

Awareness of textual constructedness: Readerly responses to multimodality in post-postmodernist fictions of the digital

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Abstract

This article addresses textual constructedness as a particular kind of foregrounding and focuses on the question of how readers deal with multimodality in post-postmodernist fictions of the digital (PPFDs). PPFDs are ‘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’ (Bell et al., 2025: 340). Multimodal PPFDs combine prose segments with visual representations of emails, text messages, social media posts, memos, online forums, tweets, blogs or non-networked software (such as PowerPoint presentations). By comparing three datasets (namely responses to an open question, Goodreads reviews and reading group data) to one another, we seek to address the following interrelated research questions:

- (1) How does the awareness of textual constructedness manifest itself in readerly responses to multimodal deviations in PPFDs?
- (2) How can we account for the impact of researcher-led questions versus reviews written without any knowledge of the research project?
- (3) How does immediate versus delayed post-processing influence readers’ responses?
- (4) What are the effects of readers reading text passages versus full texts in their responses?
- (5) How do readers react to different degrees of multimodality in the texts?

In our qualitative study, we assume a bird’s-eye view on readerly reactions to multimodality in PPFDs. We will show what happens when readers become aware of the shifts between semiotic modes and determine subdimensions of the awareness of textual constructedness.

Keywords

awareness of textual constructedness, foregrounding, multimodality, post-postmodernist fictions of the digital, readerly reactions

1. Introduction

This article addresses textual constructedness as a particular kind of foregrounding and focuses on the question of how readers deal with multimodality in post-postmodernist fictions of the digital (PPFDs). PPFDs are ‘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’ (Bell et al., 2025: 340). Multimodal PPFDs combine prose segments with visual representations of emails, text messages, social media posts, memos, online forums, tweets, blogs or non-networked software (such as PowerPoint presentations). In what follows, we show how multimodality acts as a form of literary self-reflexivity that foregrounds the text’s artificiality, provide evidence that readers notice the shifts between semiotic modes, and present a new typology of eleven distinct reading strategies for processing foregrounding in multimodal PPFDs based on empirical evidence. Specifically, we triangulate three datasets, each of which contains reader responses to the same three multimodal PPFDs. In the terminology of Miller (2003: 328), we deal with a case of investigator triangulation (because we fuse two research teams) and data triangulation (since we combine different ‘blocks’ of information). The primary purpose is to cross-check reaction patterns across datasets to increase confidence in our conclusions, to reduce potential biases, and to gain deeper insights by looking at different forms of evidence.

By comparing these three datasets to one another, we seek to address the following interrelated research questions:

- (1) How does the awareness of textual constructedness manifest itself in readerly responses to multimodal deviations in PPFDs?
- (2) How can we account for the impact of researcher-led questions versus reviews written without any knowledge of the research project?
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- (5) How do readers react to different degrees of multimodality in the texts?

Given the high number of PPFDs that experiment with multimodal features in the twenty-first century, more qualitative and quantitative research on the effects of visual representations of digital media is necessary.¹ Most existing studies focus on foregrounding in traditional literature (often poetry, sometimes prose) and film (see, e.g., Bálint et al., 2016; Hakemulder, 2004, 2007, 2008 and 2020; and van Peer et al., 2007) but do not address the specific effects of multimodality.

There are two articles on foregrounding that move into this direction: Van Peer (1993: 50) looks at ‘typographic foregrounding’ in experimental poetry and investigates ‘the graphical representation of language on paper (or any other information carrier) and its concrete arrangement (type face, paragraph arrangement, type size, etc.)’. Short (2004 [1996]: 176) examines ‘graphological deviations’ (such as capitalization, italicization and unusual spellings) as an indicator of viewpoint in Irvine Welsh’s novel *Marabou Stork Nightmares* (1995). Van Peer and Short analyse the semantic potential of the (typo-)graphical representation of letters, words, sentences and paragraphs on the page but they both operate purely introspectively, i.e. without looking at the reactions of other readers.

A few studies exist that address the impact of multimodality on larger groups of readers. Gibbons (2012: 167–207), for example, investigates reader responses to Graham Rawle’s *Woman’s World* (2005), a multimodal novel that is composed of clippings from 1960s women’s magazines. ‘Bistable oscillation’ is a central concept in her analysis. It expresses the idea that readers shift back and forth between immersion in the storyworld and awareness of the text as a collage assembled from magazine scraps. Gibbons shows that the multimodal form contributes meaning rather than merely decorating the narrative. Also, in an exploratory (qualitative) study of Amazon customer reviews, Caracciolo (2014: 183) examines the functions of explicitly foregrounded multimodality in Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) and Emma Donoghue’s *Room* (2010). He demonstrates that the use of diagrams, maps, pictures, and non-standard capitalizations helps readers to relate to the unusual mind styles of the narrators in the two novels. However, the quantitative results from the statistical analysis by Tien et al. (2023: 12) do not confirm the hypothesised effects of multimodality on ‘reading-induced imagery and emotional reactions in the process of reading multimodal novels’. The results also falsify the hypothesis that ‘differences between unusual and usual mind style were traceable to multimodal vs. monomodal versions of these selected narratives’ (Tien et al., 2023: 12).

Since the impact of multimodality on reader responses is not yet clear, we need more research. In our qualitative study, we therefore zoom out and assume a bird’s-eye view on readerly reactions to multimodality in PPFs. We will show what happens when readers become aware of the shifts between semiotic modes and determine subdimensions of the awareness of textual constructedness. We will develop eleven reading strategies that cover both unconscious and conscious reaction patterns and can be further tested in the context of quantitative studies. In

addition, we will transcend the above-mentioned studies by exploring the impact of research designs, different kinds of post-processing, text length and degrees of visual modality on the construct of interest.

The article is structured as follows. We will first clarify terminological issues and provide definitions of the most important concepts. In the second section, we will explain our three datasets and coding methods. In a third step, we will turn to our data analysis and discuss our findings in relation to the research questions above.

2. Terminological issues and definitions

In their exposition of PPFs, Bell et al. (2025) define three subtypes: multimodal, transmedial and hybrid forms. Multimodal PPFs (such as Maria Semple's *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* [2012]) combine prose segments with visual representations of digital media. Through multimodality, 'different types of signs combine within the same media object' (Ryan and Thon, 2014: 19); it is thus a way of exploring 'the coexistence of more than one semiotic mode within a given context' (Gibbons, 2012: 8). Transmedial PPFs (such as Caleb Azumah Nelson's *Open Water* [2012]), by contrast, take the reader beyond the printed prose text to additional material on related websites, apps or social media platforms (see also Lutostański, 2020 and Ryan, 2016). Finally, hybrid PPFs (such as Marisha Pessl's *Night Film* [2013]), contain both multimodal and transmedial elements.² For the sake of comparability, we limit ourselves to readerly responses to *multimodal* PPFs in this article because prior research suggests that transmedial PPFs entail somewhat different response patterns to multimodal ones (see Wong et al., in press).

Our research is motivated by Shklovsky's (1965: 12) notion of *ostranenie*, which he uses to highlight fiction's ability to 'make strange'. For him, 'the technique of art' is 'to make objects "unfamiliar", to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged'. As is well known, Shklovsky's *ostranenie* is a complex concept that cuts across textual features and readerly reactions (see, e.g., Bálint et al., 2016: 177; Hakemulder, 2004: 196–97 and 2020; Miall and Kuiken, 1994; Schmid, 2005; Tian et al., 2023: 2; and van Peer et al., 2007).³ It is therefore necessary to break it down into individual components that can be delineated and then investigated.⁴

In this context, foregrounding theory (see also Short, 1996: 11 and van Peer, 1986) offers several helpful concepts because it predicts that textual characteristics which involve deviations will have certain effects on the reader, namely changes in perception (Hakemulder, 2004: 197). It also suggests that deviation shifts the attention of readers from what is told (i.e., the story level) to how it is told (i.e., the level of the discourse) and typically results in readers' 'increased awareness of the artifact' (Bálint et al., 2016: 180). Furthermore, Bálint et al. (2016: 177) distinguish between (1) foregrounding seen as *textual features* (involving deviations); (2) foregrounding seen as *perception*, that is, instances in which recipients perceive an element in the text as a deviation; and (3) foregrounding seen as an *experience*, that is, how recipients sense or undergo the perceived deviation.

Following this impetus, we define the visual representation of digital media in prose fiction as textual features that involve foregrounding (see also Tian et al., 2023: 3). Multimodality constitutes a kind of 'internal deviation' because it disrupts 'a pattern established by the text' (Gibbons and Whiteley, 2018: 19), namely the continuous use of prose. It also involves a kind of 'external deviation', which concerns the relations between genres (or types) and specific examples (or tokens) (see Hakemulder, 2004: 177 and 2020: 95; and Leech and Short, 1981). Multimodality is still rare and/or unusual in prose fiction; multimodal PPFs thus deviate from the generic norm that has been established for novels. Since multimodality entails movement between different semiotic modes (such as verbal and visual cues or typographical variations) and is still not a common representational technique in prose fiction, it qualifies as a self-reflexive textual feature that draws attention to itself and thus foregrounds the artificiality of the text (see Bell et al., 2025).

Investigating reader responses, the present investigation will focus on the results of foregrounding that concern deviation as perception and the effects of foregrounding as readerly experience. We are interested in 'the awareness of textual constructedness', i.e., the extent to which readers are made aware of the artificiality of PPFs through instances of multimodality. We explore what readers do once the deviating aspects of multimodal PPFs become noticeable: what happens when recipients perceive textual deviations related to multimodality as being pronounced, dominant or striking, and set them against what they perceive to be the norm of the textual pattern (see also Hakemulder, 2020: 95; and Short, 1996: 11)? Perceived deviation (Bálint et al.'s type 2) is the starting point of our analyses but we are specifically interested in the readerly experience of deviation (Bálint et al.'s type 3). More specifically, we look at three different datasets to determine

readers' experiential reactions and analytical sense-making strategies to perceived deviation. These readerly responses concern the question of how recipients sense or undergo the perception of multimodality.

3. Method

3.1. Datasets

All datasets are taken from recent empirical studies which investigate how multimodality and transmediality in PPFDs shape readers' experiences. In the dataset 1 study (Wong et al., in press), 60 university students in Germany read excerpts from three multimodal PPFDs (namely Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* [2017]; Maria Semple's *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* [2012]; Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* [2011]) and one transmedial PPFD (Marisha Pessl's *Night Film* [2013]). The excerpts were 886 words, 842 words, 665 words, and 686 words respectively. Data was collected between February and April 2025. A mixed-methods approach was used which combined closed and multiple-choice questions that provided quantitative data and open questions that provided qualitative data. Here, we report only on the second part of the study, i.e., the responses to the following open questions: 'Literary texts may use language in unexpected ways and contain striking and/or unfamiliar visual and narrative features. Did you notice any striking and/or unexpected textual, visual and/or narrative features in the story that you just read? How did they affect your reading experience?' In this case, *researcher-led questions* were asked *immediately* after the reading process, and the study was based on *extracts* rather than whole novels.

The second and third datasets are taken from two qualitative studies (Georgiou et al., forthcoming) in which readers read multimodal PPFDs *Conversations with Friends*, *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*, and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and transmedial PPFDs *Night Film* and *Open Water*. Dataset 2 comprises 99 reviews of *Open Water* and 100 reviews of each of the other four novels⁵ from the online social cataloguing platform Goodreads.com, collected in May 2024. Dataset 3 captures discussions of 69 readers across 10 reading groups in England which took place between June 2024 and February 2025. Participants were asked to read the whole novels before discussing them jointly in reading groups that already existed and were therefore not set up for the study but rather chose to take part in the research project. Participants were given prompts regarding the representation of digital media in the novel, ethical issues raised about digital media

in the novel and ways in which digital media might contribute to the themes in the novel but also instructed that they could discuss any aspect of the novel that interested them. These two datasets are based on *whole novels* and involve *delayed post-processing* in so far as the reviews and/or discussions took place at some point after the whole texts had been read. Furthermore, dataset 2 contains reviews written *without any knowledge* of the research project, whereas dataset 3 involves *researcher-led prompts*. The following table illustrates the similarities and differences between the three datasets:

	Text length	Post-processing	Research design
Dataset 1: Open questions	extracts	immediate	led by researcher
Dataset 2: Goodreads reviews	whole novels	delayed	no knowledge
Dataset 3: Reading groups	whole novels	delayed	prompts

Since we are interested in the effects of multimodality (as opposed to transmediality), the datasets from the initial studies outlined above were shortened and collocated so that they only contained readerly responses to three multimodal PPFs, namely Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011), Sally Rooney’s *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and Maria Semple’s *Where’d You Go, Bernadette* (2012). These novels were chosen because their multimodal representations of digital media differ in terms of degrees of visual modality, which ‘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’ (Nørgaard, 2023: 158). As Bell et al. (2025: 341–43) show, multimodal PPFs can be distinguished on the basis of low, moderate and high visual modality. The Low Visual Modality PPF, *Conversations with Friends* (henceforth *CwF*), makes use of internal variations in typeface to distinguish between representations of digital media, such as emails and text messages, and the first-person narrative voice of its protagonist Frances. The Moderate Visual Modality PPF, *Where’d You Go, Bernadette* (henceforth *WdYGB*), deploys more pronounced typographic features including lines, boxes, text alignment, page layout and typeface changes to distinguish types of digital media, which includes emails as well as digital invoices and bills, and the main narrative discourse. These ephemera are curated by the protagonist, Bee, as she tries to make sense of her mother’s disappearance. The High Visual Modality PPF, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (henceforth *VfiGS*) uses polyphonic narration and

includes one chapter that graphically renders a Powerpoint presentation written by a character called Alison.

3.2. Coding

The present study aims at exploring manifestations of ‘awareness of textual constructedness’ through the analysis of responses to open questions, Goodreads reviews and transcripts of reading group discussions. To this end, we used an approach informed by grounded theory, which is a qualitative method (see Flick, 2009) that is employed for exploratory research. The goal is to generate new theoretical understandings from the analysis of data (Birks and Mills, 2015: 2).

For the review (dataset 2) and reading group data (dataset 3), we used data that had been previously coded by the authors of those studies as ‘effect of multimodal element’ via the QDA software NVivo. More specifically, one of the authors coded within this code for ‘awareness of text’s constructedness’, i.e., the extent to which readers are made aware of the text’s artificiality through multimodality. In other words, this construct concerns the readers’ perception of the text’s deviation from standard conventions of fictional prose narratives, focusing especially on elements of multimodality. The open questions from the quantitative study (dataset 1) specifically asked participants to comment on their awareness of textual constructedness and thus we did not need to separate out specific data from this original dataset.

When undertaking new coding of the three dataset for this article, we took an abductive approach, which combines deductive (or top-down) and inductive (or bottom-up) coding, such that ‘researchers can code [...] text that allows them to address the research question empirically’ while also ‘genera[ting] inductive codes’ (Vila-Henninger et al., 2024: 980–81) from the data. In the open/initial coding stage, which is ‘a way of identifying important words or groups of words, in the data and then labelling them accordingly’ (Birks and Mills, 2015: 10), four researchers coded the three datasets individually and then shared their results with each other. All in all, three group coding sessions took place to compare and reach an agreement regarding the question of how the data should be coded. This process also involved stripping out any data that we retrospectively felt did not fulfil the definition of ‘awareness of constructedness’. The resulting dataset used comprises 5,363 words. In this phase, we produced nineteen codes: recurring labels were grouped together into categories, and the categories were then clustered into higher-order categories. The decision-making process was documented in memos.

In the axial (or intermediate) coding stage, we then looked at the nineteen codes to see how they might be refined and reorganized. In this phase, we developed fully individual categories by connecting subcategories and we also linked categories together (Birks and Mill, 2015: 12). This process resulted in fourteen codes. During the advanced coding stage, we employed theoretical coding (Birks and Mill, 2015: 13) and organized the coding categories into a flowchart (see Figure 1 in ‘Discussion’ section) to visually represent the relationship between the codes and thus how the participants’ perception and experience of multimodal text elements unfold.

4. Data analysis

4.1. Subdimensions of awareness of textual constructedness

4.1.1. Perceived deviation

To begin with, the responses in the datasets suggest that the readers noticed the deviations related to multimodality. They did not expect to be confronted with visual representations of emails, text messages, doctors’ bills or a PowerPoint presentation, and were surprised by them. The recipients also typically considered the prose segments to be the default or what they called the ‘traditional’ (GRGS43) or ‘normal’ (JLUPPFD128) text format.⁶ In reference to *CwF*, JLUPPFD141, for instance, noticed ‘the visual and orthographical/stylistic differences between the prose sections and text messaging/e-mail sections’, while JLUPPFD149 commented on ‘the different writing/typing styles’. Also, many readers detected typographic peculiarities such as the lack of quotation marks (GRCF43, GRCF19, and Sara in RG_CWFA), missing ‘capital letters’ (Yorkshire Pudding in RG_CWFA) and the lack of ‘punctuation’ (Elizabeth in RG_CWFA) in the emails. Similarly, GRWB68 wrote the following about *WdYGB*: ‘most of the book is in emails between characters but there are some diary entries and news articles but very little of it is the traditional novel format.’ Laura in RG_WBA highlighted the innovative quality (or newness) of the inclusion of ‘documents’ and ‘e-mails’ in *WdYGB* by stating, ‘I haven’t read anything that’s set like that’. GRWB76 saw it as a ‘very strange book’ that tries ‘something different’; the inclusion of a medical bill was seen as ‘some sudden unexpected curious visual feature’ (JLUPPFD158) or ‘a nice surprise’ (JLUPPFD102); GRWB79 spoke of a ‘unique format’; others described the novel’s multimodal features as being ‘striking’ (JLUPPFD130 and JLUPPFD216). Furthermore, Rebecca in RG_GSD notes that *VftGS* ‘represented the story in such a different way’, while JLUPPFD179 felt that the ‘change to powerpoint-slides [sic] was unmoderated and therefor [sic] sudden and

unexpected’ and added that they ‘do not usually expect a change of form after a page break’. JLUPPFD158 wrote that ‘the graphs were unexpected visual characteristics’; JLUPPFD217 spoke of ‘unexpected textual, visual and narrative features’; JLUPPFD152 argued that ‘the Book stood out’; and JLUPPFD154 reported that ‘the text contained presentation slides, this is the first time I’ve seen somethink [sic] like this.’

4.1.2. Cognitively challenging vs easily assimilated

We also observed that some recipients found it cognitively challenging to deal with such deviations, whereas others were able to easily assimilate them. Readers who belonged to the first group usually stated that they found the text hard to read, difficult to concentrate on or simply did not understand it. Regarding *WdYGB*, JLUPPFD184 wrote, ‘I still had to process all the names and what happened while deciphering the “unnecessary” information of the bill’. Along similar lines, members of the reading groups stated, ‘I had to think my way through it to sort of follow the sequences’ (Carolyn in RG_WBB) or spoke of the idea of ‘piecing it together’ in the context of ‘detective work’ (Leanne and Amy in RG_WBA). The PowerPoint slides in *VftGS* caused even bigger problems. While some only considered them to be ‘challenging’ (Sara in RG_CFWA and JLUPPFD192) or stated that ‘it was difficult to concentrate’ (JLUPPFD154), others were taken aback and even lost interest in the text: JLUPPFD141, for example, wrote, ‘it was difficult for me to make sense of them [the PPP slides] and made me loose [sic] interest’, while GRGS20 argued that ‘the powerpoint presentation [sic] [...] really threw me off’.

Readers who belonged to the second group usually reported that the multimodal features did not interrupt their reading experiences or that they could easily adapt to the new reading mode. Regarding *CwF*, readers pointed out that ‘the incorporation of text messages felt very natural’ (JLUPPFD184), saw texting as ‘a relatively subtle way to represent the digital way of communicating via instant messages’ (JLUPPFD 179) or even speculated that this representational technique ‘became quite common in books set in a contemporary setting’ (JLUPPFD152). JLUPPFD178 also considered *WdYGB* ‘easy to dive into’, while others reported that after initial difficulties, ‘you get used to’ (GRWB80) or ‘into the pace of it’ (Kim in RG_WBA).

4.1.3. Disrupting immersion

The readers who found the deviations to be cognitively challenging tended to report that the instances of multimodality disrupted overall textual immersion, which we define as the subjective ‘sense of being there’ in a narrative (Ryan, 2001: 130). Willow in RG_CWFB, for instance, stated that the inclusion of email exchanges in *CwF* ‘took’ the ‘concentration away from the book’, while GRWB86 wrote that ‘the emails [in *WdYGB*] took me away’ from the novel. With regard to *VftGS*, JLUPPFD152 pointed out that ‘the insertion of the PowerPoint Presentation has a disruptive effect’; JLUPPFD190 reported that ‘any attention I had while reading the text was lost when trying to understand the PP’; and JLUPPFD178 argued that ‘the powerpoint [...] interrupted the reading flow and thus forced me to take [...] a step out of the storytelling’. Consequently, some of these readers lost interest in the text: regarding *WdYGB*, GRWB22 admitted that they ‘gave up after about 1/3. The email format was not for me!’ GRWB2 even claimed that ‘the writing was hard to follow as it’s only email and letter correspondence’ and that ‘most of the [reading] group quit reading’.

4.1.4. Different types of immersion and mental imagery

The readers who were able to assimilate the deviations typically stated that multimodality correlated with a kind of immersion. In other words, the visual representations of digital media contributed to the subjective experience of ‘being there’ in the narrative (Ryan, 2001: 130). In our three datasets, emotional immersion, which comprises ‘subjective reactions to characters and judgements of their behaviour [...], emotions felt for others’ and ‘emotions felt for oneself’ (Ryan, 2015: 108), turned out to be the most important subdimension. For instance, several readers felt that the text messages in *CwF* were ‘very personal’ (JLUPPFD190), led ‘to the emotions she [i.e., Frances, the first-person narrator] was experiencing’ (JLUPPFD121), ‘pulled them into the narrator’s head’ (JLUPPFD130) or enabled them ‘to feel how she feels’ (JLUPPFD135). Similarly, the email exchanges in *WdYGB* could foster understanding of the novel’s multiperspectivity since they ‘provide glimpses into the woven web of perspectives of the characters’ (GRWB1) or allow ‘the reader to see many sides of the mystery and feel both empathy and frustration towards all the characters’ (GRWB6). The PowerPoint presentation in *VftGS*, which is written by one of the characters to present her personal history, also helped the readers to get a clearer sense of her emotions: JLUPPFD130 wrote that ‘it helps one feel they’re more on the kid’s side’, while Agnes in RG_GSC states that through it, ‘you’ve got the feel of the daughter’.

The recipients also related the instances of multimodality in the three novels to temporal immersion, which ‘keeps readers turning pages or spectators speculating about what will happen next’ (Ryan, 2015: 100). The email exchanges in *CwF*, for instance, ‘made the reading experience much better as well as more engaging’ (JLUPPFD162), were seen as ‘a good way of moving the story along’ (Yorkshire Pudding in GR_CWFA), made readers ‘feel more into the storyline’ (JLUPPFD202) or made them want ‘to know what happened next’ (JLUPPFD104). The unique format of *WdYGB* likewise created ‘new curiosity’ (JLUPPFD153), drew readers ‘into the book’ (GRWB79), caused them to want ‘to know what followed one event after the other and how did it end’ (JLUPPFD126) or was seen as being ‘conducive to [...] the greater plot’ (GRWB6). The PowerPoint in *VftGS* also kept ‘the reader[s] interested’ (JLUPPFD192), enabled them ‘to learn about the past and the present’ or served ‘to tie up some loose ends’ (GRGS43).

There is less evidence of spatio-temporal immersion, which refers to ‘a sense of being present on the scene of the represented events’ (Ryan, 2001: 122), in our data. Ryan argues that this kind of immersion invites us to ‘slow down the pace of reading, and occasionally to reread a passage so that we may linger on a particularly pleasurable scene’ (Ryan, 2001: 140). GRCF22 reported that they ‘loved’ the email exchanges in *CfW* and ‘had to put the book down and reread them a couple of times’. Similarly, JLUPPFD202 wrote that the inclusion of digital media in *WdYGB* ‘makes me more into the story and feel like I’m one of them in the story’, while GRWB1 states that ‘it draws you in’. Two readers connected the unexpected visual features to ‘mental images’, i.e., ‘*visual* imagery that comes to mind specifically when reading a story’ and ‘can aid a deeper immersion into the story world’ (Kuijpers et al., 2014: 92; italics in original). They argued that these characteristics helped them to ‘visualise the story’ (JLUPPFD217) or ‘the environment [...] in this text’ (JLUPPFD215).

4.1.5. Emotional response

The readers also commented on the perceived deviations by accentuating the emotions that they evoke in them.⁷ In several cases, the readers reported that they found the multimodal segments trying, confusing, disturbing, tiring or annoying but also interesting, appealing or enjoyable. In the case of *CwF*, for example, the recipients considered the email exchanges to be ‘frustrating’ (Annie in RG_CWFC), ‘cringe’ (GRCF87), despicable (GRCF83), ‘annoying, [...], tiresome, [...] and boring’ (JLUPPFD152), but also enjoyable (JLUPPFD176) and ‘interesting’ (GRCF51).

Regarding *WdYGB*, readers stated that they ‘didn’t really mind the way the book is mainly composed of email, letters and messages’ (GRWB83), that ‘the narrative [structure] [...] made it all the more interesting’ (JLUPPFD192), that they ‘liked the story’ in relation to ‘smartphone communication’ (JLUPPFD102) or even that they ‘personally love the stylistic device of a “found footage” story in all its variations’ (JLUPPFD178). On the other hand, there were also readers who considered the visual segments to be ‘a bit confusing’ (JLUPPFD123), ‘very confusing’ (JLUPPFD184) or ‘hard to follow’ (GRWB2).

We observed the widest and most ambivalent range of emotional reactions in the case of the PowerPoint slides in *VftGS*. The inclusion was perceived as being ‘tedious’ (JLUPPFD162), confusing (JLUPPFD162, JLUPPFD164, JLUPPFD165, JLUPPFD200 and JLUPPFD206), ‘disturbing’ (JLUPPFD102), ‘annoying’ (GRGS41) and ‘weird’ (Willow in RG_CWFB); Julia in RG_GSC even stated that they ‘don’t wanna read it [a PPP] in a book’. Other readers considered the visual material to be ‘breathtaking’ (GRGS60), ‘appealing’ and ‘interesting’ (JLUPPFD192); Agnes in RG_GSC reported that ‘it resonated for’ them. One reader (GRGS77) even expressed indifference as they ‘didn’t really care for the PowerPoint chapter’.

4.1.6. *Active (aesthetic) evaluation of representational technique*

The readers occasionally made aesthetic judgments and assessed the visual representation of digital media in terms of beauty or artistic quality both negatively and positively. Significantly, the multimodal formats of all three novels received rather ambivalent (and sometimes even contradictory) reactions.

Some readers saw the email exchanges in *CwF* as ‘a perfect way to put the book together’ (GRCF59) or as an artistic ‘achiev[ment]’ that called for ‘kudos [sic] to sally rooney [sic] for adding email format exchanges and actually making it readable’. Others said that they ‘don’t know why the only form of communication was through email and instant message’ (GRCF53) or that they ‘hated the long email dialogues’ because ‘there is no need for an email to take up an entire chapter’ (GRCF29). One reader was wondering why ‘the digital messages were sent via email and then back to instant messenger again’ (JLUPPFD184).

Similarly, the multimodal aspects of *WdYGB* were seen as ‘a great way to show there are more sides to every story than just one’ (JLUPPFD157), as ‘a good way of [...] doing it’ (Amy in RG_WBA), as being ‘conducive to the mystery of Bernadette’ (GRWB6), as a way of keeping

‘the story fresh and interesting’ (GRWB68) or a means of giving ‘full context to the story’ (GRWB86); one reader even fell ‘in love with the quirky writing style 3 chapters in’ (GRWB93). Others, however, saw the material collected by the narrator, Bee, as being over the top because it ‘invite[s] the reader into voyeurism’ (JLUPPFD103), stated that ‘it’s still not [their] preferred method of storytelling’ (GRWB93) or simply that they ‘didn’t love the format’ (GRWWB76). One reader suspected that the author ‘put [...] storyline[s] in’ to increase the amount of visual material in the story (Laura in RG_WBA).

Regarding the insertion of the PowerPoint in *VftGS*, JLUPPFD152 writes that it ‘demonstrate[s] the “quirkyness”, interests and views on the world and invironment [sic] of the Character [sic] Allison’; for GRGS60, ‘it actually works quite well as a storytelling mechanism’; and GRGS43 notes that they ‘found this chapter to be one of the most creative in the entire story’. Other readers felt that Egan ‘didn’t have to use PowerPoint’ (Joe in RG_GSA), that the author ‘was making a punt on the future that she got a little bit wrong’ (Agnes in RG_GSC) or that Egan ‘could have made that a bit easier’ (Sausage Roll in RG_GSC).

4.1.7. *Multimodality as a gimmick*

Several readers combined their emotional responses and their aesthetic judgments by classifying the multimodal features of the three novels as ‘gimmicks’. According to Ngai (2020: 1), ‘gimmicks’ are ‘overrated devices that strike us as working too little (labour-saving tricks) but also as working too hard (strained efforts to get our attention). In each case we refer to the aesthetically suspicious object as a ‘contrivance’, an ambiguous term equally applicable to ideas, techniques, and things’. GRCF32, for instance, commented on *CwF* as follows: ‘the conflicts in this book are solved with lengthy existential proclamations in the form of an email and then never spoken about again, therefore the stakes just end up feeling too low to care.’ Two readers expressed similar ideas regarding *WdYGB*: GRWB90 stated, ‘I also thought I was gonna like the whole email/fax/letter thing, but it was just TOO MUCH. Like, I love when a book has that kind of content but this was WAYY [sic] too much.’ Similarly, GRWB91 noted, ‘I usually hate the gimmick of assembling correspondence, email etc in between character dialogue and point of view. Overall though it was a fun fast read.’

Many readers considered the PowerPoint presentation in *VftGS* to be ‘gimmicky’ along the lines of Ngai’s (2020: 1) notion of the ‘aesthetically suspicious’: GRGS41 found it both ‘annoying’

and ‘genius’ at the same time; Kaley in RG_GSD saw it as being ‘contrived’; GRGS85 simply called it ‘gimmicky’; for Julia in RG_GSC, it was ‘a step too far’; GRGS5 perceived it ‘as a novelty that has been leveraged to elevate it to Pulitzer-level status’; GRGS19 thought that ‘there is some creativity with the form in which these stories are told [...], but if you ignore these gimmicks, you are left with a collection of stories that are middling at best’; GRGS95 noted that ‘literary gimmicks like a PowerPoint chapter notwithstanding, pop culture relatability alone cannot add heft to an already threadbare concept, threadbare I guess only in the author’s mind’; and JLUPPFD162 wrote that ‘the powerpoint presentation made it more tedious and confusing’.

4.1.8. *Highlighting the mimetic*

We also found that readers tried to make sense of the novels’ multimodal features by invoking their real-world knowledge. In such cases, they judged the perceived degree of realism and talked about the overall authenticity, plausibility or credibility of the textual representation (see also Culler, 1975: 138–40). Such mimetic responses to narrative fiction involve ‘an audience’s interest in the characters as possible people and in the narrative world as like our own, that is, hypothetically or conceptually possible’ (Phelan, 2007: 5–6).

Many readers looked at the emails in *CwF* from the perspective of authenticity. For JLUPPFD130, the novel’s representational mode felt ‘realistic because that is how people text each other’; JLUPPFD135 argued that ‘the whole text seemed so natural’; Elizabeth in RG_CWFA saw Frances as an actual person and stated that ‘she was quite young and texting is an easier way of saying things to people’; similarly, GRCF6 stated that ‘nick and frances’ texting/email/phone conversations and all the uncertainty associated that frances didn’t feel able to address was just so human’; JLUPPFD176 and JLUPPFD129 saw connections to the ‘real world’; JLUPPFD157 linked the typographic peculiarities to ‘the idea of two people arguing/breaking up/separating’, while JLUPPFD189 stated that they ‘felt real’; JLUPPFD192, finally, noted that ‘the structure of the text made it more realistic and gave it a sense of relatability with the reader’. Two readers pointed out that in the real world, people no longer communicate via email: GRCF83 wrote, ‘I don’t think that is a real thing that people do’, while GRCF93 was wondering, ‘who the hell communicates via email btw?’

The inclusion of visual material in *WdYGB* was seen as making ‘the story more appealing and believable’ (JLUPPFD215); ‘more realistic as it included multiple narrative angles’

(JLUPPFD130) and reminded ‘some readers of internet Forum where real people air their dirty laundry’ (LUPPFD152). The technique was also seen as enabling the text to ‘present [...] the person’s // mental [...] health’ (RG_WBA) or to expose the ‘almost absurd [...] behavior of the adults’. Others considered the multimodal features lacking in terms of realism (JLUPPFD121 and GRRWB86) or ‘contrived’ (Laura in RG_WBA). Slightly fewer readers looked at the PowerPoint presentation in *VftGS* in terms of mimetic motivation. For JLUPPFD178, it made the narrative ‘more convincing as it fleshed out the world building’; GRGS85 was ‘surprised at how well it was still able to convey that story’; JLUPPFD152 considered the ‘style’ to be ‘realistic’ and argued that ‘this Format could be intended to show the fragmenting thoughts, Feelings, Relationships and spaces of the story’ and GRGS77 connected ‘the PowerPoint chapter’ to ‘forms of communication evolving as technology evolves [in the real world]’.

4.2. Research design and knowledge of the research project

Our data shows that readers respond differently when they are confronted with researcher-led questions or prompts as opposed to a situation in which they can express themselves freely without any knowledge of the research project. In contrast to the other two datasets, dataset 2 (Goodreads reviews) was clearly dominated by active (aesthetic) evaluations of representational techniques, emotional responses (also observed by Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo, 2019) and references to novels as gimmicks. Readers also tended to focus on emotions and questions of artfulness. GRCF59, for instance, said that ‘the email correspondence format [in *CwF*] was a perfect way to put this book together’. Regarding *WdYGB*, GRWB91 noted, ‘I usually hate the gimmick of assembling correspondence, email, etc in between character dialogue and point of view. Overall though it was a fun fast read and I ended up liking the character’. GRGS41 commented on *VftGS* as follows: ‘using powerpoint to tell a story is just as annoying as it is genius’. Furthermore, in contrast to the other two datasets, dataset 2 contains no references to mental imagery, only one comment on the idea that novels can disrupt immersion (GRWB86 on *WdYGB*), and significantly fewer mimetic responses than the other two datasets. These observations suggest that the format of the Goodreads review, which involves no prior knowledge of the research project on the part of the readers, channels readerly responses in a particularly evaluative way.

4.3. Immediate vs. delayed post-processing

We also observed that the temporal gap between the initial text processing and the formulating of reactions or responses can have an impact on readers. It is, for instance, noticeable that we received most of the comments on whether instances of multimodality were cognitively challenging or easily assimilated from dataset 1, i.e., the responses to the open questions which were part of the experimental study. In this case, the readers had to respond immediately after reading the extracts, whereas time had passed before readers wrote their Goodreads reviews or participated in the reading group discussions. This might mean that the immediate cognitive effect of the multimodality was more prevalent in their minds. Supporting this hypothesis, dataset 1 contained significantly more reactions regarding difficulty or processability than dataset 2 and dataset 3.

4.4. Text length and specificity of responses

The difference between extracts and whole novels might also play a role regarding the high number of comments on the difficulty or processability of perceived deviation in dataset 1 (in contrast to the other two). In the first case, it is arguably easier for participants to recognize and ponder the textual deviation because they have less additional material to compare it with (i.e., a few pages as opposed to a whole novel). Of note was the fact that in dataset 1, the readers typically named the visual feature that had caught their interest by using a specific expression. In dataset 3, on the other hand, where readers are engaged in a group discussion, the readers often remained vague about the phenomenon in question, and it often took them some time to build to their point. For instance, while JLUPPFD154 stated that *VftGS* ‘contained presentation slides’, Agnes in RG_GSC said about *VftGS*, ‘my heart sank a little bit when I got to *that page* ‘cause I don’t normally like *that kind of thing* [...] but it read easily’ (our italics). Similarly, JLUPPFD157 wrote about *WdYGB*, ‘swapping the point of view was a great way to show there are more sides to every story than just one’, whereas Amy in RG_WBA noted, ‘I did think *that was a good way of of doing it // that kind of (putting it into pieces so)*’ (our italics). Finally, regarding *CwF*, JLUPPFD184 pointed out that ‘the incorporation of text messages felt very natural’, whereas Rebecca in RG_GSD said, ‘I just thought it represented the story in such a different way’.

4.5. Degrees of visual modality

Our data suggests that at least the readers in data set 1 noticed the degrees of visual modality (Nørgaard, 2023: 158), i.e., low (*CwF*), moderate (*WdYGB*) and high (*VftGS*) (Bell et al., 2025:

341–43). To begin with, not a single reader across all three datasets considered *CwF* to be cognitively challenging – instead, the novel was frequently mentioned as being easily assimilated and nobody reported that they lost interest in the text. *CwF* also received various mimetic responses and was described as ‘natural’ (JLUPPFD135), ‘realistic’ (JLUPPFD130 and JLUPPFD192) or as being connected to the ‘real world’ (JLUPPFD176, JLUPPFD129 and JLUPPFD189). Our readers considered *VfGS* to be the most ‘challenging’ (JLUPPFD192) or ‘difficult’ (JLUPPFD154) text that nobody mentioned under the code ‘easily assimilated’. Instead, it was repeatedly referred to as being a cognitively challenging novel that even ‘threw [people] off’ (GRGS20), thus affecting immersion. JLUPPFD141 stated, ‘the power point slides were quite an abrupt break for me when I had just settled into the prose. It was difficult for me to make sense of them and made me loose [sic] interest’. JLUPPFD190 even wrote the following: ‘any attention I had while reading the text was lost when trying to understand the PP. It seemed very disconnected and not just by form but also by content’. There is no evidence in the datasets of the novel triggering spatio-temporal immersion in the readers and it did not receive many mimetic responses. *WdYGB* belongs in the middle (between the other two) because readerly classifications of the novel as being cognitively challenging or easily assimilable here find themselves in a state of equilibrium. Also, *WdYGB* received several contradictory responses. In a typical instance, GRWB80 wrote that ‘the narrative/email/switching of voices style may be a little off-putting, but you get used to it’. Similarly, Kim in RG_WBA reported, ‘I did struggle with that part initially to get in’ but ultimately managed to ‘get into the pace of it’. Interestingly, eight readers mentioned *VfiGS* as a novel that disrupts immersion, whereas *CwF* and *WdYGB* were only mentioned once each.

5. Discussion

Our analysis has resulted in the articulation of eleven distinct strategies that readers adopted in responding to deviating elements in connection with multimodality in PPFDs. As shown in Figure 1, these strategies can be categorised according to two types of response: experiential reactions and analytical strategies. The former constitute spontaneous and less metacognitive responses, while the latter involve more conscious attempts to come to terms with the deviations.⁸

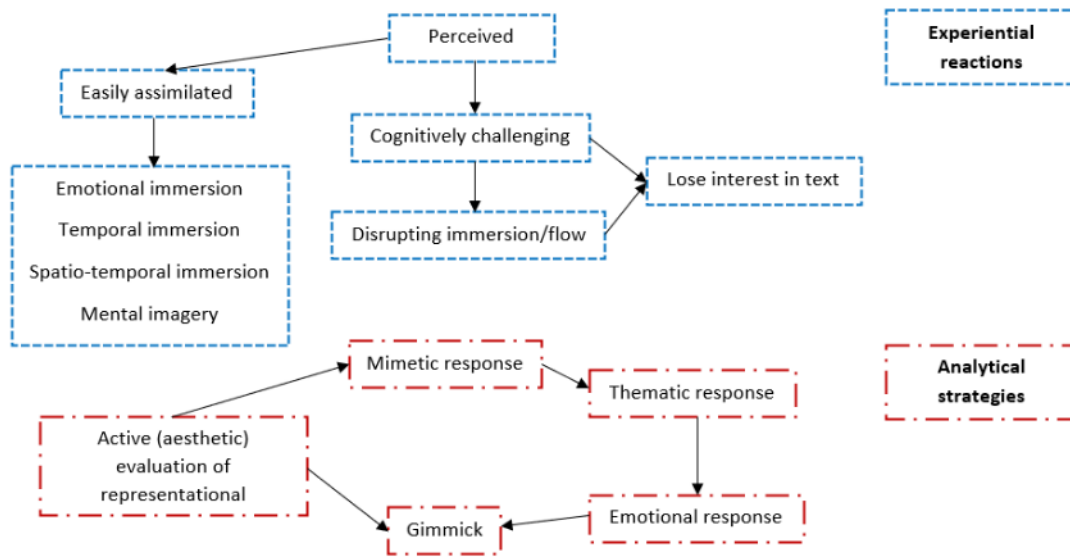


Figure 1: Reader responses to foregrounding in multimodal PPFs

Perceived deviation, the first experiential response we encountered, involved surprise and amazement upon encountering the innovative representational technique of multimodality. The readers either explicitly compared the visual representation of digital media to the ‘standard’ prose segments (internal deviation) or they commented on the special kind of novel they were confronted with (external deviation) on account of the visual component. If the instance of multimodality was challenging, the readers felt that they had to invest additional cognitive effort and think longer and harder about it. If the visual feature was easily assimilated, they were quickly able to integrate or naturalize it and find an explanation for it.

Those readers who fell into the first group (‘cognitively challenging’) sometimes also argued that the instances of multimodality had a disruptive effect or interrupted the flow of reading. In such cases, the feeling of being immersed in the text was made more difficult for them to attain or maintain. In extreme cases, the readers even lost interest in the texts. One of the factors affecting loss of interest was the degree of visual modality involved: readers only gave up in the case of *WdYGB* and *VftGS*, but not in the case of *CwF*. By contrast, the readers who fell into the second group (‘easily assimilated’) usually reported that the instances of multimodality correlated with a kind of immersion (either emotional, temporal or spatio-temporal). The reported feelings of immersion might be related to the degree of visual modality, but they might also have to do with

the psychological predispositions and/or reading habits of the recipients. Further studies are needed to determine why certain readers experience immersion while others report that their feeling of immersion is disrupted by instances of multimodality and whether the two (seemingly contradictory) readerly reactions (immersion vs. disruption of immersion) can co-exist (see, e.g., Alber, 2016; Kukkonen, 2020; and Polvinen, 2016 and 2023): it is, for example, possible that readers who like to deal with postmodernist, unnatural or otherwise experimental narratives (somewhat paradoxically) consider the disruption of immersion to be immersive.

In our three datasets, temporal immersion was the most commonly reported type (11 instances), emotional immersion slightly less common (10 instances) and spatio-temporal immersion (including the creation of mental imagery) the least common readerly reaction (3 instances).⁹ We argue that this order of responses reflects upon the significance of time, characters, and space in narratives in general (see, e.g., Herman, 2009: 14). Temporality is an important ingredient of narratives: it begins to play a role as soon as two event sequences are connected to one another. Temporal progression creates causality, builds tension and anticipation, makes character development possible, shapes emotional impact and reflects how humans experience their own lives. Fictional characters are crucial because they usually serve as bearers of experientiality, and readers tend to relate to the thoughts, feelings or emotions of these figures (Alber, 2021: 5; see also Schneider, 2013: 122): their experiences (especially the quality of ‘what it is like’ to have certain experiences) typically take center stage. Space is less important regarding our understanding of narratives than time (see Buchholz and Jahn 2005: 551–55). Notably, Forster’s example of a minimal plot (‘The king died and then the queen died of grief’ [1954: 130]) does not even contain any reference to space, and we are presumably all familiar with bare stages in the theater that do not really obstruct our understanding of the minds of the characters or the play’s represented action.

Within the analytical strategies, emotional responses and the aesthetic evaluations of the instances of multimodality in *CwF*, *WdYGB* and *VftGS* were rather ambivalent and included approving and disapproving comments across the board. We would like to conjecture that this is typically the case when it comes to new representational techniques that ‘make strange’ and create new perceptions and experiences. Such ambivalent reactions probably relate to the inherent cognitive conservatism of readers who will usually try to ‘retain a [familiar] frame for as long as possible’ (Jahn, 1997: 457). *VftGS* received the widest range of ambivalent emotional reactions,

which seems to suggest that the representation of PowerPoint slides is probably the most radical or daring of the visual representations we investigated.

We also observed a connection between the classification of multimodal features as being gimmicky and mimetic responses, in the case of which readers explicitly compared the multimodal segments to their real-world experiences and measured them against factors such as authenticity, plausibility and credibility. Some readers considered the visual material in *CwF* and *WdYGB* to be gimmicky, but the PowerPoint presentation in *VftGS* was most frequently seen as being aesthetically suspicious. Conversely, many readers considered the email exchanges in *CwF* to be authentic; slightly fewer people felt that the visual material in *WdYGB* was plausible; and the smallest number of readers described the PowerPoint slides in *VftGS* as being realistic. For us, this suggests two things. First, readers notice that when it comes to the visual representation of digital media, they are not actually confronted with the real thing but a textual rendering of it. Second, mimetic responses to narratives are more important to readers than thematic or synthetic ones. Peplow et al. (2018) describe such responses as ‘mimetic reading’, which is ‘a type of reading that conflates real-life and text’ (2018: 63).

Knowledge of the research project also seems to have influenced some reader responses. In this context, we have shown that readers react differently when they receive questions from the researchers (as in dataset 1) or prompts (as in dataset 3) – compared to a situation in which they can comment freely without any knowledge of the research design (as in dataset 2). In the Goodreads reviews, it is primarily important for readers to communicate their aesthetic ideas and emotions. They thus usually comment on whether multimodal PPFDs are well (or beautifully) written or they address the question of how they can emotionally relate to them. Indeed, Nuttall argues that such online reviews allow the readers ‘to comment without formal or conventional constraint on their understandings, feelings and associations in relation to the text, and are encouraged to do so by the degree of anonymity offered by this mode of discourse’ (2017: 156). However, we also acknowledge the performative element inherent within any public-facing book review. We agree with Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo that ‘through the act of writing a review, readers describe the emotions they feel when reflecting on a book. This is a performative act, one that assumes the review will be read and constitutes a social network identity display’ (2019: 257).

We have also shown that the temporal gap between the initial text processing and the formulating of reactions or responses can have an impact on readers. The responses to the open

question (in dataset 1) contained more specific reactions regarding the processability of multimodality than the Goodreads review (in dataset 2) and the reading group discussions (in dataset 3). While readers in dataset 2 tended to recall the instances of multimodality, but not necessarily how they dealt with them, and therefore, did not explain their reading strategies for dealing with cognitively challenging aspects of the text, reading group participants spoke at some length about different coping techniques they adopted. These included rereading the entire novel or specific chapters, making notes and drawing genealogical trees to keep track with all the characters and reading peritextual material, such as interviews with the author or book reviews. Both types of data included in datasets 2 and 3 are predicated on a premise of honesty and mutual trust, meaning that readers more often than not feel at ease to express their earnest opinions and thoughts about a book, protected by the anonymity of Goodreads or surrounded by the familiar environment of a reading group posse. However, responses in dataset 1 were far more specific as to the cause of the cognitive challenge, whereas responses recorded in datasets 2 and 3 rather capture the overall experience of reading, which does not necessarily focus on specific elements when recalled. As a result, readers may remember when a book/extract was cognitively challenging or easily assimilated moments after reading it, but after longer periods of time the memory becomes disengaged from the specific textual feature that triggered it.

Furthermore, we observed that text length has an influence on comments regarding the processability of multimodality. In the case of shorter passages (as in dataset 1) there is less distracting material compared to a situation in which readers read the novel as a whole (as in dataset 2 and dataset 3). This makes it possible for readers to focus on the multimodal segment specifically. The flipside of this specificity was the effect of reported confusion by readers and their inability to enter a state of immersion. Reading the entire novel has the potential to remedy both these issues.

Finally, the question of how the readers estimated the strangeness of the perceived deviation had to do with the degree of visual modality. Notably, no reader considered *CwF*, which displays the lowest degree of visual modality, to be cognitively challenging, but five readers mentioned it as being easily assimilated. Six readers saw *WdYGB* as being cognitively challenging, but six readers also perceived it as being easily assimilated. No reader considered *VfGS*, which displays the highest degree of visual modality, to be easily assimilated, but nine readers mentioned it as being cognitively challenging. These findings suggest that a) readers notice the different

degrees of visual modality, and thus the degrees to which multimodal PPFs move away from traditional prose and b) that readers are more affected by high degrees of visual modality than by moderate or low manifestations. Across the different conditions, and whether readers had received prompts or not, the closer the text's layout and typography remained to classical prose, the easier it was for readers to assimilate it.

6. Conclusions

The present qualitative study may lead to hypotheses to be tested in future research. This article uses triangulation to address textual constructedness as a type of foregrounding and focuses on readers' responses to multimodality in post-postmodernist fictions of the digital (PPFs). Our evidence demonstrates that awareness of textual constructedness elicits experiential reactions that transform into proto-interpretations and guide readers' analytical strategies. Our data also shows that recipients who found the text easy to assimilate developed emotional, temporal or spatio-temporal immersion and testify to mental imagery as a result of their interaction with the text. By contrast, in instances when readers found the PPFs cognitively challenging, more conscious analytical strategies were deployed, in the form of meaning-making mechanisms or aesthetic judgements (including evaluations of multimodal features as being gimmicky).

The triangulation of three datasets also enabled us to see that when readers are not familiar with the research project, they will comment on their aesthetic ideas and emotional reactions more openly. Furthermore, our empirical evidence shows that text length and the time readers had to absorb the text plays a significant role regarding the ability to adjust to the cognitive demands made by the text. Our findings also suggest that readers are aware of the different degrees of visual modality, and that they are more affected by high degrees of visual modality. Finally, we would like to note that we do not only rely on self-reported reaction patterns; especially the use of Goodreads reviews and reading group data also provide access to *unconscious* influences of multimodal foregrounding.

Notes

¹ As our catalogue of PPFs shows most examples of PPFs involve multimodality (rather than transmediality): <https://ppfdproject.com/ppfdproject/catalogue-of-ppfs/>

² What exactly makes such novels post-postmodernist? Alber and Bell (2019) argue that post-postmodernist authors continue to use self-reflexive strategies, but they do so to express ethical principles. Hence, ‘self-reflexive ethics’ (Alber and Bell, 2019: 130) is the most important feature of fiction in the twenty-first century. Along these lines, Bell et al. (2025) argue that the multimodal and transmedial segments of PPFs self-reflexively foreground the constructedness of the text. At the same time, however, PPFs use these components to make certain ethical points (typically about digital media) (see Bell et al., 2025).

³ The term ‘textual feature’ denotes ‘anything in the text that can be objectively identified. Textual features include many of the distinctions [...] of narratology, such as narration styles [...], speech styles [...], techniques for marking discourse and story time, and aspects of characterization’ (Bortolussi and Dixon, 2003: 28). The term ‘readerly reactions’, by contrast, refers to the subjective responses of the recipients. They may concern the evocation of thoughts, attitude changes or emotional responses, and will vary across readers and contexts (2003: 28).

⁴ In 1965, Lemon and Reis translated the Russian term *ostranenie* as ‘defamiliarisation’ (Shklovsky, 1965; see also Schmid, 2005). The term ‘foregrounding’ goes back to Garvin’s translation of the work of Havránek and Mukařovsky (1964). Havránek defines foregrounding as ‘the use of devices of the language in such a way that this use itself attracts attention and is perceived as uncommon, as deprived of automatization, as deautomized’ (1964: 10), while Mukařovsky writes that ‘foregrounding is the opposite of automatization’ (1964: 19). Since foregrounding has developed into the more established term, we will continue to use it.

⁵ At the time of data collection, only 99 reviews met the selection criteria for *Open Water*. To harvest relevant data for the research questions, the reviews were filtered using the following keywords: ‘app’ for *Night Film*; ‘playlist’ for *Open Water*; ‘email’ for *Conversations with Friends*; ‘email for *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*’; ‘PowerPoint’ for *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Since the *Night Film* app became obsolete in 2020, data was harvested from 2013–2020, during which the app was available and functional. Since the other novels were unaffected by obsolescence the ‘newest first’ filter was used to collect the most recent reviews for those PPFs. All reviews collected were written in English.

⁶ All data has been anonymised via pseudonyms (some of which were self-chosen by the participants) or participant IDs. Data with the prefix ‘JLU’ is taken from dataset 1; data with the prefix ‘GR’ is taken from dataset 2; data with the prefix ‘RG’ is taken from dataset 3. The open

access datasets are available via:

https://osf.io/3bjm4/?view_only=dce823dc42844ec68d181e2947ecddce;
<http://doi.org/10.17032/shu-00000000300>; <http://doi.org/10.17032/shu-00000000301>

⁷ We follow Hogan (2003: 169) who argues that emotions involve ‘eliciting conditions’, a ‘feeling or phenomenological tone’, ‘expressive outcomes’, a new ‘attentional focus’ and ‘actional outcomes’. We are particularly interested in the connections between the eliciting conditions (the deviant textual features) and the feelings or emotional tones the readers assign to them.

⁸ We locate our study in the context of 4E cognition or post-Cartesian thinking. We do not buy into the traditional Cartesian split between mind and body. For us mental processes are always already embodied, embedded, extended and enactive (see also Caracciolo and Kukkonen, 2021: 5–6). We see the experiential reactions as protointerpretations, on which the analytical strategies then build.

⁹ It is necessary to further investigate the question of whether readers are more likely to evoke mental images when they are confronted with standard prose or visual representations of digital media. Tian et al. (2023: 12) could not confirm the hypothesized effects of multimodality on reading-induced imagery.

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