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**Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene, by Marco Caracciolo, Charlottesville and London, University of Virginia Press, 2021, viii + 229 pp., US\$34.50, £27.50 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8139-4583-5**

### **Review by Jasmin Kirkbride**

A hierarchical model of humanity's relationship with the natural world, in which human beings act upon a passive environment, is a root cause of the ecological crisis facing our planet. *Narrating the Mesh* by Marco Caracciolo contends that narrative forms exploring the human-nonhuman mesh are key to countering this ideology.

Caracciolo builds on research undertaken in his previous four books, including *Embodiment and the Cosmic Perspective in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (2020). *Narrating the Mesh* is engaged with ongoing conversations in the field of econarratology, with several of its chapters published in various ecocritical and narrative journals between 2018–2019 (Caracciolo 2018a, 2018b, and Caracciolo et al. 2019). Moreover, work on it was sponsored by the European Research Council as part of the NARMESH Project under the EU's New Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. The book is thus in line with the project's aim to shed light on narrative's engagement with the 'mesh' of human communities and nonhuman phenomena.

Caracciolo builds on Abram's 'phenomenological method' regarding literary form, adapting it for the anthropocene age by using Morton's 'mesh' and Kohn's 'interlocking forms' as methodological lenses through which to view narratives concerned with the climate crisis. This results in the book's central thesis: that narrative short stories and novels, using formal tools, are able to demonstrate the complexities and enmeshments of human societies and nonhuman phenomena (or the human-nonhuman relationship). These formal tools include 'strategies, at the level of plot dynamics, character, consciousness representation, and metaphor, that mirror or integrate contemporary science in order to unsettle the primacy of the human-scale world'. Caracciolo argues that these forms, by uncoupling the concept of form from immediate human perception, offer 'better purchase on the complexity of today's ecological crisis, how human and nonhuman realities are folded together (enmeshed) within it' (1–12).

Caracciolo places the book firmly within Richard Grusin's 'nonhuman turn' (16), but beyond that the book is highly interdisciplinary, with Caracciolo bringing complex systems theory, visual and graphic metaphors, and cognitive psychology to bear on his argument. Following Morton, for instance, he notes how both art and science use a variety of analogical and imagistic forms, hardwiring in the environment whether consciously or unconsciously, and the imagistic is revisited regularly through the book.

The basic opposition brought in by narrative form specifically is 'between linear and mesh-like ways of thinking about the nonhuman'. The latter forms Caracciolo's central exploration as builds on the theories of material ecocritics such as Serenella Iovina and Serpil Oppermann to ask: 'how can a story – a quintessentially human and, for all we know, uniquely human practice – convey a notion of "thing-power"... uncoupled from human intentionality and agency?' (17–19) Through his answer, he hopes to contribute to the ongoing conversation on econarratology, inhabited by those such as Erin James, Nancy Easterlin, David Herman, and Alexa Weik von Mossner to name a few.

The book proposes that 'thinking with and about narrative form, in its intersection with scientific models and patterns of affectivity, is a critical step in the econarratological project'. However, it moves beyond ecocriticism's perceived problematic overstatement of the 'sphere of cultural representations' in the climate crisis by investigating the cognitive and affective form of the human-nonhuman relations underlying narrative (20), including a discussion of the

pitfalls of narrative form in affecting real-world environmental change, and a combatting of the criticisms levelled at ecological storytelling (20–22).

The book is subdivided into three parts, reflecting Caracciolo's goal to make a 'core contribution by 'exploring three pathways through which narrative can render, in formal terms, the complexity of our Anthropocenic moment': nonlinearity, interdependency and multiscalarity. These three aspects, Caracciolo argues, capture the 'key dimensions of the human-nonhuman enmeshment in the Anthropocene'. He argues narrative can 'integrate them at a formal level and translate them into a lifelike imaginative experience rich in affect' and by exploring this aims to overcome the 'form blindness' that 'affects large swathes of ecocriticism' (18–19). Leading directly on from the Introduction, Chapter One investigates 'enmeshment' narratives, which are technical in the sense of complex systems theory, as they emerge 'from the way in which human activity interlocks and interferes with the cycles of climatological and biological processes' (15). As Caracciolo says, this chapter does most of the 'theoretical heavy lifting' (24) and stands apart from the three discrete sections of the book.

Chapter Two marks the opening of Part One, 'Nonlinearity'. It uses cognitive literary studies to investigate narratives that 'resist linear models by assimilating spatial forms such as the discontinuous line, the loop, the network and the rhizome', which demonstrate new, mesh-like ways to rethink human-nonhuman relations even in non-ecologically-themed narratives (15). Case studies include works by Julio Cortázar, Ted Chiang, and Dale Pendell, creating a deep dive into complex systems theory. Focussing more on the visual, Chapter Three is an examination of postapocalyptic fiction through the lens of an optical illusion first discussed by Italian psychologist Gaetano Kanizsa. It discusses the use of 'negative strategies' in Emily St John Mandell's *Station Eleven*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, viewing the negation of post-apocalyptic narrative as a mode of disrupting linearity to promote thinking about human-nonhuman relations.

Part Two, 'Interdependency', explores how either plot organisation or negative devices can 'shatter the reader's imagination of the narrative into multiple possibilities and temporal planes' (54). The discussion features visual and spatial analytical strategies, but often moves beyond them as well. Via ecolinguistics, Chapter Four investigates how stories resist the 'widespread anthropocentric template' by elevating and giving agency to the nonhuman (16), looking at works including Jim Crace's *Being Dead*, Jeff Vandemeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy, Kurt Vonnegut's *Galápagos*, and Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*. Chapter Five explores the 'neuronovel', which can embed the nonhuman at the core of narrative agency into the minds of human characters. Utilising the theory of 'e-approaches' to cognition, it focusses on a key passage in Rivka Galchen's novel *Atmospheric Disturbances*, Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker*, and Bruno Arpaia's *Qualcosa, là fuori*, investigating how human-nonhuman enmeshment can 'emerge from within the experiential patterns of a characters' psychology (16).

Part Three, 'Multiscalarity', looks at what role metaphorical language plays in bringing together human subjectivity and nonhuman materialities. Chapter Six utilises the combined qualitative and quantitative analysis of metaphorical language, using computer-aided investigation of metaphorical patterns in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* and Ian McEwan's *Solar*. It is based on work in collaboration with Andrei Ionescu and Ruben Fransoo and explores the complexity of metaphorical bridges between human-scale and nonhuman realities in narrative. Meanwhile, Chapter Seven offers a more theoretical discussion of anthropomorphising or organismic metaphors for the nonhuman, focussing on Ursula le Guin's 'Vaster Than Empires and More Slow' and Jonathan Lethem's *As She Climbed Across the Table*.

Finally, a coda brings together these points with a close reading of excerpts from an interview with an environmental activist conducted as part of NARMESH. It illustrates how

the tools of narratological and stylistic analysis outlined in the book can be employed beyond the domain of literary fiction and literary scholarship.

Following a high-level, theoretical start, Caracciolo interweaves a series of literary and visual narrative case studies to build his argument. He uses a range of sources from within and without the usual canon of fiction concerned with climate change, addressing existing discussions and seeding new ones. He justifies some of the more fringe examples, a few of which do not directly address climate change, by arguing that ‘fiction doesn’t have to speak to the Anthropocene directly, at the level of themes and plot, to deploy pertinent formal resources’ (47). He re-visits several of texts throughout the book (for example, Richard Powers’s *The Overstory* appears in both Chapters One and Two), which can feel repetitive but over the scope of the argument creates a formal circularity and nonlinearity that pleasingly mimics some of its theories.

Overall, the book argues convincingly through the chapters’ individually explored devices that ‘narrative has the potential to create formal bridges between the imaginative situations it evokes and the abstract nonhuman realities investigated by science’ (16). *Narrating the Mesh* demonstrates that narrative strategies are an essential, though partial, springboard for change.

## References

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Jasmin Kirkbride  
University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK  
[j.kirkbride@uea.ac.uk](mailto:j.kirkbride@uea.ac.uk) | [jasmin.kirkbride@city.ac.uk](mailto:jasmin.kirkbride@city.ac.uk)

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