

## Unveiling Storyworld Affordances

### A New Perspective on Narrative Gaps and Literary Description

The article introduces the concept of storyworld affordances into narratological research and operationalises it in the context of narrative gaps. Its central proposal is the notion of relational gaps, grounded in the relational structure of withdrawn affordances. It also explores what follows from the assumption that affordances are both actualised and latently present within fictional worlds – namely, how this shapes the interpretation of literary texts, the reader’s cognitive process of inhabiting the fictional world, and the functions of literary description. To address these questions, the article proposes a method of reading through storyworld affordances across three registers – referential, inferential, and speculative – tested above all on the ending of *The Homeless* by Stefan Żeromski (1900), where affordances as relational gaps prove especially consequential. The paper concludes by sketching several directions for further research, particularly in the context of econarratology and object-oriented narratology.

#### 1. Reading through Storyworld Affordances: A Mode of World-Centred Interpretation\*

The concept of affordance has so far been used only sporadically in narratology – far too rarely, given the conceptual originality and analytical range it enables. The present article seeks to redress this by posing a single, fundamental question: if affordances are ceaselessly actualised by the most diverse of organisms in the actual world and systematically studied across multiple fields, why should they not also be operative within fictional worlds – and open to systematic analysis?

I see no compelling logical grounds to deny this possibility. Accordingly, I proceed from the assumption that affordances not only can but must be present within fictional worlds, where they are either actualised or, to borrow Roman Ingarden’s phrase, “held in readiness” (1973, 56). The totality of such affordances at the level of the diegesis I designate collectively as storyworld affordances. And my main aim is to demonstrate the multiple advantages this concept offers for a multi-dimensional analysis of literary texts.

However, since fictional worlds are not directly accessible to readers, but are variously mediated and, moreover, subject to processes of concretisation (Ingarden 1973), the very investigation of affordances in fictional environments must itself be problematised. Such inquiry necessarily proceeds under conditions of incomplete access – conditions that differ fundamentally from those governing the study of affordances in the actual world. For this reason, the present

study also advances a method of close reading, which I term ‘reading through storyworld affordances’. This mode of reading operates across three principal registers: referential, inferential, and speculative. The first encompasses affordances explicitly represented in the text; the second, those implicitly encoded and recoverable through inference; and the third, affordances that present themselves as both permanent and relevant gaps (Sternberg 1978, 50–51; 1985, 236) – what I conceptualise here as relational gaps.

More generally, the concept of storyworld affordances might appear, at first glance, as a tool suited primarily – if not exclusively – to the analysis of so-called world-centred narratives, to use Marie-Laure Ryan’s (2013, 383) term. The concept is, nevertheless, considerably more versatile: it functions as an instrument of world-centred interpretation and, as such, remains equally productive across realist, modernist, and fantastic prose – as the readings of Émile Zola, Marcel Proust, John R. R. Tolkien, and Stefan Žeromski in the fifth section will demonstrate.

## 2. Gibson’s and Chemero’s Theory of Affordances – Definition and Applications

Since the concept of affordance plays a central role in this study, I begin by clarifying how it is understood and operationalised here. Rather than surveying its extensive interdisciplinary history, I focus on its methodological relevance for narratological research, particularly with respect to storyworlds and narrative gaps.

The concept itself was first introduced by James J. Gibson in preliminary form in 1966 (Gibson 1966, 285), further developed in later writings (Gibson 1977), and most fully articulated in the chapter “The Theory of Affordances” in *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* in 1979 (2015). In the classical Gibsonian sense, an affordance refers to the potential “offer,” use, or action provided to an animal by the environment or, more specifically, by a particular object such as a tool, plant, or another animal. These offerings may be beneficial or harmful; as Gibson (2015, 134) asserts, “[t]hey offer benefits or injury, life or death. This is why they need to be perceived.”

It should be emphasized, however, that in the same chapter Gibson also proposes a more expansive and philosophically provocative characterisation of affordances, one that departs from strict definitional precision and challenges conventional philosophical distinctions.

An important fact about the affordances of the environment is that they are in a sense objective, real, and physical, unlike values and meanings, which are often supposed to be subjective, phenomenal, and mental. But, actually, an affordance is neither an objective property nor a subjective property; or it is both if you like. An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy. It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. It is both physical and psychical, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer. (Gibson 2015, 121)

As the foregoing passage illustrates, Gibson's formulations, though theoretically ambitious, remain conceptually elusive and open to interpretation, and this very elusiveness is among the reasons they have generated extensive commentary, corrections, and reinterpretations (see Michaels / Carello 1981; Turvey 1992; Reed 1996; Michaels 2000 etc.). The theorists cited here broadly concurred that affordances are simply animal-relative properties of the environment. In contrast, to date, the most precise and influential reformulation of Gibson's theory has been offered by Anthony Chemero, who explicitly rejects this interpretation. In Chemero's (2009, 145–147) initial, static conception of affordances,<sup>1</sup> they are neither properties of the environment alone, nor of the animal alone, but relations of action-potentials between specific *abilities* of an animal (to perceive and act) and specific *features* of an object, a situation, or an environment. As relations, affordances are not easily localizable physically; nevertheless, they are fully real and directly perceivable, since, on radical empiricist grounds, "anything perceivable is real" (Chemero 2009, 142).

This relational and ontological reconceptualization of affordances provides the theoretical basis for my own use of the term. My understanding of affordances integrates Gibson's foundational insight with Chemero's clarifications. Building on this integrated framework, it becomes possible both to identify the methodological perspectives that the concept opens up for research in the humanities and specify the conditions governing its precise and proper use. These issues are outlined in the following paragraphs.

Given Gibson's strikingly forward-thinking notion of animal – which today sits comfortably alongside terms such as actant or agent –, Gibson's ecological theory of perception as a whole emerges as quite a non-anthropocentric one, oriented primarily toward organism-environment systems. This perspective also weakens the traditional subject-object dichotomy by shifting the focus from isolated entities to the relation of fit between organism and environment. Such a relational reorientation makes it possible to move beyond both subject-oriented accounts that privilege individual experience and object-oriented approaches that emphasize the physical properties of the environment. It foregrounds instead how meaning, perception, and action are constituted relationally within inhabited environments (here: storyworlds).

To make this point concrete and to demonstrate how affordances should be properly described within a relational framework, consider the following example: an aged oak tree with a substantial hollow, before which stand a squirrel and a human. The affordance of the oak is not that it has a hollow – that is merely a feature; rather, it is, among many other possibilities, the relation of sheltering that obtains between the hollow's features and a creature capable of entering it and in need of refuge, such as a squirrel or, in this situation, also a human (as in many literary works, e.g., Edgar hiding in the tree-hollow in *King Lear* or the tree-dwellings in *Winnie-the-Pooh*). Obviously, if the hollow is too small relative to the organism's bodily capacities, the affordance of sheltering does not obtain.

A note on terminology is necessary here, since Chemero's relational framework exposes certain limitations of linguistic conventions. For example, when a

squirrel climbs a tree, it may seem natural to describe this affordance as *climbability* or *climb-on-able relation*. But the same tree may also serve as a source of nourishment, insofar as the squirrel feeds on its acorns. What term should be used in this case – ‘*nourishability*’? Such a formulation quickly reveals its artificiality. Here, the more appropriate expression is not a nominalized property, but a relational phrase, such as *a relation of nourishment*. Yet in practice, it is far more natural to retain Gibsonian terminology and simply say that the tree offers (or affords) nourishment to the squirrel. It is this linguistic tension that makes a clarification of terminology necessary.

To avoid this difficulty, I will occasionally retain Gibson’s convenient language of environments and objects as ‘offering’ something to an animal. This phrasing usefully conveys the directed character of affordances, but must be understood in strictly relational terms. It must not be taken to imply that the offering is a property intrinsic to the object, waiting to be collected by a passing animal. Accordingly, statements such as ‘the tree offers shelter’ will function here as shorthand for relational configurations.

It is also needed, in order to avoid possible misunderstandings, to emphasise the fundamentally dispositional and selective character of affordances actualisations. As the example of the tree could illustrate, when a squirrel stands before the tree, an almost countless number of affordances may obtain (affordances relate to action-potentials). However, even among the affordances available to a given organism, not all are perceived at once – such holistic and exhaustive perception would be neither possible nor adaptive. As Gibson (2015, 126) emphasizes, “[p]erception is economical. ‘Those features of a thing are noticed which distinguish it from other things that it is not – but not all the features that distinguish it from everything that it is not.’” Perception thus selectively discloses only those relations that are relevant under current ecological conditions. In line with Chemero’s relational reformulation, affordances can therefore be understood as relations that are selectively perceived depending on the organism’s abilities, needs, and situational context.

Last but not least, Chemero (2009, 149–150) addresses also a pivotal ontological question: do affordances vanish when no animal is present? His answer is unambiguous: they do not. Affordances do not cease to exist as long as there exists somewhere an organism with the relevant abilities to actualise them – that is, a potential perceiver. They will vanish only if no such organism exists anywhere. A cliff, for example, does not require a person standing nearby in order to offer a fatal fall. This offer remains real in virtue of potential relational structure, regardless of whether it is presently taken up.

Accordingly, both in real environments and in literary storyworlds, affordances may be meaningfully analysed even in the absence of an actual perceiver within a given scene. If an organism with the relevant abilities could in principle be present, the relation can obtain, and it remains theoretically legitimate to speak of concrete affordances.

### 3. Applications of Affordance Theory in Literary Studies – External and Internal Approaches – Five Levels of Storyworld Affordances Analysis

So far, I have offered a necessarily selective account of the concept of affordances and its general principles. Since my focus is on literary narrative, I will now briefly survey some influential applications of the term within literary studies before turning to my key concern: clarifying its potential for narratological research centred on the storyworld.

It can be stated at the outset that although, as noted earlier, the notion of affordances has a long and wide-ranging interdisciplinary history – having been extensively employed in fields such as information technology and design studies – its application within literary studies remains comparatively limited. When it has been taken up, it has most often appeared in discussions of aesthetic form, as in Caroline Levine’s *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), or in reflections on literary conventions and genres, as in Terrence Cave’s *Thinking with Literature* (2016). In both cases, however, the concept of affordances is employed in a relatively loose manner. Levine (2015, 6) draws her understanding of the term primarily from design theory, treating affordances as “latent in materials and structures” and often approaching them as properties of forms themselves – particularly in her discussion of categories such as plurality and situatedness. Cave’s (2016, 48) central difficulty, by contrast, lies in shifting affordances from relations between organisms and environmental features into objects themselves viewed in light of their uses (for an in-depth critique of Levine’s and Cave’s approaches, see Suoranta 2023, 32–51).

A more conceptually rigorous and theoretically nuanced engagement with affordances – explicitly grounded in Chemero’s relational framework – can be found in P. H. Khost’s insightful study *Rhetor Response: A Theory and Practice of Literary Affordance* (2018). Khost shifts the emphasis away from meaning and interpretation in the traditional sense and toward the rhetorical and pragmatic uses readers can make of literature, whether or not these align with authorial intentions and whether or not they are consciously adopted.

The uses of the concept of affordances surveyed above – and many others (such as McHale 2010; Bazarnik 2021; Mangen et al. 2022; Płuciennik 2025) – share a common feature: they focus primarily on the broadly understood level of the reception of the literary work, its existence in social contexts, and its form. I will term these, for convenience, external approaches – and the affordances they investigate, external affordances of the literary text. A partial exception to this external focus is Esko Suoranta’s dissertation (2023).<sup>2</sup> My own approach is not polemical with respect to these perspectives; it simply operates at a different level. This difference stems from the fact that my analysis is oriented toward the internal level of the literary work – toward internal affordances that emerge within the storyworld and only subsequently extend outward across other levels of the text, ultimately reaching the reader.

To provisionally organize the field of analysis, I set out below five basic levels at which storyworld affordances can be examined, together with the key questions each level brings into play:

1. *World-centred approach.* This approach focuses on the internal structure of storyworld affordances – that is, on the relations between the features of a fictional environment and the abilities of the characters inhabiting it. The key questions are: how do affordances shape the course of real and potential events; which potential actions are available to a given character; which are taken up unconsciously; and, under what conditions are they actualised?
2. *Narrator-centred approach.* This is the level of narrative mediation, where the key question concerns the construction of perception – specifically, the distinction between internally and externally focalised perception, that is, whether a given affordance belongs to the character’s perceptual field or remains the exclusive province of the narrator and the reader.
3. *Text-centred approach.* This approach shifts attention from agents to textual organisation, foregrounding the question of text types. The key questions are not what narration or description affords to the reader, but rather: how storyworld affordances are revealed, structured, and distributed across descriptive, narrative, argumentative, and other text-types; what functions these different textual modes perform when viewed through the lens of affordance theory; and, to what degree the worlds they depict are, by means of them, saturated (Doležel 1998, 169-184).
4. *Reader-centred approach.* Since the storyworld is fundamentally a cognitive category, co-created through the recipient’s imaginative engagement, this approach addresses the question: how does the notion of storyworld affordances shape the reader’s process of inhabiting and co-creating the fictional world?
5. *Author-centred approach.* This approach concerns the process of worldbuilding in its broadest sense – the design of environments, objects, and situations as spaces that enable or invite particular actions. The key question is how affordances are embedded in the world at the stage of its construction.<sup>3</sup>

Of the approaches outlined above, only three can be developed here. The following section offers a brief commentary on the reader-centred approach (4), before turning to a full analysis of the world-centred approach (1) – the main concern of this article. The discussion closes with a preliminary sketch of the text-centred approach (3) which highlights what the concept of storyworld affordances brings to the study of literary description.

#### 4. Reader-Centred Approach – The Storyworld as a Field of Affordances

A useful starting point is some convergence between Gibson's ecological theory of perception and David Herman's well-known definition of a storyworld in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (2005, 570), illustrated in the following brief excerpt:

When compared with cognate narratological terms such as fabula or story, story-world better captures what might be called the ecology of narrative interpretation. In trying to make sense of a narrative, interpreters attempt to reconstruct not just what happened but also the surrounding context or environment embedding storyworld existents, their attributes, and the actions and events in which they are involved. [...] Interpreters do not merely reconstruct a sequence of events and a set of existents, but imaginatively (emotionally, viscerally) inhabit a world in which things matter, agitate, exalt, repulse, provide grounds for laughter and grief, and so on – both for narrative participants and for interpreters of the story.

In fact, reading and interpreting through storyworld affordances – as I understand it here – may be described as an ecological interpretation *par excellence*. It rejects the idea of the world, the environment, or the landscape as merely a backdrop for events or a simple setting. Instead, it invites us to see the world as a network of relations among inhabiting agents and the assemblages of objects around them. The environment is viewed as a collection of ecological niches<sup>4</sup> (clusters of affordances) that enable basic actions and, in turn, influence the development of the story. From this perspective, a fictional world is not defined by a single 'story' to which everything must conform, but rather as a configurational field – a space of action-potentials that includes multiple possible scenarios. Simultaneously, characters are seen as part of the environment they inhabit – an environment that offers or denies essential opportunities for action and habitation. Ultimately, what makes a world inhabitable, what makes it a world at all, is that it contains and sustains affordances.

Obviously, Herman's approach focuses on the cognitive mechanisms that underpin narrative worldmaking. If we consider this issue through the lens of affordance theory, we might say that in order to achieve what Claus Toft-Nielsen (2013, 256) has termed a sense of worldness, the reader needs to make a cognitive investment. This investment involves imagining answers to a specific set of questions: what does the world afford, what does it offer – to the characters, and potentially also to the reader? Moreover, what can or cannot actually be done within this world, and what might still be left to do? Put differently, this mode of engagement entails a reorientation of interpretative attention: first, toward "allocentric thinking" – the mind's capacity to conceive of the fictional world from the perspective of that world itself (Maj 2019, 15) – and second, toward what has been termed a topofocal reading, in which setting is treated as equally significant as characters and plot (Ekman 2013, 2).

In general, this issue also pertains to the indeterminacy of every storyworld, and thus to narrative gaps, which involve the process of concretisation (Ingarden 1973) – a process that, in a Hermanian context, should be understood as a

cognitive mechanism directly linked to readerly immersion (Schaeffer 2013; Płuciennik 2025). From the perspective adopted here, one can observe that the inherent indeterminacy of objects (their features) or characters (their abilities) inevitably extends to the indeterminacy of certain storyworld affordances. This means that concretisation – at a very intuitive level – also encompasses the action-potentials “held in readiness” (Ingarden 1973, 56) by storyworld niches. Here, I argue that the reconstruction and comprehension of such a horizon of potentialities constitutes an integral dimension of the reading process, one that bears directly on what Umberto Eco (1984, 214–217) called inferential walks: the reader’s projections of how the story might unfold, or – when inference is no longer available and only hypothesis remains – what I provisionally term ‘speculative walks.’ Storyworld affordances, from this perspective, function as the structural resources through which such walks – inferential or speculative – are both enabled and constrained.

## **5. World-Centred Approach – Referential, Inferential, and Speculative Readings of Storyworld Affordances – Light as a Factor in Environmental Perception**

Within the space of most fictional worlds, much as in the actual world, there exists a vast multitude of objects, and with them a correspondingly vast number of affordances. Many fictional worlds also operate according to markedly different principles: they may follow alternative physical laws, permit the existence of magic, and so forth. Such differences can at times radically expand or restrict the range of ‘admissible’ affordances that may occur within them. For this reason, the horizon of potentialities – the possible offers, uses, and actions available to agents within a given world – is virtually boundless and, as such, resistant to exhaustive description. Yet, this does not mean that the concept of affordances – despite its generality – is of little use for describing the internal relations that take shape within such worlds. On the contrary, these potentialities become concretised whenever a particular object is put to use, whenever its features support or enable a given ability or capacity of the agents involved. At such moments they are reduced to the form of fully observable, actualized affordances, which can then serve as objects of further analysis.

If one assumes that the reader’s access to a fictional world is necessarily limited, and that fictional characters typically perceive their world as complete – a premise that does not, of course, hold universally, postmodern prose being the most obvious exception – then such an analysis may, in principle, proceed along three paths – each involves a distinct operation: *reference*, *inference* (Doležel 1998, 182–184), and – what I propose to term – *speculation*.

The first consists in identifying explicit, referential affordances – those articulated directly by the narrator or a fictional character: “it was a hollow that provided Tom with shelter.”

The second relies on inference drawn from implicit meanings – most typically from the actions of characters: “Tom tried to squeeze into the hollow, but both his legs stuck out.” Here, the affordance is not stated but reconstructed – as an absent relation, a hollow that offers no shelter – inferred as a presupposition of the interaction between agent and environment.

The third approach enters the domain of speculation – and thus of pure potentiality. Consider the following description: “About two meters above the ground, a large hollow gaped in the trunk of an old oak.” Faced with such a passage, the task would be to assess whether a relation of sheltering might obtain between the properties of a possible agent – its size, its climbing abilities – and the relevant features of the hollow, such as its dimensions or its height above the ground. In most such cases, however, the affordance remains indeterminate. Literary texts often exploit precisely this indeterminacy – at times elaborating it to considerable artistic effect; in many novels, extended descriptive passages occupy exactly this space: one in which potential affordances are evoked but never resolved.

Finally, it remains to add that fictional worlds also encompass niches and objects about which the text provides no information whatsoever – “*dark areas*,” to adapt Brian McHale’s (2004, 90) term to a somewhat different purpose: not gaps in historical reference, but simply the whole zones of the fictional space that the text leaves entirely unspecified. In the absence of any data, there is simply no ground for meaningful speculation about possible affordances that can occur in them.

The very notion of ‘dark areas’ invites – if the metaphor may be indulged – a complementary consideration of what might be called ‘*bright areas*’ – zones of higher saturation – niches that are illuminated, and therefore perceptually accessible. Such areas foreground what is, in ecological terms, a foundational condition of perception: the role of light as the primary carrier of information. As Gibson (2015, 119) puts it: “And if there is information in light for the perception of surfaces, is there information for the perception of what they afford? Perhaps the composition and layout of surfaces constitute what they afford. If so, to perceive them is to perceive what they afford.” Realist writers in general were intuitively well aware of this principle. They took care to ensure that scenes were sufficiently illuminated, arranging lamps, candles, and – above all – windows, those classic realist *topoi* discussed by Philippe Hamon (1981, 224–255). Such devices provided, of course, convenient metatextual justifications for the insertion of visually motivated descriptions of spaces, interiors, or panoramas. However, from the diegetic perspective, these sources of light – hence, sources of information – perform a more fundamental function. They reveal space not as an abstract or purely mathematical construct, but as a domain that is inhabited, and indeed inhabitable: a configurational field within which agents encounter concrete possibilities for action, more or less clearly specified but nonetheless real and operative within the storyworld. From the technical standpoint of novelistic composition, the mere ‘insertion’ of a window amounts to the creation of a basic niche in which information about particular affordances becomes available.

## 5.1 Reading through Storyworld Affordances – Zola, Proust, Tolkien

It is now time to turn to concrete literary examples. For the moment, it is useful to remain with the example of the window. A particularly clear instance of its functionalisation – that is, the narrative exploitation of the window's ecological value – can be found in the fiction of Émile Zola. In the opening scene of *L'assommoir* (1877), nearly the entire narrative sequence is structured around the actualisation of the affordances of an open window<sup>5</sup> by Gervaise Macquart, who peers through it while waiting for the return of her lover, August Lantier.

The window here affords not only the possibility of observing the outside – the view onto the Rue de Poissonnière – but also the possibility of being observed – of being exposed to public view: in this case, the protagonist's face, reddened by tears and exhaustion after a sleepless night (“Madame Boche saw her eyes filling with tears”) (Zola 1998, 9). It also offers Gervaise, for better or worse, the opportunity to lean out into the street; at the same time it entails the risk of falling and getting hurt – a possibility that Zola carefully registers: “When Gervaise thought she recognized Lantier among all those people, she'd lean further forward, at the risk of falling out; then she'd press her handkerchief harder on to her mouth, as if seeking to bite back her pain” (Zola 1998, 7). Finally, by letting in the cold morning air, the window offers the possibility of chilling the body and, consequently, illness or a cold: “You poor dear, you really shouldn't stay there, you'll catch your death... You're quite blue.” (Zola 1998, 9).

In *L'assommoir*, as in other novels by Émile Zola – notably *Une page d'amour* (1878) and *La Bête humaine* (1890) – the window operates not only as a familiar metatextual trigger of description (as noted by Hamon), but above all as a functionally significant environmental element within the diegesis. By virtue of its properties – transparency, openness, and elevated placement – it creates the conditions for a whole network of relations, some of which Gervaise actually enters into, while others remain merely potential within the scene.

Of course, these observations offer a rather straightforward example of reading through storyworld affordances. As this case demonstrates, by attending to the relational and the dispositional interplay between the window's properties and the protagonist's abilities and dispositions, such a reading refuses to treat the object as a merely passive background to human action.

Yet by concentrating on the function of windows, I have set aside a much more fundamental affordance – one encoded in the simple fact of movement, that is, the possibility of walking. As Gibson (2015, 119) observes:

If a terrestrial surface is nearly horizontal (instead of slanted), nearly flat (instead of convex or concave), and sufficiently extended (relative to the size of the animal) and if its substance is rigid (relative to the weight of the animal), then the surface affords support. It is a surface of support, and we call it a substratum, ground, or floor. It is stand-on-able, permitting an upright posture for quadrupeds and bipeds. It is therefore walk-on-able and run-over-able. It is not sink-into-able like a surface of water or a swamp, that is, not for heavy terrestrial animals. Support for water bugs is different.

So long as walking on water passes for a miracle, the fact that a pavement is *walk-on-able* will pass unnoticed – as transparent, for the reader, as a windowpane. Not all surfaces, however, are perfectly smooth: pavements may be uneven, cracked, or unstable – as when individual slabs are slightly loose. In relational terms, such a surface will still unequivocally sustain a *walk-on-able* affordance, while simultaneously giving rise to others – *trip-over-able*, *stumble-on-able*, or *fall-on-able* – typically enacted without reflective awareness (Khost 2018, 19).

In literature, perhaps the most famous and consequential instance of such an unconscious uptake of a pavement's affordances occurs in *Time Regained* (1927), the final volume of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1912–1927). In a well-known scene, the narrator stumbles on uneven paving stones in the courtyard of the Guermantes residence; the sensation immediately recalls the feeling he once experienced while standing on the uneven floor of the baptistery of St Mark's Basilica in Venice (see Proust 1970, 222–223).

Read through the lens of storyworld affordances, this episode makes it possible to recognize that *mémoire involontaire* – deeply anchored in bodily sensation – does not arise without an external, object-based trigger. In this case, that trigger is nothing other than the involuntary actualisation of exactly the same affordance *trip-over-able* – here in Paris, and earlier in Venice. The object – the pavement with its irregular surface – appears to the narrator together with the preconscious memory that seems somehow 'attached' to it.<sup>6</sup> What this suggests is that involuntary memory resides neither in the subject nor in the objects alone, but in the relation between them: more precisely, in the relation between the subject's abilities and the properties of the object – hence, in the domain of affordances. So, memory returns when the identity of the affordance is superimposed upon the identity of the subject.

Reading through storyworld affordances, which insist on tracking of such relations, thus makes it possible to perceive what is objectal within what appears subjective – and, conversely, what is subjective within the apparently objective – thereby subtly unsettling the very distinction between these categories.

To continue the thread of involuntary engagement with environmental affordances – or, as Khost puts it, unconscious or unintended uses (Khost 2018, 19) – and to extend the analysis to a different generic context, I turn to another well-known instance: the scene of the destruction of the One Ring in *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (1955) by J. R. R. Tolkien.

I would like to begin with a provocative question: who actually cast the One Ring into the fires of Mount Doom? Let us go straight to the relevant passage:

The fires below awoke in anger, the red light blazed, and all the cavern was filled with a great glare and heat. Suddenly Sam saw Gollum's long hands draw upwards to his mouth; his white fangs gleamed, and then snapped as they bit. Frodo gave a cry, and there he was, fallen upon his knees at the chasm's edge. But Gollum, dancing like a mad thing, held aloft the ring, a finger still thrust within its circle. It shone now as if verily it was wrought of living fire.

'Precious, precious, precious!' Gollum cried. 'My Precious! O my Precious!' And with that, even as his eyes were lifted up to gloat on his prize, he stepped too far, toppled, wavered for a moment on the brink, and then with a shriek he fell. Out of the depths came his last wail *Precious*, and he was gone. (Tolkien 2008, 1238)

Not Frodo – who, at the very Crack of Doom, claimed the Ring for his own. Not Sam – the focaliser of the scene, who lay dazed on the stony floor. And not Gollum, at least not intentionally. The answer closest to the truth is: no one. But the most precise reply, I would argue, is that the destruction of the One Ring resulted from the affordances of the Sammath Naur itself – from the relations that obtained between Gollum’s abilities (and inabilities) and the features of a specific and lethal niche: a tunnel bored into the Mountain’s cone, which terminate in a brink beyond which there was only the abyss stretching down to the fiery bottom of the volcano. The Crack of Doom was, in affordance terms, a kind of ‘cliff’ – and everything about this environment afforded falling. The fatal relation between the chasm’s features and Gollum’s abilities was already in place; it merely awaited a moment of inattention – a creature who, in relative darkness, stepped too far and fell.

Without the affordances of the rocky edge and the deadly fires below, the One Ring would not have been destroyed. This leads to a deeply pessimistic conclusion: Sauron was right from the beginning in believing that no one would be able to destroy the Ring of their own free will – Frodo himself, the Ring-bearer, confirms as much: “Sam, I could not have destroyed the Ring” (Tolkien 2008, 1239). What Sauron did not foresee, however, was that the dark tunnel of the Sammath Naur, lit only by occasional flashes of red glare and ending in a great chasm, would itself offer – for better or worse – the possibility of an accidental fall: “Similarly, a slope downward affords falling if steep; the brink of a cliff is a falling-off place. It is dangerous and looks dangerous” (Gibson 2015, 124). It may therefore be said that this Tolkien scene presents one of the most consequential unconscious actualisations of the affordance of a cliff in literary history.

## 5.2 Affordances as Relational Gaps – The Ending of *The Homeless* by Żeromski

Up to this point, the examples considered so far have shared a common feature: the storyworld affordances were either already actualised or in the process of actualisation; moreover, they were either explicitly presented or implicitly encoded in ways that rendered them relatively easy to infer. As a result, any indeterminacies pertaining to objects or agents did not significantly affect either interpretation or the course of the analysis.

The more consequential problem arises when affordances enter the domain of indeterminacy – especially when they occupy the position of permanent and relevant gaps (Sternberg 1978, 50–51; 1985, 236): that is, gaps that cannot be filled in definitively and that carry interpretive weight. Precisely, when they belong to the domain of the nonnarrated understood in the more restrictive sense proposed by Wolf Schmid (2023, 3): not everything that is simply omitted, but that which, though not told, nonetheless belongs to the story.

Withholding of crucial diegetic information regarding an object's features, an organism's abilities, and /or the relation between them may, under certain conditions, give rise to a relevant affordance-based gap. Given the inherently relational and dyadic structure of affordances, such gaps resist localisation on either side of the relation exclusively. It is for this reason that I propose to term them *relational gaps*. Such a gap resides neither in a missing feature of the object, nor in incomplete knowledge of the organism's abilities; rather, it is the absent or indeterminate relation that may – or may not – obtain between them: one that, strictly speaking, can only be approached through disciplined speculation.

One particularly compelling example of an affordance which function as a relational gap appears in the strikingly ambiguous ending of *The Homeless* (*Ludzie bezdomni*) (1900) by Stefan Żeromski – a canonical work of Young Poland (c. 1890–1918), as familiar from school curricula as it is from scholarly debate. The novel traces the fate of Tomasz Judym, a young doctor who struggles to reconcile his altruistic social mission – serving the poor and confronting systemic injustice – with his personal desire for love and happiness. In the novel's final scene, Judym – having broken with his fiancée, Joasia Podborska – wanders aimlessly through the industrially devastated landscape of the Dąbrowa Basin, consumed by bitterness and contempt, until he arrives at a post-mining collapse. The passage warrants quotation at length:

Right beside Judym's feet was a broad, dry landslip – a funnel-shaped hole pointing downward. Deep beneath it, there had once been mine galleries. Layers of sandstone and clay shale had collapsed under their own weight after the extraction of the support pillars beneath the upper level; as they fell, their fragments filled the empty spaces in the coal seams. The surface soil had slid into the chasm along with the grass and shrubs, forming a pit twenty meters deep.

At the rupture, streaks of grey and pale-yellow sand were visible. Around it stood dwarf pines, stunted and miserable.

One of them grew right at the edge of the sinkhole. The torn earth dragged its right root into the depths, while the left remained on firm ground. Thus the mine's history had torn it in two. Its trunk stood with one half above and the other descending with the landslip, like a human being impaled on a stake. The half drawn down with the clods of earth strained like limbs in torment. Its upper roots, sunk in the soil, clung with all their strength.

Judym slid down into the sinkhole so that no one could see him. He threw himself onto his back. Beneath him, deep in the earth, he occasionally heard the thud of dynamite and gunpowder explosions. Above, he saw clouds gliding across the azure sky.

Bright, sacred, reddened clouds...

Right above his head stood the torn pine.

From the depth of his pit, he could see its shredded trunk, dripping with bloody resin. He stared at the rupture for a long time, without pause.

He saw every fibre, every suffering tendon of the torn bark. Around him he heard a solitary, unique cry – a cry before the face of God.

He only did not know who was that cry...

Was it Joasia? – Or were the sepulchral vaults of the mine crying?

Or the torn pine?<sup>7</sup> (Żeromski 1987, 405–406)

In the extensive Polish critical tradition devoted to this novel, the ending has attracted a strikingly uniform interpretation: aligned with a broadly modernist poetics, it has been read not as an external landscape but, first and foremost, as an inner one (Kłosiński 2007, 39). The torn pine – rooted partly in the soil, partly dragged into the chasm – has been taken to figure Judym’s internal fracture, as mentioned earlier, his tragic division between social duty and personal happiness. The sinkhole itself, in turn, mirrors his inner abyss, a collapse that is simultaneously literal and psychological (Bukowiński 1900, 21; Sternklar [pseud. Zbigniew Zatorski] 1931; Eile 1976, 7–8; Polańczyk 1997, 18; Kłosiński 2007, 39–42).

Yet *The Homeless* is a novel in which such expressive, symbolically charged description coexists in productive tension with distinctly naturalistic modes of representation. In the passage cited above, this second dimension is especially evident in what one might call – after Zola (2012) – a ‘hypertrophy of the true detail’: a sustained, almost clinical attention to material specificity. This dimension of the ending – its quasi-scientific precision, its insistence on material and spatial specificity, its realist grounding – has, with the notable exception of Paweł Tomczok’s work<sup>8</sup> (2018), remained largely unexamined by critics. What has gone equally unremarked, however, is something altogether more elementary: that Żeromski conspicuously passes over a simple and self-evident fact that sinkholes are inherently dangerous terrains. Judym, who focalises the scene, seems not to register this at all – and neither, with the exception of Tomczok, has the critical tradition.

This is precisely the problem the reading through storyworld affordances undertakes to examine. I propose to treat the ending of *The Homeless* as a kind of geological (and mathematical) puzzle, and to pose the following questions: Could Judym have left this place on his own? (Tomczok 2018, 673) Does the collapsed pit afford any possibility of escape – and if so, under what conditions? And what do the affordances of this terrain ultimately reveal about the meaning of Judym’s decision to enter the sinkhole at all?

As a first step, I begin with the extraction of the explicit meanings the text provides: the descriptive data that allows for a reconstruction of Judym’s niche:

- a) the pit is “twenty meters deep”;
- b) the funnel-shaped pit was formed by a sudden event: the collapse of the mine roof (that is, a collapse of supports);
- c) the sand, soil as well as the layers of sandstone and clay shale, collapsed spontaneously;
- d) the sand visible at the rupture is dry;
- e) no water has accumulated in the sinkhole (or at least not yet);
- f) at the edge of the sinkhole stands a torn pine, its trunk split and oozing resin;
- g) Judym “slid down into the sinkhole”;
- h) throughout the scene, the sounds of successive explosions can be heard from beneath the ground.

The second step proceeds within the adopted realist framework of interpretation and turns to the implicit layer of meaning – namely, meanings that are encoded in the text and become accessible through inference. Drawing on actual-world encyclopaedia, this stage involves the evaluation of descriptive data and the reconstruction of their underlying presuppositions.

First, post-mining sinkholes are typically “less than 10 m [in diameter; M.M.] and less than 15 m deep” (Canbulat et al. 2017, 332–333); consequently, Judym’s sinkhole should be regarded as significantly larger than average.

Second, although the attribution of active suffering and torment to the pine may at first appear as a straightforward instance of animism, it nonetheless presupposes that the tree is still alive: “he saw every fibre, every suffering tendon of the torn bark.” This presupposition, in turn, allows one to infer that the sinkhole is relatively recent, since a tree would not remain alive in such a violently damaged condition for long.

Third, given the precise geological information concerning the rock strata in the sinkhole area – sandstone and clay shale – it can be inferred that the surrounding soil consists of a sandy-clay mixture.

Fourth, since the sounds of explosions are heard from beneath the ground, this indicates that the mine workings are relatively shallow and that there is a significantly increased risk of further sinkholes forming, or of the existing one deepening (Canbulat et al. 2017, 333).

Finally – and most crucially – Judym does not descend in a controlled manner but “slid down into the sinkhole”; this implies that a controlled descent in an upright position would be either impossible or prohibitively dangerous. Moreover, such sliding is the direct actualisation of a specific affordance of the terrain, one that obtains between:

- (Judym’s) *abilities* (sliding) × (post-mining sinkhole) *features* (slope angle: relatively steep; substrate: sandy-clay mix; surface: relatively flat)

Were the affordance *slide-on-able* the only consideration, the precise parameters of slope angle would be of limited consequence, given that this affordance has already been actualised. The problem arises, however, once we recognise the fundamental asymmetry inscribed in this relation: *slide-on-able* does not automatically entail *climb-on-able*. Judym may slide all the way down to the bottom of the twenty-meter funnel; whether he can leave it depends above all on the inclination of its walls:

- (Judym’s) *abilities* (climbing) × (post-mining sinkhole) *features* (slope angle: ?; substrate: sandy-clay mix; surface: relatively flat)

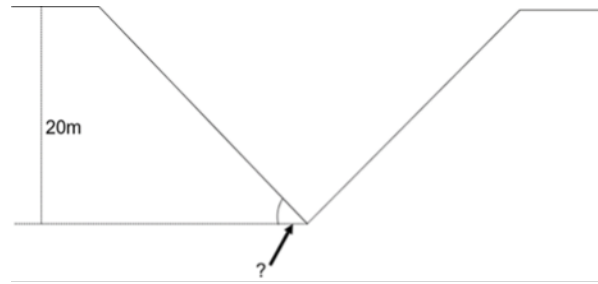


Fig. 1: Hypothetical reconstruction of the sinkhole in *The Homeless* and its possible slope angle.

At this point, the affordance structure begins to operate like a puzzle, revealing a fundamental and not immediately perceptible gap: the angle of the sinkhole walls. This gap, however, is not merely a missing parameter – it is constituent of a larger relational structure, *climb-on-able*, within which it is inscribed. The affordance itself thereby becomes a gap: a relational one. From this perspective, it is precisely this nonnarrated parameter that emerges as the most consequential element of the entire passage – and the one that opens onto the third step of the reading.

The third step takes up where the second leaves off: the inferential procedure is now extended into a ‘speculative walk’ around the relational gap. It is here that the reading opens onto an entire field of hypotheses – concerning Judym’s motivation, his psychological state, and his possible course of action.

So, on the basis of the natural angle of repose for dry granular material, it can be inferred that the slope angle of the funnel must have been at least  $34^\circ$  (for dry sand) (Al-Hashemi et al. 2018); otherwise, Judym could simply not have “slid” to the bottom. This angle may have been even greater regarding the fact that the sand was probably mixed with dry clay – reaching approximately  $36^\circ$ – $40^\circ$  (Kim et al. 2018, 4).

Nonetheless, several additional factors complicate this initial estimate. The relative freshness of the collapse; its formation above a shallow mine; the natural compaction of the slope walls, likely reinforced by root systems; and the composition of the substrate – a sand-clay mixture retaining probably some degree of moisture (the dry sand was visible only at the rim) – all suggest a more stable and potentially steeper structure. The precise description of the sinkhole as “a funnel-shaped hole pointing downward,” together with the detail that Judym, lying at the bottom, could see the pine directly above his head, further narrows the geometry of the scene. Taken together, these elements allow one to speculate that the actual angle of the sinkhole may have been significantly greater than the initial data would suggest – quite possibly well in excess of  $45^\circ$  (Dobak et al. 2009, 66–67).



Fig. 2: Mining-induced collapse in the area of the Pomorzany lead and zinc mine, Olkusz, Poland. The pit is about 10 metres deep.<sup>9</sup>

The speculative walk now arrives at its central question: could Judym leave the sinkhole? If we assume that its walls are inclined at approximately  $34^\circ$  and composed predominantly of dry sand, then – despite several constraining factors listed below – the answer, tentative as it is, remains affirmative. As one study pointedly observes: “[...] climbing sandy slopes at angles close to the avalanche angle is possible for beings larger than ants, such as humans or firebugs” (Crassous et al. 2017, 1).

This conclusion holds, however, only under the initial assumptions. Several factors complicate the picture as the slope steepens. Sand affords slower movement, a longer stance phase, and reduced push-off force; locomotion on such a substrate demands at least twice the energetic expenditure of walking on firm ground (Lejeune et al. 1998); and at angles around  $30^\circ$ , sand tends to yield and avalanche unpredictably – making every step a negotiation with the terrain. Furthermore, given a depth of twenty metres, the effective length of the slope would be more than thirty-five meters, and the text provides no indication that Judym possesses any specialised climbing skills.

So, the steeper the slope, the more prohibitive these conditions become – until, at a certain threshold, ascent becomes effectively impossible, as approximated by the photograph above. In the absence of precise data concerning unaided climbing on moist or unstable sandy-clay substrates, one can only speculate that an inclination which exceeds approximately  $40^\circ$ – $45^\circ$  would render escape practically unfeasible. On much more stable mountain slopes of comparable steepness – where the ground offers considerably better purchase – progress typically requires the use of hands (so-called scrambling) and is considered both

difficult and hazardous. On a loose, shifting surface of sand and clay, such conditions would render unassisted ascent all but impossible.

One might therefore reasonably conclude that a sinkhole of this kind would no longer afford Judym any viable means of escape: the affordance *climb-out-able* would fail to obtain between his abilities and the features of the terrain, and the capacity to climb would effectively turn into an incapacity. Moreover, if we take into account other affordances within Judym's niche – most notably those which involve the torn pine – even granting that its trunk extends into the lower reaches of the pit, its structural instability rules it out as a reliable aid to ascent. Read in this way, the pine becomes a negated symbol of hope: a promise of rescue that cannot be fulfilled. Judym's situation thus comes to resemble, in a curiously apt sense, a Tantalus-like torment.

Lest the foregoing appear to reduce literary analysis to a problem in geotechnical engineering, it should be clarified that the exact numerical value of the slope's angle is obviously not the point. What matters, rather, is the very possibility of speculating whether the sinkhole is more or less steep. It is precisely this speculation that allows us to interpret Judym's slide into the funnel both as a self-destructive gesture and as a form of deferred suicide – consistent with the character's psychological state. If he is unable to climb out unaided, if the collapse remains unstable and may deepen further (due to ongoing explosions), and if no help arrives – the area, to all appearances, being uninhabited: “far beyond the forests, the whistle of a train sobbed” (Žeromski 1987, 405) – then his death becomes only a matter of time, and the sinkhole, his grave (Tomczok 2018, 673).

Adaptation of such an interpretive solution makes it possible to trace a set of fairly evident thematic and compositional regularities overlooked by critics. First, the apparent alternative between pursuing a social mission and committing himself to Joasia proves to be false: in this reading, both possibilities are rejected in a single self-destructive gesture. The torn pine, which has traditionally been taken to symbolically visualise this inner division, instead emerges as a figure of slow dying: a tree torn apart by the ‘history of the mine’ will soon perish, much like Judym himself – ‘torn apart’ by his dilemmas and his past. Second, the ending thus interpreted is consonant with the compositional structure of the novel. The two chapters preceding the final – “Asperges me” and “Dajmonion” – both end in death: the first with the death of a woman under Judym's care, the second with the suicide of his friend, the engineer Korzecki. Judym's deferred suicide thus forms a strikingly coherent, three-part compositional sequence that closes the novel.

Yet the slope's inclination itself demands one further observation: such speculative reading reveals that the angle is not purely diegetic – a feature of an object within the fictional world – but also metatextual. In this sense, it becomes an angle ‘between life and death’ for the protagonist, and ultimately an ‘angle’ between a closed and an open ending of the novel. Precisely because this angle constitutes a gap, both oppositions remain undecidable.<sup>10</sup> In this light, the ending remains open: not because Judym survives, but because, at a meta-level, it pro-

duces a superposition between a living and a dead protagonist, between the bifurcation and the convergence of the story's possible paths.

But the angle is, in the end, only a threshold. Beyond it lies what truly matters: the indeterminacy of the affordance itself, the uncertainty of its actualisation. It is this indeterminacy that invites one further question that concerns the very nature of the relational gap constituted by affordance: is it, in fact, an ontological gap, or rather an epistemological one?<sup>11</sup>

If an ontological gap is understood, in general terms, as one intrinsic to fictional objects – their inherent, internal incompleteness; and an epistemological gap as one pertaining primarily to real or historical objects, residing solely on the side of the reader's knowledge and its limitations, that is, what is known or not known about an object, which is in itself fully determined (Smith 1979, 379–382) – then the relational gaps exemplified by storyworld affordances (fictional by definition, yet amenable to systematic analysis), should be classified as ontological.

The matter grows more complex, if the epistemological gap is understood diegetically, as pertaining to the fictional character's perception and knowledge – his relation with the environment and the possibilities it offers him, not all of which he is, after all, aware of. In such a case, affordance – neither purely subjective nor purely objective, belonging neither exclusively to the organism nor to the environment – would also become an epistemological gap. In that sense, affordances as relational gaps could be treated as ontological-epistemological lacunae.

Returning, nevertheless, to the level of the reader – one may observe that in cases where the affordance can be inferred from knowledge of an animal's abilities and the properties of its environment, it does not, strictly speaking, function as an ontological gap; rather, it approaches the category of Sternbergian 'temporary gaps.' Affordances encoded in characters' actions or in descriptive data correspond to epistemological gaps to the extent that they mark the limits of our knowledge, our cognitive capacities in the act of reading – above all, the impossibility of grasping all the implicit affordances encoded in the text. Some of these may, in principle, be progressively reconstructed through successive reinterpretations of the work (cf. Schmid 2023, 12–13), much as in the case of Judym's "sliding" into the sinkhole, where the very act encodes information about the sinkhole's minimal steepness.

## 6. Text-Centred Approach – Storyworld Affordances and the Functions of Literary Description

The final issue I wish to address is description, which appears clearly in the scenes discussed above, from Zola through Tolkien to Żeromski. In the following paragraphs, I present three key aspects of its function in the context of storyworld affordances theory.

First, in its prototypical form, narrative tends to actualise affordances in the course of action, encoding them – more or less explicitly – in the deeds of characters. Description, by contrast, works otherwise: by supplying data about niches, objects, or animals, it typically suggests possible affordances rather than showing them in their realisation. Many such possibilities remain unactualised or suspended; still more are consigned to the domain of relational gaps. In this sense, description primarily constructs configurational fields – spaces within which potential relations may emerge, though not necessarily be realised. Judy's sinkhole offers perhaps the most telling instance of such a field encountered in this study.

Second, within the theory of description, its governing principle is widely held to be attributivity – that is, the assignment of multiple features and properties to an object or agent (Wolf 2007; Herman 2009). From the perspective of affordance structure, this mechanism proves crucial, as it directly governs the elaboration of the two relational poles: abilities and features. In this sense, the difference between the mere naming of an object and its attributive elaboration – description proper – is decisive. It is precisely description that endows objects and agents with a *specific ecological value*<sup>12</sup>, thereby determining the range and character of relations they may enter within the storyworld.

A simple comparison may clarify this point: “there was a tree” versus “there stood an old, damaged tree with a large hollow and low-hanging branches.” The former yields an indeterminate or minimal ecological value; the latter specifies a considerably more concrete field of possible relations. It should be added that, although from the standpoint of verbal economy the second formulation might appear excessive, laden with superfluous detail – from the standpoint of perceptual economy the situation is reversed. Extended description does not broaden but rather narrows and specifies the field of affordances associated with a given object and a potential organism (one might recall here the description of the torn pine in *The Homeless*). For this reason, descriptive passages – exceptions such as the *nouveau roman* notwithstanding – tend to exhibit an inverse relation between their length and the range of probable affordances they evoke: the more elaborate the description, the more specific the ecological value it confers upon its object.

Third, while selectivity can be considered a general property of literary art, it comes into sharpest focus in descriptive passages. In this domain, it has long been linked with questions of representational hierarchy and the politics of the gaze. A reading through storyworld affordances, however, allows this selectivity to be approached from a different angle. In certain visually motivated descriptions, it may prove particularly fruitful to ask whether the foregrounding of some details, at the expense of others altogether withheld from view, does not follow from the principles of perceptual economy – according to which the features of objects most likely to be noticed are precisely those that enable specific relations or actions. In this light, Gibson's theory would also allow us to identify a particularly economical mode of description – an affordance-oriented one – in which, rather than enumerating an object's properties, the object itself is grasped

through the possibilities for action it affords: “there stood a tree that I could easily climb.”

Taken together these three observations point to a reconception of description as a mechanism through which, by means of attribution and selection, objects and organisms acquire a determinate ecological value – their potential relations made available to the reader in varying degrees and forms, according to the mode of narrative mediation.

## 7. Conclusion and Areas for Further Research

The concept of affordance, as the foregoing analyses have sought to demonstrate, can serve as a productive tool for narratological analysis and for a world-oriented mode of interpretation. Its advantages – deriving above all from the precision of Chemero’s definition and its elegant dyadic structure – allow for a methodologically disciplined identification and interpretation of not only explicit and implicitly encoded meanings, but also crucial narrative gaps.

The decisive theoretical step has been the attribution of affordances to the storyworld – and with it, the proposal of the concept of storyworld affordances. This concept opens the way not only to tracing diegetic action-potential relations between objects and organisms (a world-centred approach), but also to asking how the very presence of diegetic affordances shapes the reader’s process of inhabiting the fictional world – the dynamics of concretisation (a reader-centred approach) – and how it bears on our understanding of the functions of particular text types (a text-centred approach).

Finally, a theoretically refined deployment of the concept of affordance under conditions of ontological incompleteness has made it possible to introduce the notion of relational gaps. This concept demonstrates that the withdrawal of a single feature – a property of an object, for instance – may entail the suspension or foreclosure of an entire action-potential relation. Such withdrawn relations may belong to the domain of the nonnarrated. Their absence proves especially consequential at the texts endings – as in *The Homeless*, where – in Schmid’s (2023, 41) formulation – “the text ends earlier than the story being told.”

However, much remains to be done in developing the concept of storyworld affordances. First and foremost, the reader-, text-, and narrator-centred approaches outlined here – the last of these remaining largely unaddressed – call for substantially fuller treatment.

A further line of inquiry would involve testing the usefulness of the concept across different types of unnatural worlds. Particularly worth pursuing is the thesis that some worlds may be unnatural not because the features or abilities of their inhabitants are unusual or impossible – indeed, they may appear entirely ordinary – but because the relations between them are anomalous, unstable, or even contradictory.

Perhaps most productively of all, it would be worth exploring the application of the concept of affordance within the framework of new narratologies. Of particular relevance here is the recently proposed object-oriented narratology (Ryan / Weisheng 2024), not least because the preceding analyses have shown that storyworld affordances not only foreground the reality of relations within fictional worlds, but also restore to view the singularity and functional significance of objects so habitually relegated to the background. A second relevant context is econarratology (James 2015; Herman 2018). Among many other reasons, this is particularly relevant given that affordances make it possible to describe what takes place between organisms and their environments without recourse to the inaccessible interiority of subjective experience. On the basis of an object's features and knowledge of an organism's abilities, one can assess several environmental action-potentials without projecting human experience onto it. In this way, the concept of affordance thus bypasses the pitfalls of anthropocentrism: it describes relations, not inaccessible private experience.

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, I adopt Chemero’s static understanding of affordances (affordances 1.1). His dynamic, enactive account (affordances 2.0) according to which “affordances and abilities are not just defined in terms of one another as in the dispositional and relational views [...], but causally interact in real time and are causally dependent on one another” (Chemero 2009, 151) I consider most productive for the analysis of what I term the external affordances of literature (see section 3).

<sup>2</sup> Only at a very late stage in the preparation of this article, I came across the PhD project of Esko Suoranta (2023), which constitutes perhaps the most comprehensive attempt to theorise cognitive literary affordances yet undertaken. Like the present study, Suoranta adopts Chemero’s relational definition of affordances, but places primary emphasis on their dynamic, enactive formulation (affordances 2.0), consonant with his explicitly cognitive framework. His work focuses on the bi-directional structure of affordances in cognitive literary environment – between author and text, and between reader and text; and develops an affordance-based theory of cognitive estrangement. While Suoranta acknowledges the possibility of analyzing affordances at the level of diegesis (linked to his notion of diegetic estrangement), his primary concern lies with their role and implications at the level of reception. Within the present framework, this corresponds to the reader-centred dimension of reading through storyworld affordances. His work thus occupies an intermediate position between external and internal approaches to affordances, with a clear inclination toward the former.

<sup>3</sup> This perspective is, by necessity, speculative and limited: the author’s creative process remains a domain to which critical access is, at best, indirect. This approach may, however, equally extend to the study of fan creativity (fan fiction), where affordance-based processes of world-building can become more directly observable.

<sup>4</sup> In Chemero’s account, an animal’s niche is defined as “the set of situations in which one or more of its abilities can be exercised” (Chemero 2009, 148).

<sup>5</sup> The fact that the window is open is not stated directly. This feature becomes evident since the actions undertaken by the heroine could only be afforded by an open window, not a closed one.

The passage thus provides a clear example of a case in which the properties of an object are reconstructed through the affordances encoded in the character's actions.

<sup>6</sup> This situation can also be illuminated by another non-representational model of perception and consciousness – that of Martin Heidegger (1994). When the pavement simply supports walking, it is *ready-to-hand*; when the Proustian narrator stumbles over it, it becomes a distinct object of attention – *present-at-hand*. The theory of affordances holds the advantage of insisting on the invariance of the relation between the Venetian and Parisian pavement and the protagonist.

<sup>7</sup> Although a recent English translation of Żeromski's novel by Stephanie Kraft (2024) exists, I provide my own translation of this passage for greater analytical precision.

<sup>8</sup> Paweł Tomczok does not, in fact, undertake a very detailed analysis of the environmental data provided in the description. He notes that the pit is twenty metres deep, before posing a crucial question: "can Judym leave this collapse?" (Tomczok 2018, 673). His remaining remarks on this scene are devoted chiefly to explaining what drove Judym to self-destruction.

<sup>9</sup> *Archivum Nadleśnictwa Olkusz* (2022). With permission of Maria Gronicz, author of the photo.

<sup>10</sup> Judym's sinkhole is a configurational field, a space of action-potentials: some actualised (sliding down), others foreclosed (climbing the pine), one – the decisive one – left indeterminate (climbing out).

<sup>11</sup> I am grateful to Professor Françoise Lavocat for raising this stimulating question in response to a conference version of this paper.

<sup>12</sup> Ecological value, understood here in a sense close to Gibson's, refers to the value of an environment, object, or organism assessed in terms of the action-potentials it offers a given organism. The greater the number of relations actualisable with a given object or environment – whether beneficial or detrimental – the greater its ecological value.