



University
of Basel

Lecture Series: New Developments in Theory
Double Feature: Rosshofgasse 2 (Schnitz), Room S 01
6 December 2019, 2:00–5:30pm

The Form of Slowness: Literary Narrative and the Imagination of the Nonhuman
Marco Caracciolo, Ghent University

Time after (the End of) Time
Elana Gomel, Tel Aviv University

Time after (the End of) Time

We are living in the historical period characterized by its refusal to imagine history. The traditional narratives of utopia/dystopia are no longer sufficient to represent the future. Indeed, we are caught in the continuous present whose repercussions are felt in politics, historiography, and popular culture alike.

The ecological crisis and the threat of climate change have created a new vision of apocalypse: a slow-moving one. If previous threats to humanity resulted in visions of sudden annihilation – from the nuclear war to the sudden technological collapse – the contemporary crisis of the historical imagination has generated narratives of “being stuck” in the perpetual presence. It is not merely that our conceptualizations of history no longer conform to the traditional duality of utopia/dystopia. Rather, the very notion of historical change has undergone a profound transformation. Instead of history being the arena of human activity alone, it now blends in with the “deep history” of evolutionary and geological change; or as Timothy Morton puts it, “we are no longer able to think history as exclusively human” (*Hyperobjects*). But this creates a strange paradox, for it is precisely human activity that is to blame for the coming ecological catastrophe. Being dislodged from its central role in the historical narrative, humanity becomes both the subject and the object. Time itself stretches into a muddle of the “broad present” since the catastrophe is always coming but is never quite here. History becomes a story that is impossible to tell: a narrative without a protagonist or narrator.

Literature, especially speculative literature, has always been the arena in which narrative templates of historical change are reflected in the shape of fictional genres. The “chronotope of the broad present” (Gumbrecht) generates new forms of the literary imagination. I am particularly interested in three new developments that signify our collective bafflement in the face of the Anthropocene. The first is what my co-author Vered Shemtov and I called limbotopia: narratives of “being stuck.” The second is a deformation of traditional generic templates that results in narrative formlessness. By this I mean narratives that lack a resolution, closure or explanation, defying “the sense of an ending” (Kermode). And finally, the third is the slow apocalypse – the emergence of a new form of apocalyptic narrativity out of the conventional popular culture formulae of, for example, invasion, epidemic, or environmental catastrophe fiction.

Elana Gomel is Associate Professor at the Department of English and American Studies at Tel Aviv University. She is the author of six non-fiction books and numerous articles on subjects such as narrative theory, posthumanism, science fiction, Dickens, and Victorian culture. Her latest books are *Narrative Space and Time: Representing Impossible Topologies in Literature* (Routledge 2014) and *Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism: Beyond the Golden Rule* (Palgrave Macmillan 2014). She is also the author of more than 40 fantasy and science fiction stories.

The Form of Slowness: Literary Narrative and the Imagination of the Nonhuman

In *How Forests Think*, Eduardo Kohn develops an anthropology of form geared toward questioning the divide between human societies and natural processes. For Kohn, form promises to bring together humans and nonhumans through its “effortless efficacy.” As a concept, form resonates strongly with the practice of literary scholarship, as demonstrated recently by work in the area of New Formalism. Yet, in literary terms, form does not prove as effortless as Kohn suggests. In fact, developing attention to form requires time and training—it involves a deliberate “slowing down of perception,” to go back to the roots of the formalist project (via Viktor Shklovsky’s “Art as Technique”).

In this talk, I explore slowness as both a conceptual category for literary theory and a mode of attention attuned to the nonhuman world. I argue that decentering the human and bringing out human-nonhuman interconnectedness depends on a specific experiential stance that can be fostered by literary narrative through formal devices. Building on David Abram’s phenomenologically inspired environmental philosophy, contemporary work in cognitive narrative theory, and examples from literary fiction and other media, I seek to develop an account of “slow narrative” and its value for the imagination of the nonhuman world.

Marco Caracciolo is Associate Professor of English and Literary Theory at Ghent University in Belgium, where he leads the ERC Starting Grant project “Narrating the Mesh.” He is the author of three books, including most recently *Strange Narrators in Contemporary Fiction: Explorations in Readers’ Engagement with Characters* (University of Nebraska Press 2016). His new book project (working title *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene*) is currently under review.