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Narrative Form and Negotiation in Cultural Narratology

Abstract

This article offers an overview of discussions within cultural narratology. One of the basic assumptions of this strand of contemporary narratology is that form is closely bound up with ideology, since it guides – without determining completely – narrative's engagement with ideas and issues circulating in society. Building on Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck's notion of narrative negotiation, I show how some of the basic forms of narrative (its temporal-causal organization, spatiality, and mediation through voice and focalization) carry important ideological ramifications. I exemplify this discussion by referring to a broad range of contemporary narratives (fictional and nonfictional) dealing with two defining crises of the present: migration and climate change.

1. *Introduction*

One of the main ideas emerging from recent discussions within poststructuralist narrative theory is that *narrative form matters* – that is, the formal strategies employed by storytellers enter a dialogue with historical and cultural contexts, carrying ideological implications. Narratology offers valuable tools to explore this dialogue between form and context.[1] This may sound like an uncontroversial statement, but it pushes back against a long history of seeing literary form, and specifically the form of literary narrative, as uncoupled from con-

1 In what follows, I will use the terms "narratology" and "narrative theory" interchangeably. However, it should be noted that the label narratology implies stronger continuity with structuralist accounts of narrative, whereas narrative theory takes a more interdisciplinary perspective. For more on the scope of poststructuralist or "postclassical" narratology, see the volume edited by Herman 1999.

text. There is remarkable convergence, in this respect, between New Formalist accounts of literature, which have devoted considerable attention to narrative, and contemporary work in narrative theory. As the foremost advocate of New Formalism, Caroline Levine (2015) argues that literary forms are always positioned vis-à-vis social configurations and hierarchies: for instance, Levine reads Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1837 poem on Queen Victoria ("The Young Queen") as bringing out the multiple and irreconcilable temporal rhythms that structure both poetry and public life (2015, 80). Narrative, in this New Formalist project, takes on special importance as the macro-form that "best captures the experience of colliding forms" (2015, 19); put otherwise, narrative can encapsulate a multiplicity of stylistic and ideological forms (e.g., the hierarchies of state power) and stage tensions between them.

In parallel, narratologists have worked on the intersection of narrative form and ideology under various headings, including those of "postcolonial", "applied", "contextualist", and "cultural" narratology (for an overview, see Sommer 2007; Nünning 2009, 54-55). While these approaches are conceptually and methodologically diverse, they converge on the ideological significance of narrative strategies. Perhaps the most comprehensive formulation of this idea can be found in Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck's (2017) work. Drawing inspiration from Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) sociology as well as Stephen Greenblatt's (1988) New Historicism, Herman and Vervaeck advance the concept of "negotiation" to describe the way in which narrative forms intervene in cultural debates. In short, any specific instance of narrative – whether literary or conversational – is positioned vis-à-vis a cultural background of beliefs and values (which can be more or less widely shared), as well as other culturally significant stories. Negotiation involves "coming to terms with cultural topics" (2017, 613) by building on, challenging, or revising ideas and stories that already circulate in the cultural field. Importantly, though, stories are not arguments. Thus, negotiation cannot be limited to their explicit content, message, or subject matter: instead, the form of story is responsible, together with its thematic dimension, for the negotiation of cultural issues. In this respect, of course, not all stories are equal: through its sophistication and self-consciousness, *literary* narrative may offer more productive or innovative negotiations than the stories circulating in the news media or everyday discourse.

It is essential to realize that the relationship between narrative forms and ideology is a deeply nonlinear one – an idea first formulated (with a focus on

"function" rather than ideology per se) by Meir Sternberg under the heading of "Proteus Principle": "in different contexts [...] the same form may fulfill different functions *and* different forms the same function" (1982, 148). This means that narrative negotiation is a complex operation, which does not allow us to draw a straight line between a certain formal device and a certain ideological function. Take, for example, the narrative device of a speaking animal, which can be found in literary texts as different as Aesop's fables and Franz Kafka's short stories. One may be tempted to think that lending a voice to nonhuman animals involves a critique of an anthropocentric understanding of the world, but there are plenty of animal-narrated narratives that do exactly the opposite: they adopt an animal perspective to put human affairs in a new light (satirically, for example), without doing much to challenge anthropocentrism.[2] Put otherwise, one cannot map form onto ideological function in the abstract, because both text and context play a major part in determining the outcome of narrative negotiation – where "text" refers to the narrative's overall stylistic and thematic dimension, whereas "context" refers to the historical situations in which the story is produced and received, and also to the reader's interests and predispositions.

Given these intricacies of narrative negotiation, is it still possible to *theorize* about the interaction of narrative form and context, or is knowledge of this interaction necessarily particularized and context-dependent (and thus recalcitrant to theorization)? In other words, what is the specific role of cultural narratology (as distinct from the broader field of cultural studies) vis-à-vis the wide spectrum of narrative negotiations of particular cultural topics? In this article, I argue that narratology is not forced to choose between a general theory of narrative forms (which has relatively little to say about ideology) and the mere application of narratological tools to specific contexts and examples (in case studies that foreground ideology at the expense of theorization). On the contrary, the main task of cultural narratology consists in developing a conceptual framework that serves as a flexible "middle layer" between the general and the particular, theory and application. This framework allows us to pinpoint a number of structural constraints and opportunities in the encounter between narrative forms and ideological contexts. These constraints and opportunities

2 David Herman (2018) has explored this question of animal-centric narratives and their formal and ideological plurality.

reflect some of the "basic elements" of narrative, to paraphrase David Herman (2009): its temporal and causal sequencing, its spatial organization, and the mediation provided by narrators and focalizing characters. In what follows, I will examine each of these dimensions of storytelling, exploring the ways in which these formal properties shape narrative negotiation around two important cultural issues: migration and the ecological crisis. I draw inspiration from the field of "econarratology" (James 2015; James and Morel 2020) with regard to the latter, but I also engage with contemporary scholarship in the field of unnatural narrative theory. I consider instances of both fictional and nonfictional narrative, teasing out the ways in which formal devices impact (with varying degrees of deliberateness and sophistication) the narrative negotiation of these issues.

2. *Temporal and Causal Sequentiality*

As the "semiotic articulation of linear temporal sequence" (Walsh 2017, 473), narrative has a privileged link with time, as has been discussed repeatedly in the field of narrative theory. From Paul Ricoeur's seminal *Time and Narrative* (Ricœur 1984; 1985; 1988) to more recent theorizations of "unnatural temporality" in literary fiction (Alber 2016, chap. 4), narrative is instrumental in the organization and imagination of time: it allows us to turn the messy flux of experience into a coherent, sequential structure, but it can also challenge everyday notions of temporality, for example by imagining time travel or the other temporal impossibilities that fall under Alber's heading of "unnatural narrative". Moreover, as already recognized by structuralist theorists (Barthes 1975, 248), temporal sequence in narrative is never *merely* temporal, because it tends to imply causal and/or thematic coherence as well: when I say, for example, "the king died, then the queen died" – to use E. M. Forster's (1955, 86) famous example of story – I am not only positing a temporal relation between those events, but also evoking a thematic connection (mortality) and possibly implying a *causal* relation as well (which Forster makes explicit by adding "of grief" in his example of plot).

This focus on temporal-causal sequentiality, which is essential to narrative, has major ramifications for the negotiation of cultural issues. Simply put, phenomena such as migration and climate change are inherently complex: they

involve a large number of social actors (individuals, but also organizations, governments, and the media), and they reflect planetary processes that are fundamentally nonlinear. Much has been written on the planetary scale of environmental issues and how that scale resists narrative representation. In his influential work on the "slow violence" of environmental devastation, for example, Rob Nixon argues that to "confront slow violence requires […] that we plot and give figurative shape to formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time" (2011, 10). But a significant tension exists between this "dispersal across space and time" of environmental threats and the inherent sequentiality of narrative.[3] The same is true of migration, whose flows are determined by numerous economic and environmental factors (including poverty and climate change itself), as well as by national or local policies. Given the complexity of these phenomena, it is of course no surprise that the cultural *debate* surrounding these topics is fragmented and split along political and ideological lines. Stories tend to work sequentially, with events following one another in a relatively linear fashion, whereas cultural discussions are nonlinear and open-ended. This places specific constraints on narrative negotiation: it means, for example, that a story *about* migration (thematically speaking) will have to reduce this complex topic to a sequence of actions performed by a small number of characters.

The negotiation of the cultural topic of migration is obviously not triggered by this action sequence alone: other aspects of the narrative (including those discussed below, as well as the narrator's explicit comments and evaluations) will contribute to the negotiation as well. But sequentiality can never be eliminated completely in narrative, and the type of sequentiality foregrounded by a story can involve specific ideological assumptions. Herman and Vervaeck acknowledge this point as well:

> A story that establishes traditional, common-sensical links between actions (such as cause and effect) has a different ideology from a story that seems to link actions in an incomprehensible and illogical way. A story that tends to blur distinctions between actions undertaken by subjects and events befalling these subjects may very well bear witness to a fatalistic ideology; anything man does is in reality ordained by fate. (2007, 221)

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3 Cf. also Amitav Ghosh's argument in *The Great Derangement* (2016), which suggests (controversially) that the realist novel, through its focus on probability, cannot come to terms with the scale of climate change.

Thus, a story about the plight of a group of migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean (such as one may find in the news media) will tend to focus on the migrants' motivations – e.g., fleeing war or poverty – and on their emotional responses to the journey's challenges. This will establish a basic sequentiality grounded in the link between mental states, long-term goals, and external actions.[4] But the storyteller may attach ideological significance to this sequence by framing it in terms of concepts such as fate/destiny, worth (how this group is special, how it stands out from other migrants), and so on.

Moreover, narrative is not necessarily limited to foregrounding a *single* sequence. Walsh's already-quoted definition of story as the "semiotic articulation of linear temporal sequence" (2017, 473) places an emphasis on linearity, but narratives can be *more or less* linear depending on whether they focus on a single protagonist and event sequence or whether they juggle multiple characters and sequences. This type of multilinearity can be encountered more frequently in sophisticated fictional narratives than in conversational or news stories, of course. Multilinearity is a narrative form that, as has been claimed by scholars working on fiction and global processes (Barnard 2009; Beecroft 2016), appears particularly well suited to tackle the challenges of migration and climate change: because these are spatiotemporally distributed phenomena, their negotiation calls for a narrative form that is equally spread out in space and/or time.[5] The strand of contemporary fiction known as the global novel, for example, combines relatively independent action sequences to convey the complexity of processes on a global scale: David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, with its six story lines arranged in a Russian doll-like structure, is an excellent example of how narrative multilinearity negotiates the historical and spatial scale of the ecological crisis.[6]

Note that this does *not* mean that a simple story with a single protagonist and event sequence would be unable to negotiate complex cultural topics. A (hypothetical) story of a group of migrants making their way across the Mediterranean does represent a narrative negotiation of migration, as I have already argued. The difference lies in the *scale* of the negotiation, and it may well have

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4 This idea is consistent with Marie-Laure Ryan's (1991) narratological account of plot, which sees plot as deriving from (and driven by) characters' mental states, particularly their desires and goals.

5 See also my discussion of the multilinear novel and global processes in Caracciolo 2023.

6 See, for instance, Astrid Bracke's reading of *Cloud Atlas* (2018, chap. 1).

ideological repercussions: by singling out an individual protagonist or group, that story will be less capable of conveying the geopolitical causes of migration than a novel like Mitchell's, which features multiple event sequences. Therefore, the more linear story may imply a certain ideology based, for example, on the value of empathy for individual "worthy" migrants, rather than on the importance of a political response on a global scale. However, a great deal depends on the particular framing of that story and how it guides readers' interpretation through affective and stylistic devices.[7]

The sequentiality of narrative is only one of the many factors that shape the negotiation of cultural issues, but it is an important factor: the fact that stories select particular events from the flux of reality and combine them sequentially (even when they alternate multiple sequences) opens up certain possibilities for negotiation but forecloses others. The logic underlying a narrative sequence should thus be a central focus for cultural narratology, because it shapes the ideological dimension of narrative directly.

3. *Spatialization*

It is almost a narratological cliché to say that temporality has received more attention in narrative theory than spatiality. In 2023, that claim is hardly accurate. Already in *Story Logic* (2002), David Herman argued that the sequencing of narrative is not merely temporal or causal: in fact, "making sense of a story entails situating participants and other entities in emergent networks of foreground-background relationships" (2002, 8). Many scholars working on narrative space (including Herman) have drawn inspiration from the mind sciences and particularly psycholinguistics, where a great deal of research has been devoted to narrative comprehension. Understanding narrative, from this perspective, involves constructing mental models (also known as "situation models") on the basis of the story; these models encode not just temporal but also *spatial* relations between characters and events, including the foreground-background relations mentioned by Herman.[8] Work by Marie-Laure

7 Liesbeth Korthals Altes (2014) discusses the importance of framing in a narratological approach to literary interpretation.
8 On situation models, see Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021, 32-41.

Ryan, Kenneth Foote, and Maoz Azaryahu (2016) has further unpacked the spatiality of story, distinguishing for example between the immediate surroundings of the actions and a more capacious "storyworld" that is evoked by way of more indirect spatial references.

Just like temporal-causal sequencing, the spatial dimension of storytelling can help shape its negotiation of cultural issues. To some extent, this is a function of highlighting certain spaces at the expense of others (Herman's foreground-background distinction): when one looks at the bulk of British fiction from the Victorian period, for example, one finds very few examples of novels that are entirely set in Britain's colonial dominions. Most plots take place in Britain, with colonialism entering the story as a relatively distant echo: the Creole "madwoman in the attic" in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the Indian diamond at the center of Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, and so on.[9] The storyworld of these novels is based on a distinction between the foregrounded British setting and a colonial territory that is merely referenced – and that therefore recedes into the distant background. The simple choice of a setting arguably carries major ideological ramifications, in this case affirming Britain's hegemonic status within the empire.

The ideological significance of narrative space goes well beyond the whereabouts of the setting. Erin James's "econarratology" (2015; 2022) starts from the assumption that the ecological crisis is destabilizing our perception of real-world spatiality: expectations surrounding the seasonal cycle, or our relative safety from natural disasters in much of the Western world, are being challenged as the climate becomes more unpredictable. Physical space is no longer a stable, reliable backdrop but a potentially threatening presence. For James, narrative theory needs to adjust its conceptual vocabulary to come to grips with this new understanding of spatiality as it enters the form of story. Thus, she argues that an econarratology "sensitive to the changes brought about by rising sea levels and an abundance of water develops a [...] category of 'unspatialization,' or spatializing information that is strategically unclear or unchartable" (2020, 195). For example, at the beginning of Jeff VanderMeer's novel *Annihilation* an important spatial landmark is referred to repeatedly as a "tow-

9 Of course, this is a broad generalization based on a small sample of (mostly canonical) works. A digital humanities approach à la Franco Moretti (2005) would be needed to verify this claim.

er", even if we are told it is a hole in the ground. The narrator remarks on this incongruity: "[a]t first, only I saw it as a tower. I do not know why the word tower came to me, given that it tunneled into the ground" (VanderMeer 2014, 6). The tower/tunnel hesitation represents an element of unspatialization, in James's terminology, introducing the reader to the mysteries of "Area X", a coastal region whose ecosystem is being reshaped dramatically by an alien presence. VanderMeer's works have been read by many scholars as engaging with the weird unpredictability of a world destabilized by anthropogenic climate change (see, e.g., Ulstein 2017; Robertson 2018); the puzzling spatiality of the tower/tunnel is a formal equivalent for man-made instability.[10] To go beyond the specific case of VanderMeer's novel, the form of narrative space becomes a site of negotiation of the ideological stakes of the climate crisis – how human societies (and certainly some societies more than others) are responsible for dramatically altering most planetary spaces.

Spatiality is also a frequent focus in stories of migration, which center on the traversal of physical space or on the psychological consequences of displacement.[11] The border, as a spatial element separating two or more locations (countries, etc.), is a highly salient feature in these narratives: it is not only a physical dividing line, but deeply embedded in ideological structures. Here we find a variety of narrative forms that use the spatiality of story to resist the strict enforcement and policing of national borders. In Valeria Luiselli's novel *Lost Children Archive*, for example, the two children of an American couple lose their bearings near the US-Mexico border: they become lost in a space that is visually disorienting as well as psychologically evocative of the migrants who perish while attempting to cross into the US. In a single sentence that stretches over a whole chapter, Luiselli recreates the consciousness of a boy narrator who addresses his little sister to comfort her as they are desperately trying to find their parents. There are no rigid spatial borders here, but only an indistinct, undifferentiated landscape that – recreated by Luiselli's flowing syntax – encapsulates both the children's disorientation and the irrelevance of national borders to migrants displaced by poverty and desperation.

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10 See also my discussion of the spatiality of "unstable storyworlds" in Caracciolo 2022, chap. 2.

11 See also Gebauer and Sommer 2023 for a helpful distinction between stories of migration (which foreground migrants' experiences) and narratives on migration (which reflect external perspectives, such as those of non-migrants or the news media).

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* offers an alternative scenario, in which the border is not turned into an indistinct (and threatening) no-man's-land, but rather strikingly erased. The premise of the novel is that a number of mysterious portals allow migrants to instantly travel to other parts of the world, making it impossible for the authorities to stop or control the flow. By denying the physical and harrowing reality of migrants' journey, the impossible spatiality of the portals functions as a provocative commentary on Western societies' blindness or obliviousness to the challenges of transit. In media and political discourse, migration is often turned into an abstract problem or talking point: migration as an experience is thus suppressed, in much the same way as Hamid's conceit completely abolishes the journey.

All the examples mentioned in this section use narrative spatiality to stage an ideological intervention in the debates surrounding the ecological crisis and migration: while Luiselli's spatialization is driven by psychological factors (the narrator's spatial disorientation), VanderMeer and Hamid use unnatural – that is, anti-mimetic – spaces to explore the responsibility of Western societies in environmental collapse and the perils of migration.[12] Narrative space, in other words, discloses possibilities for the negotiation of cultural issues by reimagining and defamiliarizing real-world spatiality.

4. *Mediation*

After the temporal-causal sequentiality of action and a spatial setting, narrative needs agents: characters whose experiences take center stage in the plot and who are sometimes also the narrators of these experiences. Even when they are not the narrators, their minds can be textually foregrounded through a narrative technique known as "internal focalization" in narratology since Gérard Genette's (1980) structuralist work.[13] Collectively, narration and focalization are discussed under the heading of "narrative mediation" (Alber and Fludernik 2014) in that narrators and focalizing characters are responsible for conveying a certain perspective on the narrated events to the

12 For an overview of unnatural narratology, see Alber, Nielsen, and Richardson 2013.

13 Focalization is a complex concept, and I will not be able to fully unpack it here. See, e.g., Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021, 60-81.

reader. The choice of a focalizing or narrating character has important consequences for the negotiation of cultural issues. Ana Belén Martínez García's (2021) work on nonfictional refugee stories offers a compelling illustration of the ideological intricacies of narrative perspective – who is mediating the story, whether through narration or focalization. Martínez García's main example is *A Hope More Powerful than the Sea*, a nonfiction book relating the experiences of Doaa Al Zamel, a Syrian refugee. However, this is not a memoir, and Al Zamel is not the author; instead, she is the protagonist of a book written by Melissa Fleming, who was at the time of the book's publication a spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Fleming's operation seeks to elicit compassion for refugees in the book's (primarily Western) audience, along two routes. First, it elevates Al Zamel's story to a paradigmatic case, presenting her as a meaningful but by no means exceptional *example* of the difficulties faced by refugees in general. Further, the book implicitly embraces a narrative template of victimization which fundamentally downplays Al Zamel's agency. On a narrative level, this reduction of agency is performed by Fleming's decision to tell this story *for* Al Zamel. As Martínez García puts it: "[i]nstead of an agentic narrating 'I,' it seems Doaa [Al Zamel] is transformed into the image of a paradigmatic refugee and thus passively embedded into the larger frame of reference of human rights and humanitarianism" (2021, 216).

The narrative form of the story thus plays directly into a human rights rhetoric that, while consistent with Fleming's official role for the UNHCR, brings up a number of questions relating to the ethics of telling another person's story, particularly when the asymmetry between author and protagonist is so pronounced in terms of race, nationality, and status.[14] This asymmetry is intensified by the nonfictional nature of the book, but similar concerns would be raised by fictional storytelling: can white novelists fully capture the experiences of a non-white minority? Should they? As Martínez García shows, the problem is not merely one of narrative *representation*, but it is tightly linked to the narrative *form* of this representation: who the narrating or focalizing instance is in a narrative, and the ideological underpinnings of that structure. Put otherwise, narrative mediation becomes involved in the negotiation of a complex cultural issue, the status of the migrant.

14 Martínez García draws on Amy Shuman's (2005) work to discuss these ethical difficulties.

If we turn from migration to ecological questions, the ideological ramifications of a narrative voice or perspective become even more apparent. Narrative, according to Monika Fludernik, has a built-in "anthropomorphic bias" (1996, 13), insofar as it tends to foreground human or human-like characters and experiences. But the ecological crisis, as has been argued time and again, calls for a profound reconsideration of our relationship with the "natural" world, which is no longer distinguishable from human presence (see, e.g., Shaviro 2012): the crisis urges us to pay attention to human activities' impact on ecosystems, for example through species extinction and habitat loss. As a result, the anthropocentric set-up of narrative can no longer be taken for granted, because it goes hand in hand with notions of human mastery and exceptionalism.[15] Storytellers today work hard to overcome this bias, opening up narrative form to the imagination of the nonhuman. Typically, this involves adopting nonhuman focalizers or narrators, whose perspective can put significant pressure on readers' anthropocentric assumptions. For example, VanderMeer's *The Strange Bird* is a novella focalized through the eyes of the titular bird, an animal modified with human genetic material. By embracing this nonhuman perspective, the narrative discloses the suffering undergone by nonhuman animals in science labs, linking that suffering to the anthropogenic violence that has turned the storyworld into a postapocalyptic wasteland. But nonhuman narrative mediation is not exclusive to literary fiction. Consider for example *Not Ok*, a documentary filmed by anthropologists Cymene Howe and Dominic Boyer about the melting of an Icelandic glacier. The documentary opens with a monologue spoken by the mountain on top of which the glacier was located.[16] The voiceover presents a witty commentary on humanity's short-sightedness. This personification of the mountain blurs the boundary between factual and fictional representation; it is a strategic use of anthropomorphism that, instead of reinforcing narrative's "anthropomorphic bias", aims to ironically undermine that bias.[17]

Such extensions of narrative mediation to nonhuman agents involve an interplay between the projection of human assumptions onto nonhuman char-

15 For further discussion of this link between narrative form and anthropocentrism, see Caracciolo 2021, 22-2.

16 A trailer for this documentary (which also features the mountain's voice at the start) is available here: https://www.notokmovie.com/

17 See also Iovino 2015 on this strategic use of anthropomorphism and how it may challenge anthropocentric assumptions.

acters and the realization that those assumptions do not fully apply to the nonhuman. In Bernaerts et al. (2014), my co-authors and I discuss this interplay in terms of a “double dialectic” of empathy and defamiliarization: readers may build on their human experiences to empathize with nonhuman agents in narrative, but they may find that this empathetic gesture calls those experiences into question, resulting in defamiliarization. In this way, nonhuman narration or focalization may prompt a negotiation of human-nonhuman relations that challenges notions of human mastery and exceptionalism. Nevertheless, it is important to stress once again that the link between form and negotiation is a complex one, reflecting both textual factors and the reader’s predispositions. In many instances, nonhuman narration or focalization do *not* lead to defamiliarization, because the text uses the nonhuman allegorically or satirically: Ian McEwan’s *The Cockroach*, which is a thinly veiled Brexit satire seen through the eyes of a cockroach turned British prime minister, is a case in point.[18] Further, negotiating cultural issues such as human-nonhuman hierarchies through narrative requires a sufficiently predisposed audience, because negotiation can never be uncoupled from interpretation, and interpretation is crucially dependent on the reader. That, too, is an aspect of what Sternberg (1982) calls the “Proteus Principle”: the (ideological) functions of narrative form are complex, and no form-function mapping is automatic, because negotiation depends both on *other* stylistic or narrative forms shaping interpretation and on the interests and assumptions that a particular reader brings to bear on the story.

5. *Conclusion*

Current scholarship in the field of cultural narratology pushes back against a structuralist way of thinking about narrative form in abstraction from cultural contexts and ideology. From postcolonial to ecological issues (Dwivedi, Nielsen, and Walsh 2018; James 2022), work in cultural narratology shows that formal choices are always bound up with the beliefs and values circulating in a culture: adopting a certain narrative form can variously reinforce, reflect upon, or challenge those beliefs and values. The exact outcome of this narrative ne-

18 See also Herman’s (2018, chap. 4) discussion of “animal allegories” for more on this possibility.

gotiation, to use Herman and Vervaeck's (2017) terminology, depends on both textual devices and the interpretive strategies embraced by a specific reader (or community of readers). But form is never neutral: it offers specific affordances for narrative negotiation, and it also places constraints on such negotiation.[19] In this article, I have illustrated this idea by discussing the impact of three fundamental coordinates of narrative – temporal-causal organization, spatiality, and mediation – on the negotiation of cultural issues: while seemingly distant from the ideological sphere, such basic elements of narrative carry ideological implications that should be carefully unpacked.

In engaging with this interplay of form and negotiation, cultural narratology addresses one of the limitations of work in a cultural studies vein, which tends to favor the "what" of representation (and its straightforward political significance) over the "how" of form. By contrast, cultural narratology shows that form can steer ideological meaning-making, not by *determining* it but by making certain pathways of negotiation more likely than others: for example, a teleologically oriented plot in which human agents are foregrounded and the nonhuman (e.g., the landscape) serves as a static backdrop goes hand in hand with notions of human mastery over the nonhuman.[20] These formal devices fall halfway between narrative theorization in the typological sense and individual close readings: this space between abstract form and application is the province of cultural narratology. It is, of course, impossible to generalize or to univocally map narrative form onto ideology, but the correlation remains strong enough to warrant narratological attention. Ultimately, the ideological significance of narrative structures should not be underestimated: form tends to elude critical or discourse analysis (because its political relevance remains implicit), but it still plays a central role in reinforcing ideological assumptions. Bringing this relevance to light is the main task of cultural narratology.

19 The language of "affordance" comes from ecological psychology (Gibson 1983), but it is widely employed by Caroline Levine (2015, 6-11) in the context of New Formalism.

20 See again my discussion of narrative form and human-nonhuman relations in Caracciolo 2021.

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