

REVIEWS



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Marco Caracciolo. *Contemporary Narrative and the Spectrum of Materiality*. De Gruyter, 2023. Pp. 210. ISBN 978-3-11-114149-7 (hardback); 978-3-11-114256-2 (e-ISBN - PDF).

To scholars in contemporary humanities, Marco Caracciolo needs no introduction. In his numerous books and articles, he develops vivid concepts that are crucial not only to our understanding of contemporary fiction but to our entire thought paradigm. He does so in *Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty* (2022), *Slow Narrative and Nonhuman Materialities* (2022), *With Bodies: Narrative Theory and Embodied Cognition* (co-authored with Karin Kukkonen, 2021), *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene* (2021) and many others.

Multidisciplinary, his theoretical and critical preoccupations extend beyond fiction to film, computer games, and comics. Caracciolo is a skilled, original and joyful conjurer of concepts. He renders his thought in statements that are precise and easy to grasp even at a time when we have moved to scales larger than the human in terms of ecologies, geographies and temporalities. Amongst his main research fields are embodiment and materiality, the Anthropocene, object-oriented ontologies and his own key concept of slow narrative. His focus remains the nonhuman. Of course, he belongs to a larger critical paradigm, New Materialism, where most of these concepts are common critical and theoretical preoccupations.

Among the denizens of this paradigm are celebrated Bruno Latour (*Reassembling the Social*, 2005; *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, 2013), Bill Brown (*Other Things*, 2015), Karen Barad (*Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 2007), Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (*Material Feminisms*, 2008; *Bodily Natures*, 2010), Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (*New Materialisms*, 2010), Timothy Morton (*The Ecological*

Thought, 2010; *Hyperobjects*, 2013) and Graham Harman (*Tool-Being*, 2002; *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 2018). Let us not forget Jane Bennett's crucial *Vibrant Matter* (2010). An important addition is Christian Moraru, who, in *Flat Aesthetics* (2022) discusses New Materialism in recent American literature. To these one could add several other volumes dealing with nonhuman agencies, the Anthropocene and ecocriticism.

Contemporary Narrative and the Spectrum of Materiality, published in 2023, comprises nine chapters including the Introduction, and an Epilogue. Caracciolo astutely pinpoints the paradox at the heart of materiality: namely the contrast between "the concreteness of the material" and "the elusiveness of the *concept* of materiality" (15).

As in his other texts, the author's concern is both with materiality and narrative, more precisely with a "narrative negotiation of materiality" (2). Certain narratives, Caracciolo argues, can challenge an anthropocentric view of the world, "hint[ing] at the limit of human cognition and affect" (2). They are thus in disagreement with the Western mindset, that sees things as "inert and equipmental," "passive" (3). The result is "a sense of materiality *uncoupled from the human*" (3; emphasis added) – precisely what the current book deals with.

Caracciolo contends that the narratives he discusses here do not resolve the tensions and disagreements at the heart of things. Instead, they turn such tensions "into productive instabilities" that define plot and character while also disrupting an anthropomorphic bias (12-13).

The first chapter, "Object Oriented Plotting," focuses on Don DeLillo's novel *Underworld* (1999) and Alejandro González Iñárritu's film *Babel* (2006). Here, Caracciolo makes use of Timothy Morton's "mesh," "the . . . intertwining between human realities and nonhuman processes." The plots in the two narratives employ what the author calls "a material anchor" to decenter the human: a baseball in *Underworld* and a rifle in *Babel* (24). They underline "object-oriented plotting" – a term inspired by Harman's object-oriented ontology. This is plotting where a material object becomes central and resists anthropocentrism, challenging it and its desire to control matter. In the novel and film, the baseball and the rifle are also what makes the plot advance, with the help of these objects' repeatedly intersecting the multiple storylines and creating

networks of connections. A larger than human, interconnected structure becomes apparent in the non-linear temporalities and causalities of these plots. Yet, as the author cannot help observing, such objects are simultaneously also strongly connected to the human being, as they shape the characters' perception of space and time.

In the second chapter, "The Ethics of Materiality in the Multimodal Novel," the focus is on multimodality in certain novels. A multimodal novel is one that adds visual and typographical dimensions to the textual one. The novels under discussion here are *Tree of Codes* (2010) by Jonathan Safran Foer, *Darkness* (2011) by Yedda Morrison, and Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* (2019). Amongst other features, such modal, non-textual features highlight the artificial nature of literary narrative and remind us of the materiality of literary works. Usually, material reference is felt as external and disruptive and therefore erased from the texts, as it "[b]ears witness to the shortcomings of verbal language and narration" (42). Yet, certain narratives attempt to bring it to the forefront. This results in a "heightened materiality of the text" (43). Caracciolo argues that multimodal tactics "point *beyond* the human" through their emphasizing of external reference – that of history, for instance. They act to induce "moral responsibility toward other humans and the natural world" (43). Caracciolo demonstrates that it is by means of physical "gaps and elisions" in the texts that materiality is made apparent (43). What such devices do is visually *reproduce* the disruptive violence of history and trauma – the Holocaust in Foer's novel, Western colonialism in Morrison and migration in Luiselli – more efficiently than mere texts will ever be able to.

The next chapter, "Curating the Anthropocene Museum," focuses on the museum trope in three texts: Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven* (2014), *Flights* (2007) by Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk, and *The Octopus Museum* (2019) by American poet Brenda Shaughnessy. The author investigates the innovative manner in which contemporary literature deals with the museum as an institution with a long Western tradition. Analysing *Station Eleven*, Caracciolo contrasts it with the texts of the other two authors. In the novel, the focus is on the material items left after a major pandemic swept Western civilisation, items that are

gathered in a Museum of Civilization. Caracciolo cannot help but notice that nostalgia is the novel's major affect, as a feeling of regret for a lost, *prepandemic* human civilisation (65). Moreover, the objects gathered there do not seem to possess any agency. Instead, they reinforce feelings of wistfulness for the objects' utilitarian function, even after the loss of the respective function. Because of this, the novel remains anthropocentric in scope.

This is not the case in the texts of the other two authors. Caracciolo considers those texts as being more in accord with contemporary thinking on nonhuman materiality as a site of *subversion* and *rebellion* against Western material hierarchies. Not only do *Flights* and *The Octopus Museum* "appeal to a wider range of affects." They also "do not objectify museum items but rather reveal their thing-power" (70). The things in the museums here lack a utilitarian function; they possess a logic that is closer to the nonhuman or more-than-human one. In *Flights*, the human body itself turns into "a museum display" (71). Anatomical parts have become autonomous through careful preservation. As such, they are no longer subservient to the body seen as a superior whole but are "transcorporeally connected to external reality" (71). In the postapocalyptic *The Octopus Museum*, the octopus is not the exhibit but the curator. The octopus is also the one who conveys the vantage point of the narrative. Moreover, as the poet herself makes clear, the reader of such a text is itself "anything but a human or even anthropomorphic reader" (71). According to Caracciolo, Shaughnessy succeeds in diminishing humanity through her rejection of the traditional lyric form and through a plurality of characters and agencies "that significantly trouble the relationship between the reader and the lyric I" (80).

In "The Fetish, the Grotesque, and the Castaway," the scene shifts from the museum to a deserted island. It is the main trope of two contemporary films that reinterpret the myth of Robinson Crusoe: Robert Zemeckis's *Cast Away* and Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's *Swiss Army Man*. Building on Crusoe's narrative, the two films defamiliarize it. Material objects are no longer mere tools used by the Western individual to affirm once again his exceptional and self-sufficient character. They no longer serve to subdue the nonhuman world. Instead, they take centre

stage in the two films. In *Cast Away*, a volleyball, though nonhuman, is anthropomorphized as “Wilson” to accompany the protagonist on the deserted island where he is stranded and finally to help him escape from there. In *Swiss Army Man*, the opposite process takes place: the dead body of the protagonists’ friend is instrumentalized as a multi-purpose tool (Caracciolo 88), the result being in the register of the grotesque. With the help of three key concepts (the fetish, anthropomorphism, objectification), Caracciolo shows how flexible the boundary between human subjectivity and thingness is and also how uncomfortable it may be (103). The grotesque plays a key role there, as it “subverts an instrumentalizing use of matter and the conventional patterns of Western thinking” (19).

“Materializing Survival Games” is the book’s first exploration of digital narrative, and it deals specifically with materiality in survival games. Caracciolo pursues here the theme of the previous chapter, Crusoe-like endurance and the castaway character as illustrated here by three games, *The Forest*, *The Long Dark*, and *Raft*. The author demonstrates that the games espouse a “productive engagement with the spectrum of materiality” (110). He focuses on three essential dimensions of the genre: the crafting system, the building system, and the narrative element. He argues that storytelling in particular plays an important role insofar as it guides the way these games “imagine and negotiate materiality” (110). The games seem to favour an unambiguous “instrumentalizing and extractive approach to matter” in their embodiment of “worlds without end” (124). This is the case especially in *Raft*, which projects an unrealistic ideal of sustainability as the eternal capacity of matter to transform into other matter without any loss or impact on the environment (124). Yet, Caracciolo contends that, at a more careful consideration of their *plot*, these survival games acquire a higher degree of complexity. The narratives complicate the meanings emerging from gameplay. Even if *Raft*’s ideal seems to be one of infinite materiality, the *narrative* there dismantles such an ideal by means of self-conscious irony (19). In *The Forest*, storytelling plays a key role in rendering the uneasy coexistence of the human with the nonhuman. *The Long Dark* employs slow pace to decenter “the player’s assumptions about the availability of

matter,” as materiality there “repeatedly eludes or challenges appropriation and accumulation” (117).

“The Office Weird” focuses on space as well, but on inside office space this time. Here Caracciolo takes up the genre of “weird fiction” as particularly suited to reflect the uncertainties of our ecological crisis. To this purpose, he compares a novel and a videogame, Jeff VanderMeer’s *Authority* (2014) and *Control* (Remedy Entertainment 2019), a video game inspired by VanderMeer’s fiction. Both works deal with paranormal events: a mysterious Area X in *Authority* and an invading force in *Control*. Employing Viktor Shklovsky’s concept of “defamiliarization,” Caracciolo shows how the objects in the two texts are “defamiliarized,” “caught in the . . . tension of familiarity and blatant alienness” (127). Concretely, in both VanderMeer and Remedy Entertainment, the office, the tedious space of administrative work, is transformed into a site that, as the result of paranormal activities, makes possible “encountering the spectrum of materiality” (147). “More-than-human entities” such as the invading force in *Control* infiltrate the office building and the quotidian objects it contains, “opening up possibilities for rethinking matter as inherently uncertain and agential” (20). Imbued with weird qualities, physical objects are consequently destabilised. To Caracciolo, this results in “material things and spaces that resist, through their sensory atmosphere, simple dichotomies between realism and the fantastic or paranormal” (147). He defines the agency of things in the book and the game as both “disturbing” and “liberating” (148).

“Mind among Material Ruins” has ruins as its central trope. The author discusses the postapocalyptic view of J. G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World* (1962) and Susanna Clarke’s *Piranesi* (2020). The world in ruins is caused by climate change in Ballard and by the violent eruption of another world in Clarke’s multiverse fiction. Once again, Caracciolo’s main concern is with showing how the two novels bridge the division between an active, human subject and what is generally seen as passive, lifeless matter. As a particularly original feature, Caracciolo remarks that the writers avoid associating ruins and nostalgia, “the dominant affect surrounding . . . ruins in Western modernity” (168). In their prose, Ballard and Clarke dismantle binaries such as those between present and past or

between human societies and relentless natural forces (157). Instead, they *conflate* them. The result is an environment that literally “runs through the protagonists” (158), generating something paradoxical, a feeling “akin to madness” (158).

The last chapter, “Infrastructure and Collectivity in Video Games,” deals with infrastructure as it is represented in two digital games, *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions 2019) and *Journey* (thatgamecompany 2012). Caracciolo explains the difference between the way fiction and certain games render the postapocalypse. While postapocalyptic fiction suggests “the collapse of modern civilization” through the crumbling of infrastructure, the games he discusses here provide a reversed, more original view of things: they are about “*rebuilding* infrastructure” (172; emphasis added). Doing so, they “reimagine the nature of collectivity in ways that challenge both mainstream gaming culture and anthropocentric assumptions” (172). More specifically, Caracciolo remarks that the two games depart from an anthropocentric view of things. It is rather “the nonhuman landscape and material things [that] become actively implicated in infrastructural efforts” (190).

In his Epilogue, Caracciolo reiterates the “vast and elusive” character of the spectrum of materiality. It is a character that he has fully demonstrated by means of the complex mechanism of analysis and critical, theoretical and literary references that he set into motion here. The result is a substantial contribution to replacing “the most productive binary of Western thinking – that between an active subject and . . . lifeless matter” (191) with a fresh view that renders matter at least as active and alive as the subject itself.

One might reproach Caracciolo for failing to address the destructive dimension of specifically man-produced materiality and excessive consumption, the waste component of our culture. When he discusses flotsam in chapters four and five, for example, he sees it more as an objective addition to the world, already assimilated and therefore not worth criticising anymore. Indeed, in “The Fetish, the Grotesque, and the Castaway,” he talks about “contemporary culture’s reckless investment in disposable things – hyperobjects whose devastating impact on the environment is frequently overlooked or swept under the rug” (102-3).

Yet he never accounts more extensively for how his fascination with a concept of matter that includes material culture accommodates the destructive dimension of the objects produced and consumed in excess. A generalising view of matter runs the risk of neutralising its nuances and specific contexts of meaning.

Was this volume a necessary addition to the already large number of scholarly books published on the topic? The answer is a decisive yes. The nonhuman and its agency are concepts still in the process of understanding and defining. Every addition is also an example of pioneering work. Even an important author's *choice of materials* – fictional books, films, games, etc – where the elusive presence of the nonhuman can be grasped is essential for students in contemporary literature, for researchers and scholars alike.

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