

Parataxis and/as Scrolling: Literary Upmarket Fiction and the Values of Juxtaposition

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In the contemporary literary field, formally ambitious literature can no longer operate at a safe remove from the marketplace, but needs to negotiate market expectations in order to establish itself as a particular niche within the market—a niche that Gisèle Sapiro has called the “literary upmarket.” Literary upmarket fiction cannot not engage with popular forms—not least the pressures from the digital story economy—even while it needs to distinguish itself from it. This makes contemporary “lit fic” essentially a compromise formation. This paper argues that this new sociological and medial reality has also impacted the narrative grammar (that is, the structural components of literary works) of formally ambitious literature. It illustrates this by theorizing the conspicuous prevalence of parataxis as a structural principle that operates on different scales in literary upmarket writing. Whether we talk about the concatenation of historical atrocities and peculiar characters in the work of W.G. Sebald or Teju Cole; the intertwined life stories of different historical figures in Colum McCann’s biofictions; the networked lives of tree-adjacent individuals in Richard Powers’ *Overstory*; the unarticulated voices in autofictions by Ben Lerner (in *The Topeka School*) or Valeria Luiselli (in *Lost Children Archive*); or the collage aesthetic of Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*; critically acclaimed writing often operates through an underdetermined and suggestive juxtaposition of narrative units. This paper argues that this eminently literary grammar of interlinking can productively be understood as a literary upmarket inflection of the ubiquitous everyday practice of scrolling through algorithmically generated feeds—an inflection that borrows the recognizability of that mundane practice and upgrades it to a strategy for generating cultural capital.

The paper leans on Sianne Ngai’s theorization of the notion of “the interesting”—a minimal act of value ascription that, far from providing a determinate content or conveying a strong aesthetic judgment, merely marks particular works as worthy of attention, as worthy of not being swiped away immediately. Which might be the most that literary upmarket writing can hope for in the story economy.

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