not an attribute confined by human-environment dualisms. The final section’s two chapters share an interest in metaphor as a component of narratives that negotiate multiple conceptual scales by putting the human and nonhuman into relationship. Caracciolo recognizes that anthropocentric values about narrative have been complicit and coextensive with Anthropocene conditions (p. 19), but he presents a renewed bid for “a solid foothold for literary interventions” in facing Anthropocene challenges by surveying twentieth- and twenty-first century texts in dialogue with diverse disciplines, including philosophy, neuroscience, and linguistics, among others (p. 22–23). *Narrating the Mesh* does not perform a literary history attempting to track an aesthetic shift from a “before” to an “after” of anthropocentric narrative, but it does present something like an inventory of possibility based in texts with varying prominence in the environmental humanities.

From “Who sees?” to “What registers?”

Given the scope of *Narrating the Mesh*’s topic and the complexity inherent to that scope, the concision of Caracciolo’s volume is especially impressive. While that concision is a strength resulting largely from Caracciolo’s focus, one could imagine having productively expanded the book in several ways. Stronger links would have been welcome between the larger argument about form in the introduction and the chapters in the book’s three main sections; searching a digital copy of this text bears out that some of Caracciolo’s most provocative points in his initial argument about form – explication of affective patterning and

macroforms, for instance – thin out as one reads on in the book. While these terms understandably fade when chapters investigate specific aspects of complexity, returning from these chapters’ depths of examples to the level of inquiry set out so persuasively at the beginning would help to understand, perhaps, how narrative’s complex qualities relate to one another.

Readers coming to *Narrating the Mesh* from within narrative studies may also find that the book’s considerations of agency based in new materialisms raise, by contradistinction, a set of questions about narrative agency that Caracciolo touches on fleetingly. These questions emerge even in the book’s title: *Narrating the Mesh*. Unlike many studies in narrative theory, Caracciolo’s book does not take overt interest in narrators (as a case in point, the term does not appear in the book’s index); instead, Caracciolo seems more focused on the task of ‘translating’ or ‘channeling’ the mesh – or recognizing narrative’s enmeshment – which suggests that a title like “Feeling the mesh’s form” might have been a better fit. Lurking in the gap between the book’s title and the task it undertakes is the question of where humans – authors, readers, and some narrators – and their agency come back into this less anthropocentric account of narrative. So, while one could infer a shift in Caracciolo’s book from the classic “Who sees?” to a vibrant “What registers?”, the stakes of that implicit shift would have been clearer if the book’s analysis were applied to an unexpected older text or a less avant-garde contemporary text.

Conclusion

Like many a good study *Narrating the Mesh* launches as much or more than it resolves. The book could certainly help launch conversations for interested undergraduates, both because its style is accessible rather than academically dense and because the set of texts Caracciolo considers could easily help put together a syllabus for a narrative theory course that doubles as an introduction to well-regarded contemporary environmental literature. Yet another exciting launching point has to do with the coda alluding to the work of the larger NARMESH project. In the book’s short coda, Caracciolo applies the foci he developed from readings of literary fiction to the text of an interview with a member of the public, and the resulting close reading is just as dynamic and surprising as the treatment of established literary authors. While Caracciolo is not the first narrative scholar to analyze interviews with non-academics, his linking of theoretical analysis of literary texts with storytelling that circulates more broadly is heartening because the environmental humanities have arisen to address pressing issues happening now, outside the ivory tower. Caracciolo’s accessible scholarship and public engagement are thus welcome efforts to bring more work from narrative theory into contact with readers who are deliberating over the complex issues he elucidates.

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