

# Nina Nørgaard. 2019. *Multimodal Stylistics of the Novel: More than words*

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REVIEWED BY LOUISE RAVELLI, UNSW SYDNEY

*Multimodal Stylistics of the Novel. More than Words.*  
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Nina Nørgaard's 'Multimodal stylistics of the novel' could not be more niche if it tried. First of all, it's about novels. Not fiction writing, or creative non-fiction, or literature, just... novels. And not the plot, history, characters or social mores of novels, just ... their stylistics. And not even the stylistics of language that some might be more familiar with, and possibly even appreciate as an academic pursuit, but the *multimodal* stylistics of the novel.

In other words, Nørgaard's pursuit is the novel as a semiotic artefact: what it looks like on the shelf – the cover of the book, the font it's written in, the illustrations it may or may not have. And of course, what's written inside too, but mostly the external, surface, stuff; the stuff that usually only catches our attention if we're searching (as we once did, and will do again) for inspiration on the airport bookshelf.

And yet, the exceptionally niche focus of this book belies a depth and reach that more than merits our collective attention. Nørgaard takes the well-established toolkit of literary stylistics, particularly the Hallidayan, functionalist approach, and expands this to incorporate a multimodal, social-semiotic approach, applying it not just to self-evidently 'multimodal' novels, where "the use of different modes is envisioned as an integrated part of the literary narrative" but also to "visually conventional" novels, that "many readers would probably tend not to think of as multimodal at all" (p. 3). She aims to "extend the traditional field of stylistics to include meanings beyond those realised by the mode of wording" (p. 3), and this is one of the key contributions of the book – that it focuses on *meaning*.

Whether such meanings are 'intended' by the author, or arise through the production process in decisions made by designers and publishers, multimodality unarguably contributes layers of meaning to a novel, and cannot be ignored. Such contributions are facilitated by the digital world and the new flexibility in production it affords, such that explicit multimodal boundaries of colour, materiality, font and image can be pushed more easily and much further than ever

before. But Nørgaard makes it clear that the most plain, black and white, simply laid-out novel is equally multimodal, and that such multimodality is an intrinsic and embedded part of its meaning, not some surface or additional factor.

Nørgaard focuses on novels written primarily for adult readers (as opposed to “adult novels”), selecting largely contemporary examples and thus providing a synchronic study.

She begins by establishing her credentials in Chapters One and Two, providing a comprehensive overview of stylistics, encompassing its various branches: formalist, functionalist; historical; and cognitive. She introduces social semiotic multimodal theory and current studies in multimodal stylistics. In these chapters, Nørgaard demonstrates key traits that can be seen throughout the book: careful and respectful scholarship, and rigour and clarity in definitions and the framework that she builds. As required of any good social semiotician, she proves herself a good historian also, carefully tracing the relevant antecedents. She positions her approach as neither better nor exclusive, but as an additional feature of the stylistician’s toolkit. Importantly, however, her approach aims to address the cornerstones of stylistic analyses – *rigour, retrievability, and replicability* – with social semiotic, multimodal tools that are consistent, and which address perceptions of “a lack of clear analytical procedures for non-linguistic aspects of texts” (p. 13). Her central hypothesis is that “adding social semiotic multimodal tools to the stylistics toolkit will facilitate the development of a detailed and systematic framework for multimodal stylistic analysis of the novel” (p. 33).

In building her model, Nørgaard reveals the clarity that characterises her oeuvre. Terms which might be slippery elsewhere are here made solid, and thus ‘mode’ is recognised as a “necessary theoretical abstraction” (p. 18), preferable to the term “resource” (p. 19), to capture the ‘multi’ side of multimodality. In the end, reiterating the well-established tenet of Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), “monomodality” does not – cannot – exist (p. 16). She demonstrates the utility of Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2001) strata of *discourse, design, production* and *distribution*, as means to consider not only “*what* meanings are constructed multimodally and *how*, but also at which stages of the novel’s coming into being” (p. 26). She counters the oft-repeated criticisms that social semiotic multimodal studies, being so strongly influenced by Halliday, are too ‘linguistic’ in their orientation, with the (self-evident) observation that Halliday’s work was always a theory of social semiosis more broadly (and see Jewitt, 2009). And yet, while linguistics may not be the aim, wording is nevertheless the “core competence” (p. 26), and should not be neglected.

The remaining chapters of the book are carefully structured to move the reader gently and progressively from the familiar to the strange. Chapter Three does indeed begin with the component of wording, also defined carefully in terms of being lexicogrammar, in contradistinction to the broader term of language (p. 42). Chapters Four-Eight address Typography (4), Layout (5), Photographs, Drawings and Other Graphic Elements (6), Book-Cover Design (7), and The Materiality and Physical Form of the Novel (8). Each chapter begins with a section ‘Preliminaries’, demonstrating Nørgaard’s careful scholarship and recognition of key antecedents and complements, and then introduces the relevant tools that a stylistician can use. These tools include systemic-functional grammar (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014), distinctive-features analysis of typography (van Leeuwen, 2005), and Kress and van Leeuwen’s visual grammar (2006), among others. This range of analytical tools might be daunting in its breadth, but Nørgaard explains

them with precision, and most importantly, demonstrates how they can be applied, and what the use of such tools might reveal.

In Chapter Three on wording, Nørgaard introduces the metafunctional approach of systemic-functional grammar, that is, the intertwined strands of experiential, interpersonal and textual meaning. She shows that these work together in complex ways in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, to create a particular microcosm of the main character's mind and world view. This is reminiscent of Halliday's (1973) study of William Golding's *The Inheritors*, in terms of the insights which detailed analysis affords (reprinted in Webster, 2002). Curiously, Halliday's work is one reference that is absent from Nørgaard's work, though it would surely have been foundational.

In relation to typography (Chapter 4), Nørgaard focuses on a distinctive-features analysis, which is useful not so much to distinguish "one plain black typeface from another" (p. 115), but as a way of capturing how typography can *index* its (apparent) material origins (hand, machine, ink, blood...). Any typography that is non-standard indicates its origins through *discursive import*, and by being different, may be considered *iconic*. While typography in novels tends to remain largely conventional, not least because of the cost and challenges of production processes, Nørgaard demonstrates that nonetheless, typography contributes to meaning in conjunction with other modes, whether those choices are made by the author or by the publisher in production. She draws on a wealth of examples, including different editions of the 'same' novel, such as *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (Haddon, 2003) and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* (Larsson, 2009).

In her exploration of layout (Chapter 5), Nørgaard deploys Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) analyses of visual composition (information values, framing, and salience, as well as van Leeuwen's [1995] linking). This is combined with aspects of Bateman's (sometimes oppositional) formal analysis of base units (what is perceptibly "there" on the page) and layout units (their combination into larger elements) (p. 124). While it is easy to contrast a page from a novel which is densely-written and has nary a paragraph-break, with a page that has lines strewn across it like pick-up sticks, Nørgaard shows that even the more mundane instances of layout can contribute to the development of character, the salience of a specific point in the novel, or the positioning of the reader to be aligned *with* the point of view and thus the emotions of one of the characters – as they face a blank page, for example, representing words that cannot be heard, or missing parts of a story, as found in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Foer, 2005). She also shows that seemingly trivial aspects of layout can go to the very essence of a novel, as with the contradictions and ambiguities established between layout and wording in Coetzee's *Diary of a bad year* (2007).

Nørgaard builds on the compositional analysis introduced in Chapter Three to include experiential and interpersonal meaning in Chapters Six (Photographs, drawings and other graphic elements) and Seven (Book-cover design), extending to further aspects of materiality in Eight. In these chapters, we are closer to the more self-evidently 'multimodal' examples; experimental novels, illustrated editions, and the airport-tempting cover. In applying Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar to the visuals of novels, Nørgaard demonstrates that far from being "gimmickry", these visual elements "function as integral literary devices" (p.166), in relation to both

individual images and the integration of images with other semiotic modes (such as layout). Again with reference to multiple and diverse examples, she shows that the visual choices made in relation to novels have “significant semiotic implications” (p. 221) in terms of narrative perspective, voice, verisimilitude, and reader expectations – which may be consolidated or contradicted, to different effect. Once again we see the very detailed unpacking of specific observations, such as the role of irregularity as a distinctive feature in the typography of multiple editions of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (e.g. p. 229), or how the photography used on the covers of recent editions of *On the road* (Kerouac, 1957) speaks to “the fame of Kerouac and the coming into being of this particular novel” (p. 250).

The very extent of such detailed qualitative analysis of select examples, will no doubt raise the response familiar to many of those who adopt Hallidayan functionalist perspectives, which is essentially ‘*why bother*’ (*with all that detail*)? Or *what does it matter – especially when the differences* [e.g. between the book covers of different editions of the same novel] *are so slight*? The answer is quite simply that it is this which makes such work systematic and replicable. It is the detail which gets us beyond ‘insight’ (a gift) to ‘analysis’ (a skill). It is the essential component of the “making strange” that is the work of semioticians. And similarly, in response to the oft-levied critique *but how can you know this is what was intended?*, Nørgaard reiterates that the aim is not to speculate about likely motivations, of either the author, designer, or publisher, but to analyse “what is there for the reader to take in and make sense of” (p. 254), that is, the text in front of us. Empiricists are likely to want more concrete proof, more ‘scalable’ insights, but it is the detail of the approach that evidences the utility of the tools.

As with any good application, there is an important feedback loop with theory and methodology. Sometimes this is quite specific, as with adaptations to van Leeuwen’s typographic analyses. At other times, this is more general, as with her extended notion of what constitutes ‘the’ text of a novel. Nørgaard argues coherently and persuasively that the multimodal aspects of the novel cannot be divorced from the wording that is encountered within, even if the relative importance of such components is not always equal. She also returns again and again to the importance of context, underscoring how this is both materialized in, and construed by, the novel.

Are there quibbles? Yes, of course. For a book published in 2019, I would have liked to have seen the inclusion of some more current references, though such gaps no doubt reflect not only the nature of academia, but also of publishing itself, including the long, slow road of permissions which has surely slowed the appearance of this book.

More seriously, Nørgaard undercuts the value of her own book, positioning it as a ‘supplement’ to other stylistic studies. It may well be that, but it is also more than that, not least a blueprint for how to do multimodal analysis, with both the detail of the chapters on specific modes, and the incredibly useful Appendix of the “Stylistics Toolkit”, which summarises the approach in a list of headings (even if the nature of the headings tends to oscillate between, for example, function and form). I would very much like to see Nørgaard’s net of influence cast more broadly, and more bravely. In the first instance, this could include social semiotic work addressing the visibility of otherwise ‘written documents’, such as document design (e.g. Hiippala, 2015), doctoral theses (e.g. Ravelli et al, 2013), or poetry (e.g. Huisman, 1998). There are close and complementary relations between Nørgaard’s study and those of other ‘visual’ texts, such as Painter

et al. (2013) on children's picture books, Unsworth (2008) on images in the (subject) English curriculum, or Doran (2018) on images in physics. Beyond that even, Nørgaard's approach could be extended to the analysis of any communicative text, be it a wine label, a selfie, or a website. The genius of Nørgaard's book is that she demonstrates, beyond all reasonable doubt, that communication *is* multimodal, and that modes other than wording are not merely of the surface, but intrinsic matters of meaning.

The final quibble, albeit a serious one, is on the multimodality of Nørgaard's book. As she acknowledges in several sections, processes of production and distribution necessarily place (economic, if not imaginative) restrictions on what can be done in terms of reproducing images, innovating in layout, or cover design. In fact, the author and publisher have done exceptionally well in the inclusion of images, including sufficient color examples, to adequately exemplify the points being made. But the cover is achingly dull, and does not even hint at the contents. This is a limitation that academic publishers would do well to reconsider in increasingly competitive publishing markets, despite their tight budgets. That airport (/conference, /online) appeal is important for the academic browser also. The opposite of niche, the cover of this book should at least begin to indicate, multimodally, its breadth, depth, and contribution.

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