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Narrative, Volume 33, Number 3, October 2025, pp. 338-360 (Article)

Published by The Ohio State University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2025.a971661*

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ABSTRACT: This article proposes and examines the new generic category of post-postmodernist fictions of the digital (PPFDs): contemporary print fictions that imitate, incorporate, and/or utilize digital media, and also display thematic concerns for the digitally mediated worlds in which they are set. We situate them within a broader post-postmodern context of contemporary fiction in which self-reflexive devices, associated with postmodernism, are repurposed to make an ethical point about the digitally mediated world outside of the text. We offer a new typology of multimodal and transmedial PPFDs by adapting and schematizing the concepts of visual modality, paratext, and remediation to theorize 6 subtypes; a new methodology for analyzing PPFDs using a medium-specific approach and hypothetical intentionalism; and new analyses of two works which exemplify the ways in which multimodality and transmediality can be used synthetically and thematically in PPFDs. We conclude that while PPFDs use self-reflexive and potentially estranging techniques, they make serious ethical points about the digitally mediated world they represent such that they urge their readers to oscillate between (joyful) immersion and (critical) reflection.

KEYWORDS: *multimodal, transmedial, post-postmodernism, contemporary fiction*

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NARRATIVE, Vol. 33, No. 3 (October 2025)

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Introduction

Since the advent of the internet in the mid-nineteen nineties, a new period of history has seen the world becoming increasingly digitized. While there is still extreme disparity and inequity between those who do and do not have access to digital technology (see United Nations) within the UK and the US, whose fiction is the focus of this article, over 90% of households in the UK (ONS) and the US have access to the internet (Statista). This data suggests that the global north is substantially digitalized. The increased prevalence of digital technology has inevitably led to responses from artists across media. Within the context of narrative fiction, these conditions have resulted in the publication and subsequent theorization of works that engage with the societal, political, and psychological effects of digital technology. This body of work includes concepts such as the representation of the "digital banal" in fiction, a "condition by which we don't notice the affective novelty of becoming-with digital media" (Dinnen 1); "postdigital" fictions which interrogate the way in which the digital and nondigital have become hybridized in contemporary society (Jordan, Bell); and "flat-world fiction" which represents "the politically charged relationships that humans have with digital devices and media" (Naydan 13). In this article, we show how in addition to prose fiction that engages with digital technology on a thematic level—i.e., "the cultural, ideological, philosophical, or ethical issues being addressed in the narrative" (Phelan, *Living* 7)—some print fiction also engages with digital technology at the "synthetic" level, which concerns the narrative as an artificial construct (Phelan, *Living* 20). This includes the multimodal representation and transmedial incorporation of digital technology. The group of novels includes Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends,* Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad,* Marisha Pessl's *Night Film,* and the two case studies we discuss at some length later in the essay, Maria Semple's *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* and Caleb Azumah Nelson's *Open Water.*[1]

In what follows, we thus argue for a new genre of contemporary fiction: post-postmodernist fictions of the digital (PPFDs) which we define as contemporary print fictions that imitate, incorporate, and/or utilize digital media, and also display thematic concerns for the digitally mediated worlds in which they are set. We situate them within a broader post-postmodern literary context in which self-reflexive devices, associated predominantly with postmodernism, are repurposed to make ethical observations about the world outside of the text. In doing so, we offer a new typology of multimodal and transmedial fictions of the digital, provide a methodology for analyzing them, and offer new analyses of two works that exemplify the ways in which multimodality and transmediality can be used synthetically and thematically.

From Fictions of the Internet to Post-Postmodernist Fictions of the Digital

Our new generic category of the PPFD distinguishes between six subtypes of fiction that imitate, incorporate, and/or utilize digital media, and also display thematic concerns for the digitally mediated worlds in which they are set. Building on, but also departing from, what Anna Weigel-Heller's study calls "fictions of the internet," we show how authors of print fiction no longer just write about the internet but also "imitate medial structures, adopting the strategies of medial forms" (4). Like us, she is also interested in novels that semiotically represent and/or materially use the internet. Weigel-Heller thus defines fictions of the internet as "a generic label . . . to subsume all the innovative 21st-century novels that deal with and make use of new media and the Internet on a thematic, structural, and transmedial level" (12) such that they "thematize, imitate, or incorporate new media into the narrative" (31).[2] Crucially, unlike us, Weigel-Heller includes novels that simply refer to the internet such as Matthew Glass's *Fishbowl* (2015) and Jarett Kobek's *I Hate the Internet* (2016). Our generic concept and associated typology thus differ from Weigel-Heller's category of "fictions of the internet" in that we exclude what Ansgar Nünning and Christine Schwanecke call "quasi-hybrids" (136), i.e., novels that merely *imitate* other semiotic systems through language, so that the referenced media (e-mails, tweets, music, or images) are not actually materially presented (see also Weigel-Heller 68). Examples of quasi-hybrid PPFDs include Tao Lin's *Taipei* (2013) and A. M. Homes's *May We Be Forgiven* (2012), in which the narrators describe the characters' use of email as opposed to including representations of them. Instead, theorizing and categorizing the incorporation or imitation of digital media within print, we investigate "actual hybrids" (Nünning and Schwanecke 136) that combine prose text with other semiotic modes. We restrict our focus to multimodal fictions that visually represent emails, text messages, social media posts, memos, online forums, tweets, blogs, or non-networked software and transmedial fictions that take the reader beyond the printed prose text to additional material on related websites, apps, or social media platforms (see also Ryan, "Digital"; Lutostański, "Across" and "For the New Novel").

Moreover, while Weigel-Heller restricts her investigation to the internet specifically, print novels such as Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) visually

represent non-networked software such as Microsoft PowerPoint and thus have a broader scope of digital media than just the internet. We suggest therefore that the contemporary print fictions that imitate, incorporate, and/or utilize digital media should be more accurately categorized as fictions of the *digital* as opposed to just the internet. Our terms of reference and scope also differ from Weigel-Heller's in that we regard her "media combination" category of fictions of the internet as denoting "multimodality." As Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon point out, "through multimodality . . . different types of signs combine within the same media object—for example, moving image, spoken language, music, and sometimes text in film" (19). In this respect, multimodality is a way of exploring "the coexistence of more than one semiotic mode within a given context" (Gibbons 8) as opposed to the existence of more than one medium (e.g., print, digital, broadcast), as is the case in our transmedial category.

Finally, while Weigel-Heller offers a comprehensive catalog of literary works (pre-2018) that represent, imitate, or incorporate the internet into prose narratives, she does not situate them within a broader context of literary movements and epochs. Nor does she offer analyses of the works to show the narratological, multimodal, and/or transmedial devices through which they convey their thematic messages. In our approach, by contrast, we investigate how digital media—as a manifestation of the current technological epoch and thus a prime locus of contemporary culture—are materially represented in fiction as well as what themes these texts raise about the digitally mediated world in which they are set.

A Typology of Post-Postmodernist Fictions of the Digital

Table 1 shows our typology of PPFDs, distinguishing between multimodal, transmedial, and hybrid forms.

TABLE 1. A typology of post-postmodernist fictions of the digital

CATEGORY	EXAMPLE
1. Multimodal using Low Visual Modality	*Conversations with Friends* (2017) by Sally Rooney
2. Multimodal using Moderate Visual Modality	*Where'd You Go, Bernadette* (2012) by Maria Semple
3. Multimodal using High Visual Modality	*A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) by Jennifer Egan
4. Multimodal and Transmedial	*Night Film* (2013) by Marisha Pessl
5. Transmedial using Peritexts	*Open Water* (2021) by Caleb Azumah Nelson
6. Transmedial using Epitexts	*There There* (2018) by Tommy Orange

In our typology, categories 1, 2, and 3 of PPFDs concern purely multimodal fictions of the digital. Acknowledging the different types of multimodality in print fiction, we distinguish between these types on the basis of what Nina Nørgaard, building on the seminal work of social semioticians Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, calls "visual modality." As Nørgaard explains, visual modality "concerns (not the truth but) the truthfulness of the representation—that is, whether what we see looks the way (we imagine) it would have done if we had been there" ("Fictionality" 158). It thus relates to the relative faithfulness or authenticity of an image or other visual representation such as typography or layout in relation to the thing it seeks to represent.[3]

We delineate our typology on this basis because it allows us to analyze the extent to which *visual representations* assimilate with and/or interrupt *verbal representations* of the storyworld. This is important because, as Weigel-Heller points out, both multimodal and transmedial novels utilize hybridization—"the process by which two or more genres combine to form a new genre or subgenre, or by which elements of two or more genres are combined in a single work" (Duff xiv)—and "medialization" (Hauthal 82)—processes that are induced by the new media landscape (Nünning and Rupp 203) as catalysts of generic change. These result in "a transmedial type of self-reference [that] occurs when a semiotic system reflects on its own artifactuality and/or mediality, its inventedness and/or constructedness" (Hauthal 82; Weigel-Heller 67n115), what Nünning and Schwanecke define as "textual self-reflexivity" (129). PPFDs therefore contain multimodal and transmedial elements that highlight their constructedness. That said, it is important to evaluate each on a case-by-case basis. As Nørgaard points out, "literary genre as well as the experiential contents of the image in question are important factors impacting on their defamiliarizing and/or mimetic effects" ("Fictionality" 156). Examining the nature and role of visual modality and/or transmediality therefore allows us to analyze the function and salience of textual self-reflexivity within each work. This focus on function and salience is important because high and low visual modality as well as transmediality can be used for defamiliarizing and/or mimetic effects depending on the context.

Returning to our typology, while Nørgaard (*Multimodality*), following Kress and van Leeuwen, presents the two categories of "low" and "high" visual modality only, we suggest that these represent two ends of a scale, with many uses of multimodality existing somewhere in between. In our typology, we distinguish between "Low," "Moderate," and "High Visual Modality PPFDs" as follows.

"Low Visual Modality PPFDs" (category 1) make use of internal variations in typeface to distinguish between media and/or incorporate text alignment, and page layout to distinguish between narrative discourse and digitally mediated communication such as instant messaging and/or emails. Examples include Sally Rooney's debut novel *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and Elif Batuman's *The Idiot* (2017). Both of these novels utilize multiple typefaces to differentiate between the prose and the digital media included.

The related category of "Moderate Visual Modality PPFDs," which includes novels such as Candice Carty-Williams's *Queenie* (2019) and Aiwanose Odafen's *We Were Girls Once* (2024), makes use of more pronounced typographic features like lines, boxes, color, text alignment, page layout and typeface changes to distinguish between

types of digital media and the main narrative discourse. Our research has shown that some texts in this category, such as Maria Semple's *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* (2012) and Janice Hallett's *The Appeal* (2021) still feature a narrating consciousness, curator or person compiling the digital "ephemera" into some coherent prose narrative. In other texts, such as Herman Wouk's *The Lawgiver* (2012) and Susan Rieger's *The Divorce Papers: A Novel* (2014), there is no standard prose and the novel is comprised entirely of memos, letters, transcripts, emails, and so on. Calvin Kasulke's *Several People Are Typing* (2021) is a more extreme example of the latter type, in which the reader is reading a Slack transcript with no clear narrating consciousness or curator of the material. Using Nørgaard's multimodal frame of reference, in both low and moderate visual PPFDs, "representations . . . have been formally stylised" (*Multimodality* 171) but to different degrees.

Contrasting with the text- or layout-based version of multimodality found in types 1 and 2, in "High Visual Modality PPFDs" (category 3) the representation of digital media attempts to show "what something would have looked like if the observer had been there" (Nørgaard, *Multimodality* 171). These are novels that do not simply gesture toward different media forms but rather seek to replicate digital media using, for example, graphic renderings and/or facsimiles. Examples in this category include Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) which includes a visual representation of a PowerPoint presentation, and Amie Kaufman and Jay Krisoff's Young Adult novel *The Illuminae Files* (2015–16) which is presented as a folder of assembled documents which have been curated by one of the characters. The digital elements include facsimiles of memos, classified army reports, network security incident reports, detailed aircraft schematics, encyclopedia entries which reproduce the layout of Wikipedia, as well as emails and instant messaging.

Category 4, "Multimodal and Transmedial PPFDs," designates novels that contain both multimodality and transmediality and thus combine both modes and media. More specifically, in addition to incorporating the visual representations of digital media, these print fictions also take the reader from the medium of print to a digital realm that provides supplementary or integral material for the primary narrative. This category is exemplified by Marisha Pessl's *Night Film* (2013), which contains facsimiles of blogs, websites, and missing person reports, but which was originally published alongside a smartphone app called the "Night Film Decoder," which took the reader to additional content on YouTube, Twitter, and Tumblr. The now obsolete app no longer works as originally intended but some content is still accessible at the time of writing via a Night Film Decoder webpage (Pessl), meaning that the novel's transmedial element remains albeit via an alternate means of access and with a different content.

Categories 5 and 6 represent purely transmedial fictions which do not contain multimodality within the printed pages of the novel. In addition to the use of apps and websites, the use of music and playlists which supplement the reading experience is a relatively dominant form. In some cases, the music or playlist is created by the author—for example, Tommy Orange has created a Spotify playlist for his 2018 novel *There There* and Jeffrey Deaver's 2012 novel *XO* comes with an album in which Deaver himself co-wrote the lyrics to a number of original country-western/pop songs. Some

of the songs in *XO* help contextualize and add to the reader's affective experience while others contain clues regarding the question of who the villain of the novel is. Other examples of transmedial PPFDs, such as Caleb Azumah Nelson's *Open Water* (2021) and Chitra Benerjee Divakaruni's *Independence* (2023), have Spotify playlists that were created by their respective publishers, Viking Books and HarperCollins India. We can thus distinguish between supplementary material, such as music or playlists, created by the author and those created by the publisher but, in PPFDs, the transmedial element contributes to the story in some way as opposed to having a (purely) metafunction such as marketing or otherwise.

In order to capture whether or not the reader is alerted to digital material within the transmedial novels in categories 4, 5 and 6, we make a distinction between the existence of "digital epitexts" that are not signaled from within the text and "digital peritexts" that are. It is important that we distinguish between these two subtypes of transmediality because the explicit or implicit signaling of transmediality can have a potentially defamiliarizing and/or mimetic effect and, like visual modality, can impact the textual self-reflexivity of these hybridized texts. Our distinction repurposes Virginia Pignagnoli's use of Gérard Genette's concept of an epitext which she uses in relation to fiction that is published and publicized within digitized societies. Taking Genette's definition of an epitext as that which is "not materially appended within the same volume, but circulating . . . in a virtually limitless physical and social space" (344), Pignagnoli "explores the connection of twenty-first-century fiction with epitextual material in the digital world to investigate the relationship between the current widespread practice of digital author-audience interactions and the emerging poetics succeeding postmodernism" (3). Unlike Pignagnoli's conceptualization of digital epitexts in contemporary fiction, the epitextual material in PPFDs is intended to add to the narrative in some way as opposed to containing information about the author or the writing process, for example. However, we utilize the term because it captures the way that material that is not contained within the printed novel contributes to the construction of the storyworld. For example, while Orange created the Spotify playlist for his novel *There There,* this digital epitext is "not materially appended" to the text, meaning that no peritextual statement alerting the reader to the playlist's existence is to be found near the text; certain songs are mentioned both in the story and included in the playlist, while others simply circulate on Spotify—"a virtually limitless" digital (rather than "physical") and "social space" which readers may or may not find. By contrast, Pignagnoli defines digital "peritexts," building on Genette's definition, as "the paratextual elements situated *in proximity* of the text" (4; our emphasis). In relation to PPFDs, examples include *Open Water* and Richard House's *The Kills,* which include peritextual statements about their transmedial material at the beginning and end of the book respectively. In the case of *Night Film,* digital peritexts are signposted within the novel by the symbol of a bird which, once scanned via the app, allowed readers to access additional material found online. In James Frey's *Endgame: The Calling* (2014) footnotes throughout the novel lead the reader to YouTube and other websites.

From Typology to Periodization and Functionality

In terms of the distinctly post-postmodernist element of our generic categorization, we have noted above how the coexistence of multiple modes and/or media in fiction is generally self-reflexive because it highlights a text's constructedness. While self-reflexivity is predominantly associated with the art and culture of mid- to late-twentieth century postmodernism, the transition away from postmodernism and toward a different structure of feeling is said to have begun sometime between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 21st century (see Toth as well as Rudrum and Stavris). Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, for example, propose "metamodernism" to describe "an attempt to incorporate postmodern stylistic and formal conventions while moving beyond them" in contemporary visual art (2) and the simultaneous "'return' of realist and modernist forms, techniques and aspirations (to which the metamodern has a decidedly different relation than the postmodern)" (2). Metamodernism, they claim, is thus "*aesth-ethical*" (2) in that it continues to utilize the formal conventions that preceded it, but in the context of a revival of theism and beliefs.

Within the context of literature specifically, postmodernist (or metafictional) devices include intertextuality; narrative contradictions; playing with narrative levels; self-reflexive parody and allegory; the mixing of linguistic styles and discourses; self-reflexive narrative voices; and the foregrounding of the materiality of the text (see Waugh, Hutcheon, and McHale, *Postmodernist*). For Brian McHale, these strategies primarily "foregrounded the world itself as an object of reflection and contestation through the use of a range of devices and strategies" (*Cambridge Introduction* 15). As both a continuation of and departure from what McHale calls the "cultural dominan[ce]" (*Cambridge Introduction* 14) of postmodernist self-reflexivity, Robert McLaughlin argues that post-postmodernist authors continue the "postmodern fascination with representation, the layers of text, discourse, narrative, and image" (213) but they do this to "reconnect with something beyond representation, something extralinguistic, something real" (213, see also Alber and Bell, Gibbons et al., and Moraru). Thus, contemporary fiction displays a continued interest in the foregrounding of ontological questions paired with a serious interest in the negotiation of societal, political, and ethical questions. Importantly, post-postmodernist narratives do not represent a complete departure from postmodernist narratives in either their techniques or their focus. Indeed, postmodernist texts take an ethical stance in so far as they are thematically concerned with the constructedness of all narratives both within and outside literary texts. In post-postmodernism, by contrast, the constructedness of narrative is taken as given and other societal, political, and ethical issues are of greater concern.[4]

Against the backdrop of these wider discussions about the move from postmodernism to post-postmodernism, we focus on the ways in which digital media are represented in fiction, whether and in what ways the forms of representation are self-reflexive, and, crucially, how such self-reflexivity is used to make a serious point about the current state of the world. Unlike Weigel-Heller's focus, therefore, the

ways in which the novels engage with the world thematically is of primary concern. Following Nünning and Schwanecke, Hauthal, and McHale (*Postmodernist*), we see the multimodal and/or material incorporation of non-verbal modes and/or digital media in print fiction as a self-reflexive textual feature. If we are to demonstrate how contemporary fictions utilize self-reflexive techniques, then it is vital that we are explicit about what those techniques are, how they are used, and to what effect. With these objectives in mind, we analyze these narrative devices to show how digital media are used in individual works.

Of particular relevance is the fact that, while self-reflexivity is typically associated with anti-illusionism, i.e., disrupting immersion or the breaking of the overall illusion of experiencing a stable fictional world (see, e.g., McHale, *Postmodernist*; McHale, *Constructing*; and Wolf, *Ästhetische Illusion*), more recent research has shown that self-reflexivity can be considered a more established convention and does not necessarily cause estrangement. With reference to the concept of "metaization," Janine Hauthal suggests that "the establishment or consolidation of metaization in contemporary Anglo-American novels diminishes metaization's hitherto defamiliarizing effect" (103, see also Wolf, *Metareferential*). For Jan Alber, the repeated exposure of recipients to self-reflexive strategies can indeed contribute to the conventionalization of metafiction. He argues that readers of the twenty-first century are no longer surprised by self-reflexivity because they have become familiar with it (including its estranging effects) (*Unnatural* 50). Merja Polvinen also conceptualizes cognition in such a way that "imaginative engagement and self-reflection do not shut each other out" (27, see also Kukkonen). While self-reflexivity can feel unusual and alienating to readers in some contexts, current research also suggests that self-reflexive narrative devices have become such a common convention of contemporary art and culture that audiences can cognitively assimilate and even be immersed by them. Accordingly, we argue that it is vital to examine self-reflexivity in relation to individual texts because self-reflexive textual features can be used in different kinds of texts for different purposes.

Our Multimodal and Transmedial Approach

In order to capture the ways that multiple modes and/or media work together in PPFDs, our methodological approach is both mode- and medium-conscious. When analyzing multimodal PPFDs, we adopt a multimodal approach as opposed to Weigel-Heller's intermedial frame. In this context, Wolfgang Hallet notes that

> . . . whereas in . . . [intermediality theories] the verbal text and a visual image are regarded and described as different, interrelated media, text-image relations in the multimodal novel (as in multimodal texts in general) are not conceptualized as intermedial relations, but as an interplay of two distinct semiotic modes (textual entities) in the same "medium," i.e. the printed book, which jointly contribute to the production of one whole meaning in a single act of communication. ("Non-Verbal" 642)

Our focus on the ways in which digital media can be represented via other modes in the text as opposed to described or "intermedially referenced" (Weigel-Heller 32)

verbally necessitates an approach that can show how verbal and non-verbal modes are used together. Theories of and approaches to multimodality (see, e.g., Hallet, "Epistolary"; Nørgaard, *Multimodality*; and Gibbons) provide a suitable method for us because, as Alison Gibbons points out, multimodality "insists on combination and integration in semiosis, rather than modes working in isolation" (5). In our analyses, we thus examine how verbal and nonverbal components of the texts construct the storyworld together. In addressing the self-reflexive nature of the texts, we analyze the extent to which the novels foreground their ontological status both verbally and non-verbally and thus how salient self-reflexivity is within the work as a whole, drawing on Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's theory of remediation and, as also reflected in our typology, on the social semiotic concept of visual modality (Kress and van Leeuwen, as well as Nørgaard, *Multimodality*; and Nørgaard, "Fictionality").

With regard to transmedial fictions of the digital, we draw on Weigel-Heller's approach by recognizing that the digital element of a transmedial novel is as important as the print element. In addition, we pay attention to the role of transmediality in terms of its narrative function and resulting cognitive effect. As Straumann notes, "telling a story on multiple media-platforms makes it possible, for instance, to add further plot developments, to explore character backgrounds, or to provide new insights into the fictional story-world" (257). In our analyses, we explore the function of transmediality in each novel and consider how salient its use is within the work as a whole in addition to paying attention to the textual features in both the print and digital components. While we recognize that digital media is inherently multimodal, Hallet points out that "media in themselves do not produce meaning" ("Non-Verbal" 642) but "a semiotic mode is always tied to a specific material or medial carrier" (642). Thus, when analyzing transmedial fictions, we also adopt a multimodal *approach* to the digital component while recognizing the interactive, participatory, and potentially networked context in which that digital component is situated.

Overall, in relation to both multimodal and transmedial fictions of the digital, we adopt a medium-specific approach (see Hayes) to the analysis that attends to the affordances of print and digital media and addresses the ways in which different modes interact in the texts. We focus in particular on the extent to which the multimodality or transmediality in the narrative is self-reflexive, the function and effect of that self-reflexivity, and what ethical point each text is making about the world in combination with that self-reflexivity.

One important question is of course how we can get from an analysis of textual features to determining their ethical implications, which we see as an important aspect of the narrative's thematic concerns (Phelan, *Living* 7). According to Liesbeth Korthals Altes, readers always attribute an ethos (such as the genius, prophet, guide, social critic, *enfant terrible,* nihilist, outcast, lunatic, pervert, or impostor) to characters, narrators, and authors. She states that such ethos attributions are "likely to determine deep down what message is conveyed"; they are thus "part of the more general issue of how people make meaning from and with texts" (5–19).[5]

We are particularly interested in the attribution of worldviews or belief systems, i.e., what Seymour Chatman calls "attitudinal function[s]" or "slant[s]" (197), the smallest building blocks of which are ethical principles or convictions (see Alber, "Introduction" 10–11). Indeed, in the words of James Phelan, moral values are an integral part of stories and storytelling because "narratives themselves implicitly or

explicitly ask the question, 'How should one think, judge, and act—as author, narrator, character, or audience—for the greater good?' ("Narrative" 531). Furthermore, we want to address the interplay between "the ethics of the telling" and "the ethics of the told." We will look at both "the ethical dimensions of the narrative's techniques" at the discourse level and "the ethical dimensions of characters' actions" at the story level (Phelan, "Narrative" 531). In this context, we will show that in PPFDs, the (multimodal or transmedial) form often involves playfulness: Readers are invited to enjoy the different semiotic modes and/or actively participate in the context of "hyper reading[s]" (Hayles 12), i.e., the switching between texts, links, pictures, video clips, and music. At the same time, PPFDs make the readers aware of potential problems of the digital world and the darker sides of the online world (e.g., phenomena such as cyberbullying, internet addiction, violent online role-playing games, the abuse of personal data, the unreliability of information, the blurring of the line between the online and the real world, and so forth).

For us, ethos (or worldview) attributions are based on textual features (see, e.g., Alber, "Introduction" 7–9), but they still involve a certain degree of hypothesizing about authorial intentions. In our approach, we deploy hypothetical intentionalism, a cognitive approach in which "a narrative's meaning is established by hypothesizing intentions authors might have had, given the context of creation, rather than relying on, or trying to seek out, the author's subjective intentions" (Gibbs 248; see also Alber, "Hypothetical" 165–68). The approach proposes that when readers process a narrative, they treat it as the product of "a rational agent who governed its 'choice' of 'action' by a 'consideration' of its 'beliefs' and 'desires'" (Dennett 27). In other words, readers do not merely engage in processes of mind reading to understand the intentions or motivations of the characters; rather, they also construct a consciousness behind the narrative as a whole. In a second step, readers then form hypotheses about this mind's intentions or what one might call the narrative's "point"—and this "point" is motivated by belief systems or ethical convictions.

There is of course no inherent or stable link between textual features and ethical principles. One can always use the same device to make a different point or a different device to make the same point. At the same time, however, the link is not purely accidental: Narratives always make points by using specific strategies. It is therefore important to address these choices, that is, the question of why a given narrative deploys the devices it uses (rather than different ones) (see also Alber, "Introduction" and "Towards"). In the following analyses, we show how and why certain worldviews or ethical convictions manifest via the narrative strategies that the PPFDs use. We argue that the combination of multimodal or transmedial playfulness at the level of the discourse and the profound seriousness regarding the characters' problems at the level of the story amounts to a readerly reaction or stance that we call "self-reflexive ethics" (Alber and Bell 133). That is, PPFDs make ethical points in the context of metafictional or self-reflexive techniques, and this combination urges readers to think about their moral values in a self-reflexive manner.

Analysis I: Multimodality in *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*

Maria Semple's *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* is a novel that we locate in category 2 of our typology, a multimodal PPFD employing moderate visual modality. It is about Bernadette Fox, an upper-middle-class woman and once-renowned, award-winning architect who has given up her job and lives in Seattle with her family. She has become a recluse in her own home, conversing primarily with her Microsoft-guru husband Elgin Branch, her daughter Bee Branch, and Manjula Kapoor, a personal assistant living in India, with whom Bernadette communicates via email. Audrey Griffin and Soo-Lin Lee-Segal, two parents from Bee's school, dislike Bernadette. There is regular friction between these three characters which results in both verbal and physical conflicts. At one point, Audrey accuses Bernadette of driving over her foot (18–19). At a different point, Bernadette has blackberry bushes removed, which causes a mudslide that destroys the Griffins' home (51, 73). Also, Soo-Lin, an admin at Microsoft, starts working for Bernadette's husband and then has an affair with him.

After a Youth Group meeting at Bee's school, Bernadette suddenly disappears (192–97). What follows is a search for Bernadette by the various characters in the novel. Acting as the collector of documents relating to Bernadette in order to ascertain why she might have left or where she might be, Bee is the organizing consciousness behind the curated material that make up the book. The main prose parts (see, e.g., 6–7) represent Bee's diary but an intermittent self-reflexive commentary also implies that she is writing for, and therefore is aware of, an external audience. For example, asides such as "I don't think I've mentioned the Petit Trianon yet" (49), unlike rhetorical notes to herself (such as "why did I even start writing all this?" [43]), draw attention to the communicative circuit between Bee as sender and the reader as receiver.

In addition to self-reflexively narrating the timeline of events, Bee presents items such as email exchanges, instant messages, school reports, invoices, letters, bills, blog posts, interviews, police reports, and psychiatrist reports. Thus, while the reader is presented with documents written by other characters, Bee is the curator of this information, both organizing and reacting to information that is provided by others. The documents that Bee collects are presented multimodally with layout and typography visually representing the various types of documents. Some text types are labeled with introductory titles such as "Letter from" or "Note from" with layout visually representing the form of the document in terms of a header (e.g., "Dear Mr and Mrs Branch" [35]), paragraphs of text in the body, and a sign-off (e.g., "Sincerely" [36]). Emails and instant messages, and thus the characters' digital correspondence, are not introduced with labels and instead are represented via layout and typography only. Emails, for example, include "From" and "To" fields with the typeface deviating from Times New Roman, which is used for most of the rest of the novel, to a *sans serif,* rounded form. Representing an internally deviating form of what Nørgaard calls "discursive import" which is "the kind of meaning that is at play when typographic signs

are imported into a context where they did not previously belong" (*Multimodality* 80), the typeface connotes digitality by both its deviance from the typeface used in other sections of the novel as well as the connotations the *sans serif,* rounded typeface carries in terms of its association with computer mediated writing.

We can see the novel's use of different text types as an early example of a "multimodal book-archive . . . , an emergent mode of contemporary literature that constructs narratives and textual sequences through the collection and representation of reproduced texts and other artifacts" (Davis 84). In Brian Davis's articulation of a multimodal book archive, he focuses on texts, such as Anne Carson's poetry collection *Nox* (2010), which utilizes high visual modality in the form of reproduced photographs, drawing, and paintings alongside letters, quotes, and definitions. *Where'd You Go, Bernadette,* on the other hand, displays moderate visual modality in which layout and/or typography are used to visually represent the various documents relatively rudimentarily as opposed to, for example, more visually faithful representations via facsimiles. The result is a form of remediation—because one medium is represented "in another" (Bolter and Grusin 45)—in the novel that represents digital media neither faithfully nor inauthentically, but instead asks the reader to recognize the media represented via subtle multimodal imitation. This composition acknowledges the various sources of information that Bee has, and by implication the readers have, access to in a networked digital age, but its multivocality also presents the storyworld as a rather chaotic, and at times absurd, mix of characters and interactions that fifteen-year-old Bee has to navigate.

It is also through the novel's use of multimodality that *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* displays a certain degree of playfulness: As we move from one document to the next, we are made aware of the fact that we are dealing with a discursive artifact, both an epistolary novel of the twenty-first century and a contemporary, literary manifestation of the archive in which a "book is . . . self-consciously utilized as an archival container" (Ivansson and Gibbons 101; Ivansson). At the same time, however, multimodality and remediation are not used to simply foreground the novel's artificiality or the fictionality of fiction but instead serve a more sincere ethical purpose. Bee gathers these materials to find out why and to where her mother has disappeared and thus reconcile her own grief at the loss of a parent.

In addition, the novel uses digital media artifacts to make further ethical points. *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* makes us aware of serious problems of the digital age. This includes the way in which being able to negotiate the world via email turns Bernadette into an agoraphobic stay-at-home parent; the fact that Bernadette's virtual personal assistant Manjula's email address is operated by the Russian mafia, through which they manage to gather personal information about Bernadette's family (including credit card details) (166); the fact that Dr. Kurtz, who is Bernadette's psychiatrist, diagnoses his patient over email without ever seeing her in person (187); and, finally, the way in which virtual communication fosters emotional outbreaks by Audrey and Soo-Lin (see, e.g., 18–19) that might not have happened if they had spoken to Bernadette in person. We thus learn that the online world might lead to loneliness, identity thefts, erroneous diagnoses, and violent outbreaks.

Moreover, there is an ethical dimension to the textual whole. At the end, we learn that Bernadette is in fact a dynamic character who learns from her mistakes. In her letter to Bee, she acknowledges that she "let [her daughter] down in a hundred different ways" (310) and that she wants to take up her job as an architect again: "Who wants to admit to her daughter that she was once considered the most promising architect in the country, but now devotes her celebrated genius to maligning the driver in front of her for having Idaho plates?" (310). A new start becomes possible as other broken relationships are repaired. Despite their initial antagonism, Bernadette acknowledges that Audrey did help her escape her house, as well as the consequences that followed after Manjula was revealed to be an alias for the Russian mafia: "Audrey Griffin is an angel. She plucked me off the balcony and whisked me to the safety of her kitchen, where she presented me with the dossier of my truly terrible behavior" (306). These reconciliations become possible once Bernadette makes a physical reappearance in society and renounces the digital world: "I will never, ever email, text, or possibly phone anyone again. From now on, I'm the Mafia, only face-to-face contact or nuttin'" (307).

Analysis II: Transmediality in *Open Water*

We define Caleb Azumah Nelson's *Open Water* as a Transmedial PPFD that employs a digital peritext and thus it sits within category 5 of our typology. Set in London, it thematizes the romantic relationship between two unnamed Black British people, a male photographer and a female dancer. The novel is written in the second person, largely adopting what Brian Richardson calls the standard "you" form in which "a story is told, usually in the present tense, about a single protagonist who is referred to in the second person" (20). In other words, an unspecified and covert narrative voice tells the main character the story of their life. However, the "you" is not exclusively used to refer to the main protagonist, but sometimes refers to the couple, or a larger group of people. For instance, "you told her not to look at you" (Azumah Nelson 1) represents a form of self-address (i.e., "you told") and self-reference ("at you") by the protagonist. Moreover, in cases such as "you gazed at each other" (1) and "all you have wanted to do was hold each other in the darkness" (55), the second-person pronoun refers to both the man and the woman simultaneously. Finally, in cases like "there's a bunch of you in the basement" (3) and "you're all drinking now" (33), the "you" refers to a larger group of Black British friends. The dialectical relationship between individuality and togetherness is thus a crucial aspect of the novel's stylistic form.

The use of second-person narration is often self-reflexive because of the way it "foregrounds the act of invention and illustrates how telling generates the story in the first place" (Fludernik 262). However, the effect of this self-reflexivity depends on the context in which it is used. While the second-person pronouns in *Open Water* invoke one or more characters, the referential flexibility of the second-person pronoun also means that the reader is implicated by the narrative voice. Defined as "double-deixis" (Herman), "you" can refer to both a fictional and a real addressee simultaneously

such that "the narrative *you* produces an ontological hesitation between . . . reference to entities . . . internal to the storyworld and reference to entities . . . external to the storyworld" (338). David Herman's conception of this form of pronominal reference as "hesitation" might suggest that the referent of "you" moves back and forth between addressees. However, in elucidating this category further, Herman describes double deixis as a "blend" (342), a "hybridized combination" (342), and, more frequently, a case of the "superimposition of deictic roles" (345), so that the second-person pronoun encompasses an actual addressee (the reader) at the same time as a fictional reference (the "you"-protagonist) and thus uses language which suggests that "you" is simultaneously actual and fictional. The reader will thus always feel addressed by "you," to some extent but, because "you" also refers to a fictional character, they will not be able to identify with the "you" completely. As Herman observes, readers will find themselves "more or less subject to conflation with the fictional self addressed by you" (345). Irrespective of which characters the "you" refers to, you-narratives are typically considered to be self-reflexive because of the way that they "function as an invitation to the reader to project him or herself into the gap opened by the discourse" (224) such that the second-person pronoun draws attention to while also "straddl[ing] the ontological divide between the reader's real world and the text's fictional world" (225).

In terms of its function in the PPFD *Open Water,* however, second-person narration allows self-reflexivity and immersion to co-exist. Denise Wong argues that "while the racial specificity of *Open Water*'s 'you' excludes a non-Black reader from reference, it can nonetheless address—or interpellate—any and all readers as witness . . . gestur[ing] towards a possible affinity between the reader and you-protagonist" (n.p.). Overall, the narrative voice of *Open Water* serves to foreground the experiences of Black characters and invites readers to empathize with these figures by putting themselves in their shoes. This invitation has of course an ethical point. These experiences include the intense love that the two characters feel for one another, but also the sense of alienation they feel as Black people who are disproportionately exposed to police brutality (see 58–59, 76–77, 102, and 117) and the self-alienation of the central protagonist who "want[s] to lay claim to this life [he] lead[s]" (115) but does not quite manage to with the narrative voice repeatedly suggesting: "you lost yourself" (135, 141). Mirroring the invitation to the reader to co-experience the protagonist's experience, the protagonist's girlfriend invites him to "stand where I'm standing," asking him, "how does that feel?" to which he responds, "not good" (125).

The preceding analysis has shown how the second-person narrative voice establishes a shared point of view in the novel. In addition, the narrative also carries out a similar kind of perspective shift transmedially as readers are invited via a peritextual statement on the cover's verso page to "listen to the *Open Water* playlist on Spotify." The playlist contains sixteen songs by Black artists (like Idris Muhammad, Kendrick Lamar, Solange, and Kelsey Lu), most of whom are also mentioned in the text. Readers who are familiar with the songs and/or seek out and play the playlist as part of the reading process, therefore, will have knowledge of and/or be able to experience the same music as the protagonist, co-aligning their perspectives. The readers thus experience an aural form of what Gibbons calls "doubly-deictic subjectivity" (77).

Developed from Herman's concept of doubly-deictic "you," Gibbons develops doubly-deictic subjectivity to account for the way that images that are produced or seen by a character and which are visually represented in a novel allow the reader to see the same elements of the fictional world as that character such that "the reader's actions become superimposed onto a character's actions" (141) and ultimately "the reader is at once both an observer of the fiction and powerfully involved in that fiction" (77).

While Gibbons' concept was developed and has been applied in relation to multimodal print fiction (e.g., Nørgaard, *Multimodality*), we can see the same doubly-deictic alignment at work via music in *Open Water.* When readers recall or listen to the tracks, they hear the same music as the protagonist, thereby enhancing their access to and understanding of the protagonist's world. They experience what we define as "aural doubly-deictic subjectivity" in which a reader's actions mirror a character's actions via aural features and in this case music.

Music in *Open Water* ultimately serves a number of different purposes. More than simply commenting on the cultural specificity of the characters in the novel, the genres of music referenced in *Open Water* are significant: soul, funk, jazz, hip hop, and UK rap and grime—these genres are neither unconnected nor incidental but integral to transatlantic Black identity and resistance. Toward the end of the novel, for instance, the you-protagonist re-encounters a man he previously helped:

> "What are you listening to?"
> "Dizzee Rascal."
> "Classic."
> "Seminal. No Dizzee, no me."
> You smile to yourself. A feeling nags at you that you cannot ignore.
> "Can I take your photo?" (Azumah Nelson 139)

The "seminal" Dizzee Rascal is a British rapper and MC, a pioneer in UK rap and grime. As the journalist Aniefiok Ekpoudom chronicles in his groundbreaking book, *Where We Come From: Rap, Home and Hope in Modern Britain,* a history of migration and resistance is inscribed in the formerly underground genres UK rap and grime. The history spans seventy years and stems from British-Caribbean Sound System Culture; as such, these genres are "products of Reggae and 2-Tone, Jungle and Garage, as well as American Hip Hop" (3). Ekpoudom shows that avid listeners of British MC culture were mainly Black and working-class people from across Britain and, moreover, that UK rap and grime archive "stories of community and identity, personal accounts of sacrifice and loss, of hope and pride, of violence and family. They are a social commentary from the margins, a vessel and a voice for the disregarded and overlooked" (4–5) and represent a counterhegemonic history of modern Britain. This reading is integral for the scene above because it both helps to explain the affinity between these two strangers and prompts the you-protagonist to ask if he can take his photo.

This question recalls what initially brings the you-protagonist and the woman he falls in love with together. The two characters find solace in their art (photography and dancing) while navigating what it means to be one of a select few Black students

at elite private schools in London. It is because of photography that she initially approaches him to pursue a project—she tells him: "I want to document people, Black people. Archiving is important" (12). The use of music by Black artists and musicians in the novel does not primarily exist to provide a non-Black listener or reader access to their subjectivity, but first and foremost a means of connecting with those who share the speaker of the song's history and the trials of living in white-majority spaces that systemically oppress and threaten the lives of Black people, and specifically in this novel, Black men.

As in the case of the multimodality of *Where'd You Go, Bernadette,* we suggest that this instance of transmediality is hardly an example of playfulness for the sake of playfulness. Through the invitation to listen to this music on Spotify, we are made aware of the fact that we are dealing with a discursive artifact. However, the ultimate purpose of this transmedial moment is rather an ethical one. We are invited to co-experience the world with the protagonist so as to try to understand the feelings he is often unable to articulate. This effort at understanding includes the longing he feels for his partner, the sense of solidarity he feels with his peers, and his experiences of racism and resistance as a young Black man in the UK. The novel's narrative voice tells us that through the music, we are "plunged into someone else's crisis, someone else's horror" (132) but the affective inner life of the novel's protagonist and the lyrics of the songs on the playlist urge us to confront racist stereotypes that render "the Black body as a species body, encouraging a Blackness which is defined as abject, threatening, servile, dangerous, dependent, irrational, and infectious" (131). As Wong concludes in her analysis of the novel, the second-person voice in *Open Water* "mak[es] a Black male *you*-protagonist's affective interiority legible while confounding the hegemonic script of Black masculinity based on reductive and vilifying cultural assumptions" (n.p.). If the reader chooses to take up the inside cover's invitation to listen to the songs featured in the text, then the novel's transmediality works with the second person form to make legible the affective interiority of the protagonist. The playlist, like the you-narration, can of course be refused; however, if accepted, then it serves to enhance our understanding of the internal and external experience of the central character.

Conclusion

This article has argued for the existence of a new literary genre: post-postmodernist fictions of the digital (PPFDs) which we define as contemporary print fictions that imitate, incorporate, and/or utilize digital media, and also display thematic concerns for the digitally mediated worlds in which they are set. We have proposed a new typology of PPFDs that distinguishes between six multimodal and transmedial categories and developed a medium-specific methodology through which to analyze them, which pays attention to their specific affordances.

Our analysis has shown that *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*'s use of multimodality demonstrates both the heterogeneity of contemporary communication and the access to information that digital media can facilitate. At the same time, it ultimately

privileges the material, non-digital world in its celebration of human-to-human contact. *Open Water*'s use of transmediality enhances the reader's ability to align their perspective with the protagonist's so as to contribute to their understanding of this particular young Black man in the UK including the racism that he and his peers consistently face. In *Open Water,* the complementary, symbiotic relationship between the print material of the novel and the digital extension, in the form of the Spotify playlist, offers readers different entry points into the storyworld while creating a more holistic reading experience.

Both novels utilize potentially estranging self-reflexive techniques. The use of varying page layouts and typography throughout *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* combined with the inclusion of reports, emails, and bills which interrupt the more traditional narrative prose can shift the reader's attention from the story to the discourse level. In *Open Water,* accessing the Spotify playlist assumes the physical act of putting down the book and playing the music, which signals a switch in media and a shift in the reader's attention. Despite these self-reflexive and potentially estranging techniques, however, both novels make serious ethical points about the world they represent (cf. Alber and Bell 133).

Finally, our analyses have also demonstrated how PPFDs thematize the potential problems of the digital world while simultaneously communicating what Christian Moraru defines as a "differential" notion of identity in the context of a new togetherness in fiction. Bee, the narrator/curator of *Where'd You Go, Bernadette,* interjects her own narrative with self-reflexive notes throughout the text, a device which foregrounds her communicative attempts (as sender) towards the reader (as receiver) in her search for togetherness. In *Open Water,* the ambivalence of the pronoun "you," which may refer to the intratextual character and the extratextual reader simultaneously, is expressive of Moraru's idea of a "differential" notion of identity, which involves separateness and sameness at the same time (5). In other words, the PPFDs of our corpus urge their readers to oscillate between (joyful) immersion and (critical) reflection.

By proposing the new genre of Post-Postmodernist Fictions of the Digital we have sought to capture a continuously growing, heterogeneous body of 21st-century novels which thematically engage with and synthetically incorporate digital media, either multimodally or transmedially, as a manifestation of an ongoing preoccupation with the impact of the digital world and its ethical ramifications on our on- and offline lives.

Endnotes

Funding Statement: This research is funded by The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation). The project website can be accessed via: https://ppfdproject.com/ppfd-project/.

1. Please see https://ppfdproject.com/ for the catalogue of PPFDs.
2. Weigel-Heller conflates the wider phenomenon of transmedia storytelling on the one hand and transmedial novels on the other. As Henry Jenkins demonstrates, some fictional universes, such as *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter,* have been produced and expanded as part of franchises, with the aim of sustaining "a depth of experience that motivates more consumption" (98). We instead focus only on transmedial novels, i.e., self-contained prose fictions that invite recipients to engage with additional digital sources of information which are located outside the text but which are published with the novel.
3. The truth of what is represented is a separate matter: a visual modality rooted in the authenticity of the visual medium represented may or may not represent something that is true.
4. To put this slightly differently, postmodernist and post-postmodernists foreground different questions. Some postmodernist writers (such as Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, and Thomas Pynchon) may be interested in ethical questions (see also the readings of postmodernist narratives in Alber, *Unnnatural*). However, what all postmodernist narratives share is a playful or ironic interest in self-reflexivity, metafiction, or the foregrounding of the ontological dominant. Post-postmodernist authors (such as Jonathan Franzen or David Foster Wallace), on the other hand, foreground the importance of ethical questions, which they address or tackle by still using metafictional strategies.
5. Similarly, Nora Berning looks at the ethical implications of narrative situations, temporalities, character-spaces, and bodies. She states that these features are "interpreted, assessed, and evaluated in terms of the ways in which they thematize, problematize, foreground/background, or consolidate specific values" (56).

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