

Eva Mangieri

Engaging Narrative(s), Engaging Environment(s)

Erin James, Eric Morel, and the Many Faces of Econarratology

Erin James / Eric Morel (eds.): *Environment and Narrative. New Directions in Econarratology*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press 2020 (= Theory and Interpretation of Narrative Series). 224 pp. USD 69.95. ISBN 978-0-8142-1420-6

Overview

Econarratological analysis, “or the paired consideration of material environments and their representations and narrative forms of understanding” (p. 1), is situated at the crossroads of Narrative Theory, Ecocriticism, and the Environmental Humanities. Since its introduction in Erin James’ *The Storyworld Accord* in 2015, the field of econarratology has become a discipline with ample advocates and a wide scope of application. Erin James and Eric Morel’s collection of articles, *Environment and Narrative. New Directions in Econarratology*, reflects this broad range of approaches, of econarratologies. By focussing on three productive directions of recent scholarship, namely the nonhuman in narratives, environmental narrative ethics and rhetoric, and readers’ cognitive engagement with storyworlds, James and Morel emphasise the many affordances of paying close attention to the “reciprocal relationship between environment and narrative” (p. 1). They acknowledge that in a changing world, the ways we tell and perceive stories about such a world are continuously in motion too, a process which finds its equivalent in our narratological repertoire. Accordingly, the volume and all its contributions complement current narratological scholarship, highlighting the emotional potential of encountering worlds in narratives alongside the ethics and poetics of old and new stories alike.

Structure and Direction: From Roots to Growth

Econarratology views narratives as potent “cultural responses to present and future environmental challenges” (p. 4). Through narratives, human values and responsibilities as well as the place of the human in the Anthropocene and the

times to come can be understood, expressed, and questioned. This premise challenges the notion of narrative as an inadequate device of engaging climate change or the more-than-human world. In addition, James and Morel remind us, it connects narratology and ecocriticism, two vibrant academic fields that have much to gain from each other. The volume 1) expresses these central premises of econarratological analysis, 2) outlines its origins and developments, its current scholarly directions, and – on this basis – 3) contextualises and categorises its own contributions.

Attempting to group the many different trends of current econarratological analysis, James and Morel identify three directions of the field, which provide the three sections of the volume: “I. Narratology and the Nonhuman”, “II. Econarratological Rhetoric and Ethics”, and “III. Anthropocene Storyworlds”. Despite the sections’ different focal points, all nine contributions and the afterword share a common narratological ground when building on the works of theorists like James Phelan, Peter J. Rabinowitz, David Herman, Marie-Laure Ryan, and Monika Fludernik. The majority of contributions also share an interest in contextualising their own approach, both historically, by tracing recent developments back to their roots, and systematically, by relating their own econarratological analysis to other postclassical approaches, such as rhetorical, feminist, and postcolonial narratology. Moreover, the essays remain in constant dialogue with each other, as will be further described in the following section.

Contributions in Context: The Versatility of Econarratology

Econarratological thought is primarily concerned with how we tell stories about the environment, as these stories offer a reflection of our attitudes and experiences toward our surroundings. Furthermore, narrative is granted a transformative potential: not only does it express and negotiate emotional and cognitive engagements by representing world(s); by doing so, it can also affect how readers perceive the world. Several of the contributions thus do not content themselves with reading existing narratives through an econarratological lens, but aim instead at helping the emergence of new stories to foster sustainability and responsibility.

Econarratologists do not discriminate when choosing texts to study: they analyse and theorise the emerging and centrally important genre of climate change fiction or climate fiction (cli-fi), Anthropocene narratives, narratives used in environmental activism or restoration ecology, narratives in which the environment is predominant or absent alike. Yet, most of the volume’s contributors focus on U.S. American novels from recent years, such as Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* (Jon Hegglund), Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (Marco Caracciolo), Richard Powers’s *Gain* (Greg Garrard), Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behavior* as well as Nathaniel Rich’s *Odds Against Tomorrow* (Astrid Bracke), or

Annie Proulx's *That Old Ace in the Hole* (Matthew M. Low). The only representative of British literature is Ian McEwan's *Solar* (Markku Lehtimäki). Despite this predominance of recent publications, the edited volume also comprises readings of Mark Twain's *The American Claimant* (Eric Morel), Sanora Babb's *An Owl on Every Post* and *Whose Names Are Unknown* (Alexa Weik von Mossner), and Wallace Stegner's short story "Bugle Song" (Matthew M. Low), demonstrating that 'older' works have just as much to gain from an ecocritical lens and shifting readerly dynamics.¹

A number of contributions also turn to other media and genres and thus prove econarratology to be a versatile approach to a broad range of primary works. Marco Caracciolo and Matthew M. Low explore the potential of econarratological analysis beyond the written text: in addition to a literary example, Caracciolo looks at Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu's film *Babel* while Low analyses non-fictional oral narratives. Drawing, in part, on a memoir, Alexa Weik von Mossner also demonstrates that insights gained from non-fiction productively complement the econarratological analysis of fiction.

Crossing Boundaries: Narrating the Nonhuman

The first section of the volume features the representation of the nonhuman in narratives. Jon Hegglund outlines the meaning and crisis of 'nature' in postclassical narratology, ecocritical, and environmental thought. He does so with the aim of extending and adapting the premises of unnatural narratology to enable more adequate interpretations of Anthropocene narratives. Remarking that "narrative mimesis [...] becomes a moving target when the contours of reality can no longer be taken for granted as ontologically secure" (p. 29), he highlights the limits of fundamental interpretive frames with regard to Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*.

Marco Caracciolo explores the experimental narrative form of Don DeLillo's *Underworld* and Iñárritu's film *Babel* with regard to object-oriented plot, causality, and temporal progression. By reviewing instances of narratives centring on non-instrumental objects as stand-ins and connectors to the material world, Caracciolo observes a de-centring of the human, human agency, and intentionality. In both works, nonhuman realities are approached by expressing human entanglement or "enmeshment" (p. 46) within a more-than-human world, contesting a clear subject / object dualism.

Whereas Hegglund focuses on the distinction between character and world (or lack thereof), Caracciolo seeks to expand the category of plot. Despite these different focal points, both contributors draw on unnatural narratology and negotiate the depiction of nonhuman agency and the deconstruction of subject / object dualisms. As a result, culturally created boundaries between the human and the nonhuman in the discussed works are shown to be fragile –

and the narrative concepts and theories that are based on these divides are challenged and become open for adaptation.

Of Reading Moral Quandaries: Econarratology, Rhetoric, and Ethics

After section one, the volume increasingly divides its attention between the artistic work itself and its audience. Accordingly, section two asks not only how the complex issue of climate change is expressed, and commented on, in and through fiction, but the contributions also touch on the interplay of the literary work and its readers. The central focus in all essays seems to be the “moral quandary” (p. 125) that understanding and addressing climate change entails. Often contradictory in nature, narratives convey and mirror the insecurities and shifting positionalities in encounters with environmental crises, provoking or subversively influencing the reader to take a stance or reflect on the elusive intricacies of trying to thrive without further damaging the planet.

Eric Morel ventures into the importance of readers’ interpretive strategies for climate fiction. Suggesting the advantages of bringing into dialogue 1) rhetorical narratology’s framework of narrative audience with 2) the effects of reading many works of climate fiction as well as 3) real readers’ connection to climate change, Morel demonstrates shifting norms in readers’ expectations and attitudes when reading works beyond cli-fi. This historical change in readers’ interests and readerly dynamics – as well as its potential implications for rhetorical narrative theory, in particular Rabinowitz’s model of interpretive stances – is described on the basis of a reading of Mark Twain’s *The American Claimant*.

Markku Lehtimäki identifies how Ian McEwan’s *Solar* metarhetorically negotiates the complexities of the rhetorical dialogue about climate change. Through narrative form, “including complex characters, dialogic voices, many-layered viewpoints, and difficult human situations” (p. 103), he maintains, *Solar* is encouraging its readers to reflect on the many conflicting views on environmental issues – and on the role narrative plays in communicating them. Lehtimäki points out that *Solar* negotiates the realist novel’s limitations as an instrument to positively influence human behaviour toward the environment, ultimately declaring literary fiction one of many discourses needed to address climate change.

A shift toward ecocritical narrative ethics – specifically “the ethics of the telling” (p. 108)² – is advocated by Greg Garrard. In an analysis of Richard Powers’s *Gain*, Garrard proposes and tests a model of ecocritical narrative ethics, and delineates how the novel’s narrative organisation stages environmental virtue and vice. He views *Gain* as complicating and questioning its readers’ ethical response to the text’s ambiguous endings and missing moralistic closure by means of “chiasmic plots” (p. 115) and intratexts.³

Inhabiting, Engaging, and Restoring (Story)Worlds

Section three discusses the cognitive turn in studies of environment and narrative, attaching great significance to readers' immersion in narrative space and place. The section opens with Alexa Weik von Mossner's commentary on the interdependency between narrative environments and characters, which is central for readers' immersion in, and understanding of, narrated worlds. Taking Sanora Babb's memoir *An Owl on Every Post* as a starting point, she moves on to the novel *Whose Names Are Unknown*, exemplifying processes of "embodied simulation" (p. 133) when reading both non-fiction and fiction: according to Weik von Mossner, narrative environments come to life when they are mentally (re)inhabited by readers because characters – or "experiencing agents" (p. 131) – ascribe meaning and emotions to their surroundings.

Matthew M. Low's contribution is an example of practical narratology with an environmental focus. Low points out with regard to the American prairie "that hopes for reconstructing meaningful amounts of ecosystem ultimately rely on more people [...] who grow up immersed in the prairie, both story-worlds and actual worlds" (p. 160). Combining cognitive narratology with restoration ecology, he proclaims that narratives, more accurately prairie story-worlds, play a crucial role in reconstructing, remodelling, and revitalising both imagined as well as real American prairie systems. Low briefly looks at Wallace Stegner's short story "Buglesong" as well as Annie Proulx's *That Old Ace in the Hole* alongside describing his own experiences during a visit of a reconstructed prairie, seeking to blend concepts such as immersion with real embodied experiences of environment.

Astrid Bracke suggests an econarratological approach to genre as "a significant element in narrating environmental crisis" (p. 165). In her essay, she defines the genre of climate fiction and uses Marie-Laure Ryan's principle of minimal departure to argue for climate fiction's capability of representing crisis by creating a pressing sense of immediacy, thus bringing across the urgency of climate change. Cli-fi, Bracke explains, introduces worlds very similar to the actual world, which nevertheless change so gradually that it becomes challenging to tell apart what is happening only in the textual world from what might also be happening in the actual world. She demonstrates how this boundary-blurring worldmaking strategy works in Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* and Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow*.

An additional frame for the volume and a further contextualisation of the field of econarratology is provided by Erin James, who picks up and elaborates on what has briefly been touched on in several of the previous essays: the contribution of the Anthropocene to narrative theory and vice versa. James points out "the role that narrative and storytelling might and should play in today's environmentalism" (p. 184) when both producing as well as mitigating the Anthropocene. At the same time, she confronts the unnarratability of the Anthropocene by exploring how environmental crises and shifts could expand the

way stories are told and, in turn, analysed. Tracing “the ability of narrative to shift and change as does the world in which it is produced” (p. 186), James systematically identifies several directions for an Anthropocene narrative theory: she considers the narrative agency of matter or material, which has the ability to inspire and find its way into human stories; next, she examines how notions of narrative time and space could be adapted to better account for the gradual nature of environmental change alongside the instability of topographies; lastly, James suggests how the understanding of collective agency may develop structures of species-scale narration.

The volume is concluded by Ursula K. Heise, who emphasises *Environment and Narrative*'s value for the every-day context of most of its recipients, namely academic teaching and learning. Similarly to James, Heise singles out which dimensions of storytelling are of particular importance within the environmental humanities, and where narrative theory needs to be revised in order to address these dimensions adequately. Focusing on story templates, actants, as well as temporal and spatial scales, Heise comments on, and expands, many of the other contributors' thoughts and concerns.

Conclusion

Subtitled “New Directions in Econarratology”, the volume signals its aim of showcasing various new approaches of econarratological analysis without laying claim to being a comprehensive handbook to a field still so young and divergent. However, several of the contributions, and Erin James' essay in particular, plausibly and purposefully move beyond pinpointing and toward a clearer systematisation of the vast networks between environment and narrative. Adding to this, the volume's index, listing authors as well as critical terms and concepts, serves as a helpful companion for up-to-date (eco)narratological analysis.

The contributions are narratological to their core and are consistently connected to each other in their content matter, which makes the edited volume valuable for readers particularly interested in the environmental humanities, the crossroads of environment and narrative, and current developments in narrative theory. While the predominance of U.S. American primary works angles the volume toward the field of American studies, the narratological observations are by no means confined to this field alone. The various approaches and analyses contextualise their fundamental premises, each briefly explaining key concepts and developments as they proceed. James and Morel's publication is thus not only aimed at scholars in search of new lenses and directions for textual analysis; particularly in these turbulent times of environmental devastation, it also represents a worthy inspiration and reading matter for advanced seminars of literary or media studies courses with a focus on narratology: of central importance are the essays' critical discussions of long established narratological

instruments and categories. The approaches help us to engage with narratives in new ways. Productively (yet transparently) venturing beyond established frameworks, the volume maintains why environment *and* narrative matter now more than ever.

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Eva Mangieri, M.A.
University of Wuppertal
School of Humanities
English and American Studies
Gaußstraße 20
42119 Wuppertal
E-mail: mangieri@uni-wuppertal.de

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¹ The value of 'old' narratives is further advocated in James (2020).

² Garrard here quotes and draws on Phelan (2014).

³ In this context, intratexts are understood as fragments of text found within, yet typographically or referentially distinct from, *Gain*'s dual narrative, such as adverts, quotes, or epitaphs. Often bridging the chiasmic plots, these intratexts remain ambiguous and thus can be read from differing vantage points.