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# Reviews

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## *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature* by Alison Gibbons

Abingdon: Routledge, 2012

Whilst the term ‘experimental’ might elicit a multitude of definitions when used in reference to literature, in *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature*, Alison Gibbons specifically means novels that incorporate a strong visual element alongside the verbal narrative, or as she puts it, “the experimental genre of multimodal printed literature” (p.1). In order to shed light on this nascent genre, Gibbons identifies two equally nascent disciplines which she feels together can prove illuminating, namely multimodality studies and cognitive poetics. At first glance, Gibbons’s use of two disciplines which are themselves still in the relatively early stages of codification appears overly ambitious. However, in her introduction, Gibbons argues convincingly that each discipline’s deficiencies might be a boon to the other, opening up a space for their combined “frameworks to be used in a critical synthesis, which [she calls] *multimodal cognitive poetics*” (p.24; original emphasis).

Thus, for example, Gibbons stresses that while the various studies of multimodality that inform her thesis are valuable and rooted in rigorous

linguistic analysis, they tend to neglect the cognitive and phenomenological experience of reading multimodal texts—what these texts actually feel like and do to someone reading them. Similarly, although the evident advantage of cognitive poetics lies in the literary and linguistic insights it draws from neuroscience and cognitive psychology (therefore taking into account the actual experiential aspect of reading that multimodality studies somewhat overlook), it nevertheless suffers from a lack of breadth in its consideration of the type of art-forms it addresses. Unsurprisingly, considering its own roots in linguistics, the visual is often the domain passed over in favour of the verbal. Gibbons is correct in asserting that “[a]s a discipline with an underlying cognitive inclination, cognitive poetics ought to be able to account for interpretive practice in its entirety, regardless of communicative mode” (p.38), something which studies of multimodality, in their consideration of visual communication, make an attempt at, even if tending to then conversely swing the pendulum of focus too far from the verbal. The stage is thus set for Gibbons’s audacious and potentially invaluable synthesis of multimodal cognitive poetics.

The book is structured across eight chapters, the first three of which provide the rationale and aims of Gibbons’s methodological approach, as well as a useful evaluative discussion of the two central disciplines involved, as mentioned above. The following four chapters are dedicated to case studies, each centring on one particular exemplar of the genre Gibbons has defined, and to which she applies her newly synthesised critical apparatus. These objects of analysis, purportedly “prototypical examples of multimodal printed literature” (p.3), are Mark Z Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000), Steve Tomasula and Stephen Farrell’s *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* (2002), Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) and finally Graham Rawle’s *Woman’s World* (2005). As if to pre-emptively stave off accusations of homogeneity beyond her corpus’s generic exemplarity, Gibbons states that her selection is entirely justified: “By ensuring that all four texts for analysis come from the same cultural and historical position, that is they are all post-millennium Western texts, certain ‘norms’ can be assured” (p.4). These ‘norms’, she urges, ensure that a uniform context for reading (and thus analysis) is maintained.

However, in the first paragraph of Gibbons's Introduction, she notes that even Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–1767) “plays with the very form of the novel itself, in both a visual and narratological sense, a facet made all the more remarkable in recent revisionings such as the (2010) release of the book by Visual Editions” (p.1). With such an established and canonical text still receiving critical attention (including, by Gibbons's own admission here, from an ostensibly multimodal perspective), and thus being subject to the same ‘norms’ emphasised in her selection criteria, there does not seem to be any good reason why older texts that fall within the bounds of the genre in question are not also looked at; this would certainly offer a greater scope of relevance to Gibbons's thesis. Equally, and as she briefly concedes in the Conclusion comprising the book's eighth chapter, “it would be productive to revisit more traditional forms of printed literature, in light of the achievements of multimodal cognitive poetics” (p.222). This demands the question why Gibbons has not simply included this type of analysis here as a preparatory exercise, or perhaps as a control group with which to assess her own findings.

Nonetheless, Gibbons's case studies are original, convincing and evocative readings of the books she chooses. For instance, her analysis of Danielewski's cult novel *House of Leaves* is conducted under sub-headings which act as instructions or descriptions, such as “Negotiate the Lock” (p.55), “Choose to Trespass” (p.58), “Cross the Threshold” (p.60) and “Explore the House” (p.65). This enacts the very concept for which she coins the expression “figured trans-world” (pp.79–84). Expanding upon the cognitive poetic framework of Text World Theory, Gibbons explains that through multimodality the house of the novel's title (in a fictional world), and the (real world) novel itself come to be one and the same thing in the hands (and brain) of the reader. This fascinating emphasis on the accentuated embodiment which multimodal printed literature affords is continued in the next chapter, where Gibbons deploys “Lanham's (1993) theory of bistable oscillation” (pp.114–115) to show how Tomasula and Farrell's “VAS encourages an embodied and enactive literary experience, transforming the bodies of its readers in terms of their habitual forms of corporeal being during the activity of literary reading” (p.125).

Although the third case study changes tack slightly, engaging in a discussion of trauma studies and literature related to the attacks of September

11, 2001, this only serves to refresh the reader's mind, clouded as it may be by the rather convoluted conceptual pathways and seemingly unrelenting barrage of nomenclature encountered in the preceding chapters. Cognitive alignment with the text and the embodiment that results from this continues to be a major theme, and Gibbons argues that Foer's "*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* employs stylistic devices such as pronoun selection [...] as well as multimodality to draw the readers closer into its storyworlds and the traumas experienced within them" (p.166). In Gibbons's final case study, she conducts some highly illuminating (although limited and notionally preliminary) empirical research into reader responses to Graham Rawle's *Woman's World*, lending weight to some of her analyses earlier in the book by "providing evidence for bistable oscillation and blended worlds within readers' reported experiences of the text" (p.206).

A note on the multimodality of Gibbons's book itself: whilst it is exceedingly helpful that she includes many figures, encompassing her own explanatory diagrams as well as pages from the novels assessed (not to mention her elucidating use in quotation of the various typographical manipulations that they actually contain), certain presentational aspects of *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature* can be disorienting and even frustrating. For instance, at the start of Gibbons's examination of the incredibly interesting "footnote 144" in *House of Leaves* (an obscure list of objects *not* contained in the house), there is an apparently errant and confusing footnote to her body text (conspicuously the only footnote in the entire book), in addition to what one assumes is a misprint in said body text: a superscript "1" and normal "44" referring to "footnote 144" (p.70). Furthermore, as Gibbons draws heavily on linguist Peter Stockwell's formulation of cognitive poetics and thus on the importance of colour, it seems a shame that a book wishing to focus on multimodality should be printed in greyscale. This becomes worryingly more than a capricious criticism in a couple of places, such as when Gibbons says that "[t]he pervasive interpretive impact of the textual surface is represented by the pink dual-direction arrows" (p.120) in a diagram of her own construction, yet there are no pink arrows. Worse, her fascinating treatment of Foer's use of red pen-like marks in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is unfortunately spoiled by the colourless reproductions of pages from the novel (pp.145, 150 and 152).

Coupled with a slightly dry, conceptually over-complicated and jargon-heavy style (perhaps related to the unquestionably comprehensive nature of Gibbons's initial literature review), these comments mean the book's ultimate impact is somewhat diminished—it could itself undoubtedly do with a higher degree of multimodality.

As Gibbons herself concedes in her concluding remarks, whilst her book is relatively successful as a first step into the highly interdisciplinary field of multimodal cognitive poetics, there is an incredible wealth of further work to be done. Having said this, where Gibbons unreservedly hits the mark is in passionately and eloquently opening up multimodal printed literature to critical scrutiny. By the end of her book, one completely empathises with her excitement and praise in the Acknowledgements for the authors “whose novels I have only grown to admire more through thinking and writing about them” (p.xiii). Indeed, when it comes to summing up the perhaps mysterious sense of excitement surrounding this emerging genre and critical stance, only Gibbons's own bizarre prefatory remark, like an unattributed epigraph enveloped by the conspicuous white of an otherwise empty page, will suffice: “This is it” (p.v).