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Marco Caracciolo

Punctuating minds: Non-verbal cues for consciousness representation in literary narrative

Abstract: This article explores the role of punctuation and typography in readers' engagement with literary narrative, and with fictional characters in particular. I argue that unconventional typography and punctuation marks can be used to convey the phenomenological "feel" of characters' (and narrators') experiences, thereby becoming a vehicle for consciousness representation in narrative. Aiming to contribute to the discussion on readers' responses to characters within cognitive narratology, I hypothesize that such responses can be guided by non-verbal cues as well as by the verbal strategies traditionally examined by narrative theorists. I explore two different dimensions of the nexus between punctuation, typography, and consciousness representation: firstly, because of their "separating" function graphic markers can render the temporal structuring of consciousness itself; secondly, unconventional graphic cues can exploit the "evaluative" function of punctuation and typography in order to convey altered states of consciousness such as dream experience, extreme emotions, and cognitive disorientation.

Keywords: literary narrative, punctuation, typography, consciousness representation, characters

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1 Introduction

The use and function of punctuation in written language has been on the agenda of linguistic research only in the last three decades, starting with Geoffrey Nunberg's seminal *The Linguistics of Punctuation* (1990). The fact that research on punctuation lagged behind other areas of linguistics reflects a tendency to consider writing as secondary to spoken language: thus, features specific to written discourse such as punctuation and graphical markers were either thought to mirror properties of spoken language (Nunberg 1990: 1) or regarded as an offshoot of the historical development of writing technologies. As shown by Parkes (1993) in another important monograph, punctuation has a long and complicated

history in the West, with punctuation marks emerging in the 6th century and undergoing a slow process of historical consolidation and standardization. Likewise, graphical markers and other non-verbal features of what Gérard Genette (1997) would call “the peritext” (the immediate surroundings of the text) appear to be heavily influenced by the materiality of writing systems such as the manuscript or the print book. Therefore, the widespread assumption was that both punctuation and graphical layout should be the object of historical, not linguistic, analysis. While linguists have come to challenge this view, narrative theorists have yet to start examining the role of these phenomena in literary narrative. In this essay I would like to address this gap by investigating the connection between punctuation, typographical marks, and the representation of characters’ consciousnesses in narrative.

I will contribute to the discussion surrounding two key questions in narrative theory: firstly, what does it mean for a text to represent the subjectivity of a fictional character? And secondly, how do readers respond to the textual markers of figural (i.e., characters’) subjectivity? Such questions, which have long been at the heart of narratology, have attracted special interest in the last years as the result of the “cognitive turn” in narrative and literary studies (Herman 2010). This turn has laid an emphasis on mental processes, both as represented by literary texts (via fictional characters) and as undergone by readers in response to texts. A number of scholars have sought to bring together these dimensions by arguing that readers’ engagement with characters is based on some of the same meaning-making strategies that guide their interaction with people (Palmer 2004; Herman 2011). It has been argued, for example, that readers interpret some textual cues as *expressive* of conscious experience, in the same way as we tend to take bodily language – for instance, a cry of pain – as expressive of a conscious state such as pain (Caracciolo 2012). The textual mechanisms behind readers’ attributions of consciousness to characters were categorized as “internal focalization” (see Jahn 2005) and “consciousness representation” (see Cohn 1978; Fludernik 1993) in classical narratology. To put it broadly, both internal focalization and consciousness representation as stylistic techniques create a tension between the reader’s imaginative access to the storyworld and the conscious experience of a fictional character, so that the former can be said to be mediated in some relevant ways by the latter.

In this essay, I would like to expand this account by arguing that readers’ access to characters’ conscious experience is guided not only by verbal but also by graphic (non-verbal) cues such as punctuation and typographic marks. These elements have been mostly neglected by literary narratology, which has tended to concentrate on the *verbal* dimension of print narrative, as if the propositional content of texts could be uncoupled from the materiality of its presentation. Yet

the current “transmedial” turn in narrative theory makes the investigation of medium-specific features of narrative – and their various “remediations” – more important than ever (see Ryan 2004: 32–33).¹ While originating from the print medium, typography and punctuation have been put to various uses by media such as comics and video games. Gaining a thorough understanding of the role of graphic markers in written discourse promises to yield insight into people’s interaction not only with literature but also with the other media that have “inherited” these cues from the print book.

The phenomena I am interested in occupy a middle ground between punctuation marks and typographical layout. Nunberg himself stresses the continuity between punctuation proper and typography as follows: “From the point of view of function . . . punctuation must be considered together with a variety of other graphical features of the text, including font- and face-alternations, capitalization, indentation and spacing, all of which can be used to the same sorts of purposes” (1990: 17). Unlike Nunberg, however, who prefers the term “text-category indicators,” I would like to call these graphic cues “paralinguistic.” As is well known, “paralanguage” (see Poyatos 1993) designates vocal but non-verbal communicative cues that accompany spoken language – for instance, volume (loud/soft) and prosody (intonation, rhythm, etc.). The term, however, can be extended to graphic but non-verbal signs appearing in written language and serving a communicative – and not purely decorative or presentational – function. Thus, on my account punctuation marks and typographical layout can work as paralinguistic cues, affecting readers’ engagement with storyworlds in ways that are at least partially similar to those of full-fledged linguistic signs.

In the following pages I will focus on cases in which paralinguistic phenomena are taken as expressive of characters’ conscious experience. I will show that punctuation and typographical layout can guide readers’ understanding of the subjectivity of fictional characters, directing them to specific feature of characters’ consciousness and psychological make-up. The connection between the qualities of experience – or “qualia,” as they are known in the philosophy of mind (see Tye 2009) – and paralinguistic cues is not coincidental: because of their non-verbal nature, punctuation and typographical marks seem to be ideally suited to convey aspects and nuances of people’s experience that cannot be easily translated into words.

The link between the non-verbal qualities of experience and paralinguistic cues may be further explained by looking at the *function* of punctuation and typographical marks in written discourse. At one level, these graphic markers serve to

1 As is well known, the concept of “remediation” comes from Bolter and Grusin (1999).

articulate a text by separating its verbal units. Consider, for instance, the use of commas or semicolons in a list, the period at the end of a sentence, or the line break at the end of a paragraph. All these indicators serve a syntactic or “separating” function (see Quirk et al. 1985: 1610): by marking the boundaries of textual units of different sizes (words, sentences, paragraphs), they help readers identify them. Thus, punctuation and typographical marks reflect, and at the same time make explicit, the way in which a text has been organized by the writer. But this is only one half of the picture: punctuation and typographical marks can also convey an evaluation on the part of the writer. Here is a concrete example of this evaluative function. According to so-called “netiquette” (the conventions regulating social interaction on the Internet), using capital letters in an online forum or in email communication is impolite, just like shouting aggressively in face-to-face interaction.²

The mechanism behind the association between typographical style (capital letters) and the volume of spoken language (loudness) is quite complex. Loudness of voice is generally thought to be impolite because it conveys a disproportionately strong emotion on the part of the speaker – for example, anger in shouting at someone during an argument. This correlation between volume and affective involvement is then transferred metaphorically to written language and in particular to uppercase letters – whose larger size is seen as reminiscent of loud voice, and therefore as conveying the same emotional qualities. Finally, the social norms concerning the volume of verbal interactions are extended to the use of capital letters in written communication.

This analysis of a relatively common typographical device points to an important conclusion: in print texts punctuation and typography can work along the same lines as prosody (volume, pitch, intonation, etc.) in spoken language. Chafe advanced this idea in an important article where he argued that there is a prosody of written language which is experienced introspectively by both writers and readers and which “is made partially overt through punctuation” (1988: 423). Further, by highlighting prosodic patterns, paralinguistic cues can also convey the experiential – emotional and evaluative – qualities that are generally associated with prosody in spoken language. Volume is only one example of the prosodic features that can modify the meaning of an utterance by communicating the speaker’s stance towards a situation or towards what he or she is saying. Pitch is also used to express emotions and moods, giving rise to what is generally known as “tone.” Someone’s tone can be worried or playful, upbeat or annoyed:

² See, for example, the following passage from Virginia Shea’s manual *Netiquette*: “NEVER TYPE YOUR NOTES IN ALL CAPS, LIKE THIS. It’s rude – like shouting constantly. And, like constant shouting, it makes people stop listening” (2004: 61).

in all these cases, the speaker's experiential state is embedded in non-verbal (prosodic) properties of his or her utterance. Because of their link with prosody, punctuation and typographical marks can create a similar impression on the reader: they can be interpreted as paralinguistic cues expressing the experiential state of the writer. For instance, capital letters can convey anger or a sense of urgency, a sequence of exclamation marks can express joy, a blank space or an ellipsis disappointment, and so on. But of course the use of paralinguistic cues in written discourse can move beyond the prosody of spoken language, taking on meanings and capturing experiential nuances that have no parallel in oral communication. This is what Chafe (1988) meant when he suggested that prose has a prosody that is at least partly distinct from (and irreducible to) spoken discourse.

It is important to stress that the use of paralinguistic cues cannot *determine* the interpretation of the writer's experiential stance. Rather, it is the interaction between verbal meaning, paralinguistic cues, and communicative contexts (text type, genre, etc.) that guides the reader's interpretation. Literary narrative is, arguably, one such context. Indeed, there is a fundamental difference between literary narrative and the forms of written communication that I've referred to so far: in reading literary stories the audience engages not only with the experiential perspective of the real author – the authorial “framework,” in Gregory Currie's (2010) term – but also with the (represented) experiences of fictional narrators and characters. This implies that the experiential states conveyed by both verbal and non-verbal (paralinguistic) cues can be attributed by readers of literary narrative to the narrator or to characters. Readers know that the point of view of the narrator in literary narrative does not necessarily coincide with that of the author; similarly, readers who are aware of the conventions of internal focalization will interpret the evaluations and emotions conveyed by an internally focalized text as expressing the experience of the focalizing character. In the following sections I will examine the role of paralinguistic cues in both these narrative situations.

2 Paralinguistic cues for narrative representation? Paradoxes and functions

Defamiliarization – the challenging of conventions and expectations – is one of the basic mechanisms underlying readers' engagement with literary narrative (Shklovsky 1991; Miall and Kuiken 1994; Oatley 2011: chap. 3). Novel stylistic devices can de-automatize the reading experience by asking the audience to develop new sense-making strategies and even to revise their own perspective on the subject-matter. In Shklovsky's words, defamiliarization “is a means of

experiencing the process of creativity” (1991: 6), which implies that defamiliarizing textual strategies can heighten readers’ awareness of reception processes normally unfolding below the threshold of consciousness. Because of their highly conventional nature, punctuation and typography are typically “transparent” in the reading experience. Whenever they are subject to defamiliarizing treatments, however, paralinguistic cues become objects of interpretation in their own right, while the text takes on a “multimodal” dimension: the audience is encouraged to make sense of it on the basis of both verbal *and* non-verbal (visual) cues.³ Thus, all the uses of punctuation and typographical marks that we will encounter in this article are – in one way or another, and to different degrees – unconventional: by capturing the audience’s attention, non-standard paralinguistic cues can take center stage in the reading experience.

Most work on typographical experimentation in literary studies has focused on poetry, especially visual poetry of the late nineteenth century (Stéphane Mallarmé) and early twentieth century (Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Gustave Apollinaire). What characterizes these modernist and avant-gardist practices is, according to Johanna Drucker (1994), the way in which they call attention to the materiality of the print medium and – more generally – of language itself. On Drucker’s account, such self-referentiality serves to affirm “the capacity of [literary] works to claim the status of *being* rather than *representing*,” therefore breaking the age-old link between literature and “imitation, representation, or reference” (1994: 10–11). By contrast, little work has been devoted to how typographical experimentation and non-standard punctuation function in texts where the representational function of language is not (or at least not directly) challenged. Literary narratives fall into this category. Making sense of narrative involves mapping a semiotic artifact onto a non-actual spatio-temporal domain – a storyworld (Herman 2009: 118–132) or, in cognitive-psychological terms, a “situation model” (Zwaan and Radvansky 1998) – populated by characters and evolving according to a temporal dynamic. By definition representation is, therefore, at the heart of narrative. But, as argued above, besides representing characters narrative can also be used to express their subjective experience – their perceptions, emotions, evaluations, and other mental states directed at the storyworld.

Before examining the role played by paralinguistic cues in the expression of figural consciousnesses, let me emphasize the paradoxical nature of this phenomenon. When we are “immersed” in a story – that is, in Werner Wolf’s words,

³ On multimodality and experimentation in postmodernist literature, see Alison Gibbons’s (2011) monograph.

when we experience it “as if it were (a slice of) life” (2004: 325) – language becomes a perfectly transparent window onto the storyworld and its characters. And so do punctuation marks and typographical choices: since these cues are highly conventionalized, immersed readers are likely to process them in an effortless, automatic fashion. What happens when unconventional paralinguistic cues are present, however? One possibility is that the use of unconventional typography and punctuation marks may remind readers of the artifactual status of the story they are reading, thus de-automatizing their reception processes. As suggested by Drucker (1994) in her analysis of visual poetry, this textual strategy may shift readers’ stance from an immersive one (where the emphasis falls on the representational content of the text) to what we may call “medium-awareness,” thus heightening their awareness of the materiality of the medium.⁴ Yet it would be wrong to claim that unconventional paralinguistic cues necessarily bring about this effect. Mimesis – conceived of as the representational relation between a semiotic artifact and a storyworld – is a powerful motor of readerly dynamics, in James Phelan’s (2007) term: it mobilizes readers’ (or at least *some* readers’) interests in ways that are highly resistant to distortions and distractions. As argued by Culler (2002) and, more recently, by Alber (2009), readers can “naturalize” unconventional textual forms and patterns by drawing on and combining familiar cognitive frames or reading strategies. This implies that it is possible, in some circumstances, that readers will try to recuperate non-standard paralinguistic cues at the mimetic level, taking them as vehicles of meanings that, rather than going against the grain of the representational relation, are firmly anchored in that relation.

In less abstract terms, highly unconventional non-verbal cues and markers may trigger reader-responses that are directed at the storyworld *and not (just) at the text in its materiality*. Hence the paradoxical status of these paralinguistic cues: a strategy that could seem to distance readers from the storyworld – by putting them in a medium-aware stance – ends up reinforcing their imaginative and emotional investment in the represented events and existents. In what ways can unconventional paralinguistic cues be recuperated mimetically? In this article I will deal with cases in which they can be interpreted as expressive of two distinct (but related) dimensions of characters’ consciousness experiences.

As we have seen above, punctuation and typography serve two different functions in written discourse: on the one hand, they *articulate* the verbal content of a text, calling attention to its logical structure and therefore making the

4 Marie-Laure Ryan (2001: 89–99) offers an insightful discussion of immersion in literary narrative.

writer's meaning more easily graspable by the reader; on the other hand, they convey the writer's attitude toward his or her own utterance in ways that resemble the use of prosodic cues in spoken language. Both the separating and the evaluative functions of punctuation and typography are reflected in the expressive effects that we will examine in the next pages. In particular, the separating function explains why paralinguistic cues are often used to render the temporal structure of consciousness itself, defined as a dialectic between continuity (the Jamesian "stream of consciousness") and discontinuities (relatively discrete mental states, temporary – and non-temporary – losses of consciousness). For its part, the evaluative dimension of punctuation and typography ties in with another possible function of paralinguistic cues: that of hinting at distortions in characters' experiences, such as strong emotions and altered states of consciousness. Just as an uppercase post is seen as "marked" in an online forum, non-standard punctuation and typographical design can be taken as indicators of the non-ordinary nature of a character's experience.

All in all, when used to express characters' consciousnesses, unconventional paralinguistic cues point to two polarities of consciousness: continuous/discontinuous and ordinary/non-ordinary. Both these polarities have to do with the *structure* of consciousness: a particular type of relationship that holds either between two consecutive conscious states (temporal continuity and discontinuity) or between an altered state (for instance, hallucination) and a baseline state (ordinary perception).⁵ But of course paralinguistic cues can also hint at the *content* of a character's consciousness by mimetically representing what he or she experiences at a given moment. Because of the graphic nature of these cues, the experiences that can be represented in this way are *visual* experiences. This is the case of illustrations portraying the content of a character's visual perception, but also of mimetic typographical designs. We will examine some examples of this explicitly mimetic use of paralinguistic cues in the section on non-ordinary experiences.

3 Patterns of continuity and discontinuity

Throughout the history of 20th century philosophy, many thinkers have called attention to the temporal dynamic of consciousness. At the root of this tradition are early 20th century philosophers such as Henri Bergson, Edmund Husserl, and William James, whose metaphor of the "stream of consciousness" has made its

⁵ The idea that consciousness has a "structure" is one of the centerpieces of phenomenological philosophy: see Gallagher and Zahavi (2008: 7–9).

way into literary studies, coming to designate a particular technique for expressing consciousness in literary narrative. But through this phrase James wanted to capture a general aspect of conscious experience. Critiquing the view of traditional empiricists such as David Hume that experience is a sequence of discrete mental actions, James argued that consciousness “is nothing jointed; it flows. A ‘river’ or ‘stream’ are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described” (1950: 239). James further characterized this stream in these terms: “Like a bird’s life, it seems to be made by an alternation of flights and perchings. The rhythm of language expresses this, where every thought is expressed in a sentence, and every sentence is closed by a period” (1950: 243). By “perchings,” James meant the apparently self-contained mental events (imagery, inner verbalizations) that the empiricists saw as the only components of consciousness; while “flights” are the often subtle and ungraspable transitions between these components. Consciousness thus seems to be caught in a dialectic between continuity (the “stream”) and discontinuity (the succession of relatively discrete mental states, along with the many “gaps” in conscious experience).

In the passage just quoted, James captures this dialectic via a linguistic metaphor in which punctuation – a period – figures importantly. By delimiting sentences, periods signal the end of a thought and the beginning of the “flight” towards the next thought; reading involves moving past the periods, flying from thought to another. James’s remark attests to the analogy between the structure of experience and punctuation as a separating device. And yet, the same metaphor could be turned upside down: since punctuation marks *segment* language – and therefore the thoughts that can be expressed through language – they can foster the illusion that meaning only resides *within* sentences and thoughts rather than in their dynamic relation. Punctuation can give a sense of logical structuring, whereas raw or “pristine” experience – that is, experience before it is apprehended conceptually (see Hurlburt 2011) – tends to follow a loose, associative logic. It is no coincidence, then, that the literary experiments that have been grouped under the heading of “stream of consciousness” texts tend to use non-standard punctuation – or no punctuation at all.

In its literary usage, the term “stream of consciousness” has a long and convoluted history – to the point that in his work on thought representation in fiction Palmer (2004: 23–24) has decided to discard the term altogether. This label refers to the unframed direct interior monologue, along the lines of the “Penelope” section in *Ulysses*, Molly Bloom’s monologue.⁶ The stream of consciousness thus

6 I borrow the term “unframed direct interior monologue” from Tumanov (1997: 5). Cohn (1978) referred to the same technique as “autonomous interior monologue.”

represents an extreme, and autonomous, form of the indirect free thought appearing in earlier sections of the same novel (and in many other literary texts of the 19th and, especially, 20th century). In both these literary techniques for representing consciousness the handling of punctuation hints at the dialectic between continuity and discontinuity of consciousness.

Consider, for example, how commas and semicolons give rise to a paratactic “rhythm” in the following passage from Édouard Dujardin’s *Les Lauriers sont coupés* (a text that is seen as the earliest example of unframed direct interior monologue): “Illuminé, rouge, doré, le café; les glaces étincelantes; un garçon au tablier blanc; les colonnes chargées de chapeaux et de par-dessus. Y a-t-il ici quelqu’un connu? Ces gens me regardent entrer; un monsieur maigre, aux favoris longs, quelle gravité! Les tables sont pleines; où m’installerai-je? là-bas un vide; justement ma place habituelle; on peut avoir une place habituelle; Léa n’aurait pas de quoi se moquer” (2008: chap. 2).⁷ Here the punctuation calls attention to the juxtaposition of several elements: it is as if the text were following the narrator’s eyes as they take in the café and its contents in real time, before being able to process and order them in a meaningful way. The character’s pristine experience is therefore rendered by breaking it down into – and juxtaposing – basic units of mental activity: perception in particular, but also inner speech (“Y a-t-il ici quelqu’un connu?”) and memory (“ma place habituelle”). Through its relative uniformity, the punctuation signals the continuity of the narrator’s experiential stream in the same breath as it highlights its qualitative diversity.

By contrast, Molly Bloom’s monologue in *Ulysses* contains no punctuation or typographical marks apart from its division into eight paragraphs. In this text inner speech plays the key role, with all other cognitive faculties being filtered – or so we are made to think – by the character’s verbal thoughts:

theyre all so different Boylan talking about the shape of my foot he noticed at once even before he was introduced when I was in the D B C with Poldy laughing and trying to listen I was waggling my foot we both ordered 2 teas and plain bread and butter I saw him looking with his two old maids of sisters when I stood up and asked the girl where it was what do I care with it dropping out of me and that black closed breeches he made me buy takes you half an hour to let them down wetting all myself always with some brandnew fad every other week. (Joyce 1986: 613)

7 “Well-lit, red, golden, the café; the mirrors sparkling; a white-aproned waiter; the columns loaded with hats and overcoats. Is there anyone I know? Those people look at me while I go in; a thin man, with long side whiskers, what gravity! The tables are all taken; where am I going to sit? an empty spot over there; just my usual spot; we are allowed to have a usual spot; Léa won’t have any reason to make fun of me.”

Again, the absence of punctuation conveys the flow-like quality of conscious experience. But Joyce's monologue is much more radical in this respect than Dujardin's: more than the latter's unconventional punctuation, these uninterrupted sentences seem to have neither been reflectively processed by the character *nor* edited by an author/narrator. They are raw and unstructured, and yet the associative and thematic "drift" of Molly Bloom's inner voice ensures that the monologue is not interpreted by readers as a sequence of random words; rather, it is taken as the product of a fictional character's experiencing – or re-experiencing, given that the monologue is mostly based on memories – consciousness. The task of structuring the monologue is entirely up to readers, which increases the difficulty of the text – as if the audience were making up for the work that neither the character nor the author/narrator have carried out in the first place. The visual compactness of the text acts as a cue, suggesting that readers are afforded access to a pre-conscious layer of Molly's experience, well before logical structuring and the barriers of social interaction kick in.

Against this background, the line breaks between the eight paragraphs of Molly's monologue take on special significance. Dorrit Cohn remarks on these interruptions in her *Transparent Minds*: "These instant pauses appear like a drawing of mental breath before a new phase of mental discourse. . . . [P]aginal blanks, regardless of their size, tend to carry much more than routine significance in interior monologue texts: they convey not only passage of time, but interruption of thought" (1978: 220). Cohn's interpretation ties in with the central argument of this essay – namely, that typographic design and punctuation marks can become a means for expressing particular features of a character's mental life. More specifically, however, Cohn's analysis hints at the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity that is at the root of consciousness. Indeed, the absence of punctuation in Molly's monologue heightens readers' awareness of the few cues they encounter (the line breaks); and just as the absence of punctuation is interpreted as an indicator of the "rawness" of Molly's experience, so are the paragraph breaks recuperated psychologically, as if they corresponded to temporary interruptions to the character's inner discourse.

This use of paralinguistic cues to signal discontinuities of consciousness is not limited to experimental texts such as Joyce's monologue. Consider, for example, a passage from Knut Hamsun's novel *Hunger*. The protagonist is spending the night in a prison cell, where the food deprivation, together with the darkness of the room, causes him to experience vivid hallucinations. He falls asleep only when daylight breaks:

It was now light enough to enable me to make out the contours of the cell fairly well This distracted my thoughts; the monotonous darkness, so exasperatingly thick that it had prevented me from seeing myself, was broken. Soon my blood grew quieter, and shortly I felt my eyes close.

I was awakened by a couple of raps on my door. (2001: 79)

In the original text, “I felt my eyes close” and “I was awakened” are separated by a blank line, which corresponds to – and thus may seem to reflect – the character’s loss of consciousness while he was sleeping. This interruption reinforces the connection between the text as a physical artifact and the character’s mind, as if the former were only offering a glimpse into the latter, without any intervening mediation. Indeed, the presence of the “narrating I”⁸ or retrospective narrator in *Hunger* is minimal, as can be inferred from another line break (here accompanied by an authorial ellipsis) at the beginning of the novel:

It was in those days when I wandered about hungry in Kristiania, that strange city which no one leaves before it has set its mark upon him. . . .

Lying awake in my attic room I hear a clock strike six downstairs. (2001: 3, ellipsis in the original)

Many commentators have called attention to the shift in verbal tense between the first and the second paragraph of the novel – a perplexing shift made even more noticeable by the suspension points. Why does the narrating I disappear so quickly, making space for a narration that is almost entirely mediated by the experiencing I? According to Alber et al. (2010), the dots are meant to frustrate the reader by preventing him or her from understanding the temporal relationship between the narrating I and the experiencing I. These two entities are paradoxically (and counterintuitively) conflated: the narrator’s mind is deranged in a way that muddles temporal parameters. Readers – Alber et al. write – “attempt to recover continuity but are forced to cope with discontinuity” (2010: 123). We are thus brought back to how punctuation and typography, through their separating function, can draw readers’ attention to the patterning of consciousness: namely, its flow-like quality and the many discrepancies (between mental states) and interruptions (some of them temporary, like sleep – others permanent, like death) that punctuate it. In some cases paralinguistic cues serve to create an impression of continuity, while in others they give rise to paradoxical minds that challenge readers’ assumptions about the

⁸ The distinction between “narrating I” and “experiencing I” was introduced by Franz K. Stanzel (1984).

temporal continuity of consciousness. All in all, by foregrounding the structure of written discourse, paralinguistic marks can highlight the temporal structure of consciousness itself. In the next section I will examine another kind of structuring via paralinguistic cues: what is thrown into relief is not the temporal progression of experience but its being made up by qualitatively different states, some of which can seem “marked” or “distorted” because they deviate from a shared standard.

4 Non-ordinary experience and paralinguistic cues

As discussed above, the feedback loop between unconventional paralinguistic cues and readers’ engagement with storyworlds tends to function best when it is possible for readers to “recuperate” those cues at the mimetic level – in Culler’s (2002) term, when paralinguistic cues can be “naturalized.” Of all the naturalization strategies described by Alber (2009), one appears particularly relevant here: as he puts it, “impossible elements can be explained as dreams, fantasies, or hallucinations” (2009: 82). By “impossible elements” Alber means any storyworld-internal event or existent that violates the laws of physics and logics. Yet I will argue in this section that the same reading strategy can be applied to the textual *presentation* of those events and existents, whenever an innovative stylistic device is taken as an indicator of a character’s altered state of consciousness: in this case, readers match a disruption in literary conventions with a disruption in the experience of a fictional character.

These two uses of the term “disruption” call for clarification: in the first case, a convention can be said to be disrupted when it is challenged through textual features – such as experimental typography and punctuation marks – that de-automatize the reader’s interaction with the medium by calling into question familiar reading strategies and interpretive patterns (see my discussion of defamiliarization above). In the second case, an experience can be said to be disrupted when it departs from a physiological or cultural norm, either because of its intensity (e.g., a traumatic emotion) or because it is inconsistent with a perception-based, rationalistic understanding of reality (e.g., dreams and hallucinations). Experiences of different types fall into this category, but they all involve – to varying degrees – a recognition of the *difference* between a “baseline” condition and the non-ordinary experiential condition one is in. Such recognition can result in states of cognitive disorientation and dissonance (Festinger 1957), or in negative emotions such as the inability to cope with trauma, the feeling of dream

bizarreness,⁹ and so on. In other cases (for instance, drug-induced hallucinations and sensations, trance-like states) the deviation from everyday modes of engagement with the world is seen as exhilarating or liberating, and even as closely related to artistic creativity and religious experience.¹⁰

We should not hyper-extend the connection between such deviant experiences and innovative stylistic devices, however: while many literary texts deal thematically with altered states of consciousness, these can be expressed in highly conventional ways; conversely, innovative stylistic strategies can convey seemingly ordinary experiences. Yet literary history – from Petronius’s *Satyricon* to Gustave Flaubert’s *Temptation of Saint Anthony* to Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* – is rich in texts that couple formal innovation with altered states of consciousness. This nexus is, in my view, well worth investigating because of the way it reveals the complexity of literary practices – the close link they can create between formal choices, socio-cultural norms and values, and readers’ experiential (emotional and imaginative) responses. The use of non-standard typography and punctuation marks is a small but important piece of this puzzle. In the following pages I will discuss three texts conveying non-ordinary states of consciousness through unconventional paralinguistic cues.

4.1 Poliphilo’s dream consciousness

While the coupling of unconventional paralinguistic cues and non-ordinary forms of experience may seem typical of modernist or postmodernist literary art, its roots can be traced back to one of the most famous incunabula of the late 14th century, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* attributed to Francesco Colonna. This romance – written in a bizarre Italian full of Latin and Greek loanwords – was printed in Venice in 1499 by Aldus Manutius, the humanist, typographer, and publisher who made a seminal contribution to the history of printing by introducing italic type and a small book format similar to the modern paperback (see Lowry 1979). Despite belonging to the early history of the print book, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* experiments with the possibilities of the medium in extremely sophisticated – and self-conscious – ways: it creates a harmonious balance between text and illustrations and uses a number of unconventional typographical layouts. In the words of Liane Lefaivre, “the *Hypnerotomachia* must . . . be seen as an extraordinarily adventurous and inventive example of book design. It is the

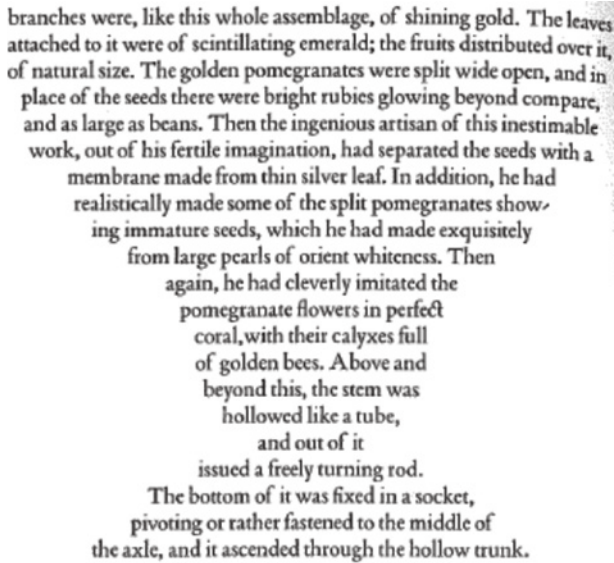
⁹ On dream bizarreness, see States (2000).

¹⁰ For more on this, see Cardeña and Winkelman’s (2011) co-edited volume on anthropological and humanistic approaches to altered states of consciousness.

first ever experimental montage of fragments of prose, typography, epigrams, and pictures and constitutes an extraordinary visual-typographical-textual ‘assemblage’ of a type not repeated until the avant-garde books of the 1920s and 1930s” (1997: 16).

But there is more. The paralinguistic cues of the *Hypnerotomachia* encourage readers to draw a connection between the graphic layout of the book and the non-ordinary experiences of the protagonist. The *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, which means “Poliphilo’s Strife of Love in a Dream,” revolves around Poliphilo’s dreams, where he encounters a number of mythical creatures and exotic, Escher-like architectures. A reading of the first two chapters of the *Hypnerotomachia* will suffice to give a sense of the alterations in the character’s consciousness. The text begins with Poliphilo lying in bed, kept awake by the thought of his lover, Polia. When he finally falls asleep, Poliphilo is transported to a mysterious wood, unable to find his way and virtually defenseless against the attacks of wild animals. This situation triggers a strong emotional response: “A sudden fear entered my hesitating heart, whose rapid beating spread it throughout my pallid limbs and drained all the colour from my bloodless cheeks. I realized that no track or side path was to be seen in this thorny wood” (1999: 13). The character starts to pace through this maze, in a state of increasing cognitive disorientation and physical distress: “Seeing no indication of a viable footpath or trodden way, I was much confused and dismayed and went even faster” (1999: 14). In the next chapter Poliphilo is so exhausted that he falls asleep and begins dreaming within his dream. In this embedded dream – a Borgesian fantasy *ante litteram* – he spots the first of the book’s many bizarre architectures, a temple/pyramid topped by an obelisk (as shown in an illustration).

But it is not only the illustrations that convey the dream-like bizarreness of this storyworld – and of the protagonist’s experience. The non-standard typographical designs that appear throughout the book seem to serve the same function: in Figure 1, for example, we can see the goblet-shaped description of a sculpture admired by Poliphilo. The spatial form of the text seems to rival, through its virtuoso layout, the elaborate decoration of the artifact. Indeed, the goblet shape feels oddly out of place here: it could appear to mimetically represent a storyworld object (therefore activating the relevant expectations in the reader), and yet it doesn’t correspond to anything that Poliphilo perceives in this passage. This mismatch between the textual layout and the representational content of the description can create a sense of puzzlement and bizarreness that is in some ways reminiscent of the protagonist’s altered state of consciousness. All in all, an unconventional paralinguistic cue can be interpreted (or recuperated) by the audience in terms of the character’s psychological state, as a stand-in for his dream experience. While the connection between typographical layout and rep-



branches were, like this whole assemblage, of shining gold. The leaves attached to it were of scintillating emerald; the fruits distributed over it, of natural size. The golden pomegranates were split wide open, and in place of the seeds there were bright rubies glowing beyond compare, and as large as beans. Then the ingenious artisan of this inestimable work, out of his fertile imagination, had separated the seeds with a membrane made from thin silver leaf. In addition, he had realistically made some of the split pomegranates showing immature seeds, which he had made exquisitely from large pearls of orient whiteness. Then again, he had cleverly imitated the pomegranate flowers in perfect coral, with their calyxes full of golden bees. Above and beyond this, the stem was hollowed like a tube, and out of it issued a freely turning rod. The bottom of it was fixed in a socket, pivoting or rather fastened to the middle of the axle, and it ascended through the hollow trunk.

Fig. 1: Goblet-shaped text, from Colonna (1999: 114).

resentation of subjectivity is only incipient in the *Hyperotomachia Poliphili*, the same interpretive mechanism has been exploited much more extensively – and explicitly – in 20th century literature.

4.2 Autism in Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident*

In Mark Haddon’s novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2004), unconventional paralinguistic cues help readers understand the psychology of the fifteen-year-old narrator, Christopher, who suffers from Asperger’s syndrome. The novelty of these cues is already evident from the peritext of the first chapters, which are consecutively numbered 2, 3, 5, and 7 – the rationale for this being that the narrator (and fictional author of *The Curious Incident*) loves prime numbers. Christopher himself justifies his choice in chapter 19, adding the following comment: “Prime numbers are what is left when you have taken all the patterns away. I think prime numbers are like life. They are very logical but you could never work out the rules, even if you spent all your time thinking about them” (2004: 19). In this way, the eccentric chapter numbering is not only psychologically motivated, but also explicitly related to the character’s worldview: the unpredictability of prime numbers is compared by the narrator to the unpredictability of life itself –

something which frightens him and is responsible for his many panic attacks. Yet because of their abstract, mathematical nature, prime numbers give Christopher a sense of control over the instability of the world. These meanings become attached to the chapter numbering, so that the reader's initial puzzlement at this peritextual quirk turns into a vehicle for understanding the character's peculiar experiential perspective – the complex mixture of attraction and fear that underlies his interest in prime numbers. In this way paralinguistic cues can contribute to the audience's engagement with the character, helping them bridge the “cognitive gap” between themselves and the autistic narrator (see Caracciolo forthcoming).

While the chapter numbering points to Christopher's worldview, other paralinguistic cues are meant to convey his perceptual and emotional experience. Later on in the novel Christopher finds himself in London, in a crowded train station where everything looks new and threatening. The character goes into a blind panic: “I could . . . feel the feeling like a balloon inside my chest and it hurt and I covered my ears with my hands and I went and stood against the wall” (2004: 208). When the narrator finally musters the courage to turn around, he is struck by the signs in the station hall (see Figure 2).

Notice how the assemblage of typefaces, styles (bold, italicized, uppercase), and non-verbal symbols renders the character's confused perception, his inability

Sweet Pastries **Heathrow Airport Check-In Here** *Bagel*
Factory **EAT excellence and taste** **YDI** sushi **Stationlink**
 Buses **W H Smith** **MEZZANINE** **Heathrow Express**
 Clinique First Class Lounge **FULLERS** **easyCar.com** *The Mad*
Bishop and Bear **Public House** Fuller's London Pride **Dixons**
Our Price Paddington Bear at Paddington Station **Tickets**
Taxis **↑↑ Toilets** First Aid **Eastbourne Terrace** **ing-**
ton Way Out Praed Street The Lawn **Q** Here Please
 Upper Crust Sainsbury's **Local** **i** **Information** **GREAT**
WESTERN FIRST **®** Position Closed **Closed** Position
 Closed Sock Shop Fast Ticket Point **Ⓢ** **Millie's Cookies**
 Coffee **FERGIE TO STAY AT MANCHESTER UNITED** **Freshly**
Baked Cookies and Muffins Cold Drinks **Penalty Fares**
 Warning **Savoury Pastries** Platforms 9-14 **Burger**
King Fresh Filled! the reef[®] café bar **business travel**
special edition **TOP 75 ALBUMS** Evening Standard

Fig. 2: Christopher's perception, from Haddon (2004: 208–209).

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 l s 9 T E D F r e s e H ■ s a n a l t y F a r m i n g S a v o u * s t r i 1 4 B u r
 z d l t h e l l y ■ ● r e s i t * □ r h □ a s p e c i t i o n T O P & U M S E v e d a r d

Fig. 3: Christopher's perception, from Haddon (2004: 209).

to process both the signs' relative position in space and the different categories to which they belong. The jumble of words and phrases suggests that Christopher has difficulties in coping with the wide diversity of the world around him. Yet in case the connection between paralinguistic cues and the character's conscious experience wasn't already clear enough, the text goes on as shown in Figure 3.

Here the signs become unreadable: some of the words are contracted (“Airport Check-In” becomes “Airpheck-I”) while a number of extraneous symbols make their way into the text. Through its physical layout, the page thus appears to mirror the contents of the narrator's perception in his state of acute emotional distress. As Christopher himself puts, “there were too many [signs] and my brain wasn't working properly” (2004: 209–210). Since the visual properties of the character's experience are expressed through a graphic (and visual) device, the reader's engagement with the text comes to overlap with Christopher's apprehension of his surroundings. Thus, by looking at this block of cluttered text and by comparing it with the previous block, readers are offered an important insight into the character's mental state and condition.

The Curious Case makes extensive use of both these paralinguistic cues and of illustrations depicting patterns (for instance, the shape of the clouds) which the character remembers thanks to his prodigious visual memory. These graphic

devices guide the audience's interaction with the character: through their eccentricity and gentle humor, they neutralize the "strangeness" of an autistic-spectrum narrator such as Christopher, making him more likeable and relatable. The unconventionality of the paralinguistic cues thus becomes a way for conveying – and dealing with – the unconventional experience and worldview of the protagonist.

4.3 Psychological space in Danielewski's *The House of Leaves*

My last case study – Mark Danielewski's *The House of Leaves* – has been extensively discussed by scholars interested in postmodernist literary experimentation, and particularly in concrete prose.¹¹ Danielewski's sprawling novel combines a Chinese-box narrative structure, multiple intermedial references, and experimental typographical design. It has been argued that *The House of Leaves* manages to emotionally involve the audience in the characters' predicament while at the same time flaunting its own materiality through self-conscious stylistic and narrative techniques (see Hayles 2002; Gibbons 2011). This is a remarkable feat, since self-referentiality in literature is generally seen as breaking the referential illusion – and therefore as inhibiting readers' emotional engagement rather than encouraging it. The hypothesis I will discuss here is the following: Danielewski's novel reconciles affective involvement and formal experimentation because its innovative stylistic solutions can be recuperated mimetically by assimilating them with the characters' extreme state of spatial disorientation.

As is evident from the title, Danielewski's *The House of Leaves* is centrally concerned with the experience of space.¹² Its "innermost" narrative level tells the story of Will Navidson and his family, who suddenly discover that their house is connected to a maze of corridors and rooms descending into the depths of the earth. These events are turned into a documentary by Navidson himself; readers know the documentary through the description/commentary offered by Zampanò in a scholarly essay – which is found by Johnny Truant after Zampanò's death and published, along with Truant's notes, in *The House of Leaves*. As narrators, both Zampanò and Johnny Truant influence in important ways readers' interpretation of the events unfolding in the Navidson house. The audience is

¹¹ See, e.g., Bray and Gibbons (2011) and Bray (2012). The term "concrete prose" was introduced by Brian McHale (1987: 184–187) in his account of literary postmodernism.

¹² There are many striking parallels between Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* and Danielewski's *The House of Leaves* – particularly their thematic focus on bizarre architectures and their use of narrative embedding techniques.

therefore suspended between all these layers of mediation and remediation and the emotional immediacy of the expeditions through the maze.

Since it would be too dangerous to venture into the house on his own, Navidson puts together a team of professional explorers, who agree to grapple with the house's mysteries. After this team goes missing, however, Navidson attempts to rescue them himself, accompanied by his disabled friend Billy Reston. In chapters IX and X readers follow first the explorers' – and then Navidson's and Reston's – descent into the innards of the house. Among the characters' discoveries is that the labyrinth extends for miles and miles, that its walls seem to shift, and that a threatening growl is sometimes heard, as if a Minotaur-like monster lurked in the labyrinth. This space defies comprehension, it is a "reality the mind and body cannot accept" (Danielewski 2000: 30).

The strangest typographical effects of the novel appear when the characters face such physical impossibility. The greater part of chapter IX, for example, is characterized by the juxtaposition of different text blocks, with different forms and positions and even orientations. Some of these text blocks run through the chapter, preserving the same typographical layout (see Figure 4): for instance, the column on even pages enumerates the architectural styles that did not "even remotely resemble" the Navidson house (2000: 120), whereas the column on odd pages contains a list – upside down, and running backwards, from the last to the first word – of famous architects. The text box with the blue border is yet another catalogue – this time, of objects and devices that *do not* appear in the labyrinth: it is a twenty-page long list where the words in the box on even pages are reflected as if on a mirror in the corresponding box on odd pages.

While all these lists unfold, readers follow the long trek of the three explorers – Holloway, Jed, and Wax – who are increasingly concerned about their distance from the surface and the scarcity of food supplies. Together with sensory deprivation (the labyrinth is pitch black), these factors contribute to radically undermining the characters' mental stability. Indeed, Holloway is the first to display signs of psychological distress when Jed and Wax decide to abort the mission and head back: "Holloway refuses to follow them. For a while, he rants and raves, screaming profanities at a blue streak, until finally and abruptly, he just storms off by himself, vanishing into the blackness" (2000: 125). A footnote explains that this "is not the first time individuals exposed to total darkness in an unknown space have suffered adverse psychological distress" (2000: 125).

It is not difficult to psychologize the typographical layout of the chapter: despite the fixed elements described above, the layout changes constantly, page turn after page turn, just like the labyrinth the characters find themselves into. The orientation of the right column forces readers to turn the book upside down – a physical gesture that is, of course, strongly reminiscent of the characters'

turning the corners of the labyrinth. All in all, readers' puzzlement at the typographical novelty of this chapter, with its extremely unusual visual appearance, provides a stand-in for the confusion and psychological distress experienced by Holloway, Jed, and Wax. At the same time, the density of verbal material on the page, which is almost completely covered with text, gives – ex negativo – a sense of the emptiness and abstractness of the enormous space explored by the characters. All these paralinguistic devices serve to bring the audience close to the characters' predicament, helping them imagine what it is like to be immersed in an impossible reality.

Chapter X acts on the reader in a similar way, but through significantly different paralinguistic strategies. While chapter IX is all about typographical accumulation, chapter X – narrating Will Navidson's and Reston's descent into the labyrinth – is characterized by the skillful use of blank space (see Figure 5).

Throughout the chapter we can see few lines or even words floating about on an otherwise immaculate page. As suggested by Hayles, “the typography in this chapter is mimetic,” since its “visual patterns . . . mirror the narrative action” (2002: 796) while – we may add – the blank space evokes the blackness of the labyrinth. Yet the mimetic relationship between the text and the storyworld is here strongly influenced by the experiencing consciousnesses of Navidson and Reston exploring the labyrinth. Indeed, the visual difference between chapter IX

Toward the end of their second day inside (making this the ninth day since Holloway's team set out into the house), both men seem uncertain whether to continue or return.

184

Fig. 5: Experimental typography in Danielewski (2000: 184). The text at the bottom reads: “Toward the end of their second day inside (making this the ninth day since Holloway's team set out into the house), both men seem uncertain whether to continue or return.”

and X reflects the way in which this space seems to “adapt” to the psychology of the explorers. This aspect is explicitly thematized by the novel: “the house’s mutations reflect the psychology of anyone who enters is” (2000: 165); “every-one entering there finds a vision almost completely – though pointedly not completely – different from anyone else’s” (2000: 174). Thus, the typographical layout can be said to capture not just the labyrinth in itself, but the labyrinth as psychologically apprehended by characters. Paralinguistic cues become a means of establishing a point of view on the storyworld.

We find a spectacular example of this phenomenon when Navidson and Reston, after opening a series of doors, stumble across Jed and Wax. The joy of the successful rescue is short-lived: one second later, Jed is shot in the head by a bullet fired by Holloway gone mad. After a graphic description of the wound, the text reads: “the after | math | of meaning. | A life | time | finished [blank space] between | the space of | two [blank space] frames” (2000: 194–201).

These words are spread over eight pages, in a straight line, with the words distanced by blank spaces – and of course, by the reader’s page turns. As suggested by Danielewski himself, these blanks increase the audience’s emotional involvement – via a suspense mechanism – by reducing the reading speed (cf. Hayles 2002: 796). But here, as in the other examples discussed above, the typographical layout can be interpreted psychologically: the slow trickle of the words on these eight pages seems to hint at Jed’s death as the vanishing of consciousness itself. Remember the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity of consciousness described in the previous section: in this passage, verbal and non-verbal cues work together in capturing the fleeting moment where consciousness gives rise to non-consciousness, where experience turns into a blank, like the space between two words.

5 Conclusion

Non-verbal cues such as punctuation marks and typographical layout can play an important role in readers’ engagement with storyworlds, and with fictional characters in particular. This is the hypothesis that I have discussed in this article, zooming in on how paralinguistic cues can convey non-verbal aspects of characters’ experiences. Thus, in the central sections of the article I have explored two dimensions of the phenomenological structure of consciousness that can be highlighted through punctuation and typography: first, the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity, or the tension between the Jamesian “stream of consciousness” and the divisions and gaps within this stream; second, the discrepancy between a baseline state of consciousness – defined by physiological

parameters as well as by socio-cultural norms – and altered states of consciousness such as dream, extreme emotion, and spatial disorientation. I have argued that these structural features of conscious experience resonate with the two main functions of punctuation and typography in written language: separating verbal units, thus foregrounding the articulation of the writer’s utterance; and expressing the writer’s evaluation of his utterance by giving rise to a “prosody” comparable to (but also significantly different from) the prosody of oral language.

In both cases, the relationship between paralinguistic cues and the structural articulation of consciousness is metaphorical: the separating and evaluative functions of punctuation and typography are projected onto two polarities of conscious experience – namely, its temporal (continuous/discontinuous) and qualitative (ordinary/non-ordinary) structuring. Thus, it can be speculated that readers’ interpretation of paralinguistic cues as expressive of characters’ experience involves a metaphorical mechanism, a “conceptual blending” (Fauconnier and Turner 2002) of the visual appearance of the page with the qualities of characters’ experiences. William James drew attention to this metaphor when he remarked that “the stream of consciousness” (in itself a metaphor) resembles “the rhythm of language . . . where every thought is expressed in a sentence, and every sentence is closed by a period” (1950: 243). The metaphorical connection between consciousness and paralinguistic cues reflects a larger tendency to talk about experience and consciousness in figurative terms. Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997: 26) have drawn up a comprehensive inventory of the metaphors that have been associated with experience in 20th century Western philosophy and psychology: at least eight different semantic fields (from “soliloquy” to “symphony,” from “horizon” to “pattern”) have been related to consciousness.

The pervasiveness of metaphors for consciousness and experience is not coincidental, of course: there is something in the phenomenological “flow” of our interaction with the world that we cannot easily express in ordinary language, so that we have to come up with alternative ways for capturing it. Using linguistic metaphors is one of these ways (see Caracciolo 2013). In oral communication, the same expressive function can be performed by non-verbal cues such as prosody and bodily language and gestures. When I tell you about an extremely difficult situation I have been in, it is not just the words I use but also my tone and my facial expression that convey my emotional response. Punctuation and typography seem to straddle the gap between these two strategies for expressing consciousness: their interpretation as psychological markers works via a metaphorical blending, but at the same time their non-verbal nature aligns them with the prosody of spoken discourse. This complex network of meanings and associations underlies readers’ engagement with paralinguistic cues in literary narrative.

Further, I have shown in this article that unconventional typography and punctuation enable readers to relate to experiences which are likely to strike them as novel and out of the ordinary: for instance, Christopher's autistic-spectrum disorder and the cognitive disorientation of Danielewski's explorers. Thus, unconventional paralinguistic cues can be seen as a vehicle for narrative empathy (see Keen 2007): they afford readers the chance to adopt a point of view on the world which is significantly different from their own everyday perspective. In this way, readers can familiarize themselves with "strange" characters and narrators. This hypothesis, of course, would have to be evaluated empirically. The project of exploring the effects of typography and punctuation on readers' responses to narrative opens up a productive avenue of research in narrative theory. The cognitive turn as well as the growing interest in transmedial and multimodal forms of storytelling (see, e.g., Grishakova and Ryan 2010) appear to offer the ideal framework for pursuing this line of research.

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