

Beyond Linguistic Sign

Embodiment and the Recovery of Resonance

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Series in Literary Studies



VERNON PRESS

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1000 N West Street, Suite 1200,
Wilmington, Delaware 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:

Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Literary Studies

Library of Congress Control Number: 2026945562

ISBN: 979-8-2616-0100-5

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Blending phonosemantics, cognitive theory, and phenomenology, the monograph daringly and inventively pushes the linguistic boundaries to open new vistas into how sound and conceptual metaphor generate emotions and meanings in the intricate works of Mark Z. Danielewski and David Abram.

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Brno 2026

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Framing The Study:

Grounding Language and Embodiment

The aim of this work is to examine *Only Revolutions* (2006) by Mark Z. Danielewski and *Becoming Animal* (2010) by David Abram to explore whether these works articulate a viable alternative to the radical pluralism and fragmentation characteristic of postmodern aesthetics. What was once diagnosed as the postmodern condition—marked by the dispersal of grand narratives, interpretive multiplicity, and decentred subjectivity—has in recent decades intensified into new forms of algorithmic hyperreality, digital abstraction, and ecological disconnection. Within such a landscape, thinking and reading risk drowning in infinite circulation of contexts, perspectives, and interpretations—in a labyrinth without resonance. The study asks whether the works under consideration offer another mode of orientation: not a rejection of plurality but a re-materialization of experience through resonance.

To approach this possibility, the project adopts an interdisciplinary framework attentive to the linguistic distinctness of the texts, particularly their engagement with the materiality of language and metaphor. Drawing on phonosemantics, conceptual metaphor theory, and phenomenology, the study seeks to foreground dimensions often neglected by previous researchers—sound, rhythm, and embodied perception—and to elevate them as generative forces of meaning. In doing so, the work proposes that language, understood as material and vibratory rather than merely discursive, may function as a site of growing resonance between elements once perceived as disconnected fragments.

The selection of the third text has not yet been determined; rather it will emerge from the findings of the first two analyses, naturally entering their trajectories. Instead of serving as a predetermined object of study, it will function as a complementary movement, enriching and strengthening the reverberation developed through the initial pair.

Only Revolutions is a road novel depicting the journey of 16-year-old Sam and Hailey, structured through a double narrative in which the perspectives of its two teenage protagonists unfold separately. The second text, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*, calls for a reawakening of our animal senses to recover a felt connection with the intelligence of the living earth.

Often regarded as a novel that mirrors the postmodern condition, *Only Revolutions* proves challenging to read, in part due to its lack of conventional semantic continuity; concurrently, it has been interpreted as a looping path from sign to sign within a linguistic system that, in a Saussurean framework,

generates meaning relationally while remaining detached from reality. Yet the novel simultaneously abounds in distinctive clusters of words shaped by specific rhythms and sonic intensities, inviting the reader to pursue a fresh approach while being attentive to its auditory architecture. Indeed, the text might be approached as a profoundly sensual work: it activates auditory and visual perception and even engages tactile awareness through the physical manipulation of the book. The present study therefore, turns to the materiality of the word, examining how sound participates in organizing the text and enabling forms of coherence that exceed purely semantical logic.

In *Becoming Animal*, the reader encounters a myriad of metaphors that encourage connections across seemingly disparate texts—the discovery of the importance of the auditory dimension of language in *Only Revolutions* and metaphor in *Becoming Animal* serves as a powerful tool to demonstrate that humans have always been rooted carnally in the environment and that both the word-sound and the metaphorical language is a direct reflection of our pre-linguistic experience which could help us to escape an endless jockeying from sign to sign.

Moreover, the study aims to determine whether the novel interpretative tools applied here can reveal the protagonists as ontologically more anchored, centred or unified within the reality of the (post)postmodern dispersion of the subject, a subject who exists in and continuously produces an environment of heterogeneity and diversity. The goal is to explore whether different interpretative approaches can portray—or even restore—a more unified framework of the self amid multiplicity, leveraging the density of everyday physical experience.

The above considerations guided the selection of analytical tools—phonosemantics, conceptual metaphor theory, and phenomenology—which together support the main argument of this work: that postmodern fragmentation and Saussurean linguistic seclusion can be overcome. Both texts, through their sonic and figurative layers, enable us to connect directly with the world, showing that language is not merely representational but reaches outward to engage with reality itself. The distinctive language of these texts invites readers to discern the carnality of the protagonists as echoed in their own bodies, which, through movement, structure the environment and co-determine how objects are presented, granting them meaning and sense. These observations are based on phenomenological assumptions, which frame and reinforce the main analytical tools employed in this study. Together, these perspectives allow us to understand the texts as works that possess the capacity to overcome structuralist linguistic seclusion and manifest that meaning is not merely recovered from a linguistic structure but is actively constituted through pre-linguistic, embodied interaction with the world. The examination of both texts seeks to explore whether and how they are capable of gathering and

recomposing postmodern fragments into a coherent, meaningful—therefore resonant—whole.

At this stage, the analysis points toward the possibility that articulated sound and metaphorical correspondence facilitate a renewed experience of embodiment. This renewed embodiment allows readers and protagonists to foreground their corporeal selves and gradually recognize themselves as centric points of reference from which it becomes safer to face the uncertain waters of dispersed wholes. This interpretation is intentionally provisional and may be reconfigured in light of the detailed examination that follows.

Chapter 1

Introduction:

Body as the Point to Which All Objects Turn Their Side

1.1. Presentation of the Analysed Works: Texts Rooted in the World (and Not in Themselves)

In one of his *Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning* (1976), the prominent Russian linguist Roman Jakobson directed his attention to *The Raven* (1845) by Edgar Allan Poe, more specifically to its gloomy refrain of “nevermore”, a declaration of definitive negation. While drawing our attention to the final /r/ consonant and its potential to cast the reader into either the future or eternity, noting also its association with the croaking of a raven, Jakobson points out that the expressive value of the word does not lie in its use of the approximant /r/ alone. He argues instead that the meaning of the word is strengthened through the unique variation of its phonic properties, such as “modulation of tone, stress and cadence, the detailed articulation of the sounds and of the groups of sounds”, all of which contribute to the revelation of the word’s full emotive quality.¹ Jakobson also emphasizes that despite the relatively small occurrence of phonic elements, they still possess a remarkable capacity for conveying the richness of emotive, conceptual, and aesthetic content of the word. The modest category of phonic matter, sound texture with its ability to allow an idea to form and develop, was a constant source of fascination for Jakobson, who saw phonics as the mystery of the linguistic symbol, the mystery of the Logos.² Discovering the sound shape of language, i.e., language as an energizing, multisensorial music, melody, allows us to approach it not only as the arbitrary system of representation but also as a means of manifesting the inherent relationship between sound and meaning, as a means of co-creating meaning. This initiated the search for literary work that featured such qualities and which would open the reader to novel forms of reading, interpretation, and understanding.³

Mark Z. Danielewski’s 2006 novel *Only Revolutions* was chosen as the first text to be explored since it enormously encourages the reader to look for creative,

¹ Jakobson, *Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning*, 2.

² Jakobson, *Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning*, 2.

³ Jakobson used the term as the title of his 1976 study, *The Sound Shape of Language*.

innovative ways of approach and interpretation. It is a work which features an abundance of unique clusters of words with specific rhythms and sounds that grant the text an unprecedented degree of musicality, while simultaneously connecting itself with and magnifying the sounds of the external world. None of the other works in Danielewski's oeuvre, whether *House of Leaves* (2000), *The Fifty Year Sword* (2005), or *The Familiar* (2015—2017), exhibit a level of sonic texture which is comparable to that found in *Only Revolutions*. The 2006 novel possesses an enormous capacity for triggering resonances on the part of the reader through their emotional and aesthetic responses, thereby opening them to the experience of yet another layer of meaning which connects "the arbitrary, the natural, and the necessary."⁴ *Only Revolutions* employs a double-narrative approach in which the two perspectives of its teenage protagonists Sam and Hailey are presented separately, and the work is typically seen by critics as a novel which mirrors the postmodern condition.⁵

The typological arrangement of the book, with the two separate narratives placed at opposite ends of the text, forces the reader to rotate the book in the process of reading and motivates them to employ both a conceptual and corporeal approach. They are encouraged to re-read the novel continuously which offers alternative combinations of the split narratives and also generates a seemingly limitless range of meanings and interpretations. The reader is caught up in a tumultuous jockeying from sign to sign, often left feeling adrift in the ocean of infinite variety. Literary critics usually have tended to emphasise the apparently chaotic nature of the book and focus on the aspects of the text which contribute to the overall impression of its infinite interpretative potential (for example, Berressem's comments on geometry and topology (2012), Bray's focus on circularity (2011), or the numerical and topological features listed by Portela (2012)). However, analyses of the novel to date have not paid particular attention to the presence of the sonic layer of the narrative. The Portuguese literary scholar Manuel Portela habitually overemphasises "the hallucinatory effect of the digit of the letter, the calculation of language, and the geometry of the codex as a recursive dispersal and proliferation of meaning in the strange looping of signs," which leaves the reader trapped in the endless combinatorial possibilities of discourse and linguistic representation.⁶ An

⁴ Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, 437.

⁵ The term "the postmodern condition" is taken from the title of the 1979 text *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* by the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard which deals with the state of knowledge in the contemporary world and which brought the term "postmodernism" to the debates in Western philosophy.

⁶ Portela, "The Book as Computer: A Numerical and Topological Analysis of *Only Revolutions*," 61.

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Agata Walek holds a PhD in English and American Literature. Her research explores the post-postmodern condition in contemporary American literature, with particular attention to the reconstruction of subjectivity beyond linguistic fragmentation. Her work adopts a multidisciplinary framework, integrating literary theory, phenomenology, embodied cognition, conceptual metaphor theory, and phonosemantics. She engages closely with developments in sound studies and non-representational approaches to language, examining how resonance, embodiment, and material expressivity reshape our understanding of meaning and selfhood.

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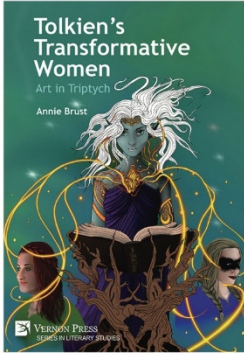
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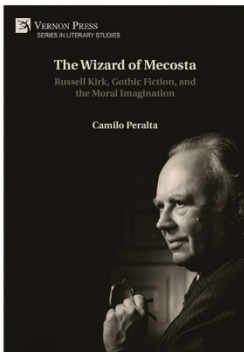
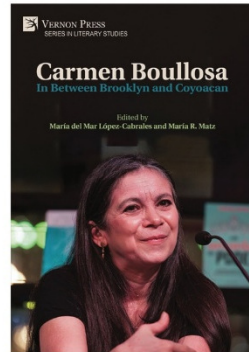
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