Rhythm and Scalar Levels in Reading Fiction

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Outline

1. Enactive cognition and the patterning of reader-text interactions
2. Rhythm: towards a multiscalar understanding
3. Example: *Boca Raton*, by Lauren Groff
1. Enactive cognition

• What is enactivism?
• A theory of the mind that foregrounds interaction, vs. Cartesian mind-world dualism.
• Part of the larger movement of “embodied cognition.”
1. Enactive cognition

• Two strands of enactivist philosophy after Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991):

1. Enactivist account of perception (Noë 2004), emotion (Colombetti 2013), and basic experience in general (Hutto and Myin 2012).
1. Enactive cognition

• Two strands of enactivist philosophy after Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991):

2. Work on intersubjectivity, coordination, and play by Ezequiel Di Paolo and colleagues (e.g., Stewart, Gapenne, and Di Paolo 2010).
1. Enactive cognition

• Both strands can be applied to the study of reading (work by Emily Troscianko, Yanna Popova, and myself) → extension and revision of reader-response theory.
1. Enactive cognition

• Popova builds on De Jaegher and Di Paolo’s enactivist account of intersubjectivity → social cognition as an act of coordination between participants.
1. Enactive cognition

• Popova (2015, 83): “the interaction between narrator and reader is best captured as a kind of rhythmic coordination between tension and release in the narrative pace itself, as the contrast between scene and summary, between the oscillation of short punctual events and temporally unconstrained moments of evaluative pausing, etc.”
1. Enactive cognition

• Popova (2015) suggests that engaging with stories involves rhythmic coordination between storyteller and audience.
• Self-evident in the case of oral performance, less obvious perhaps in the case of written narrative.
1. Enactive cognition

• Cf. also David Herman’s (2013) account of narrative, which is based on the concept of “joint attention” (Tomasello 1999) → a premise for storyteller-audience coordination.
1. Enactive cognition

• Central questions: How do rhythms emerge and interact in reading fiction? How do they contribute to experience and interpretation?
2. Rhythm: a multiscalar concept

• Rhythm (Barbieri 2004): any iterated *formal* pattern.
2. Rhythm: a multiscalar concept

• Through his focus on tension, Barbieri draws a link between form and experience.

For instance, prosody and rhyme:

“I trust I have not wasted breath:
I think we are not wholly brain,
Magnetic mockeries; not in vain,
Like Paul with beasts, I fought with Death” (Tennyson, *In Memoriam*)
2. Rhythm: a multiscalar concept

• How can we apply this account of rhythm to narrative?
• Rhythm concept is often used metaphorically or loosely in narrative theory, but cf. recent work by Andrea Fenice (2018), Yonina Hoffman (forthcoming), and others.
2. Rhythm: a multiscalar concept

• “The cadence that makes for a story is that of the arousal and resolution of affect, a pattern that is biologically programmed. Hence we understand stories visceraally, with our bodies” (Velleman 2003, 13).
2. Rhythm: a multiscalar concept

• E. M. Forster’s (1955, 86) example of plot: “The king died, and then the queen died of grief.”

The king’s death creates tension ("arousal" for Velleman) + queen’s death brings closure or "resolution."
2. Rhythm: a multiscalar concept

• Basic rhythm of narrative involves event sequentiality: in the interaction between storyteller and audience, an event creates tension and, later, another event resolves that tension.

• This tension registers (more or less consciously) in the reader’s body.
2. Rhythm: a multiscalar concept

• Many configurations are possible: cf. Meir Sternberg’s “narrative universals” of suspense, curiosity, and surprise.
2. Rhythm: a multiscalar concept

• But rhythm in narrative exists on levels besides event sequentiality → multiscalarity.

• Scale = basic unit of analysis (from individual words to discourse).
2. Rhythm: a multiscalar concept

- Thematic patterns
- ↓
- Discourse-level segmentation
- ↓
- Event sequentiality
- ↓
- Sentence-level patterns
- ↓
- Prosody
2. Rhythm: a multiscalar concept

- Thematic patterns
- Discourse-level segmentation
- Event sequentiality
- Sentence-level patterns
- Prosody

- Accelerations and decelerations that Genette (1980) discusses under the heading of duration/speed
- Story/discourse deviations that create suspense, curiosity, and surprise
2. Rhythm: a multiscalar concept

• Rhythmic patterns can exist on all of these scalar levels, and they can all generate (micro-)tensions in the reading experience.
2. Rhythm: a multiscalar concept

• “Foregrounded” rhythm (Fenice 2018) is the rhythm that takes center stage in the reader’s attention and subsumes or coordinates the other rhythmic levels.
• Usually, event sequentiality is foregrounded, but not necessarily.
2. Rhythm: a multiscalar concept

• “Scale effects” in narrative rhythm: top-down or bottom-up

[Diagram showing the relationship between Thematic patterns, Discourse-level segmentation, Event sequentiality, Sentence-level patterns, and Prosody with arrows indicating top-down and bottom-up flow]
3. Example: *Boca Raton*

- Novella (2018) in Amazon-published “Warmer” series
- Focuses on Ange, a young single mother struggling with climate change-related anxieties
3. Example: *Boca Raton*

- Foregrounded rhythm (event sequentiality): five sleepless nights.

- “It was very late and Ange couldn’t sleep. She had tried the usual things, had drunk a bottle of wine and watched a glacial Scandinavian film, had stared at her daughter smiling in her dreams, but her mind stayed bright, and there was no fatigue in her bones.”

- “*Two in a row*, Ange said. *I’m going for the record.*”

- “But for the fourth night in a row, sleep did not come.”

- Etc.
3. Example: *Boca Raton*

- As time passes, Ange’s visions of the end of the world become more vivid, almost hallucinatory: e.g., “Only the ocean was always awake. Ange and the ocean. Ange being eaten, the ocean that will eat everything.”
3. Example: *Boca Raton*

- Sequence of sleepless nights is complicated by segmentation into unnumbered sections of uneven length (discourse-level scale).
- Effect of foregrounded event sequentiality: loose juxtaposition + crescendo of anxiety.
3. Example: *Boca Raton*

- Bottom-up effect: enumerations at stylistic level reinforce the sense of unstructured juxtaposition (→ character’s mental state).

- E.g., “Out of the mud and from under the foliage, Ange had wrested license plates, condoms, popped balloons, Ping Pong balls, beer cans—the effluvia of disposable lives.”
3. Example: *Boca Raton*

- Top-down effect (from thematic focus on climate change): the enumerations recall the mindless consumption that is at the root of the ecological crisis.
3. Example: *Boca Raton*

Return of catastrophic visions

↔

Unnumbered sections

↔

Open-ended series of sleepless nights (foregrounded rhythm)

↔

Stylistic enumerations
3. Example: *Boca Raton*

• Through resonances across these scalar levels, *Boca Raton* achieves remarkable integration between theme, narrative form, and stylistic strategies.

→ Discontinuities across these rhythmic levels are possible, too.
Conclusion

• Enactivist approach: focus on the interactive dynamic of engaging with narrative.

• Rhythm concept captures the patterning of storyteller-audience coordination (dependent on both textual strategies and audiences’ attention).
Conclusion

• Rhythm not a monolithic phenomenon, but a multiscalar one, with effects traveling both bottom-up and top-down.

• Inseparability of (narrative, stylistic) form and (thematic) dimension → rhythms in narrative and in society, cf. “New Formalism” (Levine 2015).
Conclusion

• As an inherently affective and embodied phenomenon (cf. Velleman), rhythm allows narrative scholars to bridge the gap between literary form and discussions in cognitive and affect theory.

• Rhythm as a **heuristic concept** for literary (narrative) analysis.
A few open questions

• Conscious vs. unconscious patterns in reading
• Link between rhythm and immersion in narrative
• Empirical applications