Multimodal Literature in the Age of Covid-19

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Abstract

Multimodal literary works typically feature an array of verbal and non-verbal elements that operate collaboratively and, in addition to the materiality of the print book medium, create unique narrative experiences. The recent developments in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic have significantly impacted the availability of multimodal works and their access by readers and scholars. While institutions have responded to the changing environment with a surge of digital online material, experiencing multimodal literary works in digital format, when available, can compromise several facets of the reading experience. The complex physical format as well as the (occasionally) limited print run of such works makes libraries and other institutions reluctant to scan and disseminate them for public access.

This article examines the contemporary challenges that multimodal print-based works are currently facing in relation to their distinctive composition and print run, suggesting that digital and audio formats can be partially effective when considered at the production stage of these literary works (rather than at earlier stages during the creative process). Moreover, the prominence of physicality in the narrative experience of multimodal literary works leads to a reconsideration of broader readerly experiences in the age of Covid-19 developments.

The recent developments, triggered by the violent eruption of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, have radically altered practices and perceptions associated with twenty-first century lifestyle. Significant aspects of everyday life have shifted online (including work and education), yet the challenges and the consequences of this shift are only beginning to emerge. In terms of literary production, the lockdown imposed on educational institutions and libraries has led to a surge of material becoming available online, as the Internet has become the primary platform for production, access, and dissemination of cultural products and services. While academic and research institutions have responded to the pandemic by offering their print material in digital form (either by scanning it or by providing an e-book equivalent), the body of literature known as "multimodal literature" is experiencing a different set of challenges due to its complex format, the lack of e-book equivalents, and the foregrounded role of the print medium in the narrative experience. It is the aim of this article to examine the contemporary challenges that multimodal print-based literary works are facing in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, and to highlight the implications of digital and audio formats for this genre. By focusing on several examples of multimodal novels, the article demonstrates the significance of the creative production stage as compared to their output formats.

Multimodal print-based novels feature a combination of verbal and non-verbal modes of representation as integral parts of their narrative. Moving away from the traditionally

"monomodal" (Hallet "Rise") texts that involve neatly arranged verbal text on white pages, these novels experiment with typography and color, and comprise an array of elements, such as photographic images, maps, letters (handwritten or typed), and drawings, in an attempt to explore their affordances in the meaning-making process.[1] While several of these components appear on the surface of the print book's pages, they can also exist as material artifacts that are physically independent from the book. As a result, the reading experience involves not only the combination of (and navigation through) different verbal and non-verbal elements (or semiotic modes, according to Hallet in "Reading Multimodal Fiction"), but also directs the reader's navigation through an array of material surfaces. The reader is therefore asked to creatively engage with the verbal and non-verbal elements that make up the text as well as with the print medium itself in order to create meaning. This article hopes to address one main concern: if this process (decision-making and reading experience) is transferred to a digital environment, how can the experience of physically independent entities be transformed into the two-dimensional surface of a screen and what is changed or even, lost?

While the different modes of representation that appear on the page surface of multimodal print-based novels can be displayed on a screen, certain elements are not transferable to it, or operate differently in a screen-based environment. This becomes more evident in instances of multimodal novels that do not involve a singular material entity, a codex, but a multiplicity of material entities, such as photographic images, letters, and so on. Apart from the considerable difficulty in providing this array of materials in electronic form, it is important to recognize how this process inevitably changes the narrative and how it is experienced, subsequently, by the reader/viewer. Hence, although three-dimensional graphics can enable the display of maps, letters, photographic images, and other ephemera in this form, thereby conjuring an illusion of their three-dimensionality, they do not enable the reader's direct engagement with them. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, the difficulty in providing multimodal print-based texts as an electronic resource is brought to the surface. However, this matter is also related to other areas concerning the production of such literary texts, such as their print run.

Print Run and Availability

Multimodal novels share certain affinities with the genre of artists' books, such as the foregrounding of the print book's materiality, or the perception of the book as "an *event* of making" (Calvert, "Unbound" 50). One finds (reproduced) traces of the creative process in the

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[1] Wolfgang Hallet notes that "strictly speaking, layout, black letters, paper, and margins on the page are also different modes and meaningful semiotic resources" ("Rise" 152).

handwritten elements the reader encounters in J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst's *S.* (2013),[2] or the bullet holes that appear in certain pages of Zachary Thomas Dodson's *Bats of the Republic*.[3] Embedding part of the process of creating the novel in its final published form attests to its elaborate design, connects the story to the production process, and invites the reader to engage with, and contribute to, the novel's multimodal landscape. This resonates with Johanna Ducker's view that the print book "reflect[s] on [its] identity and form through a self-consciousness of the act of production in a physical as well as a conceptual sense" (185). Similar to artists' books, the process of creating multimodal novels is often interwoven within their final form, yet a primary differentiating element is their print run.

Contrary to artists' books, which predominantly involve a limited print run that makes them inherently difficult to access, multimodal novels are, for the most part, published by major publishing houses in large numbers, which ensures fairly reasonable pricing and availability. At the same time, the authors and the publishers' endeavor to push the boundaries of what a book can be, have led to the creation of multimodal novels with exquisite design, which in turn has attracted readerly attention and drawn scholarly interest. As a result, specific editions appear to have sold out, with the prices of remaining copies (new or second-hand) skyrocketing. The following three cases demonstrate how the challenges in accessing these literary texts are intimately tied to their defining characteristics.

Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010) is defined by the die-cut technique employed, which creates a distinctive literary experience. Foer has carved out parts of Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles* (1934) and the outcome involves a fragile book of holes and snippets of verbal text that requires delicate handling. His intention to create "a book that can't forget it has a body" (qtd. in Heller) has attracted significant scholarly attention. Jessica Pressman views it as "an example of literary bookishness that is both a memorial and a fetish" ("Jonathan" 97), while N. Katherine Hayles comments on the reading practices that this and related novels invite, underlining the "physical involvements readers undertake to access their materialities" ("Combining" 231). Owing to its elaborate design[4] and despite its initial print run of 30,000,[5]

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[2] In a discussion with Bill Whitaker on CBS, J.J. Abrams traces the inception of *S.* in a note he found inside an abandoned paperback edition of Robert Ludlum's novel, *The Cry of the Halidon* (1974), at a bench in Los Angeles International Airport: "to whomever finds this, please read it, and leave it somewhere for someone else to find." Abrams reveals: "it was this notion of a book being used as a vessel of communication between two people, and there was just something about that, that felt like it was a seed of something potentially exciting and intriguing." *S.* therefore features extensive handwritten notes and drawings by two fictitious students upon a library copy of a 1949 novel, *Ship of Theseus*, by V.M. Straka. As Doug Dorst reveals in an interview at Kansas City Public Library, the inscribed handwriting has been created by two women that belong to the design team of Melcher Media ("Doug Dorst"). Such processes also challenge Garrett Stewart's claim that "digitization […] induces a new register of dematerialization—by contrast not just to codex engineering but to the very imageering of word forms in print culture, now codec-driven at every stage of the process" ("Codex" 55).

[3] Zachary Thomas Dodson comments on the process: "At one point in the story there is a bullet hole that pierces the book so I took a power drill and drilled the hole through the book and scanned in all the pages and made the artifact" ("Bats").

[4] *Tree of Codes* is the result of the collaboration between the London-based publisher Visual Editions and the graphic design studio Sara De Bondt Studio, in collaboration also with the Belgian printer Die Keure.

Tree of Codes swiftly sold out. According to the publisher, there are no immediate plans for a reprint, which both increases the prices of the few remaining or second-hand copies and highlights the difficulty of releasing Foer's book in electronic form. Mikko Keskinen notes that despite the foregrounded tactility in the reader's experience of the novel, "*Tree of Codes* is not available in Braille or in audiobook versions, perhaps for good reason" (102). It may be that the book has "no desire to become digital and escape the limits of print and paper" ("Old" 7), as Kiene Brillenburg Wurth notes, but what would the implications of an electronic format be in this case? Would this be another stage of remediation, to use Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's term, or a form of demediation (Stewart, "Bookwork") since tactility so essential to the reading experience will no longer be part of it?

In 2012, The Folio Society decided to release William Faulkner's classic *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) in the way the author originally imagined it, using fourteen ink colors for the different time periods in the novel. The exquisite edition was published in 1,480 hand-numbered copies, most of which were preordered. The edition quickly sold out and remaining copies are currently available for no less than $1,500. At the time of the pandemic, the few libraries owning the specific edition have either closed temporarily with no particular timeline for re-opening (The British Library, for instance), or have not seemed particularly enthusiastic about providing access to such an item in electronic format due to its specificities.[6] According to the publisher's press release, they are "fulfilling Faulkner's vision in the creation of this new edition," but, whether *The Sound and the Fury* is a "publishing landmark"[7] or a dubious attempt to afford "restorative literary justice" (Boyagoda, "Benjy's" 31), the defining characteristics of the particular edition make the text inaccessible to the public. Following, and perhaps despite the original intention to produce a justifiably expensive edition that aims at collectors, libraries, and devoted scholars, can the publisher reconsider an affordable paperback, or an electronic equivalent? Based on the 2012 edition, The Folio Society released a 2016 edition, which was considerably more affordable ($99 compared to the $345 of the 2012 edition), yet, this quickly sold out as well. Fulfilling Faulkner's vision has all been about facilitating the reader's navigation through the text, not obstructing access to it. In moments when traveling and physical access is banned, availability and accessibility of such literary works becomes an issue of print run and market price.

A third example that highlights the difficulty of accessing certain multimodal print-based literary works is *Where You Are: A Book of Maps that Will Leave You Completely Lost* (2013), a work created by sixteen authors/artists/thinkers, including Leanne Shapton, Geoff Dyer, Lila

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[5] Anna Gerber, one of the founding members of the publisher Visual Editions, reveals in an interview: "*Tree of Codes* has sold over 30,000 copies which, for a book that is so intricately produced, is quite unusual. It would be a lot easier to have just made a hundred copies of that book and sold it at a really high price, but that wasn't our intention" (Mantzaris, "Visual" 214).

[6] In a private correspondence with an American library in relation to the particular edition, the response was: "Given its cost, recent publication date, and extremely short publication run, digital copies have not been authorized."

[7] The publisher's press release can be accessed at blogs.foliosociety.com/press-release/the-sound-and-the-fury-william-faulkner/

Azam Zanganeh, Peter Turchi, and Valeria Luiselli. Each contributor explores the concept of a map, employing the creative combinations of verbal text, drawings, Google maps as well as photographic images, and the result is bound separately. The sixteen contributions are placed in a box,[8] making the experience of this material artefact distinct. Although the physical book has sold out and remaining copies cost no less than $400, Visual Editions provides *Where You Are* in electronic form via its webpage.[9] The experience of this box of maps on screen is certainly different from that of the print version, yet Visual Editions has sought to provide a different form of interactivity, "with the website as a sociable-dynamic-playful screen twin to the intimate palms-itching-to-dig-in paper one."[10] Redeeming the tactile experience of the print version is achieved not via imitating the operations of print in an electronic environment, but rather by acknowledging the different affordances of the latter and utilizing them in order to provide an equivalent reading experience. This becomes particularly effective since it has been considered during the creation stage of *Where You Are*, making the electronic format a viable option in the age of Covid-19 restrictions.

The three examples highlight the challenges that readers and scholars face in relation to the availability of multimodal print-based works. The limited print run in addition to the difficulty of transferring some of the defining features of these works to a digital environment in light of the pandemic, leads us to consider the formats in which multimodal novels were released prior to the spring of 2020.

Formats and their Implications

Though one of the defining features of multimodal print-based novels is the foregrounding of their materiality, a few of them have also been released in electronic or audio formats. So, in which formats are multimodal novels available, and to which extent can their print substantiations be transformed into electronic or audio equivalents?

A brief survey of established and less frequently appearing multimodal novels in critical scholarship reveals that the predominant format of multimodal literary works involves print substantiations, while e-book and/or audio formats are available on certain occasions. In the category of Anglophone multimodal literary texts published solely in print form, one finds, among others, Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), Anne Carson's *Nox* (2010), Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper* (2005), and Reif Larsen's *The Selected Works of T. S. Spivet* (2009). Such examples of novels that have shaped the landscape of multimodal fiction in this category illustrate the significance of print in the experience of the literary text, while they underline the different reading experience that other formats invite.

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[8] This is reminiscent of B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1999), which involves twenty-seven sections individually bound and placed together in a box. A similar arrangement is also found in Aka Morchiladze's *Santa Esperanza* (2006). It involves thirty-six individually bound sections that are color-coded in yellow, brown, green, and blue covers, all of which are placed in a case made of cloth. Binding variations, and the distinct materials that shape the form in which these works are published, can be seen in a new light amidst a shift to electronic resources.

[9] *Where You Are* can be accessed at where-you-are.com/

[10] The press release can be accessed at 2005.visual-editions.com/articles/www-dot-where-you-are-dot-com

On the other hand, there exists a range of multimodal print-based novels that also appear in different formats. The availability of a multimodal novel in audio or electronic format is accompanied by challenges and implications that ought to be considered. To this end, I will briefly turn my attention to the cases of Blake Butler's *Scorch Atlas* (2009) and Danielewski's *The Familiar* (2015-).[11] In Butler's *Scorch Atlas*, the pages are designed to appear blackened and damaged as a result of a fire. When the pages are viewed on a screen instead of a print book, the effect of scorched pages is considerably compromised. Therefore, while the Kindle version provides access to the narrative (which is also out of print), it inevitably alters the experience of the print book's design. In other words, although the design of the pages essentially remains the same in the Kindle version, the reader's experience is disengaged from the print book medium which legitimized (the manufactured authenticity of) its design.

Danielewski's book series project *The Familiar* has also been released for Kindle, yet it arrives with its own challenges. Each of the five volumes comprising *The Familiar* (up to date) involves 880 pages of verbal text interspersed with (colored) design elements, which makes each volume notably heavy. Although the Kindle edition can display what appears on the surface of the print edition's pages, the material presence of the volume and the reader's tactile engagement with it, a tacit (yet constant) reminder of its physicality, are inevitably lost in this format. In a conversation with Kári Driscoll and Inge van de Ven, Danielewski notes that he "seem[s] to create books that are inherently averse to a digital experience," while also highlighting that he "like[s] the counterweight, the heaviness, the tactile communication of weight and size" (146). This leads one to consider a different aspect of the hardcover print edition, the fixedness in terms of its size and shape. While the Kindle edition can be displayed in screens of different (and adjustable) sizes, and therefore invite variations of reading experiences, this instability contradicts the concreteness of the physical object.

Zachary Thomas Dodson's *Bats of the Republic: An Illuminated Novel* (2015) is a literary text that features an array of design elements in multiple ink colors, various forms of experimentation with typography, handwritten letters, drawings, maps in addition to a sealed physical envelope at the back of the book that encloses a letter with the inscription "DO NOT OPEN." The reader also encounters a hyperlink in the following (recto) page, leading to a webpage where the content of the letter can be revealed. The reader is presented with the dilemma to remove the physical letter from its envelope or to go online, in other words, to resume the experience of the print edition or to proceed to an online domain. This dilemma is not presented to the reader at any other point in Dodson's novel. However, given the prominence of the letter in the two storylines comprising *Bats of the Republic*, this dilemma does not emerge when the reader reaches the end of the novel, but instead it is subtly present in the reading

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[11] Published by Featherproof, *Scorch Atlas* is "a novel of fourteen interlocking stories, set in ruined American locales" and the design of its pages combines conventionally arranged typeface with traces of damage to the physical book. *The Familiar* involves nine storylines set in diverse geographical areas, which develop intermittently in each volume (but also across the five released volumes), and often intersect. The design of the novels, a result of enhanced collaboration between artistic and publishing forces, makes Danielewski's work a field of exploration and creative engagement.

experience from the moment the reader realizes the existence of the physical letter until the moment they decide to open it. The possibility of shifting between the two domains, the physical and the online, is absent from the Kindle edition. The novel has become available in e-book format as well, yet the experience that the entire novel invites (and the letter, in particular) is significantly different.[12] A crucial difference also appears in the effect enabled by the affordances of each format in relation to the letter. In the print edition, the physical letter is folded in four pages per side (eight in total) and the reader is asked to twist the end of the last page and connect it with the first page on the reverse side. The Möbius strip created is inextricably linked to the two storylines in the novel. In the electronic version, the content of the letter appears as a pdf document, with a distinct beginning and end, significantly compromising the experience of this crucial element of the novel. In this case, the electronic format appears to be significantly restrictive, compared to the reading experience the print version affords. In an interview, Dodson comments:

> Doubleday did as best as they could in the e-book format, but the e-book formats don't allow for a lot of design changes or fonts, you are kind of squeezing text into their format. They just don't allow for design. So, I was frustrated about that, because it destroyed a lot of the meaning I was trying to make with the book by cramming it into the e-book format. (qtd. in Mantzaris, "Singular" 191-192)

This is certainly not to discredit the work of Doubleday or of the released e-book version of the novel, but to highlight the particular qualities of *Bats of the Republic* in relation to the limitations of the medium in which it is displayed. Dodson's intention with his next book project "to explore the electronic version and see what some of the capabilities are there" (Mantzaris, "Singular" 192) reveals an understanding of the format as integral to the creative process. Similar to Danielewski's intention "to labor in the pursuit of an experience that a reader *cannot have anywhere else*" (Driscoll 152), Dodson reveals the significance of considering electronic formats in the inception stages of a project rather than as subsequent to the endpoint of the creative process. Instead of seeking to transfer the textual components, medium affordances, and reading experience of print-based novels to a different (electronic or audio) environment, configuring the literary text to the specificities of each format allows media affordances to be embraced rather than to be viewed as restrictive. Therefore, designing and creating a literary text for a specific output form allows different dimensions of the literary text to be highlighted, and different possibilities to come to the front. In the case of multimodal print-based novels, which feature a complex and diverse media assemblage, considering the output form during their creative

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[12] It is worth noting that the letter is not instantly available after typing the particular URL, but rather requires a specific password in order to access it; this layer of obscurity can be viewed as being equivalent to the folder in which the physical letter is located. In effect, by inviting the reader to surpass the layer of either the folder or the password, the reader is invited to re-assess their decision to open the letter.

production stage not only becomes even more essential, but can also lead to previously concealed or unpursued narrative possibilities.

I will now turn my attention to *S.* and discuss the implications of the available e-book and audio formats, considering the prominence of materiality in the print substantiation of Abrams and Dorst's novel.[13] Intending to be, according to Abrams, "a celebration of the analog, of the physical object" (qtd. in Rothman), *S.* comprises not a singular material entity, a book codex, but a multiplicity of material entities that includes a slipcase, postcards, photographic images, a napkin, letters, photocopies, and so on, resulting in an intensely visual and haptic experience. Yet, the release of *S.* in other formats leads us to consider the challenges involved as well as the different experiences afforded. Dorst comments on the process: "Down the road, once the publisher got involved, it was pointed out to us that that [the publication of only a print version] wasn't really a viable model in today's marketplace" ("Doug Dorst – May 8, 2014"). Consequently, an e-book and an audio version of *S.* have been developed. In the e-book version of the novel, created by Melcher Media, the (inevitable) loss of the reader's tactile[14] experience of the text is redeemed by an option to toggle off the handwritten narrative on the margins and read only the core narrative level, *Ship of Theseus*, which is available only in the electronic format of the novel. However, there is a significant difference with respect to the processes that lead to the format of the book that the reader experiences. In the print version, the reader can choose to read only the typed text of *Ship of Theseus* and disregard the handwritten narrative on the margins and the inserted material artifacts. However, this decision needs to be re-confirmed when the reader encounters—consciously or not—the surface of each page. Hence, the decision to opt for the exclusive reading of *Ship of Theseus* requires an ongoing investment on the part of the reader. In stark contrast, the non-laborious implementation of these features in the electronic version creates a form of reader empowerment that is disproportionately consequential, as a single moment of decision impacts on the entire reading experience. In other words, the e-book version reproduces the various narrative levels and layers of the novel, but does not reproduce the laborious processes involved in the reader's experience of the print version.

An audio version of *S.* has not been created, only one that features part of the novel, the verbal text of *Ship of Theseus* narrated by the actor Graeme Malcolm. The release is accompanied by a note by the publisher:

> In *S.*, J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst conceived of a multi-layered novel-within-a-novel that involves handwritten notes in the margins and physical objects slipped between the pages. Because an audio edition is unable to recreate those innately visual pieces of the

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[13] Although a few scholars have examined audiobooks in terms of their similarity to the print experience (Kuzmičová 2016), or their potential for interactivity in educational contexts (Marchetti and Valente 2018), the body of multimodal literature that this article focuses on, remains unexplored.

[14] It is significant to note that the description of the e-book, on the website of Melcher Media, does not distance itself from the haptic engagement with the material artifacts, but instead attempts to sustain it through the register employed: "We also made the ephemera interactive—tapping on an item allows you to move it on the page or turn it over to examine it in detail." For more information, visit melcher.com/project/s/

story and the intended experience of *S.*, the text of *Ship of Theseus* has been recorded here.

The absence of the rest of the narrative levels accounts for the (in)complete experience the audio version of the novel provides but, at the same time, it reinforces the manufactured authenticity of the particular narrative level. *Ship of Theseus* exists independently as a novel, which echoes the structure of *S.* in its conceptualization. To this end, the audio version of *Ship of Theseus* does not merely serve to legitimize the manufactured authenticity of the specific narrative level, but in doing so, it seems to confirm the manufactured authenticity of the other narrative levels that orbit around it and, in this manner, the totality that *S.* constitutes and materially embodies. In other words, the release of *Ship of Theseus* as an audio book enhances the manufactured authenticity of *S.*, as the characteristics of the specific format support the narrative structure of Abrams and Dorst's novel.

The audio version is accompanied by a number of challenges that are highlighted by the intricate combination of verbal and non-verbal elements that appear both on the surface of the book's pages and across the other physically independent domains. Since the visual (and tactile) aspect cannot be reproduced in an audio version, the book design of *Ship of Theseus*, which is central to the reading experience of the print version, cannot be conveyed. As Sara Tanderup notes, "the work is designed to look old and worn," reflecting an idealized "nostalgia for the old media, for handwriting, yellowing pages and for the book itself" ("Nostalgic" 53). In order to create the illusion of an authentic library copy of a novel written in 1949, the pages of *Ship of Theseus* appear weathered, and this is reflected in their brownish hue that is more vivid in the outer margins and more faded in the center of each page. In order to enhance this ontological play, the designers have even created minor stains that further reinforce the manufactured authenticity of the novel as a material object.[15] There are also other significant challenges as regards the transformation of the print version of the novel into an audio version, such as the multiplicity of characters that would require different voices (Straka, Caldeira, Eric, and Jen), the co-existence of handwritten[16] notes pertaining to different temporal stages on the same page, and the presence of non-verbal elements (drawings by Eric and Jen, typographic variation, irregular[17] lines and arrows, properties of the book as an old library item, and the material artifacts tucked into the pages of the codex). Determining a linear order in narrating *S.* would also entail

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[15] Danuta Fjellestad, in "Forging Uniqueness in Contemporary Fiction Books," proposes that "the mimicry of wear and tear be viewed as a sly strategy of creative a (faux) 'uniqueness effect'" (44). More precisely, she argues that "employed to authenticate the tactile physicality of the fictional world, 'smudged' script and stains intensify the sense of materiality, become markers of a specific time and place, individualize characters, and conjure up a sense of their singularity" (45).

[16] José van Dijck and Sonja Neef have examined the implications of handwriting in relation to authenticity, uniqueness, and personality in "Sign Here! Handwriting in the Age of Technical Reproduction."

[17] Christian Mosbæk Johannessen and Theo van Leeuwen have explored the concept of irregularity, focusing on the meaning potential of "the nature and communicative uses of irregular and distressed shapes in graphics" (175).

suggesting a single path of navigating through the narrative levels, which is hardly the case in the print book version.[18]

The complex process of designing and producing *S.* has been costly, which has led the publishers Mulholland (US) and Canongate (UK) to "combine their orders [so as] to reduce per-copy cost of production in China" (Hill). The initial print run of *S.* has involved the substantial number of 200,000 copies (Hill), which has ensured the availability of the novel. Within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, providing an equivalent experience to the one the print version of *S.* offers, seems hardly possible. Interestingly, this further emphasizes the manufactured authenticity of Abrams and Dorst's novel, a print book that exists outside the world of screens.

Material Challenges and the Aftermath

The current shift to electronic resources due to the Covid-19 pandemic is firmly establishing the realm of the digital in the cultural production of the twenty-first century. The lockdown of physical premises during the spring and summer of 2020 has led libraries and other institutions to pursue alternatives to their print holdings, while several publishers and academic journals have opened part of their collections without subscription.[19] While a significant body of literary works has become (or was already) available in e-book format, in library databases, multimodal literary works either remain unavailable or appear in formats other than print that pre-exist the Covid-19 developments. Does their intricate composite nature hinder the capacity for transformation into an e-book equivalent? In other words, can the current shift towards electronic resources address and accommodate multimodal print-based novels?

Critical scholarship on multimodal literature highlights the significance of the print book in the creation or as part of the textual world, and the reading experience it invites.[20] Alison Gibbons notes that these works "experiment with the possibilities of book form [. . .] testing the limits of the book as a physical and tactile object" (420), while Pressman has coined the "aesthetic of bookishness" in order to describe a trend in novels since 2000 that "exploit the power of the print page in ways that draw attention to the book as a multimedia format, one informed by and connected to digital technologies" ("Aesthetic" 465). The implications of the rapidly changing technological environment for literary production have been explored by

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[18] In the case of interactive audiobooks, Niklas Röber et al. suggest that "the listener/player may and can intervene with the story at pre-defined and user-selected points using an auditory user-interface" (358). However, in being predefined, these affordances cannot offer the reader a similar sense of empowerment to shape the path of the reading process, as that of the print version. Dylan E. Wittkower has also noted how the audiobook "follows its own rhythm and pace in a context-insensitive and user-independent way" (222).

[19] For example, *JSTOR* has expanded access to its content for collaborating institutions, while it has made more content available for everyone until December 31, 2020 (about.jstor.org/covid19/) In collaboration with over eighty publishers, *Project MUSE* provided free access to over 300 journals and approximately 25,000 until June 30, 2020 (about.muse.jhu.edu/resources/freeresourcescovid19/#covid19resources)

[20] Other scholars have refrained from describing this body of literary texts as multimodal, but they still underline the foregrounded function of the print book medium. Alexander Starre argues that "more than just the container of a story, the physical codex here comes to function as a narrative device in and of itself" (*Metamedia* 6), which leads him to describe these texts as "metamedia."

Hayles, who has noted that "so essential is digitality to contemporary processes of composition, storage, and production that print should probably be considered a particular form of output for digital files than a medium separate from digital instantiation" (*Electronic* 159). If the current pandemic suspends novels from their print substantiation stage, it becomes essential to consider the implications of design in literary production towards different forms of output. I suggest that digital formats of multimodal literary works can be effective when they are considered during their production stage. In other words, if the transformation into digital form occurs after the endpoint of the creative process, then, significant components of the multimodal narrative assemblage[21] (and the reading experience the latter affords) can be compromised, since the design of the novel is inextricably linked to the medium originally intended by the author and the publisher.

The first decades of the twenty-first century illustrate the book's significance as a terrain for rich creative experimentation and innovation, but they also invite us to reconfigure the role of the printed book in shaping other formats in literary production. In her introduction to *Book Presence in a Digital Age*, Brillenburg Wurth proposes the following definition of book presence: "[t]he apparition of an 'analog' information medium, including its material potential, restraints, uses, conditions of production and distribution, and its novel actualizations in a digitally mediated present" (9). In the age of the Covid-19 pandemic, the defining characteristics of multimodal print-based novels pose significant challenges to their availability in digital format, yet in so doing, they trigger discussions on broader conceptualizations of materiality, reader engagement, and literary production. Whether the current conditions are prolonged, or the post-pandemic stage involves an increased demand for the off-screen, haptic reading experiences that multimodal novels afford, or the creation of new cultural practices, this body of literary texts constitutes a significant counterbalance to the contemporary dominance of screen-based material, probing deeply into the nature of the book's presence and our engagements with it.

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[21] This should be differentiated from what N. Katherine Hayles describes as a cognitive assemblage ("Literary").

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