

Decentering the Human through Narrative Forms The “Impossible Closure” of Gadda’s *That Awful Mess* and VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy*

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Introduction

In Carlo Emilio Gadda’s philosophical dialogue ‘L’Egoista’ (*The Egoist*) (1953), the characters Teofilo and Crisostomo express a variety of thought-provoking ideas. Gadda – one of the most innovative authors of Italian modernism¹ who contributed to the twentieth-century novel as a literary genre with his nonlinear narrative style² – endows these characters with striking opinions. The most interesting one regards Teofilo’s disapproval of the notion of life as a stand-alone phenomenon: he perceives this as a ‘concetto erroneo’³ since the life of every living being is in ‘simbiosi con l’universo’.⁴ Our individuality is thus seen as the result of countless interactions with countless human and nonhuman beings; in such a way, every human is the metaphorical child of a bundle of relationships that ties the whole world together. But Teofilo’s stance is then absorbed and later exacerbated by Crisostomo, who states that if all humans are connected to each other – hence sharing credit for charitable and generous acts – they also share the weight of every guilt and sin.⁵ By attributing both *the good* and *the bad* to humanity as a whole, Crisostomo hypothesizes a world where it is impossible to conceive neatly cut dualities and to follow exclusively the events of a single being. Everything is so deeply intertwined and connected⁶ that it becomes very difficult to

¹ Cf. R. Luperini, ‘Il modernismo italiano esiste’, in: R. Luperini & M. Tortora (eds.), *Sul modernismo italiano*, Napoli, Liguori, 2012, pp. 3-12; R. Donnarumma, ‘Tracciato del modernismo italiano’, in: R. Luperini & M. Tortora (eds.), *Sul modernismo italiano*, cit., pp. 13-38.

² Cf. C. Savettieri, *La trama continua. Storia e forme del romanzo di Gadda*, Pisa, Edizioni ETS, 2008; C. Benedetti, ‘Gadda e l’astrazione narrativa’, in: *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, 7, supplement 9 (2011), online edition <https://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/journal/supp9decennial/articles/benedettinarra09.php> (26 July 2022).

³ C.E. Gadda, *Saggi giornali favole e altri scritti. I*, L. Orlando, C. Martignoni & D. Isella (eds.), Milano, Garzanti, 2008, p. 654. This volume will be henceforth referred to as *SGF1*. Similarly, C.E. Gadda, *Scritti vari e postumi*, A. Silvestri, C. Vela, P. Italia, G. Pinotti & D. Isella (eds.), Milano, Garzanti, 2009 will be referred to as *SVP*; C.E. Gadda, *Romanzi e racconti II*, G. Pinotti, R. Rodondi & D. Isella (eds.), Milano, Garzanti, 2018 will be referred to as *RR2*.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ ‘Al dogma della messa in comune de’ titoli di merito dei santi per la comune salvezza, corrisponde, in reciproca, il riconoscimento dostoevskiano del gravame comune delle colpe: sì che la colpa di uno è colpa di tutti. Il tiranno, l’omicida, il ladro, è colpevole nel consenso di tutti, nell’adulazione, o nella invidia o nella indulgenza di tutti’ (‘To the dogma regarding the sharing of the saints’ merits for the common salvation corresponds, reciprocally, the Dostoevskian acknowledgement of the common burden of sins: so that one’s guilt is everyone’s guilt. The tyrant, the killer, the thief, is guilty with everyone’s approval, in everyone’s adulation or envy or indulgence’) (*SGF1*, p. 656). Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Italian are mine.

⁶ ‘Ognuno di noi è limitato, su infinite direzioni, da una controparte dialettica: ognuno di noi è il no di infiniti sì, è il sì di infiniti no. Tra qualunque essere dello spazio metafisico e l’io individuo [...] intercede un rapporto pensabile: e dunque un rapporto di fatto. Se una libellula vola a Tokio, innesca una catena di reazioni che raggiungono me’ (‘We are all limited, in infinite directions, by a dialectic counterpart: each of us is the no of infinite yeses and the yes of infinite noes. Between any being of the metaphysical space and the individual I [...] intercedes a thinkable connection: and therefore a factual connection. If a dragonfly flies in Tokyo, it triggers a chain reaction that reaches me’) (*SGF1*, p. 654).

distinguish single causes and single effects, and it is almost impossible to discover all the effects a single cause has contributed to or to identify all the causes participating in the making of one single effect. This view recalls Tim Ingold's notion of 'things':

If we think of every participant as following a particular way of life, threading a line through the world, then perhaps we could define the thing [...] as a *parliament of lines*. Thus conceived, the thing has the character not of an externally bounded entity, set over and against the observer, but of a knot whose constituent life-lines, far from being contained within it, continually trail beyond, only to mingle with other lines in other knots.⁷

This concept can be seen as an evolution of Bruno Latour's 'parliament of things',⁸ since it cuts across dichotomies – between nature and culture, subject and object, human and nonhuman – and highlighting the entanglements among entities of any kind, it elevates and dignifies the inherent hybridity of 'things'. Accordingly, if we follow this reasoning, the world becomes an element we can just perceive parts of but which we can never grasp in its entirety. Timothy Morton discusses this phenomenon in *The Ecological Thought*⁹ and in *Hyperobjects*¹⁰ where he uses the term 'hyperobjects to refer to things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans';¹¹ in fact, we often try to focus on one knot/event at a time in order to have a better understanding of what we have in front of us. Even more crucially, in the case of novels – and especially the ones involving a mystery –, readers tend to acquire a better grasp when following a linear and logical plotline. We want (and sometimes need) a beginning, a development of events, and an ending with a proper closure. In this way, Peter Brooks' 'paradox of narrative plot' becomes explicit, meaning that the plot diminishes 'as it realizes itself, leading to an end that is the consummation (as well as the consumption) of its sense-making'. Furthermore, since he argues that 'the motor of narrative is desire' and that 'the ultimate determinants of meaning lie at the end', it follows that narrative desire *has* to coincide with a 'desire *for* the end'.¹² However, the world Teofilo and Crisostomo discuss is certainly not linear nor entirely logical; on the contrary, it is chaotic, indefinite and surely does not have an end which ties all the plotlines together.

This article intends to analyze the formal structure used in two selected novels to represent reality according to its nonlinearity and complexity. From a theoretical perspective this also implies a decentralization of the human figure, since the reality described above is one where beings are not hierarchically divided. The aim is to analyze how these works can narrate fictional events from a perspective that exceeds the traditional linear plotline, and that in doing so undermines the idea of human exceptionality through the explicit display of human limits. The shape that this kind of novels take recalls the detective novel – and even more so its 'anti-detective' variation.¹³ In this sub-genre, the reasons behind an unforeseen event are investigated by various people, thus producing a multi-linear plotline. The narration of said events from multiple perspectives creates an instability which leads towards an ending that does not offer a resolution nor an answer to the burning questions that steadily become more and more prominent throughout the text.

Besides occasional references to other works by Gadda (e.g. *Meditazione milanese* (1928) and other theoretical essays), I shall delve into the structural form employed in narrating a mystery with no resolution through the analysis of Gadda's *Quer pasticciaccio*

⁷ T. Ingold, 'Bringing Things to Life. Material Flux and Creative Entanglements', in: M. Finke & F. Weltzien (eds.), *State of Flux*, Berlin, Reimer, 2017, p. 24 (emphasis in original).

⁸ B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Harvard University Press, 1993, pp. 142-145.

⁹ T. Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Harvard University Press, 2010.

¹⁰ T. Morton, *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 1.

¹² P. Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, New York, Vintage Books, 1984, p. 52 (emphasis in original).

¹³ S. Tani, *The Doomed Detective. The Contribution of the Detective Novel to Postmodern American and Italian Fiction*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.

brutto de via Merulana (That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana (That Afwul Mess or TAM)) (1957) and, for reasons I will explain below, of the *Southern Reach Trilogy (SRT)*¹⁴ (2015) by Jeff VanderMeer. Although they have been written in different times, in different languages (the former in Italian and the latter in English), and in different places (*TAM* in Italy while *SRT* in the USA), I argue that they both share particular formal and structural elements that concur in creating the multifaceted reality discussed above. As shown by Amberson 2012,¹⁵ Falkoff 2014¹⁶ and Amberson-Past 2016,¹⁷ Gadda's narratives can be fruitfully analyzed through a posthumanist perspective. In particular, the two scholars' readings of the ending of *That Awful Mess* in light of Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's Material Ecocriticism, and Falkoff's analysis of the emblematic images of *La cognizione del dolore (The Experience of Pain)* (1938-1941, 1963, 1971) firmly showcase how Gadda's work (spontaneously) anticipates some of the key notions currently employed in contemporary posthumanist narratives.

Nontraditional crime fiction flourished in Italy as well as in the US, hence making it possible to identify some of *SRT*'s similarities to *TAM* as inherited from American literary post-modern tradition.¹⁸ However, I argue that the coupling with VanderMeer's work is especially effective because these works do not simply play with their genres but they both seem to convey a similar post-anthropocentric message through the adoption of comparable narrative forms and structures. Therefore, Gadda's work could be seen as anticipating formal techniques that are popular in contemporary narratives.

Many studies¹⁹ have been published since the 2000s pushing for a complete reconceptualization of the place humans should take in the ecosystem-world. And most of the authors writing them have positioned themselves within Posthumanism, which – in Rosi Braidotti's account – was conceived as a tool to help humans reframe the 'basic unit of reference' in the Anthropocene, the geologic/historic era characterized by humans as a 'geological force' capable of affecting the whole ecosystem.²⁰ However, the questioning of human exceptionalism is not of recent creation; representations of it can certainly be found in literary works of past eras, both in Anglophone²¹ and Italian literature.²² The case of

¹⁴ The installments of the trilogy (*Annihilation, Authority, Acceptance*) will be cited as if being volumes of the same novel; for example, a page from *Annihilation* will be cited as *SRT I*.

¹⁵ D. Amberson, *Giraffes in the Garden of Italian Literature. Modernist Embodiment in Italo Svevo, Federigo Tozzi and Carlo Emilio Gadda*, London, Routledge, 2017.

¹⁶ R.R. Falkoff, 'Carlo Emilio Gadda's Junk and Other Vibrant Matter in Milan and Maradagà', in: *California Italian Studies*, 5, 2 (2014), pp. 83-105.

¹⁷ D. Amberson, E. Past, 'Gadda's *Pasticciaccio* and the Knotted Posthuman Household', in: *Relations*, 4, 1 (2016), pp. 65-79.

¹⁸ Cf. P. Merivale & S.E. Sweeney, *Detecting Texts. The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999, p. 5; S. Tani, *The Doomed Detective*, cit., pp. xi-xvi.

¹⁹ Cf. T. Morton, *Ecology without Nature. Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Harvard University Press, 2007; D.J. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008; C. Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010; S. Alaimo, *Bodily natures. Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2010; D.H. Coole & S. Frost, *New Materialisms. Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Durham (North Carolina), Duke University Press, 2010.

²⁰ R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge (UK), Polity Press, 2013, p. 5.

²¹ Cf. J. Wallace, *D.H. Lawrence, Science and the Posthuman*, Houndmills England, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005; C. Rohman, *Stalking the Subject. Modernism and the Animal*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2009; C. Alt, *Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature*, Cambridge (UK), Cambridge University Press 2010; B.K. Scott, *In the Hollow of the Wave. Virginia Woolf and Modernist Uses of Nature*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2012; D. Ryan, *Animal Theory. A Critical Introduction*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2015.

²² Cf. D. Benvegnù, 'The Tortured Animals of Modernity. Animal Studies and Italian Literature', in: D. Herman (ed.), *Creatural Fictions. Human-Animal Relationships in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Literature*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016, pp. 41-63; G. Minghelli, *In the Shadow of the Mammoth. Italo Svevo and the Emergence of Modernism*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2016; K. Driscoll, 'Fearful Symmetries. Pirandello's Tiger and the Resistance to Metaphor', in: D. Ohrem & R. Bartosch (eds.), *Beyond the Human-Animal Divide. Creatively Lives in Literature and Culture*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan US, 2017, pp. 283-305; G. Conrad, 'Giacomo Leopardi's Book of the Future. The *Zibaldone* as an Encyclopedia for the Ecopsychological Posthuman', in: E.M. Ferrara (ed.), *Posthumanism in Italian Literature and Film. Boundaries and Identity*, Cham,

Italian modernism is particularly fascinating since its narratives often feature a stark nonanthropocentric attention, strengthened by authors' relationship with materiality. As Luca Cottini argues, Italian modernism coincides with the country's first massive industrialization, which encouraged people to rethink their relationship with space and materials.²³ Modernist authors' works attempt to replicate this socio-cultural phenomenon, thus blending narrative innovation with fascination with the nonhuman. For this reason, I see the narrative devices and structures employed by Italian modernist authors as a possible source of inspiration for contemporary literature engaging with non-humanity.

Clearly, Gadda is here categorized as a modernist author; this article indeed builds on the leading works by Raffaele Donnarumma²⁴ and Romano Luperini²⁵ on Gadda as a modernist and on Italian modernism as a whole. Donnarumma identifies Gadda as a modernist not only for the content of his literary works, but also from a formal standpoint; in fact, he writes about 'il formalismo modernista, che si manifesta tanto nell'esorbitare della prosa di Gadda quanto nelle complesse architetture di Pirandello o Svevo'.²⁶

Accordingly, I see the use of Caroline Levine's New Formalism²⁷ as a way to promote the re-examination of Italian modernism from a novel formal perspective. As it will be clarified later, the case of Gadda's *TAM* is of exemplary value in narrating a reality not exclusively centered on humanity, but similar attempts at going beyond the human are not limited to Gadda. Thus I hope that this article will set the basis for further explorations of the unexpected convergences between (Italian) modernism and contemporary posthumanist fiction.

Forms, Genres, and the Acceptance of the Nonlogical

In 2015, Levine gave a pivotal contribution to rethinking Formalism with her book *Forms. Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. The aim of her theory is to bring together literary studies' 'dispersed insights into social and aesthetic forms'.²⁸ To do so, Levine offers a broader definition of "form" and a reframing of the concept of "affordance". She notices that 'all of the historical uses of the term, despite their richness and variety, do share a common definition: "form" always indicates *an arrangement of elements – an ordering, patterning, or shaping*'.²⁹ Hence, her own argument begins with a 'definition of form that is much broader than its ordinary usage in literary studies. Form, for our purposes, will mean all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference'.³⁰ A similar process of abstraction happens to the concept of affordance: Levine borrows it from design theory, where the term is used to 'describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs'.³¹ For instance, wood affords sturdiness, wool affords warmth, and a light bulb affords light. The advantage of using affordances to think about forms consists in being able to 'grasp both the specificity and the generality of forms';³² this implies that 'each shape or pattern, social or literary, lays claim to a limited range of potentialities'.³³ In other words, forms contain and limit a specific set of affordances; however – and most importantly for the purpose of this article – they all share one, which

Palgrave MacMillan, 2020, pp. 31-50; A. Godioli, C. Van den Bergh & M. Jansen, 'Thresholds and Tortoises. Modernist Animality in Pirandello's Fiction', in: E.M. Ferrara (ed.), *Posthumanism in Italian Literature and Film*, cit. pp. 51-71; S. Iovino, *Italo Calvino's Animals. Anthropocene Stories*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

²³ L. Cottini, *The Art of Objects. The Birth of Italian Industrial Culture, 1878-1928*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2018.

²⁴ R. Donnarumma, *Gadda Modernista*, Pisa, ETS, 2006; Id., 'Tracciato del modernismo italiano', cit.

²⁵ Luperini, 'Il modernismo italiano esiste', cit.

²⁶ Donnarumma, 'Tracciato del modernismo italiano', cit., p. 26.

²⁷ C. Levine, *Forms. Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2015.

²⁸ Ivi, p. 3.

²⁹ Ibidem, emphasis in the original.

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ Ivi, p. 6.

³² Ibidem.

³³ Ibidem.

is portability, meaning that they are capable of repeating a principle, shape or pattern in both time and space. As Levine says, ‘they can be picked up and moved to new contexts’.³⁴ Nevertheless, specific contexts also have an important role, since forms – and especially the literary kind – never operate in isolation. This reminds us that literary forms are deeply imbued in the social sphere and that although they can be studied as abstract principles, they also need to be understood in their own specific contexts to grasp how different forms might overlap and/or collide. In his 2021 book, Marco Caracciolo pushes this discussion a step further and foregrounds ‘narrative’s engagement with the forms of the natural world’,³⁵ implying that sociopolitical forms should be placed in a ‘broader context, one that goes beyond a narrowly anthropocentric worldview’.³⁶ Caracciolo believes that scholars, writers and artists should strive to translate ‘science into human-scale, embodied language of everyday perception’³⁷ and argues that such a translation can be obtained through the use of formal tools like ‘strategies, at the level of plot dynamics, character, consciousness representation, and metaphor, that mirror or integrate contemporary science in order to unsettle the primacy of the human-scale world’.³⁸ In sum, he tries to explain how valuable literary forms can be and highlights the powerful effects that they might trigger in the reader.

Often “form” and “genre” are considered synonymous, however Levine argues that the classification of texts in genres is deeply tied to the social and historical context the reader lives in, since the same text might be perceived as belonging to different genres depending on when it is read. Conversely, forms ‘defined as patternings, shapes, and arrangements, have a different relation to context: they can organize both social and literary objects, and they can remain stable over time’.³⁹ Nonetheless, as LeMenager has shown, in some cases we can experience a phenomenon called “genre trouble”. Her argument builds on Lauren Berlant’s⁴⁰ statement about genres providing affective expectations of the experience of watching something unfold. LeMenager explains that ‘genre trouble comes about when the affective expectations we hold for how things unfold, in art and in life, do not make sense anymore’.⁴¹ In short, a reader might undergo this short-circuit-like experience when their expectations are *betrayed*. Primarily focusing on (eco-related) contemporary literature, LeMenager claims that ‘artistic genres are fraying, recombining, or otherwise moving outside of our expectations of what they ought to be because life itself is moving outside of our expectations for what it ought to be’.⁴² A fine case in point is the shift from the detective novel to the anti-detective novel. In *The Doomed Detective*, Stefano Tani gives a full account of the characteristics of the genre “detective novel” and showcases how said features have been reframed and reshaped in order to overturn the sense of certainty conveyed by the original genre. Following his argument, the *proper* detective novel is based on the assumption – drawn from the Enlightenment – that ‘everything should be explainable by the power of reason’.⁴³ Hence, in order to *betray* the affective expectations of the reader – thus causing genre trouble – the text has to be identifiable as a true detective novel at the beginning, but then show its true colors and display the shortcomings of human reason. Indeed, the techniques identified by Tani contribute to create a non-resolution of the plotline. In the last chapter of his book, he states that

³⁴ Ivi, p. 7.

³⁵ M. Caracciolo, *Narrating the Mesh. Form and Story in the Anthropocene*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2021, p 7.

³⁶ Ibidem.

³⁷ Ivi, p. 12.

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ Levine, *Forms*, cit., p.13.

⁴⁰ L. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011.

⁴¹ S. LeMenager, ‘The Humanities after the Anthropocene’, in: U.K. Heise, J. Christensen & M. Niemann (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, London, Routledge, 2017, p. 476.

⁴² Ivi, p. 477.

⁴³ Tani, *The Doomed Detective*, cit., p. 2.

anti-detective fiction restores and assimilates [detective-like concerns] to twentieth-century man's acceptance of the nonlogical in everyday life. Once decapitated by the nonsolution, detective rules no longer epitomize a genre but a contemporary attitude towards life as a mystery to be accepted.⁴⁴

This is the definition of anti-detective fiction that will be employed here. Its illogicity and non-solvability will be indeed rethought in the light of Levine's theory, and therefore be examined as narrative forms in the corpus texts.

'Something Always Remains Unexplained': Knots and Networks in *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana*

Carlo Emilio Gadda's *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana* centers on two criminal events and on the detective who tries to identify the guilty party/ies. The police commissioner Francesco 'Don Ciccio' Ingravallo investigates the theft of some jewels belonging to the 'vedova Menegazzi', living in via Merulana 219, in Rome. Slightly after this first crime, Don Ciccio is informed that a homicide has happened in the same building: Liliana Balducci, a friend of his, has been found dead in her apartment. From this point on, the narration begins to showcase the complex entanglement of plotlines that somehow seem to be all tied to these two events. We read of the maids working for Liliana and of her *nieces*, who were actually not related to her, but whom she liked to host to fight loneliness and to feed her desire for a child of her own that she could not naturally have. We read of the superintendents of the central police station and the *carabinieri* of the city of Marino investigating in the suburbs. We follow a multitude of viewpoints for the entirety of the narration until we land on a very uncertain ending, as Don Ciccio is not sure whether Assunta, one of Liliana's old servants, is the culprit or not:

'No, nun so' stata io!' Il grido incredibile bloccò il furore dell'ossesso. Egli non intese, là pe' llà, ciò che la sua anima era in procinto d'intendere. Quella piega nera verticale tra i due sopraccigli dell'ira, nel volto bianchissimo della ragazza, lo paralizzò, lo indusse a riflettere: a ripentirsi, quasi.⁴⁵

These ending sentences are particularly significant since they symbolize and summarize the organizing principles of the writing of the novel. Every word contributes to give a precise meaning to the sentence it belongs to, but at the same time contradicts the meaning of the word it follows. Indeed, we read of a young woman who seems to be guilty and innocent at the same time, and of a detective who is both angry and calm, sure but also uncertain about the killer's identity. The clues Gadda's different inspectors picked up along the way to this final scene are ultimately fundamentally useless, generating an uncertainty that would definitely be out of place in a traditional detective novel. The clues we – readers – have gathered from reading lead to a messy and entangled reality where it is impossible to clearly identify who is guilty and who is innocent, thus even the inspectors constantly second-guess themselves and appear to act on an investigation seemingly governed by chance. The ending has no solution because there is none: the plotlines are so deeply intertwined that neither the policemen nor the readers can unravel them. This can be seen as the result of what Gadda theorizes in his *Milanese Meditation*, being – as Raffaele Donnarumma writes – that 'per capire una cosa, siamo costretti a richiamare la totalità dei rapporti che essa implica; e per narrare un fatto siamo costretti a richiamare tutta quanta la realtà, entro cui essa è e ha senso'.⁴⁶ Thus, in order to understand who killed Liliana,

⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 151.

⁴⁵ 'No, it wasn't me!' The incredible cry blocked the haunted man's fury. He didn't understand, then and there, what his spirit was on the point of understanding. That black, vertical fold above the two eyebrows of rage, in the pale white face of the girl, paralyzed him, prompted him to reflect: to repent, almost' (RR2, p. 276; C.E. Gadda, *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana*, translated by William Weaver, New York, New York Review Books, 2007, p. 388).

⁴⁶ 'In order to understand something, we ought to recall all the relationships that this thing implies; and to narrate an episode, we ought to recall the entire reality in which this episode exists and has meaning.' See R. Donnarumma, "Riformare la categoria di causa". Gadda e la costruzione del romanzo', in: *The Edinburgh*

the Gaddian detective does not simply seek out a motive and a *modus operandi*, a killer and a victim – instead, he recognizes each as the center of thousands of shifting hidden wishes, personal and national histories, scientific laws, each of which is again the center of further associations, desires, histories without end.⁴⁷

Indeed, we do not have to simply know about her last days, but we get to know even small insignificant details that in a real detective fiction would be picked up by a Sherlock Holmes-like figure and be used to find an ultimate solution,⁴⁸ while here they are simply thrown at the reader, who is left alone to try to make sense out of them. In other words, here Levine's 'network' of relations among events and characters is presented in its entirety without following an organizing principle of clarity, but only trying to give an idea of a more complex reality.

Although many scholars have tried to find the solution to Gadda's enigma,⁴⁹ I prefer to align myself with Robert Dombroski's stance, summarizable in 'Does it really matter?'.⁵⁰ In fact, this article will be using the 1957 version of *That Awful Mess* as an autonomous and independent piece, since the average reader of this novel will most likely rely on the cues given in the single text without considering those given in the first version (published in 1946 in the journal *Letteratura*). Therefore, this study accepts and embraces the non-logicity of an ending which is typical of the so-called anti-detective novel or 'metaphysical detective story',⁵¹ where we encounter the 'detective's failure to identify individuals, interpret texts, or, even more to the point, solve mysteries'.⁵² However, I argue that in *TAM* the ending acquires a broader meaning since this text – and its author – seem to juxtapose reality and narration (especially its formal structures and techniques), in a way that strongly tries to encapsulate the complexity that the messiness of life entails to the point that the mystery becomes reality itself. Gadda has openly stated in one of his short essays, 'Un romanzo giallo nella geologia'⁵³ (*A Detective Novel in Geology*), that 'le ipotesi e le congetture fanno, della scienza geologica, il più interessante romanzo giallo',⁵⁴ hence implying that nature is in itself a mystery to be discovered and solved. Yet, reading *TAM*, we gather that this *case* will never have its resolution since only stories characterized by causality can have a proper traditional ending, while this novel does not seem to follow a principle of causality, following Gadda's attempt at transposing reality in text form. The events are not laid out as a chain of causes and effects but are distributed as belonging to an intricate 'net[work]',⁵⁵ possessing many concauses:

Journal of Gadda Studies, 4 (2004), online edition
<https://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/journal/supp3atti1/articles/donnaconf1.php> (26 July 2022), n. p.

⁴⁷ R.A. Rushing, "La sua tragica incompiutezza". Anxiety, Mis-Recognition and Ending in Gadda's *Pasticciaccio*, in: *MLN*, CXVI, 1 (2001), p. 133.

⁴⁸ Cf. H. Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure. The Life and Times of the Detective Story*, Mineola-New York, Dover Publications Inc., 2019; S. Kracauer, *Il romanzo poliziesco. Un trattato filosofico*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1997.

⁴⁹ Some critics – like Pedriali (F.G. Pedriali, 'Il Pasticciaccio e il suo doppio', in: *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies* (2000), <https://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/journal/issue0/articles/pedrialidoppio.php>, online edition (26 July 2022)) and Pinotti (G. Pinotti, 'Liliana Balducci e il suo boja?', in: *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies* (2008), <https://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/resources/archive/pasticciaccio/pinottililiana.php>, online edition (26 July 2022)) – have taken into consideration the editorial history of *TAM* and identified the culprit in Virginia (one of Liliana's *nieces*), who in these previous versions was more clearly presented as a (potential) murderer. Other scholars – like Amigoni (F. Amigoni, *La più semplice macchina. Lettura freudiana del Pasticciaccio*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1995) and De Lucca (R. De Lucca, 'Virginia', in: *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, 2 (2002), <https://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/resources/walks/pge/virginiadeluc.php>, online edition (26 July 2022)) – see Assunta as the murderer since they believe that in the final (1957) version of the novel her character is merged with Virginia's, who in turn disappears almost completely.

⁵⁰ R.S. Dombroski, *Creative Entanglements. Gadda and the Baroque*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1999.

⁵¹ Merivale & Sweeney, *Detecting Texts*, cit., pp. 2-4.

⁵² Tani, *The Doomed Detective*, cit., p.10.

⁵³ Henceforth referred to as *Romanzo giallo*.

⁵⁴ 'Hypotheses and conjectures make of geology the most interesting detective story' (*SGF1*, p. 149).

⁵⁵ Savettieri, *La trama continua*, cit. p.49.

[Don Ciccio] sosteneva, fra l'altro, che le inopinate catastrofi non sono mai conseguenza o l'effetto che dir si voglia d'un unico motivo, d'una causa al singolare: ma sono come un vortice, un punto di depressione ciclonica nella coscienza del mondo, verso cui hanno cospirato tutta una molteplicità di causali convergenti.⁵⁶

In a way, *TAM* rejects linearity in favor of the portrayal of the tangles and muddles (or *gnommeri*) which life is made of. As a consequence, this novel takes the shape of a polymorphic story driven by principles of complication and accumulation: as JoAnn Cannon writes, the narrative is 'replete with digressions which have no bearing on the solution of the mystery'.⁵⁷ In this way, the digressions make the reading more complicated while also inducing doubts on the importance of any information given at any point in the book. Savettieri points out that the narrative organism of Gadda's novel is conceptualized as a system of intertwined relationships where nothing can ever be really considered secondary. This idea of entangled relations clearly recalls Ingold's theory, mentioned in the introduction, about participants as threads, moving and *knotting* with each other continuously; to this, I want to juxtapose – as Gabriele Frasca reminds us in his 2011 book –⁵⁸ that Gadda admittedly wanted to present individuals as 'nucle[i] deformant[i]'⁵⁹ inserted into the 'perenne deformazione che si chiama vita',⁶⁰ which – according to Pierpaolo Antonello – can take the shape of a 'spinta evolutiva che si applica al mondo naturale, al dominio tecnico e al dominio espressivo'.⁶¹ Such a decision explains the complexity of the novel, especially the refusal of causality and the adoption of the concept of 'coesistenza logica'⁶² instead. The techniques present in the novel can be identified as either belonging to a conceptual sphere or a more narratological one, meaning that they either broadly belong to philosophical theory or to narrative methods. Conceptually, the type of writing used in the novel follows the image of the 'chiazza d'olio allargantesi',⁶³ meaning that the narration starts from a center point/event and then spreads around retaining its impurity but also encapsulating everything that belongs to that system indistinctly. Practically, as we experience when reading the novel, this intention translates into a narration conducted through analogies, allegories and digressions which seem to be out of place. Caracciolo explains that these processes – and especially analogies – establish similarities across precise semantic domains, and 'can push narrative beyond its home field of human interaction by bringing out [...] the ways in which nonhuman-scale realities resemble human-scale ones'.⁶⁴ In fact, the mentioning of the knot/tangle/muddle reminds us of both the intricate structure of the novel and of a nonlinear and noncausal conceptualization of life – namely, the system where the cause-effect relationship is replaced by a network of concauses – and gives us a hint of a bigger reality that goes beyond the actions and thoughts of a single human being. Indeed, the text certainly succeeds in conveying the multiplicity of viewpoints belonging to all the participants even slightly involved in the event under examination; but what it also achieves is giving the reader a strong feeling of uncertainty. The multiplicity and multiplying of causes is an incredibly strong element of the story, especially since it is the predominant structure of the narration.

⁵⁶ '[Don Ciccio] sustained, among other things, that unforeseen catastrophes are never the consequence or the effect, if you prefer, of a single motive, of a cause singular; but they are rather like a whirlpool, a cyclonic point of depression in the consciousness of the world, towards which a whole multitude of converging causes have contributed' (*RR2*, p. 16; *TAM*, p. 5, emphasis in the original).

⁵⁷ J. Cannon, 'The Reader as Detective. Notes on Gadda's *Pasticciaccio*, in: *Modern Language Studies*, X, 3 (1980), p. 47.

⁵⁸ G. Frasca, *Un quanto di erotia. Gadda con Freud e Schrödinger*, Napoli, D'if, 2011.

⁵⁹ 'Deforming nucleus[es]' (*SVP*, p. 650).

⁶⁰ 'Constant deformation that is called life' (*ibidem*).

⁶¹ 'An evolutionary force which impose itself on the natural world, the technical domain, and the expressive domain' (P. Antonello, 'Darwin', in: *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, 4 (2004), <https://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/resources/walks/page/darwinantonel.php>, online edition (9 March 2023)).

⁶² 'Logical coexistence' (*SVP*, p. 664).

⁶³ 'Spreading oil stain' (*ivi*, p 742).

⁶⁴ Caracciolo, *Narrating the Mesh*, cit., p. 43.

And the constant multiplication in this text translates into a juxtaposition of heterogeneous relationships that constantly deform themselves and each other: as Gadda writes, ‘conoscere [...] è, quindi deformare il reale’.⁶⁵ Following this idea, while investigating on their cases, both Don Ciccio and Pestalozzi (one of the superintendents) deform what they are inspecting, while being simultaneously deformed by ‘una molteplicità di causali convergenti’.⁶⁶ Furthermore, Frasca compares the world described in *TAM* to a system affected by quantum entanglement – which is a physical phenomenon occurring when a group of particles act in such a way that their single quantum state cannot be described separately from the state of the other particles, comprising when the particles are very distant from each other. Similarly, every action performed in *TAM* modifies the entirety of the plot; for instance, Frasca sees the entanglement of the two main plotlines (the theft and the murder) when the word “murderer” is pointlessly used in regard to the thief of the widow Menegazzi’s jewels, which then calls for the following murder of Liliana.

As it might be easy to understand, the intricated narrative structure of this case study seems to fight the traditional idea of the story as a *whole*; on the contrary, it calls for openness and fragmentation. On this matter, Levine agrees that plotted suspense – in detective fiction, in particular – is ‘the narrative form best suited to conveying [...] resistance to totality’.⁶⁷ This could seem odd considering that traditional readings of detective fiction argue that endings are postponed to give a sense of satisfaction and order, but such readings tend to focus exclusively on the closure and miss the value of the narrative middle. ‘The suspense of the middle occurs when a narrative clearly signals that it is holding something back. Such moments might indicate that we are missing a crucial piece of information [...] or they might deliberately prolong an uncertain process, holding off the outcome’.⁶⁸ This plotted suspense and the sense of incompleteness that follows are even more fitting in our case, since the suspense never really ends, and the story lacks a real denouement.

Now, I shall move on to my second case study; while analyzing VanderMeer’s novel, I will compare both cases with regard to the formal elements used to convey the narrative structure I am investigating, as well as the latter’s philosophical implications.

‘Before You Are Nowhere. Before You Are Everywhere’: Genre Trouble and Human “Unexceptionability” in the *Southern Reach Trilogy*

Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy* (*SRT*) is composed of the books *Annihilation*, *Authority* and *Acceptance*,⁶⁹ and narrates the events surrounding the discovery and evolution of a humanly inexplicable ecosystem known as Area X. Throughout the three books, a polyphony of narrators give their accounts of what happened in Area X and in the military and scientific base of the institution appointed to study it, the so-called ‘Southern Reach’, set in front of the *main entrance* to Area X. In *Annihilation*, we follow a group of five women who are sent inside the area to explore and gather information about it. In *Authority*, we follow John Rodriguez, also known as Control, an agent sent by the Central organization to discover the mysteries hidden within the Southern Reach. Lastly, in *Acceptance*, we follow the timeline of Area X, from its appearance (or, rather, its discovery) to the narrative’s present time, via the viewpoints of the lighthouse keeper, the director of the Southern Reach, and Ghost Bird – presumably a clone made by Area X. None of the installments offer a satisfactory and conclusive solution to the mystery of Area X.

⁶⁵ ‘Knowing [...] means, then, deforming reality’ (*SVP*, p. 863).

⁶⁶ ‘A whole multitude of converging causes’ (*RR2*, p. 16; *TAM*, p. 5).

⁶⁷ Levine, *Forms*, cit., p. 129.

⁶⁸ Ivi, p. 129.

⁶⁹ J. VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, London, Fourth Estate, 2015; J. VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, London, Fourth Estate, 2015; and J. VanderMeer, *Authority*, London, Fourth Estate, 2015. The novels were initially published as stand-alone instalments and then collected in the volume *Area X. The Southern Reach Trilogy*, New York, FSG Originals, 2014.

Gry Ulstein easily classifies this trilogy as belonging to the New Weird,⁷⁰ being the “child” of the “old” Weird, primarily represented by H.P Lovecraft’s work. VanderMeer himself claims to belong to such a *genre* and defines it as

a type of urban, secondary-world fiction that [...] [chooses] realistic, complex real-world models as the jumping off point for creation of settings that may combine elements of both science fiction and fantasy [...]. [It] often uses elements of surreal or transgressive horror for its tone, style, and effects.⁷¹

And indeed, it is really challenging to find a categorization for these books that is not the one VanderMeer suggests. Often, the horror elements of the trilogy have been highlighted in order to broadly position it within such a genre. Matthew Masucci, for instance, reads *SRT* as eco-colonial horror,⁷² meaning that his interpretation of it implies the understanding of Area X as a colonizing force that in attempting to create its own new order has to commit horrific actions against humanity. Tom Idema ties the categorization of the novel to the mentioned idea of genre trouble.⁷³ Indeed, as LeMenager says, ‘genres intend to call publics into being’;⁷⁴ thus it is understandable that VanderMeer, who writes a text that willfully baffles the reader, aims to fit it within a new genre. He aims at catering to an audience which might be interested in sci-fi and horror but not necessarily engages with the current events concerning the environment and well-being of all species, thus creating a new public. In these case studies, we hence see what Levine discusses in her book: genres may change and evolve, and with them their denominations and categorization; however, the formal structures and patterns bridge between genres, untouched by cultural and historical factors.

As in Gadda’s work – where life ‘giunge talora ad apparenze così difformi dalle consuete che noi ne facciamo nome speciale e diciamo morte’⁷⁵ –, in the trilogy we experience a depiction of humanity and of the environment ‘in a state of uncertainty and transition, without exclusively labeling this moment as one of tragic loss’;⁷⁶ in fact, in these books, death becomes just one episode of the never-ending story of life. According to the idea of life as a continuous flux – where ‘[l]a realtà si presenta come il fiume eracliteo pieno di gorgi e di forze aggrovigliate e intersecantesi’⁷⁷ – the role of humanity is diminished; and in *SRT* as well as in *TAM*, human exceptionalism is undermined to the point of making the characters nonlogical. The undermining of the notion of the human is achieved both through the trilogy’s plot and through its narrative fragmentation. I will focus here on two formal arrangements: first, the employment of various viewpoints to narrate the trilogy’s story as a way to showcase the shortcomings and biases of human reason; and second, the growing number of theories about the existence of Area X representing the impossibility of finding a univocal explanation or solution.

The books composing *SRT* have different narrative structures. *Annihilation* is a fictional journal in which the Biologist acts as the first person narrator who tells the reader her experience inside Area X; *Authority* has an external narrator who is focalized on Control; and *Acceptance* is a choral novel containing many focalizers. We read in the first person when the narration focuses on the Biologist, we read in the second person when it focuses

⁷⁰ G. Ulstein, ‘Brave New Weird. Anthropocene Monsters in Jeff VanderMeer’s *The Southern Reach*’, in: *Concentric*, XLIII, 1, pp. 71-96.

⁷¹ J. VanderMeer, ‘Introduction’, in: A. VanderMeer & J. VanderMeer (eds.), *The New Weird*, San Francisco, Tachyon Publications, 2008, p. xvi.

⁷² M. Masucci, ‘Angry Eden. Hyperobjects, Plant Entelechy, and the Horror of Eco-Colonization in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy*’, in: R.J. Schneider (ed.), *Dark Nature. Anti-Pastoral Essays in American Literature and Culture*, Washington D.C., Lexington Books, 2016, pp. 171-184.

⁷³ T. Idema, *Stages of Transmutation. Science Fiction, Biology, and Environmental Posthumanism*, New York, Routledge, 2020.

⁷⁴ LeMenager, ‘The Humanities after the Anthropocene’, cit., p. 476.

⁷⁵ ‘Sometimes takes shapes so different from the ones we are used to that we create a special name and we call it death’ (*SVP*, p. 650).

⁷⁶ Idema, *Stages of Transmutation*, cit., p.3

⁷⁷ ‘Reality reveals itself like the Heraclitean river, full of whirlpools and entangled intersecting forces’ (*SVP*, p. 777).

on the Director of the Southern Reach, and we read in the third person when it focuses on Control, Ghost Bird or the Lighthouse Keeper. The story is organized in such a fragmented and inconsistent manner that it makes readers wonder about the truthfulness of what they are reading, since the viewpoints presented are always uncertain and partial. To further emphasize this uncertainty, the Biologist, towards the end of *Annihilation*, admits to having omitted some information – for instance, that she felt a *brightness* coming from her body – hence pushing the reader to reconsider the entire story she had told up to that point. Structurally, we could say that the trilogy is shaped like a puzzle, having many pieces to put together, but it is also in some regards a detective story because we are faced with a mystery that needs to be solved. We know that both structures are essentially incomplete: although we have a puzzle, we lack a reference picture; and although we have mystery, we lack the right clues to properly solve it. What precisely makes the mystery impossible to solve, is that all these viewpoints and pieces of information we are offered are fundamentally *corrupted* by either one of the following couple of reasons.

First of all, all characters – and especially the focalizers – have their own convictions, which are mostly tied to their experiences as humans. For instance, Control, the main character and focalizer of the second installment, always tries to rationalize things and believes that ‘grand unified theories could backfire’,⁷⁸ but then, in the third installment, he moves on to *feeling* that everything is connected towards a greater pattern.⁷⁹ The experiences lived in *Authority* and partially in *Acceptance* made John Rodriguez lose his “control” and rational behavior in favor of the acceptance of the existence of more standpoints: he is indeed the one wondering if ‘someday the fish and the falcon, the fox and the owl, will tell tales, in their way’.⁸⁰ This latter evolution can be attributed to Area X and constitutes the second type of *corruption*. Caracciolo writes that ‘through the actantial mediation of [Area X], the nonhuman infiltrates both the storyworld and the characters’ psychology. Far from being straightforwardly personified, the landscape of Area X ends up taking over and nonhumanizing the human’.⁸¹ Conversely, Idema has argued that Area X’s influence and actions can be interpreted as the character’s projection, hence not the outcome of a supernatural encounter but the very human reaction to events that are difficult to comprehend and/or accept. The vast difference in scholars’ positions towards the novel showcases how these books lend themselves to many interpretations; for example, talking to Control, Grace – the vice-director of the Southern Reach – admits: ‘Have we been compromised by our own data? The answer is: Of course [...] In a few weeks [...] You will be just like us’.⁸² These statements represent *corruption* in all its aspects; how they are perceived and interpreted really depends on the reader. This contributes to the uncertainty of the trilogy: by offering many voices to the readers, the narrator gives many perspectives but at the same time conveys the message that all these viewpoints are not entirely truthful, just as in life no one really is. Furthermore, since the focalizers of the story are humans (or human-like beings), the story they tell is the result of experiences subject to blind spots caused by the characters’ own belonging to the human species. However, just like in *TAM*, all characters here are also deeply influenced and conditioned by a multitude of elements which makes them who they are, meaning human, meaning fallible. The quest towards the acceptance that gives the title to the last installment also passes through the acceptance of human reason as partial and falsifiable, and at the same time as the result of a deeply intertwined network of characters and events.

As for the second strategy, we will briefly go through the theories explaining the existence of Area X that are mentioned throughout the trilogy, and we shall see how this narrative strategy, consisting in adding more and more theories, pushes the critique of human reason further and thus contributes to the decentralization of the human figure. The

⁷⁸ *SRT* II, p. 132.

⁷⁹ *SRT* III, p. 310.

⁸⁰ *SRT* III, p. 156.

⁸¹ Caracciolo, *Narrating the Mesh*, cit., p. 110.

⁸² *SRT* II, pp. 39-41.

first theory implies the occurrence of two different *events* that created Area X and its border. Another group of theories we encounter is the one categorizable as *slow death by* (aliens, a parallel universe, a malign unknown time-traveling force, an invasion from an alternate earth, wildly divergent technology, the shadow biosphere, symbiosis, etc.). One of the most discussed theories is the one circling around the notion of *terroir* – a wine term translatable as a “sense of place”, which refers to the sum of the effects of a localized environment which affect a specific product. This implies that Area X has to be studied from different scientific perspectives, including history, geography, geology or the climate. Interestingly, this same all-encompassing approach is used by the narrator of *Romanzo giallo* to describe a particular landscape. Linked to the concept of *terroir* is the theory about local Area Xs, foregrounding the existence of more areas than the one we are aware of. We also encounter a theory about parallel universes and about how what is behind Area X might have come from one of them. Then, we find a theory involving the ‘water-feature crew’, an agency that studies radio waves to intercept signals from extraterrestrial life; hence implying that aliens are behind the appearance of Area X. The last theory regards the Séance and Science Brigade and its ties with Central, especially with Control’s family. It is not presented as a proper theory, but this obscure and mysterious link is often highlighted.

All these theories can ultimately be reduced to simple assumptions of the characters trying to wrap their heads around such an incredible phenomenon. What is more striking from a narrative perspective is that none of these paths is taken and walked by the characters until the end of the trilogy. As in Gadda’s *TAM*, in *SRT* we experience an accumulation of hypotheses that will not be proven (neither true nor false) and that will serve the sole purpose of conveying the message that it is impossible to find the indisputable cause of the birth of Area X. Such an impossibility can be justified by humans’ own condition, meaning that we are limited in both our perceptions and actions, hence the human characters of these novels might be missing pieces of the puzzle. It is quite telling that only Ghost Bird – whom we might call a more-than-human being – is truly receptive, sympathetic, and understanding of Area X. In fact, she is the only one to perceive that the Southern Reach building has become a living organism at the end of the trilogy. Differently from *TAM*’s, the ending of this last installment, despite leaving the plotline open and *untied*, manages to still create a sense of closure in regard to what the trilogy might aim to convey. The last page contains a letter written by the Director to the Lighthouse Keeper, where she seems to reflect about humans as a species and she writes: ‘The world we are a part of now is difficult to accept, unimaginably difficult. I don’t know if I accept everything even now. I don’t know how I can. But acceptance moves past denial’.⁸³ Area X has put humans – the Director, in this case – in a corner: willingly or not, it forced all the characters to realize that their species was not the only one on Earth, and that it was not the strongest nor the most intelligent one. Area X showed human weakness, and the formal choices made for its representation in the trilogy enhance the decentralization of the human figure in favor of a more liminal position among all the beings on the planet.

As outlined above, the narrative structure of these three books resembles in some ways the one Gadda employed in his anti-detective novel. We saw investigators and scientists unable to complete their tasks and being governed by chance; we went through a seemingly never-ending number of hypotheses, ideas and theories on how to solve the *case*; and we endured the characters’ doubtfulness that even made us wonder if anything in the story could be conceived as stable. All of this led to the sense of vagueness and instability that only an unsolved business can transmit. However, the novels’ narrative fragmentation and their open endings send a message that in both case studies regards humans as a species. Accompanying readers through stories that showcase in which ways humanity is fallible, these stories undermine humankind’s presumed exceptionality and prompt the understanding of human life as part of a bigger network of relationships with both humans and nonhumans.

⁸³ *SRT* III, p. 338.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the forms and (sometimes) the meanings of some works are capable to travel through genres, times, languages and places; indeed, in this article I have argued that similar structural arrangements can be recognized in texts written almost 60 years apart in opposite hemispheres and in different languages, even though they do not share any direct or clear connections. Both *That Awful Mess* and the *Southern Reach Trilogy* are structured as systems of intertwined relationships where nothing can be considered as secondary; their storytelling takes the shape of an unorganized network which is filled with digressions and ramifications that purposefully complicate the narration. Utilizing the form of the network as the fundament of storytelling can only have one logical outcome, which is an inconclusive ending. This particular form tends to always expand, so avoiding closure and – in combination with the shortcomings inherent to human abilities – it becomes impossible for humans to understand it in its entirety. In fact, in this article I have drawn attention to what this inextricable bundle affords, being a confusion that implies humans' inability to comprehend all that exists. Although in different ways, in both stories, humanity is presented as partial and so is their perspective on all the events that may occur. For instance, in *TAM* human perceptual limits are implicitly showcased through a(n often ironic) narration of exclusively human characters; while, on the contrary, *SRT* presents both human and nonhuman characters and has a more explicit approach in showing humans' limits – indeed the trilogy ends with a confession/reflection on the human species by one of the main characters. Notwithstanding these differences, both works under examination present only partial viewpoints that – consequently – do not afford certainty. Hence, it becomes impossible for humans to solve any kind of mystery. As mentioned, this impossibility is a key feature of the anti-detective novel, which has been here reframed and juxtaposed with Levine's New Formalism in order to analyze the organizing principles and arrangements of the novels under examination from a perspective that tries to go beyond the plot without undermining its value, so demonstrating that 'fiction doesn't have to speak to the Anthropocene directly, at the level of themes and plot, to deploy pertinent formal resources'.⁸⁴

Two outcomes can be drawn from this study. The first one is that – differently from theme- or content-oriented approaches – New Formalism can shed new light on modernism as a repertoire of narrative strategies that can be fruitfully reprised in contemporary fiction. The second outcome regards the specific form analyzed in this article, which has been shown to be capable of representing a system where humans are not at the center although still being important characters of the plotline. Fighting against the human tendency to categorize things and pushing for the acceptance of human shortcomings, such a form might afford a way to *expose* a post-anthropocentric environment while avoiding the issues of nonhuman representation. In a time when nonhuman representation becomes increasingly important, forms able to prompt narratives 'beyond the human'⁸⁵ are highly needed, and the present article might pave the way for future investigations in a similar direction.

Keywords

Gadda, VanderMeer, New Formalism, anti-detective novel, Posthumanism, nonhuman

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⁸⁴ Caracciolo, *Narrating the Mesh*, cit., p. 47.

⁸⁵ D. Herman, *Narratology Beyond the Human. Storytelling and Animal Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018.

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RIASSUNTO

Decentrare l'umano tramite forme narrative

La 'chiusura impossibile' del *Pasticciaccio* di Gadda e della *Trilogia dell'Area X* di VanderMeer

Il presente articolo si pone l'obiettivo di individuare ed esaminare le caratteristiche narrative formali capaci di suggerire una concezione di vita come intricata matassa di incontri e relazioni fra esseri umani e non umani. Partendo dal presupposto che le innovazioni formali moderniste abbiano anticipato le narrative postumane contemporanee, l'articolo offre una comparazione neo-formalista fra *Quer pasticciaccio brutto della via Merulana* (1957) di Carlo Emilio Gadda e *La trilogia dell'Area X (Annientamento, Autorità, Accettazione, 2015)* di Jeff VanderMeer. In entrambe le opere sono identificabili due caratteristiche peculiari: la prima consiste in una comune impronta autoriale che segue un principio di accumulamento e complicazione manifestantesi in un accavallarsi di teorie non soddisfacenti e spesso incomplete, ma che comunque cercano di dare una soluzione o spiegazione ai misteri al centro dei rispettivi testi. La seconda corrisponde all'affidamento della narrazione ad una moltitudine di personaggi che si rivelano sempre parziali in quanto inabili a comprendere i fenomeni accaduti nella loro interezza. Infatti, i testi analizzati riescono a ridimensionare l'eccezionalità umana dimostrando che la realtà è sempre più complessa ed intrecciata di quanto sia umanamente comprensibile. Da questo ridimensionamento consegue l'impossibilità ad avere una conclusione che si possa definire finale.