

What's in a voice? Quantifying the Narrating Instance in Rachel Kushner's *The Mars Room*

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This paper aims at reconsidering aspects raised by criticism of Rachel Kushner's *The Mars Room* (2018). While almost universally praised for its contents, the novel has been met with a more diverse response as far as its stylistic and narrative structures are concerned. By adopting a double methodology, grounded in traditional close reading and quantitative tools derived from corpus stylistics, this analysis addresses the issue of voice and perspective in Kushner's novel in order to show how ultimately traditional their use is. These findings thus clash with previous views on *The Mars Room*, and they confirm the more aprioristically identifiable impact certain narratological features (such as focalization) tend to have on style when compared to broader notions like that of voice, which intrinsically involves a broader 'field of action' and is thus more problematic when it comes to quantification.

Keywords: American literature; Rachel Kushner; Narratology; Narrative voice; Quantitative study; Close reading

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¿Qué hay en una voz? Cuantificación de la presencia narrativa en *The Mars Room*, de Rachel Kushner

Este artículo tiene como objetivo reconsiderar aspectos planteados por la crítica acerca de *The Mars Room* (2018), de Rachel Kushner. Aunque la novela ha sido elogiada de forma casi unánime por su contenido, esta obra de Kushner ha recibido una respuesta más diversificada en lo que respecta a sus estructuras estilística y narrativa. Adoptando una doble metodología, basada en la tradicional lectura en profundidad y en herramientas cuantitativas derivadas de

la estilística de corpus, este análisis aborda el tema de la voz y la perspectiva en la novela de Kushner para demostrar cuán tradicional es su uso en última instancia. Los hallazgos contradicen análisis previos de *The Mars Room* y confirman el impacto más apriorísticamente identificable que ciertas características narratológicas (como la focalización) tienden a ejercer en el estilo en comparación con nociones más amplias como la de voz, que intrínsecamente implica un “campo de acción” más amplio, siendo por lo tanto más problemático en lo que respecta a su cuantificación.

Palabras clave: literatura estadounidense; Raquel Kushner; narratología; voz narrativa; estudio cuantitativo; lectura en profundidad

1. INTRODUCTION

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 authors highly skilled in their craft like the traditionally equally ‘difficult’ Modernists. In recent times, many works that have been enthusiastically received and praised because of their content or the themes addressed have also been specifically criticized for their management, or mismanagement, of narrative voice (a case in point being the Costa Award winner *The Secret Scripture* by Sebastian Barry [Howell et al., 2014]). This inconsistency in critical praise has been noted by quantitative researchers such as Howell et al. who, in their article for the *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, proposed a methodology for the exploration of voice markers. Their method relied heavily on the marking of content and context, with little attention paid to purely formal, textual aspects. I, on the other hand, wish to verify whether aspects other than the referentiality of a voice can be of use in determining its uniqueness: a single narrating instance (Prince 1988) can be characterized by its ‘aboutness’, but turn out to be completely similar in form to another one.

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 her adoption of voice or narrative person were not equally homogeneous (Allardice 2018; Deutsch 2018). Because it is quite difficult to argue on the basis of impressions alone, however, this paper aims to test claims made about the style and structure of *The Mars Room* by adopting a double methodology, namely combining close reading with a quantitative approach that uses automated text analysis. My initial observations about the novel’s ultimately traditional structure on the basis of a close reading approach concur with the traditional lack of stark dissimilarities in terms of voice, perspective and point of view. However, the findings dispute previous claims about Kushner’s work in that they show how certain of its narratological features tend to have a higher impact on style than others and, in addition, open up traditional narratological and narrative concepts to the idea of “operationalization” (Salgaro 2018) though their quantification remains difficult.

2. *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)¹ has to spend “two life sentences plus six years” for having killed her stalker. The situation is desperate, and

¹ By “main narrator” here I mean the most frequent one. However, Romy’s voice is ‘interrupted’ by the intervention of other narrators and characters, which when summed together represent almost the same amount of narrated action as Romy provides.

Romy has learnt that she had better “shut the fuck up” (*MR*, 2)² and try to survive. Things change when she learns that her son, Jackson, is about to be taken into welfare services after his grandma’s sudden death: from that moment on, Romy’s atelic existence experiences a sudden shift. A greater need has entered her life: Jackson, innocent as he is, is about to be half criminalized (Kushner 2018)³ and risks inheriting his mother’s guilt in the modern version of a Greek tragedy. However, with little to no valid legal advice available to her, Romy sees her efforts turn to failures before her eyes. So much so that in the end only one possibility seems to retain any appeal: escaping from prison. In what might look like an impossibly *rocambolésque* choice, Romy manages to run away and spends her last, desperate days as someone who has “a right to walk along a road” (*MR*, 316) before being caught and (likely) killed by the police.

Rachel Kushner, a native of Oregon but raised in San Francisco and an LA resident, has claimed on more than one occasion that what spurred her desire to plunge into six years of research⁴ about the American carceral system is the inevitable pervasiveness of its presence and the way it has shaped the country in a literal way. This, together with the effectiveness of the depiction of characters like Conan, Fernandez and Laura Lipp, and the ever-increasing interest in matters of social (in)justice represented through popular media channels like Netflix,⁵ has contributed to a certain kind of criticism being directed at *The Mars Room*.

The subtitle of the *Guardian* review of *The Mars Room* published in June 2018, for instance, 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. 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 here: “Two male characters are given their own chapters, told in the third person—this isn’t really their story” (Allardice 2018). Rob Doyle’s contribution to *The Irish Times* is in line with the trend we see in Allardice, with Kushner’s “authorial feeling” being mentioned but still placed on a secondary level compared to the “plenitude of nourishing insights into the American prison system, the lives of strippers and the west coast underworld” (Doyle 2018).

Kushner’s structural and narrative strategies are, though, more fully explored by Abigail Deutsch for the *Yale Review*:

² From now on, parenthetical references to the novel will be made thus: (*MR*, page number).

³ Children of people with a criminal record tend to be ‘criminalized by proxy.’ In the novel, Romy reflects on how this might happen to the child of a fellow inmate, but she may easily be concerned about something similar happening to Jackson: “I pictured a cop standing over the newborn, already half criminalized, the cop watching it to be sure of no sudden movements” (*MR*, 22).

⁴ A word which however does not exactly reflect the author’s own vision: Kushner stated in an interview presenting the novel: “I never myself use the word ‘research’... I always write about worlds that I know” (Politics and Prose 2018).

⁵ Ava DuVernay’s documentary *13th*, Matt Cooke’s *Survivor’s Guide to Prison* and series like *Orange is the New Black* are all examples of a larger trend.

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 three chunks of text in bold bring forward three main points which should 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 the fact that it is among the reviews which devote more space to Kushner's style—hence it could be argued that the novel has been considered for its 'literary' status and not just for being a 'mirror of society'.

First of all, Doyle puts stress on the narrative's 'unconventionality'. Indeed, the architecture is complex—although, once one realizes that there is more than one focalizing character, the complexity ends; 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 said that the novel readapts highly traditional narrative strategies (the self-narrative, the spiritual diary, writing 'on the spot' *à la* Richardson) in a twenty-first century version.

Second comes the idea that 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 for such a position.

Last, to consider the apparently semi-meaningless insertion of passages from Unabomber Ted Kaczynski's diary a "daring" touch and then dismiss it seems a bit rushed, especially when we think of how much can be gained in terms of insight into Kushner's artistic process from the choice of inserting them. Although this particular theme is beyond the scope of the present analysis, it feels relevant to highlight the slightly superficial nature of this claim and I will try to comment, when appropriate, on this aspect of the novel.

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? If applied in these terms, the results could prove significant:

- a) A close reading of the novel can highlight how its structure, however complex, is indeed reminiscent of, and one might dare say deeply rooted in, tradition more than innovation—and how this may be a matter of appeal rather than a 'weak' spot.

- b) An investigation of stylistic peculiarities using tools for automated text analysis can show how linguistic cues can be organized to 'pack' the narrative and prevent 'drift' in the face of overlaps and stratification—or not.

Whereas point a) will rely on strictly qualitative evaluations, point b) adopts tools and methods derived from the field of digital humanities and in particular from the hybrid discipline commonly known as corpus stylistics.⁶

3. STRUCTURING *THE MARS ROOM*

The rather 'crowded' narrative material of *The Mars Room* is inserted within a careful architecture that is more thoroughly analyzed in the following paragraphs; first, however, let us quickly go through the main 'participants', the 'engines' of the novel.

The Mars Room presents a series of events which are more or less related to its central figure, Romy Hall. When the protagonist decides that she needs to get out of prison and eventually plans her escape (see section 2 above), she does so with the unwilling help of another character, whose perspective dominates a few chapters, Gordon Hauser. Hauser is a General Education Development (GED) teacher at Stanville Women's Correctional Facility and basically functions as a 'free world' counterpart to the story we are witnessing as readers. The other 'free' character in the novel is Kurt Kennedy, Romy's stalker, whose 'version of the tale' is presented in two chapters in the second-last section of the book. The fourth and final focalizer is Doc (Richard Lynn Richards), a corrupt cop who has ended up in a different, male, correctional institution himself, and whose connection to Romy is bilateral—not only is he in prison, but he has also had a relationship with one of Romy's current fellow inmates.⁷

In addition to these four fictional perspectives, Kushner has inserted one extra voice to the picture, that of real-life Ted Kaczynski (otherwise known as 'Unabomber'). The passages from his journal, which Kushner has had access to thanks to James Benning (*MR*, 338),⁸ combine in an ascending climax which moves from general considerations about hunting and environment-threatening activities to explicit mentions of violence, thus working as a *contrapunto* to Romy's very restricted life in prison, but which is similarly characterized by a climax resulting in her escape.

⁶ The definition of 'corpus stylistics' has been at the center of a recent theoretical endeavor by Dan McIntyre and Brian Walker (see *Corpus Stylistics. Theory and Practice*, 2019) in which it is stated that the discipline consists in the "adoption of frameworks from stylistics to corpus analysis" (15). In my analysis of perspective and voice in *The Mars Room*, the direction is somewhat reversed, with a functional use of methods derived from the discipline applied to a purely literary notion; hence, my choice *not* to label this paper "a corpus-stylistic analysis."

⁷ The word is used here as it is in the novel. No discriminating attitude wishes to be expressed against incarcerated people in the U.S. or elsewhere.

⁸ Benning is a filmmaker. He worked on Henry David Thoreau and Ted Kaczynski in projects such as *Two Cabins* and *Stemple Pass*.

3.1. 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, appear in third-person narratives. The spotlight of the narration alternates between these four individuals and Ted Kaczynski's diary as set out below:

Table 1. The structure of the Novel

| Part One | Part Two | Part Three | Part Four | Part Five |
|------------------------------|-------------------|---------------|------------------|-----------|
| 1. Romy | 12. Doc | 23. Doc | 29. Kurt Kennedy | 32. Romy; |
| 2. Romy | 13. Fernandez | 24. Gordon | 30. Romy | The end |
| 3. None: rules of the prison | 14. Romy | 25. Kaczynski | 31. Kurt Kennedy | |
| 4. Gordon Hauser | 15. Hauser | 26. Romy | | |
| 5. Romy | 16. Ted Kaczynski | 27. Hauser | | |
| 6. Rules of the prison | 17. Doc | 28. Kaczynski | | |
| 7. Romy | 18. Romy | | | |
| 8. Unknown | 19. Hauser | | | |
| 9. Gordon | 20. Kaczynski | | | |
| 10. Kaczynski | 21. Doc | | | |
| 11. Romy | 22. Romy | | | |

A first look at this list allows for a couple of observations on the structure of the novel: Romy's voice opens parts 1 and 5, whereas either Doc or Kurt open parts 2, 3 and 4, building a traditional circular structure that begins and ends with Romy's life: "my life was over and I knew it was over" (*MR*, 4); "I emerged from the tree and turned into the light, not slow. I ran toward them, toward the light" (*MR*, 336).

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

3.2. Self-narrative and Suspension of Disbelief: Fictional Writing and the Fiction of Writing in *The Mars Room*

Half of the novel consists of Romy's first-person narration; hers is a kind of self-narrative which ranges from the impressionistic tones of an intimate journal or confession to the more matter-of-fact attitude of (auto)biographical accounts. There is no introductory or

clarifying statement serving the purpose of explaining Romy's plan, 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. We have to trust that what we are reading is 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 skepticism against the 'uselessness' of fiction in general by building new standards of acceptability, new boundaries where it is commonly understood that works coming from imagination do not have to conform to the reality of facts in the way they are told either. Hence, no one would dismiss *The Mars Room* as a 'bad' book because it is actually impossible for someone to write about their 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 if we are to trust her on this we may assume 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 her. *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, and although that may sound like a rather obvious statement, given that she is in prison and her possibilities are limited, we can choose to see it as a declaration of intent concerning her narrative act, which is not, as stated above, taking place within a strictly traditional frame of autobiographical or memorial writing.

Romy rejects and dismisses the God-like role (Anderson 2001, 21) which is granted by writing one's own spiritual confession or self-narrative. Looking back at one's life, shaping the causational chain which has led someone to where they are, is the human equivalent of providential knowledge: normally, no one is allowed to see what the future will be like, but if we reshape time by writing, we can. This is not what Kushner's protagonist aims at, although she is very well aware of its *possibility*:

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, however, there is no real causal connection between working at a strip club, meeting someone and that same someone becoming your stalker. By looking back at her past, Romy does indeed provide a chain of events with hints toward what could have been different, what she may have avoided, but this way of thinking does not belong to her—things are never that simple and (temporally) consequential happening does not necessarily imply cause, let alone *responsibility*. Seeing cause-effect relations in the paths of life is instead what characterizes people like Jones, one of the guards, who believes inmates had choices and always made the worst ones, knowing perfectly well the consequences awaiting them: “‘Hall, if you’d wanted to be someone’s mother, you should have thought of that before’” (MR, 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’” (MR, 127, italics in the original).

3.3. The end of the story

Through a first description and reading of the novel’s architecture and structure a few characteristics emerge, and some are in direct contrast with points highlighted by reviews and critiques; mostly, the first paragraphs of this paper contributed to show how the author has rooted her work in tradition and reshaped it to make it more suitable for a character like Romy. What may have been perceived as ‘unconventional’ has been presented and explained above, demonstrating how well-established constructions such as the ring-composition and the ‘writing-on-the-spot’ technique have been worked within a modern set of values and concerns.

4. MARKERS OF VOICE AND POINT OF VIEW IN *THE MARS ROOM*: STYLE MEETS NARRATIVE

According to Abigail Deutsch, narrative in *The Mars Room* is decentered because of the novel’s characteristic “weave of voices” (2018). However, defining the extent to which the voices differ from each other (who is speaking and how) and how possible differences, overlaps and similarities interfere with understanding is crucial to back up or dispute this 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; italics added). This implies a connection with the recounter’s identity, and goes well beyond the mode of narration (first vs. third person narrative, for instance), including the possibility of more than one participant at a time: “not only the person who carries out or submits to the action, but also the person (the same one or another) who reports it, and, if need be, all those people who participate, even though passively, in this narrating activity” (Genette 1980, 213).

In short, to put it in Aczel's terms, voice is "a complex and problematic category" (1998, 467), which seems to resist aprioristic quantification. As far as point of view is concerned, the adoption of first-person narration and internal focalization (Genette 1980, 188) throughout the novel implies that four points of view are presented—and, perhaps, this is what reviewers are referring to when they talk about the book's "weaving of voices."

Arguably, the whole text of *The Mars Room* 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' in terms of these two narrative categories. It may be the case that not all aspects pertaining to *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," such as focalization (Shen 2005, 138), whereas things become more complicated for a broader category such as 'voice'.

4.1. Methodological Design

I have decided to focus on portions of text taking into account the four different character perspectives involved (Kaczynski's diary will be left out of the study).⁹ 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, and thus 'setting the tone'; they have a similar length of approx. 3000-4000 words; they all present instances of speech and thought presentation. This brings an additional question to the table, because by selecting the first appearance of a character as significant I am assuming that the novelist wishes to further highlight the abrupt change from one perspective to the other with marked linguistic choices. This is suggested by Kushner's decision to 'foreground' a character's first appearance in topical parts of the book: the author, indeed, inserts a few pages explaining prison rules

⁹ This choice has been made because taking his pages into account would imply dealing with a different author altogether: a study on the similarities and differences in style between Kushner's narrative and Kaczynski's diary may be pursued in a second work.

between Romy's first narrative and Gordon's, where it acts as a sort of metaphorical wall dividing the free and non-free world; moreover, both Doc's and Kurt's narratives appear for the first time as opening chapters of a new section (respectively sections 2 and 4, see table 1).

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 through a text-analysis software can be in any way related to the same concern.

4.2. Quantifying Narrative

4.2.1. Perception

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, with words of perception being 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. Moreover, despite what many reviews highlighted, the critical agreement on the fact that Kushner has an ability "to articulate the movements of human psychology in situations of extremity" (Ives 2019, 32) offers further grounds for the discussion of such elements.

Functioning as an interface between two types of tagger, USAS and CLAWS,¹⁰ Wmatrix allows for the tagging of the text on the basis of semantic domains and grammatical categories (parts-of-speech).

The advantage of relying on a fine-grained tagset here allows for specific distinctions to be made at the semantic and grammatical level: in this case, subdomains included in the macro-domain X (Psychological Actions, States and Processes, identified through Wmatrix's interaction with USAS) will be at the core of my investigation. Words belonging to X are related to a person's 'inner life', independently of the part of speech they represent: verbs, nouns, adjectives and adverbs concerning one's psychology are all subsumed in this broad category, which is then more finely divided into groups such as "Learn," "Sensory," "Understand," etc.

Semantic domains belonging to X account for 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 where there are the biggest number of subcategories (29), followed by Romy's (24) and Kurt's and Gordon's (22 each). The rather small difference among the four chapters and perspectives seems to confirm the four characters'

¹⁰ UCREL Semantic Analysis System and Constituent Likelihood Automatic Word-tagging System; Wmatrix was devised by Paul Rayson at Lancaster University (2018) and allows users to store their texts in folders on the platform, interact with the taggers and perform such operations as frequency counts and keyness comparisons.

similar extent of ‘psychological involvement’, possibly due to the fact that despite the alternation between first- and third-person narration, focalization remains internal in the latter.

The first observable difference between characters occurs when analyzing the subdomain marked X2.1, Thought and Belief. 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*)—that is, to both voluntary rational actions and to involuntary, spontaneous reactions to states and conditions.

While the domain appears as frequent in all the chapters considered here, there is an internal variation between characters in terms of those more prone to be represented as *feeling* and characters represented as *thinking*: perception is polarized between the two, with Romy and Doc, in prison, being 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. Compare for reference the following concordance lines (obtained through AntConc)¹¹:

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------|------------------------------------|
| hear the honeybees and it makes you | think | about fresh apple cider and warm |
| love my son but its hard for me to | think | about him . I try not to . My |
| k robber instead of to the host . I | think | he enjoyed that I stole the shop |
| n . Creep Kennedy . I sometimes | think | San Francisco is cursed . I mostly |
| San Francisco is cursed . I mostly | think | it's a sad suckville of a place |
| | | |
| e , that 's not exactly what people | think | of as the number one problem in p |
| he smell of Cell Block 64 , come to | think | of it . His visits to Las Brisas s |
| p-and-down motion . Which makes him | think | of that joke . It 's the only joke |
| n her pants and he does n't like to | think | about it , but sometimes he lets |
| it , but sometimes he lets himself | think | about it , to remember not to do |
| | | |
| e would not call it loaded , how he | felt | when he got on the plane . He was |
| nd real . When he was near her , he | felt | good . Every person deserves to |
| o be the one to do the talking . He | felt | good with her. He felt |
| alking . He felt good with her . He | felt | comfortable. He loved to touch her |

¹¹ A toolkit for automated text analysis developed by prof. Laurence Anthony, Waseda University (2019).

, waiting on a package , and he had felt irrational jealousy that she was
 ny passion for his own subject . He felt trapped into an impossible comm
 h later . In fact , he never really felt that to be the truth . It was ev
 ally because so little did , and he felt he was placed at the wrong end of

While Romy and Doc are in prison and have a lot of time to think (too much even, 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, on the outside, are still able to *feel comfortable, feel good* and ironically *feel trapped*, despite 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 both the level of characterization (two people locked up, thinking, two free men, feeling) and of plot (as it happens for domains that stand out in chapters 12 and 29). Internal perspective 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.

4.2.2. Keywords and Kurt's Causal Thinking

Since keyness calculations allow for a measurement 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 (statistically significant words) in each chapter when compared to the others, with the aim of identifying differences which go beyond those dictated by context. Keyness calculations were performed via Laurence Anthony's AntConc keywords tool, adopting log-likelihood measures to determine keyness values.

While chapters 1, 4 and 12 (Romy's, Gordon's and Doc's narratives, respectively) displayed a short list of keywords related to context, hence confirming the impression I got from the USAS-based investigation, Kurt's narrative is characterized by the disproportionately frequent (keyness-retrieved) 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 far more about Kushner's building of perspective and voice than 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 and comparing with 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, Kurt 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 he is. In the end, he thinks: "Every person deserves to feel good. Especially him, since he was himself" (*MR*, 305)—even *being* Kurt is enough of a reason for acting in a despicable way.

4.3. 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 considered (words of perception) did not present significant differences related to narratological tenets, keyness calculations 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 examined 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 than 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, despite this, contribute to the engraving of one particular narrative entity in the mind of the reader.
- c) The individuation of the causal patterning in the chapter devoted to Kurt Kennedy points to a direction of investigation that could expand to the whole novel, and it strengthens the Genettian take on ‘voice’ as being something intrinsically related to the voicer’s identity in a way which can barely be quantified on the basis of aprioristic distinctions.

With respect to what has been stated at the beginning of this text, then, the point about Kushner’s ‘weaving of voices’ has been disputed: via first person narration and internal focalization the novel is held quite tightly together. In this sense, the narrative does not drift; if anything, the opposite is true: 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.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The present paper has attempted to achieve two separate, although linked, goals: first of all, it has tried to shift critical attention on the novel under investigation, *The Mars Room* by Rachel Kushner, from the general field of thematic and contextual criticism to the more specific narrative and stylistic peculiarities of the work. Secondly, it has shown the possibility of carrying out an analysis from two different perspectives and of using them in a complementary way, as often happens with empirical literary research.

The motivations behind stylistic choices are embedded in narrative. Yet, not all narrative features seem to have the same impact on style—this paper has shown that, with respect to the situation portrayed in these four chapters, ‘perspective’ is a stronger influence than other factors. Have stylistics and narratology informed each other fruitfully, or is their combination in this analysis purely instrumental, resulting in a ‘borrowing’ of categories, so that “narratological models or concepts are [...] used as

frameworks for investigating the functioning of language” (Shen 2005, 141)? I believe that, taking into account both purely linguistic and purely organizational features of the novel, its style and its narrative have been explored in equal measure in an attempt to give “a fuller picture of narrative presentation” (Shen 2005, 142) and demonstrating how the two disciplines can be a real treasure-trove for each other. However, the problem of the quantitative investigation of voice reiterates what Aczel noted, *mutatis mutandis*, about the issue of free indirect speech: “it *can* be grammatically marked, but it is not in any final sense grammatically *identifiable*” (1998, 477-78, italics in the original).¹² Similarly, the discussion of the first results from my analysis shows that the problematic nature of the notion of ‘voice’ makes it quantitatively explorable, while not necessarily quantitatively (automatically) “identifiable.”

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¹² It is interesting to see how similar questions also arose with respect to (seemingly) more identifiable direct speech, which overall appears more prone to be retrieved automatically (Schöch et al., 2016).

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