

English 353: Experimental Fiction Multimodality in the Novel

Prof. Joseph Conte
Spring 2015
T R 12:30-1:50

We will read a selection of “books” that question every aspect of what it means to be a print novel. These are multimodal works that integrate text, pictures and design elements; and yet they are books you *can’t* read on a Kindle™. We experience multimodality as the environment of our daily life, in various platforms that include the urban streetscape, art galleries, digital “desktops” and other electronic media.

Multimodality is as new as the iPhone with its “app” icons and voice assistant, Siri, but as old as the New England Primer.

Multimodal literature both resists and appropriates digital technology in the print medium. Most literary works are language-centered: they call on the reader’s store of linguistic competency and comprehension of the text, but they subordinate or exclude pictorial or graphic elements. The experience of reading a multimodal novel, however, requires that the reader negotiate between the verbal and the visual, always aware that the bound book is also an expert technology. We will examine the effects of multiple reading paths on narrative

structure; the physical manipulation required to read these books; and the “self-conscious” reading that is required by works that call attention to themselves as books.

Works for extended discussion will include: Mark Z. Danielewski’s *Only Revolutions* (2006); Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes* (2010); B. S. Johnson’s *The Unfortunates* (2009); Vladimir Nabokov’s *The Original of Laura (Dying is Fun)* (2008); Tom Phillips’s *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* (fifth edition, 2012); Art Spiegelman’s *MetaMaus: A Look Inside a Modern Classic* (2011); and Steve Tomasula’s *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* (2004).

Course requirements include discussion boards for each novel in UB Learns, a midterm essay and a final critical essay.

