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FROM METAREFERENCE TO STORYTELLING: MULTIMODALITY IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION*

Abstract. The aim of this paper is to discuss the use of multimodality, that is simultaneous employment of verbal and non-verbal semiotic resources, in American fiction from the postmodern novel of the 1960s to the recent examples of novels that depart from the conventional, purely verbal format. In William H. Gass's *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, the first text to be discussed, multimodality ties in with obsessive self-reflexivity, typical of high postmodernism, and mobilisation of the metaphoric potential of the printed codex as object: the metaphoric equivalence between the book and the body of the eponymous heroine constitutes the core of Gass's exploration of the text-reader interaction. Like *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* by Steve Tomasula relies on the semiotic potential of the book-body equivalence and contains explicitly meta-referential elements; however, it goes beyond mere self-reflexive exploration of the status of a literary text: for Tomasula *VAS* as book and as novel becomes an embodiment of a transition from the human to the post-human condition. Finally, in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, the last book to be discussed in this paper, multimodality is primarily employed as a storytelling device, which only indirectly — that is, via a juxtaposition of words and images — gives the novel a meta-referential dimension.

Multimodality, that is simultaneous employment of verbal and non-verbal semiotic resources, constitutes an important strand in novelistic experimentation, going back at least to Lawrence Sterne's canonical engagement with the book's materiality in *Tristram Shandy*. Such novels often combine devices operating on the levels of typography, layout and the material form with the use of images and other graphic elements, and thus in many cases become "total books" integrating all the semiotic resources of the codex format into a unified whole. The aim of this paper is to discuss contemporary manifestations of this literary phenomenon

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* The research this article is based on has been funded by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education, grant no. N N103 225838.

and to outline changes in the use of non-verbal devices in American fiction from the postmodern novel of the 1960s to the 21st-century examples of departures from the conventional, purely verbal format.

To present this evolution of novelistic multimodality, I will take as my tutor texts three books: William H. Gass's *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* (1968), Steve Tomasula's *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* (2002) and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). In the first of them multimodality ties in with obsessive self-reflexivity, typical of high postmodernism, and mobilisation of the metaphoric potential of the printed codex as object: the equivalence between the book and the body of the eponymous heroine constitutes the core of Gass's depiction of the text-reader interaction. Like *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, *VAS* relies on the metaphoric potential of the codex as artefact and contains explicitly metareferential elements; however, it goes beyond mere self-reflexive exploration of the status of a literary text: for Tomasula *VAS* as book and as novel becomes an embodiment of a transition from the human to the post-human condition. Finally, in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, the last book to be discussed in this paper, multimodality is primarily employed as a storytelling device, which only indirectly — that is, via a juxtaposition of words and images — gives the novel a metareferential dimension.

As befits a “total book,” the metaphoric equivalence between body and book is produced in *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* via integration of semiotic modes; that is, through the combination of visual, material and verbal means of expression. On the most basic level the body-book parallel is signalled by the use of images taking up the whole available space on the front and back covers: the former contains an image of a nude female torso, depicted from the neck to the lower part of the belly, not accidentally deprived of a bellybutton, and overwritten with the title, the author's name and the information about the publisher. The back cover, in turn, depicts just the naked female backside, the location of images suggesting that they are photographs of the same female body.

As signalled by both the cover and the title, the protagonist and narrator of the major part of *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* is a woman who indirectly identifies herself as Babs in the opening section of the book and who adopts multiplicity of textual positions as the novel progresses. On the basic diegetic level she rather obliquely tells the story of her sexual encounter with a particularly unresponsive lover named Gelvin and provides a few descriptive segments, which endow her with a body of certain physical characteristics. This narrative strand constitutes a barely sketched diegetic framework for her memories of and extensive reflections on her earlier sexual encounters and sex in general as well as her rumina-

tions on naming and other aspects of language, which in turn modulate into self-reflexive remarks on her own textual status, the text the reader is reading, the process of writing and the nature of fiction as such. Thus, on the one hand, Babs provides textual hints that allow her to be construed as “a prostitute, striptease artist and sometimes actress” (PIER 100), and on the other hand, describes herself in purely abstract terms: “These words are all I am [. . .] I am that lady language made her playhouse of” (GASS, white).¹ She thus turns out to be a peculiar personification of abstract notions, the ambivalence of her ruminations allowing a number of different, though, naturally, related readings of who or rather what she “really” is. For Larry McCaffery “the narrator of the work – the ‘Lonesome Wife’ of the title – is lady language herself” (MCCAFFERY 172), while for Michael Kaufman “she is the story or more properly Story speaking itself” (KAUFMANN 28).

Rather than comment directly on his own fiction from the position of a fictional dramatized author, Gass has thus developed a complex metareferential set-up, in which such abstract notions as imagination or story appear to be embodied in the figure of Babs, a fictional character simultaneously existing on and speaking from the level of the fictional storyworld projected by the text of *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife* and embodied in its material form. Not surprisingly, what Babs says can be directly related to the conceptual framework developed by Gass in other, non-fictional texts. The phrase “These words are all I am” echoes, as McCaffery notes, Gass’s emphatic assertion of the purely verbal nature of fiction: “literature is language, [...] stories and the places and the people in them are merely made of words” (qtd. in MCCAFFERY 172).

Babs’s constant fluctuation between sexuality- and textuality-oriented reflections ostentatiously sets the terms for *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife*’s self-reflexive exploration of its own status and relation to the reader. Just as Babs as narrator/character is primarily a personification of the book and the abstract notions it may signify, sex functions in *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife* as a metaphoric vehicle for the representation of the interaction between book and reader, personification allowing Gass to present the process from the book’s perspective in another layer of the metareferential metaphoric network he develops in *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife*. Consequently, Babs’s commentaries on her sex life can be interpreted as reflections on the book-reader relationship (the more so as her monologues abound in addressee-oriented, frequently self-reflexive passages, inviting the reader to identify with the “you”), while the material manoeuvres can be

¹ As *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife* is unpaginated, I can only indicate, just as most other interpreters of Gass’s novel do, the page colour of the section from which a particular quotation comes.

construed as elements of her seduction of the reader: “in order ‘to entice’ the lover/reader, a battery of ‘physical charms’ is displayed by Babs/ WMLW by putting into relief various graphic and other features” (PIER 118).

This “typographic seduction” resists easy description on account of the sheer variety of typographic and graphic devices it relies on. In the original edition of *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife* the alterations in the paper colour and texture from thin blue paper through thicker olive paper and grainy red paper to glossy white paper are the only, if especially conspicuous, indication of internal division into sections, as the book lacks any pagination. It also uses a number of typefaces and manipulates their shape and orientation, just as it plays with the conventional page layout, especially the standard spatial relationship between the text proper and paratextual footnotes, and occasionally arranges the graphemes into quasi-figurative typographic images. Consequently, the reader is constantly forced to re-adjust the mode of his/her engagement with the book, McCaffery succinctly summarising the haptic and ocular effort *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife* requires:

throughout *Willie Masters* Gass never allows our eyes to move easily along the page from left to right and top to bottom, instead, we turn from page to page, moving backward and forward, moving our eyes up and down in response to asterisks or footnotes, from left to right to check marginal glosses, and occasionally standing back to observe the organisation of the page as a whole. (177)

Paradoxically, on the verbal level the idea of Babs enticing the reader is undermined by her rather confrontational stance towards the reader. As Kaufman points out,

Gass’s text complicates the paradigm of passive reader and active writer, and between passive (“female”) text and active (“male”) reader, making the text at once open to the reader’s advances, aware of the reader’s ultimate power in “creating” or not creating the text, yet also, in the insistent attacks by the text on the reader, resentful of that dependence. (39)

Kaufmann’s use of the word *text* rather than Babs indirectly points to another aspect of the complex relationship between multiple typographic devices and the verbal component of *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife*. Paradoxically, the departure from the conventional “transparent” typography — which foregrounds Babs’ embodiment in the material form of the book, the only object the reader has a physical access to — precludes the reader’s imaginative reconstruction of Babs as a fictional character existing on the diegetic level: as John Pier points out, “she is in a sense ‘disembodied’ by the typographic design of the work” (101).

Babs's textual status is further complicated by the photographs recurring through the book. Pier notes that they are not simple illustrations clearly coordinated via captions with relevant sections in the text: some of them even appear to contradict physical features attributed to Babs on the verbal level (111). At the same time, he admits that "the paucity of spatio-temporal coordinates [. . .] tends to reduce her to a bare voice, seriously hindering any attempt to constitute her as a character situated within any clearly defined diegetic frame of reference" (PIER 101). If this is the case, then the relation between the text and the images will inevitably be oblique, though not random: Rolf Samuels observes, for instance, that Babs's memories of the comments about her bosom and buttocks made by her father, whom she describes as a "smart ass" (GASS, blue), are accompanied, across the gutter, with a photograph of the legs and buttocks of the model. Furthermore, the images can be interpreted as visual parallels to the central themes of *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, which they present according to their own logic. As Brian McHale observes, they "are clearly designed to stimulate sexual interest or tension of one kind or another in the reader" (180-181).

Textually unacknowledged and scarce as they are, the images are parts of *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* as book and their presence undermines to some extent its central metareferential message self-reflexively proclaimed on the verbal level. A book incorporating images, which by their erotic contents will inevitably draw attention to themselves, cannot be construed as a demonstration that "literature is made of words and nothing else" (MCCAFFERY 172). Contrary to what Babs claims on the verbal level, she is not made of words only. By the same token, the presence of images of a naked woman can be interpreted as a transposition of the physical charms and their seductive power from textual materiality to pictoriality. The reader frustrated by the fragmentation and non-linearity of the text may well turn to the images with their promise of a simple voyeuristic pleasure. The fact that they are never directly commented upon in the otherwise obsessively self-referential verbal sections of *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* can be interpreted as a signal of their being beyond Babs's control and thus an indirect indication of the authorial presence beyond and behind her — only apparently — self-generating textual performance. While Babs — though only to a limited degree — decides what happens on the verbal level, it may well be yet another figure that stands behind the incorporation of images. It would thus appear that Babs's self-generated status suggested earlier in the book is merely a metafictional ploy and that she is just an instrument employed for his own purposes by Gass.

His position in relation to Babs is thus more ambiguous than most critics admit, as they easily switch back and forth between Babs and Gass in their discussion of the book's central manoeuvres. If Babs is a prostitute, then the logical extension of the sexual metaphor that underlies the book's metareferential manoeuvres is that Gass is her pimp — "Willie (the whore)Master," as Caramello calls him at some point (103) — flaunting her naked textual and pictorial body to the "you" of a decidedly (and exclusively?) male reader. The pun in the title, which can be read as "Willie masters lonesome wife" and which is put over the naked body on the cover, can be read as Gass's indirect admission of his controlling presence and somewhat instrumental use of Babs.

Ultimately, *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* proves to be a deeply ambiguous, if not self-undermining exploitation of multiple semiotic resources for the sake of metareferential exploration of the author-text-reader relationship, its equivocality stemming from the clash between textual materiality and pictoriality. Its overall composition invites the reader to interact not so much with the book's *textual* body as with its *multimodal* body, the text in all its visual physicality being just one of multiple modes that signify (in) *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*.

The interplay between metareference, referentiality, materiality and multimodality is pushed to yet another level of complexity in *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* by Steve Tomasula, with art and design by Stephen Farrell. Like *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, it relies on the multimodally established book-body equivalence, introduced first by the cover which imitates human skin with its branching web of bluish veins; however, Tomasula extends it far beyond the metaphoric metareferential exploration of the creative process and the text-reader interaction. For one thing, the staggering variety of pictorial elements incorporated in *VAS* far exceeds Gass's employment of images: graphic elements are combined in *VAS* with typographic devices operating on the levels of typeface and layout, both modes — the verbal and the visual — being equally important to its meaning. For another, Tomasula exploits the parallels between genes and language, often employed in popular representations of genetics and clearly related to the basic body-book equivalence, to explore the broad theme of transition from the human to the posthuman condition and to transpose it to the level of the material and visual form a literary text — a novel, to be precise — may take. In its multiplication of semiotic modes and collage-like fusion of verbal and visual fragments *VAS* thus becomes a textual artefact that probes at the limits of the novel as genre, a (post-)novel about a post-human body.

Fragmentation, heterogeneity and self-reflexivity are interrelated dominants of construction of *VAS*. On the basic diegetic level, it tells the story of a typical

nuclear family consisting of Square, the husband and the narrator-protagonist, his wife Circle and their daughter Oval. As the names of characters indicate, it is supposed to be an allegorical story about a (post)modern everyman living at the turn of the twenty-first century. The “vas” from the title stands for vasectomy, which Square is about to undergo. This is to be the solution—which his wife insists on—to the family’s reproductive concerns. Having gone through miscarriage, Caesarean section, prenatal examination and abortion, she believes it is now Square’s “turn.” This narrative strand is interwoven with numerous graphic elements, such as simple black-and-white illustrations, pedigree trees, cranial measurement charts, chromosome maps, digitalised photographs, pages reproduced from nineteenth-century anthropological monographs, Internet advertisements, Mendelian diagrams, as well as multiple disjointed verbal sections, usually one or two sentences long. These are quotations attributed to famous scientists and politicians, bits of scientific discourse, medical statistics, fragments of the genetic code, facts from the history of medicine and American medical law, sarcastic comments on the aforementioned etc. These chunks of printed text can occupy several consecutive pages and are often mixed up with one another (a particular typeface type being the only indication of where to look for continuation of a given fragment) and with graphic elements.

All these textual and graphic fragments incorporated/reproduced in *VAS* can be related to the elusive moment of change in our relation to our own body exemplified by Square’s vasectomy and self-consciously described by him thus: “He could see what was happening, this transubstantiation of being his body into having his body” (TOMASULA 315). Multiple ramifications of the body-book equivalence signalled by the cover are the central element of Tomasula’s exploration of the process. Thus, the parallels between language and genetic code are made explicit by verbal means, when Square muses on the connection:

Square stopped writing to look at the whorls
of his fingertips, little miracles of line, their
repetition a swirling reification of his mother
and father and their mothers and fathers and
[...] back through 125,000
generations to the ape, written in a language of
four base letters, ACTG, which combined into
words — CAC|ATA|ACC — the words forming
double-helix sentences of genes which filled
pages of chromosomes within the cells which
made up the book of his body. [...]

(TOMASULA 51)

In the margin of this page we see a set of stylised letters resembling the *scriptio continua* of medieval manuscripts, punctuated with words, printed in a very different, modern-looking font, “Body text once had body. Couldn’t it again? What would it look like if it did? (TOMASULA 51).

The intertextual allusions to Edwin A. Abbott’s *Flatland*, a late-nineteenth century novella envisioning a two-dimensional world populated by “straight Lines, Triangles, Squares, Pentagons and other figures” (TOMASULA n.p. [12]), indicate two major lines along which Tomasula explores the transition epitomised by “vas.” On the one hand, by quoting passages from the section of *Flatland* entitled “How I Tried in Vain to Imagine a Dimension Not My Own”, he implies that the post-biological future of mankind is as hard to conceive for us as the world of three dimensions would be for somebody living in two dimensions. On the other hand, by citing passages in which Abbott’s Square extols the merits of geometrical regularity as the only safeguard against barbarity, Tomasula throws into sharp relief the recurring tendency in human history to eliminate those who do not fit some abstract ideal of normality or racial purity.

VAS sets out to communicate its author’s ideas not so much through a linear pattern of narrative or logical development as through juxtapositions and digressions. It displays an encyclopaedic impulse to explore all biological, cultural, political, social etc. ramifications of recent developments in biotechnology and medicine through numerous parallels, contrasts and interrelations, my discussion presenting but a partial picture of the ideas constituting Tomasula’s cognitive collage, whose structure resembles very much that of hypertext with its web of links. Disruptive as they are, non-narrative verbal and visual elements reflect, refract and highlight the change in the human condition exemplified by Square’s story. They locate it within a larger context of contemporary culture of competing and simultaneously interlinking discourses, in which a straightforward narrative (a novel) is just one way of representing a human experience, equally valid — or so Tomasula seems to suggest — as an apparently dry, biotechnological record of the gene sequence or a set of assorted quotations or a series of images.

If the book is/has a body, then what we encounter in *VAS* can be interpreted as mutation in the canon of the novel brought about by the incorporation of non-fictional, historical or biomedical discourses and visual elements. With all the aspects of *VAS* interlinking into a complex network, its subversion of novelistic conventions can be understood as another reflection of its thematic concerns. Unable to imagine how exactly a human body (and soul) will change, Tomasula and Farrell have modified the material which is more malleable and more familiar — the book. Abbott’s *Flatland* again throws light on what happens to the novel as

genre in *VAS*. A page being after all a classic example of a flat surface, Tomasula implies an analogy between the typical print novel with its archetypal (flat) components of plot, characters, setting, linear organisation and Abbott's *Flatland* to indicate that *VAS* ventures beyond the conventional dimensions of the novel in an attempt to develop a material and discursive format adequate to its thematic concerns. In contrast to Gass, Tomasula does not stop at the level of metafictional exploration of literariness for its own sake but incorporates metareference in a much broader self-reflexive representation of the interrelations between the discursive and the biological.

Compared to Gass's and Tomasula's "total books," Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is much more "restrained" in its multimodality: its major part consists of a conventionally laid out text which is only occasionally disrupted by photographs, typographic deformations and (pseudo-)facsimiles of printed materials. This attenuated multimodality, in which photographs rather than typeface and/or layout variation constitute the central non-verbal mode, ties in with two other interrelated departures from the interplay between materiality, multimodality and self-reflexivity observable in *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* or *VAS*. For one thing, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* lacks an explicit, i.e. verbally signalled, metareferential dimension; it is only the correlation between multimodality and its thematic concerns that indirectly introduces the motif of metareferential reflection on/of the limitations of verbal representation. For another, in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* multimodal semiosis does not rest on some central iconic metaphor embodied in the book as object but simply relies on the capacity of the printed codex to provide a material support for a narrative conveyed via multiple semiotic modes.

The conventional format of the rectangular block of text embodying a comparatively conventional (at least in narratological terms), homodiegetically narrated and evidently fictional story of a nine-year-old boy's coming to terms with his father's death dominates in the material organisation of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*; consequently, the novel is much closer to what might be called mainstream fiction than Gass's novella-essay or Tomasula's collage of appropriated and re-worked motifs and materials. Still, as is the case with these works, heterogeneity and juxtaposition constitute the compositional dominants of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. The main narrative strand is narrated by Oskar Schell, a precocious "inventor, jewelry designer, jewelry fabricator, amateur entomologist, francophile [...]" (FOER 99), whose father died in the Twin Towers disaster. His narrative describes the eight-month-long quest to discover the meaning of the mysterious key he believes his father intended him to find and

ends at the moment when he appears to have come to terms with the past. This condensed *Bildungsroman* is systematically interspersed with two epistolary strands, narrated by his paternal grandmother and grandfather respectively, the division into chapters signalling the transition from one point of view to another. It is only after reading through all the sections of the novel that the reader can arrive at a reconstruction, still rather provisional, of the life stories of Oskar's grandparents. Just as he has been traumatised by the September 11th attack, their lives have been marked by the 1945 bombing of Dresden, in which they lost their whole families, including Anna, who was the grandmother's sister and the grandfather's girlfriend, pregnant with his child at the moment of her death. They meet again in New York and get married only because they remind each other of Anna; however, Thomas Sr. abandons his wife and moves back to Dresden when he learns that she has broken their agreement not to have any children. He returns to New York only after he learns about the terrorist attack.

Central as they are to the multimodal set-up of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, photographs are neither directly referred to in the verbal sections nor captioned. Still, they are related to the diegetic plane and in many cases located in close vicinity to the verbal section they correspond to. For instance, the passage which describes Oskar taking pictures of YES and NO tattooed on his mute grandfather's hands (FOER 258) is followed by an appropriate image (FOER 260-261). While it might appear that the images are thus a redundant element merely repeating narrative data already conveyed by verbal means, this is not quite the case. According to Wolfgang Hallet, novels like *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* allow the reader to look at the artefacts produced and collected by fictional characters and "[i]n this way characters from the fictional world move closer to the reader's real world, since a photograph is indexical of the reality of the person or object depicted, as well as of the photographer who took the picture" (HALLET 144). Given the fact that Oskar is an inveterate photographer and collector of visual materials, it can be assumed that the images incorporated in his sections are photographs that he has taken himself or has found on the Internet and included in *Stuff That Happened to Me*, "[his] scrapbook of everything that happened to [him]" (FOER 42).

The incorporation of images foregrounds the importance of the visual dimension to Oskar's mental processes and perception of reality. This function of photographs is thrown into sharp relief in a section in which Oskar narrates his attempts to overhear the conversation between his mother and psychiatrist. It is suddenly interrupted by a photograph which immediately evokes one of the key visual representations of the September 11th attacks — the (in)famous image of

a man who jumped from one of the towers to certain death. Oskar obsessively speculates on the circumstances of his father's death and explains at one point that he has enlarged a series of frames from the film depicting the man to see whether it might be his father. While the referent of the photograph can fairly easily be established by any reader with appropriate cultural competence, its precise narrative function remains elusive, as it may indicate the fact that Oskar has just remembered this image at this moment or that he has just thought about his father.

Another type of reader-text-character relationship is established in sections that elicit the reader's performative engagement with the materiality of book as an iconic equivalent of Oskar's actions. In the closing sections of the novel he narrates how he tears the frames out of his scrap-book, reverses their sequence and flips through them rapidly, so that "it looked like the man was floating up the sky" (FOER 325). The final pages of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* appear to contain the pictures Oskar has just mentioned. Turned rapidly enough, they do indeed suggest that the man is flying up rather than falling down: the reader not only mimics the actions of the character but he/she also enacts via his/her interaction with the book the visual iconic representation of the movement.

Many of the typographic devices are intended in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* to represent documents supposedly existing on the level of the presented world in their visuality and textual materiality; the verbal sections preceding them usually prepare the reader for their occurrence and signal their significance. Thus, when Oskar goes to an art supply store to ask for advice on the possible meaning of the word *Black* written in red ink on the envelope in which he found the mysterious key, the sentence "She showed me a pad of paper that was next to the display" (FOER 44) is followed by a sequence of full-page, full-colour simulations-cum-reproductions of a pad covered with words and doodlings scribbled by people testing different pens.

Analogous semiotic mechanisms operate in the sections disrupting the continuous blocks of text constituting Thomas Sr.'s letters. As he explains in the first of them, after the bombing of Dresden he gradually lost the power of speech and was forced to resort to communicating via short messages he wrote in notebooks he carried around. This explanation of his method of communication ends with the words "at the end of each day I would take the book to bed with me and read through the pages of my life:" (FOER 18). As the colon makes abundantly clear, the set of one-line pages that follows reproduces pages from Thomas Sr.'s notebook, which he has earlier suggested he is now using to write a letter to his son.

The principle of juxtaposition governing Foer's use of multimodal devices, these nearly empty pages are indirectly contrasted with the overwritten pages that

close Thomas Sr.'s final letter written in New York two years after his son's death. A plea for forgiveness, it begins with the words "I'm sorry" (FOER 262, 264, 266) repeated three times on three separate pages. Thomas Sr. quickly realises that he does not have enough space in his notebook to express all the emotions brought about by the death of his only son and the return to New York: "There won't be enough pages in this book for me to tell you what I need to tell you, I could write smaller, I could slice the pages down their edges to make two pages, I could write over my own writing, but then what?" (FOER 276). These words prefigure the material organisation of the text in Thomas Sr. last letter: as it progresses, the amount of blank space between graphemes is gradually decreased until the text becomes illegible. On the basic level of visual representation of a fictional written document, the gradual modification of text layout as well as the subsequent transition from a textual materiality in which graphemes can still be discerned to an almost pure visuality can be interpreted as an iconic representation of Thomas Sr.'s attempts to put down as much as possible in writing, which naturally end in complete illegibility. Seen from another perspective, this section foregrounds Thomas Sr.'s *furor scribendi* — he wrote a letter to his son every day — and his urge to express himself, which undermines Sien Uytterschout and Kristiaan Versluys's claim that he does not even try to put his experiences into words. They argue: "His inability or refusal to speak testifies to an unwillingness to cope with his traumatic past. Using language suggests at least some form of coming to terms or comprehension, and that is what Thomas wants to avoid at all cost" (222).

Actually, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* suggests that establishing a successful channel of communication, or rather willingness to establish it, is as important as expressing oneself verbally. Thomas Sr.'s letter that comes before the one mentioned above relies on another multimodal device to signal the link between trauma and ruptures in communication. The striking element of its visual materiality is the presence of red circlings, which draw the reader's attention not only to stylistic mistakes but also to selected words and phrases, beginning with "my child" (FOER 208) in the first line. As no verbal explanation is provided, the reader can only conjecture that the letter has been marked by Oskar's father on the basis of the information about him provided by Oskar in his first section, where he not only relates his father's custom of marking mistakes in newspaper articles but also provides a pseudo-facsimile of an article with the words "not stop looking" (FOER 10) marked in red. Significantly, this conjecture is confirmed in Thomas Sr.'s last letter, where he reports his conversation with Grandma about the only letter he actually sent to his son and the latter's coming to Dresden in response to it.

This section of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, as Alison Gibbons points out, superimposes via multimodal means three temporal planes on each other—the Dresden bombing, Thomas Sr.’s act of writing and Thomas Jr.’s reception of the letter (GIBBONS 144-146)—and represents the latter via purely non-verbal means. Interestingly, for Ilka Saal the red markings indicate the son’s indifference to his father’s trauma: they show, she argues, that Thomas Jr. “had little interest in the traumatic content. If anything, the son’s annotations illustrate what Versluys calls the failure of empathetic listening” (465). What she seems to have completely overlooked, though, is Thomas Jr.’s emotional investment in the act of marking: he marks not only stylistic mistakes but also these sections which cause him distress, including a sudden slippage in the referent of the second-person pronoun from Thomas Jr. to Thomas Sr.’s first, unborn child: “I looked for my parents and for Anna and for you” (FOER 214). It is on the basis of this facet of red markings that Gibbons arrives at the following conclusion: “the red marking communicates its maker’s emotional trauma and/or distress in reading the letter” (151). This section of the novel can be read as a multimodal metonymy for what seems to be the central element of Foer’s exploration of trauma—a traumatic vicious circle in which the victim of trauma becomes an (unintentional) perpetrator of (unavoidable) distress to those close to him/her to the extent that precludes meaningful communication and forgiveness, which could potentially help overcome the traumatic condition.

Taken together, the three novels discussed in this paper illustrate the evolution of the extensive co-deployment of multiple semiotic resources, which turns a novel into a “total book,” a multimodal artefact in which various elements of textual materiality as well as other visual devices contribute to its meaning. While in *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife* and *VAS* the book constitutes the nexus for multimodal semiosis, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* refrains from embodying the central iconic meaning in its material form. This departure from the exploitation of the semiotic potential of the physicality of the codex seems to be correlated with a decrease in metareferentiality, which can in turn be interpreted as an indication of typographic experiments having been naturalised to such a degree that they need not coincide with explicit metareferential reflection on the status of the book.

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OD METAREFERENCYJNOŚCI DO STORYTELLING:
MULTIMODALNOŚĆ WE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ PROZIE AMERYKAŃSKIEJ

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest omówienie wykorzystania multimodalności, czyli jednoczesnego użycia werbalnych i niewerbalnych środków semiotycznych, w prozie amerykańskiej od powieści postmodernistycznej z lat sześćdziesiątych do najnowszych przykładów tekstów, które odchodzą od konwencjonalnego, czysto werbalnego formatu. W pierwszym z omawianych utworów, *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* Williama H. Gassa multimodalność wiąże się z obsesyjną autotematycznością, typową dla wysokiego postmodernizmu, oraz wykorzystaniem potencjału metaforycznego książki jako obiektu: metaforyczna ekwiwalencja książki i ciała tytułowej bohaterki stanowi rdzeń przedstawienia interakcji między książką a czytelnikiem. Podobnie jak *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* także *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* Steve'a Tomasuli wykorzystuje potencjał semiotyczny ekwiwalencji między książką i ciałem i zawiera wyraźne elementy metareferencyjne; utwór ten

jednak wychodzi poza autotematyczne rozważania na temat statusu dzieła literackiego: dla Tomasuli *VAS* jako książka i powieść staje się ucieleśnieniem przejścia od człowieczeństwa do post-człowieczeństwa. Z kolei w powieści Jonathana Safrana Foera *Strasznie głośno, niesamowicie blisko*, ostatnim z omawianych utworów, multimodalność służy głównie opowiedzeniu historii i tym samym wymiar metareferencyjny tego utworu zostaje tylko zasugerowany poprzez zestawienie słów z obrazami.

Streścił Grzegorz Maziarczyk

Key words: multimodality, total book, metareference, William H. Gass, Steve Tomasula, Jonathan Safran Foer *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, *VAS: An Opera in Flatland*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*.

Słowa kluczowe: multimodalność, książka totalna, metareferencyjność, William H. Gass, Steve Tomasula, Jonathan Safran Foer, *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, *VAS: An Opera in Flatland*, *Strasznie głośno, niesamowicie blisko*.