



Vol. 4.2 (2016)

ISSN 2182-8830

'Estudos Literários Digitais 2'

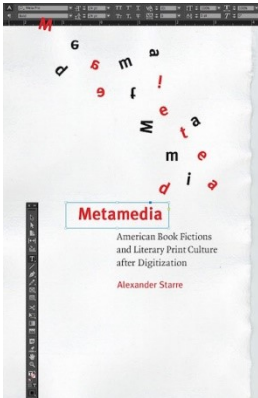
Manuel Portela e

António Rito Silva (orgs.)

# Self-Reflexive Materialities in Contemporary American Fiction

LIZZY POURNARA

*Aristotle University of Thessaloniki*



Alexander Starre, *Metamedia: American Book Fictions and Literary Print Culture after Digitization*.

Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2015, 316 pp.

ISBN 978-1-60938-359-6

**M***etamedia: American Book Fictions and Literary Print Culture after Digitization* (2015) constitutes an important contribution to scholarship that pays attention to the study of the book as a material object after the advent of digital technologies. The significance of Starre's work lies in its in-depth analysis of particular texts—especially those that perform self-referential operations on their media—by prominent American writers, in an attempt to highlight the impact of digital practices in the conception, production and reading of contemporary American fiction. Starre mainly focuses on the discussion of works by Dave Eggers, Mark Z. Danielewski, Chip Kidd, Salvador Plascencia, Reif Larsen and Jonathan Safran Foer. What is special about these works is that they were written in the first decade of the twenty-first century and thus they offer an interesting insight into recent literary production that has been influenced by rapid technological developments, as evidenced in the way their layout and design works together with their narrative meaning.

To take an example so as to illustrate the emerging demand for experimental layout, the London-based publishing house Visual Editions has undertaken the publishing of books with innovative visual design, thus making such books available to the wider public. Exploring theoretical concepts put forward by N. Katherine Hayles, Johanna Drucker, Jerome McGann and

Marshall McLuhan, Starre builds on the notions of “metamedia” and “metamediality” and argues that “a literary work becomes a metamedium once it uses specific devices to reflexively engage with the specific material medium to which it is affixed or in which it is displayed” (8). The discussed metamedial works are not only reflexive about their materiality, but they also point towards issues that are related to media ecologies.

The first chapter starts with a discussion of theoretical concerns by addressing the relationship between metamediality and literature. Drawing on Niklas Luhmann’s theory of social systems, Starre frames “media change as a process that does not penetrate the core of social communication but occurs within its environment” (28). This is also achieved through “irritations”—a concept used by Luhmann to describe the ways in which closed systems affect each other’s functions—“that media change initiated in recent American literature” (29). Discussion of textual materialism is illustrated through bibliographic features of works by Marshall McLuhan and N. Katherine Hayles that promote “the aesthetic primacy of the material text over its production technologies” (25). This is the kind of priming of visual textuality that Johanna Drucker and Jerome McGann have discussed in relation to the practices of the modernist avant-garde. Particular attention is paid to the little magazine, whose production “proved to be the perfect breeding ground for experiments with book production and typography” (60). Modernist print experimentation was not restricted to books but encompassed booklets, brochures, pamphlets and periodical forms. Actually, the little magazine constituted one of the dominant material expressions of experimental modernist practice in the sphere of print as we can see in the case of the futurists, whose artistic accomplishments with verbal and visual media have anticipated intermedia forms of expression.

According to Edward E. Chielens, the little magazines—since they were “founded by an individual or small group, usually with a small, precarious budget, in order to publish new writers or a new school of literature not accepted by the large commercial publications” (67)—were more prone to accommodate experimental pieces in their pages than big publishing houses. Focusing on the literary journal *Timothy McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern* (1998–2010) and on the entrepreneurship of its founder Dave Eggers, Starre highlights the essential role this journal played both as “a symptomatic reaction to and a seminal influence on the coevolution of literature and media in American print culture after digitization” (25) and “as an exemplary institution of print culture in the digital era” (68). Instead of feeling threatened by electronic technologies, *McSweeney* considered digitization as “an integral component of contemporary book culture” (69) and embraced “the tools of the digital age, yet—and this is the main twist—not as media, but as technologies” (74).

In the following chapter, the analysis turns to Mark Z. Danielewski’s works *House of Leaves* (2000) and *Only Revolutions* (2006), two novels that, despite their experimental format, have been rapidly canonized. This canoni-

zation also reflected the cult status and appeal of Danielewski's most popular work, *House of Leaves*, which retained its very complex layout in its manifold editions. *House of Leaves's* multiple versioning interconnects "a communication that stretches across various inscription surfaces and communication technologies" (128). One of the most striking achievements of *House of Leaves* is the dialogue that it establishes between literary and critical writing, and vice versa. This becomes apparent in the way N. Katherine Hayles reads Danielewski and Danielewski reads Hayles: "*House of Leaves* streamlines the feedback loops linking authors, readers, and academics" (133). Another aspect that justifies the use of the term "metamedia" for Danielewski's work is the crossing of boundaries between narrative and physical world, which makes *House of Leaves* acquire a material dimension in the physical world as the novel "invites the reader to rethink the text as a book" (158). This process is brought to a different level in Danielewski's other work, *Only Revolutions*, whose medial effect pursues "a poetic agenda that seeks to elide all the metamedial strategies of *House of Leaves*" (161).

The fourth chapter explores the convergence of writing, design and bookmaking as seen in the works of Chip Kidd, Salvador Plascencia and Reif Larsen. After introducing the notion of convergence within the context of transmedia, this chapter offers a distinctive perspective of convergence focused on "the authorial practices of several writer-designers, who one might call 'literary bibliographers'" (168). Starre highlights the idea of the "literary bibliographer expand[ing] the traditional sphere of the writer" (168) and that "the digitization of writing and designing has radically expanded the potential reach of an author's artistic influence" (169), letting his readers speculate whether the activity of making books annuls the writing of books or vice versa. In Kidd's *The Cheese Monkeys* (2001), the author examines the ways in which Kidd "positions the bibliographic ekphrasis of a cloth-covered book object within the text, only to materially recreate this same object in the hands of the reader" (174). In Plascencia's *The People of Paper* (2005), he observes that paper is used "as more than a neutral inscription surface," extending thus "the metamedial mode of American literature into yet another genre" (183). With Larsen's *The Selected Works of T.S. Spivet*, his analysis comes to the conclusion that contemporary literature "has always sprung from a complex media ecology, and it still does" (216). This affects the ways in which embodiment is to be considered one of the most crucial issues of current literary production. The medium is no longer a mere repository for the text, but assumes an active role at the semiotic level as well.

The fifth and final chapter engages with Jonathan Safran Foer's novels *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005) and *Tree of Codes* (2010). Drawing on Friedrich A. Kittler's assertion that "[w]hat remains of people is what media can store and communicate" (quoted on p. 219), Starre claims that "Foer's books are books of the dead—but extremely lively ones," because in order to "preserve memories always entails making

media” (219). In *Everything Is Illuminated*, the tactility of typefaces is part of Foer’s embodiment strategy, for he “foregrounds the immediate cohesion of bodily activity that unifies the writing and reading processes” (229). In the case of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Starre underlines the poetics of the making of the story of a book, and examines the ways in which books “enforce second-order observation on the medial processes of writing and reading” (233). The book sculpture *Tree of Codes* reevaluates metamediality, as the book, with its cuts and gaps, appeals to the reader “through linguistic codes and through the absence of specific bibliographic codes” (252).

*Metamedia* offers a particular understanding of metamediality, one that is demonstrated through the analysis of fictional works of contemporary American literature. The book’s concept of metamedia is graphically suggested in its front and back cover, which seem to remediate a word processing screen interface. What also becomes clear in this extended analysis is that metamedia novels have the potential of functioning as learning devices on multiple levels and in a variety of disciplines. *Metamedia* effectively shows that bookmaking and design in print have thoroughly integrated digital modes of production, thus turning book technologies “from a medium of necessity into a medium of choice” (263).

© 2016 Lizzy Pournara.

Licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International \(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).