

Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature: A Review of Alison Gibbons, *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature*. London: Routledge, 2012, 260 pp. £90. ISBN 978-0-415-87361-1.

Multimodal literature is defined by Alison Gibbons, in her book *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature*, as literature which employs “multiple semiotic modalities” (1). An example might be an illustrated novel; it might equally be a text that uses varied typography. Graphic novels are clearly fundamentally multimodal, as is concrete poetry, where text is used for its visual as much as linguistic effect. Different types of discourse within a single text can be multimodal: think, for instance, of the (largely) postmodern exploration and extension of the function of footnotes, indexes, and other quasi-referential extra-textual elements explored by writers from Vladimir Nabokov to Dave Eggers. James Joyce’s use of newspaper advertisements in *Ulysses* (1922) is multimodal, as is any use of punctuation that draws attention to itself. Similarly, texts which exploit the flow and disruption of the white space of the page – from Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de dés* to the novels of Christine Brooke-Rose – all these must count. We might, too, also think of texts which specifically exploit their status as material objects, like B.S. Johnson’s book in a box *The Unfortunates* (1969); Tom Philips’s remarkable late twentieth-century artistic and literary project *A Humument* (1973); or Robert Coover’s novel on a set of playing cards *Heart Suit* (2005). In this sense, the topic is not merely in dialogue with the whole (and particularly the twentieth-century) history of the book as a material, cultural and social object, but constituted by it.

As such, in a book which seeks to provide a definition of an emerging and increasingly important genre, we might have expected a more thorough contextualization of the topic. In the first paragraph of the book, Gibbons writes that “An early, canonical example of a novel with graphic elements is, of course, Laurence Sterne’s much celebrated and sometimes berated *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*” (1), as a text which “plays with the very form of the novel itself, in both a visual and a narratological sense” (1). This mention of Sterne, however, feels rather tokenistic by the end of the book, which ignores much of the rest of the rich history of books that have explored and subverted the various boundaries between text and the extra-textual in which Gibbons is interested. (In fact, Sterne seems condemned to play this role in some studies of contemporary experimental literature, as if *Tristram Shandy* were the canonical, dusty old work that it is ok to like.) In Gibbons’s initial exploration of her topic, we might too have wished for a catchier title for the genre under discussion than “multimodal printed literature” (1), and it seems unlikely to catch on in wider critical discourse.

It is a fascinating area of study, and Gibbons points out that multimodality itself has a privileged relation to reality: we do, after all, experience clashing and cacophonous types of signs at all times: the auditory, the visual, the gestural, the kinetic, or the material. As such, this is a potentially overwhelming subject, but she carefully demarcates her territory, concentrating on that “experimental genre of multimodal printed literature” (1). Nevertheless, she points out that there are “no rules for writing or identifying a multimodal text” (3), and this potential for multimodality to offer us a way

of reading a broad range of texts in a way that takes a fuller account of their form than previously possible is seductive.

Gibbons's specific contribution to the growing field of multimodal studies is her development of a critical synthesis between multimodality and cognitive poetics. The composite form of these texts, she argues, marries particularly neatly with a critical method that seeks to assess the psychological and experiential effects of reading and of interpretation. As such, multimodality offers much to cognitive poetics, and vice versa: a reader is by necessity engaged in active participation with the text, whether physically or through using different aspects of her perception to make meaning from an array of different visual and semiotic clues. As she argues, "linguistic structure has a different relationship with time and space to the image" (14–15); for one thing, sentences themselves "in Western cultures, are necessarily read from left to right. From given to new, whereas images do not impose an equivalent and compulsory structural linearity" (14–15). The way that we read multimodal texts is therefore necessarily pluralistic, flexible in its meaning-making, and bears a unique relationship to the underlying mental processes by which this occurs.

Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature is structured specifically to give the reader unfamiliar with multimodal studies a thorough grounding, as well as providing a useful guide to recent developments in cognitive poetics. She defines the specific, interdisciplinary critical synthesis between the two that is her book's major contribution as consisting of further four "types" of text: each one is given a case study and a specific chapter. The four texts that she selects are all post-millennial, Western texts, and are all by men. Her reasons for this are to establish certain cultural "norms" (4), and to give weight to her argument that the current popularity of multimodal forms is related to "the zeitgeist of their era of creation" (3) and that, more specifically and convincingly, "multimodality takes on new strength in periods of significant communicative and technological development" (3).

As such, her examples are Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000); *VAS: An Opera in Flatland*, by Steve Tomasula (text) and Stephen Farrell (artwork) (2002); Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005); and Graham Rawle's *Woman's World* (2005). Gibbons's analysis of Rawle's collage of a novel is insightful and energetic, offering an assessment of readers' responses to the book's "strange ontological permutations of voice and vision" as part of its ongoing textual existence as a "creative project" (207). Similarly, her chapter on Danielewski's text, with its emphasis on the cognitive idea of "reading paths", is suggestive and often persuasive, negotiating the book's spatial and ludic possibilities with a deft touch. Elsewhere, the prose can be burdened by its own occasionally unwieldy linguistic and theoretical register, and during the exposition of the conceptual frameworks which underpin her project, the reader might sometimes wish for the clarity that she brings to bear on her close readings. The conclusion of the book is a little underwhelming, too, offering a somewhat overly schematic retreading of the argument already outlined in the bulk of the text. At its best, though, this is a genuine contribution to two fertile fields of criticism, enlivening cognitive poetics as it demonstrates how its possible insights might extend beyond traditional forms.

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