

Slowing Down in a Sped-Up World: How Slow Narrative Can Foster Embodied Experiences of Climate Change and Prompt Ethical Responses

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Abstract:

Marco Caracciolo's *Slow Narrative and Nonhuman Materialities* focuses on the form and potential of slow narrative for an affective and embodied experience of climate change. With a variety of vivid close-readings, Caracciolo illuminates the narrative strategies that produce deceleration and convincingly shows how these are conducive to an experience of entanglements between the human and nonhuman world. His study proves to be an important contribution to (cognitive) narratology, phenomenological conceptions of narrative, and the environmental humanities as a whole.

Langsames Erzählen in einer beschleunigten Welt: Das Potential von *slow narrative* für das affektive Nachvollziehen des Klimawandels

German Abstract:

Marco Caracciolos *Slow Narrative and Nonhuman Materialities* nimmt *slow narrative* — langsames Erzählen — als narrative Form und affektive Erfahrung im Kontext des Klimawandels in den Blick. Caracciolo beleuchtet anhand anschaulicher Lektüren, wie langsames Erzählen eine Erfahrung von *entanglement* zwischen menschlichen und nicht-menschlichen Akteuren hervorrufen kann. Sein Werk leistet damit einen wichtigen Beitrag zur Analyse von Erzählformen und ihren affektiven Effekten im Kontext der kognitiven Narratologie, der Phänomenologie und der Environmental Humanities.

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The value of narrative in furthering our understanding of contemporary ecological crises is widely discussed in the environmental humanities. In *Slow Narrative and Nonhuman Materialities*, Marco Caracciolo makes a compelling case for the mode of slowness in narrative and its potential to tease out an affective experience of and response to the scientific abstraction that is anthropogenic climate change. Including a wide array of fascinating case studies from (postmodern) fiction to video games, comic books and essayistic writing, the work under review contributes to the study of narrative just as much as to the field of environmental philosophy, new materialism, and cognitive narratology.

Slow Narrative and Nonhuman Materialities is the second installment in Caracciolo's trilogy of monographs that investigate narrative's potential in making sense of the ecological crises of our time. The work is conceived of in the context of the five year research project "Narrating the Mesh" (NARMESH) funded by the European Research Council at Ghent University where Marco Caracciolo works at the intersection of narrative theory, phenomenology, and cognitive approaches to literature. *Slow Narrative and Nonhuman Materialities* entangles itself within the broader mesh of Caracciolo's substantial research on the nonhuman turn in relation to narratology. His extensive knowledge on affect theories and materialism further enrich this dense study that will interest literary scholars of narrative just as much as other researchers from the environmental humanities engaging with conceptualizations of the nonhuman world. With this monograph, the author expertly contributes to each of these research fields and convincingly furthers NARMESH's aim to shed light on the entanglements of nonhuman materialities within narrative.

Slow Narrative and Nonhuman Materialities makes a convincing appeal for the potential of slowness as an experiential and affective mode of complex narrative. It argues that the evocation of slowness in narrative — through form, stylistic devices, and through a heightening of the reader’s awareness — is conducive to experiences of entanglement with the nonhuman world. For Caracciolo, slowness is more than just a deceleration of reading time. Rather, slowness functions as an embodied and affective experience that corresponds to a thickening of awareness and brings into focus the ecological entanglements between human and nonhuman species.

Challenging the narratological figures of containment in a storyworld or relocation in relation to fiction, Caracciolo proposes metaphors of “textural entanglement” that are closely related to questions of temporality and immersion: “Texture is a figure of entanglement that channels the dynamics of attention as audiences become immersed in a story. Within this attentional dynamic, slowness can arise, deepening the textural nature of the reader’s imagination and thus echoing a basic ecological insight into the interdependency of human societies and nonhuman processes” (p. 28). Here, the ethical implications that remain at the center of Caracciolo’s study become clear. Slow narrative has an impact on the embodied experience of climate change that reach beyond the realm of fiction.

Closely linked to questions of form, slowness is produced through various narrative strategies such as disruption of plot progression, teleological discontinuity, or nonlinearity. Caracciolo sheds light on these narrative strategies with a wide array of fascinating case studies in the corresponding chapters. Throughout the book, we encounter slow narrative in the context of perplexing narrative complexity in fiction, through the inclusion of multimodal visual narratives, the abandonment of verbal language in favor of wordless comic panels, environmental storytelling in video games, or essayistic meandering. In all of these instances, slowness becomes the pivotal point where a multithreaded experience of interconnectedness with the nonhuman world come to the fore.

Drawing upon a wide array of theory from anthropology, phenomenology, cognitive narratology, new materialism, and analytical philosophy, Caracciolo first develops a brief methodology of a particular aspect of deceleration in each chapter. He then brings these perspectives into conversation with his detailed close-readings of narrative and exemplifies the

conceptions of nonhuman materiality produced by slow narrative. This approach gives the book a conceptual coherence while at the same time opening it up to a plethora of discourses within the environmental humanities. What further stands out in this approach is Caracciolo's knack for vivid and engaging descriptions of his case studies that give plasticity to his arguments even when readers are unfamiliar with the primary sources.

A high point of such illustrative analyses can be found in Chapter 6 in which Caracciolo engages with two examples of slow narrative that pose a particularly interesting challenge to the question of literary form: two almost entirely wordless comics, namely *Gaïa* (Brussels 2017) by Thierry Cheyrol and *L'année de la comète* (Strasbourg 2019) by Clément Vuillier. He convincingly demonstrates how these comics "create a slow rhythmicity that reveals a rich array of nonhuman forms" (p. 137) and introduces the concept of "narramorphism" in the absence of an anthropomorphic bias in narrative: "[N]arramorphism is based on visual cues and the inherent rhythmicity of the panels and pages. By bypassing language through their wordlessness, *Gaïa* and *L'année de la comète* demonstrate the potential of narramorphism as a heuristic device to explore textural continuities and discontinuities between human stories and nonhuman processes" (p. 143). Slowness becomes the foregrounding affective experience of the reader's engagement with the comics: "The imagination is here put in a slow, textural mode, because the near absence of language foregrounds the formal nature of this engagement with materiality: we are encouraged to reread the book, taking in visual resonances beyond a mere sequentiality of cause and effect; the narramorphic shape of the evocation of Gaia becomes increasingly distinct as we take our time and learn to appreciate Cheyrol's stylistic operation" (p. 152).

One critique that can be brought with regard to this work is at the same time an acknowledgment: the theoretical underpinning of this study is of such reach and richness that deceleration becomes — almost performatively so — an embodied experience in the reading of the work. Connecting the intricate and multithreaded networks of Caracciolo's argument at times requires the sort of thickening of attention that he attests to the experience of slow narrative. Interspersing the enriching close-readings with paragraphs that synthesize the argument independent from the illustrative examples or, alternatively, providing a conceptual methodological introduction, would here and there lead to an even stronger guiding thread.

That being said, the overall argumentative arc continues to be clear-cut and Caracciolo's use of illustrative examples remains engaging throughout the span of the whole work.

Slow Narrative and Nonhuman Materialities makes a convincing appeal for the potential of slow narrative in regard to the ecological imagination that is needed to (en)counter the contemporary ecological crises. With his multifaceted and innovative work, Caracciolo adds to reconceptualizations of the study of narrative in the environmental humanities. Literary scholars are sure to gain from reading *Slow Narrative and Nonhuman Materialities* on its own as well as in connection to the two related works, *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene* (Charlottesville 2021) and *Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty: Narrating Unstable Futures* (London 2022).