

# FICTION BOOKS IN THE MULTIMODAL SOCIETY. NEW MODES OF COMMUNICATION AND MARKETING PRACTICES IN THE BOOK INDUSTRY

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## **Abstract**

*The development of digital technologies, new media, multimodal forms of expression and transmission of information that now characterize the multimodal age we are living in has inevitably affected the activity of the book industry with all the components and parties involved. This article presents some of the latest strategies developed by authors, publishers and sellers in order to present, advertise and, ultimately, sell their books, especially books of fiction. It then narrows down the discussion to contemporary English author Nicola Barker who, in her novel H(A)PPY (2017) illustrates the concept of multimodality in fiction by employing a system of varied choices to communicate meaning, ranging from language, image, colour, typography to music.*

## **Keywords**

digitalization; multimodal(ity); book branding; marketing strategies; commodity; fiction books; Nicola Barker

## **JEL Classification**

M39

## **1. Introduction. The digitalization and commodification of culture in the multimodal era**

With the evolution of digital technologies and the development of a marked visual culture, the twenty-first century can be considered a characteristically multimodal era, one that involves several different modes of expression, transmission of and access to information. Contemporary people are permanently challenged visually from all directions and in many ways – always invited to look at TVs, laptops, displays, billboards, meshes (while, as we shall see, multimodal literature also invites us to look through things). Digitalization has thus created new types of readers and has changed readers’ expectations from a book, meaning that these expectations go beyond “the monomodality of the printed page as a display of printed letters” (Hallet, 2018).

The new media have also influenced the communication and transmission of information and the book industry also embraces the opportunities provided by them. The book itself, as a cultural artefact, has been challenged into changing not only its content but its form as well. In the context in which even tattoos have become pieces

to listen to by help of an app<sup>1</sup>, any product laid on page has had to greatly reconsider the manner of delivery. Additionally, on a market in which eBooks and audiobooks have gained important ground<sup>2</sup>, in which “electronic, holographic and video art” is a new category of products included by booksellers in their offer and holographic books are used as educational tools<sup>3</sup>, new products have appeared on the market so as to meet the needs of demanding readers.

This article presents some of the latest strategies developed by authors, publishers and sellers in order to present, advertise and, ultimately, sell their books, especially books of fiction, in an age that witnesses a worrying decline in book reading.<sup>4</sup> The events organized to celebrate the UK World Book Day in 2020, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March, for example, took into account the benefits offered by technology and sought to respond to this crisis found especially among the young, proposing “in schools, stadiums, and TV studios, in bedrooms, bookshops, libraries, and prisons, hundreds of thousands of stories” to be “shared across the UK and Ireland”. Fiction writers themselves, like Nicola Barker, a contemporary English novelist, have adjusted themselves to the current times, creating (printed) novels that invite readers to benefit from a stimulating reading act which, in effect, becomes a multisensorial experience.

## **2. The publisher’s and seller’s strategies: book branding and marketing strategies in the book industry**

The necessary adaptation of authors, publishers and sellers to the principles and demands of the contemporary market has also integrated books to the business arena. Efforts to find the successful formula that would generate satisfactory sales and profits involve branding and marketing the book efficiently. Branding, as a business practice, has become an important component of marketing and, in turn, it has inevitably reached the book industry, too. All the strategies employed by those involved in the industry, a part of which are also illustrated and analysed in this article, can be considered elements of a book branding process, which are skillfully and constantly improved in order to keep the pace with the latest demands and trends. The book as a commodity employs innovative features in order to make people want to buy it: design, format, promotional activities and a rich collection of features – which are further discussed in this article – which are part of the product’s identity and make it identifiable and appealing on the market.

Brands and branding processes have constituted the object of research mainly for marketing specialists. However, a cultural approach to brands is also possible as long as brands are part of the wider cultural fabric (Heding et al., 2009). Similarly, Morris B. Holbrook and Elizabeth Hirschman (1993) have also pointed out a clear relation between marketing practices and cultural products, thus launching the concept of cultural marketing which integrates consumer behaviour within the dimensions of culture. Therefore, the relation between marketing practices and the socio-cultural context or cultural products opens an insightful perspective for analysing the complex phenomena of cultural production, marketing, and consumption. For example, by better interpreting cultural practices, we can better grasp the social meanings that customers attach to their patterns of consumption.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/life/wellness/tattoos-you-can-hear-are-thing-now-and-we-may-see-more-body-tech-experimentation-soon-1.4160544>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/nov/14/pandemic-drives-ebook-and-audiobook-sales-by-uk-publishers-to-all-time-high-covid>, accessed December 20, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nexar.cl/en/soluciones/recursos-digitales-educativos/libros-holograficos/>, accessed December 18, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> <https://publishingperspectives.com/2020/03/uk-2020-world-book-day-reading-in-sharp-decline-national-literacy-trust/>, accessed December 20, 2021.

Branding as a commercial practice has existed for hundreds of years, and has turned into a modern concept, promoted by a science as well as an art (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009) starting with the former half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Clifton et al., 2003), being applied to almost anything, from products and services to companies, NGOs, people and even countries. Books, too, take advantage of the common business branding process that enables the building of brands, as defined by Al Ries & Laura Ries (2000), and also come close to S. Anholt's (2007) definition of branding as a process of creation, planning, and communication of the name and identity with the aim of building and managing reputation.

Though studies present the multisensory nature of reading and handling books especially with reference to old books (Spence, 2020), educational studies introduce multimodality in classes of English (Albers & Sanders, 2010) or they introduce analysis of contemporary books that exploit the multisensorial nature of books and reading (Baron, 2021) and speak about visual literacy or multimodal literacy (Serafini, 2013). Thus, the *commodity* that the *fiction book* is (McAleer, 1992, chpt. 2 "Books Are a Commodity: The Commercialization of Popular Fiction" of his study; Raven, 2009, "The Book as a Commodity", chpt. 3 in Suarez & Turner, 2009) moved from traditional formats towards new (commercial) ways of attracting the public. Therefore, printing and publishing had to increase their commercial ingenuity (Raven, 2009) or "'commodity-style' publishing techniques" were employed so as to bring exposure of the product and increase sales (McAleer, 1992).

The complexity of such a process comes from the fact that books are not just any type of commodity, they comply simultaneously with 8 *principles* (Lesser in Allington et al., 2019): (1) modes of textual production and reproduction interact and overlap; (2) books are mobile crossing physical borders and passing jurisdictions ("posing problem for political, religious and economic authorities"); (3) books are not just containers of words, they "can support community formation, religious affiliation, cultural identification, or personal development"; (4) their spread has always been regulated or tried to be controlled by the authorities; (5) they are produced out of combination of reasons: economic/financial, artistic/cultural, personal-psychologic, etc.; (6) book selling is an economically-risky business; (7) book trade is connected to the forming of a canon of national literature and imposed copyright policies; (8) landmark texts positively evaluated by historians and critics play a smaller part in the history of the book in comparison to some more mundane, material texts.

While studies on book publishing have multiplied simultaneously with new media of production/transmission of information in general, or book promotion/selling in particular, we observe that there is a permanent doubling of the pragmatic and the artistic. Pragmatic as it may be, book selling starts with the artistic act of writing, readers/buyers will hold in their hands/listen to in their ears/watch on their screens a cultural artefact. Those strategies that make books sell combine semi-pragmatic and semi-artistic perspectives, thus blending the artistic with the pragmatic sources of book selling success.

The great number of existing studies or guides for publishing houses and authors alike, offering advice with the purpose of selling books in the traditional printed form or as eBooks or audiobooks, for selling and promoting fiction or nonfiction works proves that there is a rising interest in developing the book industry so as to respond to the advances in technology and the latest demands of society (Cole, 2003; Higgs, 2011; Lansky, 2011; Camacho, 2013; Weber, 2013; Penn, 2014; Baverstock, 2015; Stapilus, 2016; Baverstock et al., 2020). Such studies regard the product that the book is and the act of selling in terms of: expense and profit(ability), competition, advertising/promoting, distribution, sales and sellers, mediums and media, author-reader contact; target markets, buyer types, marketing plan, press release, self-

promotion and internet marketing; developing online platforms (blogs, using social networking, doing teleseminars, promotion through videototechnology); the print on demand advantage and quickly correcting/adapting your product to a new market; the blessing and curse of online reviews, building one's own site and an online press kit, multimedia as tool for self-promotion and podcasting for publicity; book-based vs. author-based marketing, copyright and piracy, financials (costs, investment, cashing in); understanding the market; finding a niche, delivery formats, improving metadata, SEO – search engine optimization etc., in so many ways that reflect the commercial spirit the book market is now prone to.

Baverstock et al.'s model of book marketing (2020) speaks about customer orientation and innovation, they combine the emotional response to books with the pragmatics of publishing, and also analyze format (from hardback, to paperback, eBook and audiobook). Baverstock (2015) also speaks in her seminal study about the Ps model or marketing mix: product, price, promotion, place, personnel/people, process, period of time, physical evidence. Thus, she speaks about a checklist which any seller (the author himself or a professional seller) should have in mind to achieve so as to sell books successfully: (1) a product for which the most popular format should be sought for (printed form – hardcover or paperback, eBooks, audiobooks with CDs or for online listening); (2) the right people – the product should be worked upon by the right people, and feedback should be taken from people involved (sellers and buyers alike); (3) pricing policies – apart from the demand and value for money that should guide pricing policies and that the author speaks about, we also include the practising of different prices for eBooks, audiobooks vs. physical books, (for instance, eBooks and kindle formats may be sensitively cheaper), audiobooks (when made available) may be quite a bargain when offers/special deals are made to the general public but especially to subscribers to specialized sites and apps (and we speak from the position of the consumer of such products); additionally, pre-orders of books have important price reductions and represent a win-win situation/transaction for the seller/author (who is ensured the sale) and for the buyer/reader who is given a considerable discount); (4) the right promotional approach – the most efficient promotional approach has to be decided for the specific product and in the case of books the following are mentioned: free extras over a certain sum, vouchers, guaranteed refund, e-mail alerts/newsletters; to all these we add promotional offers that might include package deals, for online purchases, loyalty points on purchase or on writing reviews (we are the beneficiary of such policies practiced by an online seller in Romania), occasional promotions/raffles for loyal/subscribed customers, discounts for books in the wish list (we have also benefitted from such a promotion from an international bookseller); (5) the right way – the creative strategy that is used so to put the product in; (6) the right time – the author only gives examples for books in the field of education (which should be launched at the beginning of the school/academic year), but we can give as appropriate times for book launching: the holiday season, book fair seasons, anniversary editions/releases; (7) the right place for distributing info materials or for actually selling the product has to be thought in terms of customer friendliness, accessibility and safety. We could also include to these (8) security of payment (in online purchases) and (9) pick up opportunities (free, if possible, shipping/home delivery, pick up points/easy boxes) for online purchases.

From the perspective of the market demand, *electronic word-of-mouth* (eWOM) is increasingly replacing traditional marketing, which implies a radical change concerning the brand communication strategy. There is a growing tendency now for consumers to appreciate the advice and recommendations of internet users, even though these are anonymous, to the detriment of advertising messages, and the buying decision is influenced by the information found by means of search engines, social networks, blogs, websites etc. Thus, the reviews about a book on a specialized website are the

expression of the collective intelligence of internet users, who become prescribers (Scheid et al., 2019). This way, the power of consumers grows, they express their opinions, evaluate products and become (part of) the media (Michel, 2017), enthusiasts and experts have the possibility of asserting their viewpoints and communication becomes more interactive and is based on the distribution and exchange of information. Advertising, presentations and pre-views are also central components of the marketing strategies. Strong publicity is many times the key to selling a book: from the announcements on the cover that the book/author is an award-winning product, or a bestseller in its first edition, presentations on TV/the YouTube or any other media channel where the author is interviewed, (s)he is reviewed, or (s)he reads from their own creations, or special web presentations as in the case of Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) which has a presentation web page<sup>5</sup> which is intriguing to say the least, all these are strategies through which the work and the author are more strongly introduced to the public.

### 3. Authorial ploys: multimodality in contemporary fiction

In an age dominated by static or moving images and sounds (music, TV programmes, podcasts and audiobooks), fiction requires and acquires a new form so as to keep pace with the multimodal media society. Novelists too have had to adapt to the numerous changes in society due to digitalization and the “tyranny” of the image with regard to its look, form and content. Readers of fiction are also well catered for nowadays, by means of *multimodal fiction*, a type of fiction that uses more media to render information, going far beyond the classical printed text and exploiting typography, graphics, but also including kinesics and the auditory dimension in the act of reading. The innovative use of multimodality thus assists the publisher's and the seller's marketing strategies mentioned above.

The new *multimodal* texts (from bills to textbooks and other scientific works, commercial fliers, newspapers and magazines, etc. especially online) (Bateman, 2008, 7) have urged changes in the fiction writing process in terms of transmitting information. The innovative arrangement of information on the page, the typographical experiments with the printed matter and the involvement of other media offer an enhanced sensorial experience and transform the book into a new good adapted to the contemporary market. Experiment and multimodality in particular have managed to transform the printed novel into a more appealing product for the contemporary reader, who seems to be increasingly attracted to the audio-visual.

Authors and publishers have witnessed the necessity of adapting their fiction books to the current necessities and set them in line with the *multimodal* nature of “texts” in the new media society. Cited among the first theorists of *multimodality*, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, in their *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (1996), focused on “composite or multimodal texts”, which represent “any text whose meanings are realized through more than one semiotic code” (1996).

In their studies, critics have a common denominator in the manner in which they regard the production of meaning: meaning is created through the integration of semiotic modalities of transmitting meaning within a given text (Baldry & Thibault, 2006). These semiotic modalities are viewed as functioning within a system in which resources are used in a certain manner, thus fulfilling certain functions in particular contexts.

John Bateman designs his own model of understanding multimodality by putting previous theory in a comprising model – the “GeM model” (“Genre and multimodality”) according to which any multimodal production becomes a “multi-

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.theministryofutmosthappiness.com/>, accessed December 18, 2021.

layered semiotic artefact” and can be analysed on more levels (Bateman, 2008): the GeM base (the basic elements present on a page), layout base (how the page is spatially composed in terms of layout and structure); rhetorical base (relationships between the basic elements on a page and their communicative purpose); navigation base (elements involved in the navigation and access to the page and which determine ‘movement’ around the page); genre base (the patterns that enable text grouping by type).

Multimodality is obvious in “forms of narrative practice that exploit more than one semiotic channel (e.g., words and images, or utterances and gestures) to evoke a storyworld” (Herman, 2009). Ruth Page expands the perspective and speaks of the semiotic mode in the analysis of multimodality as “a system of choices used to communicate meaning. What might count as a mode is an open-ended set, ranging across a number of systems including but not limited to language, image, color, typography, music, voice quality, dress, gesture, spatial resources, perfume, and cuisine” (Page, 2010).

Alison Gibbons, too, regards multimodal novels as a mixture of the linguistic and visual dimension: “multimodality is the coexistence of more than one semiotic mode within a given context” (2012). Multimodality is also reader-targeted and involves a special reading experience: “the two semiotic modes collaborate in the literary act, and thus both the verbal and visual influence the reader’s creation of, and potential immersion in, an imagined text-world” (id.). Additionally, “since multimodal novels exploit the visual surface of the page to communicate their story, the readerly performance of transportation from the discourse-world and submersion into the text-world is not as fixed as with traditional literary forms”. Thus, “multimodal texts demand a dynamic reading strategy in which the reader must ‘toggle’ between the mediating textual surface and cognitive worlds” (id.). Gibbons speaks about readers constantly “moving between worlds” (id.) – we could, therefore, speak about a movement from textual surface to content depth.

Alison Gibbons mentions additional techniques defining multimodality, such as: *multisensory perception* – by this, we are supposed to understand that the practice of reading multimodal literature can be seen as closer to our experiential processing of reality when compared to more conventional novels (Gibbons, 2012); they involve multiple sensory stimuli as verbal and pictorial recognition activate different areas of the brain; in this new type of writing, sensory faculties such as sight, hearing, smell, taste, or touch can be activated and engaged; videlicet, word and image act in synchronicity, engaged in the production of a shared textual meaning (id.). Gibbons also introduces other tools or techniques, such as: embodiment, visual perception (with the introduction of principles: proximity, similarity, continuity, closure, smallness), double deixis, figured-transworlds, and lamination.

Confronted with the necessity to appeal to readers and sell their books well, authors have expanded the modes of expression and communication regarding them. Experiments with form and with various forms of transmission of meaning and expression have increased. It is thus obvious that the novel written after the first decade of the twentieth century exemplifies these strategies in what reader engagement is concerned. To give only a few examples, books manage now to stimulate us *visually* by means of coloured words (Mark Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2001) is among the first novels to have highlighted words in different colours throughout the entire novel), or layout of text on the page (Raymond Federman’s *Double or Nothing* (1971/1998) has parts of texts written in a manner which reminds rather of chemical formulas than of fiction writing); they also sometimes stimulate us *auditorily* – Nicola Barker proposes to the readers of her novel *H(A)PPY* (2017) to listen to Agustín Barrios’ guitar concert while reading the novel, an experience which would enhance the process of perception thus making a novel an upgraded type of product; readers are also occasionally stimulated *kinetically* – even a novel written as far back as 1969 such

as B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969/1999) engages readers at a kinetic (and cognitive) level to combine the sections of the novel – the book comes in a box, with 27 sections, with only the first and the last marked clearly with “First” and “Last” and the other ones, as stated by the author in the Note on the right part of inside of the box, are left at the reader's will to be arranged/combined and read in whatever order they want. More recent examples of the sort in which the visual and the kinetic are engaged can be found in works such as Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005) which challenges readers to flip pages so as to obtain, in the manner similar to cartoon-making in the 1960s, an image in which an individual throws himself/falls off a building – but, oddly enough, the images are arranged by the character/author in reversed order, thus reversing the throw/fall. Adam Thirlwell's *Kapow!* (2012) makes the readers unfold pages which seem to transform the book in an accordion.

The novel created in the digital age seems to be compelled to experiment with typographical innovations, sound, image and kinesics, which, of course go beyond the dimension of form and are key to understanding narrative composition and have a major function in the meaning-making process. This is because such a novel innovatively benefits from the combined working of linguistic and visual strategies along with those regarding sound, as we shall further examine.

#### **4. Nicola Barker's exploitation of multimodality**

Contemporary English fiction writers have also adapted to the new trends and calls regarding the book as a cultural artefact. In line with contemporary multimodal fiction, Nicola Barker's novel *H(A)PPY* (2017) is a good example of the manner in which the printed novel draws attention to the medium and the way in which it assists the content's interpretation, while seeking to engage the reader in the act of reading-cum-experiencing in diverse ways. Thus, *H(A)PPY* appears as an *avant garde* niche work of multiple semiotic modes: typography, words, images and sound/music (for example, we are invited to listen to Agustín Barrios' guitar music while reading the novel). The visual and graphic elements of multimodal fiction prevent readers from engaging with the imagined content of the narrative in a sustained manner and entail “bistable reading strategies, whereby the surface and texture of a book's pages also become a significant dimension of literary meaning” (Gibbons, 2012).

The author's innovative use of multimodality is triggered, on the one hand, by the exigent demands of a public used more and more to consume images and to be stimulated visually and, on the other hand, by the attempt to render the complexity of the aesthetic, emotional and mental processes in a variety of modes. From another perspective, typographical elements, taken separately and in conjunction, function as instruments in a large orchestra – the concert of the book which is, therefore, more complex the more instruments there are.

The immersion into multiple levels of the novel is enhanced by the imagistic elements that support the linguistic content. Through multimodal novels, the physical and sensorial interaction of the readers with the book becomes stronger – they feel more poignantly the emotions of the character by means of colour (through the markings of words from the emotional sphere in pink or purple), they are carried through the reading in a slower or faster pace depending on the musical part they listen to (either from the guitar concert or from kora music that they might search for, as we have done). Their reading experience is enriched and given intensity to and a supplementary dimension is added to the written and the visual, confirming once more that words do not suffice anymore.

The book is now “an object of faith” (Watkins, 2020) due to the explosion of typographical elements<sup>6</sup>. We are thus encouraged to believe in the power of everything there is on page to transmit. Moreover, Barker goes beyond the artful employment of typography and adds the auditory dimension, which is very important both for readers and the main character, who is encouraged to play the guitar as a means of escaping anxiety. The reader’s sensory experience is thus heightened.

### 1.1. The auditory dimension

The Graph (the surveillance device in this dystopian world through which the Youth are monitored and simultaneously controlled) seems to be “listening” to the Youth’s thoughts and also, by recording them, to be making the readers “listen” to the characters’ thoughts. Additionally, the auditory dimension suggested by the author to the readers in her introduction to the novel – the proposal to listen to Agustín Barrios’ guitar concert, or the kora instrument that is introduced in the novel – engages readers in a synesthetic experience. Gibbons refers to this engagement as a “perceptual fluctuation between *looking at* the material surface of the page and *looking through* the page to immerse oneself in its content” (2012) supplemented in Barker’s novel by listening to the proposed material. The sensation induced by the aural dimension is very strong, providing the reader with new experiences, from anxiety, frenzy, play to a form of emotional dynamism which is supposed to draw the reader closer to the character’s mind frame. The author’s suggested musical background for reading the novel enthralls readers by engaging them in a more dynamic, sometimes frenzied, reading – we can testify from our experience of reading the novel while listening to Barrios’ concert and also the suggested African music, that the tribal kora music is energizing, liberating and seems to stimulate ebullience. The auditory dimension is important from two perspectives: the effect this music produces on readers at a sensorial level and the support it brings to the understanding of the meanings transmitted (about the characters, at the level of the ideas communicated and at the level of narrative technique).

Supplementing reading with listening to music also adds an accompanying emotional dimension: we are invited before page 1 of the novel to listen to an instrumental material while reading the book. The auditorily-enhanced experience of reading enriches the reader and creates precisely what is forbidden in the text – emotion. “It is only by means of MUSIC that the Paraguayans can communicate their emotion to the outside world”, we read on page 206 of the novel (author’s capital letters) (a secondary narrative is created through the presence of the Paraguayans and a story from a tribe). Thus, we understand that this is the frenzy, the frantic search that the character engages in. In a heavily technologized world, The Youth are supposed to lead their lives between imposed parameters, with Mira as their representative. However, they are desperately trying to live the experience of uniquely felt emotions, the experience of a unique speed and rhythm in perceiving the world. Tonkin (2017) believes that “an occult musical theme drifts through her dystopian architecture”. The experience we had while reading with the music on the background was that of floating above a world that is stifling and abusive, running frolickingly towards another less oppressive dimension. At times, we had the impression of entering a frenzy of feelings that we did not know whether to attribute to the simple pleasure of listening to this guitar music, or to the despair which we could feel more strongly regarding Mira’s inability to play what she wanted on her guitar, to feel what she wanted. As for the rhythm, while listening to the music we felt that we were running, that we were in a chase towards an unknown destination, but we vitally felt that we wanted to escape from somewhere. And then another part followed

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<sup>6</sup> The analysis of typographical elements in Barker’s novel represents the work of another article pending publication: Culea, Mihaela; Suciu, Andreia-Irina (2021), *Typographical Artifices in Nicola Barker’s H(A)PPY*, pending publication.



that would calm us down, would soothe our unease. The kora pieces proposed in chapter 6 have, to a large extent, the same effect, but they seem to imbue the listener with more primitive beats, they seem to plunge the reader into a dimension of more instinctual urges. Barker seems to manage to perform on her readers the “Oral Adjustment” (Barker, 2017, 104).

#### **4.2. Supplementing words with images**

This is a very complex and appealing process of making the book “speak” through another medium than the written word. Various images formed by some words, the image of a kora (an instrument) and of a stave (Barker, 2017, 53, 54), pattern writing (words forming on a page the image of a guitar, from whose sound hole the word “love” comes out, for example, (Barker, 2017, 116), the visualization of the Greek letter “phi” (in 2 representations:  $\varphi\Phi$ ) (id., 233), but which in Mira’s interpretation resembles an egg, split in half, from which twins are formed, or it resembles the hemispheres of a brain (meant to lead us towards the theme of the splitting of the self), the presentation of some sort of calculus page, recording and presenting, at the same time, aspects connected to the production of sound (see the graphs, staves, charts, diagrams, figures, symbols, atom chain-like drawings on p. 241), supporting images (see the image of the bell-shaped Cathedral, id., 253). All these promote an active process of visualization of thoughts, they add up to the semiotic process of transmitting meaning and introduce to us “a protagonist who breaches the limits of speech” (Darlington, 2020).

The strongest of all of these is, of course, the image of the cathedral (Barker, 2017, 253), which best illustrates the juxtaposition of the outside world (a world of figures, quotas, ratios, formulas or algorithms as they are used by the System to monitor and then adjust deviations) and Mira’s inner world (here, from all the external stimuli she manages to create and give shape to her own world). Illustrated through a cathedral (which is also one of Agustín Barrios’s seminal works), her inner world is the equivalent space of quiet, peace and harmony. The symbol stands for the figure of the woman, and is ultimately a space of reclusion and of dialogue with one’s self. The Cathedral also symbolizes faith, hope and motherhood, and in the end Mira metaphorically gives birth to her new self when coming out of the cathedral “in the hush of possibility” (Barker, 2017, 279).

In what the process of supplementing words with pictures is concerned, we consider worth mentioning at this point the rise of the graphic novel in the last two decades and not only in the sector of children’s books. Apart from comic books, graphic novels were written by acclaimed authors such as Neil Gaiman.

#### **4.3. Transforming words into images/picturizing**

Barker shows tremendous inventiveness and visual power by this extremely impressive visual artifice. Barker transforms words – for example “fizz” (Barker, 2017, 126) and “war” (id., 171) – into a special type of word-image that communicates graphically its very meaning or an idea/emotion associated with its image. This is how bubbles come out of the word “fizz” to render the fact that Mira’s mind is made to “fizz” at the strange narrative; at the same time, drops of blood drip from the word “war” coloured, obviously, in red, when Mira feels the struggle/the war between the two sides of her – Mira A. and Mira B. – with the “I” caught in between and trying to emerge. In the end, the author uses the image of some soap bubbles which “entrap” words (id., 278), as a means of escaping the reading of the Graph. Therefore, words can be seen as the one entrapping us by the force of their message, but, equally it can be our inner force that can shatter them just like we would shatter the fragile, fleeting soap bubbles. The messages imposed on people

by an abusive system are threatening to engulf us, with their force, but they can be made transitory and insubstantial if the victims fight back and seek means of resistance and defeat.

## Conclusions

Were we to find a justification for such narrative practices, we think we would find the sources and/or functions of such type of writing practices at two ends of the axis on which the book is supposed to travel/be transmitted from the author to the reader/buyer – one end would have an artistic purpose, while the other could be interpreted pragmatically, (at least partially rooted) in the spirit of the business world: (1) meeting the contemporary writer's need to express himself/herself through more vehicles/more media of perception and achieve a more complex artistic “purging”; (2) trying to attract the post-millennial reader who has lost the propensity to the traditionally written works and needs further visual and sensorial stimulation, thus bringing “narrative entertainment” to (a) new level(s); (3) conditioning and simultaneously inviting the reader through such new products to a new type of reading, combining the symbolical, emotional and cognitive with the sensorial and forcing him/her to a multiple decoding; (4) exceeding traditional modes of expression and activating the readers experientially; (5) creating new forms of artistic/narrative expression which are grounded in the contemporary way of experiencing and rendering the world/reality around; (6) skillfully making the book an attractive, salable product in an age that calls for new and innovative ways of planning, creating and presenting fictional or non-fictional texts.

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