

Rachel Kushner's *The Mars Room*. A Case Study in Narrative and Style

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**Abstract**

Multi-focal and multi-vocal narratives can sometimes be displacing for readers and impeach their understanding; similarly, they are commonly regarded as a 'difficult' endeavor for writers, better handled by highly crafty authors like the traditionally equally 'difficult' Modernists.

It is surprising how, in recent times, works that have been enthusiastically met and praised because of their content or the themes addressed have been criticized specifically for the managing or mismanaging of narrative voice (a case in point being the Costa Award winner *The Secret Scripture* by Sebastian Barry, which has even been adapted into a film [Howell et al., 2014]). Such an inconsistency in critical praise has been spotted by quantitative researchers as Howell et al. who, in their article for the *DHQ*, proposed a methodology for the exploration of voice markers.

Just like it happened for *The Secret Scripture*, Rachel Kushner's *The Mars Room* was met with enthusiasm by critics, who almost unanimously praised the accuracy and depth of her depiction of life in a correctional facility for women. As for her style, however, comments on the adoption of voice or narrative person were not equally coherent (Allardice, 2018; Deutsch, 2018), clashing with the overall impression of the novel as offering an immersive experience for critics and readers alike. Because it is quite difficult to argue on the basis of impressions alone, this paper aims at testing claims on the style and structure of *The Mars Room* by adopting a double methodology, combining close reading with a quantitative approach via automated text analysis.

**Keywords:** Rachel Kushner; multi-focal narrative; autobiography; quantitative methods; close reading

### 1. *The Mars Room* in review: previous claims and a proposal

Most of the plot in *The Mars Room* takes place at Stanville Women's Correctional Facility, California, where the protagonist (and main narrator)<sup>1</sup> has to spend "two life sentences plus six years" for having killed her stalker. The case is desperate, and Romy has learnt that she had better "shut the fuck up" (*MR*: 2) and try to survive. Things change when she learns that her son, Jackson, is about to be given up to welfare after his grandma's sudden death: from that moment on, Romy's atelic existence experiences a sudden shift. With little to no valid legal advice, Romy sees her efforts turning to failures before her own eyes. In what might look like an impossibly *rocambolesque* choice, Romy flees and finds her last, desperate days as someone who has "a right to walk along a road" (316) before being caught and (likely) killed by the police.

The subtitle of the *Guardian* review to *MR*, published in June 2018, reads "what it means to be poor and female in America" (Allardice, 2018), a formula summing up a trend of observations tending to prefer subject-matter over style.<sup>2</sup> Only a few rather vague comments are devoted to Kushner's distinctive and crafted voice – and, sometimes, they seem to completely miss the point, as is the case for the following: "Two male characters are given their own chapters, told in the third person - this isn't really their story" (Allardice, 2018). The same vagueness can be detected in Rob Doyle's contribution for *The Irish Times*, in which Kushner's "authorial feeling" is mentioned but still placed on a secondary level if compared to the "plenitude of nourishing insights into the American prison system, the lives of strippers and the west coast underworld" (Doyle, 2018).

The author's structural and narrative strategies are more fully explored by Abigail Deutsch for the *Yale Review*:

Kushner's unconventionality in *The Mars Room* doesn't always work: the weave of voices decenters the narrative, yielding an occasional sense of drift. And one daring touch, the inclusion of excerpts from the Unabomber's diaries, adds little in the way of meaning. Still, in pushing its main character into the air of another planet—that of the American prison, with all its injustices—the novel provides a stirring study of the rules we live by, which fill the very air we breathe. (Deutsch, 2018)

The two underlined chunks of text bring forward three main points which I feel need to be challenged and investigated further in order to reshape critical views on the novel. I have selected this review since its academic stance and the journal's popularity within the realm of fiction criticism make it a good candidate for discussion, as well as for the fact that it is among the ones which devote more space to Kushner's style – hence it could be argued that the novel has been taken into account for its 'literary' status and not just for being a 'mirror of society.'

First of all, comes the stress on the narrative's 'unconventionality.' Indeed, the architecture is complex – but speaking of unconventionality would need ampler grounds for discussion, the breaking of rules, nothing of which actually happens in the book. It could rather be maintained that the novel readapts highly traditional narrative strategies (the self-narrative, the spiritual diary, the writing 'on the spot' *à la* Richardson) in a 21<sup>st</sup> century version.

Second comes the idea the "weave of voices" yields "an occasional sense of drift" – hence assuming that indeed *more than one voice* is implicated in the narrative (something which is hinted at by Allardice as well, who maintains that the novel is "noisy with voices" [2018]). Perception of drift is personal and hard to quantify, but a reading of the text through the lens of narratology and digitally-aided stylistics can be helpful in order to establish whether there are solid grounds to maintain such position.

Could a narratological and digital reading of the book shed light on the points of criticism raised by reviews or vague claims such as Allardice's and Deutsch's – and enrich what has already been praised about the contents? I maintain it could, if applied in these terms:

- a) A close reading of the novel can highlight how its structure, however complex, is indeed reminiscent and one dare say deeply rooted in tradition more than innovation – and how this can constitute a matter of appeal rather than a 'weak' spot.
- b) An investigation of stylistic peculiarities through tools for automated text analysis can show how linguistic cues can be organized to 'pack' the narrative and prevent 'drifting' in the face of overlaps and stratification – or not.

Whereas point a) will rely on traditional methods of analysis (such as close reading), point b) adopts tools and methods derived from the broad field of digital humanities and in particular from the hybrid discipline commonly known as corpus stylistics (Mahlberg, 2007).

## 2. Structuring *Mars Room*

### 2.1 Actors and setting

*Romy Leslie Hall*. The protagonist of the novel is a twenty-nine-year-old from San Francisco; her crime, killing Kurt "Creep" Kennedy, has cost her two life sentences plus six years –she knows that, even if she were to be able to parole for both her major sentences, she will never leave prison.

The sympathy readers feel for Romy in the unfortunate outcome of her poorly managed trial is not simply elicited by the fact that the person she has murdered was her stalker – she was acting in self-defense; it also derives from the awareness of the completely inadequate legal support she receives. Romy herself finds the trial to be the defining moment for her future: "You may decide to link my

fate to the night I found Kurt Kennedy waiting for me, but I link it to the trial, the judge, the prosecutor, my public defender” (59).

As motherly instinct goes, Romy is not ‘ideal’. Readers are not given an innocent lamb: they are given a person with huge issues and a lot of time to think about what has happened to her.

People say holidays are depressing in prison. It’s true. [...] My last free-world Thanksgiving I had squandered. I worked day shift at the Mars Room. [...]. No one forced me to spend Thanksgiving at the Mars Room. I didn’t need the money that badly, on that particular day. Why didn’t I do something with Jackson? I’d given him to a neighbor to watch. She and some friends made a meal. The kids had fun. (124)

*Gordon Hauser.* Perhaps the least complex among all the characters in the novel and with a surname which links him to the story of the only ‘real’ person in the book, Ted Kaczynski,<sup>3</sup> Gordon is part of the staff at Stanville and a G.E.D. teacher who gradually becomes acquainted with Romy and unwillingly provides her with some tools which will prove crucial in her evasion. Focalization lies within him in the chapters which see him as ‘protagonist’ and at times this allows for a double perspective on the same events as narrated by Romy or through Gordon’s eyes. The possibility of looking at them as two diverging forces in the same environment is enhanced by the fact that they arrive at Stanville together and leave Stanville together: when Romy decides to take advantage of a moment of agitation in the prison yard to attempt her escape, Gordon has just quit his job.

*Doc.* Richard Lynn Richards is the first truly disagreeable focalizer we meet in the narrative. His ‘career’ as a corrupt cop has brought him to a life sentence without the possibility of parole to be spent in the Special Needs section of New Folsom (at least, this is where we find him first). Kushner challenges our boundaries by allowing Doc’s gaze to lead us through the narrative: no hedging is used by the author while presenting the character’s misogynistic and heavily sexualized thoughts, and it is clearly through Doc’s eyes that we witness the major events (not all of them known to the police) which led him to where he is now.

Suddenly, you’ve got these creatures with big asses and actual, real boobies bouncing around under their knit cotton state-issue jersey as they run bases and jump up and down, cutely helpless at the batter’s plate, or run after, and never catch, a ball that came their way. They were fun and stupid and uncoordinated and smelled good, just like women, and like women, they had pea-brains and spoke in soft, squeaky voices. (132)

The suspect brings his arms not just down, but toward his pockets. At the moment when the suspect’s hands go into the pockets, Doc fires at his face. Twice, aiming upward. [...]. He didn’t know why he’d done it. The child rapist could burn in hell, but why did he kill that kid on Beverly? (198)

The description of Doc's traumatizing childhood could be seen as a counterpart, as something accounting for 'why he is the way he is' – however, we are not meant to feel *pity* for him; if anything, we are required to acknowledge the duality of feelings and thoughts a single person can elicit.

“Folsom Prison Blues” had been a popular song when Doc was young. Doc was ambivalent on account of Vic, his foster dad, who loved it and was a sadist toward young Doc. Later, as a grown-up with a shotgun bolted to the floor of his squad car, a man with weapons and badges who could no longer be Vic's punching bag, Doc heard that song again. [...] Vic's only addiction had been beating and raping little Doc. He was otherwise an insurance adjuster who smoked exactly six cigarettes per day and occasionally had a glass of Lancers. (137)

*Kurt Kennedy*. The same cannot be said about Romy's stalker, Kurt Kennedy, whose point of view leads chapters 29 and 31, thus providing 'the other side of the story' to Romy's tragedy. Significantly, in her public readings of the novel, Kushner often chooses passages from Kurt's narrative (see for instance the *Politics and Prose* reading in 2018 the Wheeler center reading in 2019):

He meant, whether anyone deserves anything is beside the problem. He needed certain things to feel okay. Vanessa was among those things. He needed dark and heavy curtains, because he had a sleeping problem. He needed Klonopin, because he had a nerve problem. He needed Oxycontin because he had a pain problem. He needed liquor because he had a drinking problem. Money because he had a living problem, and show him someone who doesn't need money. He needed this girl because he had a girl problem. Problem was perhaps the wrong word. He had a focus. Her name was Vanessa; that was her stage name but for him it was her name-name because it was the one he got to know her by. (305)

Everything about Kurt is disagreeable: his job (he serves legal papers), his looks, his thoughts. Even when he seems to be almost acknowledging the extent of his issues (“he had a girl problem”), he corrects himself and goes on with the word “focus”; we could never like someone like Kurt Kennedy – apparently, no one can. From where we stand, thanks to Kushner's choice of internal focalization, we can see it very clearly – while at the same time realizing that the one who does not want to see it at all is Kennedy himself.

*Ted Kaczynski*. Theodore John Kaczynski's deeds are well known and there is no space here for a full overview on the when and how of his 'mission' – the fact that Kushner decided to include pages from his journal in the novel, however, prompts at least a short comment on the choice and on their collocation: Unabomber's name occurs in pair with that of Henry David Thoreau

Gordon Hauser found a place to rent sight unseen, a cabin up the mountain from Stanville proper [...] It would be his Thoreau year, he wrote to his friend Alex, sending him the realty link.

*Your Kaczynski year*, Alex wrote back, after looking at the photos of the cabin.

[...] Gordon had looked at the manifesto. Everyone had. The guy had briefly been a young professor at Berkeley. (91-92)

When asked about her decision to include the diaries and about her pairing of the two characters, Kushner answered that both men were concerned with how the world was going, but that they adopted very different ways of expressing their dissent (Alex in the novel ironically dismisses Thoreau such: “ ‘his inflammatory act of resistance was not getting a welcome mat for his place’ ” [92]): Kaczynski “got very angry,” Kushner stated in a 2019 interview –an effectful phrasing indeed.

The passages from the journal combine in an ascending climax which from general considerations about hunting and environment-threatening activities surrounding Kaczynski in Montana get to explicit mention of violence.

In the last chapters, Romy will find her way out of prison and into the woods: the first stages of her escape take place in the man-made valley, brutalized by intensive agriculture; her final refuge is sought in the trunk of a tree, pure enough to be inhabited by bees. However, nowhere is safe anymore: she is found. There is no way you can cancel your unmistakably human traces from nature, it is an irreversible process and it will be the end of you: “You notice inconspicuous things on the ground, such as edible plants or animal tracks. If a human being has passed through and has left even just a small part of a footprint, you’ll probably notice it,” Kaczynski writes (299).

## 2.2 Circularity and recursiveness

Romy is the only character to tell her own story; Doc, Gordon Hauser and Kurt Kennedy, on whom several chapters are focused, belong to third-person narratives. The flashlight of narration alternates between these four individuals and Ted Kaczynski’s diary.

Romy’s voice opens parts 1 and 5, whereas Doc and Kurt open parts 2,3,4, building a traditional circular structure that begin and end with Romy’s life: “my life was over and I knew it was over” (4); “I emerged from the tree and turned into the light, not slow. I ran toward them, toward the light” (336).

The novel proceeds pursuing a *reductio ad unum*, with an ever-decreasing number of chapters in each section reaching part five with one chapter only, the condensed and hyper-concentrated final result.

### 2.3 Self-narrative and suspension of disbelief: fictional writing and the fiction of writing in *The Mars Room*

The novel offers no introductory or clarifying statement to explain Romy's plan in telling, no hint at the fact that the book we are reading is part of a diary or some sort of manuscript: by depriving the first-person narrative of its possible frame, Kushner induces readers to suspend their disbelief in absolute terms. The narrative is presented as some sort of spontaneous output, even when the protagonist/narrator is writing about her own escape from prison, *while* it is happening, and about her own death.

Unconventional as it may seem, this kind of 'impossible' writing-on-the-spot technique has been used since the modern novel was first born, and it has slowly helped overcome the skepticism against the 'uselessness' of fiction altogether by building new standards of acceptability. Hence, no one would dismiss *The Mars Room* as a 'bad' book because it is impossible for someone to actually write about her own death; Kushner's point is to give us access to Romy's perspective and it is crucial that this perspective remains unchanged until the very end.

To Romy's *I* responds the general addressee of her deliverance, a non-better-specified *you*: Kushner claimed not to have thought about any particular kind of reader for the novel, a specific audience of free or not-free people (*Politics and Prose*, 2018), and it seems like Romy is not thinking of anyone in particular either. She just knows that there are other people in the world who are not facing an unjust sentence for killing their stalker, and then there is herself. *You* is all the people who are not Romy.

At the very beginning of the novel, Romy claims that she has no plan concerning her life and her future; this statement is indeed also a declaration of intents concerning her narrative, which is not taking place within a strictly traditional frame of autobiographical or memorial writing.

Romy rejects and dismisses the God-like role (Anderson, 2001: 21) of self-narration. Shaping the causal chain of one's life events is the human equivalent of providential knowledge, but this is not what Kushner's protagonist aims at, although she is very well aware of the *possibility* of it:

I don't plan on living a long life. Or a short life, necessarily. I have no plans at all. The thing is you keep existing whether you have a plan to do so or not, until you don't exist, and then your plans are meaningless.  
But not having plans doesn't mean I don't have regrets.  
If I had never worked at the Mars Room.  
If I had never met Creep Kennedy.  
If Creep Kennedy had not decided to stalk me.  
But he did decide to, and then he did it relentlessly. If none of that had happened, I would not be on a bus heading for a life in a concrete slot. (12)

Clearly, there is no real causal connection between working at a strip club, meeting someone and that same someone becoming your stalker. Things are never that simple and (temporally) consequential happening does not necessarily imply cause, let alone *responsibility*. Seeing cause-effects relations in the ways of life is instead what characterizes people like Jones, one of the guards, who believes convicts had choices and always made the worst ones: “ ‘Hall, if you’d wanted to be someone’s mother, you should have thought of that before’ ” (126); “ ‘I used to feel sorry for you bitches,’ Jones said. ‘But if you want to be a parent, you don’t end up in prison. Plain and simple. Plain *and* simple.’ ”(127)

### 3. Markers of voice and point of view in *The Mars Room*: style meets narrative

According to the *Yale Review* piece, narrative is decentered because of the novel's characteristic "weave of voices"; defining the extent to which such voices differ from each other (who is speaking and how?) and how possible differences, overlaps and similarities infer with understanding is crucial to the backing up or disputing of such statement.

In narratological terms, voice represents what the "narrating instance" (act of recounting) consists of (Prince, 1988); Shen, in her contribution to *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, makes reference to Genette's definition of voice as "the way in which the *narrating itself* is implicated in the narrative" (137; my emphasis). As far as point of view is concerned, the adoption of first-person narration and internal focalization throughout the novel implies that four points of view are presented – and, perhaps, this is what reviewers referred to when mentioning the book's "weaving of voices."

Arguably, the whole text falls under the spectrum of investigative possibilities for markers of voice or point of view, but not every item plays the same distinctive function. Intuitively, frequent words or semantic/grammatical categories will be more likely to be significant because by being repeated they contribute to engraving the idea of a unique narrating 'entity' in the mind of the reader. By positioning my analysis on the border between narratology and stylistics, I will try to identify which items function as 'defining' for these two narrative categories. It may be the case that not all aspects pertaining *narrative* have a significantly marked stylistic counterpart: this shows how, although building a dialogue between narratology and stylistics can be extremely fruitful in terms of research, the two do not 'exist' at the same level. In the words of Dan Shen, "the relation between narratology's 'discourse' and stylistics' 'style' is one of superficial similarity and essential difference because discourse is primarily concerned with modes of presentation that go beyond strictly linguistic matters, and style is in general concerned more narrowly with choices of language." (Shen, 2005: 136). I thus assume that it will be easier to quantify narratological categories which indeed can be identified via "strictly linguistic matters," as focalization (Shen, 2005: 138), whereas things become more complicated for a broader category as 'voice.'

#### 3.1 Methodological design

I have decided to focus on portions of text taking into account the four different perspectives involved (Kaczynski's diary will for now be left out of the study);<sup>4</sup> the criteria I adopted for selection are the following: the sections represent the first appearance of the character, i.e. the first chance the author has to convey voice and/or point of view, of 'setting the tone'; they have a similar length of approx. 3000-4000 words; they all present instances of speech and thought presentation.

While the first step in my analysis will be performed starting from previous assumptions on what may work as marker, the second will be guided by a ‘bottom-up’ approach (Freddi, 2014) and see if what emerges after running the text on a software can be in any way related to the same concern.

## 3.2 Quantifying narrative

### 3.2.1 Perception

Functioning as an interface to two types of tagger, USAS and CLAWS, Wmatrix allows for the tagging of the text on the basis of semantic domains and grammatical categories (parts-of-speech). The first part of my analysis moves from the assumption that some linguistic features are more likely to function as markers of point of view and voice than others, among which words of perception are paramount: knowing that focalization is internal throughout (implicitly so in the case of first-person narration), I expect such words to play a major role. The advantage of relying on a fine-grained tagset here allows for specific distinctions to be made at a semantic or grammatical level: in this case, subdomains included in X – Psychological Actions, States and Processes will be at the core of my investigation.

Semantic domains belonging to X, Psychological actions, states and processes, amount to similar percentages in the portions of text taken into account: 3,90% in chapter 1 (Romy), 4,18 % in chapter 4 (Gordon), 4,38% in chapter 12 (Doc) and 3,67% in chapter 29 (Kurt). Doc’s is the chapter in which X is most represented and in which we find the biggest number of subcategories (29), followed by Romy’s (24) and Kurt and Gordon’s (22 each). The rather small discrepancy among the four chapters and perspectives seems to confirm the partial similarity of ‘psychological involvement’ related to the four characters, possibly due to the fact that despite the alternation between first and third-person narration, focalization remains internal in the latter.

Frequency distributions display a rather similar behavior, with the first positions occupied by very frequent subdomains and others with rather low frequencies (1 or 2 occurrences on average); the only exceptions to significantly stand out (with more than 10 instances) are in Doc and Kurt’s chapters, in which there is a high frequency of, respectively, X2.5 – 3.2 – 3.5 and of X8+.

The first observable divide among characters occurs when analyzing the subdomain marked X2.1, Thought and Belief. When looking at words belonging to this category, it can be observed that they refer both to the act of thinking (*think, believe, assume, consider*) and to that of feeling (*feel, felt, feeling*) – both to voluntary rational actions and to involuntary, spontaneous reactions to states and conditions.

While the domain appears as frequent in all the chapters taken into account, there is an internal variation between characters more prone to be represented as *feeling* and characters represented as *thinking*: perception is polarized between the two, with Romy and Doc, in prison, mostly subjects of verbs of thinking and Gordon and Kurt still allowed to feel in the free world. *Think* is the most frequent X item in chapters 1 and 12, which display the perspectives of Romy and Doc, while *felt* appears in the top position for Gordon and Kurt. Unsurprisingly, narrators/focalizers are often the subjects (grammatical or logical) of these verbs, stressing the internal perspective we gain in each chapter:

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <p>hear the honeybees and it makes you love my son but <b>its hard for me to</b> k robber instead of to the host . I n . Creep Kennedy . <b>I sometimes think</b> San Francisco is cursed . <b>I mostly</b></p> | <p><b>think</b> <b>think</b> <b>think</b> <b>think</b></p> | <p>about fresh apple cider and warm <b>about him</b> . I try not to . My <b>he enjoyed</b> that I stole the shop <b>San Francisco is cursed</b> . I mostly <b>it's a sad suckville</b> of a place</p> |
| <p>e , that 's not exactly what people he smell of Cell Block 64 , come to p-and-down motion . <b>Which makes him</b> n her pants and <b>he does n't like to</b> it , but sometimes <b>he lets himself</b></p>  | <p><b>think</b> <b>think</b> <b>think</b> <b>think</b></p> | <p>of as the number one problem in p of it . His visits to Las Brisas s <b>of that joke</b> . It 's the only joke <b>about it</b> , but sometimes he lets <b>about it</b> , to remember not to do</p> |
| <p>e would not call it loaded , how <b>he</b> nd real . When he was near her , <b>he</b> o be the one to do the talking . <b>He</b> alking . He felt good with her . <b>He</b></p>                              | <p><b>felt</b> <b>felt</b> <b>felt</b> <b>felt</b></p>     | <p><b>when he got on the plane</b> . He was <b>good</b> . Every person deserves to <b>good with her</b>. He felt <b>comfortable</b>. He loved to touch her</p>  |
| <p>, waiting on a package , and <b>he had</b> ny passion for his own subject . <b>He</b> h later . In fact , <b>he never really</b> ally because so little did , <b>and he</b></p>                              | <p><b>felt</b> <b>felt</b> <b>felt</b> <b>felt</b></p>     | <p><b>irrational</b> jealousy that she was <b>trapped</b> into an impossible comm <b>that to be the truth</b> . It was ev <b>he was placed at the wrong</b> end of</p>                                |

While Romy and Doc are in prison and have a lot of time to think (even too much, as it almost goes against their will: *he doesn't like to think about it; it's hard for me to think about him; he lets himself think about it*), Gordon and Kurt, from the outside, are still able to *fell comfortable, feel good* and ironically feel *trapped* though not actually being so.

It seems relevant here that the differences in the use of verbs of perception quantified by the software mirror divisions that happen at the level of characterization (two people locked up, thinking, two free men, feeling) and plot (as it happens for domains that stand out in chapters 12 and 29) and not necessarily at a narratological level. Internal perspe seems to play a major role in shaping stylistic choices, functioning as a cohesive device among the four intertwined perspectives in the book and granting a degree of continuity despite the apparent disruption due to the shift between one character and the other and between the two voices.

### 3.2.2 Keywords and Kurt's causal thinking

Since keyness calculations allow for a sort of measuring of the 'distance' existing between texts (Freddi, 2014), I decided to perform one extra check on the presumed similarity or dissimilarity among the four perspectives by looking for keywords in each chapter when compared to the others, with the aim of identifying differences which go beyond those dictated by context.

While chapters 1,4 and 12 (Romy's, Gordon's and Doc's narratives) displayed a short list of keywords related to the context, hence confirming the impression I got from the USAS-based investigation, Kurt's narrative is characterized by the disproportionately frequent use of *because*:

miss his flight. And he had time to shower, because, as every man knows, that's supposed  
sewer pipe. He got the wine at duty-free because he could, and because he  
thing in life does. He liked that place okay because he didn't know better.  
e things. He needed dark and heavy curtains, because he had a sleeping  
had a sleeping problem. He needed Klonopin, because he had a nerve problem.  
he had a nerve problem. He needed Oxycontin because he had a pain problem.  
use he had a pain problem. He needed liquor because he had a drinking problem  
or because he had a drinking problem. Money because he had a living problem  
who doesn't need money. He needed this girl because he had a girl problem.  
g to read for three years. It interested him because he had begun long ago  
all. He went to Clown Alley for a burger, because he had nothing else to do. Clown All she had not  
changed it, he didn't think, because he paid the entrance fee and went i  
her that, got more, and gave her that, too, because he really, really, really liked this  
the wine at duty-free because he could, and because he wanted something of  
dess arrived and told him she took his drink because he was sleeping. He  
seat. He was going to insist on another drink because he wasn't done with the one she took  
He'd had to wear shorts on the plane because his only pair of long pants smelled  
pilot and Kurt wasn't even halfway through. Because it was taking him so long to read,  
name but for him it was her name-name because it was the one he got to know  
the boots, but he still ate at Clown Alley because they cooked a good burger and he  
nto try sometime but hadn't or couldn't because they were not free the way she was,  
not to tell people he was a process server because when he explained how you serve  
sco who rode motorcycles. This bothered him. Because women, how did they  
and was she high, what drug was she on, because you can't fuck in the tunnel.

This causal conjunction tells us about Kushner's building of perspective and voice more than what more 'expected' items could have; by picturing Kurt in this constant causal framework, the author provides the image of a character who sees the world in a specific way, ruled by simple consequential patterns and direct explanations – the narrating instance ('voice') adapts and "is implicated" accordingly. Looking back at the initial statements given by Romy on her lack of plan and her ultimate refusal to see a real causal connection between her past and present life, the augmented stress on Kurt's point of view in one of the final chapters of the book gains even more significance. While the protagonist of the novel has given up the possibility of identifying a justifying pattern, a scheme that, with meaning-making, may also provide relief, Creep Kennedy needs exactly that: his is a world in which rules of cause-effect can help explain to everyone, himself included, why he is like that. In the end, he thinks, "Every person deserves to feel good. Especially him, since he was himself" (305) – *being* Kurt is enough of a reason.

### 3.3 What is gained and what is lost

An investigation of four extracts from *The Mars Room* has offered a first possible frame of analysis for the detection of stylistic markers of narrative voice and point of view; although the most immediate linguistic items taken into account (words of perception) did not highlight significant differences related to narratological tenets, keyness calculations have proved effective in distinguishing one repeated pattern that connects strongly to one character only and specifically to his world-view, consequently transforming the “narrating instance”.

From this initial exploration, a few observations can be drawn:

- a) The chapters seem to display a homogeneous voice with only a few significative detours; this could be read as a sign that ‘perspective,’ in the form of either autodiegesis or internal focalization, is a stronger stylistically cohesive or divisive device if compared to the more obviously marked choice of narrative person. Moreover, Kushner probably relied more heavily on the differences in referentiality among the characters – whose moral ambiguities are nonetheless not so confusing as to prevent a summary division between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ guys.
- b) Bottom-up approaches can sometimes prove more effective than top-down ones, because they allow for the individuation of seemingly unimpressive linguistic choices, which however contribute to the engraving of one narrative entity in the mind of the reader.
- c) The individuation of the causal patterning in the chapter devoted to Kurt Kennedy points in a direction of investigation that could expand to the whole novel: the narrating instance can be characterized by work-specific linguistic constructions which go beyond what is traditionally assumed to be relevant.

With respect to what has been stated at the beginning of this paper, hence, the point about Kushner’s ‘weaving of voices’ has been partially disputed: via internal focalization, adopted throughout, the novel is held quite tight together. In this sense, narrative does not drift but, if anything, the opposite: the fact that the characters’ world-views are accessed without stark dissimilarities and through similar stylistic means works in favor of understanding and narrative flow, without marked interruptions in perspective. This also confirms previous statements about the supposed lack of direction in sympathy: all characters are granted the same ‘treatment’ and readers are supposed to look at what is happening as if they were handling first-hand testimonies.

## References

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## Software:

- Anthony, L. AntConc 3.5.8, <https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconc/>
- Rayson, P. Wmatrix 4, <https://ucrel-wmatrix4.lancaster.ac.uk/wmatrix4.html>

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<sup>1</sup> By which I mean the most frequent one: Romy's voice is 'interrupted' by the intervention of other narrators and characters, which summed together represent almost the same amount of narrated action than Romy's.

<sup>2</sup> And, weirdly enough, a ([n] unconscious?) quote from Kushner's *The Flamethrowers*, her second novel, published in 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Hauser is also the surname of one of Unabomber's victims.

<sup>4</sup> Mostly because taking his pages into account would imply dealing with a different author altogether: a study on the similarities or differences in style among Kushner's narrative and Kaczynski's diary may be pursued in a second moment.