May 17 Proj Narrative

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[00:00:00] **Marco Caracciolo:** Many of them die. When they die, they stop pushing air .When they die, they do not search for things anymore.

[00:00:13] **Jim Phelan:** This is Jim Phelan, director of Project Narrative at the Ohio State University, and I'd like to welcome you to the Project Narrative Podcast. In each episode, a narrative theorist selects a short narrative to read and discuss with me or another host. Today I'll be talking with Marco Caracciolo, who has selected Charles Yu's 2020 story Systems for our discussion.

[00:00:39] **Jim Phelan:** Yu's story was commissioned by The New York Times as part of a collection that's published under the title, the Decameron Project, 29 New Stories from the Pandemic. Marco Caracciolo is associate professor of English and Literary Theory at the University of Guent in Belgium, and he currently serves as the second [00:01:00] vice president of the International Society for the Study of Narrative.

[00:01:04] **Jim Phelan:** Marco is the author of numerous books that collectively explore a wide range of individual narratives and issues in narrative theory as their titles suggest. The books include the experiential of narrative and an activist approach. Strange narrators in contemporary fiction explorations and readers engagement with characters, a passion for specificity.

[00:01:29] **Jim Phelan:** Confronting inner experience in literature and science. Co-authored the psychologist Russell Holbert. With Bodies Narrative Theory and Embodied Cognition, co-authored with Karin Cookin narrating the mesh forms story in the Anthropo scene and slow narrative and non-human materialities. Marco, is there anything you'd especially like our listeners to pay attention to as you read Yu's story?[00:02:00]

[00:02:00] **Marco Caracciolo:** First, thanks so much for the invitation, Jim. It's a pleasure to be here to discuss this story with you. Two things I'd like to highlight. First one is perhaps, an unavoidable question given the text. Who is narrating it? Who is the narrator? without giving away too much, there are two options here at least that I could think of. Or perhaps a third option. We could say this story is vague by design. In any case, I think it's worth paying attention to the narrator's identity and how it's textually constructed. Second I'm interested in the emotional arc that is created by the story and also in the ethical position that underlies that arc, particularly with regard to the impact of the pandemic on human societies.

[00:02:48] **Jim Phelan:** Okay, terrific. Yeah, and we'll get into those issues. More after you read the story. Sure. So now here's Marco Caracciolo reading Systems by Charles Yu.

[00:02:59] **Marco Caracciolo:** [00:03:00] They need each other like to be around each other, like to touch each other. They search for things. Harry and Megan. Harry and Megan Canada. New Year's resolutions, new Year's resolutions.

[00:03:12] **Marco Caracciolo:** How long they like being with their families. They like being with their strangers. They work in small spaces, crowd into boxes, push the air around, sleep in boxes, need each other, touch each other. They move around the world. Everywhere in the world like us. They search for things. Harry and William, Megan and Kate.

[00:03:35] **Marco Caracciolo:** Megan and Kate Feud, n ffc, playoff picture. They ask themselves, should I be afraid? How afraid should I be? They ask themselves. What is Coronavirus? Coronavirus, what is it? Oscar party ideas. State of the Union. State of the Union. What time? Super Bowl Odds Bean dipped. Very spicy bean dipped. [00:04:00] Not so spicy.

[00:04:01] **Marco Caracciolo:** They ask themselves if they should be afraid, but they already are. They have patterns. Weekends, summer plans. They have ways of doing things. They don't see how they can give those up. They have weaknesses. They need each other like being around each other. They make noises open their mouths and push the air around and make noises at each other.

[00:04:24] **Marco Caracciolo:** Ha ha ha. Is a noise. Thank you. Is a noise. Did you see the thing about Megan and Harry is a noise. They have systems. Systems have pressure, pressure to grow, make more things more and more and more. They go in the air. Boxes and in those boxes are smaller boxes and smaller boxes, and many of them crawl inside a box and sit there and share the air.

[00:04:51] **Marco Caracciolo:** Their movements seem random at first, but study their movements and it becomes clear that the systems have patterns. Sunlight brings them out of their small [00:05:00] boxes. They move together in streams. Massive streams, sometimes traveling quite far from their home boxes to hubs or centers where they collect in large boxes, streams on the ground.

[00:05:12] **Marco Caracciolo:** They're also capable of airborne travel. They sort themselves and divide their work up. The work is to make more, more, and more and more all day long. They break off in groups, then reform new groups. Air is pushed. There is touching in the moonlight is streamed back to their boxes or to other boxes. When it gets warmer, they spend less time in boxes.

[00:05:36] **Marco Caracciolo:** When it is colder, they heat up their boxes. They follow cycles of earth and moon and sun. Most of them live for many cycles. They search for things first. Date ideas, tapas bars, tapas. Downtown Wuhan Wuhan, where sushi near me. How to tell if he's interested. How to tell if she's interested. Good first date.

[00:05:59] **Marco Caracciolo:** How to [00:06:00] tell second day ideas. Italy. Lumber to Italy. Chinese virus. Trump. Chinese virus. Coronavirus versus flu. Covid not that bad. They search for things. Why do some people say coronavirus? Not that bad. News sources. Trustworthy. Fauci. Fauci. Credentials, Fauci. Face, palm, piff. Fauci, handsome fauci. Married.

[00:06:25] **Marco Caracciolo:** They divide themselves into groups. They say some of us are them and some of us are us. They do not always tell the truth. They spread things on their own. More and more and more. They ask themselves, who invented coronavirus? W H O invented Coronavirus. They search for things. Governor Lockdown, they change their patterns.

[00:06:50] **Marco Caracciolo:** They search for how long is six feet? They ask themselves, zoom, what is it? How to use zoom? School grades, do my grades count? [00:07:00] They search. They look for patterns. They gather data, they look for patterns in the data, and then they do something unexpected. They change their own patterns. No more streaming to large boxes.

[00:07:11] **Marco Caracciolo:** The hubs are empty, the streams are gone. The airborn migration is gone. They stay still in small boxes. They ask themselves affordable. Chromebooks Does zoom cost money? Bored kid activities for bored, kid, teacher thank yous. Teacher appreciation. Green onions grow. Green onions grow. How fast Quadratic formula sign.

[00:07:35] **Marco Caracciolo:** Co-sign tangent. How to be hopeful for kids. How to seem hopeful for kids. Lock down. How much longer what to say to kids. Their older ones sit alone in boxes staring at smaller boxes. Their older ones have trouble with air. They find patterns, but some of them need to find more patterns showing results.

[00:07:57] **Marco Caracciolo:** For coronavirus search. Instead for [00:08:00] coronavirus conspiracy, they ask themselves how to cut hair, how to fix kids' haircut. Hats for kids. The younger ones search. Interview with Astronaut Museum Virtual tour. When does my school start again? Thing versus Hulk. Who wins? Hulk versus Thor? Newham, who wins? Hulk and Thing versus Thor Drunk.

[00:08:23] **Marco Caracciolo:** Who wins Coronavirus. Real Coronavirus Kids. Mother's Day Ideas. Gifts for your mom. Gifts to make for your mom with no money. All the Spider-Man's versus Hulk who wins. They need each other like each other. They miss each other. They ask themselves, can cats get depressed? They search for food, bank donation.

[00:08:47] **Marco Caracciolo:** Food bank near me. What is a pandemic? What is furlough? How to keep kids safe. How to keep older people safe. How old is old? Am I old? What is how [00:09:00] to, is it okay? Can I numbers? Numbers up. Numbers growing. How long before symptoms of coronavirus. Is there a vaccine for coronavirus? How do I avoid coronavirus?

[00:09:12] **Marco Caracciolo:** How did coronavirus start? Is virus getting worse? What is mental health? How can I tell if I'm depressed? What is safest? Takeout they search for stop payment indicator. What does stop payment indicator mean for unemployment? Unemployment office number. When do we open up Lexington? When are we reopening Flint?

[00:09:33] **Marco Caracciolo:** When can we reopen Bowling Green? When it gets warmer, they change their patterns again. They're temperature sensitive and they spend less time in their boxes. Many of them die. When they die. They stop pushing air when they die. They do not search for things anymore. The weather changes and their patterns change.

[00:09:54] **Marco Caracciolo:** Again, staying still in boxes for many cycles, they begin to emerge. Some of them are hungry, [00:10:00] some of them are hungry. They restart the system slowly. The streams resume. The pressure builds more and more and more. They make food. Some of them have too much food. Some of them share food with others. Some of them line up for food.

[00:10:16] **Marco Caracciolo:** They search for things. Cats still depressed? Are we in a bear market? What is a bear market? What? What is a payroll tax cut? What is martial law? How do I shelter in place safest cities to live? What is considered a fever? What is considered a dry cough? What is considered essential? What is open right now?

[00:10:36] **Marco Caracciolo:** What is martial law? How to make, make hand sanitizer. How to sew a face mask, shirtless mask, underwear. His mask. What is N 95? How to Break a Fever. Living alone. What if I'm not alone? They have subgroups. The subgroups are virtually indistinguishable genetically. They have invisible signals that help members of one subgroup [00:11:00] identify fellow members.

[00:11:01] **Marco Caracciolo:** They divide themselves. They say some of us are us and some of us are them. They have weaknesses. Some of them are aggressive, some of them are confused. Some of them have short memories. Some of them cannot change the patterns. They have systems, systems of air, of information, of ideas. Some of them enjoying breathing as the right.

[00:11:23] **Marco Caracciolo:** Some of them can breathe. Some of them send signals with incorrect information about the environment. Misinformation spreads quickly through the population. Misinformation can be transmitted through the mouth or eyes. These signals confuse some of them. Others of them study us. They know what we are not quite alive, invisible.

[00:11:44] **Marco Caracciolo:** Information. They have invisible signals. They talk to each other. They push air. They need each other like each other, miss each other. Think about each other. They harness invisible forces. Electro mag magnetism, light. [00:12:00] They're like us. They have codes. Codes of symbolic sequences. They encode information and spread it.

[00:12:07] **Marco Caracciolo:** They can mean small boxes and signal to each other, encode and coordinate their actions. They can be one and many and one somehow. They have particles, they have transmission. They have ma magical powers. They can communicate across time and space. They have sign. They know approximately 8% of the human genome is viral, d n a.

[00:12:30] **Marco Caracciolo:** They know we will never be a part. There are no subgroups. There is no us and them. They search for things. Where is protest safe? To protest how to protest? They realize community is how it spreads. Community is how it is solved. They will keep going emerge from their boxes, in boxes, in boxes into sunlight cycles resuming.

[00:12:54] **Marco Caracciolo:** They will transmit messages to each other. Some of them will be confused. Some of them will share food. [00:13:00] They will make more and more and more. Some of them will die. Some of them will be hungry. Some of them will be alone. The systems will be systems, but some of them may change the systems, rebuild them, make new patterns.

[00:13:14] **Marco Caracciolo:** They will fly again, collect again in hubs, gathered by the thousands and push air at each other. Ha, ha, ha. And other noises they make to each other to signal invisible things. Some things will not change. They will need each other like each other, miss each other. They will have weaknesses and strengths.

[00:13:33] **Marco Caracciolo:** They ask themselves. Harry and Megan, were now. Harry and Megan, what next?

[00:13:40] **Jim Phelan:** Okay, Marco. Great. there's a lot to get into there.

[00:13:43] **Marco Caracciolo:** Yes, for sure.

[00:13:45] **Jim Phelan:** But, why don't we start with the narration. Then go back to the question you flagged. So who is telling, who's our narrator here? And what are some of the options you think, and, and who, who might the Narratee be then?

[00:13:58] **Marco Caracciolo:** Mm-hmm. My first impulse [00:14:00] was to Regenerator, something like a sentient search engine and ai. Mm-hmm. They can read and extract patterns from people's, search history. So something like chat GPT, but directly plugged into the internet, which is what AI experts have been warning us against for a long time.

[00:14:18] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:14:19] **Marco Caracciolo:** But I think on a closer look, there are elements that don't fully square with that reading.

[00:14:25] **Jim Phelan:** Okay.

[00:14:26] **Marco Caracciolo:** A sense of self-awareness.

[00:14:28] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:14:28] **Marco Caracciolo:** Not just individually, but also as part of a collective.

[00:14:32] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:14:32] **Marco Caracciolo:** And I think this is something that emerges in the passage that I didn't pay a lot of attention to initially, but it is quite striking when the narrator says, others of them study us.

[00:14:41] **Jim Phelan:** Right.

[00:14:41] **Marco Caracciolo:** They know what we are not quite alive, invisible,

[00:14:45] **Jim Phelan:** right.

[00:14:45] **Marco Caracciolo:** Information. So the narrator seems to refer to other ais. Other entities like narrator, but it's quite unclear what this really yeah. Means. And also there's this, in the same passage, there's a reference to [00:15:00] the fact that the narrator and other entities , like it can move around the world, Which is a strange way of describing how artificial intelligence works. So that seems to. Challenge their reading a bit and maybe lend credence to the other hypothesis, which is, the fact that narrator might be the virus itself

[00:15:22] **Jim Phelan:** Right.

[00:15:22] **Marco Caracciolo:** Or Okay. Yeah. In assemblage of, of viruses, the coronavirus.

[00:15:26] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right.

[00:15:27] **Marco Caracciolo:** Like, yeah. So

[00:15:29] **Jim Phelan:** Right. And not quite alive, invisible, able to move around the world.

[00:15:34] **Marco Caracciolo:** Exactly.

[00:15:35] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yes. And then the us Right. So it's a narrator talking to other viruses , , in that sense. Is that

[00:15:42] **Marco Caracciolo:** Yeah. Yes. Absolutely.

[00:15:44] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Okay.

[00:15:45] **Marco Caracciolo:** But I think, I think this is deliberately uncertain and ambiguous.

[00:15:53] **Jim Phelan:** Okay.

[00:15:53] **Marco Caracciolo:** And the narrator seems to have some aI like traits and some virus like [00:16:00] traits. So there is space for right multi ratings here, which I think is, is deliberate.

[00:16:05] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, and I mean, just going back to what you said about, you know, some of the things that the narrator is able to do you know, there's definitely the plugging into the internet, but there's also this knowledge of people, right? There's judgements about, okay, they have weaknesses, they have strengths, you know this kind of thing. So that also creates a kind of interesting perspective, right? And then I think we could, play out, well what does it mean for you to be, charge you to be suggesting that AI knows us this way, or to be suggesting that the virus knows humans in these ways. As you say, if, we have , the uncertainty and, the invitation to try out how the two hypotheses work, we get some really interesting different results, I think. Mm-hmm. [00:17:00] Yeah. Yeah. So, good. So a couple other things that stand out. There's a, a fair amount of repetition. In the narration, right? Some of the key phrases air airborne noises, boxes, streams, that phrase more and more and more. , what do you make of, that sort of repetition? Do you see that as sort of contributing to the narrator's you know, knowledge of, Humans, or is it more just like, okay, recording these things, without a lot of self-awareness.

[00:17:36] **Marco Caracciolo:** Right. I do think that repetition has to do with the automatic nature of the telling or the impression of the telling being just the recording of people's search terms.

[00:17:50] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:17:51] **Marco Caracciolo:** So there is that quality that

[00:17:55] **Jim Phelan:** yeah.

[00:17:55] **Marco Caracciolo:** Comes through. Because of the repetitious of the, of [00:18:00] narration. At the same time, there is also counterpoint to that in the form of these commentaries that you discussed just now. So you know, they have weaknesses. That is not something that, I mean,

[00:18:11] **Jim Phelan:** yeah.

[00:18:11] **Marco Caracciolo:** That is something that seems to, against the grain of the automatic.

[00:18:16] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Right, right. Somehow a regimen string of the internet searches, and that gets translated. There's, there is this kind of active interpreting , of these, yes. Of many things, but I think you're right to also to say that some of them do seem automatic. Right? So the, you know, Harry and Megan. Harry and William, you know, or bean d you know, like, okay, I'm just recording these things that are being searched and there's no commentary on that.

[00:18:43] **Marco Caracciolo:** Exactly. Then we, then we get a sense of randomness. That is also thematized to some extent. But

[00:18:48] **Jim Phelan:** yeah,

[00:18:48] **Marco Caracciolo:** these especially early on we see, you know, the Super Bowl reference that is maybe meant to position the story, the timeline,

[00:18:57] **Jim Phelan:** right.

[00:18:58] **Marco Caracciolo:** In a certain way, but there is a [00:19:00] clear crescendo in the text, I would say with more randomness early on. And then, yeah, more of a focus on covid and its effects. And of course, that also reflects how people's attention was yeah. Was captured by, by Covid and it was difficult to think about anything else.

[00:19:15] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right,

[00:19:16] **Jim Phelan:** right, right. Thinking that's nice. Right. So in the beginning we have this mix of. The Super Bowl State of the Union these kind of searches about the, the royals and so on, and then it gets more focused

[00:19:27] **Marco Caracciolo:** and towards the middle it is really just, covid and it's impact on human communities.

[00:19:32] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah. Great. All right. And then I think, you know, the, the obvious term to go to in terms of this perspective right, is the kind of defamiliarization. Mm-hmm. Right? So and some of these phrases like air and the way in which the different sort of meanings of air come through, we're getting this sort of outside perspective on humans during Covid, right?

[00:19:58] **Marco Caracciolo:** Yes.

[00:19:58] **Jim Phelan:** So let's, [00:20:00] explore that a little bit. In terms of like distance, right? So how, how, how much distance do you feel like the narrator has from the humans that they're talking about?

[00:20:11] **Marco Caracciolo:** I think quite a bit. And that is something that contributes to the Emotional and ethical.

[00:20:17] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:20:17] **Marco Caracciolo:** Complexity of telling that we can maybe discuss later. But certainly there's a long history in science fiction of de familiarizing basic bodily and human activities like breathing in this case.

[00:20:32] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:20:32] **Marco Caracciolo:** But also, you know, being inside a box for being at work or at home.

[00:20:36] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:20:36] **Marco Caracciolo:** So this is a very distant take on on the human. What I find interesting, and that also seems to support the viral reading of the text is that the human is repeatedly described through language that seems to point to viruses. So there is, for example a sense of Human replication. So the work is to make more.

[00:20:59] **Jim Phelan:** Yes.

[00:20:59] **Marco Caracciolo:** [00:21:00] Again, evoking an analogy between humankind and viruses. Mm-hmm. There is also, of course, the focus on airborne travel with the, yeah. Word airborne being very loaded in the context of the pandemic. Of course, this is Just in a sense there's a way of de familiarizing air travel but it's airborne and that seems to point to controversies surrounding how the virus itself moves around. So there is a blurring of ontological divides between the human , and the viral.

[00:21:28] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:21:29] **Marco Caracciolo:** Which is of course part of the defamiliarization, but is also, yeah. Something that contributes to an emotional right distance and estrangement as we read the text.

[00:21:39] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. And in that regard, I mean, it might be, it is also, I think, interesting that.

[00:21:45] **Jim Phelan:** The commentary on groups mm-hmm. Is a place where the narrator does distinguish between their community and that of humans. Right?

[00:21:57] **Marco Caracciolo:** Yeah.

[00:21:57] **Jim Phelan:** They humans make, they [00:22:00] make these groups right. Some of us are us and some of us are them, right? Mm-hmm. Even though there's no difference genetically, right,

[00:22:08] **Marco Caracciolo:** right.

[00:22:09] **Jim Phelan:** Whereas we. Don't do this. Right. So that, you know, that becomes a kind of, you know, again, another juxtaposition, right? So some certain kind of sure language that's, , emphasizing similarity. And then here's a kind of explicit differentiation. Mm-hmm. So, you know I, I guess we're thinking about Defamiliarization there and, explicitness, we might ask, well, you know, what's Yu doing with that kind of differentiation?

[00:22:41] **Marco Caracciolo:** Yeah, yeah, definitely. I think humanity comes across as, Caught between individualism, you know, with this image, which is I think a very powerful image of the boxes. Mm-hmm. Or people isolated in their, homes or wherever they are during lockdown. Yeah. So there's individualism, but there is also [00:23:00] a belonging or striving for the collective. And that is something that emerges very clearly towards the end when we read, you know, community Yeah. Is how its solved or something like that. So yeah, certainly the. narrator seems to have a stronger sense of belonging to a group in a fairly un unplug, unproblematic way versus human tends to divide and create.

[00:23:23] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah. Nice. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:23:24] **Marco Caracciolo:** Racial distinctions and social divides and things like that.

[00:23:28] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Mm-hmm. Yeah. struck this time I was struck away before, but maybe he came out even stronger this time, the repetition of that more and more and more. Right?

[00:23:39] **Marco Caracciolo:** Mm-hmm.

[00:23:39] **Jim Phelan:** So, you know, in one re one respect, I think you could say, okay, well this is what the virus is trying to do. You know, that was one of the similarities there, right? But there's also like this more and more and more without any point to it, right? Mm-hmm. It's just like, you know, it seems to be. [00:24:00] What do they work for more and more and more? What do they do more? You know, what's, what's their purpose? More and more and more, but without any sort of tie to results. Right. It's just like, let's keep increasing.

[00:24:15] **Marco Caracciolo:** Yeah. Yeah. And I, I don't think it's, you know, too farfetched to to read that as a, as a critique of you know, neoliberal capitalism. And it tends to produce more and more and more without. A clear outcome or something is meaningful at the end of the process. Right,

[00:24:32] **Jim Phelan:** right.

[00:24:33] **Marco Caracciolo:** And in that sense, humans are quite virus-like as well.

[00:24:37] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And that, that then ties into some of the, the ethical, uh, Mm-hmm dimension that, that we'll get to and that, I know you're interested,

[00:24:45] **Marco Caracciolo:** but I guess part of the defamiliarization here has to do with the fact that, you know, humans seem to think that they're driven by goals and, and

[00:24:55] **Jim Phelan:** mm-hmm.

[00:24:55] **Marco Caracciolo:** Ambitions and purposes and aspirations and so on and so forth, but active [00:25:00] actually, from the virus's perspective or from the narrator's perspective, there is just pattern, right? Yeah. So it's. It's actually something that humans are not fully conscious of, that that drives them. Yeah. In more or less the same way as, as viruses tend to replicate by

[00:25:15] **Marco Caracciolo:** nature.

[00:25:16] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Good. Good. Maybe just before we go to , the ethical dimension and the effect of dimension

[00:25:22] **Marco Caracciolo:** mm-hmm.

[00:25:23] **Jim Phelan:** We were just a little bit more on the narration by taking a look at You know, one of the, a specific passage, so

[00:25:30] **Marco Caracciolo:** mm-hmm.

[00:25:30] **Jim Phelan:** We get the narrator describing humans saying their movements seem random at first, but study their movements and it becomes clear that the systems have patterns.

[00:25:43] **Jim Phelan:** Sunlight brings them out of their small boxes. They move together in streams, massive streams, sometimes traveling quite far from their home boxes. To hubs or centers where they collect in large boxes. So, just again,[00:26:00] the idea that there's some kind of, similarity between the virus

[00:26:04] **Marco Caracciolo:** mm-hmm.

[00:26:05] **Jim Phelan:** human movement and so on. And maybe even something about the way the story itself works. So the narration works as a pattern or set of patterns. What are your thoughts?

[00:26:17] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, especially

[00:26:18] **Marco Caracciolo:** thinking about the, the beginning with these references that we discussed to the Super Bowl State of the Union dress, Megan and Harry. All of this seems quite arbitrary , or random at first.

[00:26:29] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:26:30] **Marco Caracciolo:** But then, the pattern of covid starts emerging more and more clearly for the readers. So in a sense, this statement also works as a meta commentary on other story itself functions.

[00:26:43] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, the larger point here about with the narration in this meta commentary and so on is the way in which there's a sort of surface, simplicity to it.

[00:26:53] **Marco Caracciolo:** Yeah.

[00:26:53] **Jim Phelan:** And yet, it sort of generates all this readerly activity of

[00:26:57] **Marco Caracciolo:** absolutely

[00:26:58] **Jim Phelan:** sense making and [00:27:00] so on.

[00:27:00] **Marco Caracciolo:** Yeah. Yeah, I don't know if it would make sense to talk about naive defamiliarization, which is your term, of course Jim, for, for the type of narrative situation. But there is a sense of simplicity, as you said, that emerges from, from the telling.

[00:27:13] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:27:14] **Marco Caracciolo:** Although I think the ethics is, is more complicated than it tends to be in child narration, for example, which

[00:27:19] **Jim Phelan:** mm-hmm.

[00:27:20] **Marco Caracciolo:** I think would be a good example of naive familiarization.

[00:27:23] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:27:23] **Marco Caracciolo:** Cause it is true that this is simplifying, but it simplifies in a way, That you know, sidelines the emotional impact of many of the things that are happening around the characters

[00:27:34] **Jim Phelan:** mm-hmm.

[00:27:34] **Marco Caracciolo:** Or humanity. And of course that can be seen as ethically problematic, but I guess we'll discuss that in a bit.

[00:27:42] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, let's go for it.

[00:27:44] **Marco Caracciolo:** Okay, great.

[00:27:44] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. We've already talked about this juxtaposition of recording and interpreting,

[00:27:51] **Marco Caracciolo:** mm-hmm.

[00:27:51] **Jim Phelan:** And so on. there's not a lot of explicit ethical evaluation by the narrator and

[00:27:59] **Marco Caracciolo:** Right.

[00:27:59] **Jim Phelan:** [00:28:00] But yet I think we both feel there's this strong, ethical dimension to the story.

[00:28:06] **Marco Caracciolo:** Mm-hmm. Sure.

[00:28:07] **Jim Phelan:** and then this is part of what, you know, I think Yu is inviting the audience, , his readers to, to do all right, well

[00:28:14] **Marco Caracciolo:** mm-hmm.

[00:28:15] **Jim Phelan:** Fill in the ethical gaps in a way.

[00:28:17] **Marco Caracciolo:** Sure, sure.

[00:28:17] **Jim Phelan:** And we've touched on it to some degree, but where would you like to go to?

[00:28:21] **Marco Caracciolo:** Yeah. I'm thinking in particular of this passage. Which I think is in a way, the emotional climax of the story. Many of them die. When they die, they stop pushing air .When they die, they do not search for things anymore.

[00:28:33] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:28:35] **Marco Caracciolo:** well, so first this really reminded me of Virginia Wolves to the lighthouse. Especially the time passes section.

[00:28:42] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:28:42] **Marco Caracciolo:** In that text where the protagonist Mrs. Ramsay. Dies in a parenthetical sentence.

[00:28:49] **Jim Phelan:** Right.

[00:28:49] **Marco Caracciolo:** And then narrator very quickly moves on without seemingly doing justice to such an important event from, from the reader's perspective.

[00:28:57] **Jim Phelan:** Right. Right.

[00:28:58] **Marco Caracciolo:** So the protagonist's death is kind of[00:29:00] brushed aside. And I think something similar is happening here. Of course, not on a personal or individual level, more on a collective

[00:29:07] **Jim Phelan:** mm-hmm.

[00:29:08] **Marco Caracciolo:** Level, but. Some readers might find this de familiarizing description of, of death disturbing because it is so emotionless.

[00:29:17] **Jim Phelan:** Right. Right.

[00:29:18] **Marco Caracciolo:** It is such a distance take on right on mass death. That can be quite unsettling. Of course another, at least part of me finds this type of de depiction reassuring as well in that it sort of presents this as something biological, mechanical, Sort of familiarizing are or the emotions that surround mortality. Mm-hmm. But I think it is the combination of these affects.

[00:29:47] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Uh.

[00:29:48] **Marco Caracciolo:** That I find particularly striking here. So, and, and that is also a point about, about ethics. Mm-hmm. Because it seems to me that this is a story that dwells [00:30:00] in ethical uncertainty. And it does so precisely, but juxtaposing such an emotionally and historically significant event as covid.

[00:30:09] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:30:10] **Marco Caracciolo:** And this very, familiarizing, distanced right, the distance Eric voice.

[00:30:16] **Jim Phelan:** Right.

[00:30:16] **Marco Caracciolo:** If it is a voice perspective.

[00:30:18] **Jim Phelan:** Right. And again, , this idea of the, of the perspec, right? So here, I I like that you're thinking about this as an emotional core, because I think here, just to pick up on what you were saying about the flatness of it, right?

[00:30:34] **Marco Caracciolo:** Mm-hmm.

[00:30:34] **Jim Phelan:** But also the perspective, right? So, and then the gap between the virus's perspective or the narrator's perspective, and a reader's perspective, right? What, what signifies dying for this narrator.

[00:30:49] **Marco Caracciolo:** Mm-hmm.

[00:30:50] **Jim Phelan:** Right? When they die, they do not search for things anymore. Right?

[00:30:55] **Marco Caracciolo:** Mm-hmm.

[00:30:55] **Jim Phelan:** That, that, I mean, and from their perspective, right? You, we see the logic [00:31:00] of that because that's what they've been plugged into so much, right? Mm-hmm.

[00:31:03] **Marco Caracciolo:** Mm-hmm.

[00:31:04] **Jim Phelan:** But to sum up the significance of a death in terms of Okay, they don't search for anything, any things for anymore.

[00:31:11] **Marco Caracciolo:** Mm-hmm.

[00:31:11] **Jim Phelan:** Right? For, I think it's quite jarring. It's jarring for me anyway. I think it's jarring for a lot of readers.

[00:31:17] **Marco Caracciolo:** Of course.

[00:31:17] **Jim Phelan:** And then it gets a kind of emotional force because of that.

[00:31:20] **Marco Caracciolo:** Sure.

[00:31:21] **Jim Phelan:** That gap. Yeah.

[00:31:22] **Marco Caracciolo:** And of course that also has to do with realizing the double meaning of search in this context, which is, as you said about online searches, but it's also about desire, something that defines

[00:31:33] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:31:33] **Marco Caracciolo:** Being alive, right?

[00:31:34] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:31:34] **Marco Caracciolo:** So I think, I don't know if that is, Fully intended on, on the narrator's part. Right. It's definitely intended on Yu's part.

[00:31:40] **Jim Phelan:** Exactly right. Yeah. No, I'd be inclined to say not, not on the narrator's part, but yeah

[00:31:45] **Marco Caracciolo:** absolutely.

[00:31:46] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, good. So maybe when we could talk a little bit about the arc, right. the emotional arc from beginning to melt in. We've already talked a little bit about the. You know, what seems random at first, and then, the variety of [00:32:00] things that are occupying humans, and then the, focus on the virus itself and all that.

[00:32:06] **Jim Phelan:** And then maybe we could, bring into that discussion a little bit of the ending, right? Where we have this shift from the present tense to the future.

[00:32:18] **Marco Caracciolo:** Mm-hmm.

[00:32:18] **Jim Phelan:** And then the idea you know, systems will be systems. Some of them may change the systems, et cetera. Some things will not change. They will need each other, like each other, miss each other. They will have weaknesses and strengths. They ask themselves, Harry and Megan, what now? Harry and Megan, what next? And so we have this kind of return to the beginning, but also a return to the more superficial and what's occupying celebrity news and, and things like that. Right. So.

[00:32:51] **Marco Caracciolo:** Sure, sure.

[00:32:52] **Jim Phelan:** Do you see that as a kind of positive or,

[00:32:55] **Marco Caracciolo:** I would say at least on a surface level, it is a [00:33:00] helpful ending. But of course it's not. There is some unease I would say when Megan and Harry come up again in the ending.

[00:33:12] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah,

[00:33:12] **Marco Caracciolo:** of course, the reference signals, they return to normality, to a time when, you know, there is no emergency. People are free to worry about completely trivial things. But at the same time I'm not sure this is not actually meant to critique our tendency to claim to whatever facade of normality we can get.

[00:33:37] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:33:37] **Marco Caracciolo:** Go back to where we started with fully processing what just happened. So that's where it becomes a bit more complicated, I would say, than, than just a happy ending.

[00:33:47] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:33:48] **Marco Caracciolo:** Because that circularity also indicates that. Not much has happened.

[00:33:53] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:33:53] **Marco Caracciolo:** And implicitly that seems to expose our tendency to sideline what happened.

[00:33:59] **Jim Phelan:** Right.

[00:33:59] **Marco Caracciolo:** Sideline [00:34:00] Yeah. Of the pandemic, you know?

[00:34:03] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:34:04] **Marco Caracciolo:** Just move on without fully Right doing justice to the events.

[00:34:09] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. And going back to making more and more and more.

[00:34:12] **Marco Caracciolo:** Exactly. Yeah.

[00:34:13] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah. Yes.

[00:34:14] **Marco Caracciolo:** So there is a sense of hope but there's some disquiet that goes with that.

[00:34:21] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:34:21] **Marco Caracciolo:** With hope, I would say.

[00:34:22] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah. And they also interesting in the emphasis there, you know, some may change the systems but then there's the fo the, the emphasis really is on the returning, returning to the systems. They'll, you know.

[00:34:36] **Marco Caracciolo:** Absolutely.

[00:34:37] **Jim Phelan:** They'll go back to Airborn trial.

[00:34:39] **Marco Caracciolo:** Yes. It's how clear what the change really is. And this reference to community

[00:34:44] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:34:45] **Marco Caracciolo:** Seems, aspirational more than anything else. Yeah.

[00:34:47] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah. So,

[00:34:50] **Marco Caracciolo:** Yeah, sure. It's quite a utopian ending. But there is of course, more than enough dystopia in it.

[00:34:56] **Jim Phelan:** Exactly right. Yeah. Maybe that leads us to the [00:35:00] question about genre, right? you referenced science fiction before, now , you've brought in the idea of utopia dystopia how do you see it? In terms of, genre terms?

[00:35:10] **Marco Caracciolo:** Yeah, I think in terms of audiences, I don't think Yu is addressing a science fiction audience,

[00:35:16] **Jim Phelan:** Uhhuh

[00:35:16] **Marco Caracciolo:** specifically at least based on the publication context. Which might lead to You know, responses they're quite different from what a typical science fiction audience would say when reading the story. So for example, this defamiliarizing device.

[00:35:34] **Jim Phelan:** Science, science fiction for non-science fiction specialist. In a way.

[00:35:39] **Marco Caracciolo:** Yes. Absolutely. And the defamiliarization at work here is quite predictable, I would say.

[00:35:45] **Jim Phelan:** Um-huh.

[00:35:46] **Marco Caracciolo:** It's Not something that will strike a science fiction reader as as anything new.

[00:35:51] **Jim Phelan:** So then the question might be, well, what is it? Is it specifically, , these kind of conventional things? The non-human, the distant perspective, the [00:36:00] Defamiliarization? Not so much in the sense of okay, formally innovative because we've seen it done before, , but maybe then the question would be a kind of judgment of the effectiveness of it for

[00:36:10] **Marco Caracciolo:** Right.

[00:36:10] **Jim Phelan:** Giving a take on the pandemic, and especially maybe we could say in July, 2020, right?

[00:36:17] **Marco Caracciolo:** Mm-hmm.

[00:36:17] **Jim Phelan:** I mean, that this, this is,

[00:36:19] **Marco Caracciolo:** yeah, we have to put in context.

[00:36:20] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, sure. Yeah.

[00:36:22] **Marco Caracciolo:** Yeah. I think there's a. There's quite a few science fiction texts that play with ai.

[00:36:31] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:36:31] **Marco Caracciolo:** Narration what stands out at least to me here, is what we discussed as the combination of Evaluation and the more impersonal objective.

[00:36:42] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:36:42] **Marco Caracciolo:** Recording element to the narration because that seems to, to be quite different from more anthropomorphic takes on AI in science fiction where the AI has a distinct voice.

[00:36:56] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:36:56] **Marco Caracciolo:** So that kind of anthropomorphism is certainly present here, [00:37:00] But less marked.

[00:37:01] **Jim Phelan:** Okay.

[00:37:01] **Marco Caracciolo:** And I think in large part, that is because of the fragmentary nature of of the narrative with these snippets of text, these search terms. that keeps the narrative from projecting what we can read as a coherent voice.

[00:37:13] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:37:13] **Marco Caracciolo:** But of course they are the moments of commentary where, you know, this is.

[00:37:16] **Jim Phelan:** Right. It is a little more coherent.

[00:37:17] **Marco Caracciolo:** Different,

[00:37:17] **Jim Phelan:** yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. So that, again, to go back to that juxtaposition, yeah.

[00:37:22] **Marco Caracciolo:** But it, I think this is part of what makes the narrator of Yu's story so convincing for me. the tendency to avoid a straightforward anthropomorization of the AI or narrator, whatever.

[00:37:35] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:37:35] **Marco Caracciolo:** Virus.

[00:37:37] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:37:37] **Marco Caracciolo:** But, Yeah.

[00:37:38] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Well that's good. All right. Well maybe as we come to the end, maybe we could speculate a little bit. So this was published in July, 2020, as we said, it's now May, 2023. What do you think it's, life will be like, I mean, what, what, what would be like to read it? You know, we're speculating, right? But. 10 years from now, 20 [00:38:00] years from now.

[00:38:00] **Marco Caracciolo:** Sure.

[00:38:00] **Jim Phelan:** I think three years after it holds up pretty well. It's.

[00:38:04] **Marco Caracciolo:** Yeah.

[00:38:04] **Jim Phelan:** It gave us a lot to talk about and, I think it is a very interesting take on the early days of the pandemic.

[00:38:12] **Marco Caracciolo:** I think that points to something that we didn't discuss at least not fully, but the reader's role in filling in the gaps here because, you know, all of this seems so, Familiar and recognizable to us because we have this more or less shared experience of going through the lockdown, the rising numbers. All of these things are implicitly evoked by the story. Never really made explicit or spelled out. And I think that is maybe a way Of immersing the reader more. I think the, the gaps of the text all of the.

[00:38:52] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, and just these little fragmentary references then that we. We can fill in because it's been our experience.

[00:38:59] **Marco Caracciolo:** We have these [00:39:00] memories and we project these memories onto the text. But of course, as you said, that brings up a question, what is going to happen 50 years from now or 20 years from now or whenever, when hopefully we won't have these memories, or at least they won't be as fresh as they are now. So how is right this, this step going to be.

[00:39:17] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:39:19] **Marco Caracciolo:** Going to be read?

[00:39:20] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Will we remember Harry and Megan? You know?

[00:39:23] **Marco Caracciolo:** Yes. Oh, of course. Yeah. And I think. There is a wave of Covid novels coming out and some of them are already out.

[00:39:35] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right.

[00:39:37] **Marco Caracciolo:** Thinking about ha Ajara two Paradise, which is another dystopian text, at least in the third part, I don't if you've read that one, but

[00:39:43] **Jim Phelan:** I have not.

[00:39:44] **Marco Caracciolo:** It imagines a world where it's not about just about a single pandemic. It's really waves and waves of pandemics that. Shape human societies, right?

[00:39:55] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:39:55] **Marco Caracciolo:** And that is a fairly bleak take, and that would seem to suggest that, you know, a reader [00:40:00] 50 years from now, if that is true. Right. I don't know if a novelist are particularly good at predicting the future, but if she's right, Yanagihara is right about that, then a reader 50 years from now will certainly recognize these experiences of being in boxes in the lockdown and

[00:40:16] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right.

[00:40:17] **Marco Caracciolo:** The numbers. So,

[00:40:19] **Jim Phelan:** yeah. Yeah. Okay. Alright. We're.

[00:40:22] **Marco Caracciolo:** We don't know. We don't know.

[00:40:23] **Jim Phelan:** But we don't know. Right. We can only speculate.

[00:40:25] **Marco Caracciolo:** We still hope that yeah, maybe one day, one reader will, will read this text and, and say something like what is Yu talking about? What are these boxes? What is, what is what is lockdown?

[00:40:36] **Jim Phelan:** Right. Right. And they'll have to, they'll have to do research of a kind that we don't have to do when we, when we, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Okay.

[00:40:43] **Marco Caracciolo:** Sure.

[00:40:43] **Jim Phelan:** Well thank you very much, Marco.

[00:40:45] **Marco Caracciolo:** Thank you. Jim was it was great.

[00:40:47] **Jim Phelan:** So, yeah. Okay. And I also want to thank our listeners and to say we'd appreciate your feedback. You can send it to us@projectnarrativeosu.edu or on our [00:41:00] Facebook page or to our Twitter account, where @PNOhioState. And I also wanna say, you can find numerous additional podcasts at the Project Narrative website or on Apple Podcasts. See you next month.