

# Anthropocene, Literature, and Econarratology:

## An Interview with Marco Caracciolo

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1. Dear Professor Caracciolo, thank you for accepting our invitation to have this interview. Let's start with a very simple question. What makes you interested in studying Anthropocene literature?

Simple question, but the answer isn't that simple. If we take the Anthropocene to refer to the long-term environmental impact of human societies (and particularly advanced industrial societies), then I think—and I'm certainly not alone—that the Anthropocene is *the* question of our time. It's hard *not* to develop an interest in how literature engages such planetary changes, but then “interest” is a bit of a strange euphemism here, given how devastating anthropogenic climate change is for nonhuman species and vulnerable human communities around the globe.

In more personal terms, though, my interest in these issues can be traced back to the first paper I wrote in English, on Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, when I was a PhD student. Although Woolf's landmark modernist novel predates the Anthropocene concept, it is steeped in anxieties surrounding human-nonhuman relations, with the natural world repeatedly impinging on the human protagonists—and even displacing them, in that haunting central chapter, “Time Passes.” Reading Woolf's novels, and modernist literature in general, shaped much of my thinking on literature and the climate crisis and inspired the formal emphasis of my work.

2. The Anthropocene is also accused of misrepresenting the role of capitalism or insufficiently differentiating humanity, which leads to the coinage of such alternative terms as Capitalocene and Oliganthropocene to accentuate the vast inequality of the responsibility for the environmental threats. When bringing this notion into literary studies, how are we supposed to deal with such trickiness of Anthropocene? I think more attention to this issue can help to further nuance the narrativity of Anthropocene and reveal the literary affordances to address the Anthropocene predicament.

I agree completely! In *Literature and the Anthropocene*, Pieter Vermeulen argues that the Anthropocene concept is more helpful for the discussion it triggers than for the

problems it solves. I will say that some *uses* of the Anthropocene concept are problematic, for instance because of how (as you point out) the undifferentiated notion of *anthropos* obfuscates differences between Global North and Global South as well as the political and historical roots of climate change. But it is perfectly possible to continue using the concept, as long as we show awareness of those issues. I think the Anthropocene does a good job of conveying the planetary scale and temporal ramifications of the changes that capitalist societies are bringing about; in that respect, it may be a more productive concept than “climate crisis,” which conveys a sense of urgency but also suggests that the “crisis” may be over soon. That’s because “crisis” refers to a temporally bounded event—a turning point—that can be resolved (one way or another) in the short term. But climate change is here to stay, and the possibility of mitigating its consequences hinges on long-term thinking at a national and global level. The Anthropocene evokes the scale of the cultural shift that is required to achieve such thinking, and that’s why the concept has had such an impact on discussions in the humanities, despite its many limitations.

3. As “[o]ne of the readiest pieces of evidence of a new climate imaginary in the Anthropocene”, cli-fi (short for climate change fiction) is a significant literary phenomenon in the Anthropocene epoch (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 229). Since Dan Bloom’s coinage of this term in 2007, scholars have defined it contextually, thematically and narratologically in an effort to further clarify the boundaries of this new genre (LeMenager 223; Mehnert 4; Blacke 165-182). An open thematic definition seems to be the most straightforward and obvious way, yet it risks excluding cli-fis that “do not explicitly name climate change but might be read as addressing it”, like Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 231). My question is, how would you like to comment on this rising genre? In what sense a fiction can be labeled as a cli-fi? What is your view on the relationship between Anthropocene literature and cli-fi? Is cli-fi one of the branches of Anthropocene literature?

Those questions on the definition and scope of “cli-fi” keep popping up in discussions with my colleagues of the [NARMESH](#) project at Ghent University. My take on this issue is that strong definitions of cli-fi are not particularly useful. In this strong sense, a “climate fiction” would be any novel that refers to climate change explicitly and uses it as a central element of the plot. That gives us a handful of works—Ian McEwan’s *Solar*, for instance, or Kim Stanley Robinson’s *2140*. These are interesting novels, no doubt, but ultimately I think that focus on literature that thematically addresses the climate crisis is limiting for scholarship, because it privileges “content” (that is, theme and plot) over the form of literary narrative. From my perspective, the question of how literature engages climate change should be seen in the broader context of how literature envisages the embedding of human societies within the nonhuman world. That’s the central premise of my recent book, *Narrating the Mesh*,

and the whole field of econarratology: in literature, the problem of how humans position themselves vis-à-vis the nonhuman world is often—and most powerfully—explored by way of formal devices that shape the reading experience affectively. (I won't be able to expand on the link between form and affect here, but it is an assumption I share with scholarship by Lauren Berlant and Heather Houser, among others.) If we spend too much time policing the boundaries of “cli-fi” as a genre, we risk losing track of that fundamental aspect of the literary imagination—how it is tied to formal strategies that evoke nuance and complexity in human-nonhuman relations, not to the mere textual frequency of the phrase “climate change.” Therefore, I'm in favour of using “cli-fi” as a loose label for a set of environmental fictions that speak to the ecological crisis along different routes, including subject matter but also (crucially) literary form and affective impact. Even if a text doesn't *name* climate change, it can still offer important resources for thinking about the present crisis. That is why McCarthy's *The Road*, with its intense stylistic craftsmanship that suggests a complete shutdown of human emotions vis-à-vis a dying world, would certainly make the cut.

4. In the Anthropocene epoch, various hyperobjects like climate change and nuclear radiation have triggered heated discussion among scholars. On the one hand, some scholars contend that narrative as a product of human-scale imagination is unable to represent things like climate change, whose vast scale far exceeds that of human cognition. For instance, Claire Colebrook and Amitav Ghosh argue that climate change is “catastrophic for the human imaginary” and “defies both literary fiction and contemporary common sense” (Colebrook 10; Ghosh 26). On the other hand, Ursula Heise and other scholars hold that “claims about the inability of narrative to address the Anthropocene are premature” in that they largely underestimate the capacity of narrative to innovate narrative strategies and experiments (Heise 210). How would you respond to this debate on the (in)ability of narrative to represent Anthropocene conditions?

I think part of the problem here is that “representation” is a vague term. There can be little doubt that narrative can represent particular *effects* of climate change or the Anthropocene: there is nothing more narratable than a disastrous event, as we know from ancient mythology (e.g., the flood stories in the *Genesis*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and accounts of the Gun-Yu in China). Where narrative struggles, though, is in representing the link between particular events and that abstract planetary phenomenon that we call the “climate change,” which is not a directly observable reality but the result of scientific, statistical modelling. Narrative—and certainly narrative in the novelistic tradition of the West—has a built-in bias towards individual protagonists acting in deliberate ways to achieve certain goals. As a spatiotemporally distributed phenomenon that is uncoupled from any individual human being's intentionality, climate change doesn't sit well with that narrative tendency. But of

course there is no tendency that cannot be resisted. This is where formal devices come into play: by experimenting with the basic “formula” of storytelling, certain literary narratives may well be able to represent important features of the Anthropocene moment. In *Narrating the Mesh*, I talk about nonlinearity, interdependency, and multiscalarity as three underlying dimensions of complex systems (including climate change and the Anthropocene) that narrative is able to capture through formal experimentation. In other words: when it comes to the question whether narrative can represent climate change, I am cautiously optimistic. I think it can, but that requires considerable work on the part of storytellers (who have to rewrite some of the conventions of narrative) and also on the part of audiences (who have to revisit their expectations as to what counts as a satisfying story).

5. Erin James and Eric Morel point that in spite of the prominent role that narrative plays in environmental conversations, “the perspective of narrative scholars is largely absent” (James and Morel 4). In fact, it was not until 2015 when James coined the term “Econarratology” that environmental concerns have been entailed in narratological studies (James xv). What are the possible reasons that are responsible for such absence of environmental interest among scholars of narratology? Does it have something to do with narrative’s “anthropomorphic bias” (Fludernik 13)?

The anthropomorphic bias may well be part of it: narratologists are late to the ecocritical party because narrative in the novelistic tradition, unlike for example Romantic poetry with its investment in the natural sublime, tends to foreground human interactions. More generally, I think the tardiness of narrative theory’s interest in environmental questions also reflects the scholarly trajectory of the field. Narrative theory or narratology started out as a structuralist endeavour, abstracting more or less completely from questions of narrative’s embedding within larger social contexts. Only with the advent of so-called “postclassical” narratology (in David Herman’s terminology) has narrative theory started paying more attention to the intersection of formal devices and ideological or social questions. The rise of “econarratology” is thus to be understood as part of a larger wave of “contextualist” narratological work that, as discussed by Roy Sommer and others, integrates extratextual issues including gender, race, postcolonial relations, and of course environmental threats.

6. In *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene* (2021), you note that the form of a narrative not only underlies ideological patterns that are “complicit with an anthropocentric, extractive mindset”, but also constitutes “the premise of an ethics of human-nonhuman relations” (19; 16). Could you elaborate on such two-sidedness of narrative form? What are the potential attributes that enable form to be a valuable resource to explore new ethics for the Anthropocene?

Form is a difficult concept to get right. In general terms, it is about *how* something is said, rather than about *what* is being said—especially when the *how* is repeated and falls into a recognizable or striking pattern. When literary scholars use the term “form,” they are usually referring to particularly complex or nuanced ways of saying things—ways that involve, for instance, metaphorical expression (at a linguistic level), or a surprising arrangement of characters and plotlines (at a narrative level). In *Narrating the Mesh*, I draw inspiration from Caroline Levine’s New Formalism, which posits that “paying attention to subtle and complex formal patterns allows us to rethink the historical workings of political power and the relations between politics and aesthetics” (Levine xiii). In a nutshell, I argue in the book that “formal patterns” do not only determine the “workings of political power” in the narrow (i.e., anthropocentric) sense, but also the workings of the power that human societies wield over nonhuman animals and ecosystems. When, for instance, we tell a story in which the natural world is merely a backdrop that magnifies the protagonist’s achievements (or their downfall), that basic formal choice at the level of plot structure implies a large set of assumptions regarding humanity’s power relations with the nonhuman world: the form involved, in other words, is fundamentally hierarchical. A story like that may not be very useful in imagining the impact of anthropogenic climate change, because it will only reinforce existing assumptions. We need narratives that question the centrality of the human and bring the nonhuman into the foreground. That shift can be achieved through formal strategies, as I explained above, that unsettle the anthropomorphic bias of narrative and challenge readers into embracing nonhuman perspectives as well as a global imagination of the ecological crisis.

7. An increasing number of scholars are expanding the implications of form and turning it into a “big form” that encompasses formal techniques and contextual concerns. For instance, Dorothy Hale finds an “ethical mode of otherness” in aesthetic forms (4). New formalists are also interested in exploring what you call the “macroform” of narrative (*Narrating the Mesh* 13). How would you like to comment on this renewing concern over form in contemporary literary criticism?

Literary criticism has always been concerned with (literary) form, of course. But you’re right to say that form is making a comeback also in more theoretical circles, largely thanks to work in a New Formalist vein. What’s so innovative about this work—including Levine’s seminal *Forms*, discussed in my previous answer—is that it puts literary form on a continuum with formal patterns that can be observed within the social world. The advantage of this move is that it opens up literary scholarship to extratextual realities without playing down what is unique about the literary (or artistic) imagination—that is, its revelling in complex formal patterns. The opening up of literary scholarship can be observed in many other approaches within the humanities, particularly cultural studies. But those approaches have frequently overlooked the power of form. New Formalism bridges the gap between that line of

cultural analysis and the formal analysis that is the traditional province of literary criticism. That's also an opportunity for narratological interventions: because of its structuralist heritage, narrative theory has developed fine-grained ways of discussing formal choices, which can make important contributions to current debates on form. So, in a sense, New Formalism and the "contextualist" vein of contemporary narrative theory converge on this interest in the intersection of literary (or narrative) form and broader social issues.

8. Here comes my last question. What are the potential directions you would like to advise for scholars in the arena of Anthropocene literature studies and econarratology to pursue in the future?

As has been observed many times, scholarship on literary narrative and the environment (including my own *Narrating the Mesh!*) still tends to privilege literature from Europe and North America. The Anglophone world, in particular, is overrepresented. Diversifying the corpus of Anthropocene literature should thus be, from my perspective, one of the main priorities for the field. If, as I said, the Anthropocene concept captures the global scale of the ecological crisis, we need to address work that truly expresses this global outlook, and that requires going beyond the Western world. That ambition is already present in James's *The Storyworld Accord*, which focuses on postcolonial narrative.

Further, we should diversify the corpus historically as well as geographically: what does it mean to discuss, say, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* as an Anthropocene novel? Or Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*? Or the ancient Greek novel? Or the *Epic of Gilgamesh*? After all, according to some scholars, the Anthropocene started with the advent of agriculture (for discussion, see Smith and Zeder). How far can we push this concept, and how does that diachronic extension change our understanding of *contemporary* Anthropocene fiction? That's another stimulating question for econarratology, in my view.

I am also interested in digital narrative and how the interactivity of computational technologies creates new opportunities for storytelling—opportunities that may enhance narrative's ability to speak to the climate crisis, for instance by introducing a global scale or a focus on long-term planning or crisis management. *Frostpunk*, for example, is a strategy video game that tells a compelling (and often distressing) story of human survival in a frozen wasteland. While the game doesn't stage climate change as we know it (i.e., it is a scenario of global cooling rather than warming), it manages to raise pointed ethical questions on, for instance, migration or the extremely limited availability of resources in the face of environmental collapse. *The Long Dark* is a postapocalyptic survival game that explores the meaning of community as civilization breaks down and mystery pervades the nonhuman world, overturning the disenchantment of technological modernity. The interaction of storytelling and the

player's strategic decision-making in these games (and many others) deserves to be studied from an econarratological perspective.

Finally, and this is perhaps the most important direction for future research, I think econarratology should pay more attention to audiences. I am slightly sceptical about arguments that reading cli-fi can directly trigger pro-environmental action, but that doesn't mean that reader response to environmental narrative isn't worth exploring. The project of "empirical ecocriticism" launched by Matthew Schneider-Mayerson and colleagues is a step in the right direction, but there is much more work to do. We need to come to a better understanding of how exposure to complex literary stories can leave a mark on readers' worldview and perception of the nonhuman world (including the climate crisis). That is likely to involve longitudinal work with audiences, and also an interest in how the social context of literary reception (from educational institutions to reading groups) shapes the way in which readers experience narrative.

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