FORM, GENRE, AND THE VALUE OF FUZZINESS: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARCO CARACCIOLO

FORMA, GÉNERO Y EL VALOR DE LO IMPRECISO: ENTREVISTA CON MARCO CARACCIOLO

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Abstract: Marco Caracciolo is an Associate Professor of English Literature at Ghent University, Belgium. His work focuses on the study of form and style in narrative, eco-criticism, cognitive literary studies and, more recently, the relationship between literature and videogames. He led the ERC project "Narrating the Mesh: Ecology and the nonhuman in contemporary fiction and oral storytelling" (2017-2022) and is the author of several books, including *Contemporary Narrative and the Spectrum of Materiality* (2023), *Slow Narrative and Nonhuman Materialities* (2022), *Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty* (2022), and *Narrating the Mesh* (2021).

Keywords: Ecocriticism; Interview; Marco Caracciolo; Cli-Fi; Anthropocene.

Resumen: Marco Caracciolo es profesor asociado de Literatura Inglesa en la Universidad de Gante, Bélgica. Su trabajo se centra en el estudio de la forma y el estilo en la

narrativa, la ecocrítica, los estudios literarios cognitivos y, más recientemente, la relación entre la literatura y los videojuegos. Dirigió el proyecto ERC "Narrating the Mesh: Ecology and the nonhuman in Contemporary fiction and oral storytelling" (2017-2022) y es autor de varios libros, entre ellos, *Contemporary Narrative and the Spectrum of Materiality* (2023), *Slow Narrative and Nonhuman Materialities* (2022), *Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty* (2022) y *Narrating the Mesh* (2021).

Palabras clave: ecocrítica; entrevista; Marco Caracciolo; cli-fi; Antropoceno.

Résumé : Marco Caracciolo est professeur agrégé de littérature anglaise à l'Université de Gand, en Belgique. Ses travaux portent sur l'étude de la forme et du style dans le récit, l'écocritique, les études littéraires cognitives et, plus récemment, la relation entre la littérature et les jeux vidéo. Il a dirigé le projet ERC « Narrating the Mesh : Ecology and the nonhuman in contemporary fiction and oral storytelling » (2017-2022) et est l'auteur de plusieurs ouvrages, dont *Contemporary Narrative and the Spectrum of Materiality* (2023), *Slow Narrative and Nonhuman Materialities* (2022), *Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty* (2022) et *Narrating the Mesh* (2021).

Mots-clés : écocritique ; entretien ; Marco Caracciolo ; cli-fi ; Antropocène.

Question- Many scholars are grappling with how best to understand and categorize narratives that engage with the climate crisis. Ecocriticism —and, in that regard, econarratology— is a relatively young discipline, but also a fast-growing one, not necessarily only in terms of scholars, but also in its capacity for self-questioning and openness to engage with multiple disciplines, from political science to cognitive science. What, in your view, are some of the most significant shifts or developments you've observed within this field over the past two decades?

   Answer- You are right, the field of ecocriticism has changed considerably over the last two decades. Some of the most exciting developments involve interdisciplinarity, via dialogue with fields such as history, anthropology and philosophy. For instance, ecocritics have challenged the Western bias of literary representations of the nonhuman environment, and they have highlighted how these representations speak to discussions in New Materialism and posthumanist thinking. Just as significantly from my perspective, the opening up of literary representation to culture has been accompanied by an interest in form as a bridge between literary texts and cultural discourse at large. You mention the "econarratology" launched by Erin James and Eric Morel, and that research program —with its exploration of how narrative strategies frame human-non-

human relations in literature and other media— is an important illustration of the field's return to form.

It is also worth singling out the empirical ecocriticism advocated by Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, Alexa Weik von Mossner, and W. P. Małecki, which brings up the question of literary influence —how exposure to cultural representations of the environment can shape (and perhaps challenge) individual views. These trends speak to a field that is becoming more and more multifaceted both conceptually and methodologically, as the broader label "environmental humanities" suggests. The risk of fragmentation is real, particularly as more interpretative modes of knowledge production create frictions with more scientifically and empirically oriented approaches. But the opportunities are enormous. Now more than ever, as discussions on the climate crisis slide into the background of political debates, we need to work across disciplinary divides to understand how the cultural imagination structures the perception of environmental issues, and how artistic representations can complicate and enrich that perception.

Q- You've highlighted how ecocriticism has expanded to embrace diverse methodologies, react to the criticism of carrying a Western bias, and incorporate insights that come from fields like New Materialism (the work of Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann on Material Ecocriticism comes to mind). You also mention these two "branches", one on econarratology with its attention to form, and another on empirical ecocriticism, more concerned on reception. Given this evolution, and particularly considering the risk of fragmentation you mentioned earlier, what are the key challenges —or perhaps even opportunities— that arise when we attempt to integrate such disparate perspectives within a single field? Do you see any particular theoretical frameworks that might be especially helpful in navigating this integration?

A- A common metaphor sees scholarship as a dialogue or conversation, between individual writers but also between strands of research that may be quite different in terms of assumptions, goals, and methodology. I would argue that sustaining this dialogue is more important (and also more attainable) than perfect integration. I said above that the field of ecocriticism is divided into formally, culturally, and empirically oriented approaches. To avoid fragmentation, it is crucial to keep in mind that questions of empirical influence, form, and culture fall on a continuum, and understanding that nexus requires a convergence of perspectives —pluralism rather than integration. Especially with research inspired by scientific methods, there is a risk that the epistemologically strong model of empirical verification may overshadow approaches grounded in interpretation and cultural analysis. This risk is particularly tangible given the centrality of STEM fields in today's academia. So, while fragmentation can be problematic, I am

personally more worried about the dangers of reductionism —of seeing interpretation (textual, cultural, etc.) as less valuable than scientific verification. Another field I've engaged with in my work, cognitive approaches to literature, has dealt with similar issues (see, for instance, Nancy Easterlin's book *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and Interpretation*), so again I would encourage ecocritics to read widely and keep an open mind about the possibilities of interdisciplinary collaboration.

While there is no single theoretical framework that can help us bring together these disparate approaches to literature and the environment, I have found inspiration in Anna Tsing's work in anthropology —a field that is quite used to bringing together empirical and theoretical agendas— as well as Caroline Levine's New Formalism. In different ways, both frameworks stress that the way in the environmental imagination is tied to a circulation of material forms, whose impact can be traced (conceptually and/or empirically) across a wide range of texts and settings. Tsing's and Levine's work combines critique of the structures of environmental violence and an interest in the transformative potentialities of narrative or literary form. That is a particularly productive jumping-off point for future ecocritical research.

Q- Your warning against reductionism —particularly against privileging scientific verification over interpretative approaches— connects interestingly to discussions about climate fiction's literary positioning. Ciarán Kavanagh has recently argued that science fiction's cultural authority is tied to perceptions of its "literariness" and its relationship with a sense of authority and the legitimacy of its speculations. Similarly, climate fiction seems caught in categorical tensions, with some positioning it within the realm of the speculative and others arguing for its fundamentally realist nature, depicting already-unfolding planetary conditions rather than imagined futures. In your book *Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty*, you argue that narratives can help audiences navigate ecological insecurity, emphasizing the importance of form in storytelling and the role of speculative fiction in addressing climate change. How do you see these genre categorizations influencing climate fiction's cultural work and scholarly reception? In which way does the framing of climate narratives as either "speculative" or "realist" impact their transformative potential that you mentioned earlier?

A- I wonder if the term "speculative" is doing helpful work here. I understand why science fiction scholars pivoted to that concept, but it seems to me that every fictional text is speculative in some sense of the word —it imagines a world that can be more or less lifelike, but the difference is always one of degree and not of kind. Particularly as climate change is disrupting our perception of what is plausible and implausible (as influentially argued by Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement*), I think the distinction

between realism and speculation is becoming increasingly blurred. What I'm saying is that the transformative impact of climate narratives is largely independent of their framing on the level of genre, and that's why climate or Anthropocene fiction (in Adam Trexler's terminology) is a fuzzy set. It seems to me that there is value in that fuzziness, because there is no single imagination of climate change but rather a variety of (more or less speculative) visions of the climate present and future. I like the idea of working with a concept that accommodates that broad range of perspectives. Of course, framing on the level of genre may still have an impact on the level of individual (as opposed to cultural) reception. That's something that may be worth exploring empirically.

Q- I'd like to ask you about how formal choices —temporality, mood, and setting— shape our engagement with visions of a climate-impacted present and future. We often categorize these futures as utopian or dystopian, but those categories carry signifi-cant ideological weight. In your experience, how do authors leverage these elements —perhaps through manipulating pacing for emotional effect, or focusing on a setting in an unrepresented community— to depict potential futures while challenging dominant narratives and foregrounding intersecting dynamics of race, class, and colonial lega-cies? Can you recall examples where a seemingly straightforward utopian or dystopian framing is complicated by such formal choices?

A- It is worth stressing that, while formal experimentation has considerable ideo-logical potential, complex forms don't necessarily entail a critique of dominant ideolo-gies. Meir Sternberg calls this the "Proteus principle": form and function (in this case, ideological function) are relatively independent. This means that fiction's interrogation of colonial legacies or of the interplay of social inequalities and environmental destruc-tion typically requires a narrative that speaks to these issues on the level of theme and subject matter.

Nevertheless, imagining these issues through the lens of unconventional or com-plex forms can have a defamiliarizing effect: it can prompt a reconsideration of as-sumptions shared by audience members, and it can even reveal how certain forms are latently ideological. In my work, I often resort to the example of the hero's journey —a powerful masterplot (in Porter Abbott's terminology) in Western narrative that tends to reinforce the dualistic split between the protagonist's human agency and the passivity of the quest's object, which is either an *actual* object (e.g., the Holy Grail) or objectified on a more metaphorical level. Experimenting with this form also means questioning its inherent dualism. A novel that comes to mind in this connection is Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019), which builds on the quest template but uses coincidence, rather than the protagonist's volition, as the main engine of the plot. Another relevant example is Alexis

Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013), where (as many critics have pointed out) the teleological form of the Western novel is complicated by the meandering patterns of oral storytelling, which reflect the author's Australian Aboriginal background. These works (and of course many others) deploy complex forms —in conjunction with plot and storyworld construction— to complicate standard narratives of climate catastrophe, and they do so by drawing inspiration from non-Western storytelling traditions. They show that, when working in tandem, form and subject matter contribute to ideological critique in more profound ways than subject matter could on its own.

Q- I understand you've been exploring the intersection of literature and videogames in your recent research. Given an emphasis on form's potential to shape affective response and challenge conventional narratives, and as we consider the unique affordances of interactive media —the capacity for agency, immersion, and procedural storytelling— what are your thoughts on how video games might be contributing to, or diverging from, the literary strategies we've discussed for representing the climate crisis? What are the opportunities for a productive dialogue between these mediums in terms of shaping audience engagement and fostering a deeper understanding of our ecological challenges?

A- In Marie-Laure Ryan's words, video games are "art of compromise between narrative and gameplay" (198). This means that they are a fundamentally hybrid medium, integrating aspects of literary storytelling but also creating new opportunities through the forms of gameplay—which game studies scholars often label its "mechanics". As such, games are well suited to capturing aspects of the climate crisis that resist conventional patterns of narrative representation: its scale, its systemic complexity, its non-linearity, and so on. Put otherwise, games are systems in a far more straightforward (and non-metaphorical) sense that any print narrative, and therefore they are uniquely able to present the complex causes and effects of environmental processes. Think about the branching paths of interactive fiction: the player's decision-making influences the characters in unpredictable or surprising ways, frequently by alternating a top-down perspective on the game world (managing resources, etc.) with the experience of multiple characters on the ground.

For instance, I have written recently about how games can model environmental change not only visually but also affectively. When players realize that the game world has been profoundly impacted by their choices, or by previous events beyond their control, they may experience something akin to what philosopher Glenn Albrecht discusses under the heading of "solastalgia" —distress at environmental transformation. An example is how *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* (Nintendo 2023) takes

place in the same game world as its predecessor, *Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2017). Returning players will recognize many of the same locations, etc. However, that world has been disrupted by a catastrophic event known as "the Upheaval". The inspiration is clearly postapocalyptic, but the centrality of exploration to the experience of both games creates a particularly immersive relationship with space, giving rise to a sense of solastalgic loss of the verdant world of *Breath of the Wild*. Moreover, space is presented as a world-wide system and not merely as a series of disparate locations.

This is just one of many examples of how "ecogaming" (see the collection co-edited by Laura op de Beke et al.) can stage environmental dynamics, but the medium is evolving rapidly and becoming more and more sophisticated in its experimentations. My hope is that ecocriticism and econarratology will pay more attention to the formal resources of digital media going forward—not in order to displace literary representation, but rather to understand the many levels of interaction between the written word and digital technologies in today's media landscape.

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