Master’s Placement Report

University of Ghent

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I. Introduction

From the end of September 2018 to half the month of January 2019, I had the pleasure of doing an internship with professor Marco Caracciolo, at Ghent University. In this timespan, I had the chance of working with and learning from very talented scholars.

The time I spent in Gent was rather packed with tasks since I decided to get the most of what the university had to offer. Therefore, I did a tutorial with professor Caracciolo and his PhD, Ms. Shannon Lambert; I went to some guest lectures organized by Ghent University; I sat in on an advance Master course taught by prof. Caracciolo; I also did some metaphor coding for NARMESH (a.k.a. Narrating the Mesh), an ERC-funded project led by Prof. Caracciolo; and I worked on an article while putting together a PhD proposal. It was intense but extremely rewarding.

It was satisfying to learn and discuss about topics that I am deeply interested in. And being able to take the time to focus and delve into them was a great experience. I really enjoyed it.
II. Receiving Organization

Ghent University—or Gent Universiteit, as it is called in Dutch—is a top 100 university and the first Dutch-speaking university in Belgium. It is located in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, and it counts over 44,000 students and 15,000 employees. Many research groups and institutions have been funded—entirely or partially—by this university, making it a very prolific and active research center.

II.I. “Narrating the Mesh” (NARMESH)

“Narrating the Mesh”—or NARMESH in short—is a multidisciplinary research project examining contemporary narrative and its potential for questioning and broadening the human imagination of the nonhuman.

NARMESH explores (a) the way in which narrative (in literary fiction and oral storytelling) captures the many ways in which humans hinge on climate or the geological history of the Earth; (b) how to narrate non-human scaled entities; (c) in which way stories may be able to undermine anthropocentrism in favor of a respectful coexistence with realities beyond the human.

NARMESH is a 1.1-million-euro project funded by the European Research Council. It is based at the department of Literary Studies of Ghent University and it is led by Prof. Marco Caracciolo.
III. The Placement

My internship at the University of Ghent consisted of a combination of tasks, courses and work on personal research. I am particularly satisfied of having found the time to also focus on my own research because I was able to get valid and eye-opening feedback from both Prof. Caracciolo and Ms. Lambert.

III.1 Tutorial

Prof. Caracciolo, Ms. Lambert and I created sort of a discussion group. We analyzed together the texts’ strongest and the weakest point, we discussed the way in which we would have built on the texts’ content, giving our opinion on both the matters and the methods used in said texts, but we also talked about the validity and (sometimes) applicability of what was theorized by the authors.

The first text that Prof. Caracciolo made me read is a book titled Ecocriticism on the Edge: the Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept written by Timothy Clark and published in 2015. Clark explores the way the planet Earth and the ecosystem as a whole is perceived by humans. He studies the different ways that could be able to challenge the very anthropocentric vision that he attributes to most humans’ behavior. I really appreciated Clark’s elaboration of Morton’s “hyperobjects” (2013)—concepts and objects that humans are not able to grasp in their entirety (e.g. the environment, the galaxy, overpopulation, etc.)—and his focus on both the narrative strategies that could be useful to undercut anthropocentrism and also the possible effects of such strategies. Even though I really enjoyed the book, I was not too fond of the main approach theorized in the book (Scale Framing), because I believe that this kind of approach depends too much on the singular
researcher, hence risking of having an outcome too deeply intertwined with the scholar’s background and personal experience.

Then, we focused on Alexa Weik von Mossner’s *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative* (2017). In her book, Mossner alternates analysis of human-nonhuman and human-ecosystem relationship with new readings of some books in light of what she defines as a “cognitive ecocritical approach to narrative emotion” (4). I really enjoyed this book as a whole but I was particularly struck by the chapters on cognitive empathy (Theory of Mind) and affective empathy (Feeling of the Body). Mossner explores human empathy with the nonhuman in its many methods but also its limits (e.g. the familiarity bias: empathy interferes with moral judgement), giving a great account of transspecies empathy and relationship in general. This is definitely one of the texts that I see myself using again in my research.

Lastly, we examined David Herman’s “Storyworld/Umwelt: Nonhuman Experiences in Graphic Storyworld/Umwelt: Nonhuman Experiences in Graphic Narratives” (2011). In this article, Herman focuses on graphic narratives and on how to convey nonhuman experience in narrative forms. He tries to go beyond the dualistic models of mind thus highlighting the continuity rather than the discontinuity between human and nonhuman experience; and makes a well-thought-out schema, useful to identify and recognize nonhuman narratives. Said schema goes from fine-grained (e.g. animal allegory) to coarse-grained (e.g. Umwelt exploration) narrations.

III.II. MaNaMa Course

During the time of my placement, I followed an advanced master course on Cognitive Literary Studies—part of a full degree called MaNaMa—taught by prof. Caracciolo
consisting of five meetings. I prepared for and participated to the classes but—with the agreement of the lecturer—I decided not to be graded nor to write a paper for this course. Nevertheless, I enjoyed these classes; I have now a clear idea of the different researchable aspects of Cognitive Literary Studies, which was something I was missing.

III.III NARMESH Metaphor Coding

Moreover, I was tasked by Prof. Caracciolo with coding metaphors contained in some interviews I was provided with. The ones I analyzed were nine of a larger corpus of over thirty interviews conducted by one of prof. Caracciolo’s collaborators, Dr. Susannah Crockford. Through this task, I learned how to identify metaphors systematically and I developed practical skills as processing an Excel spreadsheet with a relatively large dataset.

III.IV. Paper on Luigi Pirandello

As I have already mentioned, I kept working on my personal research throughout my internship at Ghent University. I revised a paper I had already wrote while still in Groningen with the supervision of Dr. Alberto Godioli on Luigi Pirandello’s short stories and the nonhuman, and I managed to enrich it based what I have learned. Both Prof. Caracciolo and Ms. Lambert took the time to read and revise this paper many times; they surely help me preparing it for publication. The paper has now been submitted for publication in the collective volume Posthumanist Modernism: Transnational Perspectives, ed. by A. Godioli and C. Van den Bergh, Brill, 2020

III.V. PhD Proposal

I started the internship with the intention of writing a PhD proposal, but I did not know how to do it. With the help I received from both my internal and external supervisors, I now
have a precise focus and a clear idea on how to put it together. My proposal is still in the works, but it will be finished relatively shortly. I will delve deeper into the ties between Italian Modernism and the nonhuman.

III.VI. Guest Lectures

During my time in Ghent, I also attended guest lectures given by Jan Alber, Kári Driscoll, Susanne Knittel and Catherine Emmott.
IV. Evaluation

Ghent University is a central institution in the city and the Flemish part of the country. In its organization, it lived up to my expectations. Professor Marco Caracciolo and the collaborators I had the pleasure to talk and work with are extremely welcoming people; they made me feel at ease from the very first moment. Furthermore, they are very knowledgeable in what they study, I felt lucky to be in the position of learning so much all at once. On a personal note, I believe that the project Prof. Caracciolo is conducting is extraordinarily valid and deeply interesting. I am really looking forward to reading the outcomes of it.

My only complaint is not about the University but more about the organization of the city. I endured a series of unfortunate events, but that could also be simply attributed to bad luck.
V. Conclusion

As I have already mentioned, this has been a very enriching experience for me. All the activities I was able to accomplish—the tutorial, the MaNaMa course, the coding for NARMESH, and the work on my article and PhD proposal—gave me a very strong sense of what kind of academic life I can aim to have and showed me which trajectory I should follow to get it.

It may seem unusual to say, but the main element I benefitted from was time. Having the time to study what I am personally interested in and deepen my knowledge of it. Sometimes it can be rather difficult find a course which fit you interests in its entirety, but throughout this placement I was lucky enough to find people who understood immediately what I wanted to study and really helped me doing it.

Other interesting outcomes of this internship were the possibility of building a network with researchers and scholars focused on topics close to mine and having to accomplish tasks I had never tried to do, as the metaphor coding.

In sum, I had a busy time in Ghent, but it was in the direction of a personal and academic growth.
VI. Bibliography


