

# **Book layout and design in unconventional printed novels: materiality and reading in the digital era**

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
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**Berta Ferrer**

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# Declaration

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

Berta Ferrer

# Abstract

This research examines the physical dimension of the unconventional novel, and the influence of book layout and design, on particular reading experiences. Through an analysis of design strategies used in examples that foreground their material dimension, this thesis considers how book design is integrated into the narrative to turn reading into an embodied experience, and what materiality offers to the act of reading in the digital era.

Understanding the lineage is essential to help comprehend the evolution of this type of unconventional novel and thus, the thesis is organised in chronological order: from the pre-digital to the digital era. For this reason, the presence of materiality in pre-digital novels and the material form of significant works of literature is studied. As a counterpoint, this research examines the status of the printed novel in the digital era, studying the transformations that appeared in the twentieth century through changes in media. In particular, it looks at hypertextual examples in print that have influenced unconventional novels in the twenty-first century, and which indicate that the adoption of new media communication practices is a significant element for the evolution of new forms, which might be derived from unconventional precedents.

The research approach examines the presence of materiality through the analysis of book layout and design in three case study novels. By using photographs, diagrams, and motion image to study the material dimension of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of leaves* (2000), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of codes* (2010) and J. J. Abrams' *S.* (2013), this thesis reveals that key unconventional novels in the twenty-first century have remained 'print-specific'. By foregrounding the physical dimension of the reading experience these examples challenge the fluidity of conventional narratives brought about by digital hybrid practices.

This examination draws attention to a design process embedded in the authorial process and the construction of both materiality and narrative. Findings make evident that unconventional novels in the digital era can be a product of a 'designwriting' process, and point to a renewed collaboration, between authors and designers, in which design is acknowledged as an integral part of the process where writing means also designing. This thesis contributes to the analysis and exploration of the materiality and physical experience in unconventional novels, and also foregrounds the importance of physical reading in the age of digital media.

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‘But no matter how hard I try to describe these texts to you, the reader, their essential difference will remain a mystery until they are experienced first-hand.’

*Cybertexts*, Espen Aarseth (1997, 2)

# Introduction

The Amazon Kindle was launched in 2007. In *Newsweek*, Steve Levy (2007, n.p.) wrote that, with the release of a new electronic reading device, Jeff Bezos was hoping to conquer ‘the last bastion of analog’ (i.e. books) and transform ‘the way readers read, writers write and publishers publish’.

The Amazon Kindle was, of course, not the first electronic reading device. In a 1945 article, Vannevar Bush had already imagined a machine with an immense capacity for storage and retrieval of interactive information that he called the Memex, although this hypothetical device lacked the portability that would be developed decades later. In 1989, for example, Franklin Electronics launched the *Holy Bible* on the Bookman, a pocket-sized device with a rectangular screen that displayed three lines of text at a time. During the 1990s and early 2000s numerous digital devices for reading text were released, such as Sony’s Data Discman in 1992, an electronic book reader for CDs; and NuvoMedia’s Rocket eBook and the SoftBook in 1998. However, as Borsuk (2018) explained, none of these devices made the substantial impact of the Kindle: a slim and light electronic device in a rectangular format that fitted comfortably in the hands, just as a regular novel or paperback book. But unlike the long-lasting traditional codex format with printed pages bound within covers and considered ‘the vessel of culture’ (Levy, 2007, n.p.), the Kindle replaced the physical touch of paper with a six-inch screen with E Ink (a brand of electronic ‘paper’ that replicates the appearance of ink on paper). Even more, it gave access to the virtual shelves of a portable, near-weightless, and infinite library. The Kindle established a turning point in the history of electronic reading as it made e-books mainstream and allowed ‘readers to take an entire library with them on the go’ (Borsuk, 2018, 231).

However, e-readers not only brought with them the idea of a future filled with screens, digital libraries, and electronic books, but also hybrid reading practices that considered the printed book as one more piece within the experience of reading. Thorburn and Jenkins (2004, 4) explain that ‘the promise or threat of electronic books engenders a renewed consciousness of the rare and durable qualities of printed books.’ In consequence, concepts such as ‘bookishness’ (Pressman, 2009) and ‘materiality turn’ (Latour, 2007) appeared, which put a focus on the object and on what physical reading could become when influenced by digital technology. The departure point of this research could be established here, at the time when the question of ‘the death of the book’ started to be replaced by the idea that materiality and the printed book could still offer an embodied reading experience that electronic books could not.

Indeed, as Levy (2007, n.p.) claimed, the Amazon Kindle changed ‘the way readers read, writers write and publishers publish’ but, as this thesis shows, the transformation did not only happen at the digital level. It also brought forward a significant question: What can print and the book offer in a digital era?

## **Aims and research questions**

This research explores the materiality of the book and its influence on the act of reading in the digital era. The choice of this topic is a result of the author’s background in architecture and graphic design. The first steps towards the development of the topic can be traced back to 2014: after finishing a BA and MA in Architecture (ETSA - UPV, Valencia, Spain), studying an MA in Graphic Design at London College of Communication (UAL) opened the door to the initial questions: What is a book? Where does a book stop from being a book? What is the difference between a printed book and an e-book? This first questioning was developed together with a series

of practical experiments with blank books<sup>1</sup>. The initial exploration combined with a personal interest in literature and its processes helped to grow the scope and depth of the topic. From a spatial and design viewpoint this research aims to understand what reading print can mean in an age of screens.

Therefore, the research focus is on the novel and on examples that foreground the material dimension of the narrative in creating embodied reading experiences. In such works, reading becomes a physical activity initiated by the interaction of readers with pages and with the narrative. The main objective of this exploration is to understand how materiality, through book layout and design strategies, can influence the narrative and, in this way, recognise what print can offer to the act of reading in the age of the digital.

With this focus in mind, this thesis aims to explore a central research question: What can materiality in printed unconventional novels offer to the act of reading in the digital era?

This research looks specifically at the novel presented in codex form and analyses examples that disrupt the qualities of the traditional codex (i.e., a physical book form where pages, bound at one edge, then open to face each other, to produce a double-page spread) within the novelistic conventions. The main examples studied in this thesis were all produced for commercial purposes and with a general public readership in mind, and therefore are not considered artists' books. Despite this, at some points in the following pages it becomes necessary to look outside both the novel and the codex form in order to build a fully comprehensive historical and theoretical context for the case studies that were considered.<sup>2</sup>

As the following pages show, the term 'unconventional' refers to novels in which narrative and material dimensions work together

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<sup>1</sup> The outcome of these experiments is *The Book of Infinite Stories*. Some images of the project can be found here: <https://tinyurl.com/ytj3y96p>

<sup>2</sup> See "Appendix A" on page 376 for an index of the unconventional narratives mentioned in this thesis.

to create an integral whole as opposed to those where narrative and material dimensions remain separate, which would be understood as conventional. This kind of novel is not an isolated outcome of the digital era but has a rich lineage that is important to examine as an underpinning for the research. Therefore, this thesis is organised in chronological order: from the pre-digital to the digital era. Lineage is essential to understanding the background and the evolution of this type of unconventional novel in the first decades of the twenty-first century. The objective is to gain an understanding of the development of these examples and the extent to which they were influenced by digital technology.

Chapter 1 looks at materiality in pre-digital novels (spanning the early works of the eighteenth century to those of the twentieth century) and analyses other significant works in the history of literature that innovated with the form of the novel and/or the book. The intention is to identify the influence of pre-digital examples and to respond to the following question: how are book layout and design strategies in twenty-first-century examples indebted to earlier unconventional predecessors? With this aim in mind, Section 1.1 focuses on the presence of materiality in the eighteenth-century novel. In particular, Sections 1.1.1 and 1.1.2 focus on Laurence Sterne's *The life and opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–79) and use the analysis of its main visual devices to identify the three characteristics that define unconventional form in novels. Section 1.2 then explores these three qualities by using twentieth-century examples, such as Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* (1897),<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida's *Glas* (1974), Marc Saporta's *Composition No. 1* (1962), and B. S. Johnson's *The unfortunates* (1969).

A key aspect of this thesis is to examine the unconventional novel within the digital environment and, therefore, it becomes necessary

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<sup>3</sup> Even if Mallarmé's poem does not technically belong to the twentieth century, it is a paradigmatic work that opens the door to the modernity of the new century.

to ask: what is the status of the printed novel in the digital era? Chapter 2 examines this question: it opens with an introduction to the digital revolution and an examination of how changes in media have historically brought with them false predictions about the demise of the printed book. Section 2.3 focuses on hypertext and its characteristics, as defined by Landow in 1997. These are used to identify hypertextual examples in print, such as Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale fire* (1962), Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (1963), and Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (1961). It also examines the *Whole Earth catalog* (1968) as a countercultural publication with hypertextual qualities that would provide a point of reference for the development of online networking. Drawing from this, the last section looks at media convergence and explains the change in critical context at the end of the twentieth century. At this point, the debate shifts from a perspective of print versus digital to one that looks at how both mediums could work together. The chapter concludes with a definition of the new conventional novel in the twenty-first century and points to the advent of fluid narratives.

Chapter 3 focuses on the development of the unconventional novel in the twenty-first century and shows how it emerged as a challenge to established reading forms and habits. This questioning is connected with technological changes that result in cultural shifts where the appearance of new media and communication practices can be seen as significant to the evolution of unconventional forms. There exists an anticipatory aspect to these explorations of book layout and design, as they point to shifts in reading and writing practices that came as a result of technological development. The evolution of the digital realm constitutes an important influence in the evolution of both conventional and unconventional print narratives, which are examined throughout the thesis. Section 3.1 explains the invisibility of print, developed through centuries of reading habit, and uses N. Katherine Hayles' (2002) study to evidence how materiality has generally been treated as a secondary element in literary studies. As Hayles (2002, 19) explains, 'exceptions include the tradition of artists' books and [...] practices



as concrete poetry', which serves to introduce artists' books as a significant reaction to this invisibility around the mid-twentieth century. Section 3.2 uses studies by Jessica Pressman (2009) and Liedeke Plate (2020) to evidence reactions to the digital age that appeared during the first decades of the twenty-first century, and that result from an 'Aesthetic of Bookishness' and a 'material turn'. The purpose of this chapter is to offer a definition for the unconventional novel in the twenty-first century, and to establish criteria for recognising examples and their 'print-specific' qualities. It aims to respond to the following question: how do unconventional novels foreground the physical dimension in the act of reading? Chapter 3 also introduces three case study novels that are to be analysed in depth in Chapters 4 and 5.

It is important to note that the aim of this research is not to produce an exhaustive catalogue of unconventional novels. Rather than seeking to build an inventory, this thesis aims to define the characteristics of these novels, analyse, from a design perspective, the visual devices they use, and compare them in order to comprehend, in more depth, the influence of materiality on the narrative and the reading experience.

For this reason, it becomes essential to understand: how are book layout and design integrated with narrative in unconventional novels? This question is addressed in Chapter 4, which is divided into three sections and examines the three case study novels at the core of the research: Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of leaves* (2000), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of codes* (2010), and J. J. Abrams' *S.* (2013). Each novel is described, compared to previous examples, and its visual devices analysed: this serves to illustrate how the reading experience is influenced by materiality. The last two sections in the chapter gather together the conclusions of the analyses in order to understand how they respond to the digital realm, and how they establish themselves as examples that emphasise print over digital media.

Foregrounding the materiality of the novel means an exploration of book layout and typography. Thus, it becomes important to ask: how does design contribute to the integration of materiality and narrative in printed unconventional novels? Chapter 5 considers this question by continuing with the analysis of the case study novels from the perspective of their design process and the involvement of the author in their design and production. The term ‘designwriting’ is introduced here to identify the role of writers who think about materiality from the first stages of the writing process (or even prior to it) and employ design methods along the way. The example of Avital Ronell’s *The telephone book* (1989) is used to evidence the important role design has in books that foreground their materiality, together with its anticipatory quality of fluid and dynamic narrative. The writing and design strategies in *Woman’s world* (2005) are also analysed: this novel constitutes a good example that included design methods within its writing process. Section 5.2 examines the creation process of the three main case study novels, aiming to understand how writing and design evolved together from the early stages of each project and how authors and designers worked together to create integrated narratives.

The thesis concludes with a reflection on the progressive research questions and proposes a possible anticipatory quality that characterises unconventional novels in the digital age. It is claimed that the contemporary unconventional printed novel provides a vehicle for understanding what reading print means in a digital era and what the future might be for printed novels more generally.

## **Research approach and methods of analysis**

Materiality in literature and the novel is one of the main focal points of the research objectives. Therefore, analysing the material dimension of relevant examples is an essential part of the work. From the first stages, even when the initial classification of potential books to include was still broad and not limited to novels, the decision was

made that the examples mentioned within the thesis had to be read and experienced first-hand.<sup>4</sup> At the beginning, this meant that the use of archives would be an important aspect of the research direction. However, as the work moved forward and the focus narrowed down to novels produced with commercial purposes, it became easier to have ownership of the required examples and create a personal research library. Even so, some planned visits to archives (such as Shandy Hall in York) had to be cancelled due to the impact of COVID-19.

Another important method included as part of the research was the interviews to editors and designers of the main case-study novels. As Chapter 5 shows, the conversation with these figures becomes essential to understand writing, design and production processes in the analysed examples. Anna Gerber and Sara De Bondt were invited to participate because of their direct involvement with *Tree of codes*, the former as one of the editors of Visual Editions who envisioned the project, and the later as designer of the book. Megan Worman, Senior Editor at Melcher Media, was invited because of her involvement in the design and production process of *S*. In addition, Graham Rawle, author of *Woman's world*, was invited for the value added by explaining the writing and design processes of his novel.<sup>5</sup>

There exist numerous studies surrounding materiality and the challenge to printing and reading conventions in literature. The main difference between other considerations of unconventional novels and this thesis is that there is no analysis of the construction of the material dimension<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, this brings forward two further research questions that serve to identify the space and the need to expand these existing studies: To what extent do case studies previously examined

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<sup>4</sup> See page 144 in Chapter 3 for an illustration of the books first considered for the research.

<sup>5</sup> These interviews were conducted in compliance with the ethical processes of the University of Reading. Two further participants were invited but did not respond to the request: Mark Z. Danielewski (author of *House of leaves*) and Jonathan Safran Foer (author of *Tree of codes*).

<sup>6</sup> An exception needs to be made for Zoe Sadokierski's work (as is explained in the following pages) in which she analyses visual devices in novels through graphic tools. Despite the visual method of analysis, the work does not examine the material dimension as part of the narrative.

for their embodied narratives benefit from an analysis of their specific material layout and design? Thus, the chapters 4 and 5 also aim to demonstrate: To what extent does analysing the construction of the material dimension extend our understanding of unconventional novels? By examining the material and graphic strategies employed in these unconventional examples it is possible to grasp a clear understanding of how materiality is integrated into the narrative and how this influences the reading experience.

### Acknowledging existing studies

In *Writing machines*, N. Katherine Hayles (2002, 19) begins by considering materiality and asking why the Humanities have paid so little attention to it: ‘literary studies has generally been content to treat fictional and narrative worlds as if they were entirely products of the imagination.’ It is significant that this claim, together with the affirmation that ‘we can no longer afford to ignore the material basis of literary production’, was published at the start of the twenty-first century. The change from the 1990s to the 2000s marked a turning point for communication practices, which embraced digital technology in full; and also, in the context of this research, for the novel.

In 2000 Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of leaves* was published, a novel which used the computer and digital practices to create a printed narrative thoroughly dependent on its materiality.<sup>7</sup> This was not the first novel in history that used typography in an unexpected way, played with book layout and text composition, and forced readers to pay attention to the material dimension of the book. However, in all likelihood, it was the first to incorporate these characteristics and also to very quickly acquire the status of best-seller and cult novel. Since then, other novels with a strong material

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<sup>7</sup> *House of leaves* is one of the main case study examples in this research and is analysed further in Chapter 4.

dimension have been published, which have brought a little more attention to materiality in fiction.

Hayles' work especially contributes to this shift. In her research, she focuses on the transformations in literature that resulted from the evolution of digital technology and puts an emphasis on the importance of materiality. In *Writing machines* (2002), Hayles uses the concept of 'media-specific analysis', which she defines as a criticism that recognises 'assumptions specific to print' (2002, 30); and underlines the importance of realising that different media do not exist in isolation from one another, but they engage by imitating each other. Her focus is not only on print, but on different media 'to explore how medium-specific possibilities and constraints shape texts' (2002, 31). Her analysis compares three distinct literary works to understand how they use materiality and its medium: a hypertext, an artists' book, and a novel (Danielewski's *House of leaves*).

Jessica Pressman's work has been equally essential for this research, especially her 2009 article, 'The aesthetic of bookishness in twenty-first century literature'. She defines 'the aesthetic of bookishness' as a trend that focuses on novels published since 2000: 'these novels exploit the power of the print page in ways that draw attention to the book as a multimedia format, one informed by and connected to digital technologies' (2009, n.p.). This work has helped to build the definition of the unconventional novel in this thesis, understanding that, in the twenty-first century, these novels are not only a reaction to the digital but that they also embrace it. They exist because of the digital realm, as is explained in Chapter 3. Furthermore, she recognises how the immateriality of the digital has brought with it an emphasis on the material aspect of literature. Due to the fact that the status of the printed book has changed, and that it is not the central technology for reading and accessing information anymore, the physical book becomes more associated with literature, as literature 'has never been just about information delivery' (2009, n.p.).

Glyn White (2005) and Simon Barton (2016) have focused their respective works on novels that challenge graphic conventions and foreground the materiality of the book. In *Reading the graphic surface*, White analyses how the material aspect of the novel has generally been neglected, and how, historically, readers have become habituated to automatic reading. This combination has led them to take the technology of the object and the act of reading for granted: ‘the automatising of the process of reading tempts us to treat narratives as divorced from the physical means of their telling’ (2005, 33). He also includes an extended reading of some key works from authors who have challenged conventions, such as B. S. Johnson’s *Albert Angelo* (1964) and Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark: a life in four books* (1981). Barton’s *Visual devices in contemporary prose fiction* builds on White’s analysis and expands the discussion to include twenty-first-century novels, such as Danielewski’s *House of leaves* (2000), Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of codes* (2010), Steven Hall’s *The raw shark texts* (2007), and Graham Rawle’s *Woman’s world* (2005). In addition, Barton compares and classifies the different styles of visual devices depending on how they confront the materiality of the book and challenge reading. Similarly, Alison Gibbons’ (2012) analysis of ‘multimodal literature’, as she defines the literary works that explore book form, looks at the heritage of these kinds of books and the strategies they employ to bring forward their material dimensions. While designer Zoe Sadokierski (2010) also examines visual devices in novels, she introduces a concept that helps to establish one of the characteristics of the unconventional novel in this thesis (see Chapter 5). Sadokierski identifies that when authors employ a visual device within their novels, they are working in what she calls a ‘*designerly way*’ (2010, 3). This term places an emphasis on the role that design has in this kind of literature.

On the other hand, Kiene Brillenburg Wurth’s (2011) work focuses on how these novels are shaped by digital media, and that they are a consequence from the intermediality between analogue and digital practices. Especially, in *Book presence in a digital age*

(2020), which she edited together with Driscoll and Pressman, several critics and artists reflect on the book, its materiality, and the aspects that could be reinvented by intermedial practices. Likewise, Alexandre Starre's (2015) *Metamedia: American book fictions and literary print culture after digitization*, discusses twenty-first-century literature that responds to digitisation by means of creative and innovative ways of pushing the limits of the novel. Starre identifies that these printed novels exist because of digital technology and the knowledge authors have of using digital creative tools. These authors 'come of age in a time of omnipresent screen media and casual computation. [...] these writers did not have to adapt to digital composition tools—they had them at their disposal all along' (2015, 7). In this respect, in *El lectoespectador*, Vicente Luis Mora (2012) claims that literary criticism, and the ways to regard the novel, need to change in the twenty-first-century to take into consideration the new ways of writing and publishing derived from the implementation of digital tools. As Mora states, in the twenty-first century, the novel needs not only to be written, but also to be designed.<sup>8</sup>

Due to the significance digital technology has in the development of unconventional novels, it is important to mention the work of theorists who have examined the transformations in media and how these changes have influenced shifts in writing and reading practices. Not surprisingly, Marshall McLuhan (1962; 1964; 1967) is an ever-present voice in this arena, especially in his understanding that the old ways of comprehending the world were changing with electronic media, and his definition of the 'global village'. George Landow's (1996; 1997) thorough investigation of hypertext led to the comprehension that the major effect digital technology has had on the book is that it can now be seen as a technology, and therefore can be explored and examined from

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<sup>8</sup> My translation from the original in Spanish. All citations of the author included in this thesis are translations from the original.

new perspectives. Espen Aarseth's (1997) definition of 'ergodic literature' and 'cybertexts', opened the door to further studies on nonlinear narratives.

Unconventional novels place an emphasis on the reader and the personal experience created through the embodied reading of the narrative. Thus, it becomes important to understand the background behind this approach and the relevance of views such as the reader-response theory developed by Roland Barthes (1966; 1974) that becomes especially present in 'The death of the author' (1967); or the deconstruction defined by Jacques Derrida (1967); and the role of the author examined by Michel Foucault (1969). From this perspective, the definition of the 'open work' by Umberto Eco (1962) and the description of rhizome by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) become essential to explain the decentralised and networked structures proposed in the case study novels of this research.

In relation to analysing and visualising the reading experience through static and dynamic visual recordings, it is important to acknowledge the work of Zoe Sadokierski. In *Visual writing: a critique of graphic devices in hybrid novels, from a visual communication design perspective* (2010), Sadokierski uses design devices such as drawings and flat plan diagrams to study and classify graphic devices in hybrid novels. This thesis expands from Sadokierski's strategy by using design devices to analyse how materiality is built and integrated in unconventional novels. In order to show the three-dimensional quality of the case-study novels, this research uses as well architectural strategies to represent spatial sequence, such as axonometries and cross-sections. For this, the working processes of architects Rem Koolhaas (Schurk, 2022), Mansilla + Tuñón (Márquez and Levene, 2012), and Herzog & De Meuron (Fernández-Galiano, 2019) have become relevant references. Similarly, the video from Olafur Eliasson's *Your house* (2006) helped to shape the idea of filming the reading process of the novels.



## Identifying gaps in knowledge

As the thesis develops, other authors are included and their works examined. The majority of the existing studies are developed mainly from a literary studies perspective or from a technological point of view, thus analysing changes in media and their influence. This research identifies the lack of a thorough visual and material analysis of novels that challenge conventions, which is essential in order to fully understand the influence of book layout and design on the narrative, and consequently, in the embodied reading experience. This thesis examines and combines the two previous approaches with a design analysis of the three main case studies that aims to comprehend how the materiality of the book is foregrounded and employed to expand the narrative and create a unique reading experience.

The three novels at the core of this research (*House of leaves*, *Tree of codes* and *S.*) have been selected, as Chapter 3 explains, because they represent the attributes of the unconventional novel in the digital era and at the same time constitute significant examples that integrate materiality and narrative to create an embodied reading experience. As has been mentioned, they have been studied in previous literature, and in particular they have been analysed together in Pressman's *Bookishness: loving books in a digital age* (2020), in which she identifies them as paradigms of the 'aesthetic of bookishness'. However, while Pressman examined these novels from a media and literary studies perspective, Chapters 4 and 5, in this thesis, build from her work (and the existing literature in general) and interrogate these novels from a design perspective.

The examination of the material and graphic strategies that construct these unconventional examples reveals the way in which materiality is treated as an integral part of the narrative and generates an embodied reading experience. This analysis develops in two different parts: Chapter 4 focuses on the physical reading experience and the way in which the material dimension is integral to the narrative,

and vice versa. Chapter 5 focuses on the design process and how the construction of the material dimension influences the narrative.

### **Introducing static and dynamic visual recording as a method of analysis**

The devices in unconventional novels are utterly dependent on their material and visual dimensions. The majority of previous analyses of these works tend to show very few pictures.<sup>9</sup> These images are usually very general, and do not attempt to show the way in which materiality becomes connected to the narrative during the act of reading. Thus, using visual and graphic means to analyse them expands the previous studies to bring attention to book layout and design details that prove fundamental for narrative development. This thesis also aims to expand this area of research by comparing the material dimension of contemporary unconventional novels with examples in their historical lineage, contrasting visual devices and strategies that create embodied reading experiences.

The visual devices used in this research as tools for design analysis are photographs, diagrams, and motion images.<sup>10</sup> The photographs illustrating this study are taken considering the materiality of the novel in question and the way in which it could be best represented through visual means. Many of the photographs are black and white in order to remove a layer of information (colour) that can sometimes be distracting. Thus, this method helps to focus the attention on the material dimension of the object and highlight the interaction with the three-dimensional body of the book. However, in the instances when colour has a fundamental role as a narrative device, the photographs are left in their original state (e.g., *S.*).

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<sup>9</sup> An exception to this is Gibbons' (2017) analysis of *S.*, in which she uses photographs and simple diagrams to represent the sequence of storyworlds in the narrative. Sadokierski (2010) also uses hand-drawn diagrams to illustrate the type of visual devices used in some novels.

<sup>10</sup> All the photographs, diagrams, and videos in this thesis are an aspect of the original research for this PhD, unless otherwise stated.

The purpose of the photographs is not only to illustrate the descriptions within the research but also to expand them and offer a more precise way to understand the reading process and the involvement required from readers. For this reason, when photographs are limited as a representational form, as they can only show a static view of the object, videos have been recorded to illustrate the reading process of these novels. Thus, videos are a further visual strategy to show how materiality is activated with the interaction from readers. These are presented in the form of QR codes that are both scannable and clickable and show digital videos of the readings.

The diagrams use graphic and architectural design techniques to represent the structure of the material dimension in the analysed examples. They appear in the form of flat plans,<sup>11</sup> axonometries, cross-sections, and outlines. Depending on what is needed to be illustrated, one technique might be chosen over the other. These diagrams aim to show what cannot be explained through either the written word or photographs and videos. Their purpose is to represent in graphic and visual terms the three-dimensional space explored in the embodied narratives of these novels.

## **Specifying the terminology for this research**

Even if materiality is not a dominant subject in literary studies, there exist numerous approaches that give different names and categories to works that pose a challenge to reading conventions. The purpose of this section is to look at some of the most relevant terms and reconsider their suitability to describe the novels and the reading experiences analysed in this research. The intention for this study is to specify the terminology for this research that will support the analysis of the material dimension in unconventional novels.

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<sup>11</sup> Flat plans are a method used in editorial design to show the overview of the pages and the flow of their content. In this thesis they are used as a way to understand visual rhythm and connections between different parts of the novels.

## Acknowledging existing terms

The kind of literature that disrupts the norm has generally been regarded as ‘experimental’. In the introduction of *The Routledge companion to experimental literature*, Bray, Gibbons and McHale (2012, 1) differentiate between ‘mainstream’ and ‘experimental’ literature, defining the latter as the ‘commitment to raising fundamental questions about the very nature and being of verbal art itself’. According to this definition, experimental would be any work that questions the limits and the possibilities of literature.

However, **experimental literature** is a problematic term. Firstly, it can be viewed as a broad category. Literature is about raising questions, interrogating the world from different perspectives, even if these arise from a ‘mainstream’ point of view. Therefore, all of literature could be labelled as experimental. Secondly, experimental literature has generally been considered unsuccessful and difficult to understand. Due to its obvious challenge to conventions, which usually involves a disruption of the traditional reading artefact, it tends to be seen as trivial. Specifically, the examples that interrogate the material dimension of the book are likely to be dismissed as superficial because the attention to the physical aspect is considered to be subsidiary to its literary content.

B. S. Johnson, an important figure for this thesis, rejected the term experimental.<sup>12</sup> He saw successful writing as that which solves writing problems. For him, the novel served as an instrument to solve certain literary difficulties, which could not always be overcome through text. As he expressed in his collection of prose *Aren’t you rather young to be writing your memoirs?* (1973), sometimes the only available way to successfully express the

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<sup>12</sup> B. S. Johnson (1933–1973) was a British novelist, poet, and literary critic, known for his unconventional use of narrative structure and the form of the book in literature. Some of Johnson’s most relevant novels, together with his approach to unconventional writing, are examined in more detail in Chapter 1.

writer's ideas would be through an unconventional form. In *The unfortunates*, for example, Johnson explored the randomness of memory through both object and narrative. To accomplish that, he unbound the twenty-seven sections of the book and put them in a box asking readers to shuffle them before reading. He was convinced that the form needed to be part of the narrative and solve a specific problem posed by a specific content:

“Experimental” to most reviewers is almost always a synonym for “unsuccessful”. I object to the word experimental being applied to my own work. Certainly I make experiments, but the unsuccessful ones are quietly hidden away and what I choose to publish is in my terms successful: that is, it has been the best way I could find of solving a particular writing problem. Where I depart from convention, it is because the convention has failed, is inadequate for conveying what I have to say. The relevant questions are surely whether each device works or not, whether it achieves what it set out to achieve, and how less good were the alternatives. So for every device I have used there is a literary rationale and a technical justification; anyone who cannot accept this has simply not understood the problem which had to be solved (Johnson, 1973, 19–20).

The sort of literary works that depart from convention and integrate a visual aspect within their narrative have been referred to with different names, depending on where the emphasis was put. Alison Gibbons (2012, 420) used the term **multimodal literature** to narrow down the concept to the instances that ‘experiment with the possibilities of book form, playing with the graphic dimensions of text, incorporating images, and testing the limits of the book as a physical and tactile object.’ An important facet of this term is that it looks at works in which ‘the process of reading becomes foregrounded and the physical act of engaging with the book is heightened’ (2012, 421). However, multimodal is a term extensively used in design discourse (especially in the UX/UI fields)<sup>13</sup> and outside the relation to literature and the novel, which could bring confusion to the discussion.

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<sup>13</sup> In digital design, user interface (UI) refers to the look and feel of a digital product and user experience (UX) applies to the user's experience with the product (Figma, n.d.). ‘Multimodal UX/UI’ refers to providing various input modes to foster a richer interactive experience with the digital products (Gruver, 2024).

N. Katherine Hayles (2002, 25) uses **technotext** to define 'literary works that strengthen, foreground, and thematize the connection between themselves as material artefacts and the imaginative realm of verbal/semiotics signifiers.' Hayles' term makes a reference to the technology of inscription and the technological fact of the book. Yet, even if it includes both print and electronic works, 'technotext' could also be a confusing term due to its connotation of electronic media. Besides, it also refers to a broad spectrum of works that are not at the centre of this research.

In a similar way, Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, Sara Rosa Espi and Inge van de Ven (2013, 93) referred to the novels that 'hover between the verbal and the visual, and foreground their paper-based, analogue materiality' as **hybrid novels**. Designer Zoe Sadokierski (2010, ix) also employed this designation to define 'novels in which graphic devices [...] are integrated into the written text.' Again, even if these definitions are closely related to the novels that are studied in this thesis, the word 'hybrid' has nowadays an indissoluble connotation with the digital, and as such, could be seen as pointing to a specific connection between analogue and digital strategies, in print and other fields, which could lead to confusion. Nonetheless, the novels in this research are works that include, connect, and combine layers from different media which, in their turn, define the reading experience of that work in question. Due to this, the term 'hybrid' is used in the following pages to define this specific aspect.

One other term that refers to works which have a 'physicality that insists on a more tactile interaction with the reader than either digital or traditional print texts' is **hyperprint**, as defined by Julia A. Galm (2019, 16). This term refers to a broad spectrum of works that 'utilize and reject digital sensibilities by employing reading strategies and habits that formed through interactions with electronic media, while simultaneously pushing against the perceived disembodied nature of e-readers to emphasise their print materiality' (2019, 2). Although the case study examples in this thesis are novels that could be labelled as hyperprint, the term is

too strongly connected to the digital realm and puts an emphasis only on one aspect of these novels.

In 1997, Espen Aarseth (1) coined the term **ergodic literature** to refer to works in which a ‘nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text.’ In so doing, they generate a performative aspect that places readers at the centre of the process of reading, which is not present in ‘conventional’ novels. The term **conventional**, which is defined in more detail in the following chapters, broadly refers to novels (either if they consist purely of text or a combination of text and illustrations) in which the performance takes place in the head of readers and does not require an interactive and physical participation from them, ‘apart from eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of the pages’ (Aarseth, 1997, 1–2). In addition, Aarseth employed the term **cybertext**, which posits ‘the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange’ (1997, 5). Even if the novels in this research can be considered as ergodic, the word ‘cybertext’ will not be used as it describes, in Aarseth’s words, ‘a broad media category’ (1997, 5). However, both concepts will be analysed further and compared with other contributions to the field.

### Proposing new terms

Even if the examples at the core of this thesis could be included in the majority of these definitions, this research aims to emphasise the fact that these novels create a specific physical solution for their narrative by disrupting conventions and foregrounding their material aspect. As Johnson would put it, these examples ‘find the conventional novel unsuitable for what [they] have to say and have therefore had to solve [their] problems unconventionally’ (Coe, 2004, 157). For this reason, in this research the term **unconventional** is chosen over ‘experimental’ to refer to novels that foreground the physical dimension and treat it as an essential part of the narrative. In these works, materiality and narrative

create an integral whole: they cannot be separated without a serious change or loss to the reading experience.

**Materiality** is an essential term in this dissertation. In the broadest sense, it refers to the physical aspect of the book. Yet, as Hayles (2002, 33) defines in *Writing machines*, materiality ‘emerges from interactions between physical properties and a work’s artistic strategies.’ In the context of this research, it refers to the book’s layout and design, and especially to how these are created, conceived and produced to encourage a specific interaction from readers with the book as a three-dimensional object, generating a particular reading experience. More specifically, it alludes to the way in which the text (or printed content) is composed and arranged, to how pages relate to each other, and to how paratexts are employed.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it is also dependent on the content and how this content is arranged on the page. Using Hayles definition once more, ‘materiality cannot be specified in advance, as if it preexisted the specificity of the work’ (2002, 23), it depends on how the work uses its own physical resources and the way in which readers interact with it.

Materiality is indispensable in unconventional novels but cannot exist in advance because it is also dependent on the book’s content, on its narrative. This distinguishes two dimensions in a book: the narrative and the material. The **narrative dimension** refers to the printed content, be it text or images, the part traditionally associated with the author and that defines the narrative world. On the other hand, the **material dimension** refers to the physical characteristics of the object: to the materiality. In unconventional novels, both dimensions are interwoven and co-dependent. Both exist simultaneously to generate a specific reading experience. This experience goes beyond the narrative level and becomes physical, which will be referred to as well as **embodied reading**.

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<sup>14</sup> Gérard Genette (1987, 2) defines paratexts as the elements in a published work that give shape to the text: ‘a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction.’



Glyn White (2005, i) employs the term **graphic device** to identify the strategies used in prose fiction ‘that range from alterations in typography to the deconstruction of the physical form of the book.’ However, the word ‘graphic’, as Jorge Frascara (2004, 4) suggests, places the emphasis on the element that is printed, drawn, or illustrated, rather than on the medium through which communication happens, which is the vision. In this sense, the expression ‘graphic device’ seems appropriate for typographical strategies that are related to the two-dimensional level of the page, but less relevant for three-dimensional devices such as the disruption of the form of the book. Therefore, the term **visual device** is used in this thesis to define the strategies employed in unconventional novels to foreground the materiality of the book.

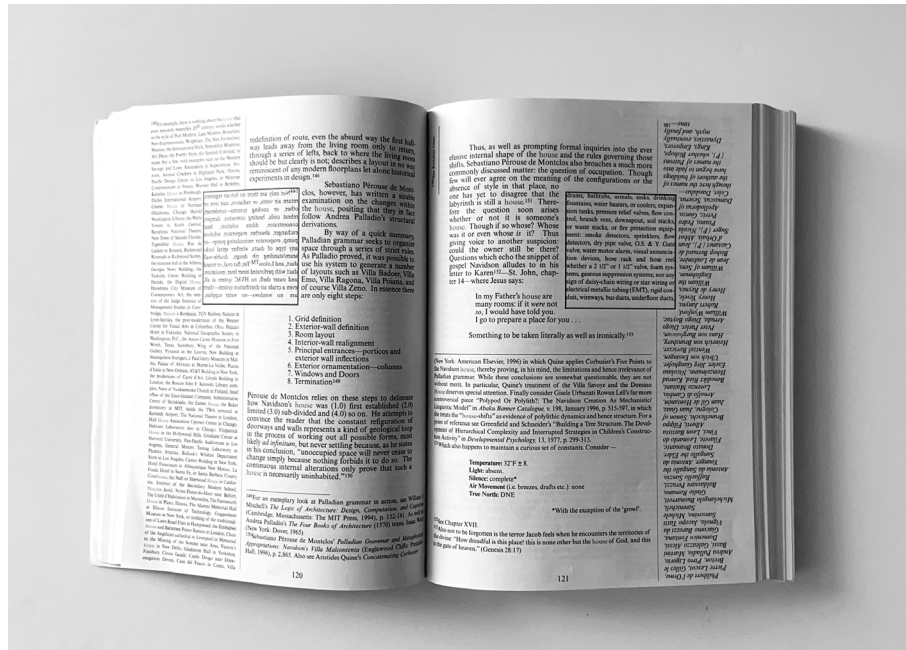
As a result, it is important to establish a difference between the ‘material’ and the ‘graphic’ dimension in a work. While the **graphic level** alludes to the individual, or rather two-dimensional, unit of the page or the spread (i.e. the typographical arrangement of the text in a page or the way in which blank space is treated in a spread), the **material level** is connected to the strategies of the graphic level and refers to the three-dimensional quality of the book, looking at the effect of layout and composition as a whole. The visual strategies employed within an unconventional novel have an effect both at graphic and material dimensions, and build its materiality. This can be illustrated by looking at some pages of Chapter IX in *House of leaves*.<sup>15</sup> The graphic level of pages 120 and 121, as Figure A shows, consists on the unexpected layout of the text, arranged in different positions and directions. This has an effect on the reading pace as it slows down readers through page composition and typographic treatment. At the same time, this creates a three-dimensional connection between the different parts, and builds the material level (e.g. the text from the column on the right needs to be read for forty

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<sup>15</sup> This is a brief explanation to illustrate the terms. The visual devices of *House of leaves* are explained in more detail in Chapter 4

pages before going back and connect with another part of the text). Consequently, readers need to interact physically with the book by rotating it and changing the reading position, which also means interacting with the materiality of the book.

**Figure A.** Spread from Chapter IX in *House of leaves* by Danielewski (2000, 120–121). The unorthodox layout of the page builds the materiality of the novel through the graphic and material levels.



This example serves as well to illustrate two other terms used in this research. In a conventional novel, the arrangement of the text ensures a linear reading, which starts on the first page and continues in uniformly to the last page: in the context of this thesis, this is referred to as **horizontal reading**. Contrary to this, unconventional novels, through nonlinearity and the play with layout and design, can also offer a **vertical reading**. In *House of leaves*, the vertical reading occurs as readers interact with the material level. For forty pages, readers are forced to read only the column on the left (Figure A), until the end of this path, in which a footnote number connects it to the column on the right, and readers rotate the book 180 degrees and retrace their steps through forty pages. This interaction changes the reading from horizontal to vertical: the act of reading itself, interacting with graphic and material levels, activates a vertical connection between the pages.

Materiality in a book, and thus both the material and graphic dimensions, is a result of a design process. In this thesis, the term

**design** is understood in Frascara's terms, defined as a 'process of conceiving, planning, projecting, coordinating, selecting, and organizing a series of elements—normally textual and visual—for the creation of visual communications' (2004, 2). As it is explained in Chapter 5, design has a significant role in unconventional novels. The material dimension in these works is conceived together with the narrative from the start, and thus the writer is involved in the creative process from an integral point of view.

This thesis studies the evolution of unconventional novels and the influence that changes in media have had on them, with a focus on the digital era. For this reason, it becomes important to distinguish between **pre-digital** and **digital** literary works. The digital era, or digital age, started approximately in 1980 with the appearance of the Internet and personal computing. However, the three main case studies in this research belong to the twenty-first century. As Chapter 2 and 3 show, the rapid evolution of digital technology during the last decade of the twentieth century, the digitalisation of information and changes in communication practices resulted in a redefinition of 'conventional' and 'unconventional' novels in the new century. The analysis of the novels in Chapter 4 exemplifies the reaction and the acceptance of digital technology and makes necessary a distinction between **digital-specific** works that are originally created to work in an online environment or meant to be read on a particular digital device. On the other hand, **print-specific** novels work only in print and have been created with their materiality in mind, and considering this as being essential for the narrative dimension. Both types of works resist translation into a different medium.

# 1 The unconventional novel before the twenty-first century

Lineage is essential to understand the evolution of the unconventional novel and its status in the twenty-first century. This chapter examines the presence of materiality in early examples of the novel and identifies Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* as a significant precursor (Section 1.1). This serves to build a definition of the three main characteristics of the unconventional novel and explain them through twentieth-century examples (Section 1.2).

## 1.1 The presence of materiality in the early novel

The appearance of the written word gave thoughts and oral exchanges a physical surface. From clay tablets to papyrus scrolls, parchment codex, and manuscripts, writing facilitated the recording of reality through tangible and durable mediums. Yet, even if ideas could be fixed on an inscription surface, handwriting conveyed a strong authorial presence implicit in the singularity and materiality of the handwritten text: no two identical copies of the same work could exist. Even within a single codex, each page, sentence, and word could present differences that spoke about the state of mind and physical presence of the scribe who had copied it. Print, on the other hand, with its mechanical nature, established uniformity from the fifteenth century onwards.<sup>16</sup> The printing press not only facilitated the reproduction of texts but also the production of more

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<sup>16</sup> Alberto Manguel (2022, 64) explains that the appearance of the written word, and later its evolution into print, gave ideas the sense of fixed knowledge: 'the printing press has created the illusion that all the readers of *Don Quixote* are reading the same book.' Likewise, Amaranth Borsuk (2018, 147) explained that 'the commodification and industrialization of print creates the illusion of text's fixity and meaning's stability.'

impersonal pages, detaching the printed outcome from the physical presence of the writer and the scribe (Watt, 1957).

The history of the novel, and in particular that of the English novel, is intimately connected to the development of print. In the late fifteenth century printing changed the conditions of book production, as Alexandra Gillespie (2017) explains. Print allowed for the reproduction of more copies of texts, increased the private and institutional accessibility and ownership of volumes, facilitated the reduction of book prices, and altered the relationship between literary production and patronage.<sup>17</sup> In particular, printing enabled the translation of medieval prose stories into English print. According to Robert Carver (2017), the first novel printed in English was William Adlington's translation of *The golden asse* by Apuleius. The fact that literacy rates increased, and books became more accessible, facilitated the development of new literary forms, which influenced the evolution of the novel as a genre in England through the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.

In this sense, the eighteenth century constitutes an important period because it sees 'the rise of the novel', as Ian Watt (1957) described. A relevant aspect of some of the novels that appear in this period is the attempt to justify the existence of the printed artefact in the hands of readers, which is done through epistolary and journal forms. White (2005) suggests that these strategies allow writers to hide the object and dissolve it into a literary background. Or, from Gabriel Josipovici's (1971, 148) point of view, the authors 'seem determined to pretend that their work is not made, but that it simply exists ... The effect is to divert attention from the fact that a novel, like a poem, is a made thing,

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<sup>17</sup> See Gillespie's (2017) 'Fiction and the origins of print' for a description of the changes between patrons, authors, and printed books, especially in the context of mid-fifteenth century Britain. Also, in *The rise of the novel*, Ian Watt (1957) gave a detailed view on how the reduction of prices that derived from printing was not a sudden change, but placed novels in the medium price range, making them more accessible.

a book, an object.’ However, as some examples in this thesis show, it could be argued that this wish to justify the artefact could be seen as an early strategy for writers to consider the materiality of the book and include it as part of the narrative.

According to Watt (1957, 196), the rise of journalism in the seventeenth century enabled the development of a form of writing that ‘was wholly dependent on printed performance’ and helped many writers of the time to develop narrative strategies that would influence other genres such as the novel (Hunter, 2017). For many early British novelists, such as Daniel Defoe, print offered a view of authority, and despite it being fact or fiction, it was used as a tool to present a truth objectively and from an impersonal perspective. In the manner of a journalistic reportage, they converted the narration into an event that prevented readers from asking if it was a made-up fact (Watt, 1957). As an example, Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) creates the illusion of the book being an objective document where the writer is merely an editor of a manuscript or journal, and readers become, in a sense, viewers of the events unfolding within the pages.<sup>18</sup>

Michael Kaufmann (1994) might be right in identifying that the intention of this strategy is to justify the form of the book and to present it within the fiction as one more document among others. He concludes that the strategy results in the subordination of the physical body of the book, which fades into a secondary part of the document, almost an invisible background. However, by using the book to justify the fiction, Defoe converts the object into part of that fiction, which becomes more physical because readers are holding the fictional artefact that justifies the narrative

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<sup>18</sup> This is evidenced already in the original title, which places Crusoe as the rightful author of the book: *The life and strange surprizing adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York. Mariner: who lived eight and twenty years, all alone in an un-inhabited island on the coast of America, near the mouth of the great river of Oroonoque; having been cast on shore by shipwreck, wherein all the men perished but himself. With an account how he was at last as strangely deliver’d by pyraters. Written by himself, 1719.*

dimension: ‘the journal is a kind of physical presence in the text, a reminder of authority and reliability anchoring Crusoe’s observations’ (Hunter, 2017, 525).<sup>19</sup>

Later in the eighteenth century, the presence of materiality becomes more apparent in the work of Samuel Richardson. The epistolary form in his novels generates a sense of involvement in readers, as if they participate in the actual exchange of letters, which are ‘the most direct material evidence for the inner life of their writers that exists’ (Watt, 1957, 191). In *Textual bodies* (1994), Kaufmann argues that with this strategy, Richardson aims for a collapse of the distance between author and reader, but at the same time the technique presents the events as simultaneous to the writing of the letters, fading towards narration and hiding the printed body of the work. However, as well as being a writer, Richardson was also a printer. This means he was always in control of both the narrative and its visual and physical representation. As Janine Barchas (1995) indicates, Richardson’s printing knowledge and his involvement in the production of his novels points towards an intentional use of the printed medium to influence and control the interpretation of readers.

Richardson’s intentional use of the visual dimension is made evident in *Clarissa* (1748). In this novel, he exploits the resources of print and his printing knowledge to explore the interpretive possibilities of marginalia, indices, dots, and ornaments as mechanisms to guide readers and grab their attention through the visual presentation of the text. His innovation is not one in technology, as he uses what is available in his time, but in technique. According to Barchas (1995, 161), Richardson conceives ‘new interpretive possibilities for the novel’s visual rendering through innovative applications of established print conventions.’

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<sup>19</sup> Chapter 4 shows that J. J. Abrams employs a similar strategy to create a fictional three-dimensional narrative in his 2013 novel *S.*

Richardson's involvement with both narrative and visual dimensions in the novel went beyond publication. This is made evident in the fact that before publishing and while working on the novel, Richardson circulated manuscripts with interleaved blank pages for his friends and advisers to comment on them and gather their impressions. Anne C. Henry (2006) explains that interleaving or inserting blank pages into books was a common practice during the eighteenth century (and especially towards the second half of it). Books were sold 'stitched in wrappers, in boards or in unbound sheets which could be bound to a reader's own specifications, the eighteenth-century reader could also arrange for them to be bound with blank leaves to be inserted among the printed' (2006, 365). After his friends had made the comments, Richardson took the notes into consideration and altered the text with supplementary material or suggestions. Once the novels were being sold, he kept altering their content and appearance. This ended up creating what Thomas Keymer (2017, 70) defined as a 'malleable' work. This idea, which Keymer identified with the instability of manuscript, and Leah Price (2000, 24), as 'an aggregate of modular parts rather than an indissoluble whole', could be compared to the concept of the networked novel that has developed as a result of the digital era (which will be studied in more detail in the following chapters): novels that are subjected to readers' comments, participation, and edition.

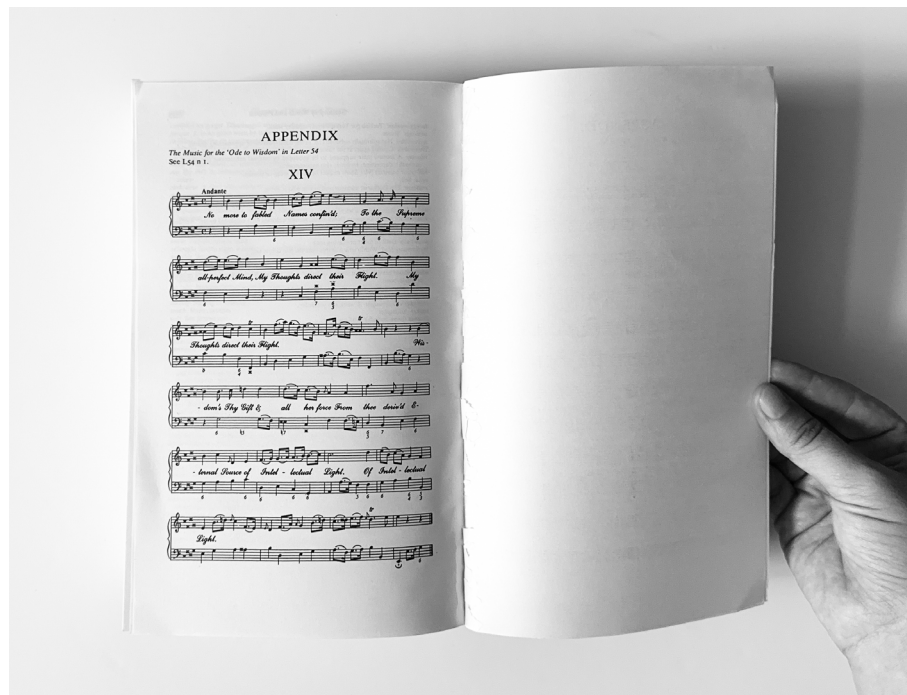
The presence of materiality in *Clarissa* is made evident especially in two details. One is the musical score, a page that originally unfolded to more than twice the size of any other page in the book but that has disappeared from later editions of the novel (Figure 1.1). In a letter to Elizabeth Carter (18 December 1747), which Barchas (1995, 82) presents in her research, Richardson describes the way in which the musical score calls attention to the book itself as 'not expected'. In fact, the absence of the page in some original editions suggests that readers might have torn it from the book to play it on the harpsichord (Barchas, 1995). The purpose of the device is to disrupt the physical boundaries of the text and simultaneously overlap three levels of content: the oversized engraved page, the



verbal text of the fiction, and the auditory material of the score. This page entreats readers to participate within the narrative, which at this point it can be read, performed, or sung:

Richardson violates a novel-reader's expectations by self-consciously incorporating a familiar cultural artefact into the novel. [...] Richardson's musical page calls attention to itself because it is visually and genetically inconsistent with the rest of the novel's format (Barchas, 1995, 107).

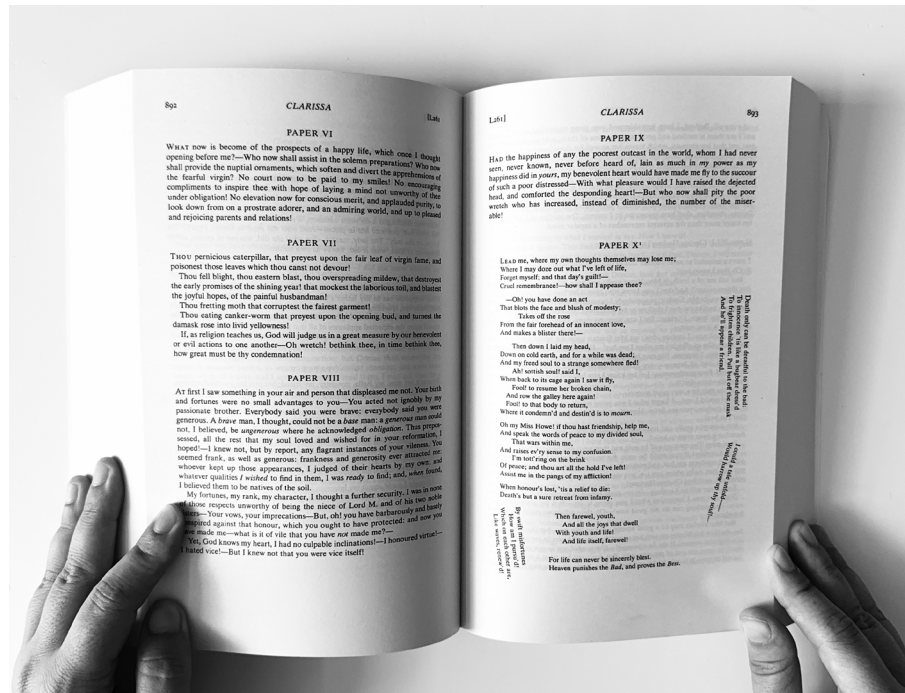
**Figure 1.1** The musical score in the 2004 edition from *Clarissa* by Penguin Classics (Richardson, 1748, 1534). The score appears on the last page and is resized to match the volume's format.



This concern with the visual aspect of the novel is also made obvious in Paper X in *Clarissa*. On this page, Richardson makes an unexpected use of layout, playing with margins and the position of text to represent the rage and distress of the main character (Clarissa Harlowe) after suffering a rape (Figure 1.2). Paper X belongs to a sequence of papers that are presented by the character who enacts the violation (Robert Lovelace). As Barr (2019, 200) observed, it is a gathering of 'recovered texts', scraps, and fragments that Clarissa has written and torn down in her distress:

What she writes, she tears, and throws the papers in fragments under the table, either not knowing what she does, or disliking it: Then gets up, wrings her hands, weeps, and shifts her seat all around the room: Then returns to the table, sits down, and writes again (Richardson, 1747, 889).

**Figure 1.2** Paper X in the 2004 edition from *Clarissa* by Penguin Classics (Richardson, 1748, 893). The layout has been resized to fit within the margins of the edition, whilst in the original Richardson disrupts the expected margins of the novel.



The page layout in Paper X replicates at the same time the fragmentation of the scraps and the agitated state of mind of their author. By distributing the text in multiple directions and creating a collage-like sense, Richardson not only defies the linearity of the discourse and the conventions of printing of his time, but also makes an early anticipatory move towards the visual and typographical experiments that avant-garde poets and artists would conduct in the first decades of the twentieth century, especially futurists and dadaists, together with figures like Apollinaire and Mallarmé.

However, Richardson's interest in the visual and material aspects of his novels more directly precedes another major literary work of the eighteenth century concerned with readers' participation and the very act of reading. As the following section will show, Laurence Sterne's *The life and opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–1767) constitutes a fundamental referent for the novels that later on will explore the inclusion of materiality as part of their narratives.

### 1.1.1 *Tristram Shandy*: an early hybrid novel

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) defines the term ‘hybrid’ as a thing resulting from the combination of two different elements. In this sense, the novel could be considered a hybrid genre in itself, as it emerged as the evolution and integration of older literary genres, such as romances, pseudo-historical prose, epic, fables and satire.<sup>20</sup> Due to the blend of memories and journalistic narrative, Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* could be labelled as hybrid. In order to narrow down the definition for the purpose of this research, a hybrid novel could be seen as one that results from the combination of narrative and material dimensions. Designer Zoe Sadokierski (2002, ix) defines hybrid novels as ‘novels in which graphic devices like photographs, drawings and experimental typography are integrated into the written text’. In these works ‘word and image combine to create a text that is neither purely written, nor purely visual.’ From this perspective, the term hybrid refers to works that include, connect, and combine layers from different media which, in their turn, define the reading experience of that work in question.

Looking back at *Clarissa*, it is possible to identify qualities of hybridity in Richardson’s typographical play in Paper X and in the inclusion of the musical score. Furthermore, there exists one eighteenth century work that can be considered a hybrid novel due to the way in which it combines different writing and printing traditions. *The life and opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* shows Laurence Sterne’s ability to create ‘a hybrid product of the eighteenth-century print shop’ (Williams, 2021, 7) that brings together different printing practices and book conventions from other genres of the period.

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<sup>20</sup> In ‘English fiction and the ancient novel’, Robert Carver (2017) reviews the influence of the fiction of classical antiquity in the emergence of the novel from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries.

*Tristram Shandy* is a nine-volume opus written between 1759 and 1767, regarded as influential for the development of the novel and as a source of inspiration for numerous writers. Contrary to the literary tradition of the time, the work is not focused on a faithful representation of the life and adventures of its hero. Instead, it is a story about interruption and digression, which dismantles the linearity of a conventional plot and creates a heterogeneous piece. The novel fluctuates through subjective ramifications, interior adventures of the mind and movements of the subconscious (Schiff, 1998). The disruption of conventions goes far beyond the narrative dimension of the novel and is also brought by its visual and material levels. For this reason, Peter De Voogd (1988, 383–384) describes it as a ‘co-existential verbo-visual whole’, referring to the closest relationship that can be created between word and image, when the ‘text’s verbal and visual elements are so intimately interwoven that they form an aesthetic whole’. By including and simultaneously challenging different writing, printing, and reading conventions of his time, Sterne creates a hybrid work in which ‘text and picture cannot be divorced from one another without serious loss’ (De Voogd, 1988, 384).

Conventional narrative fiction has been defined over the centuries with a linear structure and lack of visual intrusions. In a standard novel, each page looks more or less the same as the others, connected by the uniformity of page design, which renders reading consistent and avoids distractions on the readers’ side. In *Tristram Shandy*, however, Sterne interferes with the regularity of the continuous text to foreground the material dimension and, as Schiff (1998, 47) rightly noted, ‘[makes] the act of reading explicitly and consciously physical’. Sterne experiments both with language and materiality, employing visual and printing resources available in his time to create an unfamiliar form, an unconventional literary structure that readers need to learn how to navigate. As De Voogd (1988) explains, the result is a novel in which readers cannot know what they will encounter in the following page, as it dismantles expectations at every turn of the leaf, both at narrative and visual levels. Sterne’s

intention is to make readers conscious of the very process of reading and to avoid reading being seen as a passive activity:

'Tis to rebuke a vicious taste which has crept into thousands besides herself; —of reading straight forwards, more in quest of the adventure, than of the deep erudition and knowledge which a book of this cast, if read over as it should be, would infallibly impart with them (Sterne, 1759, 48).

According to Helen Williams (2021), at this point in the evolution of print, readers had become used to a standard look in prose narrative. Therefore, by manipulating navigational elements in the pages, Sterne not only defies readerly expectations but also hinders a straightforward reading experience. This is the case, for example, of catchwords. This reading tool had become a convention in printed texts and helped to guide reading by repeating the last word of a page at the bottom of a verso and at the top of the following recto. Sterne breaks the invisibility of catchwords and manipulates them by opening the possibility for the device to carry narrative meaning. He uses catchwords to set a certain narrative expectation that is then frustrated on the next page.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, Sterne subtly plays with page numbering by subverting the convention of placing odd numbers in right-hand pages when in Volume 4 he inserts Chapter XXV before Chapter XI. As De Voogd (1988, 385) explains, later on, the missing Chapter XXV provokes a jump in page numbering from 146 to 156 (Figure 1.3), which appears on the right-hand page and from then on until the end the volume appears to be misnumbered.<sup>22</sup>

The subversion of navigational and paratextual elements becomes more evident in Volume 9, when, after Chapter XXV, Sterne inserts two blank chapters: XVIII and XIX. The two chapters appear

<sup>21</sup> In *Laurence Sterne and the eighteenth-century book*, Williams (2021) describes in more detail some instances in which the catchwords are subverted and offer unexpected narrative meaning. De Voogd (1988) also describes this strategy in the article '*Tristram Shandy* as aesthetic object'.

<sup>22</sup> In the Oxford's Classics 1998 edition the play with the chapters and the misnumbering of the pages have been eliminated.

on the recto and verso sides of the same leaf. Each blank page maintains the conventional paratexts that make them recognisable as chapters: headings, page numbers, catchwords (Figure 1.4). Williams (2021) refers to these blank chapters as an example of how catchwords subvert readers' expectations by creating the impression, with the word 'CHAP', that what will be found on the next page will be a regular chapter opening with its expected text. Contrary to this, in the 1998 edition by Oxford Classics, the blank chapters appear as facing pages and the catchwords have been removed from them (Figure 1.5).

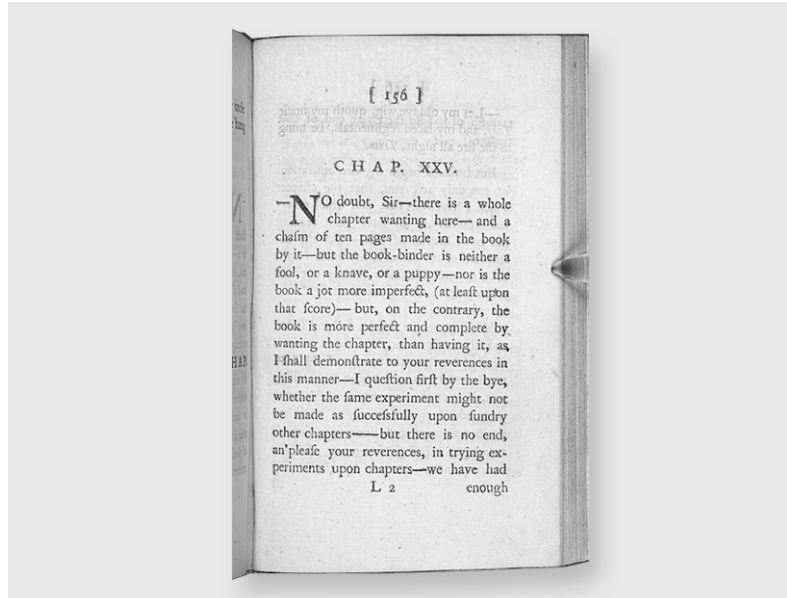
By placing Chapters XVIII and XIX after Chapter XXV, Sterne not only subverts book conventions at narrative and textual levels, but also plays with the novel as a three-dimensional object. Readers become aware of the page as a visual space and of the book as a physical object. The blank chapters force readers to see that the regular sequence of the novel has been broken and that other ways of reading are possible.

Punctuation and typography also play an important role in making readers aware of the act of reading. Sterne uses hyphens, dashes, asterisks, manicules, crosses, and dots, as graphic devices that expand the meaning of the text. In particular, the use of dashes and asterisks is especially relevant for the way in which Sterne goes beyond their conventional usage to mark ellipsis and footnotes (De Voogd, 1988), with an obvious wish to interrupt the text and make them impossible to ignore. As Roger Moss (1981) points out, Sterne also uses hyphens and dashes as silent signifiers, visual devices that mark emptiness and a silent space. In this sense, blank space between paragraphs is used as a means of punctuation, bringing the attention of the reader back to the physical page, and acts as another form of establishing narrative rhythm.<sup>23</sup>

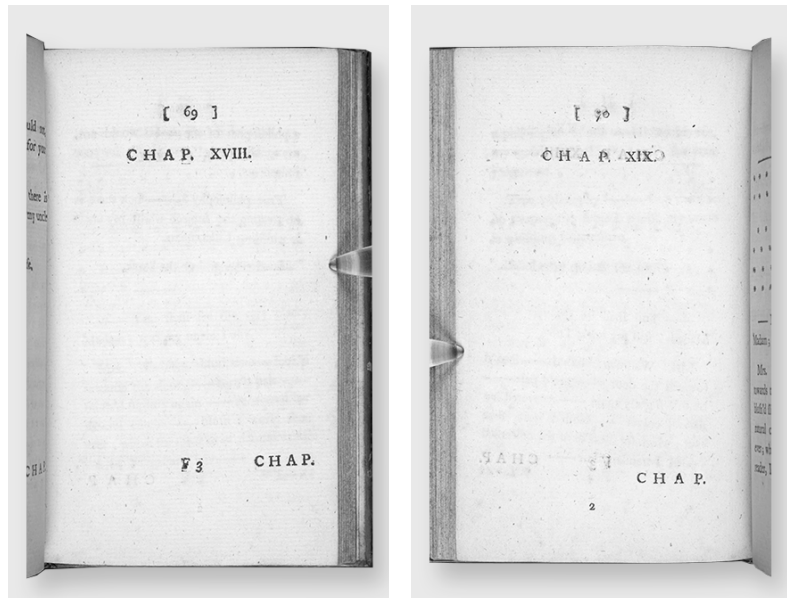
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<sup>23</sup> As book artist Keith Smith claims 'every writer uses the space between words, between lines as pauses for rhythm. Layout of the page may also be a form of punctuation' (1991, 16).

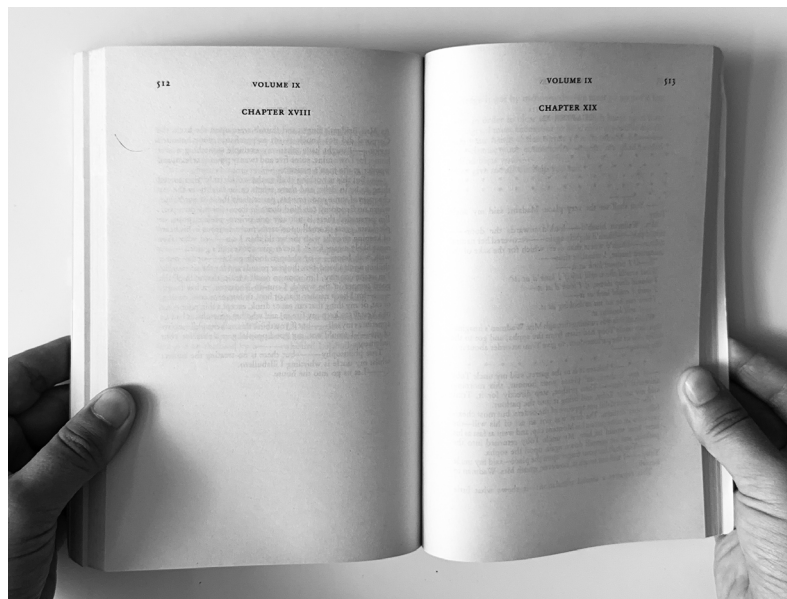
**Figure 1.3** Chapter XXV in *Tristram Shandy* (Sterne, 1761, 156). This chapter appears before chapter XI and disrupts the conventional numbering of the pages, placing an even number on the recto.



**Figure 1.4** Chapters XVIII and XIX in *Tristram Shandy* (Sterne, 1770, 156). In the first edition from 1770, the blank chapters appear on the recto and verso of the same page. They can be recognised as chapters because they preserve the page number, the heading and the catchwords.



**Figure 1.5** Chapters XVIII and XIX in the 1998 Oxford Classics edition of *Tristram Shandy* (512–513). In this edition, the blank chapters appear facing each other on a spread. They are placed in what would be their expected location after chapter XVII and not after chapter XXV as originally devised.



According to Kaufmann (1995, 14), ‘readers usually see the printed body of a book only when some irregularity—a misspelling or a broken character—calls their attention to it’. Similarly, Moss (1981, 194) describes the typographical interventions in Sterne not only as strategies to make readers aware of punctuation, but also as uncomfortable devices that hinder reading: ‘Just as you cannot be conscious of the mechanics of walking without being in danger of tripping up, so these devices, once focused on, make reading dangerously ludicrous and uncomfortable.’ However, a definition of this kind seems to look at the visual interventions from an incomplete point of view, forgetting that they are part of the narrative and belong intrinsically to its construction. These devices are more than mere visual plays and Sterne uses them intentionally to create interruptions and digressions. The ‘difficult’ experience is necessary in order to create an embodied narrative that brings the act of reading to the forefront. Sterne uses printing in an unconventional way, as a tool to represent a narrative idea and challenge readers to determine what is happening within the unfamiliar form.

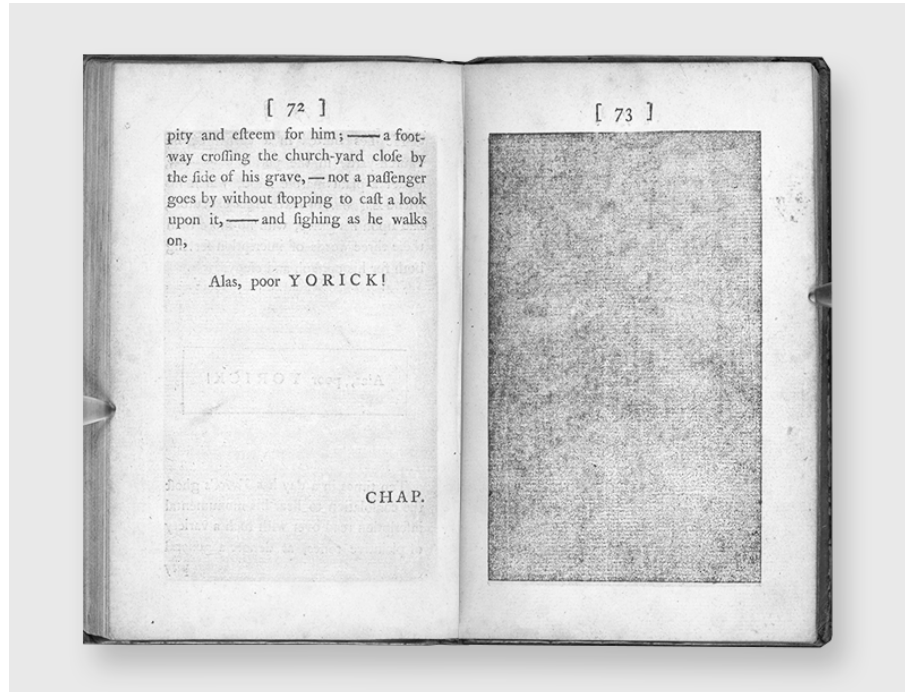
Despite the uncommon use of visual devices in the novel, Sterne does not invent but employs existing conventions in an unexpected manner. In order to innovate with the form of the eighteenth-century novel, he relies on reading, writing and printmaking traditions of his time. As Williams (2021, 14–15) explains, he was well-versed not only in novel conventions, but also in every aspect of book production, copyright debates and ‘in codices from multiple disciplines and their varied experiments in the visual presentation of data.’

This is well evidenced in one of the most famous devices in *Tristram Shandy*: the black pages that close Chapter XII in Volume 1. The black pages represent and commemorate the death of Parson Yorick. A description of his death is followed by the phrase ‘Alas, poor YORICK!’, which is framed within a text block. After turning the page, the phrase appears again but without the frame, followed by the catchword that closes the chapter



(CHAP.) and on the facing recto page a blacked-out rectangle that corresponds with the type-area, which is then repeated on the verso (Figure 1.6). Due to the double-sided nature of the device, the black page acquires a three-dimensional quality and creates an embodied halt in the continuity of the narrative. It is a suspension, a mournful silence that accompanies the turning of the page.<sup>24</sup>

**Figure 1.6** The black page of *Tristram Shandy*, vol. 1 (Sterne, 1759, 73). The black leaf is introduced by the expression of ‘Alas, poor Yorick!’ (72).



From a twenty-first-century perspective, a black printed page does not seem a big achievement. Creating one nowadays would be as easy as drawing a rectangle on a chosen computer programme, filling it with black colour and pressing ‘print’. However, in the eighteenth century, printing an entire blacked-out area in a book could be a more laborious task. As De Voogd (2021) explains, the black leaf could have been considered separately and glued to the volume. Moreover, composition or inking rollers, which facilitate the even application of ink onto the type surface, were not to be invented until 1810 (de Voogd, 2021). The black page could have

<sup>24</sup> For this reason, Williams (2021, 64) explains that ‘leaf’ is a better term to refer to the black page (and therefore to the blank and marbled pages as well), because it makes a direct allusion to its three-dimensional quality, ‘in that the term “page” technically refers to the surface of the leaf, of which there are two.’

been produced from a wood block onto which ink was applied through slapping leather pads. Williams (2021, 40) also suggests that it could ‘have either been printed using blank blocks or with the reverse of ones already engraved.’ What becomes clear is that the insertion of a black page in the novel is a conscious decision from the writer’s side and a conscious effort from the printers.

Even if the way in which Sterne employs the black page is innovative within the genre of the novel at the time, the representation of death and grief in print is not a new thing. As Williams (2021) explains in a chapter dedicated to the lineage of funereal representation, the death of the eighteen-year-old Henry, Prince of Wales, in 1612, saw the proliferation of mourning literature and the appearance of commemorative works that experimented with woodcuts, ink and paper, to produce areas of black ink. A good example of this, and one that resembles Sterne’s the most, is Joshua Sylvester’s *Lachrimae lachrimarum* (1612) and the use of rectangular woodcuts to create black pages that leave margins on three of their sides (Figure 1.7).<sup>25</sup> This results in Sterne referencing ‘the production process of traditional funereal iconography while also referencing the reuse of woodcut technology in the popular press’ (Williams, 2021, 40).

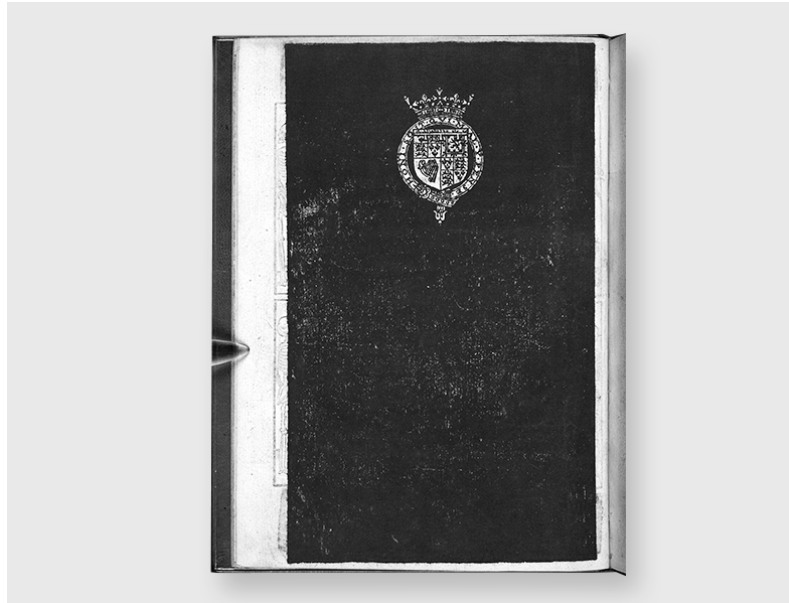
The tradition of commemorative publications continued during the eighteenth century in the form of ceremonial pamphlets for the deaths of royalty and nobility. According to Williams (2021), these publications typeset their pages creatively to represent the order of processions and, in many cases, they also used black lines to represent and symbolise the black box of the coffin (Figure 1.8).<sup>26</sup>

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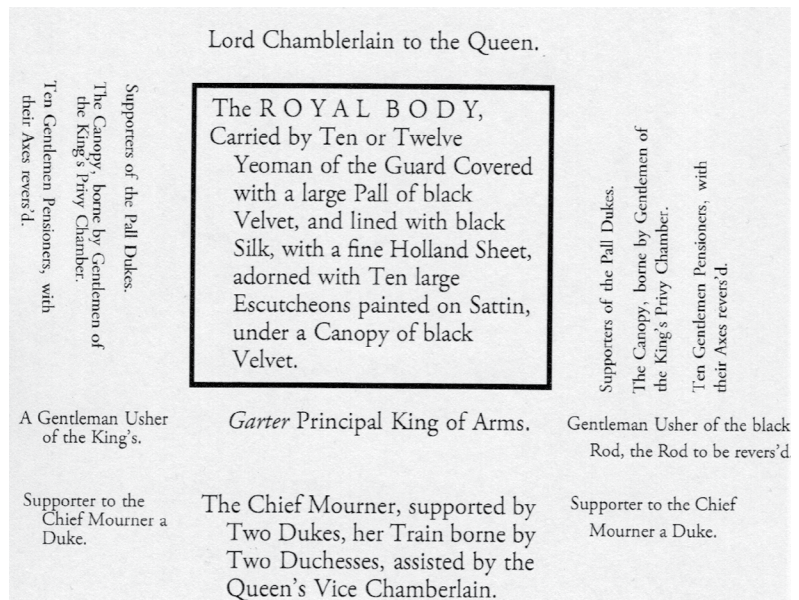
<sup>25</sup> Other examples mentioned by Williams that also present examples of black pages are the *Three elegies on the most lamented death of Prince Henrie* by Cyril Tourneur, John Webster and Thomas Heywood (1613); and *Great Britaine, all in blacke* by John Taylor (1612).

<sup>26</sup> Williams uses the term ‘black leadings’ to refer to these lines (2021, 44). However, ‘leads’ could not be printed at the same time as the type, and a possibility exists that these would have been created with rules. On the other hand, the precise alignment of the lines in Figure 1.8 suggests the possibility that the black square was a continuous line printed from a single woodcut.

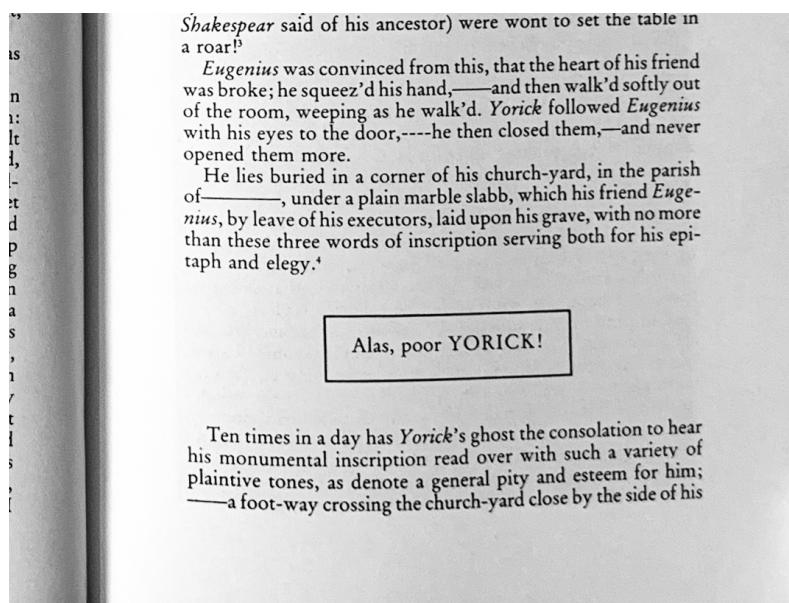
**Figure 1.7** Joshua Sylvester's *Lachrimae Lachrimarum* (1612). The black pages nearly cover the whole extension of the paper.



**Figure 1.8** The ceremonial proceeding to a private interment of Her Late Most Excellent Majesty Queen Caroline (1737). Typographic representation is used to indicate the order of processions in major funerals. In this case, the coffin is represented by creating a frame of black leadings.



**Figure 1.9** Yorick's death in *Tristram Shandy* (1998, 27). Sterne includes the tradition of the black borders and represents Yorick's body within a coffin.



This practice extended further during the 1750s, when black mourning borders were widely available as a carved box and could be used habitually in newspapers. By enclosing ‘Alas, poor YORICK!’ within a black box that also represents the deceased character’s tomb, Sterne is borrowing from an established tradition of commemoration and ceremonial representation (Figure 1.9). He exaggerates these practices, which by that point had become quite unimaginative, and plays with conventions to produce an innovative use of the black page in the novel.

The black page represents *Tristram Shandy*’s hybrid quality as it utilises conventions from different genres to create an unexpected and innovative narrative feature. By using imagery typical in various print publications, Sterne demonstrates an understanding that the eighteenth-century novel was not ‘an artefact which developed in isolation from other media’ (Williams, 2021, 7). He interrogates the materiality of the narrative, foregrounding it by importing standard printing practices from other genres and their own associations. He uses tradition in order to disrupt tradition, thus challenging the desire of the eighteenth-century novel to offer a linear and coherent sequence of events.

### 1.1.2 *Tristram Shandy*: precursor of unconventional form

Since it was first published, *Tristram Shandy* has been a source of inspiration for numerous novelists. Writers such as Virginia Woolf, Raymond Queneau, Michel Butor, and Georges Perec expressed an interest in Sterne’s work. In particular, Italo Calvino referred to it as ‘the progenitor of all vanguard novels of our century’ (De Voogd and Neubauer, 2004, 216).<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Sterne’s digressive narrative and

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<sup>27</sup> *The reception of Laurence Sterne in Europe*, edited by Peter de Voogd and John Neubauer in 2004, helps to understand Sterne’s influence when his work is translated and introduced in different countries. Additionally, Mariano D’Ambrosio’s (2018) ‘Black pages and blank pages: Shandean visual devices in contemporary fiction’ also gives a good summary of *Tristram Shandy*’s influence on numerous twentieth-century authors.

explorations of form constitutes an influence on many works that since then have challenged the conventions of writing and reading.

In 1917, Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky referred to *Tristram Shandy* as the ideal example of a novel that made readers conscious of the very act of reading: 'by violating the form [of the novel], [Sterne] forces us to attend to it; and, for him, this awareness of the form through its violation constitutes the content of the novel' (30–31). By the end of the twentieth century, in *Writing space*, Jay David Bolter (1991) identified those characteristics in *Tristram Shandy* as an anticipation of electronic writing. This statement was based on Sterne's interest in 'contravening the natural use of print' (1991, 134) and establishing a dialogue with readers, inviting them to have a share in the building of the narrative. Bolter went further with his affirmation and enhanced the accomplishments of electronic writing, which according to him, Sterne could only hint to: 'Electronic writing puts its reader in the same position. But Sterne can only pretend to offer the reader a chance to participate in the construction of the text' (1991, 134).

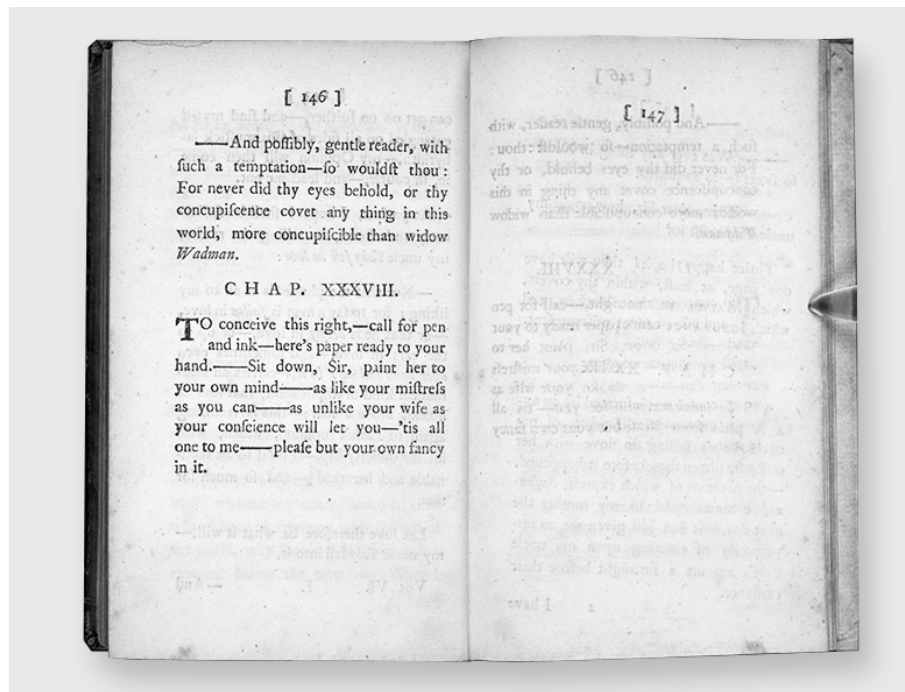
Bolter is right in seeing in *Tristram Shandy* a precursor to the challenge of the conventions to print and the book in the twentieth century, which eventually, as the following chapters explain, would be influenced by electronic and digital technology. However, referring to Sterne's work as an anticipation of electronic writing seems excessive. Leaving aside that in the eighteenth century the term 'electronic' was obviously still to be born, the fact that Sterne subverted narrative habits of his time and offered readers the possibility to participate in the text, need not necessarily connect the novel with the electronic practices that would appear with the computer more than two centuries later. Instead, this thesis argues that by challenging the conventions of the novel, *Tristram Shandy* constitutes a precursor to the characteristics of unconventional form.

As said, a marked characteristic of *Tristram Shandy* is the attention the novel demands from readers, who are actively involved in the

development of the narrative and are required to interact with it. This is clearly seen in the renowned blank page (Figure 1.10). In Volume 4, the appearance of the blank page not only constitutes a visual interruption to the text, but also an invitation for readers to draw Widow Wadman on it and to participate explicitly in the construction of the narrative:

To conceive this right,—call for pen and ink—here's paper ready to your hand.—Sit down, Sir, paint her to your own mind—as like your mistress as you can—as unlike your wife as your conscience will let you—'tis all one to me—please but your own fancy in it (Sterne, 1959, 376).

**Figure 1.10** The blank page in the first edition of *Tristram Shandy*, vol. 6 (1762, 147) visually interrupts the text and asks readers to participate in the narrative.



In order to include readers, Sterne first dismantles the expected structure of the narrative. He ‘violates’ the form, to put it in Shklovsky’s words, and foregrounds its physical dimension. The blank page is in itself an unexpected device that makes visible the paper, the page, and the material dimension, which is then interwoven with the narrative. This idea is reinforced by the fact that the blank page retains the page number in the same position as the previous ones, and therefore acts as one empty page for readers to fill. By interrupting the text in this way, Sterne creates an embodied reading experience. He generates a narrative dependent



of its own materiality, or in De Voogd's (1988) terms, builds a 'co-existential verbo-material' whole.<sup>28</sup>

The device that best represents Sterne's intentions to disrupt the narrative and foreground the material dimension is the famous marbled page (Figure 1.11). Contrary to the conventional placement of marbled paper in books, Sterne places the marbled leaf in the middle of Volume 3. Thus, he interrupts the continuous progress of the text and disrupts the predictable composition and structure of the physical object:

—Read, read, read, read, my unlearned reader! read—or by the knowledge of the great saint *Paraleipomenon*—I tell you before-hand, you had better throw down the book at once; for without much reading, by which your reverence knows I mean much knowledge, you will no more be able to penetrate the moral of the next marbled page (motley emblem of my work!) than the world with all its sagacity has been able to unravel the many opinions, transactions, and truths which still lie mystically hid under the dark veil of the black one (Sterne, 1760, 180).

**Figure 1.11** The marbled page in the first edition of *Tristram Shandy*, vol. 3 (1760, 169). This page provides evidence of the break of the conventional structure of the book and constitutes the most visual digression of the entire novel.



<sup>28</sup> As chapters 2 and 3 will explain, this embodied quality is what will constitute a difference with electronic writing.

At the time of *Tristram Shandy*'s publication, the marbled page is an unexpected device to be found inserted within the pages of a novel. Even nowadays, with the possibility to produce such kind of images digitally, it would be surprising to find a hand-marbled page in a book. In the eighteenth century, several reasons accounted for the unexpectedness of this feature. First of all, illustrations were rare in literary first editions (Williams, 2021). Due to their cost and the printer's effort, they were usually added in later versions, after seeing if the book was successful enough. It was even more unusual to encounter coloured illustrations within these works. Besides, in newspaper advertisements it was common to inform readers if they should expect to find any colour within a published work, which obviously added to the cost of it.<sup>29</sup> In the case of *Tristram Shandy*, the marbled page was not advertised, as Sterne's works were usually 'advertised in the most basic manner, never revealing the surprises that each instalment might hold' (Williams, 2021, 124). Therefore, its earliest purchasers would have been startled to find an expensive colour image that consisted not only of one but of four coloured inks.<sup>30</sup>

In the mid-eighteenth century, marbled paper was available in England, but mainly used for bookbinding and sometimes the marbling appeared on the leather of hardbacks (Williams, 2021). Therefore, the marbled leaf that readers found unexpectedly sewn inside Volume 3 of the novel would have connoted the outside of books to them. Disregarding conventions, Sterne dismantles the standard structure of the novel and places its wrapping in the middle of it, which reflects 'the Shandean habit of telling a story not from beginning to end' (Schiff, 1998, 83). In this way, the

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<sup>29</sup> Williams (2021) explains that eighteenth-century readers were most likely to only encounter colour on title pages, and this was usually the colour red. Besides, colour was even more infrequent within literary fictional texts. The common genres where coloured illustrations could usually be found were science and fine art.

<sup>30</sup> According to W. G. Day (1972, 144), there were five colours if the white base is considered: 'All the marbled leaves I have seen in the first edition contain five colours: a base of white or gall, red, olive green, yellow, and white or gall again.'



material dimension of the book is included as part of the narrative. This becomes more significant if considered from the perspective of its time, as the volumes were sold sewn together but not bound, which reinforces the idea of a book that is missing its outside covers and these are found within the pages. The marbled leaf appearing subversively as page 169 manifestly states that *Tristram Shandy* 'is not just a narrative but a three-dimensional artwork of which he [Sterne] is the designer' (Williams, 2021, 116).

Producing the marbled leaf was, with all probability, a challenging task. At the time, the easiest way for the marbled page to be introduced in the book would have been to cut to size already existing marbled paper and to sew it to the volume. Marbling was not a common practice in England, and in 1760, the year in which Sterne published the marbled page, it was still in its infancy in the country.<sup>31</sup> As Diane Patterson (1989) argues, one of Sterne's major achievements with the marbled page was to be able to find an English marbler to manufacture eight thousand marbled pages for *Tristram Shandy*. To produce a marbled page that matched the type-area of the book and left margins blank, the marbler had to use sheets of paper that matched the size of the volume and fold the margins to leave the identical rectangle of the print area. After marbling the central rectangle, removing the sheet, and waiting for the page to dry, the margins would be folded in the other direction and the process repeated for the other side; afterwards the page numbers were hand stamped. The first edition consisted of around four thousand copies, which means the marbling process had to be repeated at least eight thousand times. Patterson (1989) and Day (1972) both point out that, due to the fact that the marbler had to skim the remaining colour from the surface of the size (the thickened water on which the colour floats) after a piece of paper had touched it, to make the next marbled page 'the colours had

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<sup>31</sup> As Williams (2021, 114) notes, in 1759, the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce 'sought to help establish large-scale manufacture of marbled paper.'

to be thoroughly stirred, then dropped upon the size, swirled or combed into a pattern and so on' (1989, xvi–xvii). In this way, it becomes impossible to create two identical marbled pages, and thus each marbled page in *Tristram Shandy* is unique.

With the marbled page, the material body of the book is included as part of the narrative and also transmits the individuality of the work by means of a 'mass-produced' object. Regan (2002, 308) argues that even though Sterne's invitation to readers to play and be involved with the book generates an individualised experience of the text, 'the productive multiplication of copies again ensures that the texts purchased by separate readers will remain identical'. It is through the uniqueness of the handmade marbled page that Sterne accomplishes originality and individuality, and ensures that the experience of reading each book will be different for each reader.

This singularity is also related to reasons of security. According to Patterson (1989) and Williams (2021), in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were some instances in which marbling was used as an anti-counterfeiting tool. This was the case of the marbled bank notes used briefly by the Bank of England, and the marbled packages used to authenticate medical products.<sup>32</sup> It is not possible to know for sure if Sterne included a marbled leaf within his novel as a way to avoid forgery. However, his concern with plagiarism is evidenced by his signing 'the first and second editions of volume 5 and the first editions of volumes 7 and 9' (Williams, 2021, 13). De Voogd (1988, 383) estimated that Sterne did probably sign around 12,750 copies. Therefore, the uniqueness of the marbled page ensures Sterne the claim of ownership of his volumes.

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<sup>32</sup> Williams (2021, 124) explains that from 31 July until 14 August 1695, the Bank of England had, in circulation, bank notes that had a marbled edge and 'could be verified as genuine when [...] returned to the bank for payment.' Apart from this brief episode, marbling continued to be used as fraud prevention, also in relation to the packaging and marketing of medicines. Most interestingly, Williams connects the latter with the fact that the marbled page appears 'sewn or pasted into a volume devoted to wounded bodies, a book collection of mock-learning on noses and concerns over nose jobs' (2021, 136).

As with many of his print explorations, Sterne took existing techniques that were used for different purposes and pushed them in innovative ways within the literary genre.

A third characteristic evidenced by the marbled leaf is the involvement of the author in the creation of the novel, not only at a narrative level but also at a material one. Sterne was not a printer himself, although he had much experience in printing, and became thoroughly involved in the composition of his novel. He worked hand-in-hand with printers and publishers to oversee and manage the production process of his *Tristram Shandy*, meticulously correcting every proof and making sure the visual features of the work were as he intended them to be. Lewis P. Curtis (1932) proposed that Robert Dodsley was probably not the first printer of *Tristram Shandy* and that the first two volumes were, in all likelihood, printed in York.<sup>33</sup> However, in 1759 Sterne wrote to Dodsley in London trying to induce him to buy his manuscript, which shows Sterne's interest in controlling the outcome of the novel: 'The book shall be printed here, and the impression sent up to you; for as I live at York, and I shall correct every proof myself, it shall go perfect into the world' (Curtis, 1935, 80). As De Voogd (1988, 383) explains, from the beginning Sterne devoted his attention to composition and typographical detail, writing to his publishers with demands 'regarding format, quality of paper, type, and layout'.<sup>34</sup> Later on, when Dodsley published Sterne's volumes, he travelled from Yorkshire to London to see 'each volume through the press himself' (De Voogd, 1988, 383).

Sterne's involvement becomes especially apparent in the marbled page. Not only because, with all probability, he paid for the book's

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<sup>33</sup> Curtis (1935, 777) explained that there existed a general belief that the first two editions of *Tristram Shandy* were printed by the same printers of the third and fourth volumes (i.e. R. and J. Dodsley).

<sup>34</sup> As De Voogd (1988, 383) also explained, Sterne's involvement and authorial control are especially made evident in the letter he wrote to Caesar Ward, who published his satirical pamphlet 'A political romance' in 1759: 'do not presume to alter or transpose one Word, not rectify one false Spelling, nor so much as add or diminish one Comma or Tittle.'

most famous feature, as he did with many other parts of his novel;<sup>35</sup> but also because the inclusion of the marbled leaf within the book would require forward planning, from his side and also from the side of the printers. As Patterson (1989) suggests, Sterne might have had the skill to measure the text that would be necessary to fill a page (in this case an octavo page), which could have been achieved by calculating the number of words or characters in a page. Thus, the fact that the text from the page that introduces the marbling fills half of the type area could suggest that Sterne planned for the marbled leaf to be in the exact position as it appears.

Moreover, the fact that the marbled pages are numbered (169 and 170) indicates that this is not a regular illustration appearing as an unnumbered addition, as was the convention at the time. Williams (2021, 117) explains that the page had to be ‘added to an octavo sheet, increasing the size of the gathering’, which means a disruption in the conventional pagination from the printers. Sterne disrupts not only the structure in the creation of his novel, but also of the production of the eighteenth-century book. It is not surprising that Williams (2021, 116) referred to Sterne as the ‘designer’ of a three-dimensional work. Even if the eighteenth century was yet to see the first steps towards the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of the concept of ‘design’, it is possible to recognise a design intention in Sterne’s involvement with the material dimension of his novel.

The three characteristics that have been analysed as part of this case study of *Tristram Shandy* were employed by Sterne to create a novel where narrative and material levels are interwoven together and generate an embodied reading experience. First, Sterne created digressions and disrupted the expected structure by making the page visible and foregrounding the material dimension of the

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<sup>35</sup> In a letter to Robert Dodsley, in October 1759, Sterne writes: ‘I propose, therefore, to print a lean edition in two small volumes, of the size of *Rasselas*, and on the same paper and type, at my own expense, ...’. (Curtis, 1935, 80).

book. Second, by doing this, Sterne called for the attention of readers, who are made aware of the physical artefact and required to interact with it in order to navigate the text. Third, Sterne himself was involved in the conception and creation of the material dimension of the novel. Therefore, *Tristram Shandy* constitutes an early example of unconventional form in the novel. By disrupting expectations both at narrative and material levels, Sterne not so much anticipated electronic writing, as Bolter suggested, but envisaged the ability of the printed novel to transform, change, and adapt, when exposed to the influence of different media and different conventions. As the following chapters will show, the unconventional novel is born out of the evolution of technology, and the influence from new and different media.

## 1.2 Unconventional characteristics in the twentieth century

To put it simply, an unconventional novel is a novel that disrupts conventions. The previous sections on *Tristram Shandy* have shown that the subversion of established traditions in print has an effect on the narrative and the reading experience. By dismantling conventions, narrative and material dimensions in the novel become deeply interwoven and work together as a whole.

After Sterne's play with unexpected devices, the first examples of fully unconventional novels could be seen to appear in the mid-twentieth century, immediately following a century focused on industrialisation, mass-production, and standardisation. As White (2005, 59) explained, the nineteenth century did not produce many examples that used the graphic surface of the novel as part of its narrative. This was probably the result of 'the development of conventional forms through a combination of publishing considerations [...] and a certain utilitarian look.' Together with the appetite for the written word and the need to print rapidly and cheaply at the time, the materiality of the novel in this period

appeared to be less susceptible to play and experimentation.

With the evolution of mechanical technology and the appearance of electronic media, the twentieth century saw the emergence of an interest in artists and writers to challenge the established conventions in writing, publishing and reading practices. This section will look at the characteristics of the unconventional novel based on examples of the time. The purpose is to set the context for the evolution of the unconventional novel and the analysis of the case study examples in following chapters.

### **1.2.1 The materiality of the page**

Explorations of print and the page are numerous through history. Ever since the development of print technologies and the first texts that tried to replicate the aesthetic of manuscripts in print (Eisenstein, 1983), there have been many instances in which the printed surface has been used as a space for innovation, unconventional storytelling, and transformation. George Herbert's play with the shape of poems in the seventeenth century, William Blake's innovation with illuminated printing techniques in the late 1700s, or William Morris' interest in elaborated and refined book designs in the following century, are early examples of poets and artists who used the page in a visionary way, as a medium for artistic or spiritual expression.

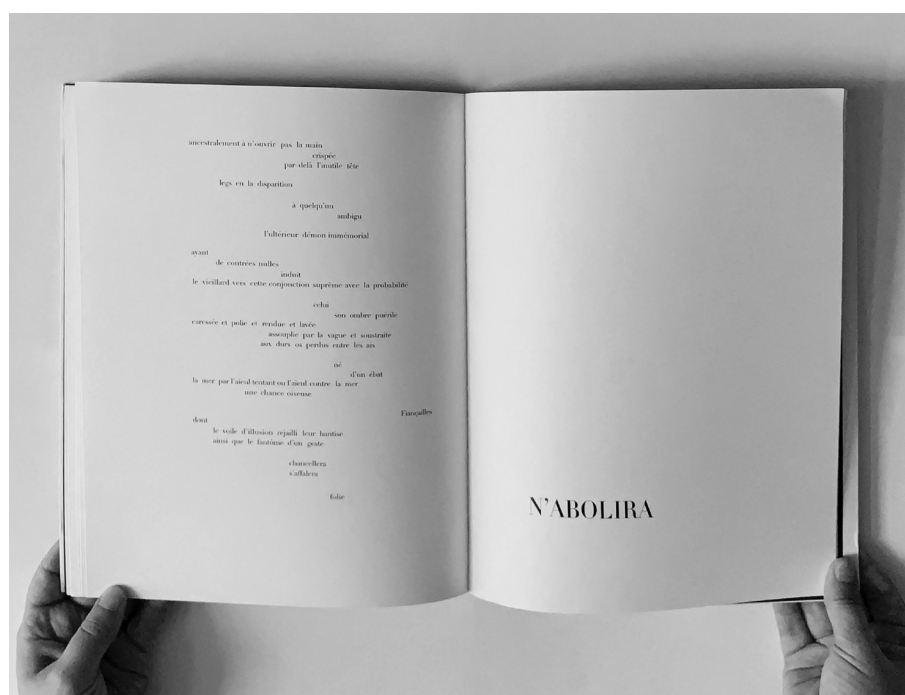
If there is a name that needs to be considered in relation to literature and the examination of the book, that is Stéphane Mallarmé's. Even if he did not work explicitly with the novel and died two years before the end of the nineteenth century, the work of the symbolist poet constitutes a point of departure for the change in the understanding of the page, which results in a break with tradition both in literature and typography. His attention to the spatial structure of the page and the composition of the words activates, as Drucker (1994, 115) describes, 'dimensions of visual poetics which could not be brought to life by literal iconic images (of vases and such) or by the conventions of traditional literary layout and design.'

In his widely famous 1897 poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, Mallarmé uses the space of the page as an active playground, a place charged with spirituality 'to keep the reader in suspense throughout the book' (Mallarmé, 1895, 84). The poem is characterised by the words and verses fragmented and scattered across each spread, and thus white space constitutes one of its most relevant traits. The blank areas of the pages have an expressive role which articulates the movement of the poem and guides readers through the typographical play. This connects the facing pages by dropping punctuation, emphasising words through font size and combining phrases in upper and lower case (Figure 1.12).

The treatment of the double page constitutes one of the most important innovations in Mallarmé's work. The poet places the text unconventionally to create a new space, which in Blanchot's (2000, 251) words is 'the space made poem':

A sentence is not simply projected linearly. It opens out. In this opening other sentence and word rhythms emerge, space themselves out and regroup at varying depths—words and sentences which are interrelated by definite structural affinities though not according to common logic (the logic of subordination) which destroys the space and standardises the movement.

**Figure 1.12** A spread from *Un coup de dés* by Mallarmé in a 2016 edition by Ya lo dijo Casimiro Parker. In this work, the surface of the page becomes part of the poem. The intentional play with typography, text placement and blank spaces represents a turning point in the understanding of the page.



Borsuk (2018) speaks of this treatment of the poem as an innovative way to render the double page visible, an indivisible unit that readers are forced to observe and absorb before starting to read the actual printed content.<sup>36</sup> While this might be the case, the actual reading process is not achieved by creating a unit that cannot be dissolved, but by disintegrating the traditional space of the book. This is aligned with Blanchot's (2000, 151) description of the disintegration: 'The fiction it involves seems to have no further aim than to achieve—through the experience of a shipwreck whence emerge and perish ever more subtly elusive figures and more sitant spaces—the disintegration of all real space.'

For the first time, a poet takes into consideration the distribution of words and the unavoidable gutter that connects, and divides, both surfaces, and breaks the spatial conventions of those elements. The page works not only as a background or surface to the poem, but is part of that poem, enacts it and creates a physical location. For Mallarmé (1895, 82), the book is 'a total expansion of the letter, finding its mobility in the letter, and in its spaciousness [it] must establish some nameless system of relationship which will embrace and strengthen fiction.' Thus, the book becomes visible and tangible in the readers' hands.

*Un coup de dés* is about a shipwreck. The articulation of the poem and its physical structure help to convey that image to the readers by making the eyes move back and forth (Borsuk, 2019, 129–132). In this sense, Paul Valéry's recollection of his first reading of the poem when Mallarmé showed him the manuscript in 1897, illustrates the way in which text and form work together:

Mallarmé finally showed me how the words were arranged on the page. It seemed to me that I was looking at the form and pattern of a thought, placed for the first time in finite space. Here space itself truly spoke, dreamed, and gave birth to temporal

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<sup>36</sup> In *Noise that stays noise* (2001), Cole Swensen also considers that the unusual treatment of the traditional elements of the page works towards the unity of the double page.



forms. Expectancy, doubt, concentration, all were visible things. With my own eye I could see silences that had assumed shapes. Inappreciable instants became clearly visible [...] —at last these appeared as beings, each surrounded by palpable emptiness (Valéry, 1972, 309).

With *Un coup de dés*, Mallarmé responds in poetic form to the appearance of mechanical reproduction and new media (such as the phonograph, the telephone, or the cinema) by the end of the nineteenth century, and the influence from graphic innovations in newspaper and advertising design. Alan Prohm (2004, 2) explains that the poet does not only borrow visual features from the new artefacts but reflects ‘on the changing role of language and reading in an environment of increasingly visual information’. Mallarmé utilises the visual dimension of the page to disrupt conventional syntactic and semantic relationships and explores spatiality in a radical way. Thus, he reflects the breakage from tradition that was starting to happen at the time and the disorientation produced by industrial change and mass production (Davidson, 2000; Dernie, 2013). Again, Valéry’s words provide an insight into the significance Mallarmé gives to the page:

His invention, wholly deduced from analyses of language, of books, and of music, carried out over many years, was based on his consideration of the page as a visual unity. He had made a very careful study (even on posters and in newspapers) of the effective distribution of blacks and whites, the comparative intensity of typefaces. It was his idea to develop this medium, which till then had been used either as a crude means of attracting attention or else as a natural ornament for the printed words. But a page, in his system—being addressed to the glance that precedes and surrounds the act of reading—should ‘notify’ the movement of the composition (Valéry, 1972, 312).

Mallarmé opens the door to the coming modernity of the early twentieth century and plays with the materiality of language, fragmenting the text and its conventions ‘in the most graphic of terms’ (Davidson, 2000, 71). *Un coup de dés* constitutes a turning point in the change of the associated values of space and print culture. It evidences that emotional expression and rhythm are not only achievable through the linearity of the text.

The subsequent modernist movements such as futurism, dadaism or constructivism play with the established conventions of typography and texts, and thus reflect Mallarmé's influence. Works such as Marinetti's *Les mots en liberté futuristes* (1919), that sought a verbal revolution that could destroy the conventions of language; Apollinaire's *Calligrammes: Poèmes de la paix et de la guerre, 1913–1916* (1918), that achieve a subversion of the rigid conventions established by the typewriter; or El Lissitzky and Mayakowski's *For the voice* (1923), an innovative achievement of text and typographic image integration; take forward Mallarmé's idea that typography can expand the meaning of a text, and that the structure of the pages can also have an effect on this.<sup>37</sup>

The second half of the twentieth century was characterised by postmodernism and, in particular for the context of this research, with the appearance of the concept of deconstruction introduced by Jacques Derrida. In his book *Of grammatology*, published in 1967, he discusses writing as a distinctive form of representation and aims to raise awareness about the nature of the written word as opposed to speech (the signifier over the signified, form over content). Without the materiality of both the word and the object, 'the very idea of the sign falls into decay' (Derrida, 1967, 14). Rick Poyner (2003) explains that deconstruction should be understood as a critique of the hierarchical oppositions of Western thought, which are taken for granted as natural but are just cultural constructions. Deconstruction does not seek to destroy these categories, but to disrupt them in order to see them in a new light. As Chuck Byrne and Martha Witte (1990, 117–118) define, it is a way of 'breaking down something (an idea, a precept, a word, a value) in order to "decode" its parts in such a way that these act as "informers" on the thing, or on any assumptions or convictions we

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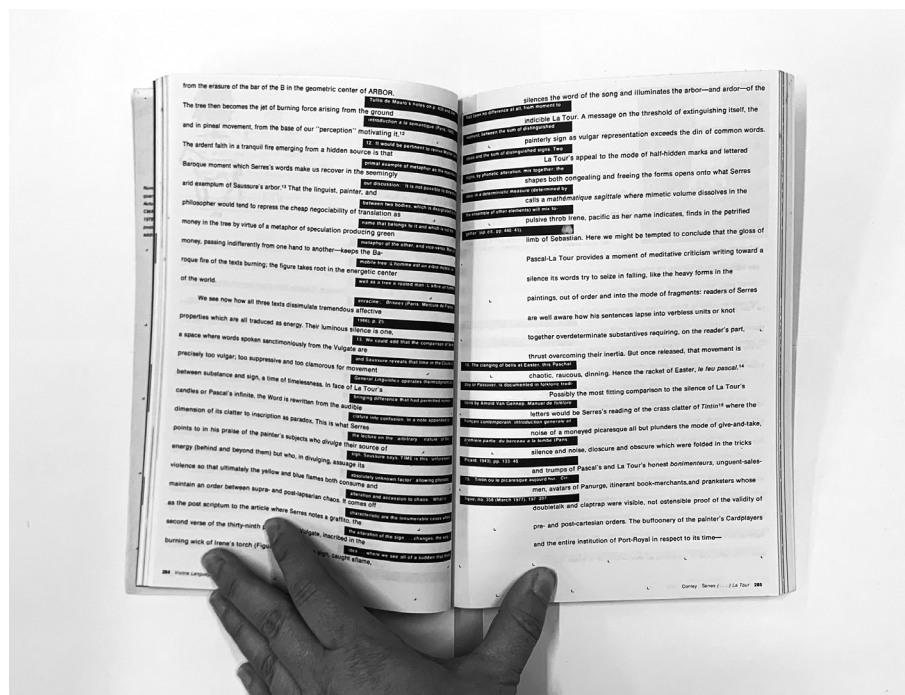
<sup>37</sup> See Johanna Drucker's chapter 'Artists' book & the early 20th-century avant-garde' in *The century of artists' books* (1994) or Susi Bloch's 'The book stripped bare' (1985), for a more detailed list of modernist examples.

have regarding it.’ Consequently, when deconstruction is applied to page design every element of language and image becomes intentional within a whole for the viewer to discover and experience its hidden complexities.

This concept was implemented in the postmodernist approach of the design department at Cranbrook Academy of Art in the late 1980s, where Katherine McCoy encouraged the students to explore the relationships of text and image in relation to the process of reading. In particular, ‘French currents of the letter’ is an issue of the journal *Visible Language* focused on poststructuralist literary theory. The students participated with pieces that progressively undermine standard book conventions as readers proceed through the essays. As Poynor (2003, 53) explains, ‘the intention was to highlight the physicality of the printed word’, establishing new and unexpected connections between words and the visual dimension of the text and the page, thus offering nonlinear ways of reading (Figure 1.13).

A work that represents this breakage with linear ways of writing and reading is Derrida’s *Glas*, published in 1974 by Editions Galilée, and translated and published by the University of Nebraska Press

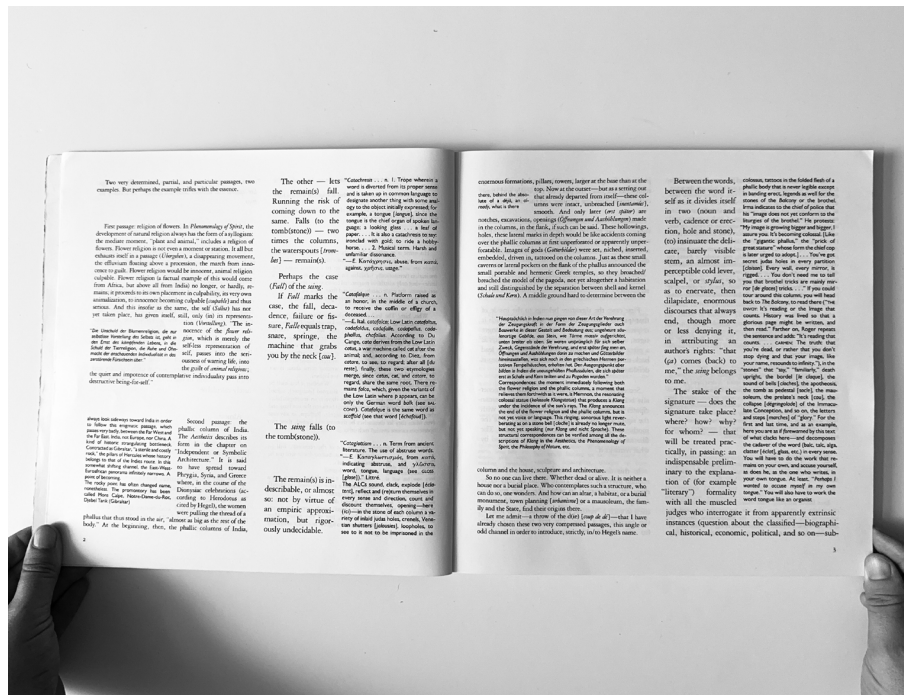
**Figure 1.13** A spread from the issue ‘French currents of the letter’ of the journal *Visible Language* (1978). The visual experiments conducted by the students at Cranbrook challenge conventional book structures and typographical arrangements, aiming to bring the attention onto the physicality of the printed word and explore nonlinear ways of reading.



in 1986 (designed by Richard Eckersley). Even if *Glas* is not a novel but a critical work, it constitutes an important reference for the way in which it breaks academic conventions and brings forward the materiality of the page by destabilising traditional layout.

The book has a square page format that allows for the text to be presented in two columns (Figure 1.14). Each of the columns in *Glas* represents one voice (Hegel on the left, Genet on the right), and is continually intruded upon by other voices. The two columns are not identical but present typographic differences (i.e., different typefaces, font size, typesetting details), as described by Derrida (1974, 1): ‘Two unequal columns, they say distyle [*disent-ils*], each of which—envelop(e) (s) or sheath(es), incalculably reverses, turns inside out, replaces, remarks, overlaps [*recoupe*] the other.’

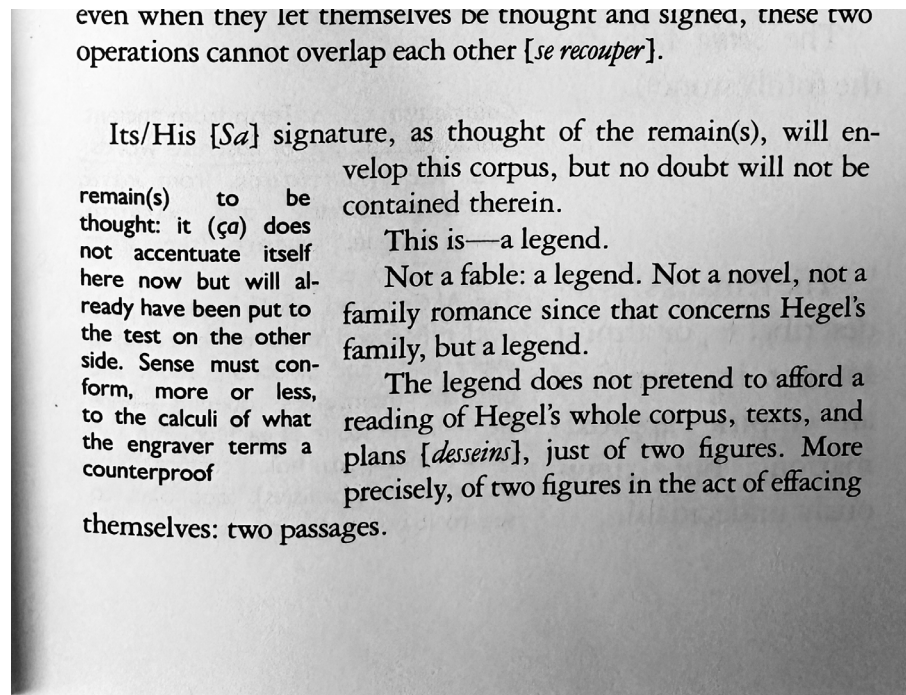
**Figure 1.14** A spread from *Glas* by Derrida (1974, 2–3) in the 1986 edition by the University of Nebraska Press designed by Eckersley. By breaking the page into columns and creating tension through text interruptions, decentres academic practices.



Simultaneously, the columns are subject to interruptions, disrupted by other voices that intrude on the text, both at narrative and visual levels, as these insets are also typographically distinct. Derrida calls the disruptive texts ‘judases’ because they betray the ‘main’ text and complicate the reading experience (Figure 1.15). In this way, the

text becomes fragmented and starts to lose its centre.<sup>38</sup> Analysing the different relations that can be created within texts, Drucker (2013, 20) identifies that ‘the text begins to fragment, pulled outward from the coherent center, acknowledging the off-centering effect of a counter discourse.’

Figure 1.15 A close-up of the ‘judases’ in *Glas*, which intrude and interrupt the two main columns of text.



Anne Royston (2019, 62) refers to the material dimension of *Glas* as ‘an architecture permanently in construction’. The description seems adequate as the page presents a multiplicity of voices clashing simultaneously and works as a cross-section of the conversation taking place. The composition of the page causes fragmentation and confuses readers, who need to pay attention not only to the discourse but to the structure of the page. As in *Un coup de dés*, white space in *Glas* becomes significant as a producer of meaning. However, whereas in Mallarmé’s poem the blanks make silence visible and give a body to the expectancy and fluctuation of the shipwreck; in *Glas* the blanks are more like holes, a sort of

<sup>38</sup> Not surprisingly, due to this decentring produced by the overlapping of numerous voices, *Glas* is considered a proto-hypertext. The characteristics of hypertext and its existence in print will be examined in more depth in Chapter 2.

negative space that acquires an architectural quality. This tangible quality of the blank space is remarked on by Derrida: ‘Let us space. The art of this text is the air it causes to circulate between its screens’ (1974, 75). By using blank space in such a semantic way, both Mallarmé and Derrida foreground the materiality of the page and create a reading experience dependent of its visual dimension.

### 1.2.2 The readers’ agency

A couple of centuries after Sterne’s efforts to encourage the awareness of readers, the idea of participation in a text was explored by mid-twentieth-century writers as a result of a growing interest to understand, deconstruct and expose the mechanics and the limits of literature. Poststructuralists such as Derrida were concerned with how structures are open to interpretations and deductions, showing that meaning is not a fixed and definite thing but a variable that can change when play is introduced in the system (Williams, 2014). Play is made possible by the interaction between readers and the physical object, opening up a myriad of interpretations and meanings. Awareness of the reading process is, therefore, directly connected to the structure and visibility of the page: breaking the established uniformity exposes the physicality of the space that holds together the printed content and forces readers to engage with it.

The notion of the readers’ agency in a book refers to the degree of participation that is required from readers to fulfil the reading experience. In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes (1970) differentiated between *readerly* and *writerly* texts. *Readerly* would be those instances in which the text does not ask any contribution from readers, who stay idle through the whole process, consuming inertly from the author’s content. Johanna Drucker explains in *The visible word* (1994) that the typical ‘unmarked texts’ in the literary world are those that appear undisturbed with no visual interferences, allowing a smooth reading through the linear sequence. This is

regarded as the conventional form of the novel, where there is a clear emphasis on the author's power and a repression of reader participation. However, the disruption of the traditional sequence and the regularity of the object displaces this authorial power and gives way to the emerging role of the reader. The *writerly* texts would be those works which give readers a role and turn them into contributors, active participants in the development of the reading activity and the construction of their own world together with the author. In this context, *writerly* refers to works where narrative and visual dimensions are connected and act as a whole, demanding an active participation from readers.

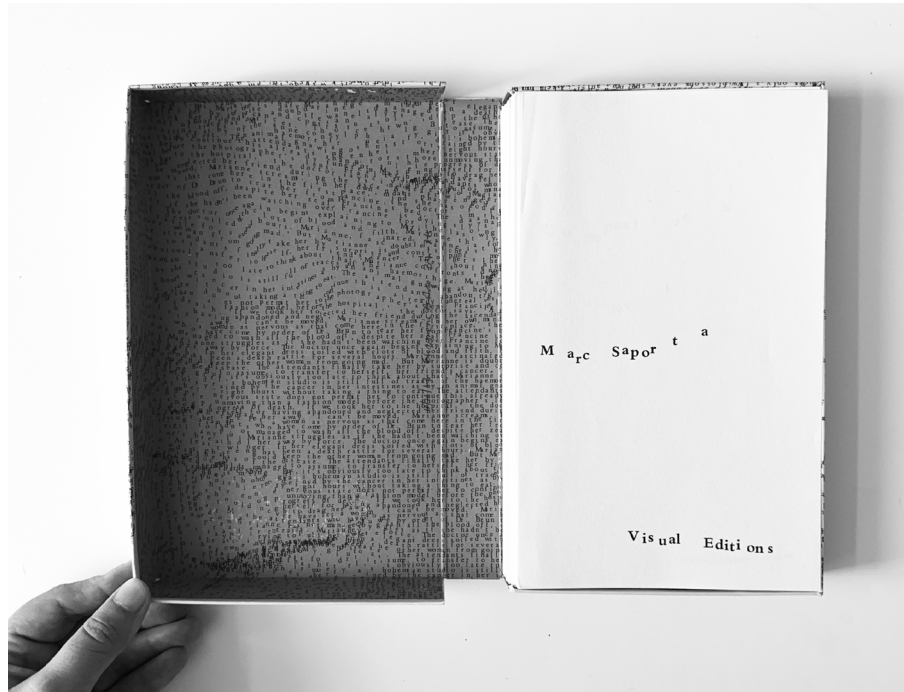
This idea of readerly contribution and participation presents the text as an open structure where meaning is not entirely established by the author's writing but is a result of an active performance from the reader, at a particular moment in time (Pfahl, 2014). This concept is also connected to the 'open work' defined by Umberto Eco in 1962. Eco used the example of pieces of instrumental music which gave autonomy to the individual performer, in the sense of 'imposing [their] own judgement on the form of the piece [...]: all this amounts to an act of improvised creation' (1962, 1). Therefore, the 'open work' is a work of art, or a novel in this case, which gives readers a tangible agency to construct their own narrative.

In 1962, Marc Saporta's *Composition No. 1* was published in French and a year later translated into English. This novel constitutes an important example of unconventional form because it is one of the first instances in which the traditional structure and sequence of the book is literally disrupted and opened to the interaction of readers. The novel consists of one hundred and fifty loose A5 sheets inside a box (Figure 1.16). Once the box is opened and readers confront the first page, they are presented with a set of operating instructions explaining the structure of the book:

The reader is requested to shuffle these pages like a deck of cards; to cut, if he likes, with his left hand, as at a fortuneteller's. The

order the pages assume will orient X's fate. [...] Whether the story ends well or badly depends on the concatenation of circumstances. A life is composed of many elements. But the number of possible compositions is infinite (Saporta, 1963, 'The reader is requested').<sup>39</sup>

**Figure 1.16** Title page from *Composition No. 1* by Saporta (1962) in the 2011 edition by Visual Editions. The loose pages give readers agency to build the order of the narrative.

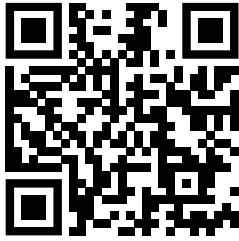


The title of the novel, *Composition No. 1*, makes an explicit reference to the fact that the order of pages readers hold at a particular moment is just one composition among the infinite number of possibilities. In fact, Grimm (1978) estimated that the number of potential narratives is 10263. Even if the number is not infinite, it makes it impossible for a reader to go through all the available combinations. Besides, by describing the work as 'a deck of cards', Saporta gives readers an image, a visual reference as to how they are expected to interact (or play) with the novel.<sup>40</sup> He presents literature as a game, and thus, from the first line, readers understand that they will be directly involved in the reading experience.

<sup>39</sup> In the 2011 version by Visual Editions, the page with Saporta's instructions was not included. Instead, a comment by Peter Uglow (Google Lab CEO, at that moment) describes the hypertextual qualities of the work.

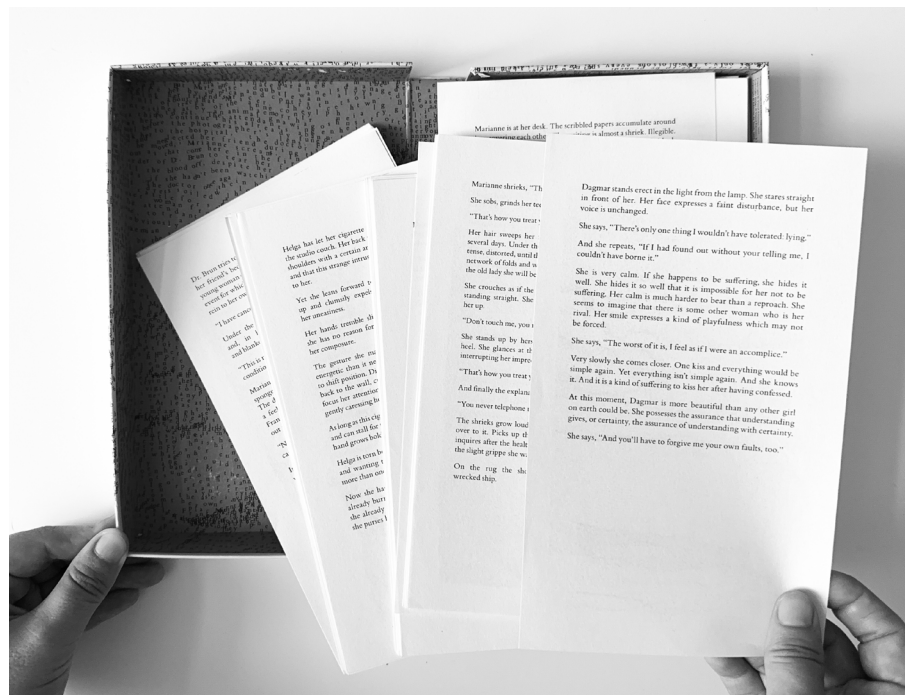
<sup>40</sup> A work that also inspires from this idea is Robert Coover's *Heart suit*, published in 2005 in *McSweeney's Issue 16*. It consists of fifteen oversized heart-suited cards on which text is printed, and includes a title card and a joker, which provide an introduction and a conclusion (Borsuk, 2018).





Video 1.1 A possible reading of *Composition No. 1* (Saporta, 1962). The shuffling of the pages can happen at any moment during the reading, which makes it an unstable narrative.

**Figure 1.17** Loose pages in *Composition No. 1* (Saporta, 1962). Each page in the novel represents a unit, which refers to a particular moment in the life of the main character. Thus, the sequence of the events is influenced by the interaction of readers with the material dimension of the book.



In an interview with Bettina Knapp (1976), Saporta explains that when writing the novel he was influenced by Alexander Calder's (1898–1976) mobiles:

I wondered for a long time how I might do the same in the novel. Then I received from a friend two or three books (one by Steinbeck) in a French boxed edition. The books had not been bound because it was a de luxe edition, and for highly de luxe editions, on Japan paper, for example, it is customary not to cut the pages. The pages are not sewn together nor assembled in any way. They are printed, folded, and sold in a box. [...] For me, it was an inspiration to have received these collectors' items with printed pages that couldn't be cut. I thought to myself: that's how to write

a novel like a Calder mobile. I shall write unnumbered pages, which I shall put into a box, it won't be a de luxe edition, since that isn't my purpose, but technically the material process would be the same (Knapp, 1976, 141).

Saporta is interested in the idea of creating a narrative structure where the elements can move and be influenced by one another. As in Calder's works, the result is a system dependent on external conditions: while the mobiles mutate with changes in light, wind and space, the novel mutates with the interaction of readers.

It is not surprising that novels demanding play and effort are often considered 'unreadable'. As in Saporta's case, they break the traditional structures of literature by empowering readers, who in some ways become in control of narrative development. Thus, *writerly* works are generally labelled as 'unsuccessful' or 'experimental'. This rejection can be seen as a natural response to the alienation of habit. *Composition No. 1* was considered by some critics as a novel that would be forgotten soon after its publication and that, in a reference to its unbound condition, it would be 'blown away by the *mistral* or carried off on Atlantic tides' (Grimm, 1976, 280–281). However, not only was the novel *not* forgotten, but in 2011 Visual Editions reedited it and put an emphasis on its loose pages and the participation required from readers.

Scholars, such as Grimm (1976), Pfahl (2015), and Burgess (2015) have argued that Saporta does not succeed in giving authorial control to readers. Apart from changing the order of the pages, readers cannot influence any other aspect of the narrative, which they end up trying to reconstruct in chronological order and experiencing a conventional reading. Grimm (1976) also commented on the fact that the individual texts have a conventional style and are not as innovative. Arguments of this kind show a limited focus on the narrative dimension and seem to leave aside the material dimension of the novel, a recurrent issue that tends to happen when analysing unconventional literary forms (as other examples in this thesis also demonstrate).

*Composition No. 1* has a particular materiality that was conceived as part of the narrative, before writing any of its text, and thus works as an integral whole. As Emma Kafalenos (1992, 384) points out, in regards to Saporta's novel, the readers' agency or the indeterminacy of the plot are 'created by physical characteristics of the text as an object, including typography.' The fact that the novel is unbound and readers are able to shuffle and change the order of the events means that they are physically involved in the construction (or reconstruction) of that narrative at the very moment of reading.

Materiality in *Composition No. 1* has a prominent role and can be seen in the empty areas that separate, and at the same time connect, each of the one hundred and fifty units. Whereas in *Un coup de dés* and *Glas* blank space becomes extremely physical and gives a tangible body to the narrative, in Saporta's novel the blanks become real space separating the units of the book. It is not the surface of the page nor the spine that holds the narrative together and foregrounds its material dimension, but the unbound nature of the novel and the fact that the pages are loose. They create a physical reading experience and continuously remind readers to pay attention to the object they are handling. Changing the material dimension of the novel would have a direct impact on its narrative.

### 1.2.3 The author's involvement

When, in 1967, Barthes published his article 'The death of the author', he was elaborating on a reader-response theory linked to the idea of the readers' agency in literature and the transfer of authorial power from author to reader. A couple of years later, Foucault (1969), in his lecture 'What is an author?', reflected on the role of the writer and rejected the idea that a text provides only a single meaning created by an Author/God. Approximately around the same time as Barthes' 'The death of the author' and Foucault's interrogation on 'what difference does it make who is speaking?', a

number of literary works appeared in which authors explored the transfer of authorial power. In 1961, Raymond Queneau published *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (1961), which requires readers to choose from the thousands of strips and possibilities in order to build their own poems. In 1962 Saporta's *Composition No. 1* was published, and a year later Julio Cortázar published *Hopscotch*, a novel that provides readers with instructions and offers them two reading paths to choose from. That is also the year in which Vladimir Nabokov published *Pale fire*, a novel that offers multiple reading paths. In 1969, B. S. Johnson published *The unfortunates*, a novel which asks readers to shuffle its unbound sections and to build the narrative in a random order.<sup>41</sup>

By placing the spotlight on the reader, Barthes (and the poststructuralist theory in general) recognises that meaning in language or in a text is never a fixed thing but depends on the person who receives and interprets it: readers bring into the equation history, context, cultural background and understanding. The text is never a complete thing on its own, created by an Author-God figure, but a 'space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing' that are an amalgam of citations and 'a thousand sources of culture' (Barthes, 1967, 53). In terms of the unconventional novel, Barthes' theory can be seen as an addition of a visual and physical dimension to the cultural level that shapes the narrative and its experience. As Cavallo and Chartier (1999, 2) rightly stated: 'No text exists outside of the physical support that offers it for reading (or hearing) or outside of the circumstance in which it was read (or heard).' The written work is therefore fully experienced by the readers' power to physically interact with the book.

To create a novel in which narrative and material dimensions work as a whole and that requires attention and interaction from

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<sup>41</sup> These works will be examined in more detail at different points in this thesis.

readers, a change in the role of the author becomes necessary. In *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne became involved in the composition of the pages and in the production of its most unexpected visual devices. In the case of Saporta, he conceived *Composition No. 1* from its materiality and the narrative emerges from the physical dimension.

In the unconventional novel, writers become involved in the creative process of the work as an integral whole, rather than just involving themselves in the narrative dimension. From this perspective, the 'death of the author' described by Barthes might need to be regarded as a change of attitude rather than a literal absence: a sort of integral writer that takes into consideration narrative and materiality simultaneously.

A significant figure who concerned himself with the materiality of the book is that of B. S. Johnson. In all of his works he employs visual devices to push the limits of the novel beyond conventions and treats the novel as an integration of narrative and material dimensions that can help to communicate his ideas more accurately. In the context of this research, the importance of B. S. Johnson lies not only in the unexpected way in which he makes use of visual strategies, but also in his active involvement in the construction of novels. In *Albert Angelo* (1964), a novel described by White (1999) as a prefiguration of the writer's later developments, there is evidence of Johnson's interest on the visual and physical aspects of the narrative:

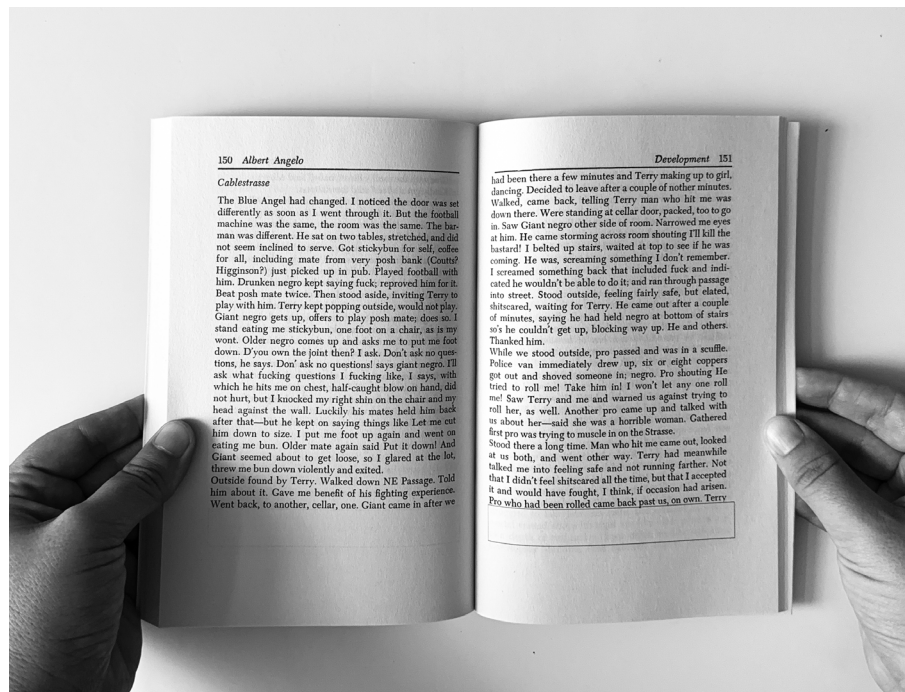
A page is an area on which I may place any signs I consider to communicate most nearly what I have to convey: therefore I employ, within the pocket of my publisher and the patience of my printer, typographical techniques beyond the arbitrary and constricting limits of the conventional novel. To dismiss such techniques as gimmicks, or to refuse to take them seriously, is crassly to miss the point (Johnson, 1964, 176).

Published in 1964, *Albert Angelo* tells the story of a substitute teacher, who, in reality, would like to work as an architect but is

not accomplished enough to do so.<sup>42</sup> Among some visual devices such as a ‘specially-designed typecharacter’ (Coe, 2004, 157) that draws attention to character descriptions, or the two-column text arrangement to present simultaneously external speech and internal thought (also distinguishing them with italics and roman typefaces), the most recognisable and widely known feature of the novel is the hole cut at the bottom of pages 149 to 152 (Figure 1.18). This strategy allows for readers to see into future events that point to the main character’s death (although when readers reach page 153, they discover that this death is unrelated to the protagonist) and at the same time foregrounds the materiality of both the page and the book. Johnson refers to his employment of the device in *Aren’t you rather young to be writing your memoirs* (1973, 23):

When a future event must be revealed, I could (and can; can you?) think of no way nearer to the truth and more effective than to cut a section through those pages intervening so that the event may be read in its place but before the reader reaches that place.

**Figure 1.18** The simulated hole in *Albert Angelo* by B. S. Johnson (1964, 150–151) in the 2013 edition by Picador. This edition does not include the cut-out hole, as in the original. Instead, the space where the hole is supposed to be appears surrounded by a black-lined rectangle that readers can choose to cut-out themselves.



<sup>42</sup> See Philip Tew (2002) and White (1999 and 2005) for a more detailed examination of the novel and its visual strategies.

Johnson was, indeed, very concerned with the fact that literary texts should attempt to tell the truth. As Tew (2002) explains, he used his own life as a source to construct fiction. For him, ‘telling stories [was] telling lies’ (Johnson, 1964, 167), and he aimed to tell the truth about his own experience. Johnson saw the novel as a device for solving certain literary difficulties which cannot always be overcome through the verbal dimension, but need an unconventional embodied outcome. His challenge to traditional form in the book is not superficial nor a mere unexpected gesture that would constitute a surprise for readers. Instead, every visual and material device in Johnson’s novels is carefully thought of as necessary for the narrative, as his own writing notes evidence:

I am not saying that all novels should be written like ALBERT ANGELO, or that all those which use conventional techniques are bad: but rather that I find the conventional novel unsuitable for what I have to say and have therefore had to solve my problems unconventionally (Coe, 2004, 157).

Despite the two centuries that separate them, Mariano D’Ambrosio (2018) is right in referring to Laurence Sterne and B. S. Johnson as two authors who question the conventions of the novel and explore its limits. Both writers involve themselves in the production process, writing and talking to printers to ensure that the visual and material dimension of their novels comes out exactly as they have conceived them. As Frank Kermode (2004, n.p.) claims, it is evident that Johnson was fond of Sterne and aware that from the early days of the novel it was possible to play with the flexibility and variety of the form ‘to make fun of narrative convention, and even to set up comic resonances between typography and story. [...] You could do the most extraordinary things, enabling you to go far beyond the possibilities of straightforward story.’

The connection between the two writers is the most evidenced in Johnson’s first novel *Travelling people*, published in 1963. As Jonathan Coe (2004, 122) explains in Johnson’s biography, Constable (the publishers) found that ‘they had an unusual author on their hands’ as he requested to be involved in every stage of the

production of his first novel, ‘and even asked for a meeting with the Garden City Press, the book’s printers, so that he could discuss the various typographical challenges it posed.’

*Travelling people*’s debt to Sterne becomes especially perceptible in the way in which Johnson uses the black page to represent the heart attack and later death of one of the characters. Rather than using the black page as a memorial tribute, as Sterne does to commemorate Yorick’s death, in *Travelling people*, the black page represents the finality of death, the emptiness and lack of life and thought (White, 2005; Barton, 2016). Johnson first represents the heart attack by covering some sections of the pages in grey: a page and a half of speckles (Figure 1.19) and a relapse of a half-page of wavy lines (Figure 1.20). Later on, the character suffers a fatal heart attack, which is followed by two and a half black pages (Figure 1.21). A further difference with *Tristram Shandy* is the fact that while the first half page is printed in black, the following one is a black sheet of paper pasted into the fold.

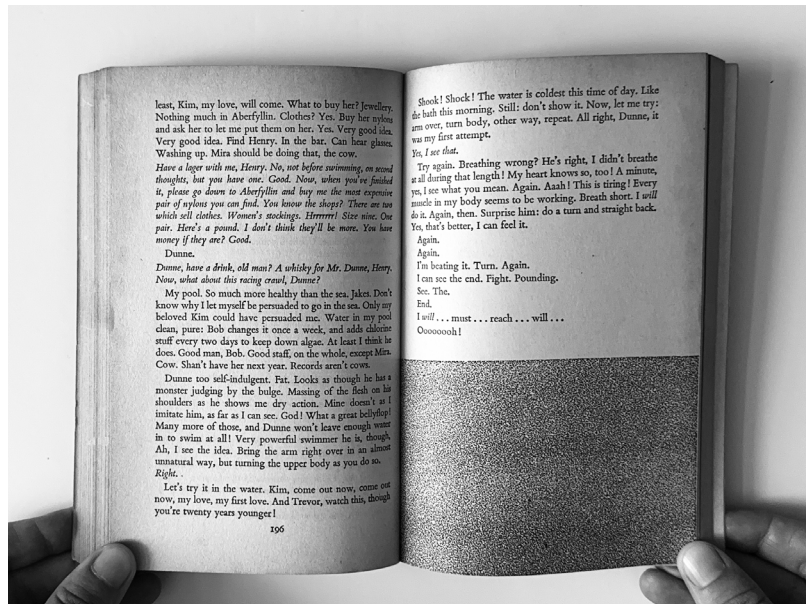
*Tristram Shandy* is also referenced in what could be labelled as the most famous of Johnson’s novels, *The unfortunates*, published in 1969. A quote from Volume 2 appears on one side of the box:

I will tell you in three words what the book is. —It is a history.— A history! Of who? What? Where? When? Don’t hurry yourself. —It is a history-book, Sir, (which may possibly recommend it to the world) of what passes in a man’s own mind (Sterne, 1759, 70).

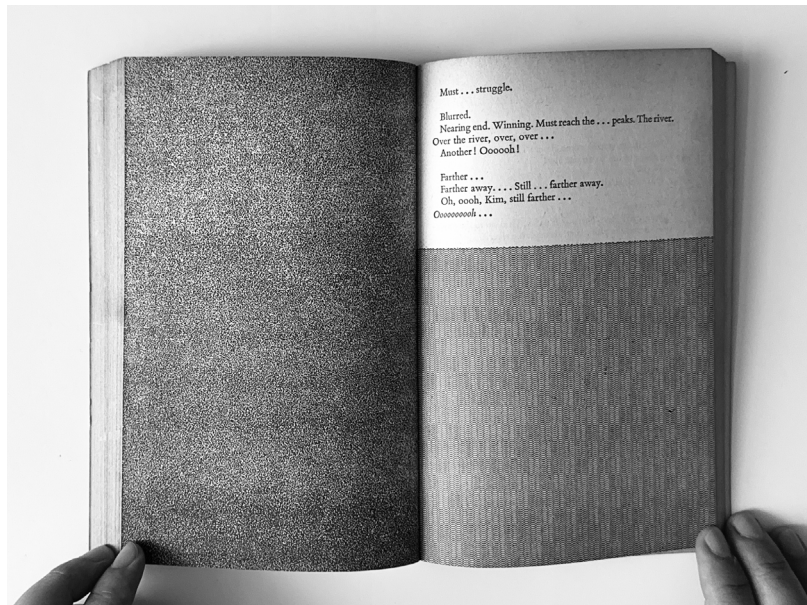
White (2005) believes that it is difficult for critics to agree which one of Johnson’s seven novels could be labelled as his major work. However, in the context of this research, *The unfortunates* is the work that best encompasses the qualities of the unconventional novel. While in his previous works (i.e., *Travelling people*, *Albert Angelo*, and *Trawl*) the employment of visual devices is very specific and applied to particular pages; in *The unfortunates*, narrative and materiality are interwoven integrally. Thus, removing the material dimension would result on a serious loss for the reading experience. This is reflected in Johnson’s explanation in the



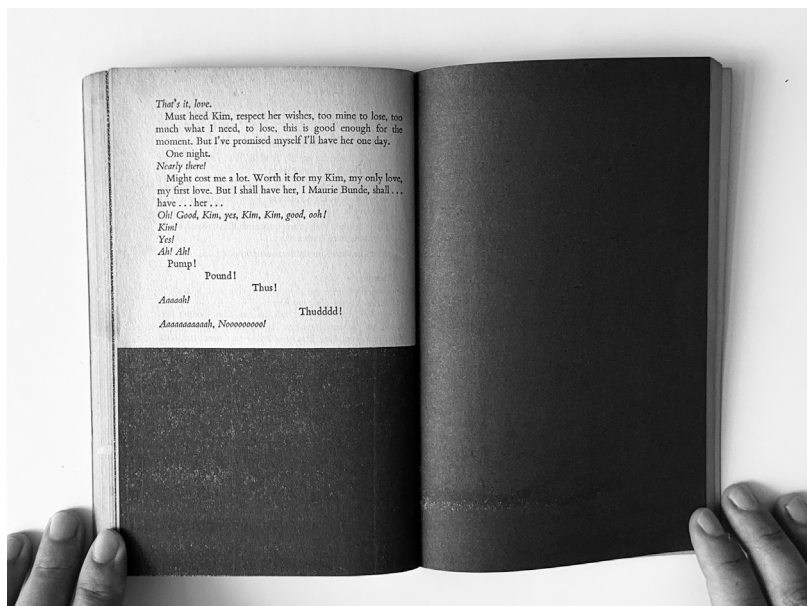
**Figure 1.19** A half-page of speckles that represents the first heart attack in *Travelling people* by B. S. Johnson (1963, 196–197) in the 1967 edition by Panther.



**Figure 1.20** A page of speckles and a half-page of wavy lines that represent the continuation of the first heart attack in *Travelling people* (Johnson, 1963, 198–199). This strategy makes a reference to the proximity of death and to the black page that follows.



**Figure 1.21** The black page in *Travelling people* (Johnson, 1963, 210–211). The black area extends to one and a half pages and is indebted to Yorick's death in *Tristram Shandy*. In this case, the black page is a sheet of black paper inserted into the book.



introduction to the Hungarian edition of the novel: 'I know certainly that I have invested more of myself in this novel than into anything else that I have written before or I have written since' (Tew, 2001, 43). Likewise, he also admitted that the form of *The unfortunates* 'seems the most extreme' of all his novels (Johnson, 1973, 20).

*The unfortunates* is a novel in a box. As Sterne's quote indicates in one of the inner sides of the case, this is a story 'of what passes in a man's own mind' and represents the digressive quality of human thought. The aleatorism of the mind is conveyed through the form of the physical object and the twenty-seven unbound sections readers find within the box (Figure 1.22). The novel presents the recollections of the author's friendship with a colleague who died of cancer. It is about loss and the randomness memory encounters through mourning. Therefore, *The unfortunates* represents the opposition to the linearity of the mind through the opposition to the linearity of the physical book.

**Figure 1.22** The unbound sections in *The unfortunates* by B. S. Johnson (1969) in the 1999 edition by Picador. The twenty-seven sections represent the fragmentation of memory, which changes with every recollection and, in this case, with every interaction from readers.



In the style of Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (1964)<sup>43</sup> and Saporta's *Composition No. 1* (1963), *The unfortunates* includes instructions explaining to readers how the novel should be read. In Picador's 1999 edition the instructions are printed inside the box (which is acting as an empty hardback cover) and to the left-hand side, in the space traditionally occupied by the endpapers or inside cover (Figure 1.23):

This novel has twenty-seven sections, temporarily held together by a removable wrapper.

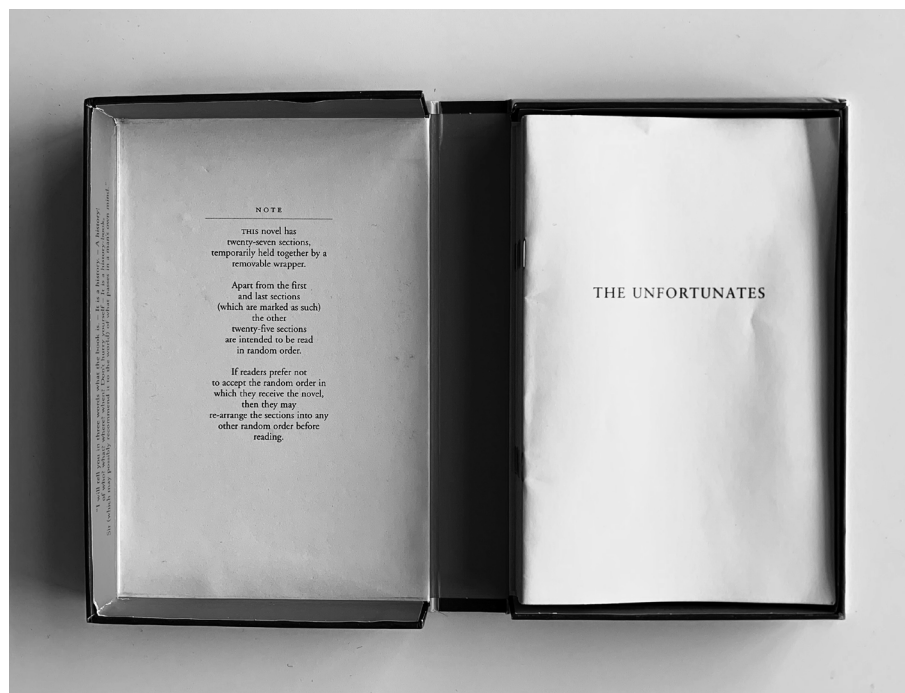
Apart from the first and last sections (which are marked as such) the other twenty-five sections are intended to be read in random order.

If readers prefer not to accept the random order in which they receive the novel, then they may re-arrange the sections into any other random order before reading.

*The unfortunates* and *Composition No. 1* are similar in the fact that they are both unbound novels in a box with instructions that ask readers to shuffle the pages and create their own random reading order. As with Saporta's novel, and despite the offered randomness

**Figure 1.23** Instructions for readers in *The unfortunates* (B. S. Johnson, 1969).

Readers are asked to shuffle the sections before starting to read, except for first and last (named as such).



<sup>43</sup> *Hopscotch* is introduced with a 'Table of instructions' that offers readers two ways of reading the novel. This is explained in more detail in Chapter 2.

of the structure, *The unfortunates* has also been criticised for making readers believe in their authorial power, whilst in reality there exists a lack of control from readers who cannot alter the facts regardless of the way in which they arrange the fragments (White, 2005; Mackrell, 1985).<sup>44</sup> However, as Jenner (2015, n.p.) explains, the fact that readers lack complete control over the novel ‘does not necessarily detract from an aleatory reading’, but it provides a potential for reinterpretation ‘by way of chance intrusions into the reassembly of the past that charges both novels with an aleatory sensibility.’

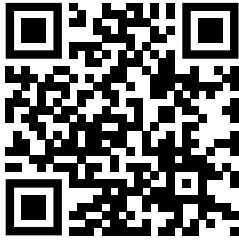
According to Coe (2004), Johnson was surely aware of Saporta’s novel when he wrote *The unfortunates*, for in October 1962 he published an article about Beckett in *Scene* magazine, where a piece by William G. Smith contained references to *Composition No. 1*. The difference between the two novels lies in the way the unbound contents are presented: whereas in Saporta’s work the one hundred and fifty pages are single-sided and loose; in Johnson’s, the text is arranged in ‘separate signatures’, as he refers to them in a letter to Bernard Bergonzi in 1967 (Coe, 2004, 231). Even if he considered his novel as ‘a modified form of Saporta’s technique’, he saw his own work as superior. In *Composition No. 1* the separate pages restrict the amount of text that can be included in each unit, whereas in *The unfortunates*, the text can be extended to ‘whatever length the material dictates’, and thus content is allowed as well to determine form.<sup>45</sup>

In *The unfortunates*, the shuffleable quality of the novel is linked to the way in which memory works. Memory is not continuous nor chronological but obsessive, repetitive, melancholic, and

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<sup>44</sup> ‘Reading *The unfortunates* is in certain respects [...] not unlike reading a conventionally structured novel which makes use of flashbacks within a linear chronology’ (Mackrell, 1985, 55).

<sup>45</sup> This is related to the fact that, as Coe (2004) explains, Johnson was an admirer of the modern architectural principles followed by Louis Sullivan and Mies van der Rohe. It seems that Johnson kept the following quotations pinned above his desk when he wrote, and he equalled them to the principles ‘of the serious writer: truth, clarity, order, discipline’ (Coe, 2004, 157): ‘Form follows function. To create form out of the nature of our tasks with the methods of our time - this is our task. We must make clear, step by step, what things are possible, necessary, and significant.’



Video 1.2 A possible reading of *The unfortunates* (B. S. Johnson, 1969). Readers participate physically in the act of remembering.

circular. Readers are forced to face the randomness of death, cancer, and memory, represented metaphorically in the materiality of the book, as Johnson (1973) himself described the novel. The unbound narrative can be read non-stop and repeatedly without ever experiencing exactly the same moment. In *The unfortunates*, the disruption of the traditional sequence and regularity of the book invites readers to participate physically in the act of reading, thus transforming it into a performance (Burgess, 2015). As such, the reading of Johnson's work is extremely connected to time and space: each reading and re-reading will be unique because the conditions will be different each time. Even the memories from a previous reading will be different (Video 1.2).

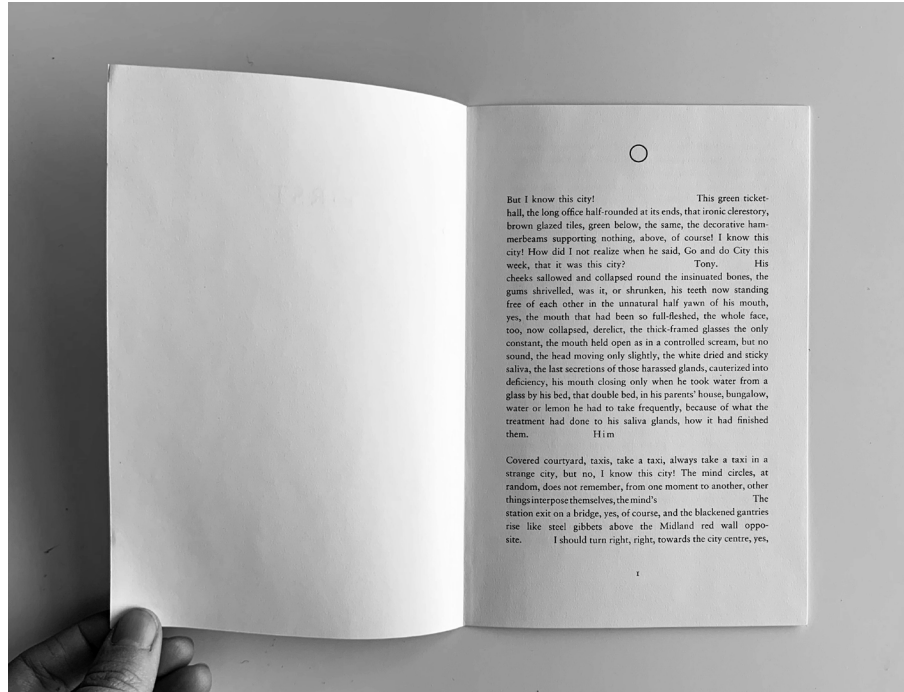
The narrative of the novel can be divided into two levels: the recollections of the past and the events of the present, the football reporting the author is sent to do in a city that sets off his memories. Likewise, the recollections can also be separated into three categories: before, during and after the friend's fatal illness. However, the unbound quality of the novel removes all attempt at indicating chronology, and readers discover and reconstruct the time period section by section, in relation to what has been read before and what will be read after:

The memories of Tony and the routine football reporting, the past and the present, interwove in a completely random manner, without chronology. This is the way the mind works, my mind anyway [but] this randomness was directly in conflict with the technological fact of the bound book: for the bound book imposes an order, a fixed page order, on the material. I think I went some way towards solving this problem by writing the book in sections and having those sections not bound together but loose in a box (Johnson, 1973, 25).

The irregularity of memory is also conveyed at the textual level of the page. Johnson uses non-uniform sentence and paragraph spacing to emphasise the representation of thought and the discontinuity of the recollections (Jordan, 2014) (Figure 1.24). While Sterne used blank space to interrupt with conversation and invite readers to participate and add to the story, Johnson's

**Figure 1.24** A typical page from *The unfortunates* (B. S. Johnson, 1969).

The irregular blank spaces between words and paragraphs reinforce the discontinuity of memory. Readers move along with the writer in the effort of remembering. The blank spaces stitch together the memories and work as another kind of punctuation.



blanks are silent, they represent the construction of thought, with its natural pauses, and the actual writing of the text. As Barton (2016, 37) describes it, the blanks represent ‘the internal time it takes to think of what word to write next, introducing the importance of time in the novel.’ In addition, a more (im)material layer of blank space is created by leaving the sections unbound, which underlines the fact that each section represents a separate moment in time. This is a novel about fragments, floating memories put together in a box to challenge the concept of unrepeatability and the conclusiveness of death.

Johnson’s concern with materiality has been generally questioned or dismissed by critics, felt as it was that his novels muddled traditional reading with unnecessary tricks.<sup>46</sup> At the start of the twentieth century the acceptance of Johnson’s unconventional forms still encountered reticence. This appears significant

<sup>46</sup> In *Like a fiery elephant* (2004), Coe shows reviews that Johnson received for his novels. In regards to *Albert Angelo*, for example, the *Daily Mail* referred to his formal innovations as ‘solemnly sterile and imitative’ (2004, 158). As Tew (2002, 34) revealed, even a close friend, such as Zulfikar Ghose, had his doubts with his use of materiality: ‘All right, I say, so the loose sheets in the box mirror the idea of randomness but after I’ve shuffled them and closed the box what there is in my mind is a biography whose form is really no different from David Copperfield ...’.

especially when seen under the light of Poynor's (2003) claim that, by this point in time, readers have already been exposed to a change in the use of visual devices. Barton (2016, 2) expanded this affirmation by assuming that contemporary readers should have no problem 'in navigating disruptions to conventional page layout'. However, after Picador reedited *The unfortunates* in 1999, and Jonathan Coe published Johnson's biography in 2004, there were reviews that still criticised the writer's way of foregrounding the material dimension of the book:

Don't go pretending you've read B. S. Johnson. It won't wash. Because nobody has [...] One novel, the only one that you may have heard of, *The unfortunates* [...] You probably read only the review in *The Times*. And that was written by me. And I didn't bother to read the book either (Coe, 2004).

White (2005, 85) explains that the struggle to deal with Johnson's works is due to the formal diversity of his novels, 'it seems difficult to discuss them side-by-side by reason of the technical complexities of their various forms.' Yet, this diversity in form confirms his own views of the novel and the fact that he uses unconventional devices to obtain 'effects which [he] felt [he] could not satisfactorily achieve by any other means' (Coe, 2004, 157). Others, like Kermode (2004, n.p.), dismiss his explorations of form as mere 'tricks' that have no real point and 'distract attention from the novel, the true interest of which is independent of them.' However, for Johnson, each novel solves a certain literary problem, and thus the materiality of each work combines with the narrative to solve that specific problem. Therefore, it is only natural that the form of each of his novels differs from the previous ones. As Johnson (1973, 19–20) claimed, 'for every device I have used there is a literary rationale and a technical justification; anyone who cannot accept this has simply not understood the problem which had to be solved'. This shows the author's involvement in the material dimension of the novel from the start of the creation process, together and simultaneously to the construction of the narrative:

The key stage is finding the form. That happens between the first idea (the "Ah!") and the filling-into-sections I've just described. Between those two points I work out the form suitable to the

material I have in my mind plus the stuff I've got down on those bits of paper. It was at that stage I settled on the book-in-a-box random form for *The unfortunates* (Burns, 1981, 88).

As the following two chapters show, unconventional novels are influenced by technological changes and shifts in communication practices. In the introduction to *Aren't you rather young to be writing your memoirs* (1973, 12–14), Johnson refers to the influence that the first cinema in Ireland, opened by James Joyce in 1909, had on the Irish writer's novels, and claims: 'It is a matter of realising that the novel is an evolving form, not a static one. [...] life does not tell stories. Life is chaotic, fluid, and random; it leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily'. In this sense, he believes that 'novelists must evolve (by inventing, borrowing, stealing or cobbling from other media) forms which will more or less satisfactorily contain an ever-changing reality' (Johnson, 1973, 16–17). Hucklesby (2015, n.p.) explains that Johnson recognised distinctive qualities in the novel that other media such as cinema or television could not offer: 'Instead of privileging narrative, the writer should attend to the materiality of the book, and should focus on representing interiority and consciousness'. Therefore, Johnson's writing was influenced by the media transformations happening at his time. In the participation required by the unbound chapters, there exists an anticipation of the qualities that electronic communication would bring into reading (i.e., interaction, shuffleability, the disintegration and frailty of both memory and information), but most importantly, there exists a wish to question the conventions of the novel in order to renew its qualities and take advantage of the distinctive qualities of the printed narrative.



## 2 The influence of digital technology

As with all great cultural changes, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment in which the analogue era gave way to the digital. Changes are transitional, and rarely obliterate the previous status. In the case of media systems, old and new forms of communication have historically coexisted during periods of change and adjustment. Oral practices did not disappear the moment the first written forms started to appear. Neither did manuscripts vanish when the printing press transformed the spread of information during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>47</sup> Roger Chartier (1989, 2) explains that the products that came out of the printing press were revolutionary but there existed a ‘continuity between the age of the manuscript and the print era [...] in the physical form of the object’. Even more, printed books have not been erased by the invention of the radio, the telegraph, the cinema, the television, the telephone, ... or the computer and the Internet.

The transition from analogue to digital systems becomes evident during the late part of the twentieth century. The decades of the '80s and '90s are characterised by the rise of digital forms of communication and a growing accessibility to personal computing. However, this change can be traced back to 1969, when the first message was sent through ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency NETWORK), a precursor of the Internet based on ‘mapping out a virtual space that was increasingly real to those who use it’ (Murray, 1997, 80). Or even further yet, to the nineteenth century

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<sup>47</sup> The work of Elizabeth Eisenstein (1993) and Roger Chartier (1989) focuses on the transition from manuscript to print culture, evidencing the complexities and long periods of time that these shifts in technology entail.

and the idea of the Analytical Engine envisaged by Charles Babbage, or the introduction of the telegraph.<sup>48</sup>

This research does not aim to establish a detailed chronology of the digital revolution and its development.<sup>49</sup> Still, in order to properly study the evolution of unconventional novels and their status nowadays, it is important to understand the impact and influence the digital realm has had on communication practices, and in particular on reading and writing habits. The purpose of this chapter is to look closer at the period of transition between the existing media of print and the new digital system, and to understand how they clashed and learnt to coexist together. A consideration of how digital reading practices developed (Section 2.1) and the debate this brought about the future of the book (Section 2.2) create the context to explore the definition of hypertext and analyse hypertextual characteristics that existed previously on printed forms (Section 2.3). The chapter concludes by examining the shift in the print versus digital discussion and the move towards media convergence, which results in the definition of the new conventional novel in the twenty-first century (Section 2.4).

## 2.1 The digital revolution

Even if transformations never have fixed boundaries, there is an invention—or rather, an imagined version of it—that has influenced the development of digital reading devices: the Memex. Conceived by Vannevar Bush in 1945, the device was never produced.

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<sup>48</sup> Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge between 1828 and 1839, Charles Babbage conceived the idea for a digital computer, called the Analytical Engine, that could resolve arithmetical problems, but he was never able to bring the project into completion (Turing, 1950). However, according to Alessandro Ludovico (2018, 16), the telegraph ‘was the first medium to enable the electrical transmission of content across long distances in real time’, and therefore unleashed a great revolution for communication and the handling of information.

<sup>49</sup> For a fuller picture of the digital revolution see *The new media reader* edited by Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort (2003). For particular authors that have focused on this topic in the context of this chapter, see also the work of George Landow (1997), Janet H. Murray (1997), or Espen Aarseth (1997), to name a few.

However, the article Bush wrote about it ('As we may think', published in the *Atlantic Monthly*) was read by Doug Engelbart and Ted Nelson, and had a significant influence on the development of the word processor, the mouse, the hyperlink, and the hypertext (Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort, 2003). Besides, nowadays the Memex is also regarded as a precursor concept for Google Books, conceived as a research tool to enable accessing, retrieving, and cross-referencing large amounts of material (Borsuk, 2018). As explained by Bush himself (1945, 45):

A Memex is a device in which an individual stores all his books, records, and communications, and which is mechanized so that it may be consulted with exceeding speed and flexibility. It is an enlarged intimate supplement to his memory.

The Memex was conceived as a table with simultaneous screens that enables working with different documents such as books, magazines, newspapers, photographs, or other media, together with a dictation machine that takes notes from the researchers' spoken orders or reflections. So, even by 1945, Bush was able to envision a future with an overabundance of information, in which researchers were 'staggered by the findings and conclusions of thousands of other workers' (1945, 37), and did not have time to keep track of them as they appeared. The Memex also allowed for the entry of keywords and metadata, thus picturing the construction of a network that facilitated the way researchers dealt with information.

In the 1980s, along with computers, the hypertext appeared. Not a new medium, as Alessandro Ludovico (2018) attested, but a new concept within a new medium. Or rather, the possibility of nonlinear writing, 'text that branches and allows choices', as defined by Nelson, who coined the term in 1987 and presents it in *Literary machines* (0/2). Even if hypertext is not a completely new thing to print (as the following section will show), computers open up a whole new abstract and flexible space that allows for new text structures and changes the commonly associated linearity of text (Ludovico, 2018).

Due to this, electronic writing developed quickly during the '90s, blurring the lines between writers and readers (Landow, 1997, 4) and challenging the traditional distinction between the two roles. As Michael Joyce (2002, 19), one of the pioneers of electronic literature, asserted, 'hypertext readers not only choose the order of what they read but, in doing so, also alter its form by their choices'. The ability to hyperlink pieces of texts was the most explored feature of hypertexts in the early days of digital platforms. By being able to move freely through the different layers of a text, readers become active participants and gain authorial agency to construct their own versions of the digital texts.

A good example of this is one of the first works of electronic literature. Joyce's *afternoon, a story* is written in 1987 and published in 1990 by Eastgate Systems in Storyspace, an authoring software system that allows readers to link a screen of text with another through 'hot words' that are activated by clicking (Hayles, 2002). This software gives readers numerous choices on each screen and the power to build their own reading path. At the same time, it also gives the author more authorial freedom to construct the narrative, as Joyce (2002, 31) himself explained:

I wanted, quite simply, to write a novel that would change in successive readings and to make those changing versions according to the connections that I had for some time naturally discovered in the process of writing and that I wanted my readers to share. In my eyes, paragraphs on many different pages could just as well go with paragraphs on many other pages, although with different effects and for different purposes. All that kept me from doing so was the fact that, in print at least, one paragraph inevitably follows another.

Hypertext evolved in form when it encountered the World Wide Web in the early 1990s and allowed 'a fully networked hypertext environment' (Landow, 1997, 154) where readers could access digital texts from anywhere in the world. Another development enabled by digital media, and which meant a big change for the spread and access of information, is that of digitisation. As Borsuk (2018) explains, the first attempt to build an online digital library happened in 1971, when student Michael S. Hart typed up the

*Declaration of independence* at the University of Illinois and sent it out to the server on which the file was stored, and six people downloaded it. After seeing the potential of computers for storage and retrieval of information, and the possibility to share scanned texts with users simultaneously all over the world, Hart called the initiative Project Gutenberg and aimed to digitise as much public domain literature as possible.<sup>50</sup> Since then, the idea to make books accessible has been followed by other digitisation projects, especially Google Books in 2005, which has digitally archived more than forty million books.

Hypertext, electronic writing, and digitisation are followed (or accompanied) by electronic reading and the growth of digital books. The last decade of the twentieth century and the beginning of the next, saw the rise of e-readers: devices dedicated to the reading of digital books that offer an immense capacity for storage and allow readers to carry an infinite library within a hand-sized, thin container. During the 1990s, Joseph Jacobson, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), developed the concept of ‘last book’, which, as James Langdon (2010, 47) explained, is based on the idea of an electronic device ‘that would be able to store and display every text ever written’, thus acting as one of the precursors for contemporary e-readers.

In 2007, Amazon launched the Amazon Kindle, which aimed to take on ‘the last bastion of the analog’, as Jeff Bezos asserted (Levy, 2007). In order to compete with such a culturally established object as the book, Bezos understood that it was necessary to create a device that replicated some of its characteristics (e.g., size, weight, portability, durability) and provided other qualities a printed book could never offer to readers:

E-book devices like the Kindle allow for you to change the font size [...]. The handheld device can also hold several shelves’ worth of

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<sup>50</sup> To date, Project Gutenberg has accumulated over 70,000 free e-books: <https://www.gutenberg.org/> (Accessed: 15 June 2024).

books: 200 of them onboard, hundreds more on a memory card and a limitless amount of virtual library stacks maintained by Amazon. Also, the Kindle allows you to search within the book for a phrase or name (Levy, 2007).

From this point onwards, digital reading became ubiquitous. At any time of the day and on any part of the world, readers can buy or download any book or text they wish to read and carry it with them. This immediacy and limitless quantity of digital reading was further reinforced by the development of smartphones and tablets. Reading can happen anytime, anywhere and in many formats and media.

## 2.2 The alleged ‘death of the book’

In *Phaedrus*, composed by Plato around 370 BCE, it is possible to find one of the earliest rejections of a new inscription technology that threatened older forms of communication:

For this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality (Plato, 2008).

In this famous fragment, Socrates explains to Phaedrus his rejection of the written word. Plato registers the philosopher’s concern about the effects writing could have on memory and conventional ways of reasoning at the time. Up to this point, society communicated mainly orally and the written word is seen as a threat to established ways of thinking and the mechanisms to remember and transmit information. Socrates fears that with the new technology people will become lazy and replace thinking with writing, merely trusting what another person writes without adding their own judgement. There is no denial that writing did indeed revolutionise thinking and communication practices. However, it was not a ‘cataclysmic’ event,

to use Eisenstein's (1983, 3) word. Orality was not replaced overnight and neither did it disappear. Both forms coexisted (they still do) and evolved into specific communication roles within society.

In *Interfaces of the word*, Walter Ong (2013) explains how the spoken word has been transformed by writing and printing. The introduction of new technologies does not mean the eradication of older ones, but a transformation through processes that could not be conceived of previously. This transformation is what Derrida (2001, 9) refers to as 'restructuration'. The fact that the electronic supplants the codex book (as the codex previously supplanted previous technologies) does not mean it will make it disappear: 'for what we are dealing with is never replacements that put an end to what they replace but rather [...] coexisting with the new form.'

Older forms of communication have always been threatened by the appearance of new technology. This is also the case of writing and the printing press. The fears of how the older ways of thought would be destroyed by print are famously reflected in Victor Hugo's (1831) novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*. Set in 1482, the archdeacon (a significant character in the novel) points simultaneously at a printed book and at the building of Notre-Dame and exclaims: '*Ceci tuera cela*' (1831, 251). This will kill that, or, more specifically, printing will kill the manuscript. The interjection reflects the fears of the time that see the press as a fierce agent of change: change from scribal to print culture; but also change of modes of expression, change of thought, and change of power (that of the church).

However, these changes, as Eisenstein (1983) explains, were brought on slowly and happened under the effect of remediation. Unarguably, the printing press transformed the production of texts and the reading practices, but not by dispensing with the products of scribal culture. Instead, it reproduced them in larger quantities and made them accessible to readers that could not previously afford them: 'Even while the conditions of scribal culture were being outmoded, texts reflecting those conditions were becoming

more abundant, and different spirits from different times were being simultaneously released' (1983, 115). In fact, the book that causes the archdeacon's rage in Hugo's novel is a printed version of a manuscript. If it were not for the technology that he rejects, he would probably not be able to read or access that book. Certainly, the printing press ends up replacing manuscripts and the way of thinking that evolved from non-uniform systems to a more uniform access to information, but this change is gradual and not abrupt.

Similarly, the development of electricity through public networks at the end of the nineteenth century prepared the ground for mass communication and originated the first visions of upcoming radical changes in media. According to Ludovico (2018), the first predictions of the death of print as a reliable medium for distribution of information appear during the early years of the twentieth century. Not coincidentally, Lyons (1999, 132) describes the 1800s as the 'Golden Age' of books in the West: 'the first generation which acceded to mass literacy was also the last to see the book unchallenged as a communication medium, by either the radio or the electronic media of the twentieth century.'

A good example of the early predictions of the future death of the book is Octave Uzanne's (1894) enthusiastic supporting vision of the phonograph. In 1894, he believed that the spoken word would replace printing. From his point of view, print would very quickly become an obsolete technology, especially because the act of reading requires an effort and a waste of physical energy for readers:

I own to you frankly that I do not believe (and the progress of electricity and modern mechanism forbids me to believe) that Gutenberg's invention can do otherwise than sooner or later fall into desuetude as a means of current interpretation of our mental products. [...] Our grandchildren will no longer trust their works to this somewhat antiquated process, now become very easy to replace by phonography (Uzanne, 1894, 224).

As the twentieth century advances and the development of electronic technology gives way to the radio, the telephone, and especially the television, the concern for the future of print and



the book becomes more obvious.<sup>51</sup> Around 1928, Walter Benjamin (1928, 62) appeared troubled by the way in which print is being ‘pitilessly dragged out onto the street by advertisement’ and technology. For him, this was an indicator that the book in its traditional form is close to the end. Some decades later, compared to the moving images offered by the television, reading seems to be losing ground and, as McLuhan (1967, 63) was quick to understand, in the ’60s, the old ways of ‘apprehending the world are no longer possible; they are just too slow to be relevant or effective.’

The ideas about the rapid changes that electronic technology was bringing into the world are well reflected in William S. Burroughs<sup>52</sup> vision of television as a technology with the ability to influence deeply conventional reading practices. For him, the novel is a form that needs to evolve with the new media forms:

I think that the novelistic form is probably outmoded and that we may look forward perhaps to a future in which people do not read at all or read only illustrated books and magazines or some abbreviated form of reading matter. To compete with television and photo magazines writers will have to develop more precise techniques of producing the same effect on the reader as a lurid action photo (Odier, 1974, 27).

With the first appearances of the digital, the speed at which electronic technology develops increased rapidly. Information and communication practices became global and started to erase time and space conditions through new networking practices. The book seemed to be gradually threatened and seen as an obsolete form of communication, unable to ‘stand up to the pressures of instantaneous coverage of the Earth’, as McLuhan (1954, 119) claimed in his article for *Explorations No. 3*. Print seemed too slow,

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<sup>51</sup> In ‘Books are dead, long live books’ (2003), Priscilla Coit Murphy gives a good view of these concerns from the late nineteenth century into the last decades of the twentieth. These concerns also bring the notion that old and new media would learn to live with each other and become complementary.

<sup>52</sup> William S. Burroughs (1914–1997) was a writer and visual artist from the United States. He employed the cut-up technique as an aleatory literary method in works such as *The nova trilogy* (1961–1964).

rigid, and linear to keep up with the changing times. The procedures of eye movement following the lines of text or decoding words one by one appeared too limited compared to the dynamic reality offered by the new media. As McCaffery and bpNichol (2000, 20) described: 'Not only the page but the book in its entirety is conceived as an obstacle to be overcome in order to achieve the desired goal of unproblematic, uninterrupted, unsophisticated consumption.'

From another point of view, conceptual artist Ulises Carrión understood books as living creatures that grow, reproduce, change, evolve, and finally, die (Schraenen, 2016).<sup>53</sup> Therefore, either as a consequence of a change in media or as a mere natural result, he believed that the 1970s constituted the final stage of the book's life cycle. Carrión asserted that in the 1960s and 1970s artists had understood this evolutionary process of books and were giving them the proper good-byes in the shape of artists' books. On the other hand, in 1984 Barry Richman was less convinced about the apparently imminent end of paper. In an article for *PC Magazine*, he asked about the death of print and reflected on its replacement by electronic reading. In his view, computers were still not in a position to accomplish that in a short period of time: 'Surprising, isn't it, how hard it is to kill off a nice little technology like print' (1984, 89).<sup>54</sup>

The death of the printed book seemed inevitable during the last decade of the twentieth century. The rise of electronic technologies together with the Internet and the hypertext appear as enemies of print. Printed books, which were the predominant media for reading and accessing information during the past two centuries, looked as though they were cornered by the new and dynamic

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<sup>53</sup> Ulises Carrión was a conceptual artist and writer who had a significant role in the definition of the genre of artists' books in the 1960s and '70s. Both artists' books and Carrión's work are discussed further in Chapter 3.

<sup>54</sup> See 'Help or hindrance? The history of the book and electronic media' (Erickson, 2003) for a more detailed discussion about the different points of view that appeared in the transitional period between analogue and digital eras.

experiences digital media could offer.<sup>55</sup> In consequence, an inevitable debate ensued: was print to survive the dynamism, immediacy, and interaction of the digital realm?

In *The Gutenberg elegies* (1994) Sven Birkerts, in his position as a firm defender of the printed book and fearful of what the digital could bring upon society, wondered ‘what it would be like to look back upon [this] cultural moment from a vantage of, say, thirty years’ (1994, 17). Three decades later these discussions seem old-fashioned and obsolete, but also natural and reasonable when understood in the context of the history of media change. Since 2000, the idea that technology would supplant the paper book has mutated into theories that consider the ability of the printed object to adapt to new circumstances. Books have always been threatened by new technologies (Ludovico, 2018). However, at the end of the twentieth century the digital revolution appears to many as the ultimate threat to print. As Erickson noted (2003), the rise of electronic media is quick to generate two separate and extremely opposed teams: the ‘book people’ and the ‘computer people’ (2003, 111). Birkerts (1994, 32) explains that he had a file called ‘The reading wars’ in which he saved newspaper clippings and his own notes about the discussion: ‘The title captures my sense of urgency, my sense that there is a battle going on.’

This dispute is evidenced in Bolter’s (1991, 164) statement: ‘Until recently it was possible to believe that the computer could coexist with the printed book.’ He even declared that the adversary of hypertext is the printed form. Similarly, Raymond Kurzweil (1992) assumed that the printed book would become obsolescent by the early twenty-first century. The ‘computer team’s’ views can be well summarised in Joyce’s conviction of the obsolescence of the book as a technology that would soon disappear or become a marginalised form:

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<sup>55</sup> This is very well illustrated in the introductory chapter of Leah Price’s *What we talk about when we talk about books* (2019). The author reflects about the questions raised in the ’90s in regards to the future and permanence of the printed book.

What we whiff is not the smell of ink but, rather the smell of loss: of burning towers or men's cigars in the drawing room. Hurry up, please—it's time. We are in the late age of print; the time of the book has passed. The book is an obscure pleasure like the opera or cigarettes. The book is dead—long live the book (Joyce, 1991).

This fate, which seemed so inevitable for some, was not shared by everyone. Birkerts (1994) defended the linear quality of print, its fixed and static nature compared to the fragmented and 'shallow' experience of the digital. In *The Gutenberg elegies*, he praises print and the act of reading printed books, although in such a subjective manner that, as Erickson (2003, 103) also noted, he sees the book 'as a natural phenomenon' and fails to see it as a technology. In fact, Birkerts was so focused in explaining his personal experience with reading, that he did not refer to the printed book at all, failing to recognise the importance of materiality as a point of difference from the digital. On the other hand, while Birkerts was pessimistic about the fate of books in the age of the digital, writer Annie Proulx (1994) was convinced that books would never be replaced by screens: 'Nobody is going to sit down and read a novel in a twitchy little screen. Ever.'

Both Birkerts and Proulx are examples of two extremes within the 'book people', who are often referenced to illustrate the romantic misguidance of those who in the last years of the previous century reject the digital future. However, there are also voices on the 'book side' that take on a more subtle standpoint, such as Geoffrey Nunberg (1993), who understands that both extremes of the argument result into exaggerations and fetishism (both of print and digital devices).

Despite the difference in views, what becomes undeniable during the last decade of the twentieth century is the fact that computers and digital technology are going to have a profound impact on print and the book. As Nunberg (1993) identifies, some uses of print such as catalogues, census reports, repair and instruction manuals, etc., were going to be replaced by their digital counterparts. Therefore, many conversations in relation

to the future of the book focused on the impact that changes in technology would have on literature, as the digital dimension was, and still is, challenging and is destined to reshape the traditional notions of reading, writing, and publishing.

In 1997, Espen Aarseth coined the term ‘ergodic literature’ to define the works where ‘a nontrivial effort is required to traverse the text’ (1997, 1). Aarseth sustained that digital literature is not ‘radically different’ from print-based literature (1997, 14) and thus, he considers interactive fiction—printed and digital hypertext forms in general—as ergodic literature that demands engagement and play from the readers’ side. However, this idea is rejected by Landow in *Hypertext 2.0* (1997, 36), where it is claimed that even if a printed text with notes can work as a hypertext, where readers decide between reading one or the other, there is a major difference in the fact that hypertext is ‘composed of bodies of linked texts that have no primary axis of organization’, with no main text or subordination. Landow’s views connect with Robert Coover’s (1992, n.p.) claim that ‘print documents may be read in hyperspace, but hypertext does not translate into print’. This adds to the belief that digital media could absorb the characteristics of printed literature, but the contrary could not happen.

Seeing these discussions from today’s vantage point, it is possible to appreciate that both sides, and especially the most extreme ones, were unable (because digital development was still in its infancy) to foresee some holes in their predictions. Books are indeed read on little screens and reading lost part of its physical dimension under the influence of the new technology. However, as the following pages show, the digital has not meant the death of printed books but, instead, has opened the door to other kinds of analogue reading. Nunberg was not inclined to predictions, but in 1996 he ventured to formulate one that would have been accurate but for a few years: ‘... by the end of the decade [1990s] all our current talk of the “end of the book” will sound as dated and quaint as most of the other forecasts of this type [...]—photography will kill painting,

movies will kill the theatre, television will kill movies, and so on' (1996, 13). It might have taken more years than he thought, but the discussion has indeed become dated.

## 2.3 The characteristics of hypertext

The emergence of hypertext entailed a revolution. The term was coined by Theodor H. Nelson in the 1960s and included in his book *Literary machines* (1987, 0/2):

Well, by 'hypertext' I mean non-sequential writing—text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen. As popularly conceived, this is a series of text chunks connected by links which offer the reader different pathways.

As Nelson himself explained, it took more than twenty years for people to notice the term 'hypertext'. For some time, no one seemed to pay attention to the definition until the '80s, when 'abruptly', as he described, people started talking about it: 'The strange thing is that all this took so long and then happened so suddenly' (1987, 0/2).

Apparently, the concept of hypertext needed to be associated with the electronic space opened up by computers in order to properly change conventional reading and writing practices.

Hypertext flourishes within an 'abstract digital space' (Ludovico, 2018, 27) where new and unexpected things can happen, such as the dismantling of linearity in texts conventionally associated with print. By allowing different reading paths, hypertext dissolves the rigidity and authority of conventional text and transfers a part of that agency from writers to readers. Landow (1997), one of the most important voices to study hypertext in the '90s, argued that, in the context of the digital revolution, the distinction made by Barthes (1990) between *readerly* and *writerly* texts can be interpreted as a distinction between print and digital text. From this perspective, print demands no effort from readers and allows a passive reading experience, while digital reading is interactive and dynamic. The *writerly* text does not only make the reader a consumer, 'but a

producer of the text' (Barthes, 1990, 4), it allows 'access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of the writing.'

Furthermore, in *S/Z* (1974), Barthes describes the ideal text as composed of networks which 'are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds' (1974, 5), with no beginning and no end, with several entrances in which none can be distinguished as a main one. Similarly, Foucault (1972, 23) also understands a text as a network made out of links. For him, a book has no rigid boundaries and is made of 'a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network'. Both descriptions could refer to hypertextual fragments linked via multiple paths that have no clear and defined entrance.

Taking all this into account, Landow (1997, 33–42) claimed that hypertext is also the realisation of Derridean texts by identifying four characteristics intrinsic to them. The first one is textual openness, namely a text composed of fragments, a 'vast assemblage' of units and citations that opens to an almost infinite reading. The second characteristic is intertextuality, the ability of hypertext to emphasise relations between texts 'in a way that page-bound text in books cannot.' Another feature is multivocality. Hypertext dims the univocal voice and creates an ongoing conversation of consciousnesses, not only of author and reader, but also of the reading path, cultural context, and references. The last attribute is the lack of a primary axis of organisation. The central point in hypertexts shifts and recentres as readers move through the text, through participation and interaction: 'the provisional point of focus depends upon the reader, who becomes a truly active reader.'

### 2.3.1 Examples of hypertext in print

The codex book has been historically structured to provide a comfortable and seamless linear experience by using the page as a unit for reading (Hayles, 2002). This is reinforced by binding the

pages in a specific sequential order and numbering them, or even by the opacity of the paper which defines the two sides of the page and relates them sequentially rather than simultaneously. However, the fact that society has used the book for linear reading has more to do with habit than with a natural and intrinsic quality of the object. The codex also allows for random access. Nicholas Negroponte, co-founder of the Architecture Machine Group at MIT,<sup>56</sup> identified this quality when writing about the fluidity of texts on screens in 1979: ‘the old fashioned book remains the best random access information resource’ (1996, 2), as it can offer many entry points to readers, even if the printed content is not originally conceived for nonlinear reading.

Therefore, hypertextual practices are not invented with the computer. Certainly, the digital space creates an ideal environment to foster the development of hypertext, but some of these practices already existed in previous print forms. In fact, it could be said that the codex offers the possibility for a more random access than a digital text. Even if a digital hypertext might appear as branching endlessly, readers cannot really access it randomly but need to follow the structure defined for them beforehand. This idea is well-reflected in Ong’s (2013, n.p.) words: ‘if you associate print with localization and space, with “linearity” or “sequentiality”, there is no more linear or sequential instrument in the world than the computer.’ As he claims, the lightning speed at which things happen digitally makes them seem near-instantaneous, but the movement through sequences is still there (more than ever before). Accordingly, Deidre Lynch points out that ‘linear reading is no more natural than any other ritual we perform with books’ (2009, 216).

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<sup>56</sup> The Architecture Machine Group (AMG) was a research group at MIT, active from 1967 to 1985. Led by Nicholas Negroponte and Andrew Lippman, the group focused on the exploration of media technology, experimenting with computer science and the intersection between film, video, graphics, and publishing industries. In 1977, Negroponte, psychologist Richard Bold and designer Muriel Cooper, collaborated to submit a proposal to the National Science Foundation titled ‘Books without pages’, in which they investigated the ‘fluid text that circulates on screens—in contrast to the fixed fact of printed “hard copy”’ (Wiesenberger, 2018, 170).



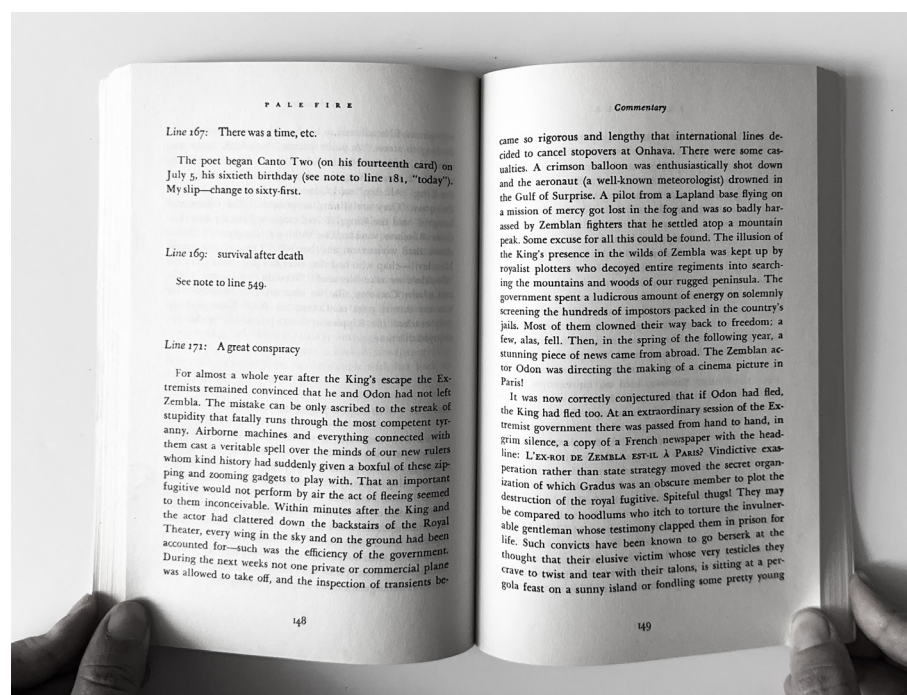
The most basic devices in the codex that allow for hypertextuality are the footnote and the index, as they open up the text to cross-referencing, and to intertextuality. They link ideas, comments and voices within the book and the manuscript or printed text. Gregory Crane (2003) argues that the scroll was probably more suited for linear reading than the codex. By dividing the text in smaller units (pages and spreads) the latter allows for the kind of annotation and navigation that enables a more flexible access and retrieval of information. Footnotes originally appeared in manuscript forms as comments in the margins of the pages (Borsuk, 2018). Tables of contents and indices, on the other hand, are more recent devices that appeared around the seventeenth century as navigational aids to help readers move through the text and build their own paths and reading journeys.

Hypertextuality in print can be traced back as far as *circa* the first millennium before current era. The *I Ching*, one of the oldest collections of Chinese wisdom and considered by Aarseth (1997) to be one of the first hypertexts, is not meant to be read linearly but by random consultation and recombination of signs, ‘through coin toss, yarrow stick ritual, or another form of chance combination’ (Strudwick, 2014, 175). The content is a mixture of image and text that has no beginning and no end, creating a labyrinthine experience for readers. On the other hand, the Talmud, one of the most important texts of Jewish religion and tradition, which combines scriptures of ancient scribes and rabbis of Israel, together with laws and oral traditions (i.e., the Mishna and the Gemara, compiled around 148–475 C.E.), is a good example of hypertextuality and non-linear reading, compiled for the first time as a printed codex form around the sixteenth century. Nelson (1987, 1/16) describes the Talmud as ‘an extraordinary hypertext, a body of accumulated comment and controversy [...]. It has been accreted over centuries with commentaries on commentaries [...], and the Talmudic scholar is one who knows many of its pathways.’

Other significant examples on the use of footnotes are the eighteenth-century *The Dunciad variorum* (1729) by Alexander Pope, in which the notes overshadow the poetry and act as a satirical commentary (Hemmingson, 2011); and T. S. Eliot's *The waste land* from 1922, regarded as one of the most important modernist poems of the twentieth century and relevant in this context because it is a poem that comes with notes. The notes originally had the function of proving wrong the accusations of plagiarism Eliot received, but when published in book form the notes became fused within, making visible the assemblage of source material that is behind the poem (Loy, 2021).

The decade of the 1960s is especially significant when looking at books with hypertextual qualities in a pre-digital era. These works explore nonlinearity and multicursality in a time when the first developments towards digital technology are taking place. One of the most important narratives in this sense is Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale fire*, published in 1962. The novel presents a poem with its commentary, written by two fictional authors (one of them editing the other, the latter being the author of the poem). The commentary appears in the form of endnotes, and the index itself has its own narrative relevance (Figure 2.1). Due to the way in which the text

**Figure 2.1** A spread from *Pale fire* by Nabokov (1962, 148–149) in the 1989 Vintage International Edition. The expected centrality of the poem is disrupted by the commentary in the form of endnotes. The interruptions within the endnotes offer digressing reading paths.





Video 2.1 A possible reading of *Pale fire* (Nabokov, 1962). Readers can choose to move linearly through the novel, but the numerous connections and references encourage readers to engage with different reading paths.

gives readers the agency to move freely through the different parts, it has since been regarded as one of the canonical hypertextual novels.<sup>57</sup> In fact, Aarseth (1997, 7) describes Nabokov's novel 'as both unicursal and multicursal', a structure made possible through the use of endnotes, which create a choice for readers and at the same time bring these readers back to the main track. In the case of *Pale fire*, Nabokov leaves this choice entirely open to readers, who can decide how to read the different parts and connections of the novel (Video 2.1).

At first sight, Nabokov seems not to offer readers instructions on how to read the novel. Simon Rowberry (2011) points out that the author gives readers freedom and does not influence them in their reading decisions, but this is not completely accurate. At the end of the novel's foreword, which is also part of the fiction written by the fictional commentator, some lines of instructions appear embedded within the text:

Other notes, arranged in a running commentary, will certainly satisfy the most voracious reader. Although those notes, in conformity with custom, come after the poem, the reader is advised to consult them first and then study the poem with their help, rereading them of course as he goes through its text, and perhaps, after having done the poem, consulting them a third time so as to complete the picture (Nabokov, 1962, 28).

These instructions are not as explicit as the ones present in other hypertextual narratives, but by including them before the actual reading of the poem Nabokov offers readers a clue on one of the many ways in which the novel could be read. At the same time, these instructions play with readers' expectations. The directions suggest that the best way to read the novel is in a linear —although still unconventional— fashion, starting with the comments and then moving to the poem. However, what remains unsaid in the foreword, and what readers discover through the actual reading, is that the comments do not foster linearity. There exist numerous connections

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<sup>57</sup> As Rowberry (2011) points out, Nelson worked with Nabokov's novel at his experiments with early hypertext systems.

and references between different notes and lines of the poem, enticing readers to move nonlinearly through the novel. For example, the comment to 'Line 270' urges readers to jump to another part of the text: '(see, see now, my note to lines 993–995)' (Nabokov, 1962, 172). Thus, although some instructions are present within the text, these are misleading and play with the expectations of readers, who can ignore these directions and choose their own reading strategy. However, the instructions are so thoroughly embedded within the fiction that it becomes difficult to ignore the encouragement from the fictional commentator.

This is not the case of *Hopscotch*. Published in 1964, Julio Cortázar presents readers with a 'Table of Instructions'<sup>58</sup> that explicitly gives them the option to read the novel in two ways: one in a normal fashion, from first chapter to last; the second, following a sequence of chapters provided by the author himself. Even if he offers only those two possibilities, by breaking the established sequential reading of the chapters, readers are encouraged by the implicit possibility that they could read the novel in any order they chose. Each chapter of the novel works as one 'chunk of text' and is linked to at least two other chunks: the contiguous chapter (if read in a conventional way) or the chapter suggested by Cortázar (or if one is following a complete random order, then each chapter would be linked to all the other chapters).<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> 'Manual de instrucciones' in the original in Spanish (1964, 11). It reads as follows: '[i]n its own way, this book consists of many books, but two books above all. The reader is invited to choose between these two possibilities: The first can be read in a normal fashion and it ends with Chapter 56, at the close of which there are three garish little stars which stand for the words The End. Consequently, the reader may ignore what follows with a clean conscience. The second should be read by beginning with Chapter 73 and then following the sequence indicated at the end of each chapter. In case of confusion or forgetfulness, one need only consult the following list: 73 – 1 – 2 – 116 – 3 – 84 – 4 – 71 [...] – 131 – 58 – 131 – Each chapter has its number at the top of every right-hand page to facilitate the search.'

<sup>59</sup> These kinds of instructions are related to the series that appeared in 1976 and known as the Choose Your Own Adventure narratives. Conceived and written by Edward Packard, the writer presents readers with several reading choices that result in different narrative developments. Even if offering readers different paths, there is not much room for randomness as the writer is always in control of the narrative and the different routes a reader can take. In fact, normally there is a 'good' path, and readers typically read the different routes until exhausting the options and finding the 'correct' path.

As Burgess (2015) suggests, in *Hopscotch* the instructions seem bound to maintain the writer's control over the narrative. This makes sense if Cortázar designed it to be read in two particular ways and is not offering randomness. However, in the two other significant works of this period, instructions appear as a device for the writers to enhance the random potentiality and hypertextual quality of the text. As Chapter 1 has described, while B. S. Johnson's *The unfortunates* (1969) presents the unbound chapters of the novel in a box (Figure 1.22), Marc Saporta's *Composition No. 1* (1963) presents single pages unbound within the box (Figure 1.16). Both novels include instructions in which the respective writer explains to readers that the novel can be read in any order and asks them to shuffle the pages or chapters before starting to read so they can build their own random order.

Derrida's *Glas* (1974) is also seen as a work that offers a hypertextual experience through the breakage of linear narrative and the simultaneous presentation of multiple possibilities on every page (Figure 2.2). The two opposing columns of text open the work to intertextuality, and at the same time decentre it. Borrowing from Drucker (2013, 8), the columns sit 'next to each other as rivals for attention, each introducing its own subject' and competing 'to

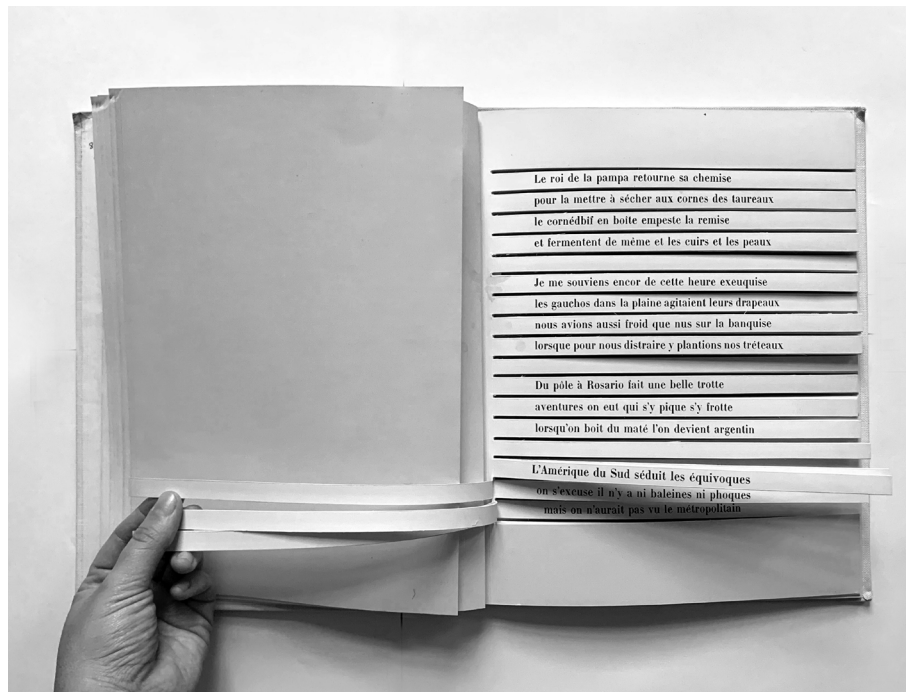
**Figure 2.2** A spread from *Glas* (Derrida, 1974, 56–57). The hypertextual qualities are made evident by the continuous disruptions that decentre the narrative axis and generate a fragmented text.



outbid the other.’ These forces are strengthened by the continuous disruption of the columns with the other voices, the ‘judases’ that increase the fragmentation of the text.

Another significant example in hypertextual print literature is Raymond Queneau’s *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, published in 1961 by Éditions Gallimard and designed by Robert Massin.<sup>60</sup> Queneau was a major exponent of the Oulipo collective<sup>61</sup> and was convinced of the importance of literary form and its complementarity with mathematics. Working together with engineer and co-founder of the group François Le Lionnais, Queneau (1961) created a ‘machine for making poems’, as he himself describes it in the introduction to the work. The book consists of ten sonnets with fourteen verses each. The poems are printed one per page and cut in strips corresponding with each of the verses (Figure 2.3). With this strategy, Queneau builds a space of possibility and creates a potentially infinite work: for a person

**Figure 2.3** A typical page from *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* by Raymond Queneau (1961) with the verses of the poems cut in strips. The combinatorial quality of the work gives readers agency to build a personal reading experience through the potentially infinite possibilities.



<sup>60</sup> Robert Massin (1925–2020) was a French designer known, among other things, for his expressive work with typographic composition. As Chapter 5 shows, he designed the French edition of Ionesco’s *The bald soprano* published by Éditions Gallimard in 1964.

<sup>61</sup> Stylised as OuLiPo, short for Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle (Workshop for Potential Literature), formed in 1960.

reading twenty-four hours a day it will take two hundred million years to read all of the combinations.

In this example, hypertextuality is foregrounded with the use of combinatorial features. By using play and restriction (essential features of oulipian literature) Queneau gives readers agency to build their own poems out of the potentially infinite options available. He disrupts the conventional structure of the printed book and transforms the reading process into a visible and physical activity. As Wocke (2014, 13) described it, this work ‘allows the reader[s] to experience [their] own particular version of the story.’ *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* is a work about reading literary form and foregrounding the materiality of the act of reading.

These narratives not only predate the development of digital space but also can be defined by Landow’s (1997) four characteristics of hypertext: they are composed of fragments, connected in ways that emphasise their intertextual relationships, which translate into multivocality and the decentring of the axis through readerly participation. They also fit within Alan Liu’s (2009) proposition that the book had already ended before the actual appearance of the computer:

But, wait. Didn’t the book already end, beginning in the age of the book itself—beginning, indeed, at the origin of books? From a certain point of view—that of the history of the book and the history of reading [...]—the digital may be the end of the book, but the book actually got to the end of the book first and was digital *avant la lettre* (Liu, 2009, 509).

Liu gives the example of the Bible and states that ‘the codex book displaced the classical and Jewish scroll in the Early Christian epoch’ (2009, 509). From this point of view, the codex is more practical and allows for the reading of the Bible through modular and random-access practices. Due to the fact that hypertextual characteristics can be found within older texts, the linear and sequential idea of the book was already obsolete from its origins. McLuhan (1964, 13–14) famously expounded that ‘the medium is the message’ but this only becomes obvious with the electronic age, with speed and global simultaneity that allows one to see the

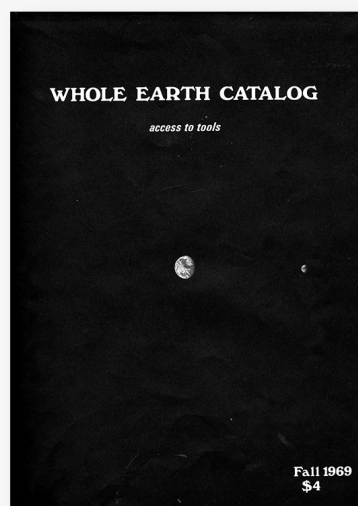
structure of the world. Thus, the development of the digital realm affords the understanding of the codex book having hypertextual qualities all along, but the development of the electronic space was necessary to bring them to the fore.

### 2.3.2 The *Whole Earth catalog*

1968 saw the emergence of a countercultural publication with hypertextual properties that would prove essential for the development of online networking. In the midst of a time when counterculture focused on the rejection of technological and capitalist systems, there also appeared a move towards a use of technology to build a better and more environmental future (Kirk, 2001). The *Whole Earth catalog* (*WEC*) was a publication run by ‘young radicals’ who aimed to place ‘the power of small-scale, easily understood, appropriate technology in the hands of anyone willing to listen’ (2001, 382). In a way, it was a move towards embracing technology within a new communal perspective (Turner, 2013).

The *WEC* was created by Stewart Brand and published regularly between 1968 and 1972 (Figure 2.4). As described by Turner (2006, 71), it was ‘neither book, nor magazine, nor traditional

**Figure 2.4** Cover from the *WEC* (1969), published from 1968 to 1972, and updated regularly with appendixes until the next issue, gave readers ‘access to tools’.





mail-order outlet.’ Each page is a combination of multiple texts and typefaces printed on rough paper, a countermovement to the conventional and technological glossy magazine. The *Catalog* features a variety of artefacts, from books to mechanical devices and outdoor recreational gear, home weaving and cooking kits, science reports, music, etc. (Figure 2.5). The purpose of the publication was not to offer readers the possibility of buying the products through the *Catalog*, which could be done by going to the Whole Earth Truck Store in California. The aim was to offer them a space to discover helpful objects, and also to contribute with reviews, recommendations or descriptions of their experiences and share them with other readers: ‘as an evaluation and access device. With it, the user should know better what is worth getting and where and how to do the getting’ (Brand, 1968, np).<sup>62</sup>

**Figure 2.5** A typical spread from the *WEC* (1968, 5–6). The pages present a variety of typefaces printed on rough paper, together with numerous images, bits of text, and comments from readers.



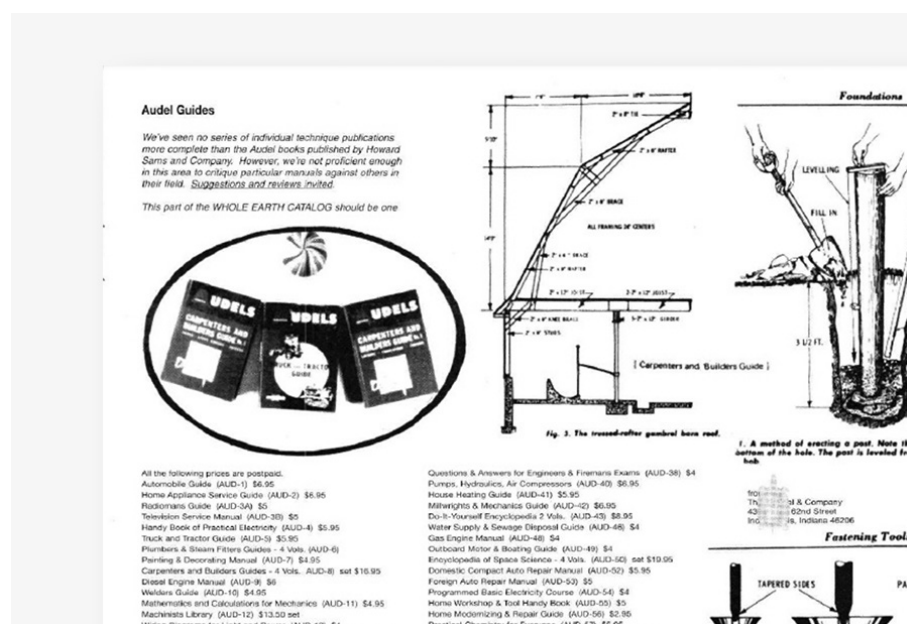
<sup>62</sup> In *The printing revolution in early modern Europe* (1983, 74), Eisenstein explains that there were some sixteenth-century editors who ‘created vast networks of correspondents and solicited criticism of each edition, sometimes publicly promising to mention the names of readers who sent in new information.’ Most interestingly, this could be regarded as a precursor of the way in which the *WEC* functioned by establishing connections between readers. The example Eisenstein gives to illustrate this kind of collaborative practice has similarities with the way in which Brand works to build the *Catalog* network: ‘Ortelius made his *Theatrum* a sort of co-operative enterprise on an international basis. He received helpful suggestions from far and wide and cartographers stumbled over themselves to send him their latest maps of regions not covered in the *Theatrum*’.

The *Catalog* aimed to create a system that users could be fully part of by using the tools (books and instruments) that are included in it. This interest in creating a network is linked to McLuhan's idea of the 'global village', developed during the '50s and '60s. In both *The Gutenberg galaxy* and *Understanding media* (published in 1962 and 1964, respectively), McLuhan argues that electronic technology is changing the linear and sequential orientation of the typographic age (or the pre-electronic period). Therefore, linear and individual thought is giving way to a communal and networked way of thinking and communicating, which is well-represented in the ideals of Brand's *WEC*.

One of the most important characteristics the *Whole Earth catalog* shared with hypertext is the aim to give agency to readers, who are empowered through the system. The *Catalog* offers readers access to tools, and, at the same time, it encourages them to participate and help build the content of the publication (Figure 2.6). This makes possible the textual openness, the intertextuality and multivocality of the *Catalog*:

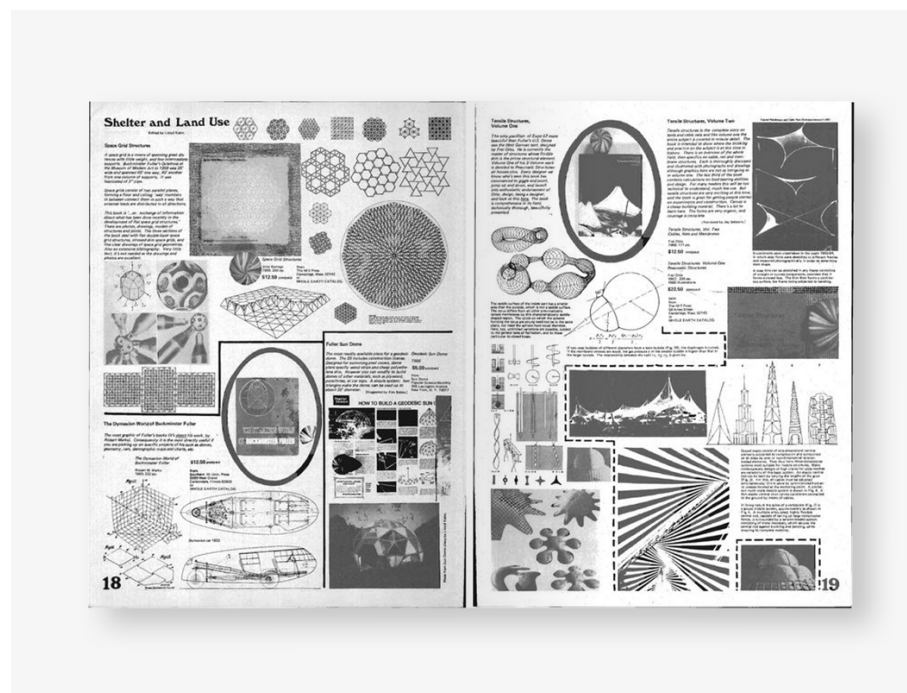
A realm of personal power is developing—power to the individual to conduct [their] own education, find [their] own inspiration, shape [their] own environment, and share [their] adventure with whoever is interested. Tools that aid this process are sought and promoted by the *Whole Earth catalog* (Brand, 1968, Introduction).

**Figure 2.6** A close-up of a page from the *WEC* (1968, 17). The *Catalog* offers readers access to tools, encouraging them to participate and help to build the content of the publication.



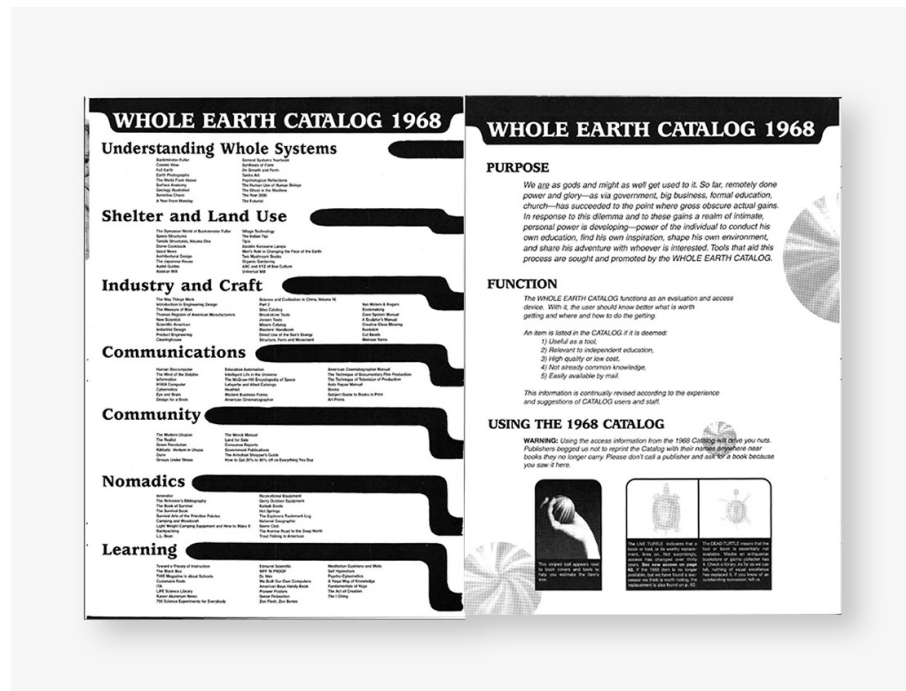
Two further essential hypertextual characteristics of the *Catalog* are the multivocality and the decentred axis of the publication's structure. Brand chooses to disregard catalogue and text conventions by not including organisational elements that reinforce reading structures or privilege one single author's voice (Figure 2.7). Products are not emphasised in importance and hierarchies are undercut to display an assemblage of voices 'of various reviewers and letter-writers and bits of texts from the products themselves' (Turner, 2006, 89).

**Figure 2.7** A spread from the *WEC* (1969, 18–19). The lack of a primary axis of organisation is made evident by the decentralised layout and the absence of a central text structure.



As a result of the lack of hierarchy, there are no defined entry and exit points to the publication. Readers can move freely from one product to another creating their own connections and reading paths. Even if the section 'Understanding whole systems' is placed at the front, as a reference point to help readers understand the structure, the publication has no other prevailing sections (Figure 2.8). Content is presented divided in seven categories 'of more or less equal size and [can] be entered and exited by the reader at will, with no loss of comprehension for the *Catalog* as a whole' (Turner, 2006, 89).

**Figure 2.8** A typical contents page from the *WEC* (1968). The seven sections of the publication are presented as a table of contents that lacks page numbers or indication of hierarchies.



What differentiates the *WEC* from the previous pre-digital literary examples is the fact that it also anticipates a fifth hypertextual quality defined by Landow (1997): the rhizomatic structure or the ability of the narrative to build and expand beyond itself. In *A thousand plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987, 21) describe the rhizome as a fragmented system with no beginning and no end, with no defined hierarchy, and made of plateaus: ‘A plateau is always in the middle, not at the beginning or the end’, and is connected at any point to all the other plateaus. They proposed a new idea of the book as a rhizome, as a system that opposes hierarchy and emphasises a different reading structure by the multiplicity of connections. In fact, Landow referred to *A thousand plateaus* as ‘a print proto-hypertext’ (1997, 38); a book that provides instructions for readers and that can be read in many multiple ways (in this way similar to Cortázar’s *Hopscotch*):

The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple [...] It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overflows [...] The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots. [...] The rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight. [...] In contrast to centered (even polycentric) systems with

hierarchical modes of communication and preestablished paths, the rhizome is an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 21).

These qualities of the rhizome are very much related to those of the hypertext as Landow (1997) or Moulthrop (1994) have noted; and, consequently, can also be found in the *Whole Earth catalog*. The first edition of the publication consists of 61 pages in which Brand himself selected nearly every item on display. Some years later, in 1971, the *Catalog* grew to 448 pages and by then, most of the objects in it were recommendations and contributions from readers (Turner, 2006). This was accomplished by using ‘a series of strategies to distribute power and work to readers and to downplay [Brand’s] own authority’ (Turner, 2006, 89). He attracted the attention of readers, inviting them to collaborate and review products by paying them ten dollars. Thus, readers became actively involved in the network of the *Catalog* and helped to build it. In three years, the *Catalog* created a network that not only grew within its pages, but also expanded beyond its printed information. The *WEC* turned into a whole enclosed system in itself, and also a tool for readers, which created a connection with the ‘whole systems that were their lives and the world in which they lived’ (Turner, 2006, 82). Thus, the *Catalog* had the ability to branch out infinitely, both as a hypertext and as a rhizome.

The potential for creating an external network, and thus feed into the idea of the rhizomatic structure, is made obvious by the later publications that appeared in the style of Brand’s catalogue. They addressed different topics that the original publication did not include, such as *Domebook one* (1970), *Good Earth almanac* (1973), *The new woman’s surviving catalog* (1973), *Catalog of sexual consciousness* (1975), *The whole Internet user’s guide and catalog* (1992) or *Hole black hole catalog* (2019).

By the end of the twentieth century Landow and others maintained that print could not effectively replicate hypertext’s digital

characteristics. However, the *Whole Earth catalog* not only behaved as a hypertext and included the five characteristics defined by Landow, but it also influenced the development of personal computing and the networked structure provided by search engines such as Google. In an article published in *Time* magazine in 1995, Brand vehemently argued that counterculture's (and especially *WEC*'s) rejection of centralised systems 'provided the philosophical foundations of not only the leaderless Internet but also the entire personal-computer revolution.'<sup>63</sup> This statement is well-exemplified in the fact that, as Turner (2006, 103) recounts, when computers in the '80s were starting to be marketed (in particular the 1984 Apple Macintosh), they were described as devices to 'tear down bureaucracies and achieve individual intellectual freedom'. Therefore, it is not surprising to find an explicit reference to the *WEC*—and its significance as a precursor to Google—in Steve Jobs' commencement speech at Stanford in 1995:

When I was young, there was an amazing publication called the *Whole Earth catalog*, which was one of the bibles of my generation. It was created by a fellow named Stewart Brand not far from here in Menlo Park, and he brought it to life with his poetic touch. This was in the late 1960s, before personal computers and desktop publishing, so it was all made with typewriters, scissors, and polaroid cameras. It was sort of like Google in paperback form, 35 years before Google came along: it was idealistic, and overflowing with neat tools and great notions (Stanford, 2008).

Regardless of this, by the end of the twentieth century it seemed as if the new openness, immediacy, flexibility, and dynamism of the digital text could never be translated into print. As is explained in the following pages, print had yet to live fully under the influence of the digital before being able to foreground new reading possibilities and experiences.

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<sup>63</sup> When the publication of *WEC* ended, Brand became co-founder of the first open online community, The Well (The Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link).

## 2.4 Media convergence and the new conventional novel

### 2.4.1 Changes in the print-digital discussion

Simultaneous with the most convinced predictions of the death of the book, the last years of the twentieth century were also a period for reflection. The doubts about the future of the book started to shift from the conviction that the new technology would overthrow print into considerations of what the new could mean for the old media. The question was not if computers were going to transform reading and writing practices, but how they were going to do so (Tolva, 1995) and how print was going to be influenced by those changes.

Media shifts are never completely definite but subject to many factors and influences. In the same way that the apparition and development of the digital realm did not happen overnight, some decades of co-existence between technologies were necessary before perceiving that the threat of the digital could mean an opportunity for the printed book. As Eisenstein (1983) explains, the advent of printing technology did not revolutionise reading and communication practices from the first text that was created at the printer's shop. On the contrary, it was a gradual process. Some propitiatory conditions had already happened before the apparition of print, on oral or handwritten practices, and were then reinforced by printing technologies.<sup>64</sup>

In 1996, Landow notes that the development of the digital was enabling a distancing from the printed book. Because information was not as dependent on print as it used to be, it could be looked at from a detached perspective. The book was not the only existing medium to access content anymore, which means the object did not

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<sup>64</sup> Eisenstein (1983) mentions, for example, the move that happened in the twelfth century from scriptoria to stationers' shops, thus replacing monastic scribes.

need to be put completely at its service. Instead, it opened up the opportunity to look at it again, studying and rethinking its value:

... we have already moved far enough beyond the book that we find ourselves, for the first time in centuries, able to see the book as unnatural, as a near-miraculous technological innovation and not as something intrinsically and inevitably human. We can, to use Derridean terms, decenter the book. We find ourselves in the position, in other words, of perceiving the book *as technology* (1996, 214).<sup>65</sup>

When looking at the book as technology, its intrinsic qualities become more perceptible. It is then possible to compare the characteristics that define print and digital media to understand that ‘both media share a certain number of characteristics, and yet they are fundamentally different – and they also fulfil different needs’ (Ludovico, 2018, 7). By the start of the twenty-first century, it became possible to see that what is a strength for one medium becomes a weakness for the other. A printed book is physical, it has a particular shape and weight, which makes it easy to see the extent of the content and how the reading advances as readers go through it. But it can be heavy, unfit for travelling and can occupy lots of space. A digital book is bodiless, easy to transport, but its content is also fungible, can be replaced easily, or even deleted. It is device-dependent and therefore if media become obsolete it can very quickly become inaccessible. Printed books are easy on the eyes and are free of distractions, but they also require outside lighting. On the other hand, digital books provide their own lighting, but they need to be charged and thus depend on access to electricity. They can be distractive, but also highly networked.

As Bolter and Grusin identified in 2000, ‘no medium today, and certainly no single media event, seems to do its cultural work in isolation from other media’ (2000, 15). In 1977, Ong also referred to the idea of remediation by pointing out that the appearance of a

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<sup>65</sup> ‘Twenty minutes into the future, or how are we moving beyond the book?’ is part of *The future of the book* edited by Geoffrey Nunberg in 1996, a book that has become a reference to understand the transitional moment between analogue and digital practices at the end of the twentieth century.



new medium does not destroy old practices, but actually reinforces previous media: ‘however, in doing so, it transforms the old, so that the old is no longer what it used to be’ (Ong, 2013, n.p.). This is in line with Henry Jenkins’ (2006) more recent definition of a culture of media convergence: a collaboration between media. Convergence focuses on how old and new media influence each other, and how the functions of the previous analogue technology are reshaped by the more recent digital one. Convergence is a process and not a termination point.

Under the influence of the new technology, books began to be written, composed, and designed digitally on the computer. This adds speed and freedom to the process of book production and means that printed books do not start on the physical plane anymore, but start as an immaterial concept, a digital product that is then printed and made tangible. On the other hand, electronic texts and webpages are also influenced by the analogue world. The look and feel of printed books are replicated on digital media. Digital reading aims to accommodate the features of traditional print with the intention to offer a familiar space to readers.

Looking back at the fifteenth century, it is possible to recognise the influence between analogue and digital worlds as part of a media transition process. The first printed books inherit the features of scribal texts, and it is difficult to differentiate between scribal and printed works. The latter are produced with typefaces that resemble script and are illustrated manually to follow the tradition of the previous medium.<sup>66</sup> New technology tends to be covered, made to look like the previous one, in a wish for continuity, ‘a need to experience this new medium under the aspect of established ways of reverence and of art’ (Thorburn and Jenkins, 2004, 7). This concept is also what Bolter and Grusin (2000) define as ‘remediation’: the act

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<sup>66</sup> In the ‘Introduction’ to *Rethinking media change*, Thorburn and Jenkins (2003, 8–9) compare a page from the Ellesmere manuscript of Chaucer’s *Canterbury tales* and a page from the first printed Gutenberg Bible, which demonstrate this idea of continuity in media transition.

of different media commenting on, influencing, and replacing each other. From their point of view, however, what differentiates the convergence of analogue and digital realms from previous periods of transitions is the fast development of new media and the rapid response of the traditional mediums to adapt to those changes.

Speed, as McLuhan had already identified in 1964, is what enabled the medium to become visible (to become the message) in an electronic age. Some decades later, in the digital world, speed (which has by now increased exponentially) not only sheds light onto the medium but also foregrounds the continuous and simultaneous transition, influence, and interconnection that is constantly taking place between the current co-existent media.

#### 2.4.2 The fluid novel

In the twenty-first century, hybridity is generally understood as the convergence between analogue and digital technologies. In particular, in books and literature it refers to works that result from digital practices of writing and reading, combined with traditional publishing. Readers inhabit analogue and digital dimensions simultaneously, moving in a sort of continuum that embraces both technologies together. As Kiene Brillenburg Wurth (2020) suggests, both the material and the immaterial are part of the same continuum,<sup>67</sup> and thus they cannot become opposites but points that create feedback loops between each other. They influence each other as part of the convergence culture.

Vicente Luis Mora (2012, 15–16) argued that technology is shaped based on social interaction, and frequently, ‘technical

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<sup>67</sup> Wurth uses François Lyotard (1979) terms, ‘material’ and ‘immaterial’, with which he analysed the consequences of a new medium technology. Wurth explains that Lyotard’s exhibition *Les immatériaux* (1985) was intent in showing how the material is also present in an empty space, and how the new technologies (as seen in the 1980s) are ‘as invisible and immaterial as they seemed in the constitution of experience, included and projected their own kind of materiality’ (2020, 5).

devices are used and reused in different ways and in different historical contexts', until their continued manipulation moves them far away from the original use. The shift from paper to digital format has disassembled the fixed primacy of the printed word and generated 'a disconcerting lack of physical presence' (Tolva, 1995). Immateriality is one of the experiences brought by digital technology. Information, which until the second half of the twentieth century, was thoroughly associated with the physicality of print and paper, has lost its dependence on the material medium. It has become fluid and in constant flow. It follows the patterns of liquids and gases, to borrow Zygmunt Bauman's (2000, 2) metaphor, and its form is continuously subjected to changes, unable to keep the same shape for a long time: 'for them it is the flow of time that counts, more than the space they happen to occupy: that space, after all, they fill but "for a moment"'.

Immateriality has subordinated everything to the digital dimension. Books, films, music, etc., are now documents or files. Texts are documents, Liu (2009) explains: 'Once we wrote or read books, stories, and poems, that is, but today—no matter the genre—everyone just writes and reads documents' (2009, 505). Information, and thus also literary works, have acquired a fluid dimension that can be shaped in any form and direction. Therefore, as Liu argued, documents (and thus texts) are 'deformational forms'. They are atomised into very small parts, in a sort of digital deconstruction, which makes them very easily prone to change, re-adaptation, and shift from platform to platform. They deform because of the liquid quality of their atoms, which cannot hold the shape when subjected to stress.

This is consistent with Mora's (2012) view that society is moving towards (if not there already) a completely horizontal and fluid world, where information is fragmented and reproduced immediately on different media. In this context, 'horizontality' means a lack of hierarchy, a transmission of knowledge absent of regulation, which is mixed and remixed (deformed) in an

amalgam of media, platforms, devices and technologies. However, this horizontal quality is not the same as that which Benjamin (1928) associated with the printed book, and which he asserted was becoming lost during the previous century by way of advertisement and film: 'the newspaper is read more in the vertical than in the horizontal plane, while film and advertisement force the printed word entirely into the dictatorial perpendicular' (1928, 62). Benjamin is here referring to a world in which text has not yet lost its physical quality, and the concepts of 'horizontal' and 'vertical' are still spatial and materially connected. But Mora's (2012, 75) explanation of this is that the digital realm adds a new condition to those two statuses: fluidity. The fluid condition of the digital deforms the physical condition of the text, which nowadays flows horizontally (that is, indistinctly) from analogue and digital dimensions.

Therefore, as the printed book co-exists with the influence of the digital, it becomes hybrid and liquid in every sense. In order to become a material object, a book needs first to be conceived on the immaterial dimension of the digital. This process was referred to by Hayles (2008, 43); that 'literature in the twenty-first century is computational'. Even more, because a printed book originates as a digital document, it is born already as a deformational form. It is a fluid document that can be modelled in any shape or direction before acquiring the form of a physical and bound book. It can simultaneously acquire several forms and exist in different mediums and on different platforms at the same time.

In 1941, Mikhail Bakhtin described the novel as characterised by a plastic quality, a genre immersed in continuous development. This interpretation acquires special significance when looked at from the perspective of digital development. Together with the printed book, the traditions of the novel have also evolved, influenced by the new technology. The genre has moved far beyond the classic and well-established idea of the nineteenth-century novel as a stable, fixed, and printed artefact. Novels are plastic and malleable, as any other digital document: they are fluid. Therefore, the conventional

novel has shifted from being an exclusively printed object to a genre which can easily flow from one form to another, changing indistinctly from platform to platform.

It is important to remember that 'text has ceased to inhabit a single world' (Landow, 1997, 58), which is the basis for the definition of the new conventional novel. As digital technology develops, the reading of novels (and of books in general) becomes disassociated from its printed form, and the material embodiment of a document becomes irrelevant. Readers can nowadays read a novel simultaneously on different platforms: one can start by reading in a printed format, shift to the laptop screen, continue scrolling on a tablet and finish reading on the constricted interface of smartphones and smartwatches. Text is, therefore, independent from its physical container. The new conventional novel of the twenty-first century is defined by the malleability of its content and the possibility of reading it on many multiple media. This novel is fluid, changeable and, most of the time, immaterial.

### 3 The unconventional novel in the digital age

This chapter opens by identifying the lack of connection between narrative and materiality that has existed in printed books since the eighteenth century (Section 3.1) and examines the focus that artists' books put on the material dimension of the book in the mid-twentieth century.

Unconventional novels in the twenty-first century constitute a reaction to the habitual reading practices of the digital; and therefore, to the fluid conventional novel. This chapter studies contemporary unconventional novels as a part of the 'aesthetic of bookishness' and a result of the growing interest in the material aspect of objects developed as part of the 'material turn' (Section 3.2). These novels include digital conventions within their narratives in order to foreground their physical dimensions and create works that are 'print-specific' and resist any change in their form (Section 3.3). The final section (3.4) introduces the three unconventional novels that are analysed in more depth in the following chapters: Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of leaves* (2000), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of codes* (2010), and J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst's *S.* (2013).

#### 3.1 Identifying a lack of connection between narrative and materiality

In 1917, referring to the experience of perceiving art objects, Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky claimed that 'as perception becomes habitual it becomes automatic' (1917, 11). Thus, habits fall into the arena of the 'unconsciously automatic'. Reading is a habit as well, and one that is culturally ingrained. Learning to

read is a ritual that generally occurs between the age of three and seven (Manguel, 1996).<sup>68</sup> Children are taught to follow the sequence of letters, words, sentences, and thus also pages, until the process becomes natural and automated. Children's books usually contain more images than text. These books, also called 'picture books', include colourful illustrations, combine different materials, textures, and structures (e.g., pop-ups or pull-outs) to encourage perception and physical interaction. Sandra Beckett (2012, 2) recognised that 'children often have better visual literacy skills than adults.' However, as they grow up and become more accustomed to the practice of reading, books become filled with text and the object loses importance. The turning of the page becomes habitual, an automatic reaction when the eyes encounter the last word at the end of a page.

Novelist and artist Shelley Jackson (2003, 251)<sup>69</sup> noted that 'turning the page [...] has become an invisible action, because it has no meaning in most texts, the little pause it provides is as unreflective as breathing.' This means that texts are not usually conceived specifically for the object in which they are going to be printed on; nor is the object taken into consideration from the start of the writing process. The material dimension of a narrative, as has been seen in the previous chapters, is usually taken for granted and not expected to have a presence during the act of reading.

This can be illustrated with a simple example. Imagine a Dickens novel. *Hard times*, as Figure 3.1 shows, can be considered an epitome of the nineteenth-century novel. If the text is removed from the pages and put into loose sheets of paper, the narrative would

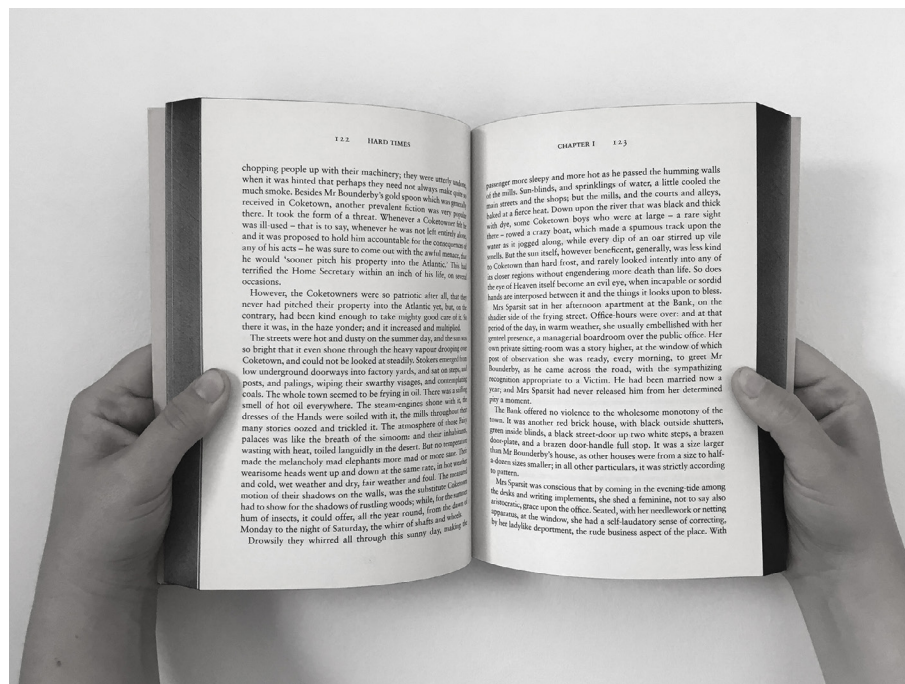
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<sup>68</sup> In *A history of reading* (1996), Manguel examines how the ritual of learning to read has changed since the Middle Ages. Even if silent reading practices appeared around the eleventh century, this modern way of learning to read from an early age appeared probably around the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as industrialisation and advances in printing technologies proved fundamental for mass-production of books and the access to them on almost every household.

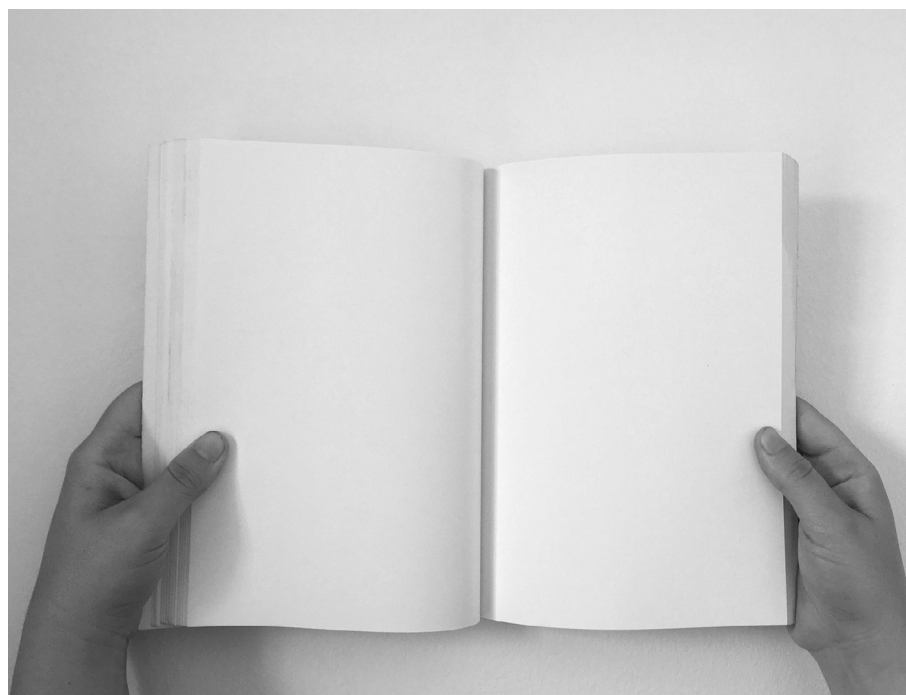
<sup>69</sup> Shelley Jackson is mostly known for her interest in disembodiment and textual aggregation in her narratives. She is the author of *Patchwork girl*, a hypertext written in Storyspace and published by Eastgate Systems in 1995.

work in exactly the same way as it does within the bound pages of the book. Dickens' words, order and meaning remain unchanged. It would probably be a bit more uncomfortable to read because of the loose pages, but the reading of the narrative would be roughly the same. Besides, by removing the text from the pages, the book would become blank, as Figure 3.2 shows. Similarly to what happened before with the text, the now blank object still works in the same way as it did when Dickens' words were printed on its pages: their

**Figure 3.1** A typical spread from *Hard times* by Dickens (1854) in the 2017 Penguin Random House edition. Generally, if the text from a conventional novel is divorced from its physical container there would be no loss in the reading experience, the narrative would work in the same way regardless of its container.



**Figure 3.2** A spread from a blank book (Ferrer, 2018). By removing the printed content of a novel from a book, it becomes obvious that the object continues to work in the same way it did when content was printed on the pages.





order and structure remain unchanged, the same movement of the hands is required to hold the book and turn the pages, the reading sequence is identical. By separating the narrative from its physical container, it becomes obvious that both have been working together without either of the two being specifically conceived or designed for the other, mainly out of pure habit.

Chapter 2 concludes with the definition of the contemporary conventional novel as a fluid work in which content is independent from the container. However, this disconnection is not the direct result of digital development, even if contributing to it, but a result of the evolution of books and the familiarisation process they have culturally undergone through centuries of reading. Historically, content has been put to the forefront, as more relevant than material form (Hayles, 2002), which results in a disconnection between printed text and object.

The appearance of the use of copyright in the eighteenth century constituted a turning point towards the invisibility of the object as it imposed the importance of text over form. As Hayles (2002) explains when referring to the traditional dismissal of materiality, copyright contributes to literature being considered as a bodiless expression. This is evidenced in the way in which some jurists of the time, such as William Blackstone around 1765, regarded the essence of a literary composition (Rose, 1995). For Blackstone, ‘paper and print [were] merely accidents, which serve as vehicles to convey that style and sentiment to a distance’, and thus ‘every duplicate of a literary text was the same text, because its essence was immaterial’ (Rose, 1995, n.p.). Even if the concept of copyright was discussed and contested by early twentieth century literary movements, such as futurism, the codex book came to be generally regarded as secondary and almost accidental.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Even nowadays, as Borsuk (2018, 100) notes, copyright still concedes more importance to the work’s idea than to its body. In the United States, for example, ‘publication is not actually required to secure copyright.’

At the end of the eighteenth century and especially during the nineteenth century there was a continuous growth in the culture of the printed word and progress towards mass-production. Industrialisation and the development of print technologies made printing cheaper and were connected to the importance given to the book as content. This was brought about by the steam-driven press, the steam-powered papermaking machines that allowed for the production of continuous rolls, and the development of stereotyping and mechanical typesetting and setting, which resulted in a rapid and greater production of books at reduced prices (Borsuk, 2018). The cost of copyright made new books expensive, but publishers saw an opportunity to produce cheap reprints of public domain works. They put an emphasis on content by reducing every possible cost: 'they used cheap thin paper, filled the page with tiny type, and in some cases included advertisements within the text' (Borsuk, 2018, 102). In this way, books became cheap and accessible objects available for a mass audience, but at the same time generally resulted in a loss of material quality and the increased relevance for quantity and fast-paced production.

The twentieth century saw the increase of an accessible mass market with books now at affordable prices, which helped to reinforce the notion of text over form. Design, which crystallises as a discipline during the first decades of the century, starts to be considered as an important part of books and employed to consolidate the idea that the object needs to transmit thoughts from author to reader without its materiality interfering in the exchange (Borsuk, 2018). A visionary in this arena was Allen Lane, founder of Penguin Books in 1935. He revolutionised the cheap books industry by publishing unabridged works by renowned authors and designed to read on the go. The books belonged to a series, presented with the same cover and typographic treatment for title and author (and featuring the penguin logo). In 1945, he hired Jan Tschichold (who worked at Penguin between 1945 and 1946) to produce affordable and high-quality paperbacks with an emphasis on accessibility and legibility. In this way, Tschichold can be seen as a successor to Aldus

Manutius, the printer who, in the fifteenth century, put value in the aesthetic of the book and believed that good quality books should not be a luxury but accessible to many. But also, Lane's vision can be regarded as being indebted to the 1906 Everyman's Library created by editor Ernest Rhys. Rhys brought design to the fore by aiming to create pleasant and comfortable books, and thus paving the way for Lane's paperbacks (Borsuk, 2018).

Tschichold believed that good design is an essential part of the book although it needs to be put at the service of the text. As he asserts in *The form of the book* (1975, 25), 'a book designer has to be the loyal and tactful servant of the written word. It is [their] job to create a manner of presentation whose form neither overshadows nor patronizes the content.' The design of the book, therefore, needs to convey the content cleanly and without disruptions from author to reader. This approach was also defended by Beatrice Warde in her 1930 manifesto 'The crystal goblet, or printing should be invisible'. She was convinced that the typographer, the designer, the printer and the editor should work together to transmit the content of the book in the most transparent way possible:

The book typographer has the job of erecting a window between the reader inside the room and that landscape which is the author's words. He may put up a stained-glass window of marvellous beauty, but a failure as a window; that is, he may use some rich superb type like text gothic that is something to be looked at, not through. Or he may work in what I call transparent or invisible typography (Warde, 1930, 42).

The last decades of the twentieth century were marked by the appearance of computers, hypertext, and the digital space. By the start of the new century, information had already become fluid and immaterial which contributed even further to the separation between content and form. Borsuk (2018) stressed that businesses such as Amazon play a part in this by offering the same book in paperback or Kindle edition. They might even print on demand, thus creating the same look and feel for every printed book regardless of its content, which severs any relationship between materiality and the narrative.

### 3.1.1 The focus on materiality through artists' books

Even if the material dimension in printed books has predominantly been regarded as secondary since the eighteenth century, this does not mean that there have not been writers and artists concerned with the physical aspect of the reading artefact. This is the case of Laurence Sterne with *Tristram Shandy*. Or of William Morris' interest in the aesthetic of the object in the nineteenth century, he who treated the book as an integral unity of text, illustration, typography, and structure. It is also the case of Stéphane Mallarmé with his life-long search for The Book, and his challenge of the space of the page in *Un coup de dés* in 1897. It was as well the quest of modernists writers such as James Joyce or William H. Gass who looked beyond the mere meaning of language and bent the rules of writing; and was also an essential concern in the printed hypertextual narratives that appeared during the twentieth century.

The intention of this research is not to build an exhaustive catalogue of all the examples that have been concerned with the form of the book through the years, but to understand the historical conditions and transformations that lead to the status of the unconventional novel in the twenty-first century. For this reason, it is important to take into account the emergence of artists' books and the change in the relationship with the material dimension of the book that takes place around the 1960s and 1970s.

The twentieth century marks the end of the 'golden age' of the book (Lyons, 1999, 313). The dominance of the printed word and paper as the exclusive technology for communication ended with the apparition of the radio, the television and electronic technology. The private and fixed point of view provided by print was challenged by the potential for connection of new media, McLuhan's (1967) 'global village' where everything happens simultaneously. At a point at which technology gained presence through the sensorial immersion of television and other media, artists identified the

potential for the codex to become more than just a carrier of information and explore its physical dimension.

There have been many attempts to define artists' books. As Drucker (1994) explained in her widely known publication *The century of artists' books*,<sup>71</sup> it might be easier to understand artists' books within a 'zone of activity' (1994, 1) in which many disciplines and concepts intersect, rather than try to establish a detailed definition that would probably be too broad or too limited. Artists' books fit well into what artist Dick Higgins (1966) labelled as 'intermedia' to describe works that fall between well-known media. These works are easier to define by what they are not, rather than what they are: 'A firm definition will, by its nature, serve only to exclude many artists' books which one would want to include' (Higgins, 1985, 11).

What Drucker was clear about is that artists' books are books created as original works of art, and they are mainly not conceived as vehicles for other kind of expressions such as literary or informational. According to Lucy Lippard (1983, 48), 'they have in common neither style nor content—only medium'. In the context of this research, the most relevant feature of artists' books is that they look at the 'bookness' of the book. The material dimension of the object is an area with the potential to carry value and ask meaningful questions for the reading experience. As Higgins (1985, 11) described: 'The experience of reading it, viewing it, framing it—that is what the artist stresses in making it.' Artists' books interrogate not only the printed content of the book, but also the physical dimension. Material form is intentional in these books. They are 'self-reflective', borrowing the term from Royston (2019, 6), and make not only artistic arguments but also bookish arguments. Artists' books question reading conventions and how the artefact works:

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<sup>71</sup> On defining artists' books see also Lucy Lippard's 'The artist's book goes public' (1977); Richard Kostelanetz's 'Book art' (1978); Barbara Moor and Jon Hendricks' 'The page as alternative space 1950 to 1969' (1980); Claire Lehmann's 'Introduction' to *Artists who make books* (2017).

Attention to materials, their interactions, and the content bound within the book are an integral feature of a book, but as with other aspects of production, artists' books tend to bend and stretch all the rules and conventions of craft decorum. (Drucker, 1994, 10).

Artists' books do not appear from nowhere in 1962 with Ed Ruscha's *Twenty-six gasoline stations*, generally considered as the initial point for the genre. Neither do they suddenly appear with Dieter Roth's book production and his experiments with the structural form of the codex in the '50s, even if he is usually considered the father of artists' books.<sup>72</sup> According to Drucker (1994), it is during the early twentieth-century avant-garde when books start to be seen as vehicles for artistic realisation. The Russian Futurist movement can be seen as the beginning of 'the development of artists' books as a form whose conceptual basis breaks with that of traditional book production' (1994, 47). This early development together with the exploration of technological changes in the period after World War II in the United States and Europe, created the perfect environment for the development of artists' books. At this point in history, book production became easily accessible and inexpensive.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, books were used by artists as mutable forms of artistic investigation, but also as political tools for artists who are not allowed to access galleries and museums in a traditional sense.

It is beyond the scope of this research to name and explain in detail all the relevant artists who challenged the material dimension of the book and its invisibility through the field of artists' books. There are many artists, such as Dieter Roth, Ed Ruscha, Marcel Broodthaers, John Baldesarri, or Sol LeWitt (to mention but a few), who interrogated the concept of the book

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<sup>72</sup> In his 1985 article 'Some contemporary artists and their books', Clive Phillpot delves further into Ruscha's and Roth's relevance within artists' books.

<sup>73</sup> The term 'inexpensive', as Carrión (1975), Drucker (1994), and Lehmann (2017) have noted, carries some difficulty because 'although [an artists' book is] inexpensive to buy, funding an entire offset edition could cost an individual artist dearly' (Lehmann, 2017, 10).

during the '50s, '60s and '70s.<sup>74</sup> However, it is important to draw attention to artist, writer, and publisher Ulises Carrión, widely known for his work with artists' books and his understanding of the object as an autonomous structure.

In 'Bookworks revisited' (1979), Carrión is reluctant to use the term 'artists' books' and prefers to call them 'bookworks'. This term separates these works from an exclusive association with artists, and significantly puts a focus on the form of the book. For him, printed content was not a key aspect in a book, but the important parts are the structure and the way the object is built. Carrión recognises that books can exist as autonomous entities and not only as mere backdrops for texts: 'A book may be the accidental container of a text, the structure of which is irrelevant to the book: these are the books of bookshops and libraries' (Carrión, 1975, 5). In his 1975 manifesto, 'The new art of making books', he views books as 'sequence of spaces', as structures in which the material dimension is nearly more relevant than the content itself. In his works and his way of understanding bookworks, materiality is likely to become the content: the message is the sum of all the elements, formal and material (Schraenen, 2016).

Carrión's work and his perception of the book as an embodied structure that holds meaning is important because of its anticipatory nature. As James Langdon (2010) explains, Carrión disregards the boundaries that traditionally are treated as separate disciplines in relation to books, such as literary criticism, graphic design, bibliography, and art theory. He sees the book 'as a space for display, including both a material history of the physical forms of books, and an exploration of the possibilities of the book as a graphic space' (Langdon, 2010, 32). As the analysis of the core novels in this research shows, some decades after Carrión, the

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<sup>74</sup> Some artists' books are mentioned and described in the following chapters as influences for the case study novels.

process of design and the visual space of the book become evident as essential parts in the development of unconventional novels. The reaction to the immateriality of the digital realm focuses on the very characteristic that digital reading lacks: the physical dimension and its connection to the narrative.

### **3.2 Bringing materiality to the fore: bookishness and the material turn**

To subvert the automatic habit, Shklovsky (1917, 25) proposes an act of ‘defamiliarisation’ through ‘an obvious display of the devices by which the familiar is made strange’. Looking at accounts from the 1990s, it becomes apparent that the rise of the digital shed a new light onto traditional communication values. Birkerts’ *Elegies* are good evidence of this: ‘We have been stripped not only of familiar habits and ways, but of familiar points of moral and psychological reference’ (1994, 21). Therefore, digital development can be seen as a form of defamiliarisation for reading and print.

In the last five decades, the arrival of hypertext, computers, the Internet, social media, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence (to mention but a few digital milestones) have forced (and continue to do so) writers and readers to question their relationship with information, texts, and communication practices in general. As the previous chapters have shown, around the advent of the printing press and up until the end of the twentieth century, the book remained as the primary and dependable source for information. With barely any contenders, print was seen as the perfect platform for storage, retrieval, and reading of texts. However, the 1980s changed this dependability. What, only a decade before, appeared reliable and unchangeable now had a sense of obsolescence, of being behind of the times. What appeared as natural, habitual, and automatic, was now put into question. Digital media strips the book from the centre and converts it into a choice.



As Thorburn and Jenkins (2004) explain, an important aspect of media change is self-awareness, both of the established and of the new forms. Old media feels threatened and therefore acquires a renewed value and visibility. On the other hand, the novelty of new media results in a 'process of self-discovery that seeks to define and foreground the apparently unique attributes that distinguish them from existing media forms' (2004, 4). However, these processes do not happen in isolation from each other. According to Bolter and Grusin (2000), remediation is mutual between old and new media: they influence and refashion each other. While print seeks to reaffirm itself within a digital and hypertextual reality, the new media forms continue to develop, decreasing their sense of novelty and moving away from self-awareness. In other words, new media strives to replicate and mimic tactics from older media to become more familiar and habitual.

This is clearly seen in the case of the Kindle. During the process of developing the e-reader, Bezos identified one aspect of the physical book that the new device needed to replicate in order for it to succeed: 'the key feature of a book is that it disappears' (Levy, 2007). Therefore, in the process of remediation, the digital realm gradually becomes more familiar, and thus more open, user-friendly, and accessible. Emerson (2014, 1) describes this as digital media moving 'toward invisibility, imperceptibility, and inoperability'. In a matter of a few decades, access to information and interaction with digital devices has come to be seen as seamless and ubiquitous. The more familiar and invisible the processes and the medium become, the less questioning and challenging there is of them from the users' or readers' sides. This has also been referred to as 'blackboxing'. Bruno Latour (1999) defines this process as a way that obscures the operations and systems behind artefacts, making them familiar but also opaque, as users utilise them without understanding how they work:

When a machine runs efficiently, when a matter of fact is settled, one need focus only on its inputs and outputs and not on its internal complexity. Thus, paradoxically, the more science and technology succeed, the more opaque and obscure they become. (1999, 304).

Contrary to this, the threat cast upon the book evolved with the new century into a renewed interest in the object. The more that information becomes fluid and immaterial, the more obvious it is that printed books do not and are not. Books are material and therefore limited. They have firm and visible limits. Books are enclosed artefacts that provide a stable and physical experience. These characteristics, which by the end of the previous century were still commonplace, have now become rare. Digital media has defamiliarised the experience of physical reading, opening up the door to challenge the potential of print. As a result of the digital development, books are more susceptible to experimentation and exploration; ‘the textual surface of the printed page has become malleable and self-conscious’ (Hagler, 2004, n.p.).

In 1979, Ulises Carrión was determined to establish a clear difference between bookworks and any other ‘common’ book (e.g., novels, comics, telephone books, etc.). He defined them as ‘books in which the book form, a coherent sequence of pages, determines conditions of reading that are intrinsic to the work’ (1979, 16). However, in the twenty-first century, the renewed interest in the book is not purely about artistic realisation: materiality can create a reading experience intrinsic to the printed content outside the art realm. This highlights the relevance that the physical medium can have for the narrative, as Tolva’s (1995, 3) thoughts illustrate:

But if the same word inscribed on paper and displayed on a computer screen means the same thing—and how could it not?—then the only explanation is that we perceive a discrepancy, that the medium itself somehow affects how we think of the words.

The attention to the material aspect of books in the twenty-first century emerges from the ‘material turn’ induced by digital technology. Archaeologist Colin Renfrew (2003) explains that the electronic impulse has replaced the material object that held a central position in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (i.e., banknotes, newspapers, bus tickets, etc.): ‘There is a process of dematerialization, where the physical, palpable material reality is disappearing’ (2003, 186). In consequence, and as a reaction

to this, a ‘new materialism’ (Brown, 2010) that focuses on the increasing importance of material objects and their role in social life emerges. This material turn aims to study the object in a concrete, material, and physical dimension, which also has its influence on literature and design: it opens new ways to rethink the materiality of texts and the act of reading (Plate, 2020). According to Latour (2005), who has studied the agency of objects in depth, materiality is fundamental when performing an action: the physical medium influences and defines the activity. Therefore, books, as objects that were once invisible because of their essential functional role, become more perceivable. As Wurth (2020, 6) exemplifies, the book moves from the background into ‘the role of figure: an object to be seen and encountered in an electric sphere.’ Furthermore, the fact that books become visible means that they can offer a physical reading experience different to that of the digital.

This derives from a trend that has developed since the start of the twenty-first century, and which Pressman (2009) defines as the ‘aesthetic of bookishness’. From a general perspective, ‘bookishness’ refers to ‘creative acts that engage the physicality of the book within a digital culture’ (Pressman, 2020, 1). The fact that nowadays there is not a functional need for physical books does not mean that readers do not ‘want’ books anymore:

[Around the turn of the millennium] ... we saw something surprising: the emergence of a creative movement invested in exploring and demonstrating love for the book as symbol, art form, and artifact (Pressman, 2020, 1).

According to Gregory Crane (2004, 119), ‘the codex was successful not for literary but for utilitarian reasons.’ Digital media displaced these utilitarian purposes. Stripped from its most practical uses, it seems natural that the printed book has gradually become more associated with the literary. As Pressman (2009) explains, literature has always been more than just about information delivery, but

about a form of experience.<sup>75</sup> This is in line with Hayles' (2002) argument; that it has become essential to consider materiality at the centre of literary production in order to understand and deal with 'how literature is changing under the impact of information technologies' (2002, 19).

Within the trend of bookishness there exists a focus on bookbound novels that not only use the object book as a central character for their narratives, but also use their physical dimension as an essential part of it: they include their embodied nature, that which the digital lacks, into the reading experience.

These narratives are characterised by highlighting print qualities through the use of digital strategies: they include characteristics of digital media to enhance the materiality of the printed object and also create an artefact with multimedia qualities (such as the readers' ability to decide what and how to read, the lack of a primary axis of organisation, combinatorial features etc.). In these works, readers need to manipulate and interact with the printed object in order to complete the reading experience. This trend can be understood as another layer in the desire for a defamiliarisation of the printed book in the twenty-first century. Novels such as Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of leaves* (2000), Steve Tomasula's *VAS: an opera in Flatland* (2002), Salvador Plascencia's *The people of paper* (2005), Douglas Coupland's *JPod* (2005), Graham Rawle's *Woman's world* (2005), Steven Hall's *The raw shark texts* (2007), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely loud & incredibly close* (2005) and *Tree of codes* (2010), or J. J. Abrams' *S.* (2013), aim to challenge and foreground the role materiality can play in their reading experience.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Birkerts (1994), for example, when mourning what he deems as the death of traditional reading practices and the book, still sees an opportunity for a resurgence of literature. Information access may not be the purpose for books anymore, but they still have a place in the exploration and experience of narratives.

<sup>76</sup> See Appendix A on page 376 for a brief description of these novels.

Bahktin's acknowledgement of the novel's plasticity, which turns it into a genre in continuous development, becomes relevant for these novels published as part of the bookishness trend. These works reflect on the importance of physical book reading in a disembodied and fluid age, but without forgetting that 'text has ceased to inhabit a single world' (Landow, 1997, 58). As is explained in the following sections, with the advancement of the digital era, it becomes evident that technological changes 'have not made older forms obsolete but, in many cases, released anew their potential for creativity' (Bray and Gibbons, 2011, 1). The shift into the digital removes the focus from the book as a communication tool but it also opens a door to the exploration of the possibilities the physical medium can offer in a digital era.

### **3.3 Defining the unconventional novel in a digital age**

As has been explained, unconventional novels, either if they belong to the pre-digital or digital eras, have three characteristics in common: 1) they foreground the material dimension of the narrative, and thus they shape reading as an embodied experience; 2) they give agency to readers, and force them to be actively involved in the act of reading; 3) they also imply a change in the role of the authorial figure, who becomes an active participant in the construction of the narrative from an integral position. Writing becomes an act of taking into consideration materiality and narrative as a whole. Unconventional novels accomplish these three points by using conventions of their time to break conventions.

The difference between the pre-digital unconventional novels and the digital ones is precisely that very word: digital. In the twenty-first century, writers and readers cannot ignore the digital practices that now surround books and reading. Thus, they take the conventions and the influence of digital technology and include them in their narratives. These novels belong to the trend of the

‘aesthetic of bookishness’ and therefore constitute a reaction to the digital realm but at the same time also re-evaluate the conventions of the printed book as such.

Even if unconventional novels are characterised by a self-awareness of the object and materially explore the possibilities of book form, they are not artists’ books. They use the publication as a vehicle for literary expression, contrary to Drucker’s (1994) definition of artists’ books. Unconventional novels are books that take into consideration the rich lineage of previous exploration of materiality but extend it under the influence of the digital. According to Wurth (2013), these works (that bring the physicality of the book to the fore) can be seen as a commodification of artists’ books and their influence on literature. They are products ‘still to be read, as part of a literary practice, not just an object to be seen, but [one] that questions commonsensical structures and metaphors of the book’ (2013, 25).

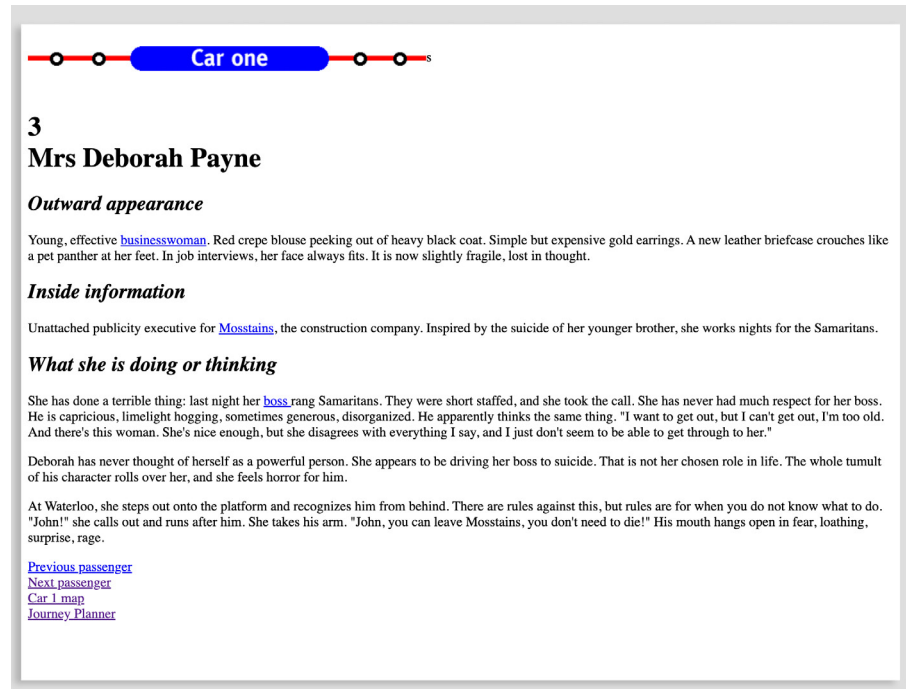
Novels that react to the immateriality of the digital consider the physical dimension of the artefact as essential for narrative development. Contrary to the new reading habits established by the digital and the fact that the new conventional novel works across many platforms and media, the unconventional novels of the twenty-first century are works that only work in one medium: print. They are built as an integral whole between narrative and material dimensions. For this reason, these novels are print-specific and resist being translated into a different medium. Content and container cannot be separated without creating a different outcome from the original version.

### **3.3.1 Acknowledging digital-specific novels**

Before moving forward with this definition, a distinction needs to be made. There exist novels that are digital-specific and have been originally created to work in an online environment or to be read on a particular digital device. These novels also resist being

translated into a different medium, especially print. This is the case, for example, of Geoff Ryman's *253*, published in sections on the Internet from 1996 to 1998 (Figure 3.3).

**Figure 3.3** Screenshot from the online novel *253* by Ryman (1996–1998), which shows a typical screen of text for one of the tube passengers. Available at: <https://www.253novel.com/>

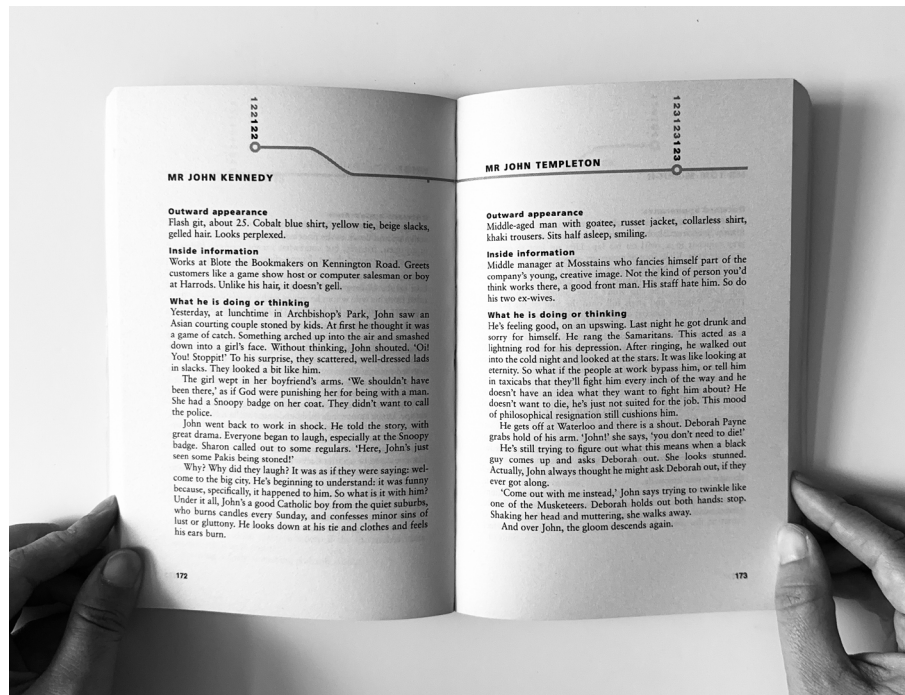


The novel is about the 253 people that fill a tube train on the Bakerloo line in London. The action happens over the seven and half minutes that the tube takes to complete the journey from Embankment station to Elephant and Castle. The novel works on a hypertextual structure and presents a screen of text (lexia) for each of the passengers, who are described in three ways: outward appearance, inside information, what they are doing or thinking. Each text presents some highlighted significant words that are links to other descriptions, which end up connecting the passengers through different aspects of their lives and personalities.<sup>77</sup> In 1998, the novel was also published in print (Figure 3.4). Although the sequential nature of the codex book fits well with the sequential nature of the passengers that are presented in their seats from the

<sup>77</sup> Ryman describes the reading of *253* as comparable to a Godlike feeling: 'Do you sometimes wonder who the strangers around you are? This novel will give you the illusion that you can know. Indeed, it can make you feel omniscient, Godlike. This is a pleasurable sensation. But please remember that once you leave *253*, you are no longer Godlike. The author, of course, is.' (1996)

front of the train to the rear, the novel loses its interactivity and the active links between passengers. These connections still exist in print, but they become extremely subtle and difficult to recognise. In this case, the material dimension of the printed novel is not taken into consideration as a tool that can reinforce the nonlinear reading experience.

**Figure 3.4** A spread from the printed version of *253* (Ryman, 1998, 172–173). In print, *253* loses the interactive elements and becomes less hypertextual by translating the content directly into the printed pages of the book.



A more recent example is that of Joanna Walsh’s *Seed*, published as a digital story by Visual Editions in 2017 (Figure 3.5). The novel is described on the website as ‘a story that grows and decays [...]’. The reader is taken on a lush journey through “story vines” to help navigate the narrator’s innocent and claustrophobic surroundings’ (Walsh, 2017). As indicated on the Editions At Play website, the novel is not compatible with every device, and functions only when using the latest versions of some browsers.<sup>78</sup> In spite of this, *Seed* was published as a printed book in 2020 by No Alibis Press. In this case, the interactivity intrinsic with the original version, which

<sup>78</sup> ‘Compatible with iPhone 5 and above on iOS8 and up. Compatible with Android devices on V4.4 KitKat and up. Works best using the latest Chrome or Safari browser.’ Available here: <https://editionsatplay.withgoogle.com/#!/detail/free-seed>

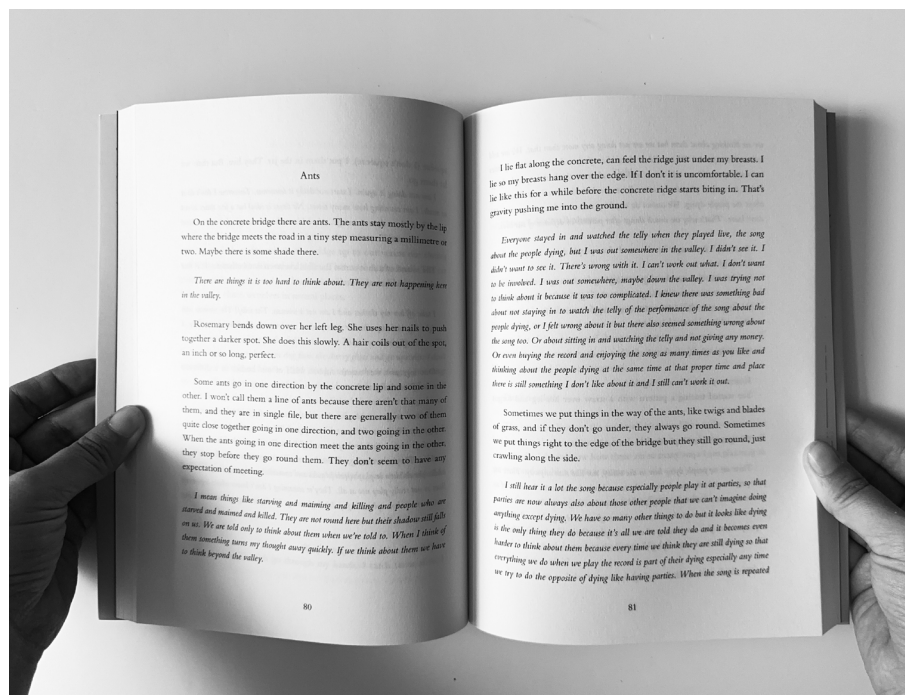


offered readers the opportunity to create their own reading journey by following in different ways the various ‘story vines’, is completely lost. The printed novel loses the ‘organic’ growth of the digital version created through ‘a sprawling digitally-native canvas to steer the reader through their own unique reading of the book’ (Walsh, 2017). Instead, this is replaced by the fixed and sequential order of a printed novel presented in a conventional way (Figure 3.6).

**Figure 3.5** Screenshot from the contents page of Walsh’s digital novel *Seed* (2017). Readers navigate the ‘story vines’ on their own way by choosing their own reading paths and connections. Available at: <https://seed-story.com/contents>



**Figure 3.6** A spread from the printed version of *Seed* (Walsh, 2021). In print, *Seed* loses all its interactive qualities and becomes a linear novel.



Even if digital novels can resist being translated to other devices and mediums, in the context of this research these are not considered unconventional. As digital reading and writing practices have nowadays become habitual and familiar, these novels are not breaking their conventions but exploring their hypertextual and digital nature. On the other hand, print has become a conscious and deliberate choice. For this reason, unconventional novels in the digital era are print-specific works conceived and created to offer material and embodied reading experiences.

### 3.3.2 Identifying print-specific novels

Print-specific novels are novels that choose to work only in print and resist being translated into other mediums. In order to achieve this, they are conceived by considering the materiality of the printed object as an integral part of narrative development. Therefore, 'print-specific' is the term that differentiates pre-digital from digital unconventional novels. Even if *Tristram Shandy* is considered unconventional, for all the reasons previously explained, it cannot be labelled as print-specific. At the time when Sterne published the novel in the eighteenth century, print was not a choice but the only existing medium for a novel to be published. Nowadays, a couple of centuries and a digital revolution later, it is possible to understand that foregrounding the material dimension of literature and creating an embodied reading experience results in narratives that work exclusively in print and resist being translated into an online environment. Print-specific narratives, therefore, are the result of a conscious choice.

However, even if pre-digital unconventional novels are not created specifically for the printed medium, they nonetheless hold the quality of working best in a particular printed edition. In the case of *Tristram Shandy*, the novel has lost many of its original disruptive qualities through its many subsequent editions. It has arrived in the present time lacking some of its controversial and innovative

strategies. Page size has changed over centuries, which as Schiff (1998) explains is enough to disrupt Sterne's original visual games. According to Patterson (1989), Sterne had the ability to calculate the amount of text that could fit in an octavo page (the size of *Tristram*'s first edition), and thus, for example, he could plan to fill the type area on the page that precedes the marbled leaf as an introduction to it. Therefore, a slight change in page proportions inevitably influences the text per page and disassembles many of the carefully devised strategies in the novel. The effect of the marbling is also a feature that has been lost, as not one subsequent edition has followed Sterne's method for marbling. It has been replicated in many ways and forms, but never following the same procedure and involvement from the first edition (Figure 3.7).

**Figure 3.7** The marbled page from *Tristram Shandy* in the 1998 Oxford Classics edition (186–187). In this edition, the marbled page appears as a black and white reproduction of a photograph or scan of a marbled paper. Even so, it preserves the original format: the marbled image fits within the type area of the book and leaves the margins blank.



Other evidence of this can be seen in the Oxford Classics edition from 1998, where Sterne's disruption of the regular sequence of the chapters has been removed. In the original edition of Volume 9, the blank chapters XVIII and XIX are placed after Chapter XXV; whereas in the 1998 version, these chapters appear in the conventional expected position after Chapter XVII (Figure 1.5). In this way, the subversion of the reading order and the play with the material dimension of the narrative are completely lost.

Sterne conceived his novel in a specific way, aiming to offer a particular reading experience to readers. Consequently, when these conditions are not replicated, they leave out details from the visual and material dimensions that change the way in which readers experience the novel.

*Composition No. 1* (1963) is also a good example of the idea that pre-digital unconventional novels are conceived for a specific printed edition. In 2011, Visual Editions published a new edition that consists of a print and a digital version, but this does not mean that the printed pages are directly translated into the electronic format. Instead, in order to convey the idea of randomness and readers' choice, the structure is redesigned to generate a similar experience and behaviour for reading in both mediums.<sup>79</sup> Whereas in the print version the pages are unbound, and readers are asked to shuffle them in order to create their own order; in the e-book version the pages shuffle continuously in an automatic way and readers have to randomly stop the shuffling by touching the screen. Anytime they lift the fingers from it, the shuffling restarts. In order to achieve the same concept (the idea of randomness) the strategy needs to change from platform to platform. In print, readers are in control of the shuffling and decide how much mixing of the pages they perform, while in the digital readers are left to choose when to stop the shuffling but cannot be in control of how the pages are being mixed. Thus, even if the concept of the novel can be translated and redesigned for a different medium, some qualities of the physical analogue experience are inevitably lost because of this difficulty to separate content and container without changing the reading experience. In order to shift platform and generate the same reading experience for readers (and also the same behaviour or the same active involvement), unconventional novels need to undergo an integral design process to re-adapt the novel to other media.

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<sup>79</sup> The interaction and reading experience generated by the digital version of the novel is well-reflected in this video by Visual Editions: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcYHQ25IkfI>

A different case, and also a more subtle one, is that of *Pale fire* (1962), which at first might not appear as unconventional. Nabokov plays with form, most certainly, although the form of the book does not directly affect the content. Whereas in *Tristram Shandy*, the change in the format of the pages, their order, or even the amount of blank space left between paragraphs can significantly influence the reading experience; in *Pale fire* the narrative is not as dependent of text size or the number of pages, as content is not thought for a specific page. However, this does not mean that it is not conditional of the material dimension. As has been mentioned in Chapter 2, Nabokov does not explicitly present readers with reading instructions, but instead he hides some guidance within the foreword, as part of the fiction. These instructions seem to foster a sort of linearity: the recommendation is to read comments first, then read the poem and go back to the comments. However, what Nabokov does not explain (and thus, leaves readers unprepared for) is that the narrative contains many references and connections between notes, in a hypertextual manner. Once reading the comments, readers are compelled and encouraged to move around the novel in a nonlinear way, jumping from one note to another or from one note to the poem. From this point of view, the novel could be easily translated to be read as an electronic book. However, reading the book on a screen would mean losing the direct access and movement through the pages of the book. Moving from one note to another following Nabokov's suggested connections would be more tedious and elaborate, and thus the digital reading experience might easily end up becoming linear to avoid the manual forward-backwards through the digital document. This, in fact, indicates that the novel could be labelled as unconventional and also print-specific. In order for *Pale fire* to foster the same reading behaviour and to work digitally, it would need to be designed and built for such an environment (i.e., creating active and clickable links to foster real connections within the text and the possibility to freely move forwards and backwards).

Therefore, the fact that these novels work best on a particular printed edition is not an exclusive quality of the unconventional novels of the digital era. *Tristram Shandy*, *The unfortunates*, and *Composition No. 1* are difficult to translate to other mediums without losing their intended physical reading experience. However, even if this quality already exists in pre-digital novels, it is only brought forward by the development of digital technology and the fact that it has enabled texts and narratives to flow and change forms easily. Pre-digital examples might resist changing form, although it cannot be said that this was consciously intended by their authors. Even if anticipating it, they did not yet think in terms of that kind of textual fluidity. On the other hand, the digital era examples studied in the next chapter actively look to create this resistance.

Unconventional novels in the twenty-first century are born under the reaction to the fluidity and immateriality of the digital. However, not all the novels born under the trend of the ‘aesthetic of bookishness’ are unconventional, or print-specific. A good example of this is Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely loud & incredibly close*. This novel from 2005 can be included within the bookishness trend for two reasons. First, the materiality of writing and language is very present throughout the narrative and embodied in a character who has lost the ability to communicate orally. Second, because Foer employs visual strategies such as blank and black pages (clearly indebted to *Tristram*’s legacy) that make readers pay attention to the physical dimension of the page. However, despite an intentional use of unexpected layout and typography at some points, the way in which these are inserted within the conventional elements of a printed novel make them susceptible to an easy media translation. The novel can work indistinctly in print and in a digital format, and therefore is not included within the category of unconventional.

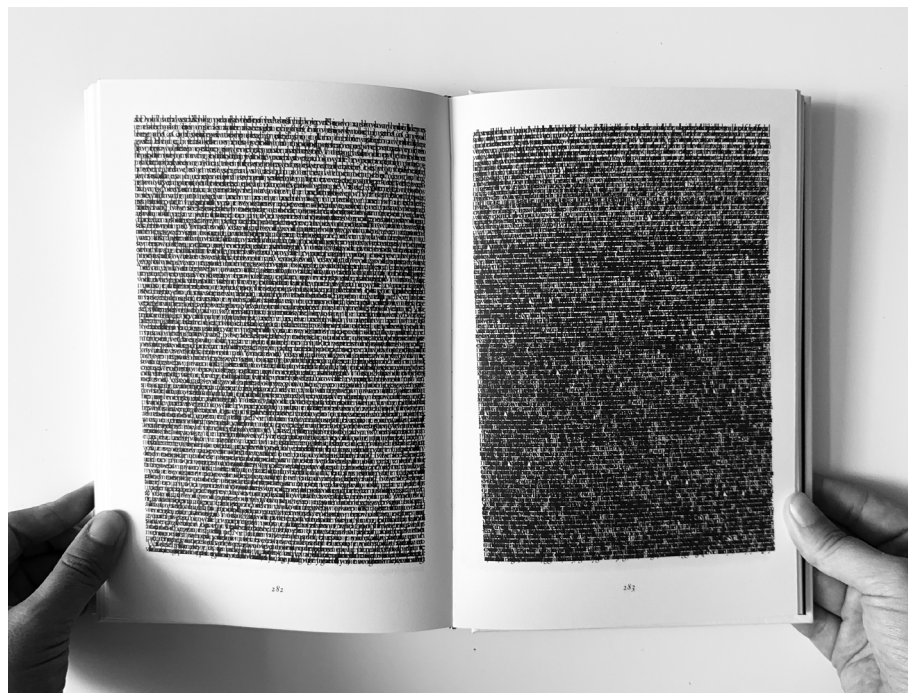
This is evidenced in the treatment of the blank page, which illustrates the discovery of a blank manuscript by one of the characters: ‘I riffled the pages, there must have been a thousand of them [...]. I picked up the pages and wandered through them [...],

I searched and searched [...], but this was all I say: [blank pages]’ (Foer, 2005, 120). However, the moment of surprise of the empty pages, which is unexpected both for the fictional character and the reader, is reduced to a spread and a half of blankness (Figure 3.8). The effect of the discovery could have been translated to the book by adding enough spreads to induce readers to be involved in the search through blank pages. Furthermore, the fact that these empty pages include page numbers also diminishes the forcefulness of the

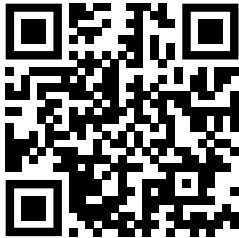
**Figure 3.8** Blank spread in *Extremely loud & incredibly close* by Foer (2005, 122–123). The blank pages create a slight interruption to the reading progress but are not effective in inserting them within narrative and material levels.



**Figure 3.9** A black spread in *Extremely loud & incredibly close* (Foer, 2005, 282–283). The black pages appear framed by conventional margins and page numbering. The progression of these pages constitutes a representation (created digitally) of a character's frenzy in filling up a notepad.

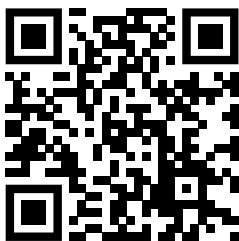


interruption. Whereas in *Tristram Shandy* the numbered blank page helps to tell readers that they are participating by adding to the novel, here in Foer's work the numbers reinforce the fact that the pages are merely a container for the fiction.



Video 3.1 Progression in the black pages of *Extremely loud & incredibly close* (Foer, 2005, 272–284). The pages become blacker as the notepad is filled with the character's handwriting.

A similar thing happens with the black page. It represents the handwriting (even if not conveyed as such but typeset digitally) of the mute character who is filling the pages of a notepad and not leaving any empty space (Figure 3.9). However, these pages that fill gradually until they become illegible and black are still framed by conventional margins and page numbers (Video 3.1). Translating any of these two strategies to an electronic version would leave their effects intact. Even if they force readers to pay attention to the visual dimension of the page, they do not engage them in the physicality of the book. Only at the end of the novel, when the narrative has already finished, a series of full-bleed images appear that could be regarded as a flip-book, and thus present a slight resistance to be translated into a digital format (Video 3.2).



Video 3.2 Flip-book sequence at the end of *Extremely loud & incredibly close* (Foer, 2005, 327–355). The flip-book section demands interaction and offers a marginal resistance to the translation of the novel into a digital format.

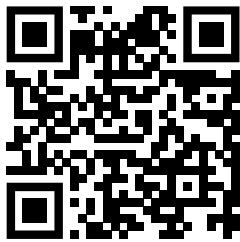
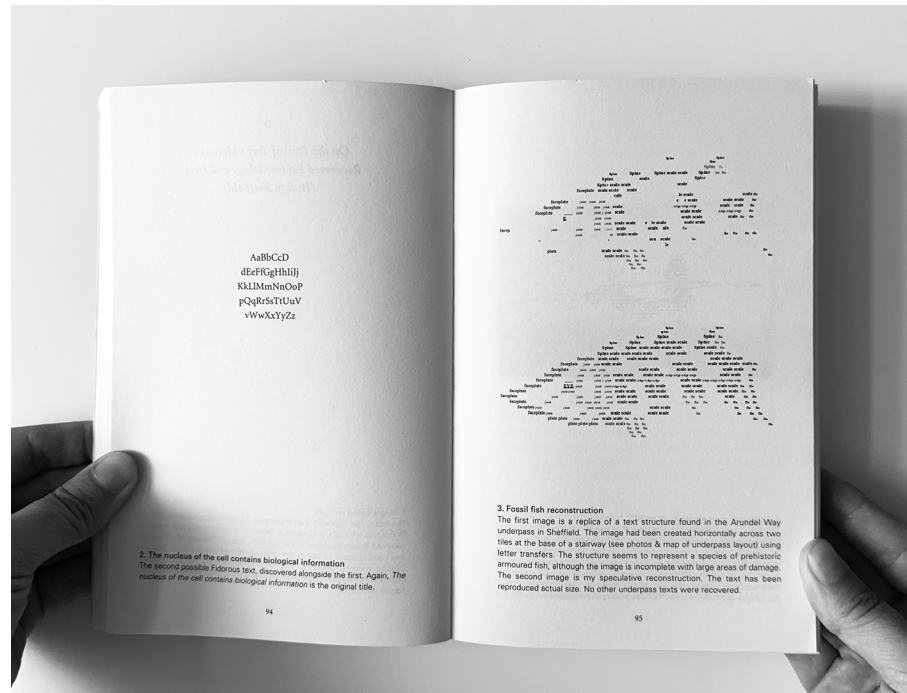
Douglas Coupland's *JPod* (2006), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is illuminated* (2002), Jorge Carrión's *Todos los museos son novelas de ciencia ficción* (2022), and Vicente Luis Mora's *Circular 22* (2022) could be included in this same category. As with *Extremely loud & incredibly close*, all of these novels include some details that might be perceived as 'unconventional' and that create a slight resistance to form change. However, these visual details are not enough to create a significant loss in the reading experience when narrative and material dimensions are separated.

A relevant comparison to this is Steven Hall's *The raw shark texts* (2007), a novel that comments on the unreliability of digital information, which is invisible and spreads virally.<sup>80</sup> Even if the work does not contain an excessive number of visual devices, it

<sup>80</sup> Pressman uses this novel as the example to define bookishness in her 2009 article 'The aesthetic of bookishness in twenty-first century literature'.



**Figure 3.10** A spread from *The raw shark texts* by Hall (2007, 94–95). The novel plays with page layout and typographic arrangement to foreground the materiality of the page.



**Video 3.3** Flip-book sequence in *The raw shark texts* (Hall, 2007, 330–381). This section requires the physical interaction of readers to activate the shark attack in the narrative.

plays with layout and typography to present a villain, a conceptual shark, made out of data that ‘mutate across spaces, platforms, and interfaces’ (Pressman, 2009), and that threatens to devour memories and information (Figure 3.10). On the page, the shark appears in the form of concrete poetry and the most significant strategy within the novel is the part in which the attack from the shark is represented through a ‘flip-book section’. If the pages are turned in a regular fashion, readers discover that after some blank pages a shark shape made out of words and letters starts appearing on the recto side (while the verso is left blank) and gradually becomes bigger (Video 3.3). Yet, the section is thought to work as a flip-book and thus when the thumb flips quickly through the pages, the attack from the shark becomes imminent and threatening, transforming the feeling of discomfort created by the narrative into an embodied attack. In order to translate this interaction to an electronic device, the visual strategy would need to be reconsidered and redesigned, perhaps translated into some sort of animation readers activate by clicking on the screen.

Therefore, the unconventional novel of the twenty-first century reaches its full potential and conveys an embodied reading experience as a particular printed edition. Other examples of unconventional novels are Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of leaves*

(2000), Steve Tomasula's *VAS: An opera in Flatland* (2002), Salvador Plascencia's *The people of paper* (2005), Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only revolutions* (2006), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of codes* (2010), J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst's *S.* (2013), Rubén Martín Giráldez's *Magistral* (2016).

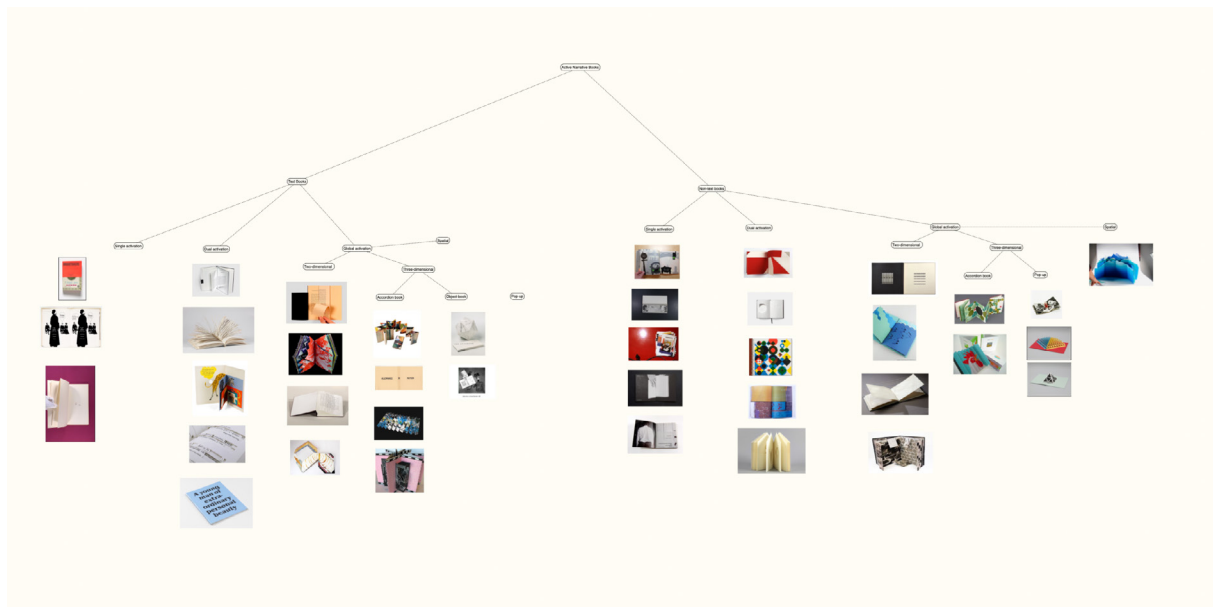
One of the characteristics of unconventional novels is the change in the role of the writer. What all these novels have in common (pre-digital and digital) is an active involvement from the authors, who have considered the material dimension as an essential aspect for narrative development. However, in the unconventional novels of the twenty-first century, the change in the authorial figure comes hand-in-hand with another aspect: the role of design. As the following pages show, with the analysis of three relevant examples (and especially Chapter 5), in order to create a work that functions only in print and resists media translation, design becomes fundamental as part of the creation process.

### 3.4 Introducing significant unconventional examples

The research process for this thesis started by looking broadly at how the physical codex book can be integrated with the narrative dimension. The focus on literature and the novel, and the choice of the three case-study examples, is the result of a process of investigation that began by studying a range of books that present mainly two characteristics: the enhancement of the physical quality and the readers' interaction. This initial selection of examples included artists' books, novels, poetry, plays, and children's books, such as *La cantautrice chauve* (Ionesco, 1964, designed by Robert Massin), *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (Queneau, 1961), *Tree of codes* (Foer, 2010), *The portrait of Dorian Gray* (Wilde, 2007, designed by John Morgan), *A passage* (Spector, 1994), *The antibook* (Prieto, 2002), *Quadrante illeggibile bianco e rosso* (Munari, 1964), *Kinderbuch* (Roth, 1954-1957), *New doors*

(Meador, 1985), *Bok AC* (Roth, 1958), *Montagnes* (Komagata, 2011), *String book* (Smith, 1982), *Little red riding hood* (Lavater, 1959).<sup>81</sup> The examples were first classified by the type of physical activation, the role of the designer, and the reader participation (Figure 3.11). This initial selection was simplified and made more specific by reducing the number of examples and by looking at the way in which the structure of the object is made visible, generating three areas of distinction: sequential, three-dimensional and spatial. At this point, other relevant works were added to the selection such as *The unfortunates* (Johnson, 1969), *Composition No.1* (Saporta, 1963), and *Your house* (Eliasson, 2006).

**Figure 3.11** Screenshot of the initial selection and classification of examples in the early stages of the research development.



As has been mentioned, the work by Hayles (2002) helped to introduce the relevance of digital technology and its influence on reading and writing practices. Therefore, an important step towards defining the unconventional examples to study was to distinguish between works from the pre-digital and the digital era. This decision evolved with the concept of ‘the aesthetic of bookishness’

<sup>81</sup> These are some of the books considered at this early stage. The list provides an insight into the type of books selected at the initial stages of the project, and shows that some of these examples have been relevant to the research from very early points in the process.

developed by Pressman (2009) and the definition of the ‘material turn’, which helped to focus the research on the materiality of literature and, in particular, the unconventional novels of the twenty-first century.

The attributes of the twenty-first century unconventional novel are well represented in the three case study examples that constitute the basis for this research: *House of leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski (2000), *Tree of codes* by Jonathan Safran Foer (2010), and *S.* by J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst. These novels constitute significant points in the development of unconventional narratives during the first decades of the twenty-first century. They have been chosen because the three examples share unconventional characteristics and also react to specific questions relevant to the print-digital situation at the time of their publication. *House of leaves* answers to the transition period between analogue and digital at the turn of the century; *Tree of codes* responds to the appearance of the e-book; and *S.* reflects on the status of print and the handwritten word in the midst of the social media expansion.

This research uses previous literature as an essential underpinning to analyse the case study examples, understand their context and lineage, and, from there, aims to expand the conversation by adding a design point of view. While previous analyses comment on the embodied nature of these narratives and the ability of the novels to involve readers in them, this research goes further into examining how this embodiment is made possible and what strategies are used to build the material dimension of these narratives. This is done in two different parts: Chapter 4 focuses on the physical reading experience and the way in which the material dimension is integral to the narrative. Chapter 5 focuses on the design process and how the construction of the material dimension influences the narrative. What follows is an introduction of the three case study examples, which situates them in the context of this research before analysing them in depth.

### 3.4.1 *House of leaves*

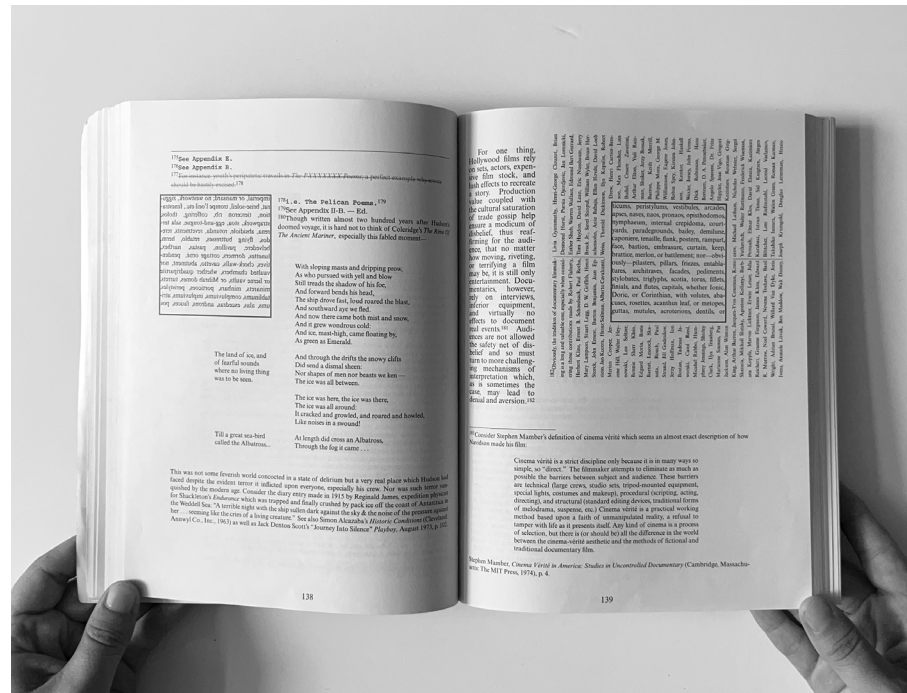
*House of leaves* is a labyrinth. Both a textual and a physical one. Published in the year 2000, the novel marks the turning point between centuries, the separation as well as the connection of the twentieth- and twenty-first century realities. Written by Mark Z. Danielewski, it is a horror story about a monstrous creature in the form of a labyrinth of unknown proportions hidden inside a family house. The labyrinth of *House of leaves* represents the uncertainty of its time and reflects the doubts about the future of the printed book linked to the fast-paced digital development and its unpredictability.

Reading *House of leaves* is no easy job. One does not turn the pages in an orderly way but traverses them consciously and with effort. It is a difficult narrative that requests interaction and awareness from readers. The convoluted narrative, disorienting and unreliable from the very start, demands attention as it grows in complexity, depth, and material presence. The numerous layers of the novel compete, overlay, and intertwine to build an intricate environment. Readers get lost in it by turning the pages and following the intersecting voices, footnotes, and complicated page layouts. They gradually move into the depths of the labyrinth while shaking the conventions of text layers and narrative agents in traditional novels.

As the reading of the novel advances, the material dimension becomes more evident and more closely connected to its narrative. The result is a work with several narrative levels created by a combination of text, footnotes, citations, internal and external references, and unconventional composition (Figure 3.12). These levels configure the novel as a labyrinth of information embodied at the same time by the materiality of the book (D'Ambrosio, 2011). In *House of leaves* the semantic and the material labyrinth are one and the same, inseparable dimensions working together to create a unique narrative. This multi-layered maze is made physical by the intentional use of print qualities, which at the same time mimic

some characteristics of digital reading practices (e.g., hypertextual connections, links, fragmented information, etc.). In this way, *House of leaves* acts as a bridge between the analogue and digital worlds of fiction in literature (Aardse, 2009).

**Figure 3.12** A typical spread from Chapter IX in *House of leaves* by Danielewski (2000, 138–139). The unconventional reading experience is created by overlaying many levels of information on the page and offering readers the opportunity to decide how and what to read.



Due to this, *House of leaves* marks the start of the ‘aesthetic of bookishness’ and can be considered the first unconventional novel of the twenty-first century. Not surprisingly, at the point of its publication the novel was seen as a reaction to how quickly and unpredictably the digital world was changing conventional notions of reading and communication. The unfathomable labyrinth can be understood as the digital world that destroys the self-contained and controlled reality of the analogue. As Pressman (2020, 110) describes, *House of leaves* places the print book as a ‘weapon against disembodied data.’ It aims to counteract the immensity of the Internet by connecting it to the material body of the printed book, and the intimacy of the physical reading process, while at the same time also challenging it.

Danielewski’s novel marks a turning point in literature and the debate about its future shape. In a time plagued with discussions about the battle of digital over print, this work brings the attention

to the physical form of the book by using the influence of digital technologies and ‘showing what print can be in a digital age’ (Hayles, 2002, 112). But not only that, *House of leaves* reveals the fact that the actual obsolete thing at this point in history was the argument that tried to decide on which medium was going to win over the other. By employing print and digital conventions to create an embodied narrative, Danielewski draws attention to the idea of hybridity in literature. According to this, the future of the novel resides in an integration of analogue and digital worlds. As Hagler states, ‘the most significant influence digital technology has made on print culture allows for the reemergence of the physical page’ (Hagler, 2004, n.p.).

### 3.4.2 *Tree of codes*

In 2000, *House of leaves* marks a turning point between centuries and represents the doubts and fears cast by digital development. *Tree of codes* was published ten years later, at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century (or the beginning of the second one). During that period of time the initial uncertainties about digital technology shifted and evolved. Digital access became common, an activity taken for granted, social media was on the rise and the first Kindle e-reader appeared in 2007. All these changes make it seem as if the first fears of the book’s obsolescence and the death of print finally acquired a specific and visible shape.<sup>82</sup> The ‘enemy’ of print, intangible until this moment, now had a physical form. If narratives can be portable, fluid, and boundless, if they can be contained in a small device and added *ad infinitum*, what future is there for an analogue object that can only hold a limited amount of information, and that remains static, unchanged, and passive?

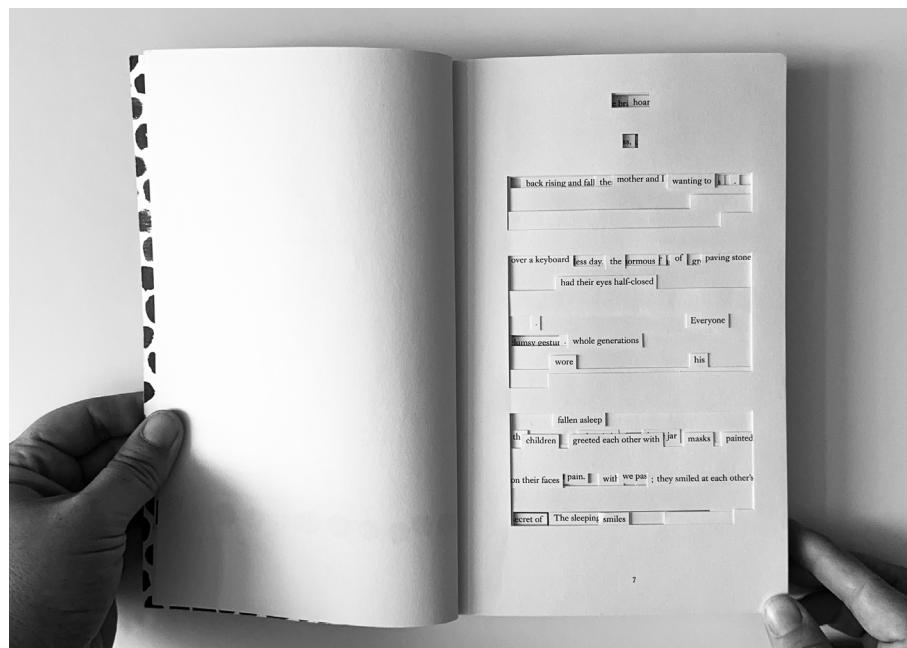
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<sup>82</sup> The *New York Times* article by Motoko Rich from 2008 is a good example of the debates that happened at the time about how e-readers and web-based reading affected print and conventional book reading.

*Tree of codes* is a reaction to this question. It is a book born from another book. Jonathan Safran Foer takes his favourite book and erases, cuts and removes parts of its text in order to create a new one. Out of Bruno Schulz's *The street of crocodiles*, written in 1934 (translated and published into English in 1963),<sup>83</sup> appears *Tree of codes*, in 2010. The result is a book, an object, that defies the conventions of the printed novel from the very first interaction from readers. Even if the book appears as any other book from the outside, readers become aware of something not being quite right with it the moment they hold the object in their hands. Despite its thickness (139 pages), the book is not as heavy as the hands might expect. Despite its apparent solid aspect, readers can sense a void within its pages without even opening it. The first manipulation of the closed book already works to raise uncertainty and awareness.

*Tree of codes* is a die-cut novel. The sense of erasure and the physical voids are accomplished by physically cutting out large numbers of words, sentences, and paragraphs from Schulz's original text (Figure 3.13).

**Figure 3.13** Page 7 from *Tree of codes* by Foer (2010). The perforated narrative of the novel is introduced on this page, which has no printed text on it but allows for the text from other pages to show through the holes.



<sup>83</sup> In 1977, Penguin Books published a new edition of the work. Thirty years later, in 2008, this edition was updated to include *Sanatorium under the sign of the hourglass* (the only other work that has survived from Schulz's oeuvre), titled *The street of crocodiles and other stories*, and which includes a foreword by Jonathan Safran Foer. The 2008 edition is the text used by Foer to create *Tree of codes*.



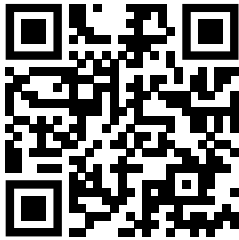
The resulting novel presents a perforated narrative. From page 7, and after the regular title and imprint pages, the die-cut technique appears in all its challenging, labyrinthine, and convoluted presence. In fact, the very first page is completely cut-out, with no printed text on it apart from the page number at the bottom. However, even if this sheet has no printed content (except for the page number), it is not blank. Text from other pages shows through the holes and creates a confusing landscape where words and sentences overlap, interrupt, and overshadow each other. This material labyrinth transforms throughout the book as the holes change shape and position on every page. The act of writing here is one of carving out, resulting on a reading of unavoidable physicality. This book is not just about erasure, but about the creation of a ‘reading through’ experience.

*Tree of codes* takes this idea of materiality as an integral part of the narrative to the extreme. In this novel, the conventional reading awareness is reversed, the physical aspect of the book is unavoidable. In order to access the text, readers need first to acknowledge the materiality, the pages, the physical act of reading. There is no shortcut. While in *House of leaves* (or in the previous unconventional novels published between 2000 and 2010) one can still decide to ignore the parts where an embodied interaction is required and go through the narrative conventionally, in *Tree of codes* this is not possible. The narrative only becomes readable by physically interacting with its material dimension. In this way, it can be compared with Raymond Queneau’s *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (1961). In both instances, the act of reading happens at a material and narrative level at once.

Foer’s novel does not only constitute a reaction to the technological situation of its time but also provides a clear definition of what reading a physical book means. It states the difference between the printed book and the e-reader, while also exploring what the former still has to offer in an age of screens and fluid information; and also vice versa, what the digital brings to the physical realm.

*Tree of codes* plays with the awareness and the embodiment of a printed narrative, making visible the simple gesture that defines the act of reading a codex book: the turning of the page.

### 3.4.3 *S*.

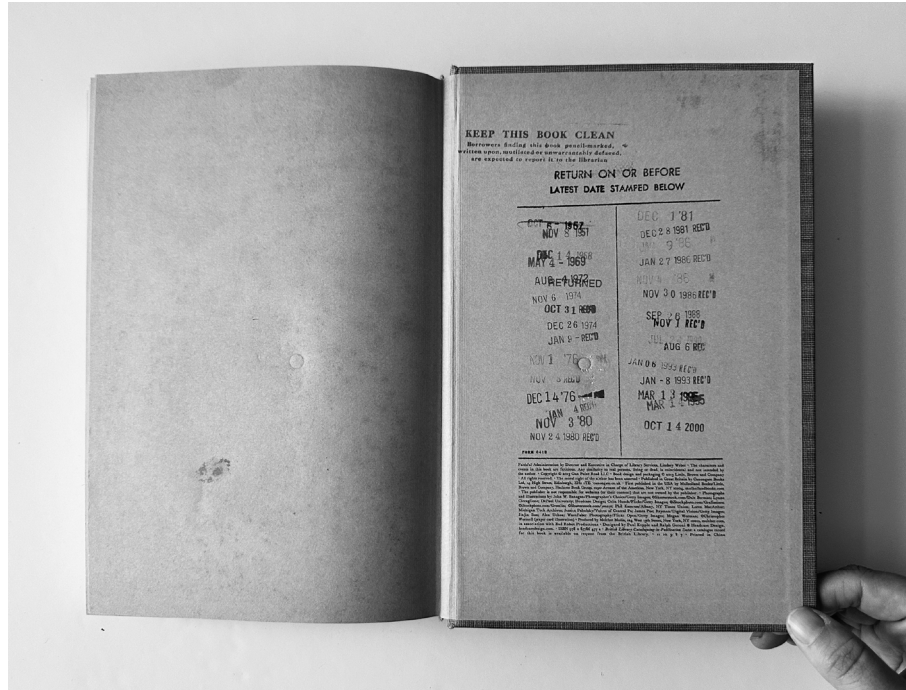


Video 3.4 First interaction with *S*. by J. J. Abrams (2013). In order to start reading the novel, readers first need to literally break the book. The narrative becomes embodied in the object from the very first interaction with it.

Reading *S*. means starting with a calculated interaction from readers. The book is enclosed within a dark slipcase and protected with a paper seal, which needs to be slit in order to remove the volume from the case. From the first point of contact the novel demands a physical manipulation. The simple act of breaking into the book inevitably establishes an embodied relation with readers, as if this was a unique and exclusive object waiting for their interaction. There is no way around it. Readers need to literally break the object in order to be able to read it (Video 3.4). The decision to enter the storyworld of *S*. becomes an intimate performance, a personal act of defiance. From the very start, *S*. demands a choice from readers: one can decide to leave the object intact and untouched (i.e., unread), or else one can break the seal to access both book and narrative. Thus, reading *S*. means an intentional intervention that begins outside the book, outside the printed pages, and outside the narrative. The slipcase acts as a sort of preamble to what will be found inside the book.

Once the seal is broken readers are able to hold the actual volume. It is a hardback book that replicates a debossed clothbound cover. The title is *Ship of Theseus* and the author is V. M. Straka. The label placed on the spine indicates provenance: this is a library book. Three stamped elements on the inside confirm it: 'BOOK FOR LOAN' on the front endpapers, the Laguna Verde High School Library stamp on the title page, and a loan record (which also indicates the book was last borrowed on October 14, 2000, and thus probably not returned) on the back endpapers (Figure 3.14). In addition, the yellowed and worn pages, the signs of manipulation, the handwritten notes that fill the title page, and the loose pieces of print that appear between some of the pages, indicate a previous ownership (Figure 3.15).

**Figure 3.14** Back endpaper from *S.* (Abrams, 2013). The stamps within the endpapers and inside covers of the book indicate that the volume belongs to a high school library.



**Figure 3.15** A typical spread from *S.* (Abrams, 2013, 190–191) showing some of the loose paraphernalia present within the pages. These reinforce the sense of previous ownership together with the yellowing pages and the handwritten margins.



Published in 2013, *S.* explores the status of the printed novel as a product of the digital realm. As its creators J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst<sup>84</sup> declared, it is ‘a celebration of the analog, of the physical

<sup>84</sup> Doug Dorst is the writer of the novel in its traditional terms: he wrote the text of *S*. However, as Chapter 5 shows, he worked as a part of a big team put together by Abrams to create the novel he had conceived. For this reason, in this thesis Abrams is considered the main author of the novel.

object' (Rothman, 2013, n.p.). Even more, it is a celebration of how the analogue is a choice to be created by the digital. Everything in *S.* is a fiction. It is a mass-produced novel created to look like an old library book. All of its elements are forged to produce a physical object, a thing that belongs to the fictional world of the narrative. While in *House of leaves* and *Tree of codes* the materiality of the book contributes to foreground the material dimension of the narrative, in *S.* the object overcomes the boundary separating content and container and becomes an integral part of the fiction.<sup>85</sup> The narrative is the object, and the object is the narrative. The activation of the latter is not limited to the text and the act of turning a page, it is entirely physical and acquires a spatial quality. The simple act of holding the book defines the fiction: readers hold a volume that has been stolen from a library, which is the starting point that originates the narrative. Where does the fiction start and where does it end?

While the two previous novels use digital qualities to explore the differences between a printed narrative and an electronic one, *S.* blurs this boundary. By exploring and playing with the limits of the novel, *S.* brings the tensions resulting from the convergence of print and digital media to the fore. In fact, the first point of contact readers originally had with *S.* was not through the printed book, but through the teaser trailer released two months before its publication in October 2013. The video, titled *Mystery project*, disclosed few details from the narrative, mainly a very disturbing image of an unknown figure with stitched lips (Figure 3.16), making it difficult for viewers to understand if the trailer was a presentation for a future film, a series, or a book.

Not surprisingly, this provoked internet speculation and, consequently, readers' engagement.<sup>86</sup> In 2013, the first glimpse

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<sup>85</sup> In this way, *S.* is related to epistolary or diary novels in which the book is also part of the fiction, as is the case for Dafoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. As is explained later, Abrams' novel makes a case for media archaeology and connects with previous conventions in the history of the novel.

<sup>86</sup> Gibbons shares some of the tweets that speculated with the trailer: 'That new Bad Robot "Stranger" teaser is amazing, especially if it's something to do with *Lost*' by @1 (2017, 329).

**Figure 3.16** Screenshot from *S.*'s trailer titled *Mystery project* (2013). The trailer raised uncertainty about the nature of the project. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qELBxIZ-g2s>



S. Trailer #1 (2013) - J.J. Abrams 'Mystery' Project HD

into *S.*'s storyworld was through a digital experience. The printed novel is, therefore, a result of hybrid practices, a product of the convergence culture defined by Jenkins (2006) that bears its three main characteristics: media confluence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence.

Reading *S.* is not a comfortable experience. This becomes evident even before starting to read it. Readers need to handle the book carefully to avoid the loose ephemera present within the pages falling out of place (both from the narrative and from the actual book). These inserts complicate the relationship conventionally established between reader and object. They force readers to reassess their own interaction with the novel and to figure out the best way to hold the book. Thus, the novel reinforces the initial claim: reading *S.* requires interaction, an active manipulation. At every level of the narrative, readers are required to interact with the object by deciding how to enter it, how to hold it, and how to move through it. Even more, readers are also faced with the question of how to deal with the novel at both print and digital dimensions. As the following chapter shows, *S.*'s narrative expands beyond the printed book through digital elements (such as blogs, website, and a Twitter exchange of messages from the characters), which are

not user interactions, but they are created for the publication.<sup>87</sup> The fiction of *S.* simultaneously occupies the analogue and digital realms, pushing the limits of the printed novel. In an age of immediacy and fluid information, Abrams applies the concept of fluidity to a conventionally finite and stable object, expanding its borders through the digital realm.

By studying the development of the unconventional novel in the twenty-first century and establishing a criteria for recognising print-specific examples, the aim of this chapter has been to understand how unconventional novels foreground the physical dimension in the act of reading. The next step in this thesis is to analyse, from a design perspective, the visual devices and strategies used in these works to comprehend the influence of materiality on the narrative dimension. After the introduction to the three case-study novels, Chapter 4 seeks, through an analysis of their visual devices, to understand how book layout and design are integrated with narrative in unconventional novels.

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<sup>87</sup> Since the publication of *S.*, Twitter has been rebranded as X. However, this thesis uses the original name of the social media platform used for the exchange of messages.

## 4 Unconventional examples: insights from the reading experience

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the three case study novels at the core of this research: Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of leaves* (2000), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of codes* (2010) and J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst's *S.* (2013). The analysis of each novel (Sections 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3) is divided in three subsections that focus on the reading experience. A part of this analysis is done by establishing connections with previous books and reading techniques in print that allow to examine the lineage of each particular example. Another, and very significant, part of this examination is conducted by dissecting the material dimension of these novels to understand how materiality is built and, therefore, how it influences and defines each particular reading experience.

The last two sections (4.4 and 4.5) build a discussion and critical reflection by comparing the three novels. The aim is to evidence the inclusion of materiality as part of the narrative and how these novels offer a printed response to the digital realm at different points in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Thus, these novels foreground the relevance print still holds for the act of reading despite the influence of the digital dimension.

### 4.1 *House of leaves*: a turning point in unconventional novels

#### 4.1.1 Introducing the house: the materiality of the narrative

Danielewski's novel is unquestionably physical. There exists no e-book version of it, and neither is there a film adaptation. There

is only one way to read this novel to its full potential: by engaging with the printed book. From the outside, *House of leaves* embodies the ideal image of a printed novel: generous proportions, heavy but not too much so, soft cream-coloured paper, all of which suggest that the reading of it will be a pleasurable, smooth, and comfortable experience. This perception, however, dissolves once readers access the pages and discover the labyrinth hidden within them.

A similar thing happens with the narrative. *House of leaves* tells the story of world-famous photographer Will Navidson, who moves with his family (wife Karen Green, and two children Chad and Daisy) to a house in Ash Tree Lane, Virginia. At first, the house looks like the ideal house, the representation of the traditional notion of a place of safety and comfort, fitting within Gaston Bachelard's (2014, 29) description of home: 'And always, in our daydreams, the house is a large cradle [...]. Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house.' The house appears as the perfect place to find the stability the family is looking for to strengthen their bonds. This plan, however, dissolves when they discover that the house hides inside a growing labyrinth of unknown proportions. Obsessed with the enigmatic house, Navidson embarks on a journey to explore the insides of the building and untangle its mystery, which gradually becomes a horrific experience for everyone involved.

As it turns out, the house is bigger on the inside than what it shows on the outside. The same happens with the printed book: by reading and turning the pages, readers are immersed in the intricate labyrinth that unfolds within them. Thus, the materiality of the book mirrors the house on Ash Tree Lane. Both houses, narrative and physical, reveal themselves as one labyrinth, engaging inhabitants and readers simultaneously in a process that violates the conventional notion of the self-contained narrative in a book (Hayles, 2002).

By breaking the traditional idea of the house, Danielewski breaks the printed book as a space of stability, regularity, and balance.



*House of leaves* makes readers rethink their idea of the printed book and their apprehended notions of how a book should be read. The novel achieves this by taking advantage of its physical qualities, including them within the narrative and forcing readers to see the object under a new light, as Pressman (2020) notes. Thus, the book is not a passive entity anymore, but a novel that demands an effort from readers, an active participation that transforms the book into a dynamic and labyrinthine medium. Very much like Sterne a couple of centuries earlier, Danielewski is able to defamiliarise the conventions of the genre by employing and challenging print and analogue reading conventions of his time.

The fact that *House of leaves* breaks expected reading practices is first and foremost evidenced in its lack of a central narrative. Navidson's account is only one among several layers within the book. The interaction of the family with the house is recorded on the Hi8 camcorders that Navidson installs in the rooms to film the family's happy move. This film is described and commented by Zampanò, a blind old man and Borges-like figure.<sup>88</sup> Yet, Zampanò's notes are gathered together by tattoo-artist apprentice Johnny Truant, who discovers the old man dead in his apartment and decides to make sense of his writings and speculations. This mixes up with Truant's own account about his relationship with the old man's narrative and his own issues, which add up to the main text, sometimes overtaking it in presence and importance. Truant's layer connects directly with his mother's, whose presence in the story is a shadow that moves along with Truant's narrative and gains importance in the appendices of the book.<sup>89</sup> In addition, all these

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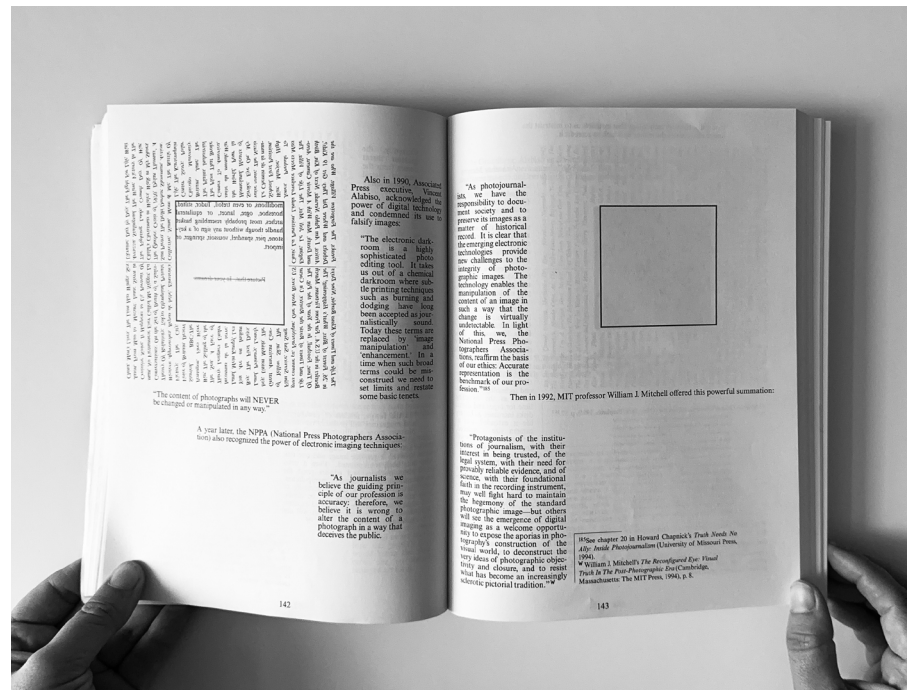
<sup>88</sup> The figure of Zampanò as a blind old man creates a connection with writer Jorge Luis Borges and, consequently, with the idea of labyrinth. As D'Ambrosio observes (2011), Borges' literature is full of erudition that mixes up false and dubious references. This has a clear parallelism with the obscure footnotes and references that also appear in *House of leaves*, where the Argentinian writer is mentioned several times.

<sup>89</sup> *The Three Attic Whalestoe Institute letters* appears in Appendix II-E of *House of leaves* (2000, 586). It has been also published independently, which confirms the importance of the chapter and the mother's relevance to Truant's narrative.

layers are contained within the mysterious presence of the ‘Editors’ appearing in the form of annotations and casting a shadow onto the unknown authorial figure.<sup>90</sup>

*House of leaves* is an assemblage of voices: a combination of layers and strata that build a rhizomatic structure with no visible central point. Borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) idea of rhizome, it could be said that the novel is made out of ‘plateaus’, which are connected to each other in multiple ways. These layers are presented simultaneously on the page, which is another characteristic of the rhizome: ‘The ideal for a book would be to lay everything out on a plane of exteriority of this kind, on a single page, the same sheet’, a way of ‘flattening all the multiplicities’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 9). Each of these layers are ‘spatially distinct narratives’, as Hayles (2002, 794–795) describes them, that overlay and intertwine on the page through unexpected layout, typographic combinations, and numerous footnote styles (Figure 4.1).

**Figure 4.1** A spread from Chapter IX in *House of leaves* (Danielewski, 2000, 142–143). The different layers and narratives are flattened on the page and represented through unconventional layout and typographic combinations.



<sup>90</sup> The word ‘Editors’ suggests that there is more than one person behind the authorial figure of the novel. Besides, this ambiguous entity also obscures the role of Danielewski as author.

Flattening these narratives at the visual level of the page not only reflects the multiplicity of voices, but also forces readers to untangle their connections and move through the book in a three-dimensional journey. They simultaneously pay attention to the text, the page, and the object they are holding.<sup>91</sup>

In this way, Danielewski challenges print reading practices in a moment, the end of the 1990s, when digital development and electronic reading are rapidly influencing the traditional ways of reading and writing. He understands that these new practices do not necessarily mean the end of the printed book, but the end of the conventional idea associated with it. The digital realm opens up the opportunity to explore the underdeveloped material possibilities in printed narratives, and therefore to question the idea of the 'sacred text' (Hansen, 2004, 602). By presenting a novel that demands a physical involvement from readers, Danielewski disputes the long-established idea that printed books are untouchable, sacred objects that need to be read and handled in a predetermined way. This becomes especially evident in his interview with Sophie Cottrell (2002, n.p.):

[B]ooks don't have to be so limited. They can intensify informational content and experience. Multiple stories can lie side by side on the page. [...] But here's the joke. Books have had this capacity all along. [...] Books are remarkable constructions with enormous possibilities. [...] But somehow the analogue powers of these wonderful bundles of paper have been forgotten. Somewhere along the way, all its possibilities were denied. I'd like to see that perception change. I'd like to see the book reintroduced for all it really is.

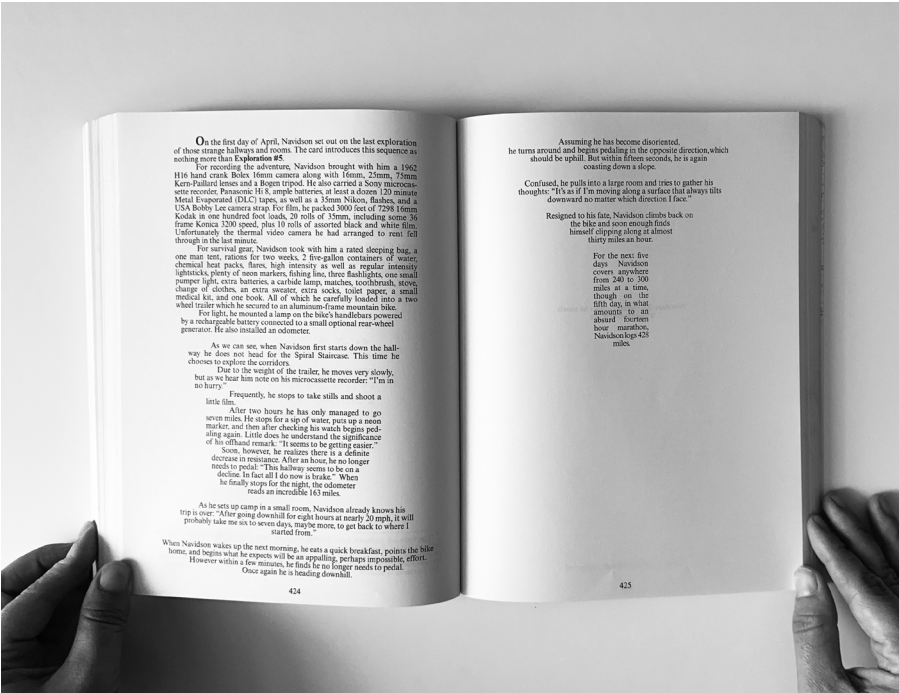
The idea of disputing the sanctity of the printed text is well evidenced in Chapter XX of *House of leaves* (pages 423–490), which recounts Navidson's final exploration of the labyrinth. In this section, the multiplicity of voices is barely present, and the focus is put on Navidson, a strategy that reflects his isolation as he

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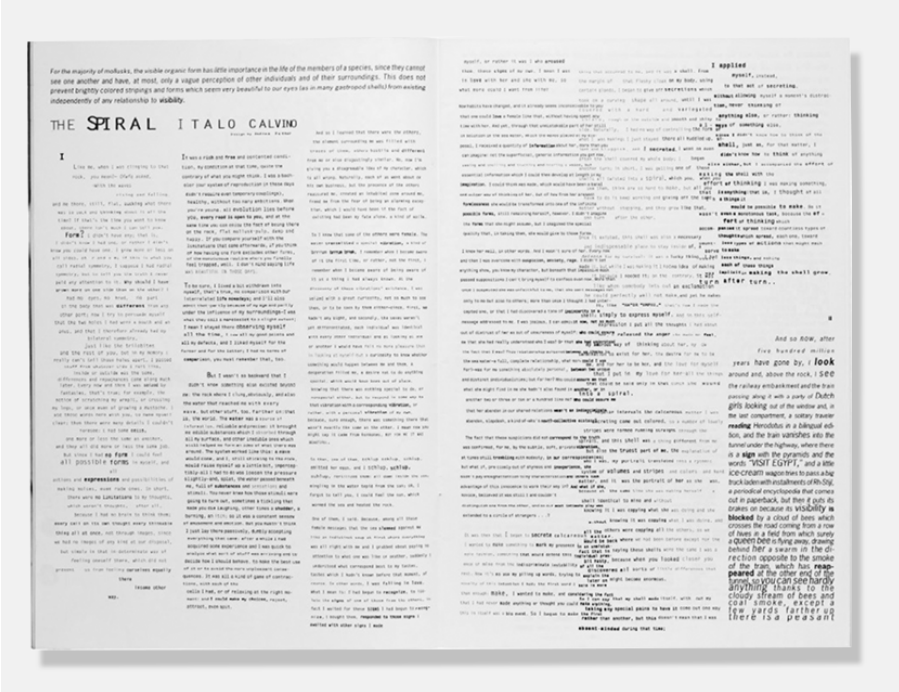
<sup>91</sup> Section 4.1.3 will show in detail the kind of three-dimensional reading that Chapter IX fosters.

moves through the labyrinth. On the very first page of the chapter (424), the text shifts from a left justified layout to a centred one to replicate Navidson's descent to the labyrinth through a spiral staircase (Figure 4.2), a technique that was also used in 1992 by designer Andrea Futter to represent, in *Emigre* 21, Italo Calvino's story 'The spiral' (Figure 4.3). In the latter, the image of the spiral is created by combining an irregularly centred text with overlapping words and lines of text.

**Figure 4.2** A spread from Chapter XX (424–425). The idea of the spiral staircase is represented through the text that shifts from its regular left-aligned position to a centred one that constantly shifts width.



**Figure 4.3** A spread from 'The spiral' by Italo Calvino as designed by Andrea Futter and published in *Emigre* 21 in 1992. The spiral is represented with changes in alignment, typographic overlay and character spacing.





**Video 4.1** Reading progression of Chapter XX (423–490). This section uses blank space to represent Navidson's isolation and disorientation as he moves through the labyrinth thinking that he will not be able to get out of it.

From this point onwards, the text loses its regular layout with the objective of representing the character's movements through the corridors, together with his disorientation and uncertainty. By employing unexpected layout arrangements, typographic games, and using white space as a strong visual strategy, Danielewski manages to mirror the ungraspable depth of the labyrinth on the page. Thus, the space of the spread becomes flexible and dynamic. Readers are forced to move in unexpected directions, replicating the blind movements Navidson makes within the darkness of the labyrinth (Video 4.1). Blank space acquires a significant presence as it not only enhances the printed words on the page but also embodies the deep silence and the darkness that surrounds Navidson in his journey (Figure 4.4). Thus, reading is slowed down by the graphic dimension of the narrative and becomes physically connected to it.

**Figure 4.4** Spread from Chapter XX (436–437). Blank space and typographic arrangement slow down the progress of both the narrative and the act of reading. Figure B-1 in Appendix B (on page 389) shows the progression of spreads of Chapter XX.



At some point in the chapter, Navidson is completely lost and reduced to use a last book of matches. He decides to employ them to read the only book that he has with him: *House of leaves* (2000, 465). In order to gain more time to read the next pages, he strips and burns the leaves from the book as he reads them. Such a destructive and physical reading reinforces the fact, as Hansen

(2004) notes, that there does not exist a 'sacred text', not even the one readers are holding. The idea suggested here is forceful: the printed book is not immutable or inert, but a technology subject to change and evolution. This idea is also mirrored in the multiple perspectives that compose the narrative and that stop readers from attaining any certainty from the novel, counteracting the conventional idea that printed texts hold the ultimate truth. In Danielewski's words: 'Let us say there is no sacred text here. That notion of authenticity or originality is constantly refuted' (McCaffery and Gregory, 2003, 121).

To accomplish this, Danielewski uses the novel and its materiality as a representation of the house that builds the narrative. The more readers immerse themselves into the multiple narratives, the more the novel demands from them. The content effectively combines with the material dimension by demanding a physical interaction and forcing readers to continuously reposition the material artefact in their hands. As is shown in the analysis of Chapter IX, readers need to keep changing and reassessing the way they are holding the book, which emphasises it as a material object. As Hayles (2002, 793) describes:

The dynamic interplay between words, nonverbal marks, and physical properties of the page work together to construct the book's materiality so that it functions as a mirror to the mysterious House, reversing, reflecting, and inverting its characteristics even as it foregrounds its own role as a container for the fictional universe in which such an impossible object could exist.

From this perspective, Danielewski follows B. S. Johnson's example (1973) and conceives the novel as a device that solves a literary problem. The sequential and linear conventions of printed narratives appear too limited to represent the labyrinth, the fear of a changing reality (analogue-digital), and the failure to represent authenticity. *House of leaves* creates an all-encompassing reading experience that integrates narrative and material dimensions at once. Removing one of the two would utterly change the reading experience of the book. Therefore,

*House of leaves* is a combination of an encounter with the fictional maze and an interaction with the three-dimensional labyrinth of the printed book.

#### 4.1.2 Constructing a labyrinth of footnotes and unconventional lineage

Danielewski is aware that *House of leaves* is indebted to the work of authors and artists that previously explored the limits of their disciplines. As he recognises to McCaffery and Gregory (2003, 106):

Anyone with a grasp of the history of narrative can see that *House of leaves* is really just enjoying the fruits of a long line of earlier literary experimentation. The so-called 'originality' claimed by my commentators must be limited to my decision to use the wonderful techniques developed by Mallarmé, Sterne, B. S. Johnson, cummings, Hollander, etc.—and of course Hitchcock, Welles, Truffaut, Kubrick, and so on.

It is not surprising to find those three first names within Danielewski's references. Mallarmé's typographical and visual innovations in *Un coup de dés* are mainly reflected in the pages of Chapter XX and the play with page composition and blank space. The connection with Johnson is evidenced in the concern with the materiality of the narrative. Furthermore, the relationship with *Tristram Shandy* is made apparent by the fact that both works can be considered as forerunners of the unconventional novels of their time. The two authors use conventions to break conventions. They take familiar techniques from literature and the printed novel to challenge, disrupt and dismantle them, thus bringing awareness to the reading process and to the materiality of the book. As Hayles (2002, 781) explains about *House of leaves* –and which could also be applied to Sterne's novel– 'none of the dynamics displayed [...] is entirely original, yet the bits and pieces add up to something specific, if not unique'. Despite the nearly three centuries that separate them and the technological differences of their respective periods, *Tristram Shandy* and *House of leaves* explore the possibilities of what a printed novel can be in their respective ages.

The two novels, for example, break the linearity of the narrative. The decentred axis in *Tristram Shandy* is particularly made evident in the unconventional placement of the marbled page in the middle of the narrative. In *House of leaves*, however, the decentred axis is not achieved by disrupting the established reading order, but by overlaying layers and presenting them on the page in unexpected ways.

Chapter 1 of this thesis argues that Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748) contains some visual devices that anticipate Sterne's way of foregrounding the materiality of the book. In particular, 'Paper X' shows Richardson's disruption of conventional page layout to represent the distress of one of the characters after suffering a rape (Figure 4.5). In this respect, a further connection could be established between *House of leaves* and the eighteenth-century novel. The section titled 'The Three Attic Whalestoe Institute letters' (2000, 586–644) introduces the correspondence from Pelafina (Johnny Truant's mother) while she resides in a mental institution. In one of the letters, she encodes a message to her son: 'Pay attention: the next letter I will encode as follows: use the first letter of each word to build subsequent words and phrases' (Danielewski, 2000, 619); a strategy that calls as well for the participation of readers in untangling the narrative.

In the message, Pelafina recounts the rape she has suffered in the institution: 'They have found a way to break me. Rape a fifty-six-year-old bag of bones. [...] Someone I don't know always comes when it's dark. Late. I've learned not to scream' (Danielewski, 2000, 620). The letters that follow this encoded account reflect the distress of the character through the fragmentation and instability of the text, which relates to that in *Clarissa* (Figure 4.6). While in Richardson's novel the anguish of the character is visually reflected in one piece of correspondence, in *House of leaves* it is extended in time, gradually growing in urgency and suffering.<sup>92</sup>

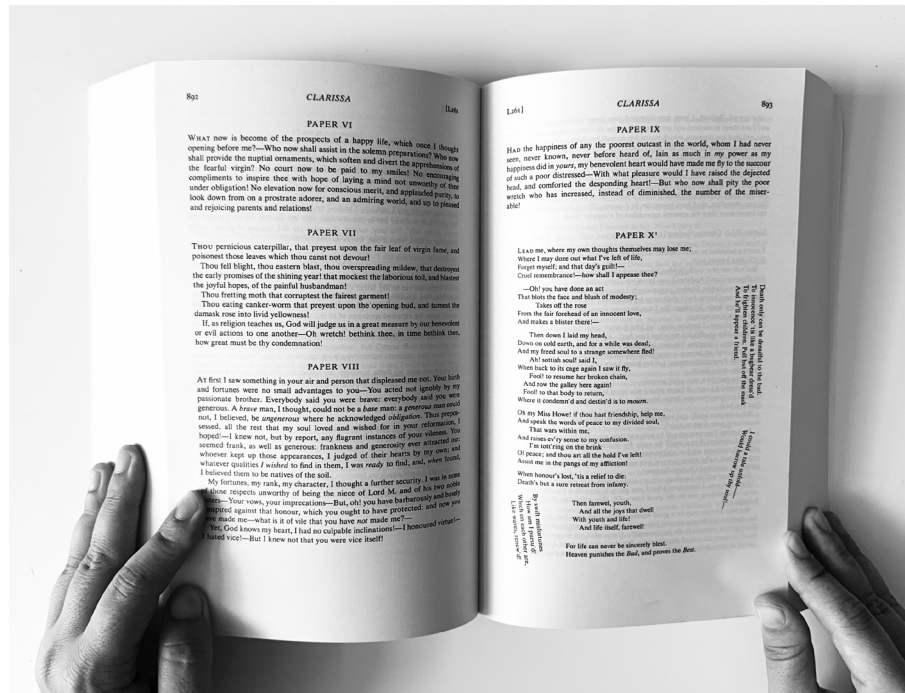
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<sup>92</sup> See Figure B-2 in Appendix B ( on page 391) for a full visual evolution of the distress in the letters.

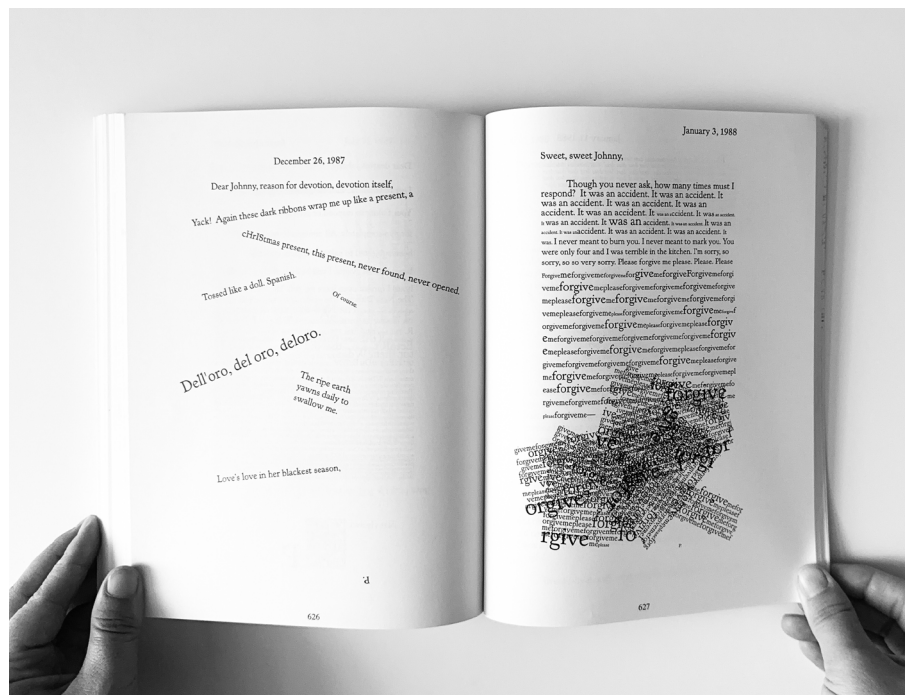


**Figure 4.5** Paper X in the 2004 edition from *Clarissa* by Penguin Classics (Richardson, 1748, 893).

This page shows exploration of book layout and typography in an eighteenth-century novel.



**Figure 4.6** Spread from 'The Three Attic Whalestoe Institute letters' in Appendix E of *House of leaves* (2000, 626–627). The letters that Pelafina Truant show the agony of the character and establish a connection with Paper X in *Clarissa*.



It is also important to mention that *House of leaves* is indebted to the history of the codex in a deeper sense. In his interviews, Danielewski usually makes a reference to the many books and texts that constitute a reference to the novel: 'Read Chomsky, Derrida, Pinker, cummings. Look at early sixteenth-century manuscripts. Hell, go open up the Talmud. Books are remarkable constructions with enormous possibilities' (Cottrell, 2002).

It is no coincidence, then, that Martin Brick (2004) compares *House of leaves* to a medieval manuscript considering its multilayered narrative. Cavallo and Chartier (1999) explain that through the eleventh century to the fourteenth, the written codex adapted its functions to the activities of reading, studying, praying, and commenting. At this point in time, oral reading was giving way to silent reading, and page layout also shifted to accommodate the new practices. Pages were divided into columns to facilitate reading and texts were broken down into sections through complex devices that transformed the page into active and dynamic spaces for the retrieval of information (Figure 4.7). Visual hierarchy became important to provide an easier access to the information and a faster movement through the texts. According to Paul Saenger (1999, 134), ‘the complex structure of the written page of a fourteenth-century scholastic text presupposed a reader who read only with his eyes, going swiftly from objection to response, from table of contents to the text, from diagram to text ...’.

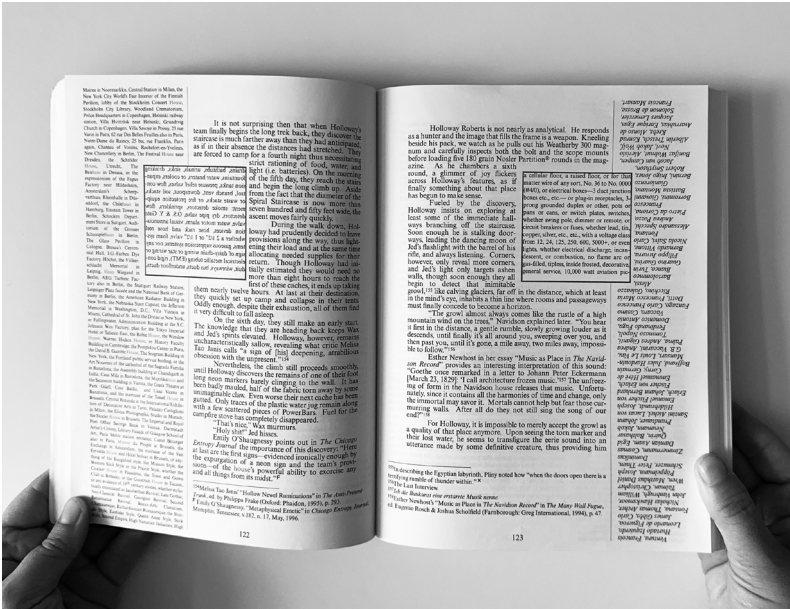
In *House of leaves*, Danielewski constructs a narrative that is rich in cross-references with a complex composition. Rather than facilitating access, page layout in the novel transforms the text into a visual labyrinth, thus muddling and slowing down reading (Figure 4.8). This intricacy presupposes readers who not only read with their eyes but also with their body, interacting physically with the book.

Typography is also a significant strategy within the visual dimension of *House of leaves*, used to distinguish the different voices in the narrative. This suggests a connection with the typographical treatment in medieval manuscripts and early printing practices, as Brick (2004) explains when comparing it to the authority projected through typography in the *King James Bible* from 1611: a Gothic typeface is used for the main body of the text ‘implying the careful hand and revered authority of medieval manuscripts’ (Bricks, 2004); whereas a Roman typeface is used for the more mechanical information of the chapter summaries and text in the margins (Figure 4.9).

**Figure 4.7** A page from the *Breviary of Renaud de Bar, Bishop of Metz (1303–1316)*. Visual hierarchy in manuscripts allowed for an easier retrieval of information. In this breviary the two-column structure allows for the combination of musical and spoken texts.



**Figure 4.8** A spread from Chapter IX in *House of leaves* (122–123) that shows how the novel plays with layout conventions to contravene the expected hierarchy. The two-column structure obstructs rather than promotes reading progress.



**Figure 4.9** A page from the *King James Bible, 1611*. The different use of typefaces informs readers about the different levels of information present on the page.



In the case of *House of leaves*, Zampanò's account is set in Times New Roman (Figure 4.10); while Johnny Truant's is set in Courier (Figure 4.11), a strategy that might aim to represent Truant's account as more informal and personal, closer to readers (Brick, 2004); and the Editors in Bookman (Figure 4.12).

A series of close-ups from *House of leaves* that evidence the hierarchy created through typography:

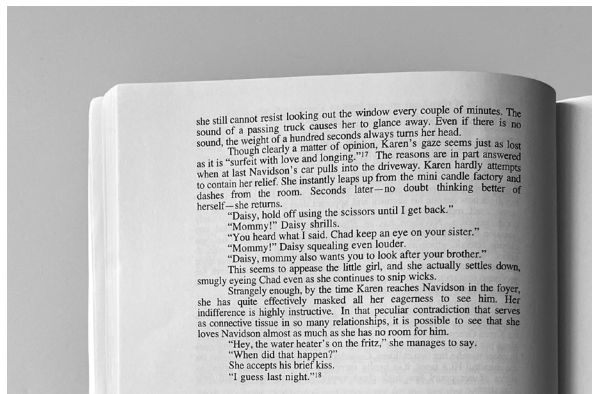
**Figure 4.10** Zampanò's narrative is typeset in Times New Roman (12).

**Figure 4.11** Johnny Truant's narrative is typeset in Courier (15).

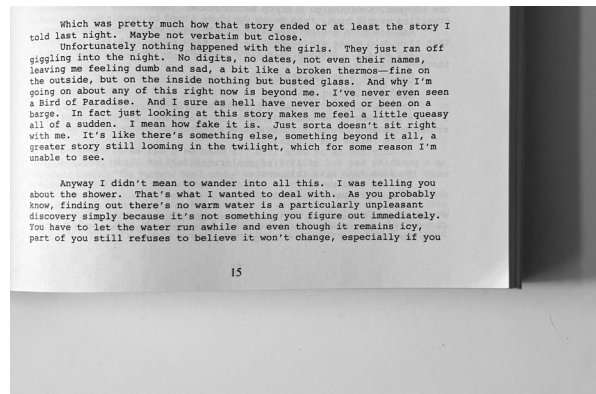
**Figure 4.12** The Editors' comments are typeset in Bookman (45).

**Figure 4.13** The Editors establish themselves as an anonymous authorial figure that adds one more layer of ambiguity to the narrative (4).

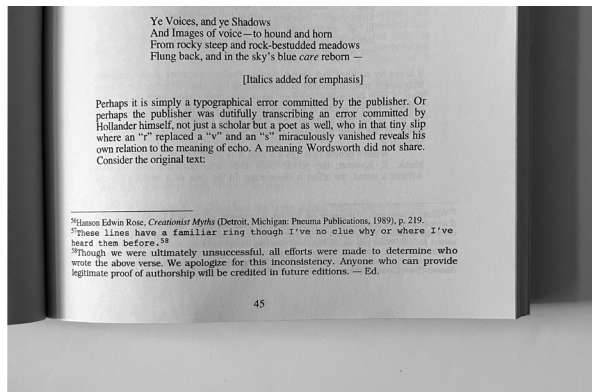
It is unclear if Danielewski is after achieving an obvious correspondence between typefaces and characters, but what becomes evident from one early footnote is the fact that he aims to create a textual hierarchy for the dialogue. He establishes the Editors as authorial and commercial figures, and therefore blurs the authority and authenticity of the other voices: 'In an effort to limit confusion, Mr. Truant's footnotes will appear in Courier font while Zampanò's will appear in Times' (Danielewski, 2000, 4) (Figure 4.13). Besides, the attempt to establish (and at the same time blur) authority through the use of typography and its comparison with liturgical texts, could be seen also as adding to the break of the 'sacred text'.



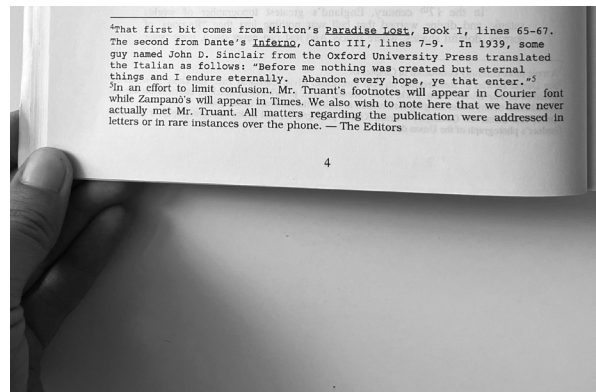
4-10



4-11



4-12



4-13

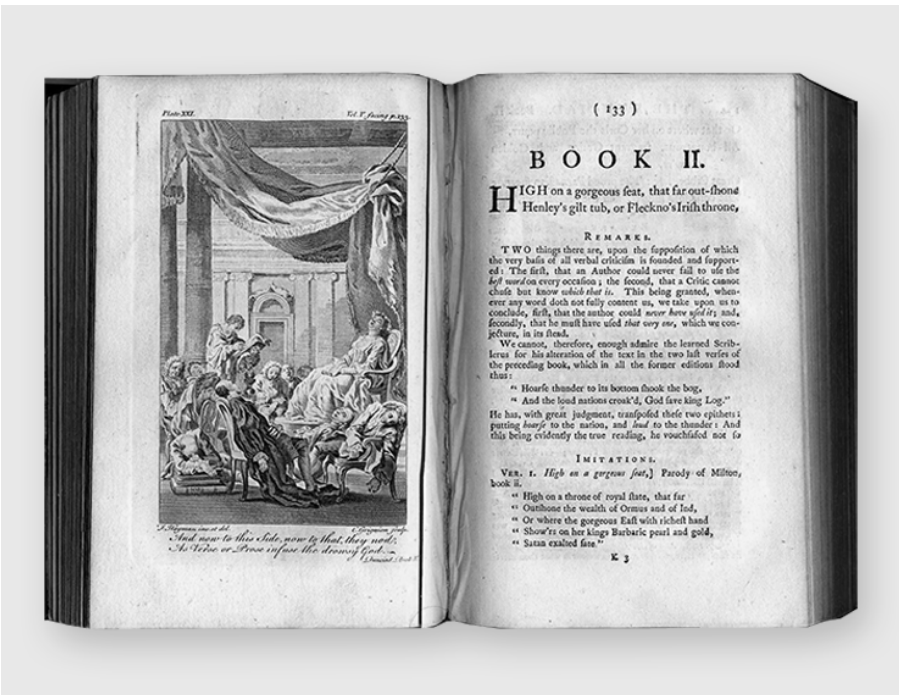
In order to build the assemblage of voices in the novel, Danielewski uses a very conventional strategy in both literary and non-literary works: the footnote. There is nothing really innovative in the use of footnotes in *House of leaves*. They work in an orthodox way and establish a path between fragments of the text through superscripts that use numbers, letters, or symbols. However, what makes these footnotes uncommon is the way in which they are arranged. Usually, footnotes appear in a smaller font at the bottom of the page and as a secondary layer to the primary text. *House of leaves* deliberately breaks this convention and plays with the layout of these notes, which are placed following unexpected compositions, breaking hierarchies and creating convoluted itineraries for readers to follow.<sup>93</sup> In this sense, the presence of the footnotes can be compared to the ones in *Tristram Shandy*. In Sterne's novel, they interrupt the text visually through asterisks and make them impossible for readers to ignore, thus acquiring a sense of urgency that makes them an essential part of the narrative. Similarly, in *House of leaves* footnotes have a visual presence that makes it difficult for readers to bypass them.

Williams (2021) compares the footnotes in *Tristram Shandy* with those in Alexander Pope's *Dunciad variorum* (1728). In the latter, the notes (called 'Remarks') are placed at the bottom of the page and end up using more space than the main narrative, thus calling for the readers' attention (Figure 4.14). However, their conventional placement at the bottom of the page removes a sense of urgency and readers can deal with the footnotes in their own time (even ignore them). In *House of leaves*, Truant's narrative develops in the footnotes and becomes more present than the supposedly primary narrative. At numerous points in the novel each instance of Truant's account extends for more than two pages, which adds to the sense of interruption and confusion, and makes it very difficult for readers to ignore these footnotes, making them a necessary part of the novel (Figure 4.15).

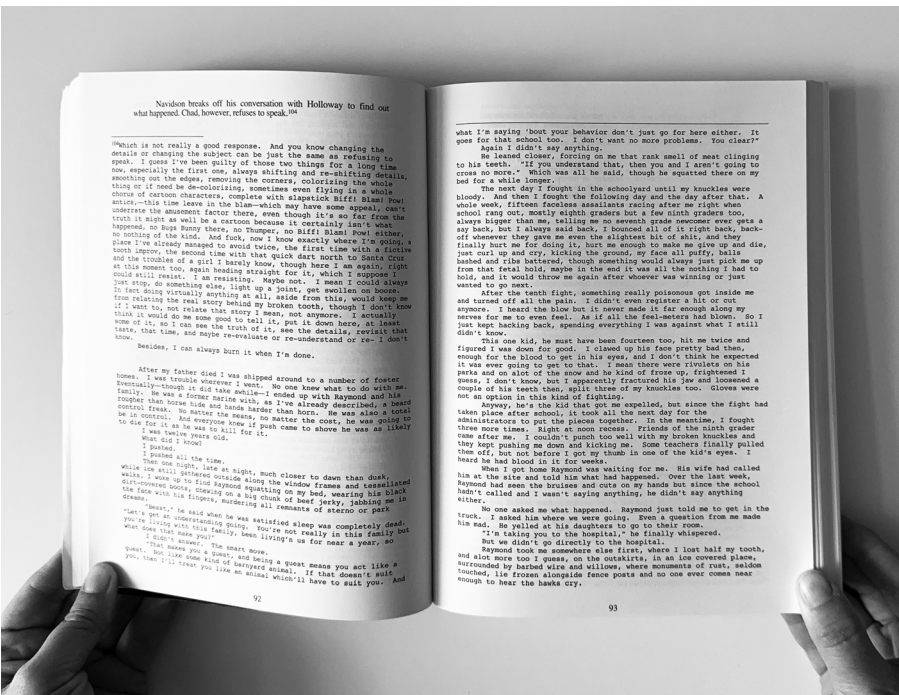
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<sup>93</sup> The next section looks in more detail at these footnotes.

**Figure 4.14** A spread from the *Dunciad variorum* by Alexander Pope (1760, 132–133). The footnotes or ‘Remarks’ take up most of the space and become more present than the main text.



**Figure 4.15** A spread from *House of leaves* (92–93) that shows how Truant’s narrative tends to impose over the supposedly ‘primary’ narrative, thus contravening the expected hierarchy within the novel.



Besides, these footnotes frequently reference nonexistent academic sources, create loops, or include footnotes within the footnotes. This strategy serves Danielewski to disrupt authority and authenticity, and also to build the material labyrinth in the novel, bring the different narratives simultaneously on the page, and foreground materiality through readers’ participation.

The dynamic use of the footnotes suggests the influence of digital communication practices as they create a hypertextual-style reading experience, characterised by fragmented information, digressions, interruptions, and visual distractions. They also make a reference to the evolution in writing practices with the use of computers: inserting footnotes has become easier with word processors than creating them in the pre-digital years, especially if using a typewriter.<sup>94</sup> In Hayles (2002, 781) words, the author is ‘showing what print can be in a digital age.’

Even if Danielewski states in an interview in 2003 that he had ‘yet to read *Pale fire*’ (McCaffery and Gregory, 2003, 114), it is difficult to talk about the relevance of footnotes in *House of leaves* without mentioning Nabokov’s novel (1962). As has been explained, this fictional poem with its fictional commentary is considered a major example of hypertextual literature in the twentieth century. The novel fosters a non-linear reading by not giving explicit instructions and leaving the choice open to readers, but at the same time urging them to jump between pages and follow the hypertextual connections. A similar thing happens in *House of leaves*, which leaves the decision of how to traverse the different layers of the novel to readers. In this case, however, choosing a linear path becomes more difficult because of the unexpected arrangement of the text and how this brings forward the materiality of the narrative. Even if readers would decide to choose a linear and single narrative layer, it would still require an effort to isolate that one path and read through it ignoring the rest.

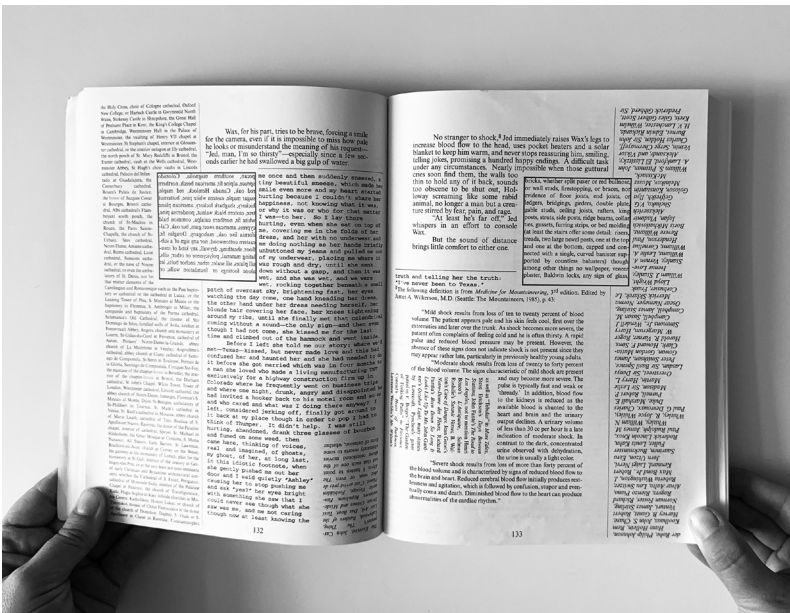
The footnotes in *House of leaves* simultaneously build the material dimension and break the conventional hierarchy (and architecture) of the page. The labyrinthine layout is especially present in Chapter IX (Figure 4.16). In these pages it becomes evident that Danielewski’s mention of the Talmud and Derrida as references for this book is not

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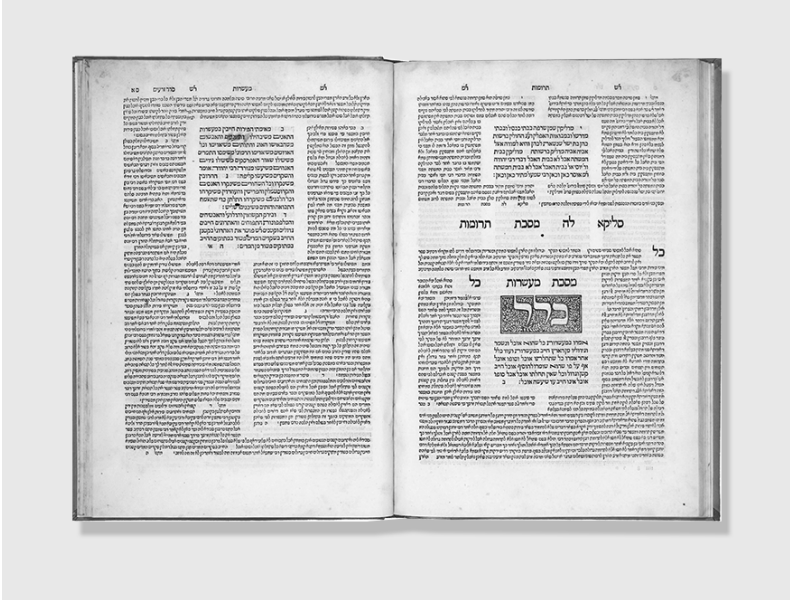
<sup>94</sup> This does not mean that *House of leaves* was created using a computer. As is explained in Chapter 5, in the first stages Danielewski wrote the novel by hand and afterwards typeset it on a computer.



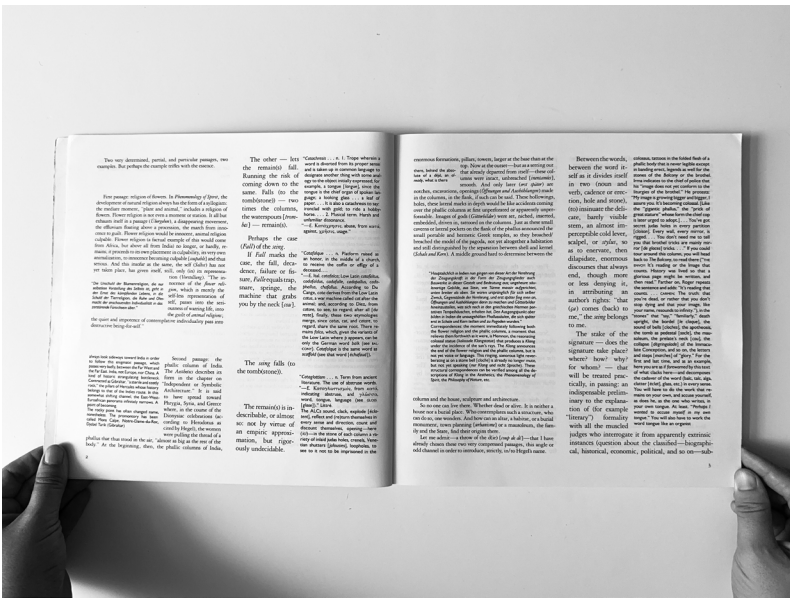
**Figure 4.16** A typical spread from Chapter IX (132–133). The labyrinth becomes apparent at the material dimension in Chapter IX, where conventional hierarchy is disrupted by means of an unexpected use of layout and typography.



**Figure 4.17** A typical spread from the *Babilonian Talmud*, *Seder Zera'im*, c. 1543. The assemblage of voices present in the pages of the Talmud bear a striking resemblance with the layout of Chapter IX in *House of leaves*.



**Figure 4.18** A typical spread from *Glas* (Derrida, 1974, 2–3). The fragmentation and interruptions present in *Glas* constitute a reference for *House of leaves*.





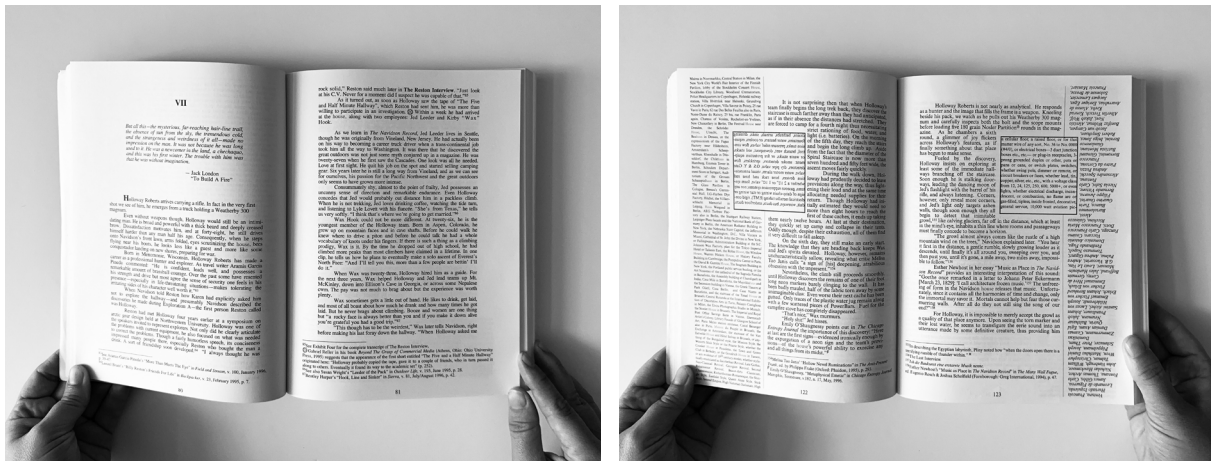
coincidental at all. The Talmud combines laws, the interpretations of the scriptures of ancient scribes and rabbis of Israel, oral traditions, and commentaries and annotations by following generations (Weiss, 1997, 98). Looking at the composition of one of the pages it is easy to draw a connection to Danielewski's novel. The Talmud is composed of an assemblage of voices that appear simultaneously on the page, which is broken in distinct spatial sections (Figure 4.17). This creates an interactive and physical reading experience as readers are required to decode the different layers of the page, understand their connections, and decide how and what to read from it.

*Glas* (1974) is also an important reference to page composition in *House of leaves*. As explained in Chapter 1, Derrida explores narrative fragmentation by dividing the text in two columns with typographic differences that are subject to interruptions and disruptions (Figure 4.18). The fact that the text is arranged in two columns, like the conventional arrangement in Bibles, points to the idea of the 'holy text' (Royston, 2019, 61), and to the resulting rupture of its sanctity by the disrupting 'judases'. As a result, in both works the multiplicity of voices clashes simultaneously on the page, and works as a cross-section of the conversation taking place. The whole arrangement of the page causes fragmentation and confuses readers, which need to pay attention not only to the discourse but also to the architecture of the page that is made visible.

Hemmingson (2011) notes that page layout in *Glas* works vertically, whereas *House of leaves* presents a horizontal structure. This is accurate for many of the pages in which the footnotes do not break completely with their traditional placement and reinforce the horizontal composition of the page. However, this hierarchy is completely lost in Chapter IX, where both horizontal and vertical compositions work together to create a three-dimensional structure (Figure 4.19).<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> There are some other parts in *House of leaves* that lose the horizontal layout, such as Chapter XX (pages 423 to 490). See Figure B-1 in Appendix B (page 388).



**Figure 4.19** Two spreads from *House of leaves* (80–81 and 122–123) with different structures. On the left, a spread arranged with horizontal hierarchy. On the right, Chapter IX, where horizontal and vertical compositions are combined together in a three-dimensional narrative.

*Glas* has also been regarded as a hypertext not only because of the bifurcations and interruptions within the text, but also, as Royston (2019, 61) explains, because ‘the book creates citational and thematic networks, which span versions of *Glas* [...] to include periodicals and even visual art.’ *Glas* creates a network that expands the discourse beyond the space of the printed book, in a similar way as *House of leaves* does through blogs, forums and websites.<sup>96</sup>

Due to the rich variety of lineage that can be found in *House of leaves*, it becomes evident that the novel could also be described as an exercise in media archaeology, and also of remediation. Not only does the novel look at old and new media, confronting them from extreme points of view (i.e., medieval manuscripts and digital hypertexts), but the assemblage of voices also includes transcriptions from videos, television, radio, telephone conversations, and personal diaries. Cinema has also a very significant role in the novel. As Danielewski explains in the interview with McCaffery and Gregory (2003), his father was a filmmaker, and this undoubtedly constitutes an important influence for his work:

The idea of how text might be placed on the page was something I’d always been interested in, probably due to all those discussions I’d had with my father about technical elements directors use to

<sup>96</sup> This is explained further in Section 4.4.

control the viewer's perceptions. [...] The visual experiments in *House of leaves* are mostly based on the grammar of film and the enormous foundation of theory established over the last century (McCaffery and Gregory, 2003, 119).

By including all these layers within the printed book, Danielewski creates a 'total media environment', as described by Bray and Gibbons (2011, 55). He uses a combination of numerous media voices to reinforce the fact that the printed novel can be a dynamic and flexible medium when working with the influence of its past, present and future.

Looking at the numerous references that can be acknowledged historically as precedents to *House of leaves*, there is one characteristic that becomes common to all of them: the subjectivity in the reading experience. In some way or another, all of these works break the traditional idea that a printed book can be read in one single and exclusive way, linearly from start to finish. Instead, they offer a personal exploration of the printed content.<sup>97</sup>

The fact that the interpretation and the journey through the labyrinth of *House of leaves* is personal and subjective, means there are also different entryways to it. In fact, the author himself has pointed to the many points of access to the novel: 'Well, there are many ways to enter *House of leaves*. Do you want to go by way of Johnny Truant or do you want to go by way of Johnny Truant's mother?' (McCaffery and Gregory, 2003, 111). In spite of this, Hansen (2004) rejects this idea by seeing those other possible entryways as secondary and dependant on the main access point to the novel (for him that of Truant). However, Evans (2011) confirms that readers can also access the novel by first listening to the musical album *Haunted* (2000), written and performed by Danielewski's sister, Poe. As he explains, both novel and album are

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<sup>97</sup> The books that have been mentioned in this section as references to *House of leaves* are not an exhaustive classification of all the works that have influenced the novel in some way or another, but they have been chosen because of their relevance from a material point of view.

independent from each other, and at the same time serve to expand their own narratives and to provide entry-points to one and the other. Besides, this view contributes to reinforce the ‘total media environment’ created by the novel.

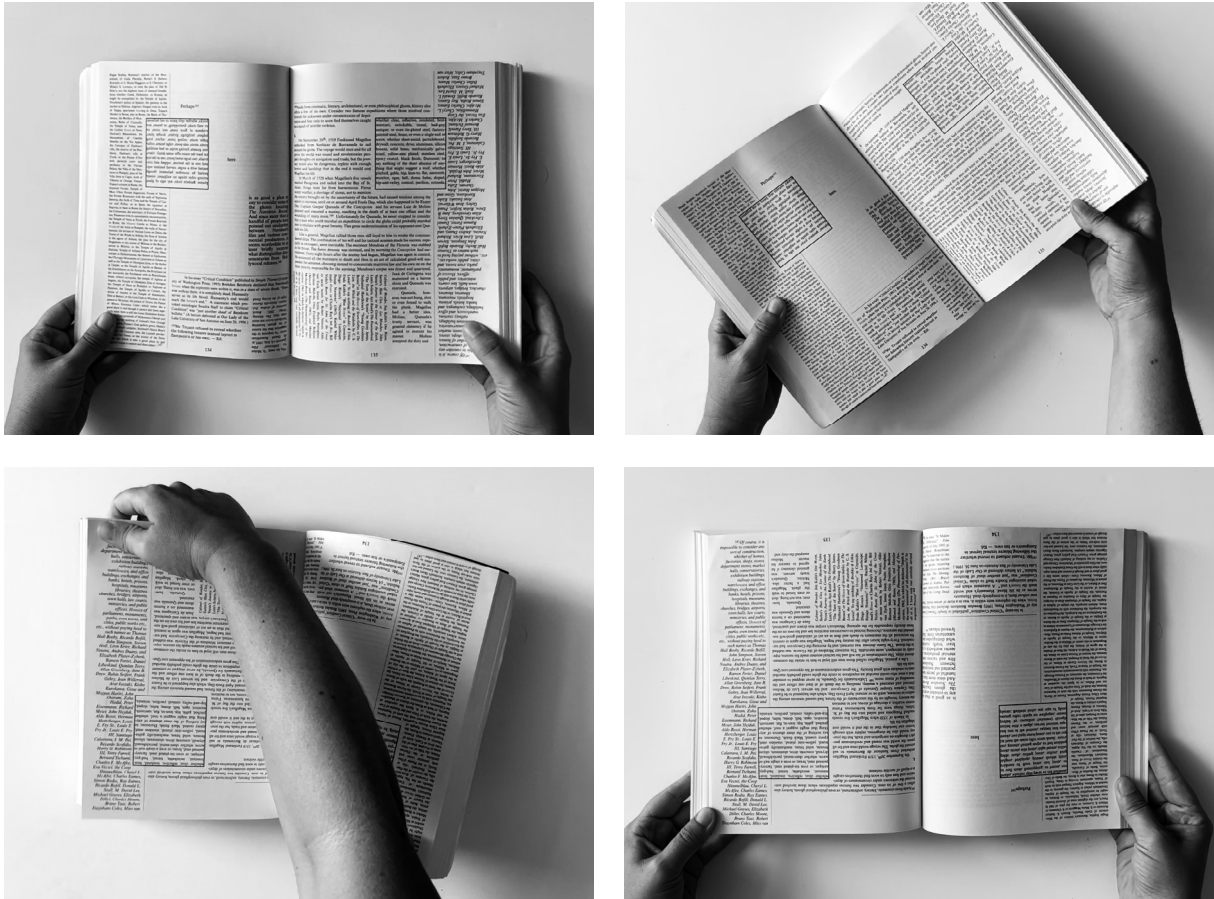
As Rowberry (2011, n.p.) describes when analysing *Pale fire*, a key aspect of the novel ‘is the constant game between reader and author’, which can also be applied to *House of leaves*. As the next section shows, Danielewski offers an elaborate and visually chaotic system of information in which readers need to find their way through, deciding on how to manipulate and traverse the narrative. The labyrinth is not only three-dimensional, but also entirely personal, as Zampanò himself describes: ‘Due to wallshifts and extraordinary size, any way out remains singular and applicable only to those on that path at that particular time. All solutions are necessarily personal’ (Danielewski, 2000, 115).

#### 4.1.3. The unfolding narrative of Chapter IX



Video 4.2 Reading progression of Chapter IX (107–152). The chapter gradually becomes more convoluted and demands a higher level of physical interaction from readers.

Chapter IX is the section in *House of leaves* that best represents the unconventional qualities of this novel. Not in vain it is referred to by some of its characters (Zampanò and Truant) as ‘The Labyrinth’: ‘Ever since leaving the labyrinth, having had to endure all those convolutions, those incomplete suggestions, the maddening departures and inconclusive nature of the whole fucking chapter, I’ve craved space, light and some kind of clarity’ (Danielewski, 2000, 179). Chapter IX narrates the exploration of the vast space hidden inside the house. It is conducted by three men appointed by Navidson to help him explore and map the place. The exploratory journey gradually becomes tortuous and difficult. Characters and readers get lost within the labyrinth, which is made physical by the intricate footnote connections, the unexpected text placement, and the changing position of the book in their hands (Video 4.2 and Figure 4.20).

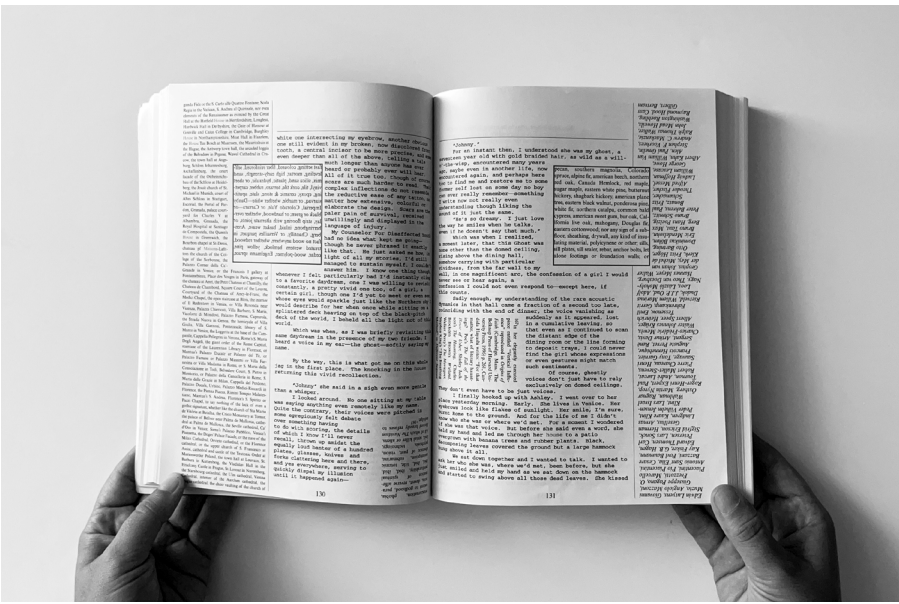


**Figure 4.20** A series of images that show the physical involvement required from readers in Chapter IX (134–135). The connection between footnote 146 and 147 requires a 180-degree change of direction in the reading journey.

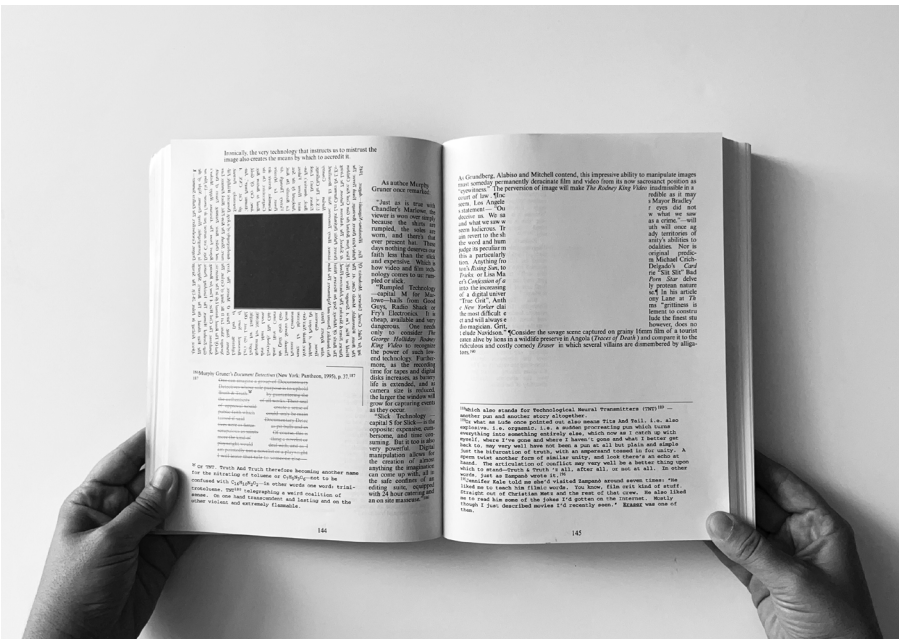
Chapter IX is probably the most recognisable section of the novel because of the challenging layout and typographical game that takes place within its pages (107–152).<sup>98</sup> In this chapter, the interdependence between narrative and material dimensions becomes more evident. The use of footnotes is taken to the extreme not only by creating connections and text jumps between different pages, but by inducing readers into narrative loops that take them to cul-de-sacs and bits of text they have already read and gone through (Figure 4.21 and Figure 4.22).

<sup>98</sup> There has been a number of useful analyses of this by academics. In *Writing machines* (2002), Hayles describes some of the main strategies in *House of leaves*. Sonya Hagler (2004), Mariano D'Ambrosio (2011) or Martin Brick (2004), to name a few, also examine important strategies for the development of the narrative.

**Figure 4.21** Spread from Chapter IX (130–131). One of the most distinct features of *House of leaves* is the typographical experimentation that foregrounds the material dimension of the narrative.



**Figure 4.22** Spread from Chapter IX (144–145). The labyrinth also becomes visible through the numerous layers of text that are placed in unconventional positions on the page. This unexpected placement activates the interaction of readers, thus connecting narrative and material dimensions.



This is illustrated in Figure 4.23, which attempts to represent the reading journey that unfolds through the chapter, and also is evidence of the difficulty to outline its narrative structure. The diagram shows that the connection between footnotes becomes more and more convoluted, taking up space and changing the orientation of the text on the page. The reading experience ends up mirroring the disorientation and confusion of its characters, who become lost in the labyrinth within the house.



**Figure 4.23** A diagram of Chapter IX that represents the connections created through the footnotes (indicated through the red arrows). This is evidence of the complex narrative of the novel and its difficulty to be faithfully outlined. Danielewski uses this strategy to comment on the unrepresentability of the Internet and shows that a printed narrative can behave in a hypertextual way. For a larger version of the diagram see Figure B-3 in Appendix B (page 392). The progression of the images works from top to bottom and from left to right. (Page 1/2)

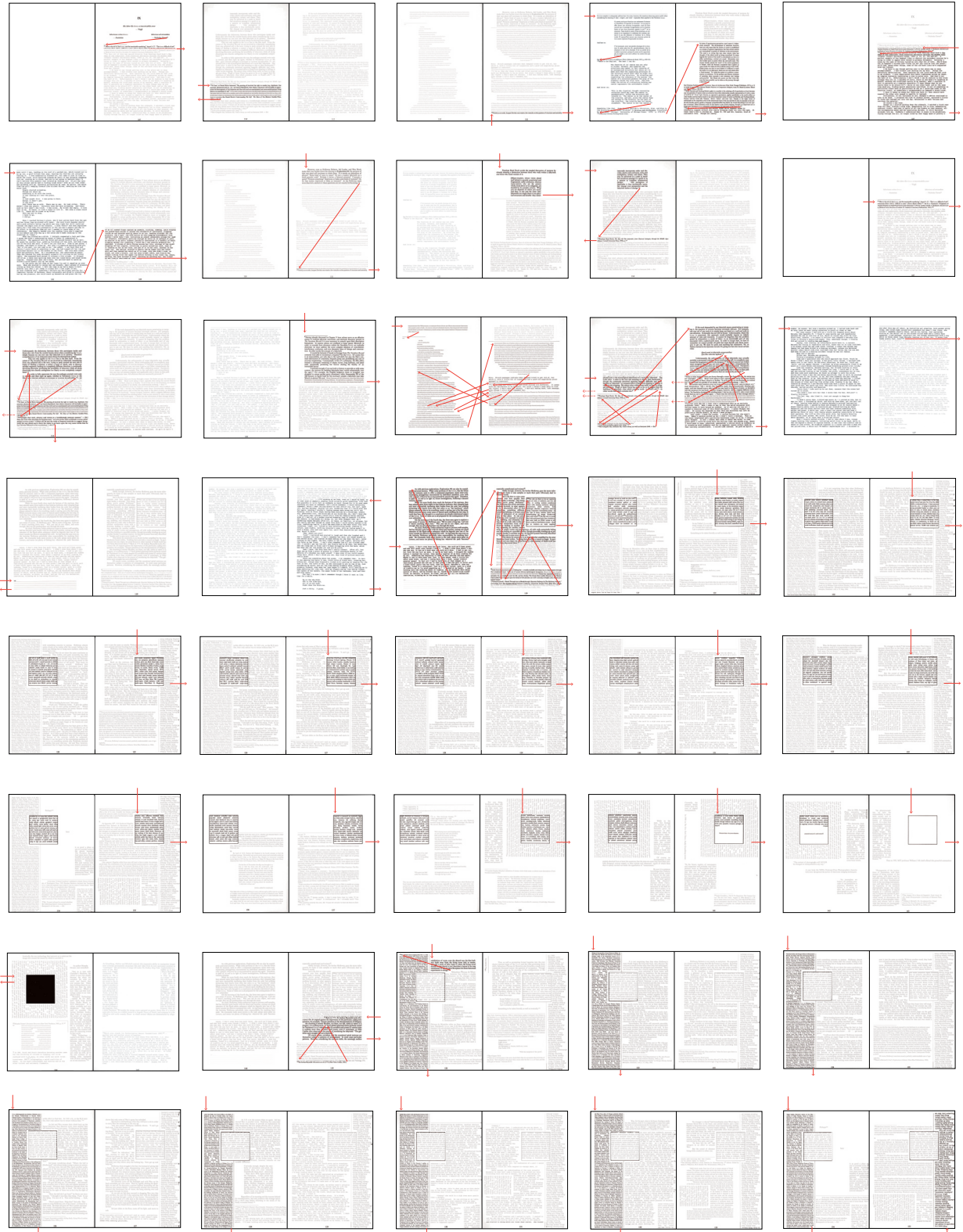


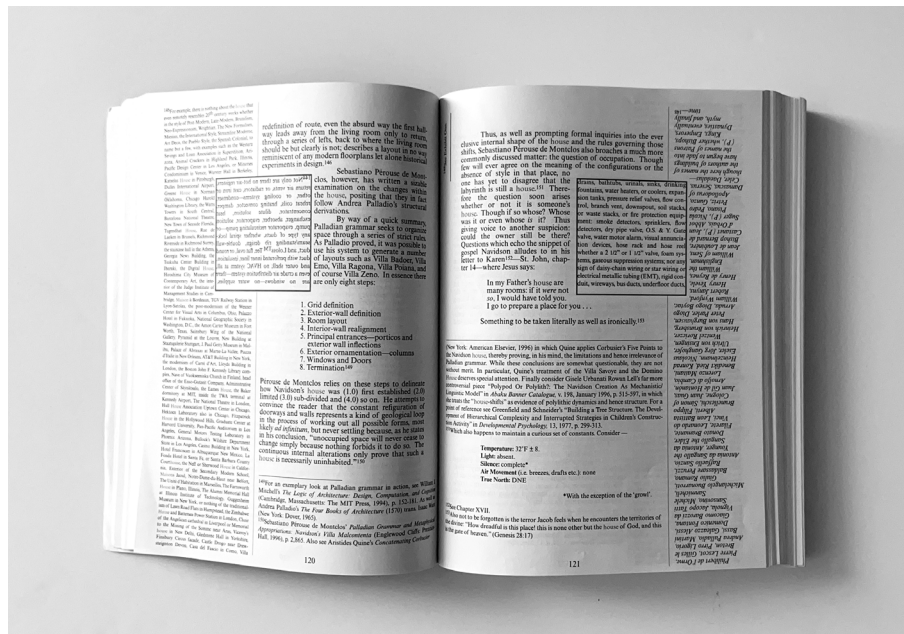
Figure 4.23 Continued (Page 2/2).





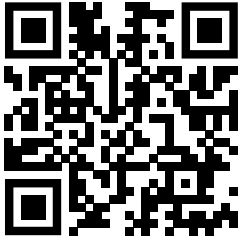
Even if the sense of confusion is mainly achieved through the complex footnotes, the reading pace is also slowed down at some points by their content in the form of endless lists (Figure 4.24). The lists could be seen to represent the fruitless progression of the characters through the corridors. They are used as a device that influences narrative and material dimensions at once, creating an alternative to the continuous text and making it laborious for readers to move forward. In the same way that there is no reward for the characters at the end of a passage, there is no particular conclusion to the lists but a connection to another footnote and another list.

**Figure 4.24** A spread from Chapter IX (120–121) that shows footnotes 146 and 147. Footnote 146 (column on the left) lists twentieth-century architecture works with characteristics not contained in the house. Footnote 147 (column on the right) lists names of relevant architects. This strategy serves to make one more connection to the idea of a narrative with a three-dimensional body and an architectural structure.



**Figure 4.25** A typical spread from the *Biblia Sacra Hebraice, Chaldaice, Graece & Latine* (1569, 2–3). In a polyglot bible readers focus on one part of the text on each spread. The same happens in Chapter IX of *House of leaves*, readers are forced to read specific areas through several pages.



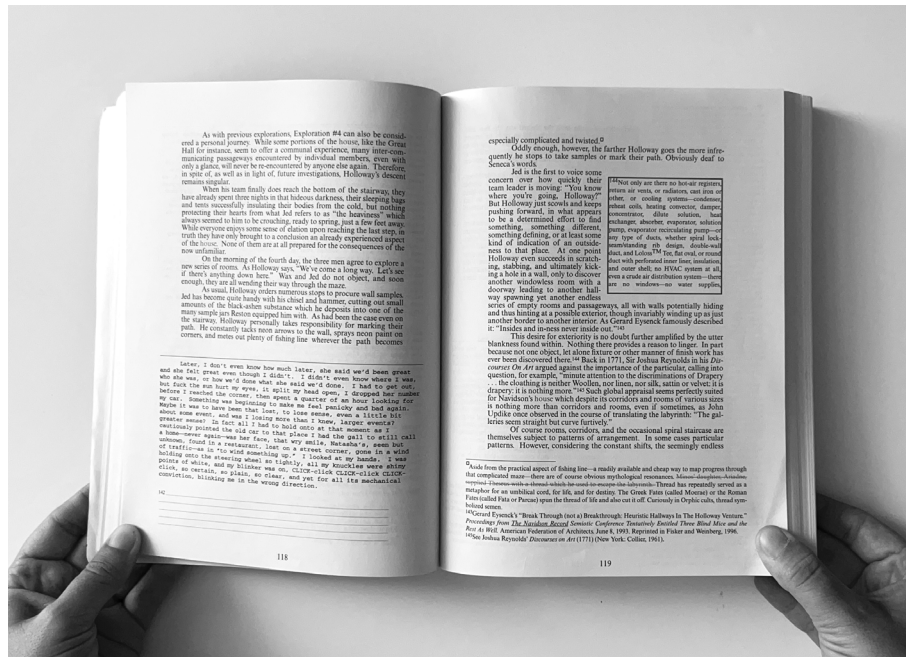


Video 4.3 Reading progression of the first half of Chapter IX (107–118). The narrative loops and dead ends force readers to reassess their reading journey as they progress through the chapter.

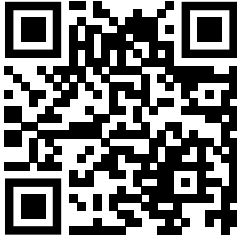
Moreover, the lists induce a repeated movement through the pages.<sup>99</sup> This reading pattern relates to that of polyglot bibles, in which readers read repeatedly a particular area of space on each spread (Figure 4.25).

This strategy has the effect of an ‘emotional pacing’, as Hayles (2002, 797) describes, of embedding ‘the action in such diverse information that either the reader foregoes the pleasurable suspense of the horror story or devours it and skips everything else.’ Besides, this offers readers the possibility to decide what they want to read, and also how they want to navigate the parts they choose to engage with (Mora, 2012). By creating the sense of loss and disorientation, Danielewski builds an intimate space where readers find themselves focusing on the interaction with the object they are holding. The key to the readers’ disorientation resides in the fact that the labyrinth unfolds gradually through the pages. It is not sudden or obvious. Readers encounter Chapter IX (page 107) with experience on misleading footnotes acquired in the previous pages. Thus, they are not surprised by the initial jumps and movements the section demands from them (Video 4.3).

Figure 4.26 Page 119 in Chapter IX marks a change in the reading progress. Footnote 144 initiates the duct or tunnel section and forces readers to follow through several pages the text that appears within the square.

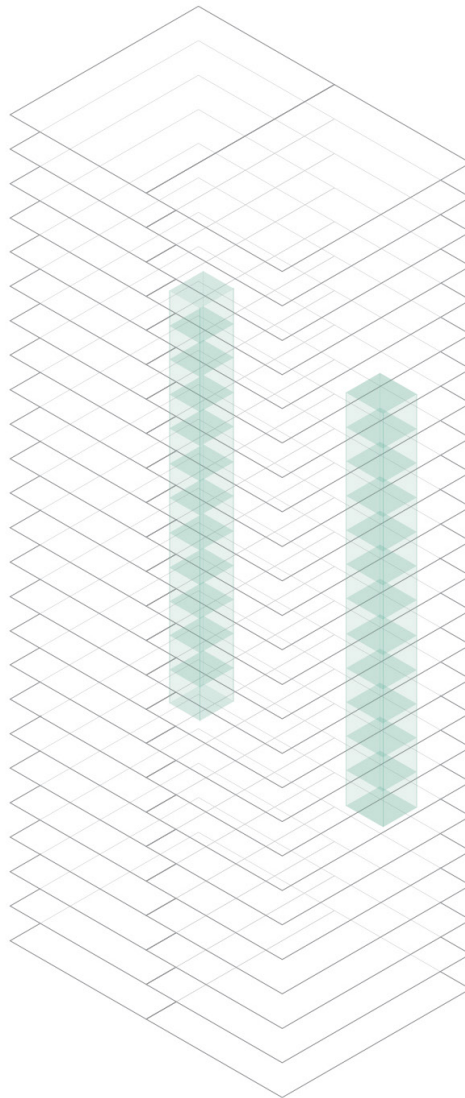


<sup>99</sup> See page 395 from Figure B-2 (Appendix B) for a closer view in the diagram of how the movement through the lists works.



Video 4.4 Reading progression of footnote 144 in Chapter IX (119–143). Reading through the duct acts as an introduction to the labyrinthine structure. It gives readers an idea of the interaction future footnotes might require from them.

On page 119 the narrative structure presents the first unexpected change (Figure 4.26). Footnote 144 interrupts the main text and sends readers to the smaller text contained within the blue-lined square placed on the top right part of the page. This square appears repeated on every verso and recto until page 143 and functions as a duct. The duct creates a vertical connection<sup>100</sup> through the spreads: readers are meant to follow the text contained within the square until page 143 and come back again to the initial point where the main text was interrupted on page 119 (Figure 4.27 and Video 4.4).<sup>101</sup>



**Figure 4.27** An axonometry or three-dimensional diagram that shows the vertical continuity of footnote 144 through the pages of Chapter IX. Readers move through the vertical (and spatial) dimension of the narrative.

<sup>100</sup> The term 'vertical' refers to a transversal reading that connects bits of text vertically from one page to the following one, instead of connecting them through the conventional thread of text.

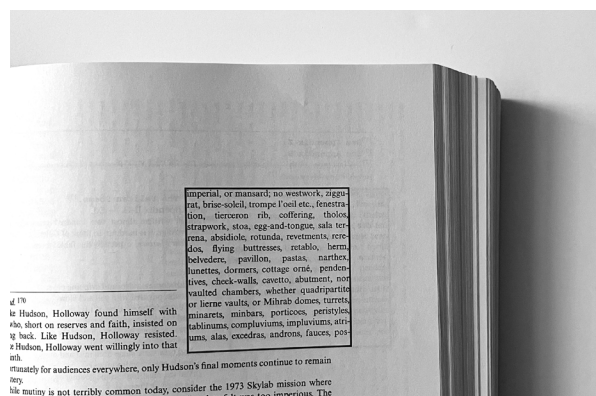
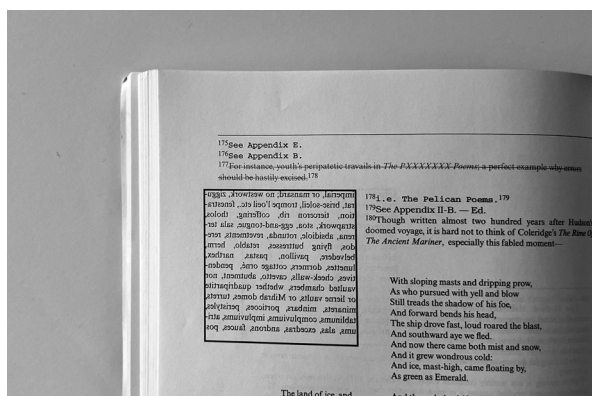
<sup>101</sup> See Figure B-5 in Appendix B (page 401) for the series of images from this section.

After this, readers resume the linear reading, but by this point they have already seen the unconventional placement of text and type in the pages that lay ahead and are aware of the chapter's difficulty.

According to Hansen (2004), the blue line of the square indicates a relation with the blue colour of active links in electronic texts. In this sense, it opens a sort of storage portal that could extend infinitely, mimicking the flexibility of digital space and foregrounding an engagement with digital technology. But more than that, the square is a visual device that serves to comment on the physical quality of the page. The 'portal' or 'duct' is materialised by the way in which the text from each recto page is mirrored on each verso until page 143.

Thus, the square acts as a transparent window within the page that points to the three-dimensional connection created through the pages (Figure 4.28). As Hayles (2002, 123) suggests, it calls into question the conventional 'opaque' quality of the page that is usually taken for granted: 'a notion that overruns the boundary between them [the pages] and constructs the page as a leaky container rather than an unambiguous unit of print.' Therefore, Chapter IX unfolds in spreads. The linguistic, visual, and material levels on the verso are dependent on the recto, and vice versa.

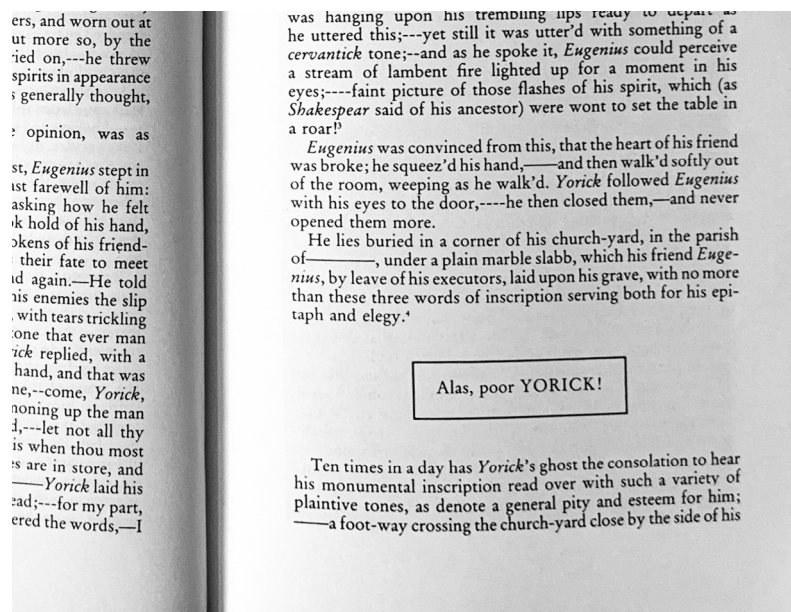
**Figure 4.28** Close-ups of the opposed squares in a spread from Chapter IX (137–138). On the recto side of the pages (image on the left) the square acts as a transparent container showing the mirrored text of the verso (image on the right).



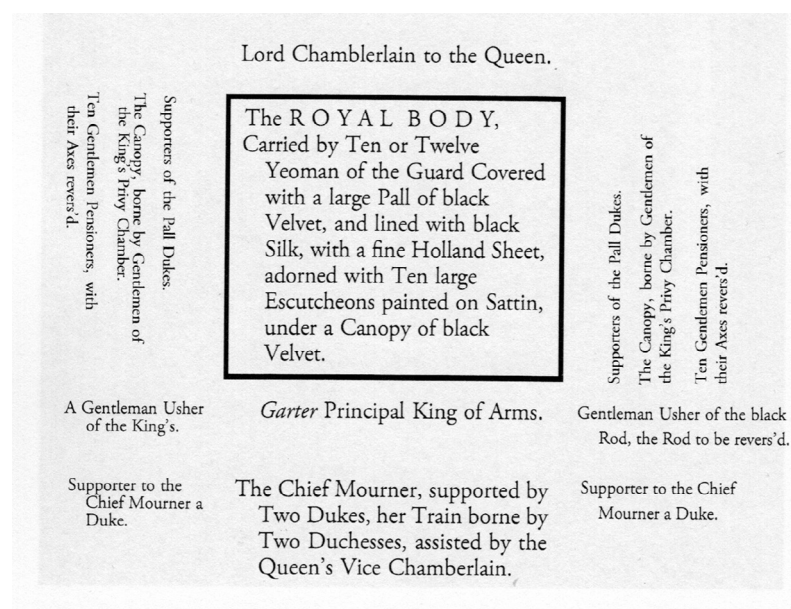
In regards to the square box, it is possible to establish a further connection with *Tristram Shandy*'s commemoration of Yorick's death and the eighteenth-century tradition of memorialising funerals in print. In Danielewski's novel, the three men that venture into the exploration of the labyrinth end up dead by the end of the chapter. The continuous presence of the square from page 119 until page 143 can be read as a device to indicate that characters are walking towards their death.

The square would also represent the labyrinth as a coffin, in the same way as 'Alas, poor Yorick!' appears represented within a box (Figure 4.29), also following the tradition of the time to visually describe funereal ceremonials. Figure 4.30 shows the typographic arrangement in the 1737 pamphlet for the ceremonial proceeding to the funeral of Queen Caroline. This bears a striking resemblance to the composition of the pages in *House of leaves* that include the square, especially towards the end of Chapter IX (Figure 4.31). This idea is reinforced by the fact that the duct finishes with the square filled with black colour. This might not be a full black page in the style of Sterne's, but because readers are meant to only read the content of the box when they follow footnote 144, the black square acts as a 'black page' that indicates the end of the tunnel (Figure 4.32). At the same time, the black square appears on the last page of the most intricate part of the labyrinth, and thus it illustrates the end of the exploration. At once a full-stop, a death mark, and a commemorative mourning square. Some pages later, at the very end of the chapter, the character that still remains alive realises there is no way out of the labyrinth: 'Battery levels are running low and there is not much desire on Jed's part to exert any energy towards memorialising what seems more and more like a trek toward his own end' (Danielewski, 2000, 151). After footnote 144, the labyrinth unfolds completely. Footnote 146, on page 120, interrupts the main text and brings readers to the left text column, which runs on the recto side for eight pages listing twentieth-century architecture works to which the house does not resemble at all (Figure 4.24).

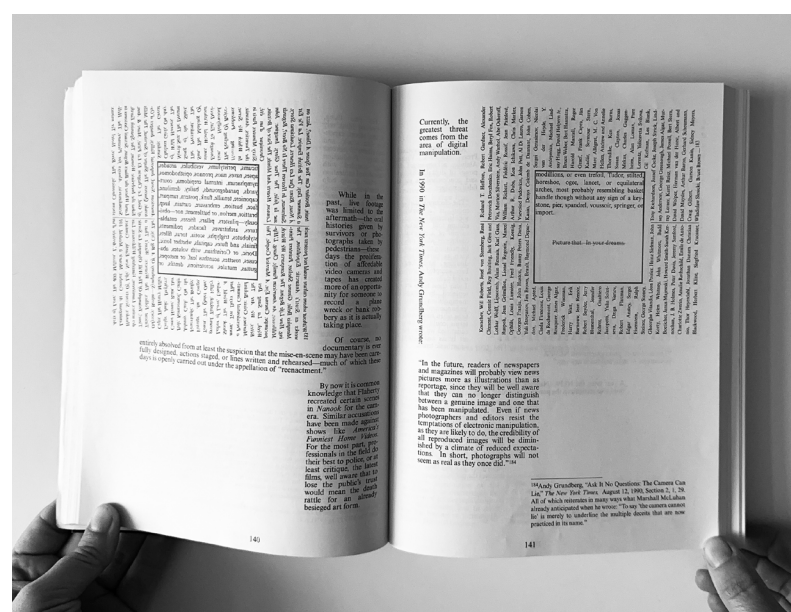
**Figure 4.29** Close-up of Yorick's commemoration in *Tristram Shandy* (1998, 27). The expression 'Alas, poor Yorick!' appears surrounded by a black square that references the coffin.



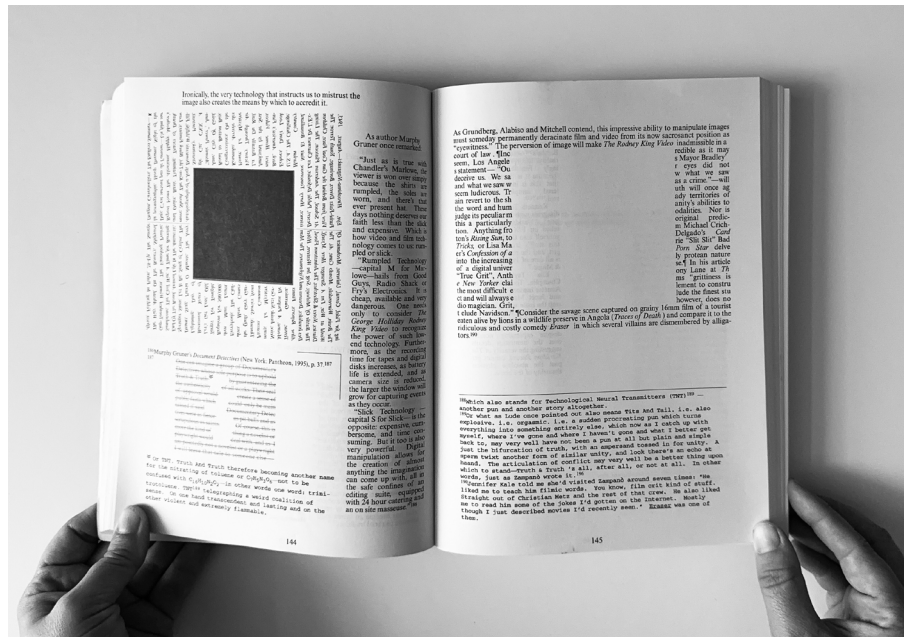
**Figure 4.30** *The ceremonial proceeding to a private interment of Her Late Most Excellent Majesty Queen Caroline (1737). The layout and typographical arrangement in the pamphlet for Queen Caroline's funeral bears resemblance with the duct square in Chapter IX of House of leaves.*



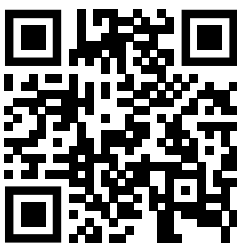
**Figure 4.31** A spread from the duct section in Chapter IX (140–141). The tunnel could be connected with the idea of the imminent death of the three characters that are exploring the labyrinth, and therefore the borders of the square act as well as a representation of a coffin.



**Figure 4.32** A spread from the duct section in Chapter IX (144–145). The end of the duct is signalled by a black square that works in this case as a black page in the style of *Tristram Shandy*.



**Video 4.5** Reading progression of footnotes 146 and 147 (120–135). This movement reinforces readers' disorientation within the text and the book.



**Video 4.6** Reading progression of footnotes 166 and 167 (130–135). Disorientation becomes more evident through the continuous repositioning of the book.

On page 134, this footnote ends and connects with footnote 147, a text column placed on the right of the recto side (Figure 4.33).<sup>102</sup> This footnote starts on page 135, but contrary to the previous one, the reading begins at the bottom part of the page and the text runs upside down, forcing readers to turn the book 180 degrees in order to be able to continue reading (Figure 4.34). The reading then moves back to page 121, but for readers it seems as if they are still reading in a regular manner from left to right (Video 4.5).

Creating a similar interaction, footnote 166, on page 134, forces readers to reposition the book upside down 180 degrees to read the pages backwards until page 130.<sup>103</sup> Then it connects with footnote 167 on page 131, which is placed sideways, and readers need to turn the book 90 degrees to properly face the text and move forward to page 135 (Video 4.6 and Figure 4.35).

Lastly, one more similar strategy is used on page 139 with footnote 182. This connects the main text to the text placed sideways on the page, which surrounds the blue-lined square, replicating a bigger shape around the smaller one (Figure 4.36).

<sup>102</sup> See Figure B-6 in Appendix B (page 402) for the series of images from this section.

<sup>103</sup> See Figure B-7 in Appendix B (page 404) for the series of images from this section.



Figure 4.33 Spread from Chapter IX (134–135). By forcing readers to move back and forth through the footnotes, Danielewski provides the labyrinth with a material dimension.

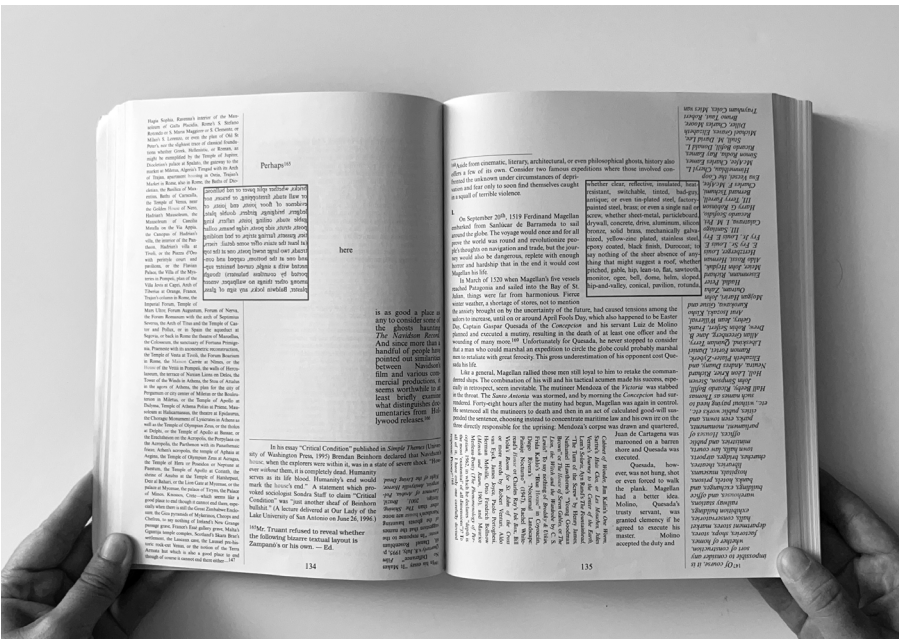


Figure 4.34 Close-ups from the starting point of footnotes 146 and 147 that require a 180-degree change in reading direction.

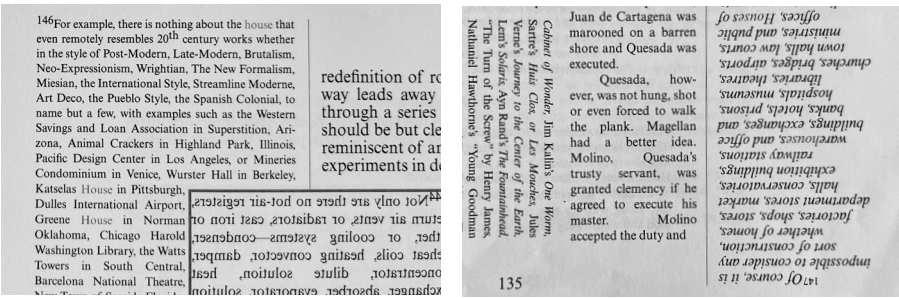


Figure 4.35 Close-ups from the starting point of footnotes 166 and 167 that require a 180-degree change in reading direction followed by a shift of 90 degrees clockwise.

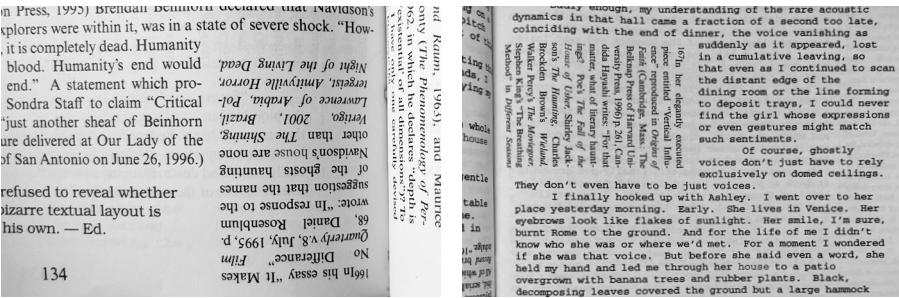
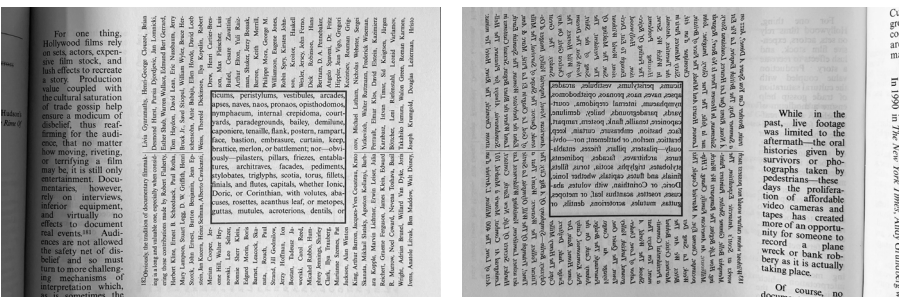
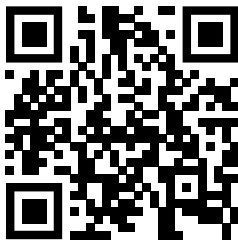


Figure 4.36 Close-ups from the starting point of footnotes 182 and 183. Footnote listings continue in these pages, which are the last of the most complex part of the labyrinth. In this case, the reading of footnote 183 requires a mirror to decipher the text.





This technique is what Drucker (2013, 15) refers to as ‘enframement’ in *Diagrammatic writing*, two texts, one embraced by the other, held together in a dynamic relation. However, in this case, there exists no fixed hierarchy between the two texts (or squares). Both are at once primary and secondary texts, depending on the footnote readers follow at a particular moment. As Drucker herself explains, ‘no properties are absolute, no properties are essential. All is relational’ (2013, 4).



**Video 4.7** Reading progression of footnotes 182 and 183 (139–142). These footnotes do not only require a repositioning of the book but also the external assistance of a mirror.

The bigger square of footnote 182 appears on the verso side until page 141, and then connects with footnote 183. This one starts on page 140, also in a square shape surrounding the initial square, and continues on the recto until page 144 (Video 4.7).<sup>104</sup> However, readers need to use a mirror in order to decipher the text. After this, the last pages of the chapter gradually return to the ‘normal’ pace of the book, still using misleading footnotes but requiring less effort and involvement from the readers’ side.

In Chapter IX it becomes evident that the labyrinth is represented on every narrative level. Firstly, it is present on the narrative, and thus also on the readers’ minds after interpreting the text. Secondly, on the graphic two-dimensional plane of the page, illustrated by the challenging layout and typographic play. Thirdly, on the material dimension, which encourages readers to interact with the pages, reposition the book, and involve themselves physically in the reading.

To further evidence the existing relationship between the narrative and the material dimension in the novel, the following diagrams aim to represent the three-dimensional quality and the hypertextual structure of the chapter. The flat plan page (Figure 4.23) serves to show the intricate links between sections, footnotes, and references. The labyrinth becomes obvious through the complicated links that sometimes are quite hard to represent and follow. In order

<sup>104</sup> See Figure B-8 in Appendix B (page 405) for the series of images from this section.



Video 4.8 Reading progression of Chapter IX through an axonometry. The dynamic outline evidences the three-dimensional and vertical development of the narrative.

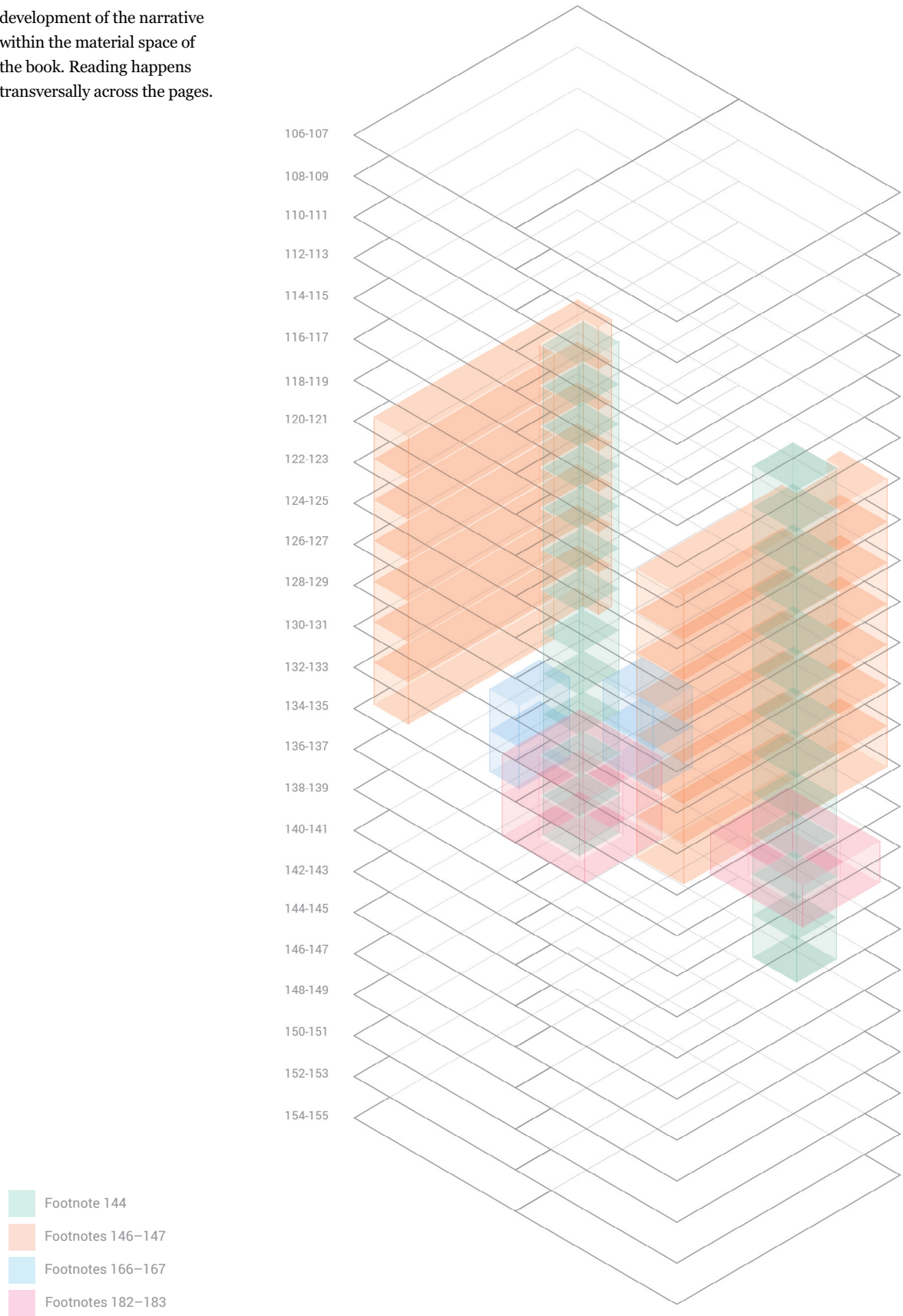
to understand, in full, the spatial and deep connections within text and object, it becomes necessary to analyse the chapter by employing a diagram that examines its three-dimensional status. The axonometric view in Figure 4.37 shows the relevance materiality has in the multilayered digressions. The reading journey happens not only horizontally (at the level of the page surface) but also, and most importantly, it happens vertically. Readers do not only traverse the pages once, as in a conventional reading, but move up and down vertically through them several times. The act of turning the page and repositioning the book opens three-dimensional spaces within the two-dimensional surface of the page. The book is indeed identical to the house within the narrative: bigger and deeper in the inside than what appears from the outside (Video 4.8).<sup>105</sup>

This sense of vertical movement through the novel sustains Danielewski's aims to build a narrative that challenges the disembodiment of literature and explores what print can be in a digital age. According to Mora (2012), we are moving towards a horizontal and fluid world, where information is fragmented and reproduced immediately on different mediums. Therefore, it could be said that *House of leaves* challenges the tendency towards a horizontal reading practice by demanding a vertical and physical reading in his novel.

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<sup>105</sup> The cross-section in Appendix B, Figure B-4 (page 400), shows a different strategy in representing the vertical connection through the pages and how the different text blocks open three-dimensional spaces in the book.

**Figure 4.37.** A three-dimensional outline that shows the vertical development of the narrative within the material space of the book. Reading happens transversally across the pages.



## 4.2 *Tree of codes*: an act of reading made visible

### 4.2.1 Physical cut-outs: representations of absence and nostalgia in design

*The street of crocodiles*, the text that serves as a basis for *Tree of codes*,<sup>106</sup> was not chosen randomly or on the grounds of favouritism: ‘*The street of crocodiles* is often my answer to the impossible-to-answer question: What is your favourite book? And yet, it took me a year to recognize it as the text I’d been looking for’ (Foer, 2010, 138).

As Foer explains in the ‘Afterword’ to *Tree of codes*, for years he ‘had wanted to create a die-cut book by erasure, a book whose meaning was exhumed from another book’ (2010, 138). Even so, he was aware that he could not do this on any book, because by doing so the resulting work would only be a physical exercise, a process of exploration that would only touch upon the materiality of the object. Instead, he ‘was in search of a text whose erasure would somehow be a continuation of its creation.’

*The street of crocodiles* is a collection of sixteen short stories written by Polish author Bruno Schulz in 1934. This work, together with *Sanatorium under the sign of the hourglass* (originally written in 1937), are his only remaining texts. Schulz was captured by the Nazis and killed by a Gestapo officer in 1942. Before being forced into the Jewish labour force in Drohobycz<sup>107</sup>, Schulz distributed his artworks and papers, which supposedly included the manuscript of a novel, between friends.<sup>108</sup> However, all of these have been long lost. Through the surviving texts, Schulz’s life and work can only be tentatively

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<sup>106</sup> The term ‘text’ refers to the written content of the narrative. The text can be in a printed or digital format, it can be handwritten or typewritten.

<sup>107</sup> The Ukrainian spelling is Drohóbyč (Drohobych).

<sup>108</sup> In the foreword to *The street of crocodiles and other stories* (2008), Foer recounts Schulz’s final days.

imagined and reconstructed. In this light, *The street of crocodiles* can be compared to a piece of an incomplete puzzle made out of the remaining traces of a lost and forgotten story that can be only partially reconstructed. Or, as Pressman (2020, 142) describes it, ‘at once memorial and ruin.’ Any exercise in trying to recuperate and retrace the details will undoubtedly leave gaps and indecipherable holes. This is what motivated Foer to select Schulz’s work as a basis for his idea of a book exhumed from another book. He chose an author whose figure is surrounded by silence and loss, and a text that provides a narrative underpinned with blanks and absence.

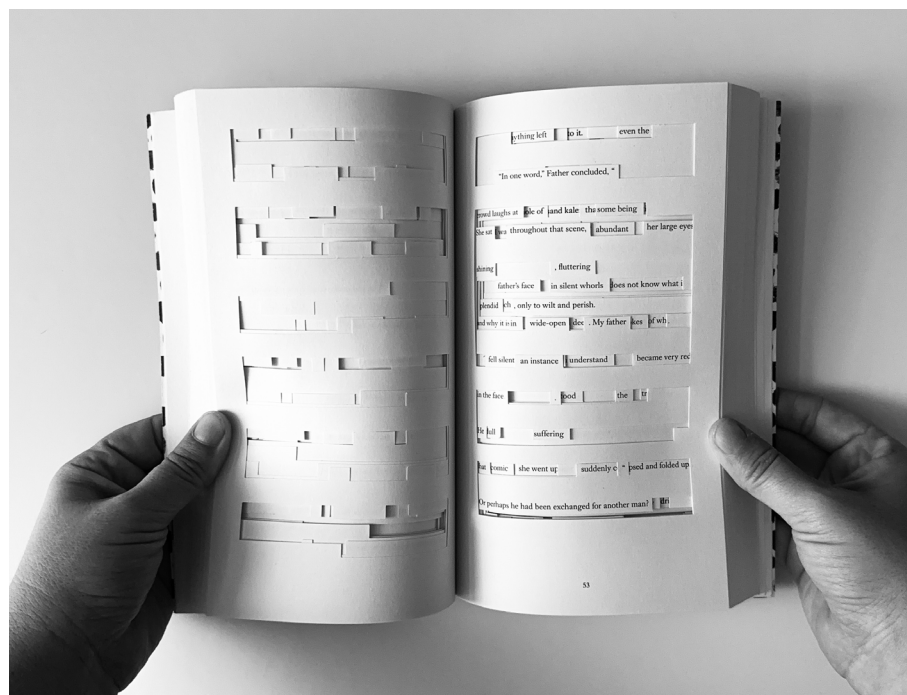
One remarkable characteristic about *The street of crocodiles* is the fact that even if the text is described as a collection of short stories, these pieces are all related to each other and describe different aspects of the same family (Galm, 2019). As Emily Budick (2015, 133) notes, the text is rather a series of ‘vignettes about the narrator’s mother and father and the ghostly, haunted world they inhabit as perceived by the son, the narrator’. It is not a closed and linear narrative, but rather a fragmented one. This generates a further connection with *Tree of codes*, which is portrayed as a single narrative, although characterised by disintegration. Hence, fragmentation is at the core of both works. By employing the erasure technique on Schulz’s text, Foer builds a narrative that underlines absence, both at a personal (Schulz’s life, oeuvre, and all that he did not write) and at a general level, as mourning to the loss of Jewish heritage in the Holocaust (Hayles, 2013).

Therefore, *Tree of codes* is not just a gimmick, as has been described by some critics who believe that the book cannot be accounted as good-quality literature because it puts more value on the material aspect rather than on the narrative. Michael Faber (2010, n.p.), from the *Guardian*, refers to it as ‘very interesting’ but suspects the book ‘will be appraised more as an artefact than as a story.’ Similarly, Kevin Nguyen (2011, n.p.) from *The Millions* describes it as a ‘little gimmicky’ and is disappointed in the fact that ‘the reading experience is far more interesting than the actual novel’, concluding that the resulting narrative feels too simple and even

mediocre. This reluctance is not surprising. *Tree of codes* breaks the boundary between material narrative dimensions in such an embodied way that forces readers to do the opposite to what they are used to: pay attention to the physical object (Figure 4.38). It creates a narrative that cannot exist without its materiality, and therefore compels readers to interact with both levels at once. Trying to isolate the narrative as in a conventional text and comparing it to other traditional narratives only results in incomplete analyses.

These reviews confirm what Mora noted in 2012, that there exists a resistance, a detached reaction to literary works that question print reading practices and demand a physical effort from readers. This is something that has raised doubts historically every time someone has tried to dismantle the barrier between materiality and literature, as this research has already shown. Mora also points out that critics need to start analysing literature with a more contemporary point of view and start considering the physical level as an important part for narrative development. This is in line with Hayles' (2002, 19) idea that the material dimension of literature cannot be ignored nowadays. Materiality 'must be central, for without it we have little hope of forging a robust and nuanced account of how literature is changing under the impact of information technologies.'

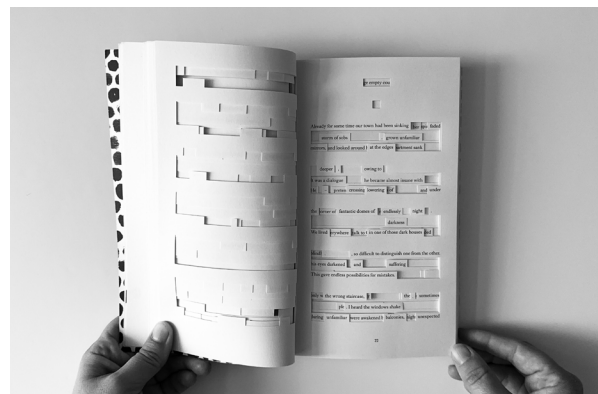
**Figure 4.38** A typical spread from *Tree of codes* by Foer (2010, 53). Narrative and material dimensions are intertwined in the novel and are dependent of each other.



Nguyen (2011, n.p.) is right in describing the novel as ‘not entirely new.’ However, this is hardly a discouraging quality. *Tree of codes* is indebted to a rich lineage of authors and artists who use blanks, cut-outs, transpositions, and layering.<sup>109</sup> One of the most evident connections can be established between Foer’s novel and B. S. Johnson’s work. In *Albert Angelo* (1964) Johnson uses the cut-out device to open a hole on one page and show future events of the narrative. As Barton (2016) indicates, having an actual cut-out gap in a novel is a rare device (they are costly and difficult to include), and these might be the only two examples of novels that use this technique.

*Tree of codes* and *The unfortunates* are two novels concerned with the representation of loss and memory. Johnson uses blank space both at the level of the text (leaving irregular gaps between words and paragraphs) to represent the difficulty in remembering, and at the level of the unbound chapters to embody the unreliability of memory, which is not linear or static or fixed. At the same time, this blank space serves to stitch the random memories together. In the case of *Tree of codes*, the blanks become void space. The holes represent a process of erasure of memory, of things lost by remembering, evolving, and moving forward (Figure 4.39). While Johnson aims to represent randomness, for Foer the blank or empty

**Figure 4.39** A comparison between a typical spread from Johnson’s *The unfortunates* (1969) (left) and Foer’s *Tree of codes* (2010) (right). In the latter, gaps and blank space have a three-dimensional quality.

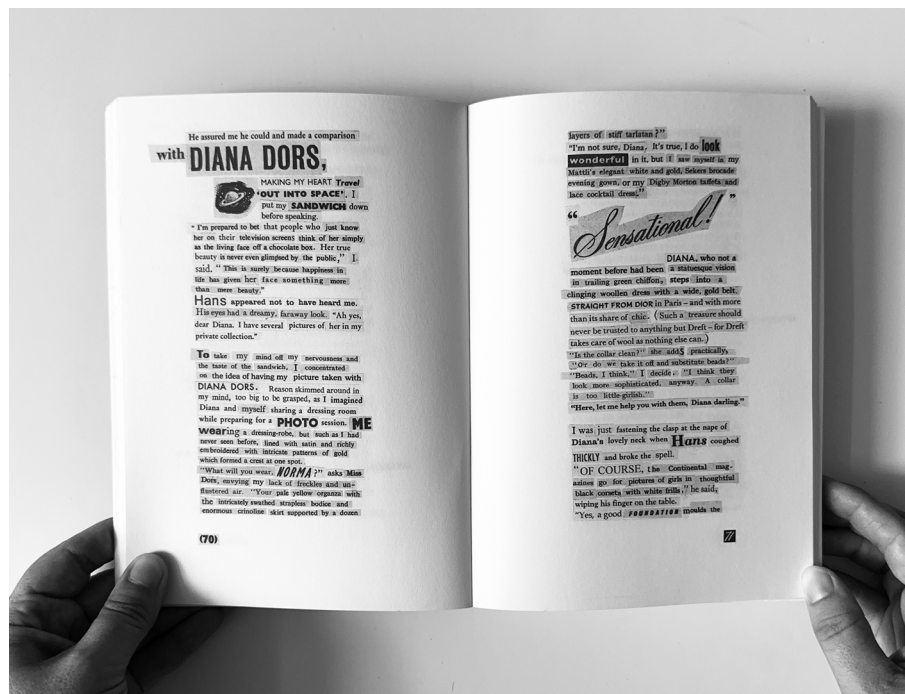


<sup>109</sup> Some significant references are mentioned throughout this section. However, there also exists a rich lineage of pre-digital authors such as Joyce, Beckett, Mallarmé, Apollinaire, Derrida, and Burroughs who have used these devices without manipulating the physical form of the book or without forcing a non-linear reading.

space stands for the intangible depth of memory and all the lost pieces that will never be retraced. He evidences the existence of that loss and the missing parts. As Wurth (2011, n.p.) notes, in *Tree of codes* ‘what appeared to be a (physical) act of forgetting, becomes a roundabout or peripheral mode of remembering.’

Foer’s novel is indebted as well to William S. Burroughs’ cut-up method of writing. The technique consists in taking one or more texts and cutting them into smaller pieces, which are then arranged in an aleatory way to form a new text, ‘with additional words added to ensure sense in the most nonsensical resulting combinations’ (Burgess, 2015, 58).<sup>110</sup> The cut-up method was also used by Graham Rawle to write *Woman’s world*, published in 2005. The novel is a collage of fragments from women’s magazines of the early 1960s (Figure 4.40). Contrary to Burroughs’, in this case a draft of the narrative is written beforehand and then adapted by employing the most convenient fragments from the magazines.

**Figure 4.40** A typical spread from *Woman’s world* by Rawle (2005, 70–71). The novel is created with cut-up and collage methods, by putting together different fragments from 1960s women’s magazines.



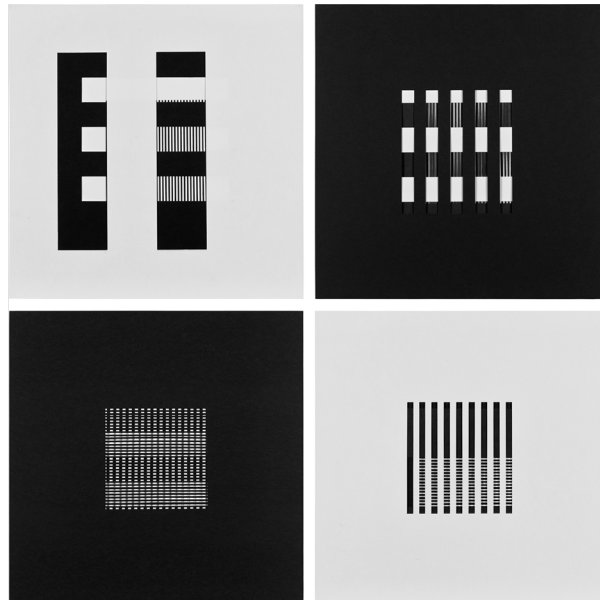
<sup>110</sup> As Hawkins and Wermer-Colan note (2019), Burroughs is not the first to employ the cut-up technique. This is a rich territory and there are many examples of appropriation and erasure in art and poetry (e.g., de Kooning, Rauschenberg, Vito Acconci ... as well as Dada and Surrealist artists who experimented with collage and cut-ups).



Foer's strategy of removing words and sentences can be seen as a reversed method to that of Burroughs' and Rawle's collages, an attempt to explore new ways of producing works. Besides, as Szymanska (2020) and Winters (2020) observe, *Tree of codes* is published in the midst of a twenty-first century trend called blackout poetry, which applies the erasure technique to literary major works of the English language.<sup>111</sup>

Furthermore, *Tree of codes*' three-dimensional treatment of the narrative and its dependence on materiality establishes a connection with artists' books. According to Pressman (2018), it is common for twenty-first century works to adapt the artists' book practice to contemporary concerns about how the digital realm is affecting print. The practice of cutting holes in the pages as a strategy can be seen in many of Dieter Roth's works, such as *Kinderbuch* (1957) or the project *Book* (1958–1964), which comprises more than thirty works. In the latter, each 'book' consists of twenty-four loose pages in two colours with cut geometrical patterns. These pages can be shuffled, oriented and overlayed in any way, giving readers the opportunity to explore the movement through the book (Figure 4.41).

**Figure 4.41** A number of pages from the project *Book* by Roth (1958–1964). The geometrical cut-out shapes in Roth's series combine to create different patterns and show-throughs.



<sup>111</sup> Szymanska (2020, 38) lists the writers that have erased fragments from writers such as Emily Dickinson (Janet Holmes, 2009), John Milton (Michael Koshkin, 2006), Shakespeare (Jean Bervin, 2004; Paul Legault and Sharmila Cohen, 2012); Geoffrey Chaucer (Caroline Bergvall, 2005); Joseph Conrad (Yedda Morrison, 2012). Not to forget the blackout conducted by Marcel Broodthaers of Mallarmé's famous *A throw of the dice* in 1969.

A bit different from the cut-out strategy but also representing absence is Buzz Spector's *A passage* (1994); the printed pages have been torn, each page a bit longer than the rest, leaving a slanting landscape in which a brief text can be read with difficulty, as if it belonged to a larger narrative (Figure 4.42). As Drucker (1994) explains, the text refers to two friends having a conversation about a Talmudic story. As Foer's, Spector's book refers to the Jewish past as a way to speak metaphorically about loss and the 'slippage of life from its containment within representation' (Drucker, 1994, 119).

**Figure 4.42** A page from *A passage* by Spector (1994). The erasure is very present in the book, which gives both a physical and topographic character to the text.



In its method of creating by erasing, *Tree of codes* is indebted to Tom Phillips' *A humument* (1970–75).<sup>112</sup> This book results from an alteration of a pre-existing nineteenth-century novel, *A human document* by W. H. Mallock (1892), which Phillips bought in a second-hand bookshop. Contrary to Foer's specific and studied choice of Schulz's text, Phillips decided that 'the first one [book]

<sup>112</sup> Wurth (2011) notes Foer's indebtedness to *A humument* in 'Old and new medialities in Foer's *Tree of codes*'. This connection between the two works is typically taken into account by most of the analysis of Foer's novel such as Barton's (2016), Le Cor's (2018) or Pressman's (2018; 2020).



sculpturally with the book, creating a three-dimensional narrative. Due to this, *Tree of codes* has been considered many times as being at the limit between readable book and bookish sculpture (Pressman, 2018).<sup>113</sup>

Another twentieth-century novel that explores ideas of absence and memory is George Perec's *La disparition* (1969), the first book Perec wrote as a member of the Oulipo. *La disparition* consists of a lipogram that deliberately leaves out the letter 'e'. Not surprisingly, at the time of publication it aroused disregard from some readers. According to Pablo Ruiz Martín (2012), many readers (including Barthes) refused to read the novel, arguing that the strategy was just an elaborate trick. Nevertheless, the novel acts as Perec's own silent way of representing the horrors of the Holocaust and the disappearance of millions of Jews, including the author's parents (Borsuk, 2018; Wadhera, 2019). In *Tree of codes*, the Jewish absence derived from World War II is referenced in Schulz's cut-out narrative. The disappearance that in Foer's novel becomes physical is a sign 'of other erasures, things and people taken away, oblivioned' (Plate, 2016, 151).

In fact, the disappearance in *Tree of codes* is substantial. As Hayles (2013) calculates, Schulz's original text is 37,483 words, while Foer's is 3,815. Instead of using the original text in Polish, Foer uses Celina Wieniewska's English translation of Schulz's text.<sup>114</sup> This has been controversial mainly for two reasons. First, because Foer does not use the original text but works with an English translation of it.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Garrett Stewart (2011) defines these works as 'bookworks', taking the definition further from that of Carrión (1979), to refer to sculptures that use the book as their material basis. For Stewart, bookworks only pay attention to the material dimension of the books they use, taking away the ability to read the printed content in them.

<sup>114</sup> Wieniewska's translation is used in the 2008 edition of *The street of crocodiles and other stories* by Penguin Books.

<sup>115</sup> Szymanska (2020, 40) refers to this lack of access to the original text as lending itself to 'criticism for ostentatious reduction.' She even states that the case of *Tree of codes* could be treated as one of cultural appropriation, 'which involves an erasure of the original author and work, disregarding their specificity and historical situatedness for the sake of the target audience.'

Second, because Wieniewska's translation has been widely criticised by its inaccuracy in interpretation.<sup>116</sup> An example of this can be seen in the title of the work itself, which in the original is *Sklepy cynamonowe* (*Cinnamon shops*) and is translated as *The street of crocodiles* for the US market (Szymanska, 2020). Therefore, it could be said that the act of erasure in *Tree of codes* happens on two levels: the translated version Foer uses to cut the text has already undergone a previous act of interpretation, deformation, and overwriting. Foer's new narrative is only one more stage of erasure within Schulz's work.

Both the act of translation and of die-cutting are understood as different interpretations that add complexity and depth to the final narrative. The difference between them is obviously one of embodiment: the complexities in Foer are created by opening physical holes on the pages. Hayles (2013, 229) mentions that words show through 'one, two, or even three pages beyond', although this is not completely accurate. These gaps can show through even up to forty pages beyond.<sup>117</sup> Thus, the narrative gains physical depth and transforms into a three-dimensional act of forgetting and remembering enabling readers to draw an analogy between the fragility of life and the pages that need to be turned with delicacy (Winters, 2020). Readers are then forced to confront materiality at every moment; and also, absence, mourning and fragility.

Still, the idea of fragility goes beyond the mere metaphorical reference and puts the focus on the book 'as a vulnerable and broken object' (Tanderup, 2014, 4). Ever since its appearance, the written word, and especially the printed word, has been associated with stability and fixity. The deliberate cut-out nature of *Tree of codes* makes a forceful statement and speaks at the same time

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<sup>116</sup> As Szymanska (2020, 41) also notes, in 1994 Goldfarb 'accused Wieniewska of "mistranslations", universalising specific images and missing what he read as Jewish references.' Since then, other critics and writers have reinforced these points.

<sup>117</sup> This is explained in more detail in the following sections.

about frailty and strength. The novel comments on the status of the book at the time of its publication: a strong and lasting object that has evolved through different reading societies and needs; but also, a weak and delicate artefact that can be threatened by the rapidly changing technologies. In the midst of digital development, Foer represents the abstract and common fear of a more or less near loss of books, of a growing change in reading habits and reading practices. He uses trauma to represent this and breaks an object that is at once sacred and commonplace. He breaks habit, conventions, and established notions about books. While ten years earlier *House of leaves* intended to prove the strength of the book under the influence of the digital, *Tree of codes* challenges, in 2010, the belief that printed books are inviolable and cannot change: it presents a perforated book, completely influenced and transformed by digital media.

Yet, *Tree of codes* generates a sense of nostalgia. The act of violating the opaque and static pages demands an effort from readers, who first of all need to accept the fact that the book is broken and perforated. They need to acknowledge this trauma in order to access the narrative. In addition, the change in reading pace and handling of the pages brings back memories of how a book needs to be read: with time, patience, and care. As Pressman (2018, 100) also concludes, *Tree of codes* not only represents a reaction to a fear of the obsolescence and disappearance of books, but ‘a recalibration of ways of thinking about books.’

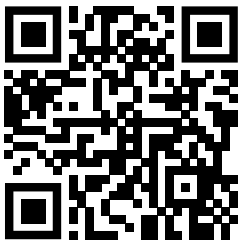
In this awareness of the changing roles of books and the nostalgia for print reading, Tanderup (2014, 2) sees the ‘symptoms of a literary culture traumatized by the arrival of new media’. This trauma forces readers to rethink their ways around such common objects as books. *Tree of codes* makes awareness inevitable.

Readers become aware of the physical aspect of the book; of the act of reading and the turning of the page; of the absence and mourning that go hand in hand with memory; of the history of the book, which is ‘full of transformations in page design and reading

practices' (Pressman, 2020, 148). Most importantly, they become aware of the inevitable and eroding force of time, which is another way of accepting loss, mourning and absence.

#### 4.2.2 Analysing the void: a slow reading experience

Three things happen when readers enter the space of *Tree of codes* and encounter the unique die-cut pattern of the pages. First, the sense of awe. The surprise of the unexpected, the intrigue of the discovery. After the title and the credit pages, readers are confronted by a rare vision: a perforated recto page that shows the sentences and words from the pages below. Second, the difficulty. The eyes attempt to understand the structure of the page by trying to scan it as they would do with any regular book, only to be overwhelmed by the chaotic composition and the amount of information that comes through the holes. The eyes are able to recognise the two rectangular gaps on top in which the chapter title and number would normally be placed, followed by the bigger holes that replace the body of text. The first page is blank, but the text from the pages beyond shows through the holes. The words appear broken. They create levels of text that, if read traditionally from top to bottom and left to right, make no sense. Finally, third comes the question: how do you read this book?



Video 4.9 A typical reading of *Tree of codes* that shows the slow reading and attention to the turning of the page the novel demands.

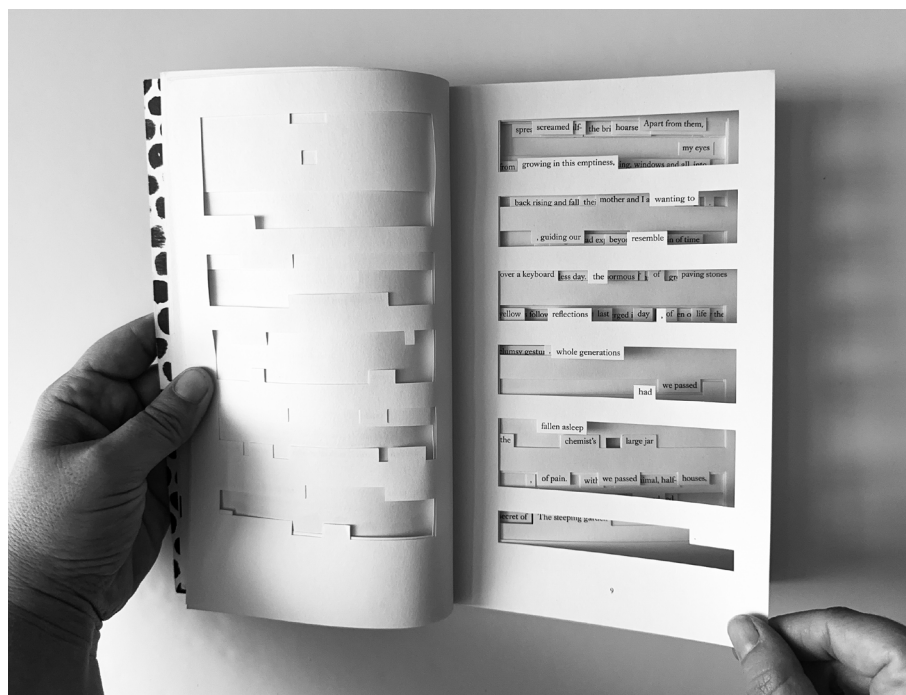
It takes a moment for readers to realise the thing this book requires is attention. *Tree of codes* works as any other book, but slower. The right hand needs to separate the page from the rest before the eyes can scan the space, discover the few words scattered between the die-cut holes, and read them in a linear order to create meaning and coherence (Video 4.9). In this way, the content of the book unravels page by page, little by little. The experience of the act of reading becomes a slow process. It also becomes visible. By slowing down the pace, readers become aware of the physical involvement necessary in turning a page. As Wurth (2011, n.p.) describes, '*Tree of codes* is about the kind of reading it requires.' Readers need to

handle the pages carefully and attentively; it is almost an exercise in mindfulness. Consequently, they become aware of their hands, their fingers and their skin touching the paper. They become aware of the act of reading ‘as a physical intervention in the text.’

Foer uses blank space as a strategy to slow down the reading pace. This technique is used in reverse to the way in which Sterne employs interruption in *Tristram Shandy*, and also to the blanks of B. S. Johnson in *The unfortunates*. While Sterne and Johnson play with spacing and typographical arrangement (in the case of the latter with the spacing between the unbound chapters as well), in *Tree of codes* the blank space is physical and three-dimensional. It breaks the commonly opaque surface of the page and interacts with the succeeding ones to create depth. Rather than leaving an empty space between words, the die-cut holes open an actual window on the page plane. Besides, the white margins that frame the holes become very present and contribute to build an embodied landscape made out of words, holes, and paper (Figure 4.44).

Despite the different outcomes (and centuries in which these novels were produced), Sterne, Johnson, and Foer had similar purposes in mind. As the interruptions in *Tristram Shandy*, the die-cut holes in

**Figure 4.44** Page 9 from *Tree of codes*. The gaps foreground the materiality of the narrative and create a three-dimensional landscape. The turning of the page becomes an embodied action.

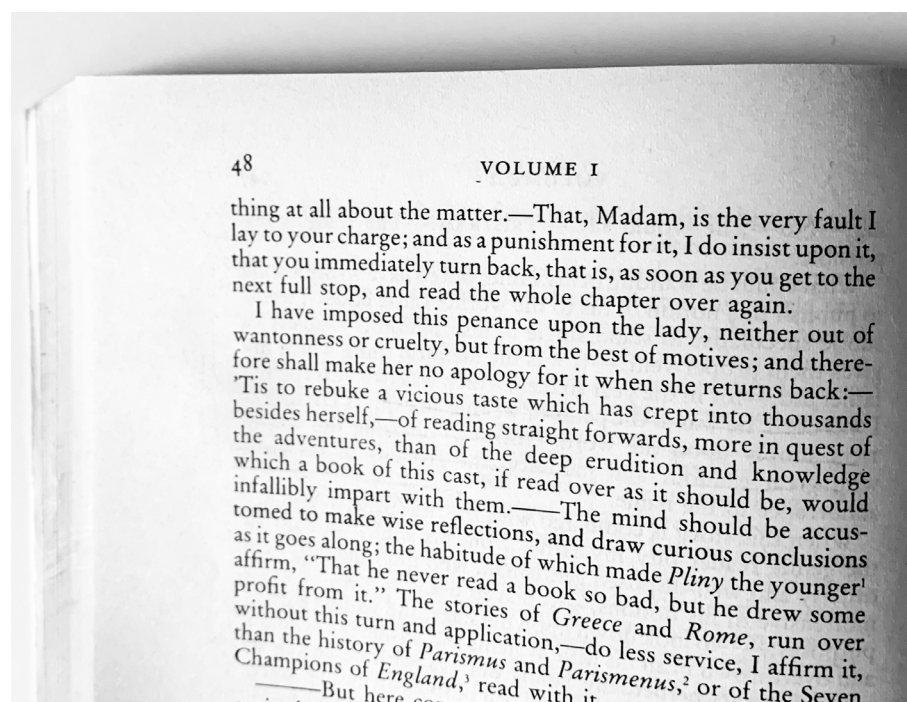




*Tree of codes* halt progress. Sterne interrupts the text intentionally at the end of a recto to increase the sense of drama and asks readers to go back and read again the previous section (Figure 4.45). By doing this, the author brings the attention back to the physical action of turning the page. In the case of *The unfortunates*, Johnson employs blanks to stitch the random memories together and simultaneously represent the unreliability of memory. Conversely, in *Tree of codes* the void space represents a process of erasure of memory and of things lost. Foer leaves the open gaps for readers to read, see and experience that precariousness. Yet, in both cases the blanks force pauses and reflection (Pressman, 2020). What makes the reading experience of *Tree of codes* unique is the fact that the most significant element in the novel is what does not appear on the pages, the fact that they are full of holes (Winters, 2020). The die-cuts in *Tree of codes* make obvious everything that could be there but is not. They evidence the existence of loss and create an embodied experience out of the missing parts.

With this strategy, Foer destabilises the practice of reading by reversing the use of conventions. Traditionally, the role of blank space within a text is to separate words and create readerly ease. As

**Figure 4.45** A close-up of page 48 in *Tristram Shandy* (from the 1998 Oxford Classics edition) in which Sterne makes visible the turning of the page by encouraging readers to go back to the text already read: ‘I do insist upon it, that you immediately turn back, that is, as soon as you get to the next full stop, and read the whole chapter over again.’ In this edition, the prompt is not at the end of a recto, as in the original, but at the beginning of a verso.



Saenger (1997) explains, the original function of word separation was to facilitate silent reading practices, which appeared around the seventh century.<sup>118</sup> Up until this time, texts were written without word-spacing and required to be read out loud in order to become comprehensible. The blank and void spaces in *Tree of codes* are used for a reversed purpose: to challenge and confuse readers. Word separation in this case does not facilitate silent reading but hinders it by breaking the text to very small pieces. As Pressman (2020, 138) describes, it ‘promotes slowness, vocalisation, and repeated reading.’ This novel benefits from being read aloud, which helps to give rhythm and provide reading with a sort of performative aspect.

According to Saenger (1997, 6–7), ancient Greeks and Romans read in ‘a kind of elaborate search pattern’ to untangle the unseparated text. As words lacked spaces, the eyes had to move ahead of the voice and decipher the script. The slow-paced reading of Foer’s novel at once references and reverses this practice: rather than separating words on the page, readers are forced to decipher the material pattern of the page. *Tree of codes* does not aim to make reading easier or swifter, but generates a slow and ‘mellifluous’ rhythm similar to the one expected by ancient readers. These readers did not read for the retrieval of information or consultation as modern readers do, but ‘relished the mellifluous metrical and accentual patterns of pronounced text’ (Saenger, 1997, 11). Thus, *Tree of codes* contravenes the original use of blank space to provoke, challenge and disrupt, simultaneously connecting contemporary reading practices with pre-print textuality.

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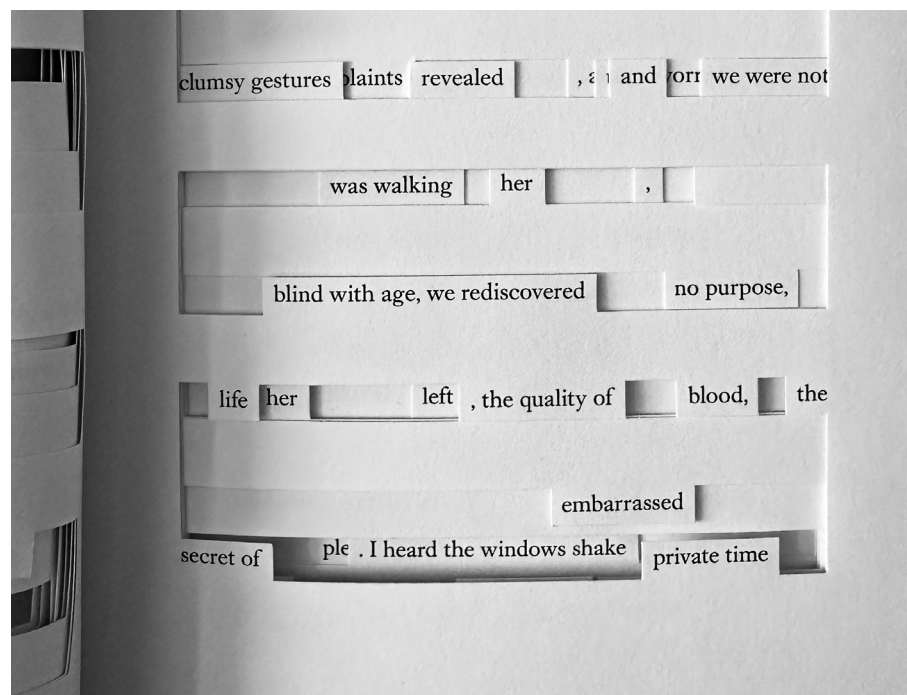
<sup>118</sup> In *Space between words*, Saenger (1997) analyses, in depth, the change in writing that happened as a result of the introduction of blank space between words during the seventh and eighth centuries. As he explains, the shift originated in manuscripts copied by Irish scribes and spread to the European continent in the late tenth century. This led to the development of silent reading practices.

### 4.2.3 Constructing a volumetric narrative

The narrative of *Tree of codes* is simple. It presents ‘a last day of life’ (Foer, 2010, 11) in an unspecific location and time,<sup>119</sup> in which the main character, the son, becomes aware of his own reality, while living this last day together with his mother and father. Even if the resulting text might appear as ‘basic’ from a traditional point of view, Foer’s way of writing by erasing generates a complex novel with numerous layers. These complexities are created by the die-cutting, the overlaying and the showing through of words in different pages, which consequently creates a narrative full of echoes and repetitions, words that keep coming back and reinforce the dream-like quality of the text (Figure 4.46).

The physical erasure deforms Schulz’s original text and transforms it into a printed object with a material dimension that cannot go unnoticed. This distinction is important because Foer did not work with Schulz’s original book, but with the text. This

**Figure 4.46** A close-up of page 15 in *Tree of codes*. Words, blanks, and gaps are interwoven to create a narrative full of echoes and repetitions as some words keep showing through the holes.



<sup>119</sup> See Pressman (2020) and Hayles (2013) for an analysis of the possible metaphors that could be found within this narrative.

transformation confirms the connection between the narrative and the material levels. As Catherine Winters (2020, 79) observes, the process of die-cutting a text creates a new narrative and ‘raises the materiality to the level of content’. Regardless of this, Winters still believes that the importance of materiality is never equal to that of the narrative and that it ‘rarely approaches that of the linguistic’ (2020, 81). However, *Tree of codes* is not aiming to create a debate about the importance of each, instead it produces an object in which the narrative cannot be separated from its material dimension.

This fits in what Brianne Bilsky (2012, 176) terms as ‘volumetric narrative’ to define works in which the physical depth is treated as part of the content. Despite her own definition, Bilsky only uses this term to describe *Tree of codes* and fails to apply it to other narratives. However, *House of leaves* can also be regarded as ‘volumetric’ because of the way in which it uses the depth of the book to expand the narrative, even if in this case this is done by layering information following unexpected layouts. In both cases, and as Hayles (2013) explains, the narratives cannot be read for their text alone and need to take into account the involvement and interaction they require.

Even if the reading is ultimately volumetric, this does not mean that it entirely changes the practices associated with it. Both novels are still recognised at the outset level as a codex, which requires some degree of conventional linearity in order to access their three-dimensional aspect. Therefore, the reading experience of *Tree of codes* only makes full sense when its narrative and physical aspects are considered as one: reading the volume of the object is as important as reading its printed text. From this perspective, the difference between *Tree of codes* and *House of leaves* lies in the fact that the volumetric aspect in Foer’s novel is more present and evident from the first page, requiring a horizontal and vertical reading almost simultaneously.

The disruption and erasure offer readers an intervened novel that they need to decide how to traverse. This generates an instantaneous sense of intimacy with the narrative and with the object. Contrary to what happens in *House of leaves*, where the decisions of readers can be mapped out through footnotes and references (a kind of guided reading that one can choose to follow or ignore), in *Tree of codes* the readers' choice is less evident. There are several decisions to make when starting to read the novel. One could decide to focus only on the text present on each page by placing a sheet of paper below and obliterating the rest of the information showing through the holes (Figure 4.47). Or one could follow the printed text by raising the page and scanning the words without obliterating the rest (Figure 4.48). On another level, readers could decide to read everything that appears each time they turn a page, reading each word, letter, sign, and gap, in what could be seen as absorbing every single change in the volumetric landscape (Figure 4.49). There might also be other options, still to be discovered by each individual reader.<sup>120</sup> The readers' agency in this work is represented in these choices, in the experimentation and discovery of the best way to move through the broken pages. But it is also represented in the infinite possibilities that the reading of a book offers: this work presents one of those infinite options. *Tree of codes* is a trace of a reading: it represents a reading conducted by Jonathan Safran Foer. Readers could decide to go back to Schulz's original text and replicate Foer's cutting of words to create their own version of the story. This novel is about all the possibilities that are left unsaid, and the effect is one of endless choice in literary meaning (Fan, 2018).

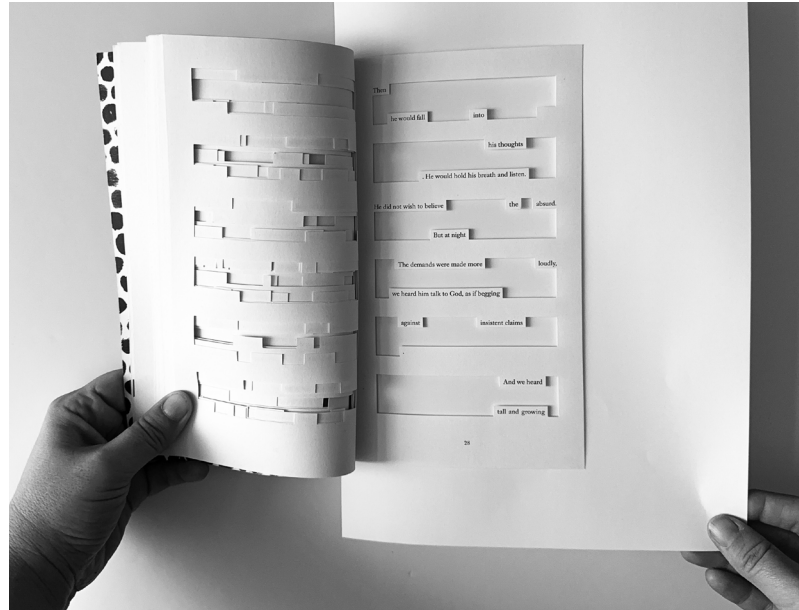
In a conventional printed novel or codex book, each page works as a unit. At the physical level pages are connected by the binding, which gives them a structure and includes them as part of a bigger

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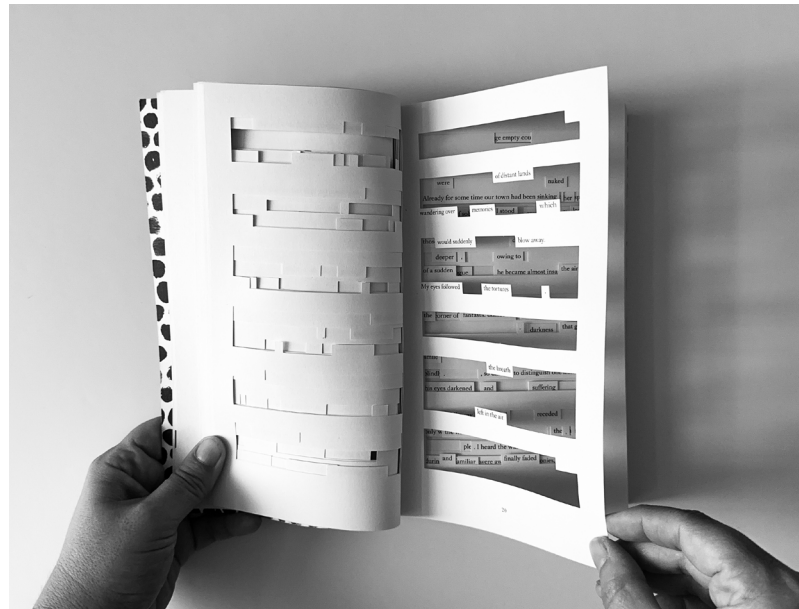
<sup>120</sup> Galm (2019, 191–192), for example, describes the three different options she explored when reading the book. It shows the level of personal intimacy that can be achieved through the reading of the book.

A number of possible approaches to the reading of *Tree of codes*:

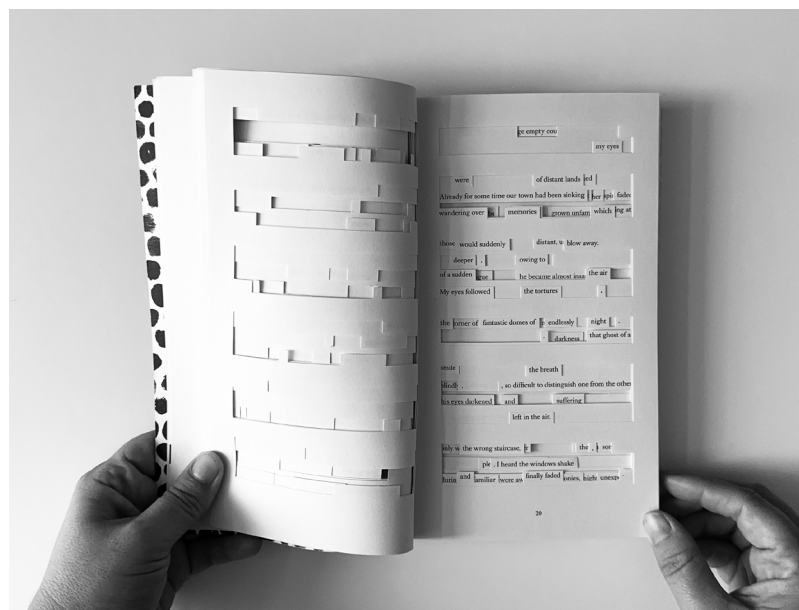
**Figure 4.47** Placing a sheet of paper below each page to obliterate the text showing through from other pages. The interaction with the narrative as a whole is minimised due to this kind of one-page-at-a-time reading.



**Figure 4.48** Separating each page from the rest and scanning the surface to locate the words and read them naturally.



**Figure 4.49** Reading everything that appears on each page at once.



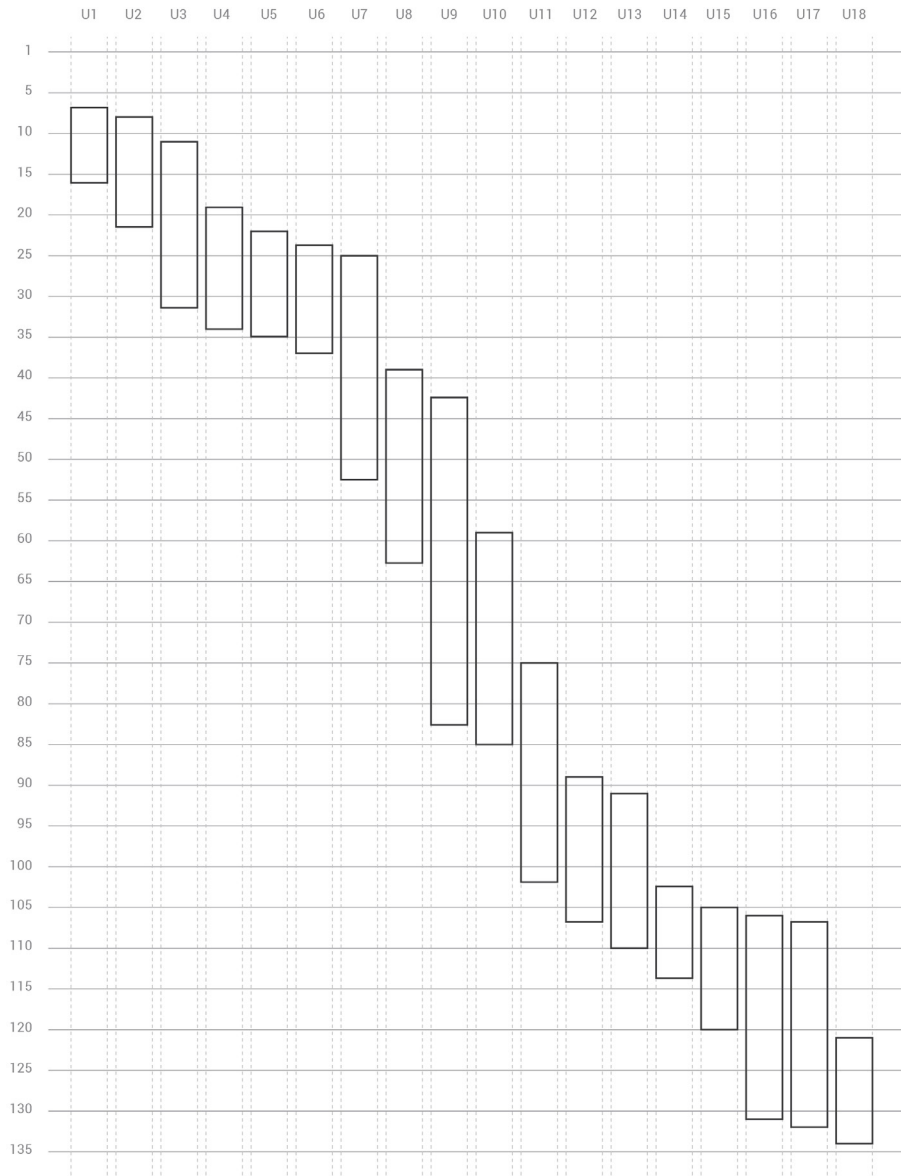
system: the reading artefact. This structure is then reinforced at the narrative level. The printed content provides an order, a sequence for readers to follow without much effort: one page after the next, from first to last, from beginning to end. In this way, reading becomes a smooth process. The form of the book provides a surface for the narrative to develop without disruptions.

*Tree of codes* breaks the expected reading journey by transforming the turning of each page into a challenge. There is no smooth traversing of the narrative in this novel. Reading is ‘defamiliarised’, as Shklovsky (1917) defined. From the first die-cut hole that opens a window into the succeeding layers, the page is destabilised, which alters its role as a unit within the book. The holes break the pages and compromise the sequential nature of the printed text (Winters, 2020). Yet, a sequence can still be found within *Tree of codes*.

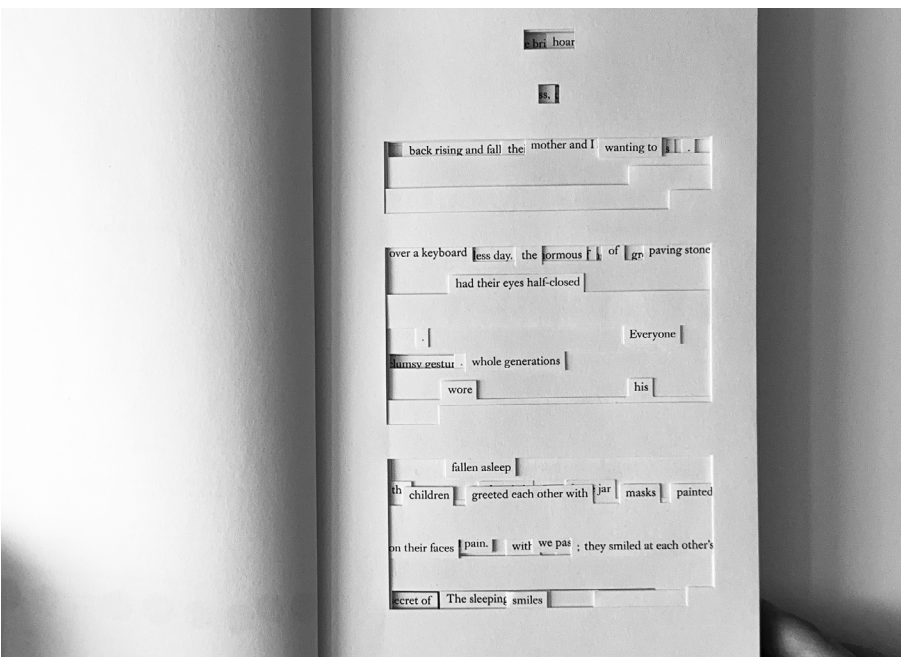
Breaking the units transforms the linear nature of the narrative into a three-dimensional one. In ‘The new art of making books’, Carrión (1975, 5) states that ‘a book is a sequence of spaces’, where the pages or spreads represent these spaces. However, in the case of *Tree of codes*, the sequence of spaces is generated by the physical connection of the pages through the holes, which defines the reading units of the novel. Therefore, the sequence acquires a body and becomes volumetric.

The reading units can be established through an analysis of the vertical engagement generated by the holes. In other words, a unit is defined by the depth showing through the gaps: the number of pages readers can see at once through the holes. For example, Unit 1 is comprised of nine pages: from the beginning of the narrative on page 7 readers can see up to page 16. By following this strategy, it can be established that the volumetric narrative of the novel consists of eighteen units. The diagram in Figure 4.50 and image in Figure 4.51 show the depth of each unit in relation to the space of the book.

**Figure 4.50** A diagram that shows the eighteen units in which is divided *Tree of codes*. These units are not isolated but interrelated to each other, which creates a richer topography.

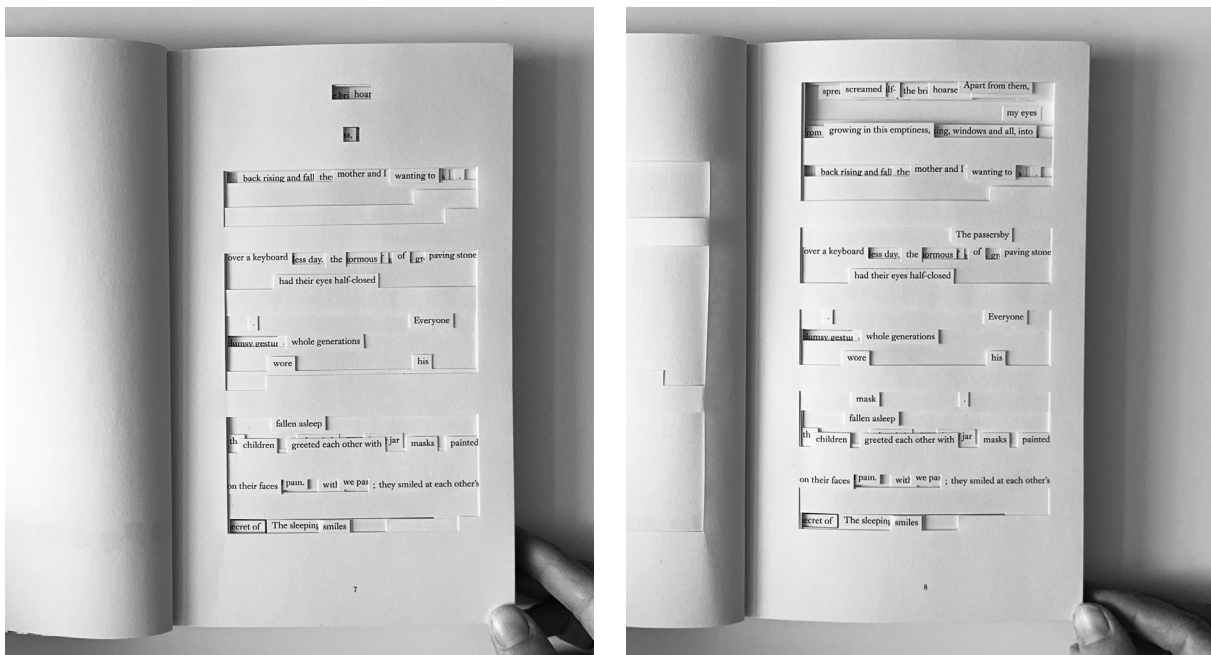


**Figure 4.51** An image of page 7 from *Tree of codes* helps to illustrate the units in the novel, which are defined by the number of pages that can be seen through the holes. In Unit 1, page 16 can be seen at the bottom of the first top gap, which is the deepest one. Volume becomes very obvious through the play of light and shadows on the pages.





Furthermore, these units are not isolated from each other, as pages are in a conventional novel, but they are also intertwined through the overlaying of the holes. For example, Unit 1 extends from pages 7 to 16, while Unit 2 extends from pages 8 to 22. Both units connect and overlay for nine pages (Figure 4.52). This means that not only the page loses its opaque quality, becomes transparent and creates a physical relation with other pages; but the same applies to the volumetric units.<sup>121</sup>



**Figure 4.52** A comparison between page 7 (left) and page 8 (right). This evidences the similarities and differences between both units. Even if the pages have some words repeated through the holes, from page 8 it is possible to see page 22. Instead, from page 7 it is only possible to see up to page 16.

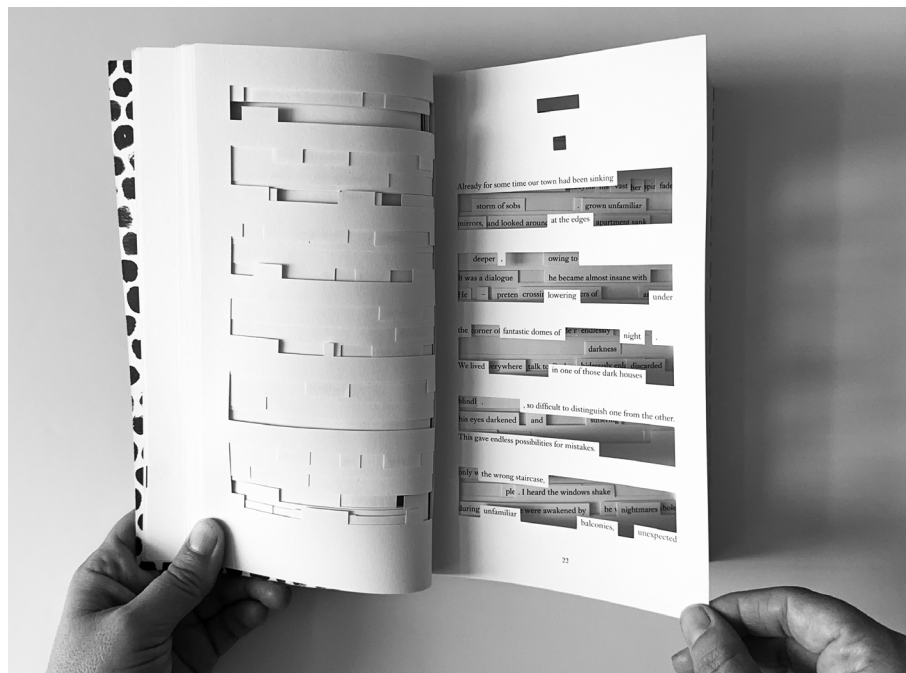
Besides, the units do not correspond with the stories of Schulz's original text, even if the beginning of these stories can be identified in the pattern of the gaps on the corresponding pages. Both the narrative and the units of *Tree of codes* develop regardless of them (Figure 4.53).

The concept of volumetric units and their interdependence is reinforced by the fact that the pages have lost their double-sided conventional quality. The pages are printed only on the recto side,

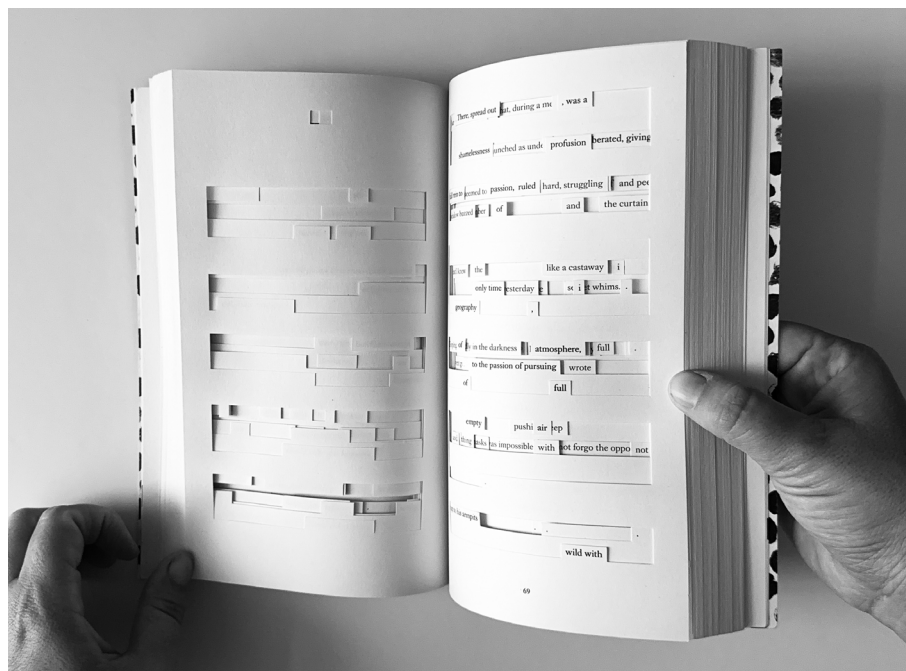
<sup>121</sup> See Figure C-1 (page 407) and Figure C-2 (page 408) in Appendix C for a full progression of Unit 1 and Unit 2.

while the verso remains blank, showing only the perforations on the paper (Figure 4.54). The main reason for this is a printing and die-cutting requirement: it would have been very difficult to include printed text on both sides of the page while also generating the appropriate gaps and fitting that text within the remaining space. However, this also helps the page to acquire a spatial quality and connect physically with the other pages to create a volumetric sequence. In *Tree of codes*, pages are not meant to be isolated from each other, but to be read and experienced as groups, as units.

**Figure 4.53** The holes in page 22 show that it is possible to recognise the start of the chapters from Schulz's original narrative. However, the narrative in Foer's novel disregards this structure and creates a new one.



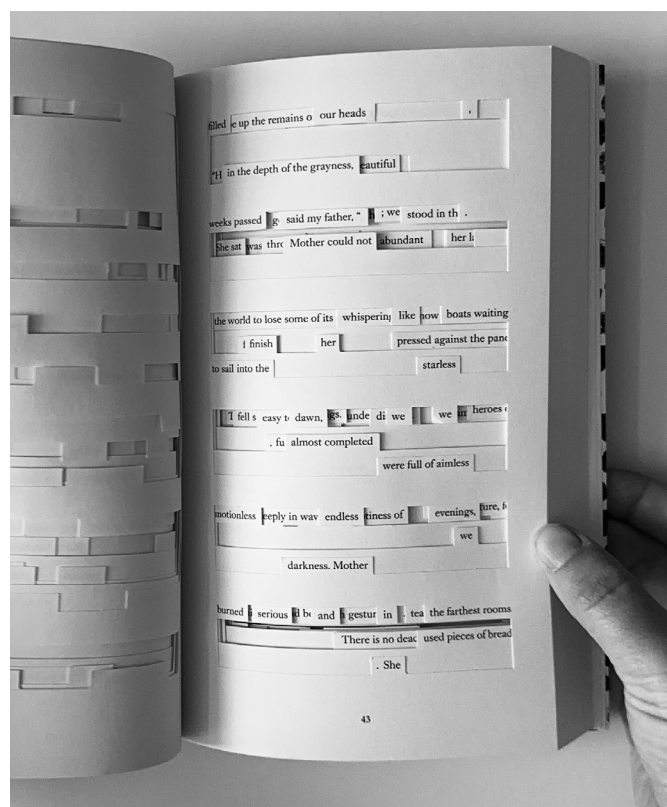
**Figure 4.54** A typical blank verso in *Tree of codes*. Pages are treated as individual pieces, an aspect reinforced by the blank verso and the page numbering that only takes in account each page recto.

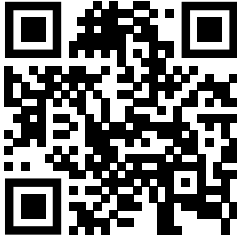


This can be associated with the concept of ‘spatial immersion’ employed by Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) to describe the intimate connection that can be established between readers’ personal memories and the text. Even if she refers to a mental process rather than a physical one, in *Tree of codes* readers develop an intimate relationship with the narrative. Ryan defines literature as a ‘temporal medium’ which ‘discloses geography detail by detail’ (2001, 122). The geography of *Tree of codes* is three-dimensional, a topography built out of holes, overlaying words, broken sentences, and blank spaces that unfold and change slowly page by page.

**Figure 4.55** A static diagram of page 43 from *Tree of codes*. The darker areas evidence the depth of the unit created by overlaying the forty pages that constitute it.

This is evidenced in the analysis of Unit 9, one of the deepest units in the novel (from page 43 to page 83). The diagram in Figure 4.55 shows an abstraction of the volumetric landscape created by the overlapping of the forty pages in Unit 9. The purpose of this diagram is to show the depth of the resulting narrative by darkening





Video 4.10 A dynamic progression of Unit 9 from *Tree of codes*. As the holes in the pages change, the topography of the novel changes slowly and gradually together with the reading. Figure C-4 in Appendix C (page 411) shows the static progression of the pages.

the pages of the unit from lighter (first page) to darker (last page).<sup>122</sup> Video 4.10 shows the mutable quality of this unit, the landscape changes gradually with the reading and other layers appear with each turn of the page. The changing topography of the novel roots the narrative to its physical dimension, while at the same time creates a space of delicacy and intimacy with readers.

The broken pages provide the narrative with transparency. *Tree of codes* plays with the concept of porosity: it becomes porous with the die-cut gaps and influences the reading pace. The movement through the pages slows down the reading process and provides it with a repetitive quality.

As can be seen in Figure 4.56, some perforations go very deep into the units and the same words keep showing through different pages, creating a gradual movement through the narrative, ‘almost providing the sense of nearly imperceptible change over time’ (Galm, 2019, 190). This slow and almost imperceptible change is also reflected in the topography of the object: it changes and progresses slowly, little by little. This expresses the changing nature of the printed book, an object exposed to the influence of new media and subjected to gradual transformations, which are unnoticeable at first but become obvious and tangible as communication practices evolve.

<sup>122</sup> See Figure C-3 in Appendix C (page 410) for an alternative way to show the depth of Unit 9 through transversal and longitudinal cross-sections of the pages.



**Figure 4.56** This sequence of the first nine pages of Unit 9 is evidence of the gradual progress that happens through the reading and the slow change in words and volumetric landscape. Figure C-5 in Appendix C (page 415) shows the full progression of the pages in Unit 9.

### 4.3 S.: the printed book as fiction

#### 4.3.1 Hybrid tensions: the status of the written word

*S.* is a novel about change. Change undergone by its own characters, who are faced with challenges of loss of identity, fragmented memory, and questions of authenticity. But also, about the change of the book, of the printed novel and the traditional practices of writing and reading in a digital world.

Within the fiction of *S.*, *Ship of Theseus* is a novel written by V. M. Straka in 1949. The narrative presents an amnesiac character, also named S, who sails against his will on a ship with a terrifying crew of sailors that have their lips stitched shut (except for the captain). This ship, to which the character returns several times in the narrative, is continually being refurbished and rejuvenated, raising doubts about its identity:

It is entirely possible, S. realizes, and in fact it seems quite likely, that not one plank or hatch or cleat or peg or bolt or nail or rope remains from the night he was first taken aboard. And yet: this is the ship (Abrams and Dorst, 2013, 396).

The ship represents the ‘Theseus’ paradox’ described by Plutarch in his *Life of Theseus*.<sup>123</sup> The ship in which Theseus returns back from Crete to Athens requires constant repair and every single one of its original elements ends up being replaced. The aim of the philosophical paradox is to question the limits of objects: at what point does the original ship become a different ship? Is it still the same ship after every piece has been replaced or has it become a replica of itself? As Mantzaris (2018) recognises, in the novel the paradox is taken further and the ship acts as a metaphor for the printed book.

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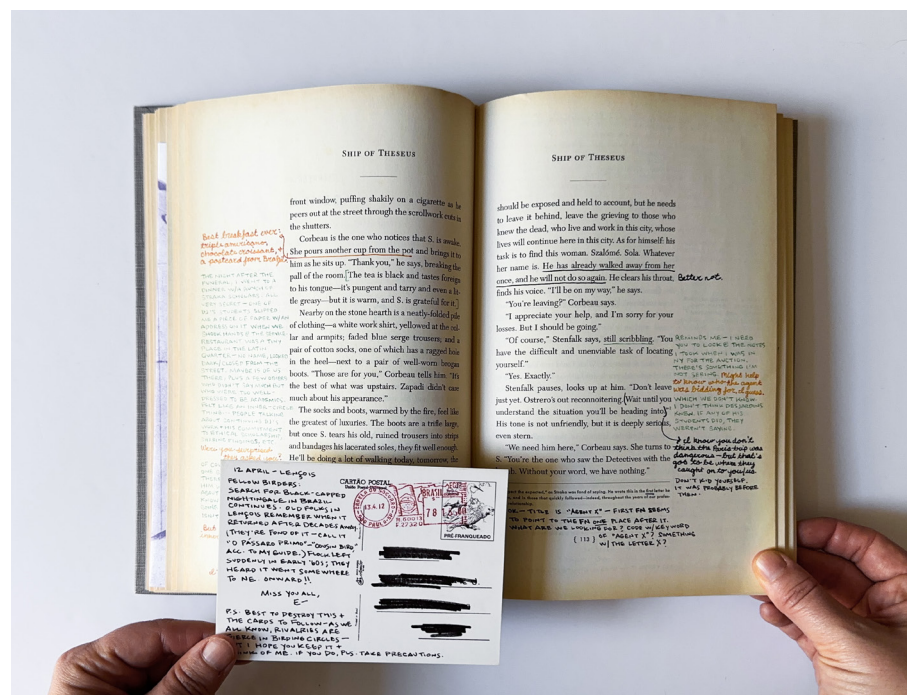
<sup>123</sup> This paradox is identified in some previous analyses of the novel, such as Pressman’s (2020), Tanderup’s (2017), or Clare’s (2019).



In this sense, *S.* is an interrogation of the changing status of the book in a digital era. Can a book still be called a book after all its elements have been replaced by digitally-produced parts? Is the act of reading a printed novel still the same once production and writing practices have been replaced by their digital counterparts? As Abrams declares, *S.* is ‘sort of a celebration of the book, that physical, analog thing’ (McIntyre, 2013, n.p.). But how much can a book change, when influenced by new technology, before it transforms into a different thing? This is the question that defines *S.*: it is an exploration of the printed artefact at a point in time when digital practices start to become commonplace.

From a traditional perspective, every detail in *Ship of Theseus* indicates that this is the central narrative of *S.* The text is typeset in a serif typeface surrounded by generous margins. However, these margins are intervened with a handwritten conversation that overflows onto the loose paraphernalia present between some of the pages (Figure 4.57). From the very first pages it becomes evident that what appears to be the centre of the novel is one more narrative within the layers that constitute *S.*

**Figure 4.57** A spread from *S.* by Abrams (2013, 178–179). The handwritten margins and the loose paraphernalia displace the centre of the narrative and challenge the traditional hierarchy of the typewritten text.



The narrative level of *Ship of Theseus* is contested primarily by the conversation that develops in the margins. In this handwritten dialogue,<sup>124</sup> two fictional characters, Eric and Jen, exchange messages and make comments on their respective readings of Straka's novel. Eric is a graduate student who has been expelled from college but continues doing research about the novel. He is the one who originally takes the volume from the Laguna Verde High School Library and hides it in a shelf of the library at Pollard State University. On the other hand, Jen is an undergraduate student who finds the book in the university library, reads it, and starts annotating her impressions on the margins, at the same time replying to the annotations Eric wrote in pencil the first time he read the novel years ago. In this way, the conversation grows into an intimate relationship. The two characters get to know each other and fall in love while trying to reveal Straka's identity and his relationship with the novel's translator, F. X. Caldeira, following the codes hidden in the narrative. All of this happens in the margins and through the loose paraphernalia, which adds a third narrative layer made out of inserted pieces: postcards, handwritten letters, newspaper clippings, Xeroxes, a map drawn on a napkin, etc.

Contrary to what happens in *Tree of codes*, where the limits of the book are explored by subtracting parts from it, *S.* faces this challenge by adding things to the object. The distinct narrative levels, the marginalia and the ephemera are additions and alterations of the object that also imply a loss. As Mikko Keskinen (2019) indicates, the question shifts to focus onto how much can be added to a book before it is not a book anymore. In *S.*, the supplement exposes the fragility of the object, evidencing how easy it can be subjected to change under the influence of manipulation, intervention, and technology (Vries and Van Dijk, 2020). According to Tanderup (2017), in this

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<sup>124</sup> For the purposes of distinguishing the two types of text present in the novel, the actual text of *Ship of Theseus* is also referred to as the 'typewritten text' and the notes on the margins as the 'handwritten text'. There is no point in referring to one of them as 'printed text', because they are both obviously printed even if one replicates handwriting.



sense the book acts as a scrapbook. However, this idea is illusory. The fiction of the scrapbook has been created digitally and then printed, giving the sense that a traditionally stable object like the printed book is open to continuous alteration.<sup>125</sup>

This aspect establishes a relationship with Anne Carson's *Nox* (2010), which works as a scrapbook made in honour of the author's brother who died suddenly in 2000.<sup>126</sup> Presented in a concertina format, the book is built with scanned pieces that include photographs, fragments of letters and pieces of printed text (Figure 4.58). The pages are greyed as an effect of the scanning process of the original document, as Carson herself presents on the back of the box: 'When my brother died I made an epitaph for him in the form of a book. This is a replica of it, as close as we could get.' The difference between *Nox* and *S.* is that, even if both are digitally produced replicas, Carson's book openly acknowledges it, while *S.* aims to create a fiction out of it. Besides, *Nox* existed originally as a unique handmade artefact before being digitised and converted into an object for mass-consumption. However, *S.* never suffers this transformation: it is created digitally to replicate the 'idea' of an analogue and handmade artefact.

**Figure 4.58** A typical spread from *Nox* by Carson (2010). *Nox* can be considered as a handmade scrapbook with scanned photos and handwritten pieces that has been converted into a digital format and then reproduced in print form.



<sup>125</sup> Chapter 5 shows the design process required to produce the book.

<sup>126</sup> See Tanderup's 2016 article 'Nostalgic experiments. Memory in Anne Carson's *Nox* and Doug Dorst and J. J. Abrams' *S.*' for an in-depth comparison between the two works.

The marginal annotations in *Ship of Theseus* challenge the expected use of the paratext. The margins are not used for secondary annotation or as a boundary or threshold to the text, according to Gerard Genette's (1987) definition of paratext; but they become more present than the typewritten, and supposedly primary, text. They not only constitute a zone of transition, but clearly become a 'zone of transaction' (1987, 2), a space where the two fictional readers engage in a handwritten conversation that develops a parallel fictional world. The dialogue in the margins foregrounds the spatial and physical quality of the margins, and thus of the book.<sup>127</sup> Therefore, the conventional hierarchy on the page is reversed: the margins become more poignant and present, bringing forward the physical dimension of the narrative.

The use of margins has a rich lineage and evolves historically along with the book and printing technology. According to Muhamed Fajkovic and Lennart Björneborn (2014), in the Middle Ages it is a common practice for scholars to comment about their readings in the margins of manuscripts, interacting with the text and its subsequent readers. Since the sixteenth century, the form of the marginal comments can take the form of printed text, occasionally giving instructions about the correct way to interpret the main text. Later, in the eighteenth century, these annotations on the sides are even regarded as literary communication created by respected authors. However, the practice of annotating in the margins changes deeply in the nineteenth century, which is described by Keskinen (2019, 144) as the point when the 'cult of the clean book' appears: as the presence of public libraries becomes more relevant, marginalia gradually comes to be regarded as a destruction of institutional property.

*Ship of Theseus* is a fake library book that recuperates the manuscript convention of writing in the margins. At the same time, it questions the idea of the book as a sacred object that cannot be written on,

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<sup>127</sup> The different layers of the marginal notes are explained in more detail in the next section.

damaged or destroyed. Yet, the intervention on the margins is also forgery. As Chapter 5 shows, the handwritten annotations are created separately, before the book is printed, and added digitally to the pages through a design software. Therefore, the handwritten conversation comments as well on the influence of digital media, which removes the constraints of readers to intervene the electronic book and transforms annotation into a practice that adds layers to the document but does not leave a physical trace on the digital page. As Cavallo and Chartier's (1999) observe, since the moment in the sixteenth century when printers become responsible for the whole production of the book, inscribing in the object becomes a surreptitious act on the side of the readers. *Ship of Theseus'* margins constitute an act of defiance and occupation of the book clearly influenced by the disembodied freedom opened by digital space.

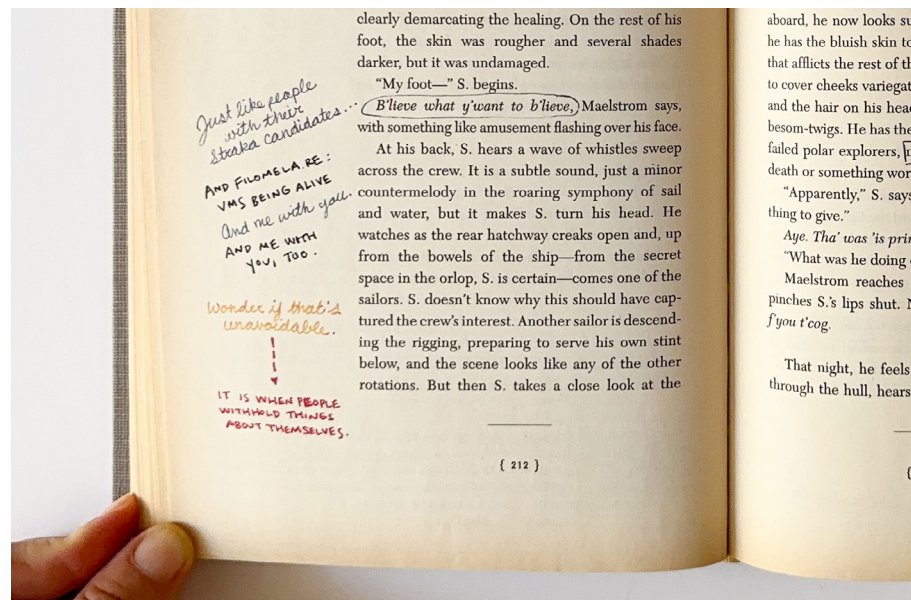
Handwritten marginalia in *S.* reverses the hierarchy of the page by filling blank space and also by creating a contrast between typewritten and handwritten texts. Both types of text have a different presence on the page. According to Torsa Ghosal (2019, 202), 'typography entails writing with prefabricated letters, whereas in hand lettering, the configuration of letters designed for a surface is unique and not reproducible.' Even if digital technology defies this statement and allows for the reproduction of handwriting, it nonetheless still brings 'site-specific associations' that influence readers.<sup>128</sup> Therefore, in Abrams' novel, both types of text act as opposites: type points to a technological production, generally mass-produced and designed to be reproduced infinitely; while handwriting works on a visual level and evokes singularity, individuality and embodiment. Type is mechanical, hand lettering is organic. The contrast between them creates tension and forces readers to pay attention to the physical contradiction between them.

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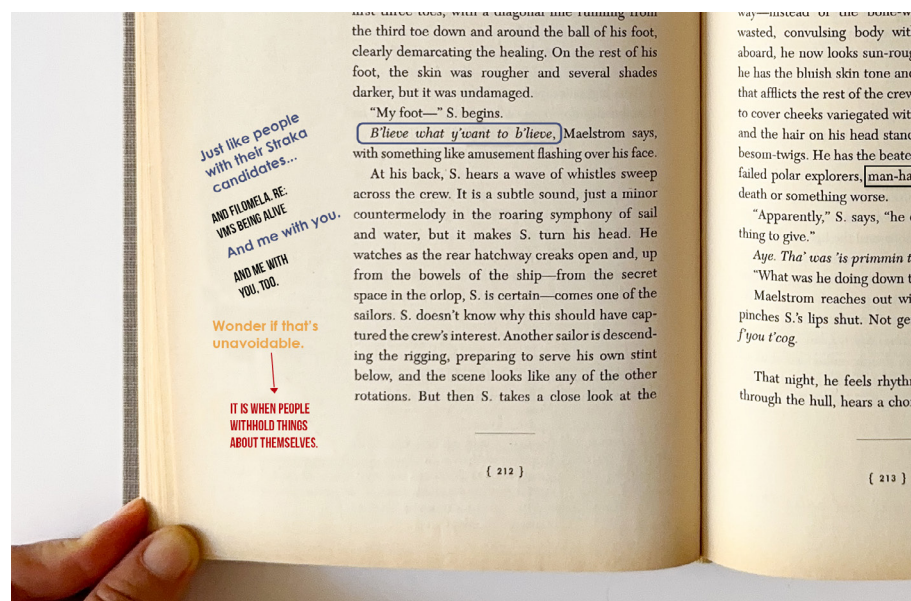
<sup>128</sup> José van Dijk and Sonja Neef (2006, 8) explain that handwriting has actually never disappeared, but just shifted its functions. 'The introduction of the typewriter, for instance, shifted the emphasis to the standardization of script, but it may even have increased the notion of authenticity associated with handwriting.'

At the same time, the visual dimension of handwriting is linked to the margins in manuscripts with decorative traits. As Borsuk (2018, 54) describes, due to the fact that the illuminator decorated the borders of the pages and illustrated the themes, ‘each book was a unique and hard-wrought object to be enjoyed by a limited audience.’ S. looks like a unique object because of the singularity of the handwriting, and also because the private exchange of messages provides a false sense of intimacy. As Ghosal (2019) notes, the perception of the dialogue in the margins would change if, instead, it was typewritten. The effect on readers would be less personal, immediately detaching them from the intimacy of the conversation, as Figures 4.59 and 4.60 show.

**Figure 4.59** Close-up from *S.* (Abrams, 2013, 212–213). The handwritten character of the marginal text provides a sense of individuality and intimacy, as if the book is a unique object of which no more copies exist.



**Figure 4.60** A simulation of pages 212–213 in which the handwritten text on the margins is replaced for a typewritten format. The sense of intimacy is lost, and the reading experience becomes detached from the conversation and the object.



José Van Dijck and Sonja Neef (2006, 10–11) use three points of criteria to describe the authenticity of handwriting, which *S.* defies: singularity, individuality, and materiality. First, handwritten text creates the feeling of uniqueness because ‘there is no such thing as two manuscripts that look exactly the same.’ However, even if the annotations in the margins are manually written by hand, all the final distributed copies are printed digitally and look exactly the same. Second, handwriting belongs to an ‘individual writer’ and is nonexchangeable (and thus unique). Instead, in *S.*, the hand that writes does not belong to the fictional characters, but to a pair of designers who forged the different handwriting styles. Third, the handwritten text is physically inscribed in the page, which is also dependable on ‘the pressure of the pen led across the paper.’ Yet, this effect is forged and created digitally to generate the sense of uniqueness. Therefore, *S.* goes beyond the question of the status of the printed book in the twenty-first century and offers a wider perspective about what is lost and gained with digital development. The novel employs handwriting to foreground past conventions in writing, and at the same time it questions the current role of writing by hand and how digital practices have changed the perception of readers. *S.* is about an interrogation on the status of writing, confirmed in the authors’ description of the novel as ‘their love letter to the written word’ (Wocke, 2014, 1).

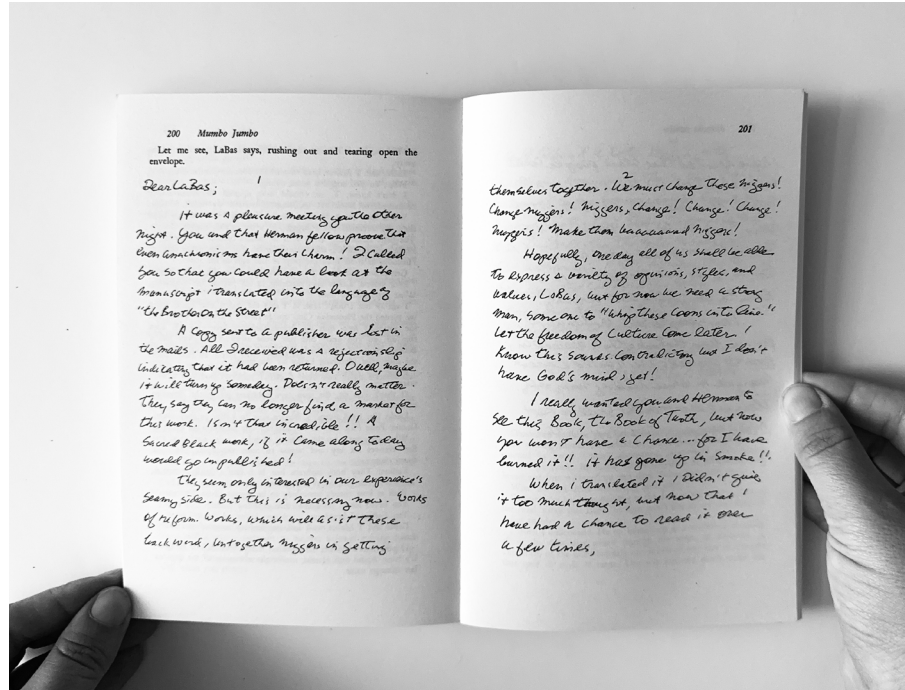
Likewise, the handwritten dialogue in *S.* connects the novel with pre-digital modes of communication. In particular, it evokes the epistolary novel, which for centuries was the major means of personal communication (especially from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century during the high point of epistolary novels) until the appearance of electronic communication technologies in the twentieth century (Keskinen, 2019). Abrams’ work plays with the materiality of the book by using, and also subverting, the conventions of epistolary communication. The fictional characters exchange their messages through the proximity of the margins relying ‘on familiar literary forms, harking back to epistolary commonplaces, as well as to marginalia, both ancient and modern’ (2019, 141).

On the other hand, the constant fight for attention between typewritten and handwritten texts defies the slow communication pace traditionally expected from an epistolary exchange. According to De Vries and Van Dijk (2020, 135), epistolary communication is associated with a high level of entropy, defined as ‘the measure of uncertainty in a transferred message, which depends on delays and disturbances in the communication channels.’ However, in *S.* entropy is reduced to a bare minimum and resembles that of the digital realm. The dialogue in the margins consists of short messages and instant replies, which contradict the slow-paced conversation that one might expect to find in a physical and handwritten exchange of ideas through a book. Instead, the correspondence between the characters resembles an email conversation, or even a WhatsApp or Twitter exchange of messages (Tanderup, 2017). In spite of the low level of entropy conveyed, the annotations still imply a time-consuming process that also requires a physical and time-consuming interaction with the book. The style of some of the comments suggests that every time a character takes the book from the shelf, he or she goes through all the pages and responds to all the previous comments made. The style of the annotations might be digital, but they do not present digital features, such as notifications or pop-up messages, to point out where the newest comment has been added. This adds up to the tension between analogue and electronic reading and writing practices.

*S.* is not innovative in evidencing the epistolary technique through the material dimension of the narrative. Going back to one of the first references in Chapter 1, it inherits Richardson’s disposition to break the conventional margins and express the correspondents’ emotions in *Clarissa*. Moreover, *S.* is related to a tradition in novels that aim to break conventions of print by evidencing the epistolary nature of the narrative through handwriting. This is the case, for example, of Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo jumbo*, a collage novel from 1972. Building a narrative out of newspaper cuttings, party invites, photographs and handwritten notes, the work embraces,

as Jonathan McAloon (2012) suggests, the improvisatory and ambitious nature of jazz. The fact that the novel uses a combination of pieces from different printed media is seen as well in the ephemera elements that appear loose within the pages of *S.*, which complement and expand the narrative (Figure 4.61).

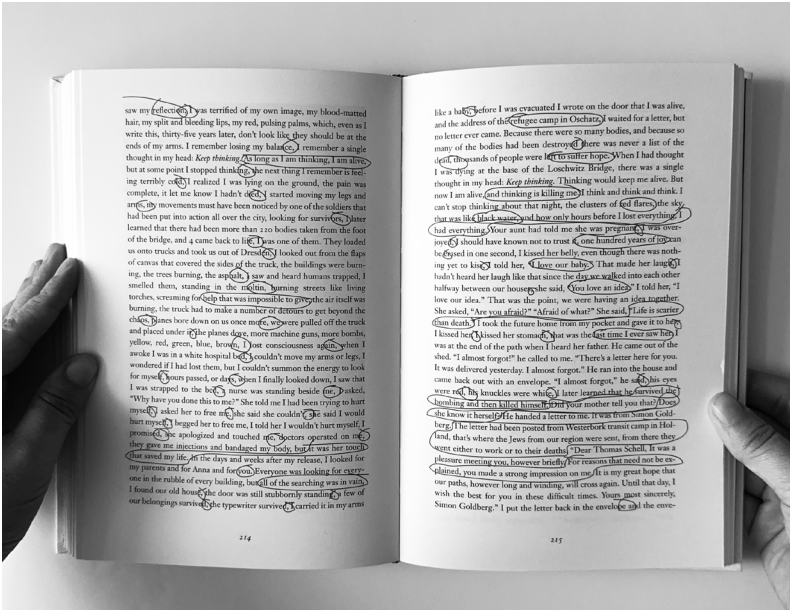
**Figure 4.61** This spread from *Mumbo jumbo* by Reed (1972, 200–201) shows the handwritten notes present in the novel. These contribute to the narrative collage and generate a sense of intimacy with readers.



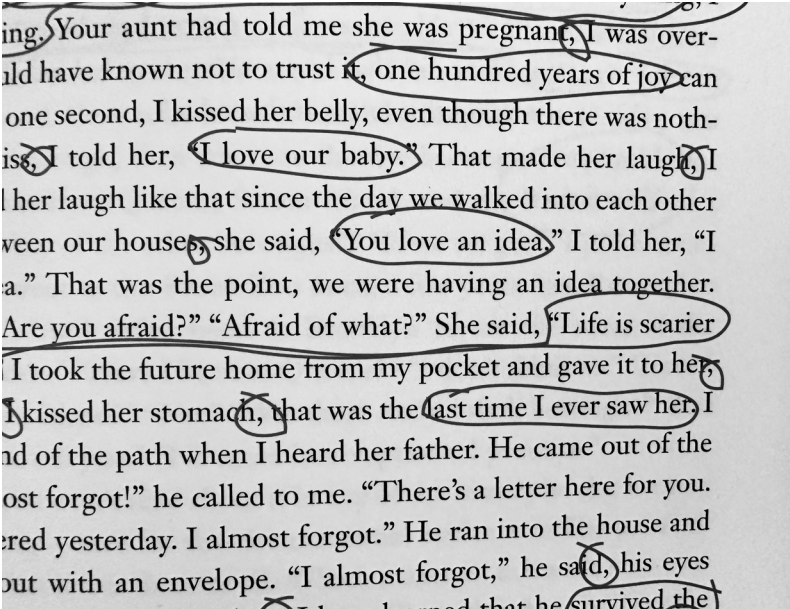
A different strategy to the use of handwriting is employed by Foer in *Extremely loud & incredibly close* (2005). In a letter written by one of the characters, many words and sentences appear circled with red pen as if someone has proofread the text (Figure 4.62). At first sight, the hand-drawn quality of the markup contrasts the typewritten text, especially because the letter is supposed to be written by hand. However, on a closer look, it is possible to see that the annotations made with pen are also not made by hand but probably generated with a digital software. This is made evident in the regular stroke of the pen, identical for every single circle; and also in the perfectly finished edges and the angular breaks of lines and curves (Figure 4.63). In this way, this letter could be compared to the fiction created in *S.*: even if the pages (and the book) have been created digitally, by replicating handwriting they generate a sense of proximity and closeness with readers.



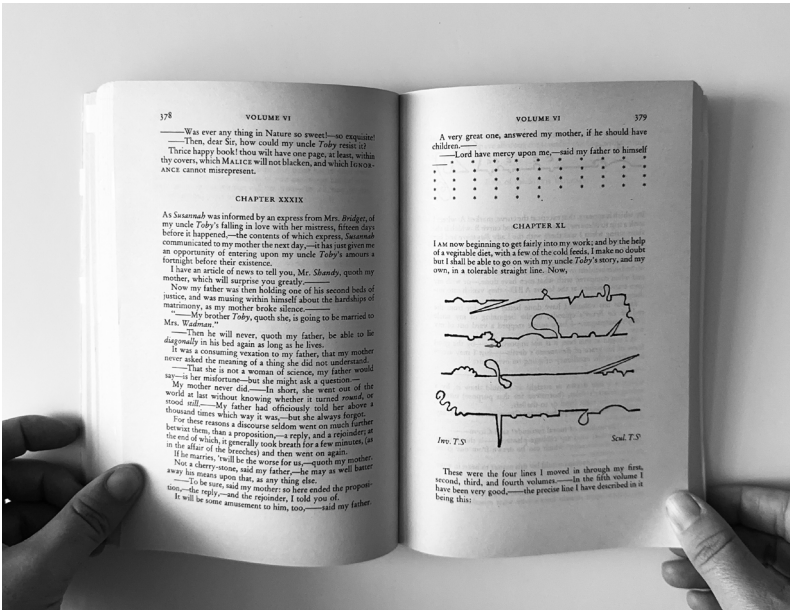
**Figure 4.62** Spread from *Extremely loud & incredibly close* (Foer, 2005, 214–215) showing a letter in which the hand-drawn and personal character of the markup contrasts with the typewritten text.



**Figure 4.63** Close-up of the marked-up letter from *Extremely loud & incredibly close* (Foer, 2005, 215). The marks are made with digital software, which is evidenced in the regular width of the strokes and the angular edges of the lines.



**Figure 4.64** A spread from the Oxford Classics edition of *Tristram Shandy* (1998, 578–579) that includes the famous squiggly lines. Volume 6 plays with the representation of hand-drawing in print.





Significantly, it is also possible to find representations of hand drawing through print in *Tristram Shandy*. The widely-known squiggly lines in Chapter XL of Volume 6 (Figure 4.64), which represent the character's inability to tell a story in a straight line, were probably drawn on paper before transferring them to wooden blocks and then engraved. According to Williams (2021, 171), 'Sterne invites us to consider the print technology that produced these pages: a combination of moveable type and wood block engraving.' The same could be said from *S.*: the novel invites readers to reflect upon the digital technology that has produced the book, and thus the fiction. The pages in *S.* are a combination of handwriting and digital design.



Video 4.11 A typical reading of *Griffin & Sabine* (Bantock, 1991). Readers need to interact and manipulate the letters that come inside the envelopes.

Nick Bantock's *Griffin & Sabine: an extraordinary correspondence* (1991) is a novel made of physical letters and postcards (Figure 4.65). In this instance, the connection with *S.* is made obvious not only at the visual level of the handwritten letters, but also in the fact that readers need to undergo a tactile and interactive process to access the narrative: they have to open and extract each letter before they are able to read them (Video 4.11). As with Abrams' novel, *Griffin & Sabine* pushes the limits of the printed book and expands the involvement of readers through loose pieces that demand manipulation and attention.

Figure 4.65 A spread from *Griffin & Sabine* by Bantock (1991, n. p.). The novel explores the idea of handwritten letters that readers have to open themselves interacting with the physical aspect and the intimacy of epistolary exchange.



The investigation conducted by Jen and Eric, who try to uncover the real identity of Straka, through the interaction of encoded messages hidden within the printed text and the ephemera, connects with *The crime dossiers* devised by Dennis Wheatley and J. G. Links in the 1930s. As Richard Humphreys (2002) explains, these books take the format of previous ‘solve it yourself’ crime books a step further and offer readers the opportunity to solve a crime by manipulating the gathered evidence from a crime scene (Figure 4.66). The dossiers are presented in a cardboard folder and include physical clues and reports, such as cigarette ends, photographs, curls of hair, bloodstained material, etc. These mysteries require readers to participate in building the narrative through deduction and encourage engagement with the physical apparatus of the dossiers.

**Figure 4.66** An overview of *The crime dossiers* by Wheatley and Links (1930s). Readers are offered the opportunity to solve a crime by interacting with evidence and building their own personal narrative through deduction and physical engagement.



Even if *S.* is not a novel in a box, in the way *The unfortunates* is, it still comes within a case and with different loose pieces in it that demand interaction from readers, which also can be compared to the multimedia quality of *ASPEN Magazine*, published between 1965 and 1971. Created by Phyllis Johnson following the concept of a multimedia publication designed by artists, the magazine fosters play and interaction. The main objective is to challenge the conventional magazine format and present readers with different materials in a

box, such as printed elements, sound recordings, photographs, reels of Super 8 film, music records, etc. (Figure 4.67).

**Figure 4.67** A typical display of all the different multimedia content included in one issue of *ASPEN* magazine (1967).



As Keskinen (2019) and Tanderup (2017) observe, *S.* can be read as an archaeological artefact that contains strata from different times and traces of diverse texts which readers need to interpret and decode. By using handwriting, one of the oldest forms of inscription, *S.* creates a media archaeology: it puts together different historical forms of communication, past and current. For example, the two fictional characters conversing in the margins alternately occupy the same channel of the book, which according to Keskinen resembles the constraints of shortwave radio communication. On the other hand, because the messages are usually short and nearly instantaneous, the conversation is reminiscent of those held on email and social media platforms. In *House of leaves*, Danielewski achieves a similar archaeological form by including reproductions of different media in print. In the case of *S.*, though, the strata become more evident through the distinct use of the material dimension by the three main narrative layers: typewritten narrative, handwritten margins, and loose ephemera. Simultaneity becomes very present here: *S.* presents numerous analogue and digital layers of media history at once.

By simultaneously presenting old and new media forms of communication, the novel plays with nostalgia. As Dorst states (Vineyard, 2014, n.p.), in *S.* the authors are:

... taking an anachronistic form of communication and having fun with it. If it's not outdated, it's in danger of being outdated. A physical book, handwriting on paper, there is something that feels a little old-fashioned about it, and that's part of the joy of doing it, being able to bask in that kind of intimate communication.

Therefore, *S.* creates a space for interaction between past and present, between pre-digital and digital forms. It brings readers back to a time 'when books smelled, when you borrowed them from lending libraries, and when you actually read them, wrote in them, and spent time interpreting them' (Pressman, 2020, 102); but at the same time, it does this by employing contemporary digital modes of reading, writing, production, and distribution. *S.* interrogates the past, present and future of both the written word and the printed book, not as isolated forms but as part of our culture and identity, which are dependent upon our interaction with objects (Vries and Van Dijk, 2020). Hence, *S.* is a novel about the physical interaction with the book at every level. The paradox of the changing ship is taken further by the different layers that construct the overarching narrative of *S.* and place the book and the written word at the very forefront of the novel.

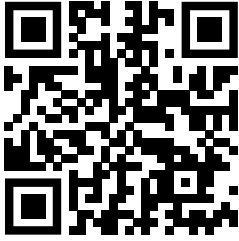
#### 4.3.2 A layered narrative: decoding the margins

*S.* is not an easy book to read. Reading *S.* means interacting with the book and physically manipulating it. It also means paying constant attention to the material dimension of the narrative: with every turn of the page readers are forced to reassess their relationship with the book, the page composition, and the printed text. Due to the fact that several stories converge and are presented together at once, spread by spread, the act of reading the novel becomes an exercise of untangling a layered labyrinth that starts as an object within a slipcase.

The paradox of *S.* is represented in the fact that the novel is an allegory of a difficult text that shows a reader encounter: the reading and the deciphering process. The difficult text in this case is *Ship of Theseus* and the reader encounter is the handwritten conversation in the margins. *S.* shows the struggle that other (fictional) readers have had with the text, and simultaneously give the actual readers the opportunity of being involved in solving some of the encoded mysteries. This is not just a *writerly* text, to put it in Barthes' (1970) terms, that demands an effort; rather, it is a representation of how a *writerly* text is dealt with and creates an intimate relationship with readers. According to Clare (2019, 273), '*S.* is in many ways a literary rendering of reader-response theory that speaks to the difficulty of the high postmodern text'.

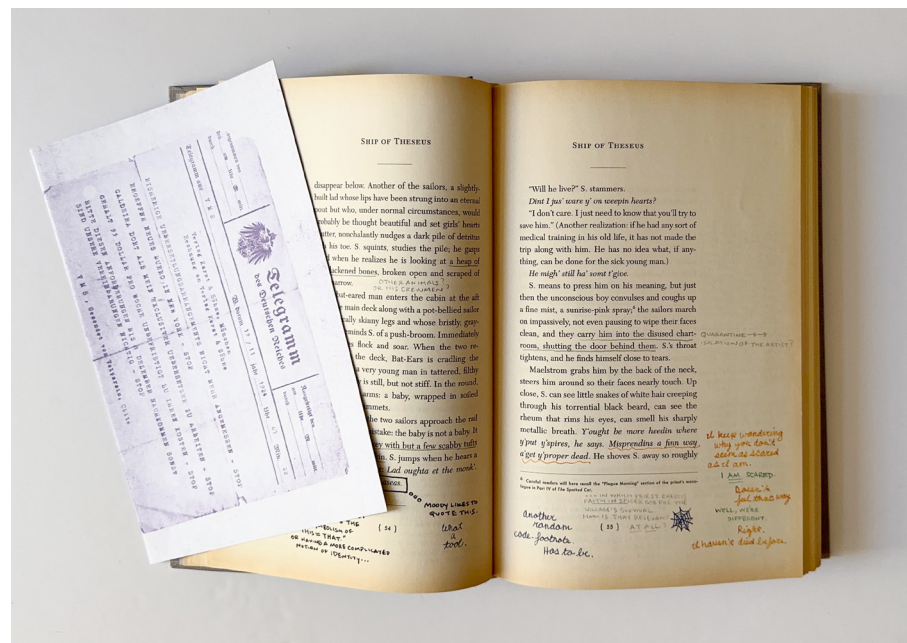
On the other hand, this depiction of the reading struggle converts the novel into more of a visual object, rather than a reading narrative, as Pressman (2020) notes. *S.* represents the relationship established between the text of *Ship of Theseus* and its two fictional readers. This is what actual readers first notice about the narrative, and it is what drives the reading experience. The faked interaction with the object also speaks about the pleasure of reading a printed novel. This could be recognised as the 'jouissance' that Barthes (1973) describes when a text forces readers to interact intimately with it by challenging their own cultural, historical, and traditional values.

From the start, the layered nature of the narrative establishes a reading experience full of digressions. All the layers are constantly fighting for the readers' attention and the act of holding the book is the most essential and physical of the digressions. Due to the loose pieces interspersed between the pages, readers are forced to concentrate on how they are manipulating the object. With every turn of the page, the position of the hands shifts accordingly to stop the pieces from falling and slipping out of their place. The loose parts are an ever-present disruption to the reading pace. Every turn



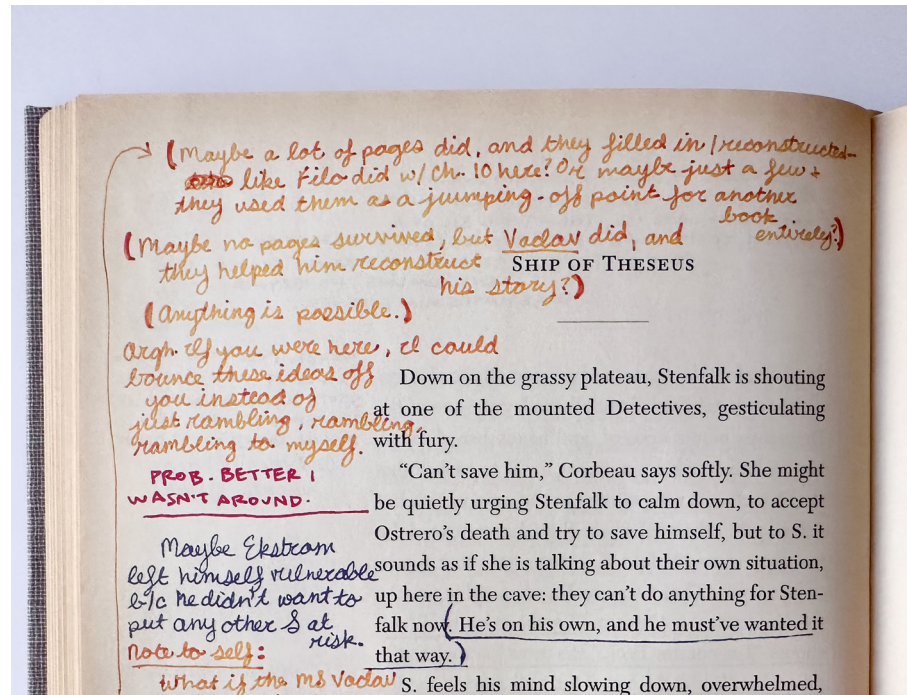
Video 4.12 A typical reading of *S.* (Abrams, 2013, 54–55). The contrast between typewritten and handwritten notes fosters a nonlinear reading that demands an interaction with the object and the loose pieces.

**Figure 4.68** Spread from *S.* (2013, 54–55) in which the inserted telegram interrupts the continuity of the reading progress and forces readers to interact with the loose pieces.



The handwritten conversation in the margins constitutes a third layer of digressions. This one is less physically intrusive than the previous ones. Instead, it disrupts the graphic level of *Ship of Theseus*. The typewritten text has a uniform and repeated layout throughout the pages, and acts as a reference point for the reading, while the annotations of the margins constantly and persistently interrupt the progress and force readers to continuously make decisions on how to read the text. Even if they decide to ignore the annotations, this requires an effort, as the presence of the handwritten dialogue works in a much more visual level than the typewritten text, and also invades the type area (Figure 4.69).

**Figure 4.69** Close-up of page 174 from *S.* (2013). The handwritten text in the margins interrupts and invades the type, thus hindering automatic reading.



The constant disruptions in *S.* have an air of the digressions in *Tristram Shandy*. To make readers aware of the act of reading, Sterne mainly embeds the disruptions in the narrative and breaks the central structure with plot digressions that defer reading progress. Instead, in *S.*, the interruptions are completely physical and visual. Readers are repeatedly detained either by the material elements of the book or by visual cues. According to Wocke (2014), digressions in *S.* are the result of a double addition: the book as object is supplemented with the loose ephemera, and the typewritten text with the annotated margins. These supplements decentre the narrative structure and at the same time complicate it. They act as the ‘judases’ in Derrida’s *Glas* (1974), betraying and destabilising the apparently primary narrative.

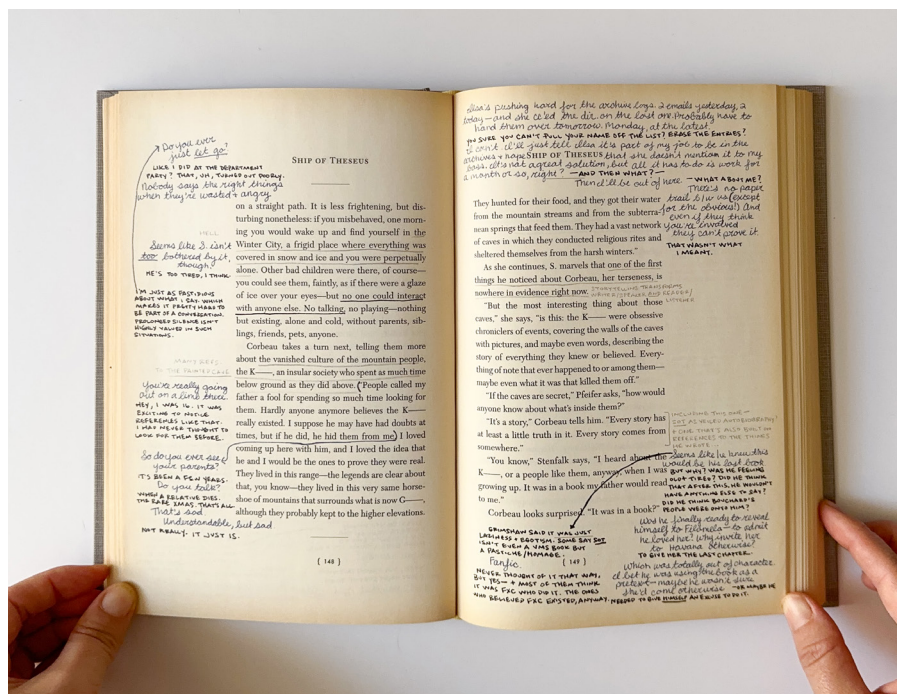
The conversation that develops in the margins between the two fictional characters, Eric and Jen, works in a traditional annotation-like style. One of the characters underlines or marks something on the text from *Ship of Theseus*, and draws a line or a symbol, or either one of them starts writing on the side, guiding the eyes to the comment. Most of the time, a dialogue ensues from that first comment. In this sense, as Ghosal (2019) and Clare (2019) have noticed, this is comparable to Nabokov’s *Pale fire* (1962),



in which the comments on the poem become more present than the ‘central’ text, and prompt readers to find subtle clues to make connections between the different parts. The case is also similar to Danielewski’s *House of leaves*, in which the narrative structure unfolds through the footnotes. However, in these two examples it is possible to establish a spatial hierarchy. In Nabokov, the comments are placed as endnotes after the poem; in *House of leaves*, even if footnotes might be misleading and force readers to interact with the materiality through convoluted paths, most of the time there still exists a top-bottom reading hierarchy between the different parts.<sup>129</sup>

In *S.*, however, the notes in the margins do not always follow an established hierarchy, but they appear disordered and placed in multiple directions. For example, on page 148, the first chunk of handwritten conversation that appears at the top of the page is meant to be read after the third piece of handwritten notes (Figure 4.70). The seemingly random placement of the annotations

**Figure 4.70** Spread from *S.* (2013, 148–149) that shows the absence of a conventional hierarchy. The text is not meant to be read in the order in which it appears. Handwritten arrows and lines guide readers and indicate the order in which the messages were originally written.



<sup>129</sup> Ghosal mentions that in *House of leaves* ‘the design still establishes a top-bottom hierarchy between Zampanò’s narrative and Truant’s notes’ (204). However, as has been shown, this is partially true. In general, there is a traditional hierarchy between Zampanò’s narrative and that of Truant’s, but at some points this relationship is broken, and Truant’s becomes more central to the overall narrative than Zampanò’s. Also at some points, and especially in Chapter IX, Danielewski breaks the top-bottom hierarchy and challenges the conventional order when reading a page.





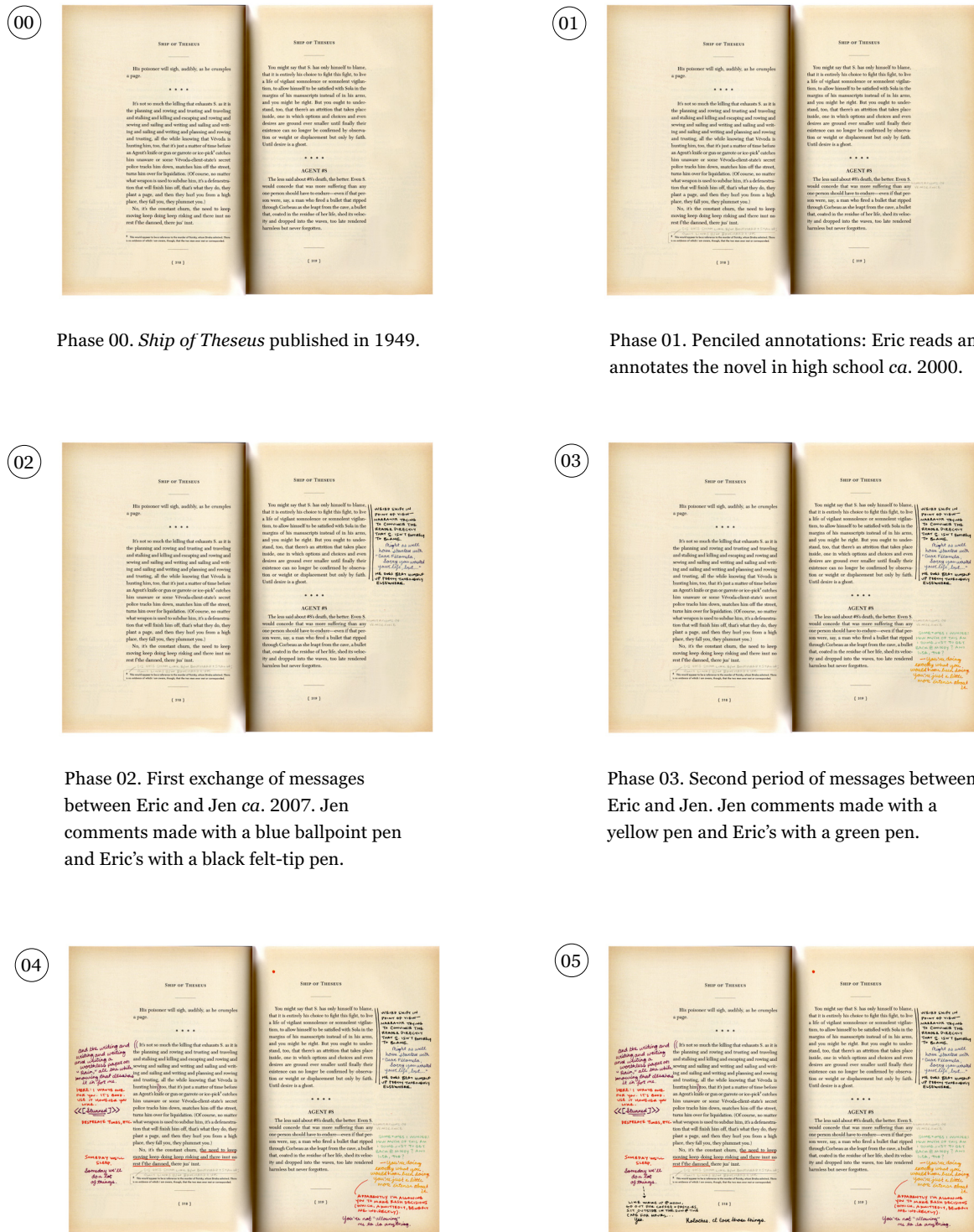
Video 4.13 A dynamic simulation that shows the chronological evolution of the margins in pages 318 and 319 from *S.* (2013).

undermines the conventional readers' behaviour when reading printed texts, which go from top to bottom and left to right.

The hierarchy in the novel is provided by the chronological complexity that characterises the marginal annotations. The narrative of *S.* is a temporally layered one. The conversation between the two fictional characters grows in depth and complexity as the plot develops. As the diagram in Figure 4.71 shows, the notes represent five different narrative moments in time. The most remote is defined by the pencilled annotations from Eric, when he first read the book in high school and made the first comments. The initial correspondence between the characters, approximately seven years later, is written with a blue ballpoint pen by Jen and a black felt-tip pen by Eric (this initial dialogue is also the most profuse throughout the novel). A bit further off in time the handwritten text changes to a yellow pen used by Jen and green pen by Eric, used until Eric's trip to Brazil. After this it changes again to a purple pen for Jen and red pen from Eric, until both characters move to Prague. Finally, they both use a black felt-tip pen, which indicates that they might be sharing the same pen because they now live together (Video 4.13).

The annotations are not organised chronologically and neither do they follow any apparent arrangement. On the contrary, the notes are presented out of order, as they were organically written by their authors. This disarranged system compromises the chronological progress both materially and narratively, thus creating a layout that does not reference any temporal progress but brings forward the physical space where the two characters are conversing. This invites readers to ignore the temporal ordering and concentrate 'on the spatial proximity of the different notes' (Ghosal, 2019, 203). In this way, the layout of each page is made out of simultaneous temporalities that involve readers in a complex and continuous decoding process.

**Figure 4.71** A visual timeline showing the progression of the different stages in the handwritten conversation that occurs in the margins. Pages 318–319 expose the entire chronological evolution of the novel. For a larger version of the phases see Figure D-1 in Appendix D (page 420).





Video 4.14 A dynamic diagram that shows how the visual presence of the margins changes with every turn of the page. That is, with every spread.

The decentralised narrative structure points to another connection with digital media despite the book's intention to enhance the physical object. The disarranged order of the handwritten notes challenges the stable and reliable quality of the typewritten text. It interrupts, obstructs, and blocks the reading progress, mocking the static quality of the printed text by playing with its conventions (De Vries and Van Dijk, 2020). In this way, the printed spread can be compared to the liquid nature of the digital screen, which changes and varies with every click. In the case of *S.*, each turn of the page acts as a 'click' on a digital platform, changing the visual information presented on the screen, as Video 4.14 shows.<sup>130</sup>

This effect in twenty-first century narratives has been defined by Mora (2012, 109) as the 'screen-page',<sup>131</sup> because nowadays:

... we read the page as if it was an electronic surface, a landscape or an oil painting [...] in fact, before starting to read the first line, our brain processes very briefly the entire page to check if the visual information as a whole could provide a kind of message or ideographic complex code.

This is exactly what happens in *S.*: on every page, readers need to stop to visually analyse the composition of the page and the spread to decide how to interact with it. The layout of *Ship of Theseus* is characterised by wide margins that provide a generous space for the annotations. These could even be compared to webpage sidebars, as Keskinen (2019) points out, as they hold supplementary information. They act as digital display banners that catch readers' attention and interrupt the reading. Thus, readers first need to decode the visual complexity of the page before being able to access the actual text.

<sup>130</sup> Figure D-2 in Appendix D (page 423) shows the progression through static images.

<sup>131</sup> *Pantpágina* in the original in Spanish.

### 4.3.3 Addressing spatial disorientation

Despite the disarranged structure of the marginal notes, the novel does not offer a set of instructions to lead readers. This is not a guided reading as the one in *Tristram Shandy*, where the narrator guides readers through the digressions; or the one in *The unfortunates*, where the unbound chapters are presented with instructions provided by the author. It is not even a reading like *House of leaves*, where the connection between text, footnotes and references guides readers throughout the narrative. There are no explicit rules in *S.* to help readers understand how they might have to deal with the book. Therefore, they have to continuously negotiate between the design of the page, the narrative, and the materiality. They are left on their own to decipher and discover the structure that generates the system (Ghosal, 2019). The only way readers have to decode the intrinsic rules is to actively participate in the reading, using the visual and material dimensions of the novel to be able to fully access the narrative and its encoded rules. In this way, as Tanderup (2017) concludes, the book becomes a space for physical interaction.

Consequently, readers are left on their own to decide how to read the book, which opens the door to different approaches in the reading process. One could choose to read only the printed text of *Ship of Theseus* by V. M. Straka and ignore all the rest; one could also decide to only read the notes in the margins, either reading them as they appear or trying to read them in the original chronological order; or instead one could take it all in page by page (which obviously offers the most complete and enriching reading experience). Similarly to what happens in *House of leaves*, the possible choices evidence the decentred axis of the narrative structure, in which marginalia gradually becomes more relevant and present than the typewritten layer of *Ship of Theseus*. Thus, while the annotated margins enhance the materiality of the object, they also call for the readers' attention, who are continuously distracted from what would constitute the primary narrative, and 'literally seduced by the mise-en-page' (Wocke, 2014, 9).

Apart from these ways of reading the novel, there is one more possible way of dealing with the narrative, which would result in a full interaction with the fiction both at narrative and material levels. One could choose to read all the layers at once as they appear page by page, and also become part of the marginal conversation, actively writing on the margins of the book, filling up the remaining blank space. However, as Gibbons (2017) has demonstrated by asking readers on Twitter, this is the least chosen option.<sup>132</sup> The novel presents a challenge through abundance, by an overkill of information. It seems that the crowded layout of the page dissuades readers from contributing to the written notes in the margins. In general, readers feel that they are entering a space that has already been used, that they are intruding on someone else's intimate story. Besides, the pages are so filled up that readers might feel left out by all the information present on every spread.<sup>133</sup> The pages are already full, adding things on them would only generate more confusion. This resistance creates a tension with the conventional idea that the printed book is a sacred thing, that the object should be kept clean and untouched. In this way, the book demands readers participation but at the same time hinders the most direct type of interaction.

The marginal conversation in *S.* starts before the narrative of *Ship of Theseus* begins. The first page after the front endpapers, bearing only the title of the book, provides readers with the first clues of the narrative that will unfold progressively (Figure 4.72). The typewritten title appears surrounded by handwritten notes

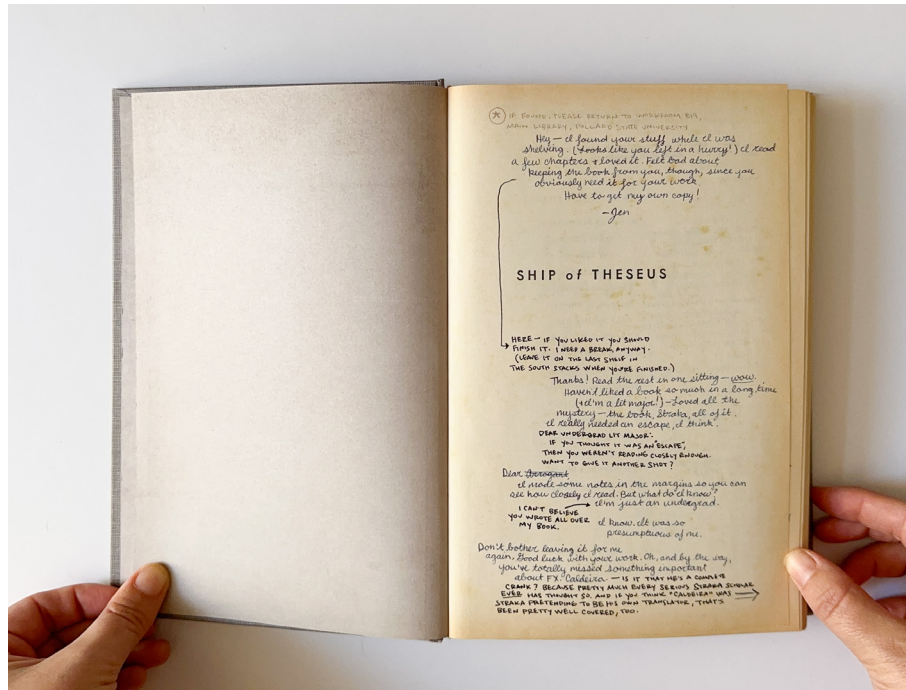
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<sup>132</sup> In 2016, Gibbons released a tweet 'asking readers if they had written on the pages of the book' (2017, 330). The majority of the responses received showed readers' reluctance to intervene the book: '@3: Could not bring myself to do it. I have taken screenshots of ebook and marked up'; '@7: No, sorry. Do you? That's a sacrilege'; '@8: I didn't write in mine (I had a separate notebook for that). But I did use sticky tabs for a while to mark pages.'

<sup>133</sup> This is also made evident in the follow up question posed by Gibbons (2017, 330–331) to understand why readers did not write on the pages of *S.*: '@3: 2 reasons. Too beautiful and, in-game, this is Eric and Jen's precious copy. Too personal'; '@5: feels destructive. I made my own notes on my phone'; '@4: Wrong level of reality. Plus, to whom would I be communicating? Just myself.'

inscribed in different colours that represent the temporal layers. The top one, written in pencil, seems to be the oldest note: ‘If found, please return to workroom B19, main library, Pollard State University’. This entry is followed by Jen’s first comment in blue pen, in which she indicates she has found the book, read a few chapters, and loved it. The response from Eric in a black pen and uppercase hand lettering invites her to keep using the book and continue reading it.

**Figure 4.72** Title page from *S.* (2013) in which the typewritten text from *Ship of Theseus* is presented as the primary narrative, but at the same time is contested by the large amount of handwritten text surrounding it. The marginal conversation starts before the main narrative actually begins, which reinforces the idea of the book as an essential part of the fiction.

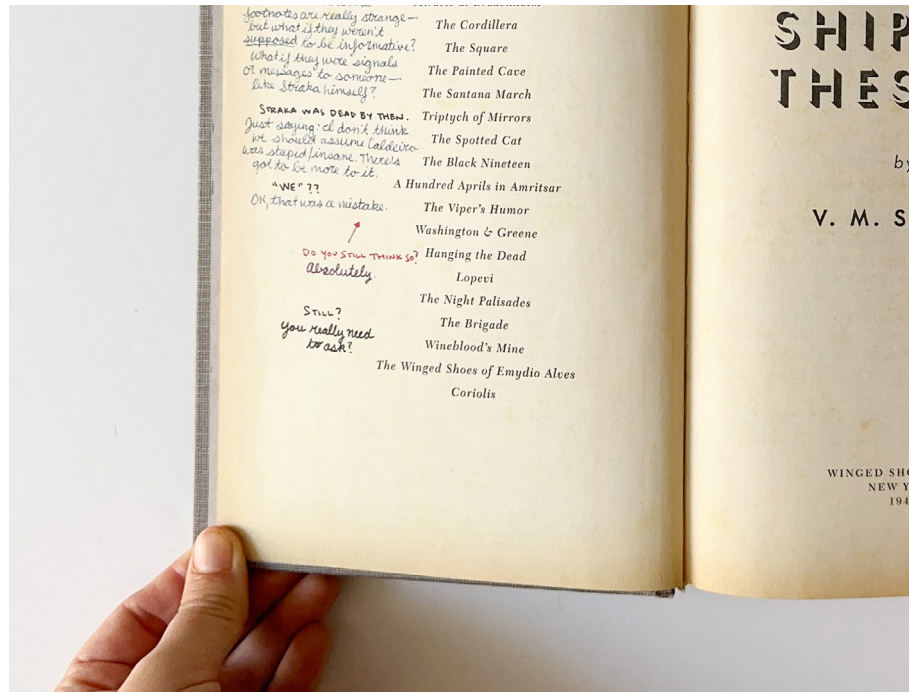


The initial conversation continues through this page and through its verso, where other works from V. M. Straka are listed and the first evidence of the different layers appears: almost at the bottom of the page the writing changes colour and Eric's line changes to red, while Jen's to purple (Figure 4.73). Below these appears a further layer in which both characters write in black pen. At this incipient point in the narrative, readers are confronted with the temporal layering. They become aware of the system in place and are made to understand that the change in the ink colour, together with the degree of intimacy the comments suggest, indicates future periods in the narrative. The conversation continues through the second title page and throughout the 'Translator's Note and Foreword' (Abrams, 2013, v–xiv). By the time readers reach the first chapter



of *Ship of Theseus* they are already immersed in the fiction and have experienced the numerous temporalities that will continue to develop through the margins of the novel.

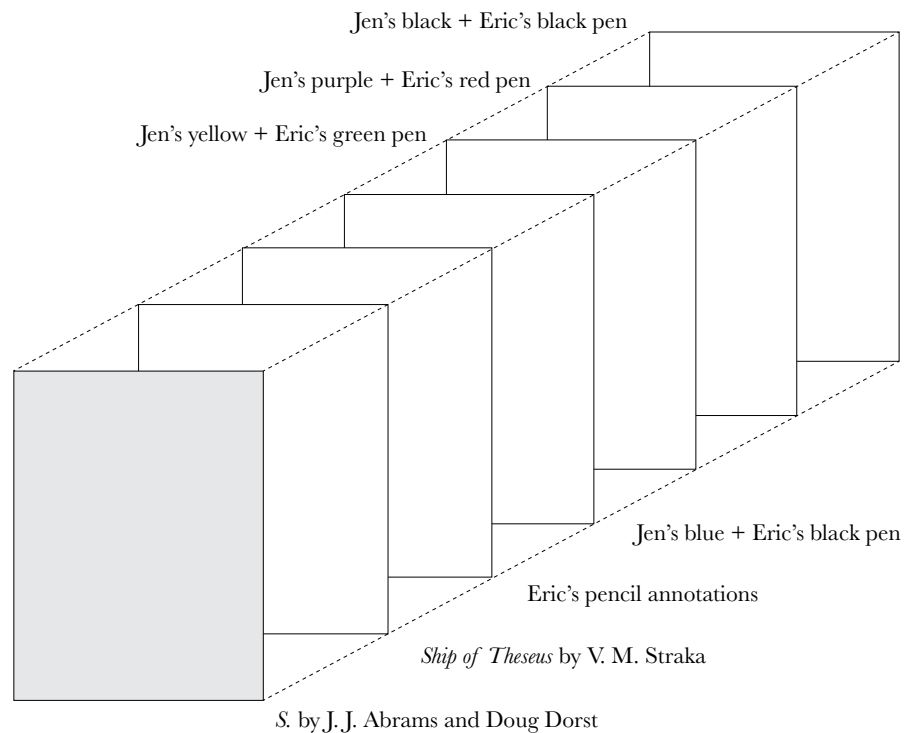
**Figure 4.73** Close-up of the title verso page from *S.* (2013) that shows the initial exchange of handwritten messages. In here it is possible to discover the first temporal shifts as the handwriting changes colour and tone of voice.



Borrowing the term from Gibbons (2017, 325), the various layers in *S.* create a ‘sequence of worlds’. In fact, *S.* is the overarching storyworld, activated by readers when they break the seal of the slipcase and access the book: it constitutes the entry point to the fiction and the narrative. From here, as the diagram shows in Figure 4.74, the sequence starts with *Ship of Theseus*, embodied by the printed object. This is followed by the handwritten worlds created by Jen and Eric, which unfold in five different layers. All the layers of the novel work in a symbiotic connection: they exist as independent narratives but are at the same time very dependent of each other. Reading only *Ship of Theseus* means leaving out the mystery about the novel’s authorship, which the two marginal characters are trying to solve; on the other hand, reading only one of the temporal layers from the margins means ignoring the link of those comments with Straka’s text.

The relationship between *Ship of Theseus* and the ensuing handwritten levels bears a similarity with the structure of *Tree of codes*. In Foer’s novel the stability and hierarchy of Schulz’s original

**Figure 4.74** A diagram that shows the way in which the sequence of worlds is contained within the fiction of *S*.



text is used as a base to decentre the narrative. The sequence of pages is physically intervened to create a new sequence of units that do not follow Schulz's chapter structure. In *S.*, Abrams and Dorst create a fictional 'existing' text that is then fictionally intervened by the characters to decentre the initial narrative. In this instance, however, everything is a fiction, and the sequence of units transforms into a sequence of worlds. Even if the marginal conversation is connected to Straka's text, it develops regardless of its original structure, as can be seen in the first exchange of messages before the actual novel starts.

The first footnote from the fictional translator (F. X. Caldeira) in Chapter 1 of *Ship of Theseus* points to the confusion and disorientation that is (fictionally) associated with Straka's novels:

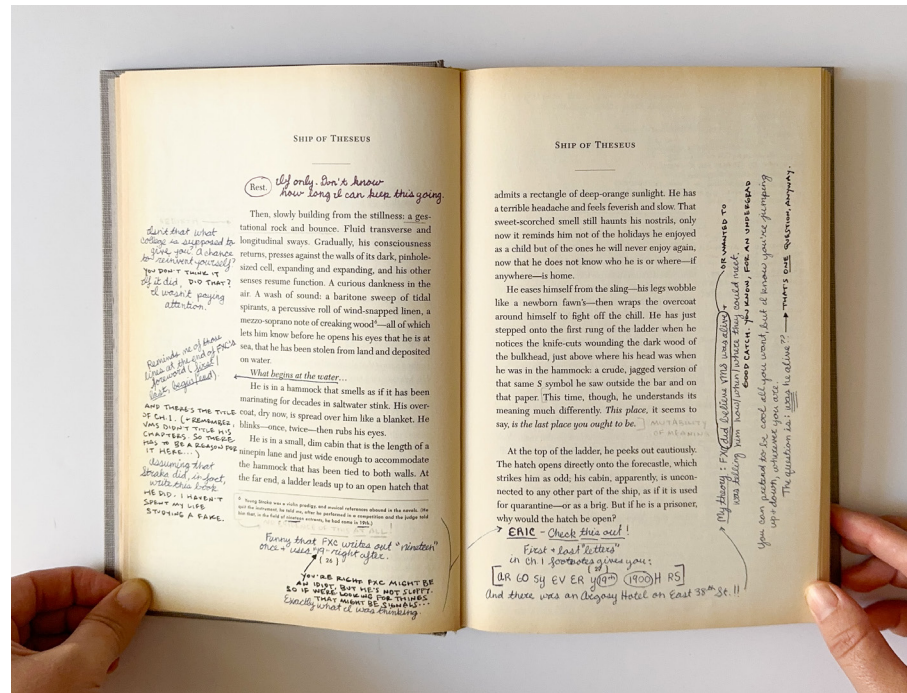
A sense of spatial disorientation afflicts characters throughout Straka's body of work—most notably in *Coriolis*, which features a character afflicted with a fictional ailment called 'Eötvös Syndrome'. The illness causes his sense of disorientation to intensify as his travels take him closer to the equator (Abrams, 2013, 3).



Although the footnote refers to the fictional author, it also represents what readers have already begun to experience: *S.* is about spatial disorientation. This is made evident by the way in which the handwritten worlds clash with the stable world of *Ship of Theseus*. The annotations appear on the page temporally all at once, not following a chronological order and thus creating the sense of dislocation. In order to read the different layers in a traditional temporal arrangement, it would be necessary to traverse the spatial body of the book several times. In other words, first one would read *Ship of Theseus* from start to finish; then would go back to the first page and go through all the pages again but only reading the pencilled notes by Eric; then again only the first exchange of messages (blue and black ink); and thus, subsequently until having read all the layers. In this way, the book becomes a much bigger and deeper object than what actually is shown from the outside. In a similar way as to what happens in *House of leaves*, *S.* expands with readerly interaction.

Due to the spatial quality of *S.* and the sequence of worlds that are all included within the structure of the physical book, the pages of the novel present readers with a cross section of the narrative structure. As Gibbons (2017, 326) notes, ‘ultimately, readers encounter a cross section of this world sequence, flattened onto the 2D nature of *Ship of Theseus*.’ Yet, this cross section is not restricted only to the single page structure, but every spread acts as a slice of the narrative. Each slice displays the different temporalities that converge at that particular point in space and time. In fact, at some points, Eric and Jen use the spread as a whole unit and make their comments disregarding the natural separation of the pages. This can be seen on pages 26 and 27, for example, when Jen’s comments overflow from one page onto the next (Figure 4.75). The cross section is reinforced by the stability of *Ship of Theseus*. The typewritten text appears static on every spread, in the same position and with the same proportions. This immutability is counteracted by the changeable nature of the margins, which vary from page to page with no defined layout.

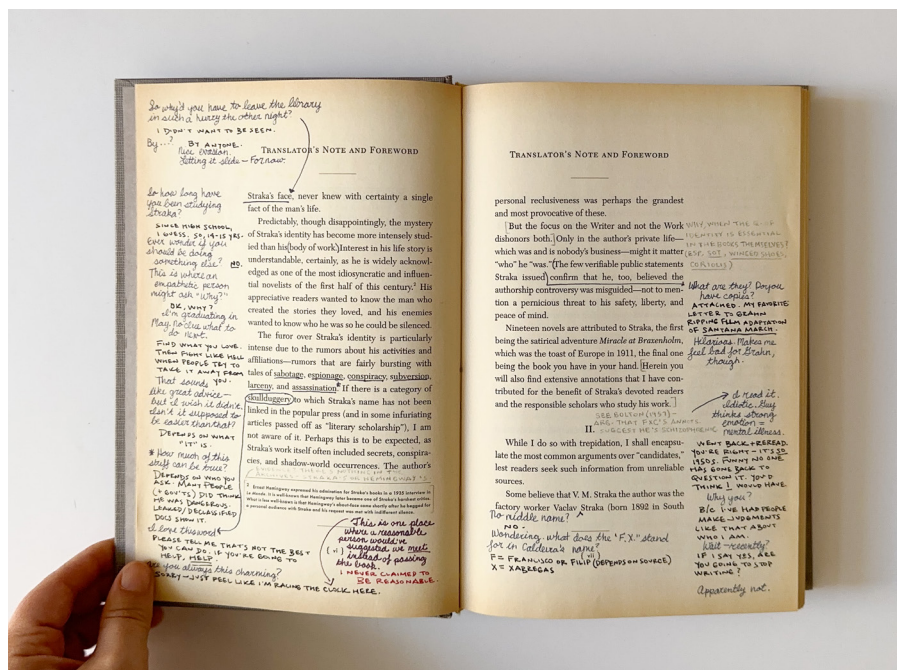
**Figure 4.75** A spread from *S.* (2013, 26–17) that shows how the conventional separation of the spread is contested by the handwritten exchange of messages. The margins of the spread are used as a whole single unit.



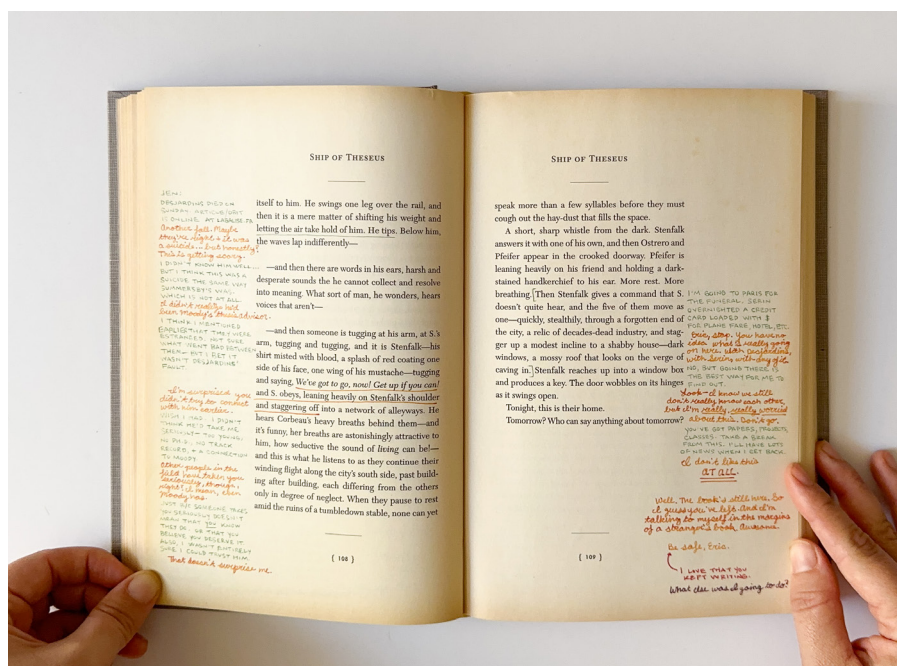
Despite the temporal and layered labyrinth, it is not difficult to experience a chronological progress as the reading moves forward. The pieces of ephemera, for example, which are connected to the handwritten conversation, help readers establish clearer points in time. This is evidenced especially with the postcards from the trip to Brazil that Eric sends to Jen, and which are presented in chronological order, despite appearing randomly interspersed through the pages.

Likewise, there is a visual evolution in the handwritten comments. The initial chapters have more notes from the first period of the conversation between Eric and Jen (Figure 4.76) and are also more crowded with annotations. Instead, as the narrative progresses, pages with fewer annotations appear more frequently and the first period loses presence. This becomes very obvious, for example, on pages 108 and 109, in which there is an evident shift from the period of the black and blue pens to the next level of the relationship, with the orange and green pens (Figure 4.77). In addition, as Chapter 4 starts on page 111, this confirms the previous statement about the handwritten narrative not taking into consideration the chapter structure of *Ship of Theseus*.

**Figure 4.76** Spread from *S.* (2013, vi–vii). These pages show that the first period of handwritten notes is more present in the initial pages. The conversation is here more profuse than in later parts of the narrative.



**Figure 4.77** Pages 108 and 109 in *S.* (2013) show the change in the handwritten conversation. As the narrative advances the first period of the conversation becomes less present and at some points even disappears, while later periods become more predominant.



Even if there are many temporalities present at once on every spread, there are only two points in the novel where all the layers from the typewritten text to the last handwritten period, coexist on the page, pages 318–319 and 366–367 (Figure 4.78). The reason for this might be to avoid a confusion between the first and last periods of dialogue. In both of them Eric writes using a black pen. The two intervals can only be differentiated by Jen's lowercase handwriting (in black this time as well) and the intimacy of the newest comments (Figure 4.79). This last period of conversation

appears already in the first exchange of messages on the title page, giving a clue to readers that the conversation will grow in intimacy and pointing to the temporal play in the handwritten margins (Figure 4.80).

The fact that the sequence of worlds appears differently on every spread confronts readers with a challenge. They are forced to decide how to traverse the novel and reassess this decision continuously. Besides, choosing a reading strategy is also difficult because of the amount of information, both narrative and material, on every page. This is evidenced, for example, in the review by Adam Roberts (2013, n.p.), in which he describes the three reading strategies he followed: he could read *Ship of Theseus* and the annotations in tandem as they appeared spread by spread; or read *Ship of Theseus* first, then the margins; or he could compromise, and ‘read the core novel a chapter at a time pausing to return to the notes before going ahead.’ He started with the first one but apparently found the progress to be too slow; then tried option two, but found it dull; only to end up ‘vacillating between the first and third strategy here.’ This vacillation is a result of the way in which the novel disrupts the traditional reading pace and demands awareness from readers. The spatiality of the fiction is also a disruption, it provokes readers to find their own particular way of reading.

*S.* is a paradox because it offers an intentional printed experience through an object that has been produced digitally and that is in itself a fiction. It is intentionally tangible in an age when writing, producing, and reading print is a conscious choice, an explicit act. Trying to comment only on the narrative layer means analysing the novel as a thing it is not. By isolating one of the layers and analysing it in a conventional way, the result is obviously disappointing, because it is not made to be experienced like this.

Abrams affirms that ‘the fun of *S.* is having the book itself’ (2013). It is true that the narrative quality of *S.* might not be as good or deep as that of *House of leaves*; and due to the huge amount of



Figure 4.78 This spread from *S.* (2013, 318–319) shows one of the points in which all the temporalities from the margins converge on the spread.

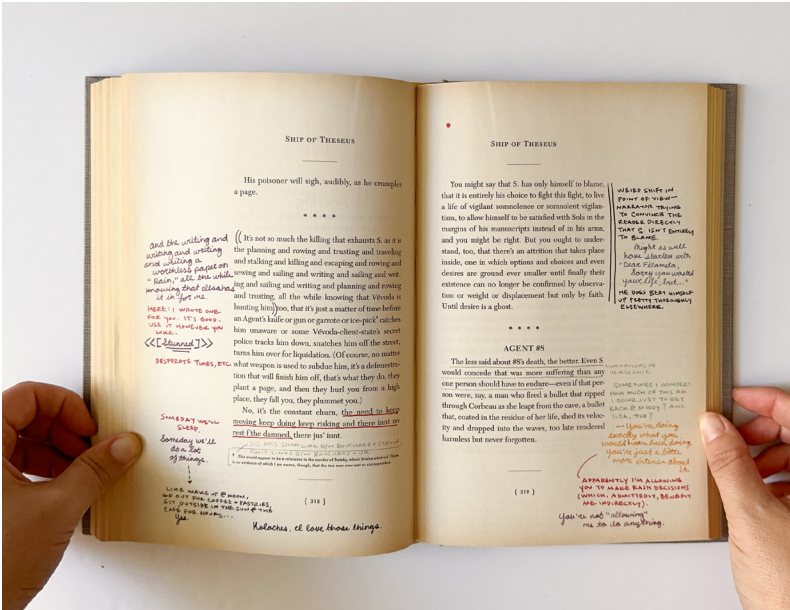


Figure 4.79 Close-up of the title page from *S.* (2013). The difference between first and last periods is in Jen's handwriting. Her messages are written at first with a blue pen and afterwards change to a black pen (possibly the same as Eric's as they are living together by then).

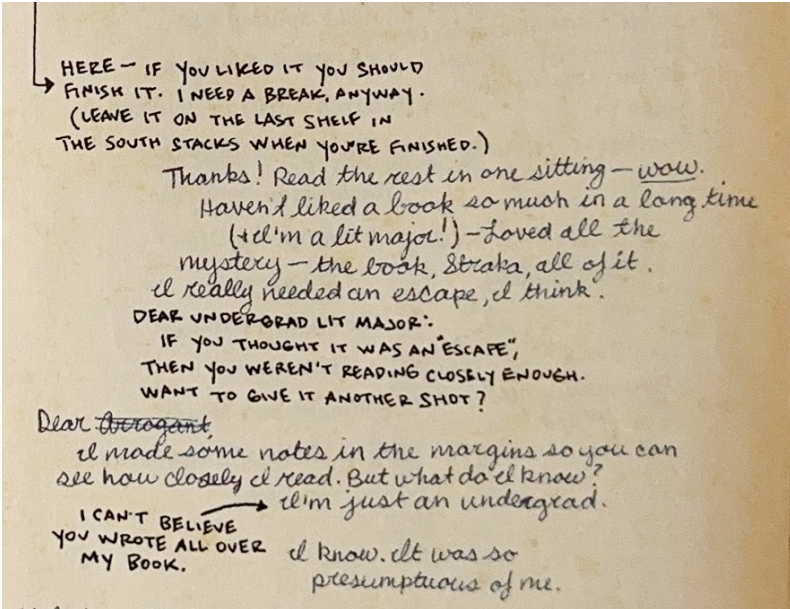
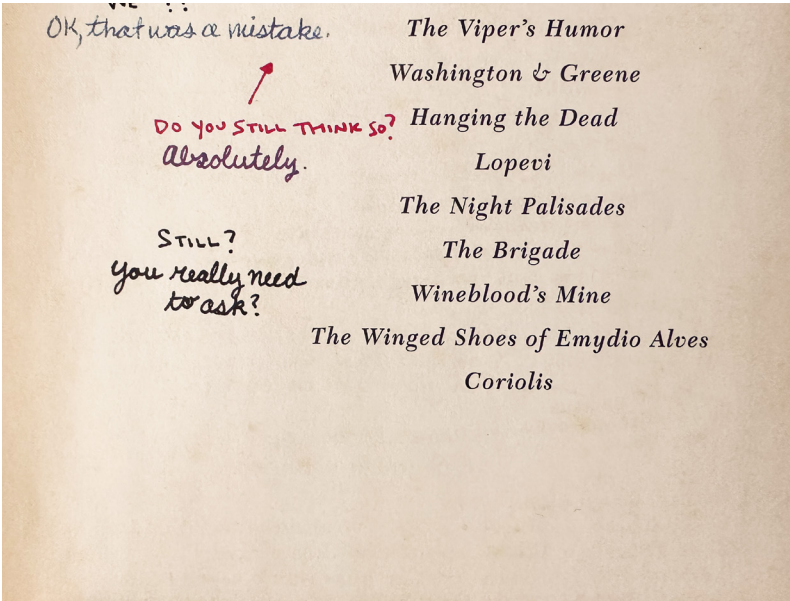


Figure 4.80 Close-up of the title verso page from *S.* (2013). The last temporal period is already introduced in the first exchange of handwritten messages. This strategy makes readers aware of the different temporalities they will encounter in the narrative and points to the difference between the first and last periods in Eric's handwriting.



visual information the pages contain, readers ‘may merely end up admiring them, leafing through the volume without actually reading anything’ (Keskinen, 154). But that is part of the game, of the reading possibilities. The fun of *S.* lies in the act of holding the book and decide how to interact with it.

#### 4.4 Physical hypertexts: printed responses to the digital realm

The three case study novels have been chosen because they constitute printed paradigms in the reaction to the immateriality and immediacy of digital media during the first three decades of the twenty-first century. They take the conventions in communication practices generated by digital technology and incorporate them within their pages. Thus, these narratives are simultaneously a reaction, a challenge, a reflection, and a comment at different points in time of the convergence between print and digital media.

The three novels confirm the claim that print-based literature can work as a hypertext. *House of leaves* could be seen as contradicting more directly the beliefs of experts, such as Joyce (1991) and Landow (1997), who claimed that print could never effectively include hypertextual qualities. Through the use of narrative and material dimensions integrally and in unexpected ways, Danielewski foregrounds the textual openness, the intertextuality, the multivocality, and the decentred axis of the work. As he explains in an interview with Cottrell (2002, n.p.):

[Many readers] will find *House of leaves* difficult because they’re prejudiced. They’ve been taught what a book should look like and how it should be read. Ruler-wielding didacts have instilled in them the notion that a book must start here, move along like this, and finish over there.

This could be applied also to *Tree of codes* and *S.* The novels can be recognised as hypertexts because of these qualities, and most significantly because of a fifth characteristic: the rhizomatic

structure. Landow (1997) argues that a printed book with chapters could never work as a hypertext because it is composed of culmination and termination points. However, these works are able to extend their narratives beyond the physical book.

In *House of leaves*, the novel expands into the Internet while being deeply rooted into its physical status. Encouraged by the author, readers move beyond the printed book to continue expanding the fiction in forums, blogs, and social media. The printed novel could be seen as a radicle within the assemblage that creates the rhizome of *House of leaves* (to borrow from Deleuze and Guattari's [1987] vocabulary): the *House of leaves* website,<sup>134</sup> *The Whaldestoe letters* printed book, the musical album *Haunted* by Poe, and related forums and blogs. Thus, the printed book transcends its bindings and expands into a network of collaborations that create a multilayered narrative, a system with numerous entry points. Or, as Pressman (2006, n.p.) defines, a 'networked novel'.

A similar thing happens in *S.*, described by De Vries and Van Dijk (2020, 128) as a 'transmedia constellation.' Apart from the fact that readers had the first contact with the novel through a teaser trailer released two months before the publication, *S.* works across several media and is a rhizomatic structure that creates an expansive network. The narrative of *S.* is not confined to the printed book but expands beyond the physical realm. While in *House of leaves* the novel expands through readers' discussion online, in *S.* the fiction is taken beyond the printed pages and into the digital realm. Twitter, for example, is the platform that better represents this expansion. Eric and Jen, the two fictional characters that write in the margins, also have Twitter accounts where they keep messaging each other.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> The website is not active anymore, but as Pressman (2006) acknowledges, it was a significant part of the novel's community.

<sup>135</sup> Gibbons (2017) shares some of these tweets: '@JenTheUndergrad I've tried 18 ways to reach you. Perhaps #19 is the key. Consider this my contrite but sincere @Twitter IPO. 4:10PM–7 Nov 2013.' '@EricHusch You're a scoundrel, but we still have work to do. You're forgiven. For now. Have you seen this? [...] 4:26PM–8 Nov 2013.'

As Gibbons (2017) has explained, these tweets are not trying to authenticate the characters outside the fiction but aim to expand narrative engagement and intensify the reading experience. In addition, *S.* is expanded through blogs, forums, websites, and even podcasts, such as Radio Straka.<sup>136</sup> Thus, the digital network of the novel, together with its analogue narrative, provides a deeper and more complete reading experience.

In an interview with Vineyard (2014, n.p.), Dorst confirms his involvement in creating some of the ‘extra things living on the web’, and also touches upon the expansion created by the actual readers: ‘There are things on the web that I did not compose, but I have no idea who did.’ Similar to what happens in *House of leaves*, this is a result of readership engagement. In the case of *S.*, the novel encourages readers’ participation by presenting coded ciphers, which engage readers in a dynamic decoding process that brings them to discover and create more about *S.*’s fiction (Gibbons, 2017).<sup>137</sup> Readers have also created many fan blogs to talk about their reading experience (such as SFiles22, WhoIsStraka, etc.).<sup>138</sup> In fact, these blogs and forums strengthen the interactive nature of the novel, reflecting the possibility of having alternative endings, and providing readers with the opportunity to personalise their experience of *S.* Thus, and according to Mantzaris (2018), the novel is presented as a work-in-progress. It challenges the apprehended idea of the printed book as a static and finite object: *S.* never ends and is always open to readers’ participation and expansion.

In the case of *Tree of codes*, the narrative does not expand beyond the printed book and into the digital realm. Or at least, it does not do it in such a perceptible way. As Wurth (2011, n.p.) notes, Foer

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<sup>136</sup> The website explains that ‘J. J. Abrams commissioned a series of five remote broadcasts’: <https://www.nts.live/shows/radio-straka>

<sup>137</sup> The publishing house Mullholland Books launched a deciphering contest. The answers are shown here: <https://sfiles22.blogspot.com/2013/11/mulholland-books-cipher-contest-answer.html>

<sup>138</sup> The website links are respectively: <http://sfiles22.blogspot.com/2013/11/footnotes-and-ciphers.html>; and <https://whoisstraka.wordpress.com>.



treats the text in *Tree of codes* 'as an open resource, a reservoir of potentialities.' The novel represents one of the possible readings the author has done of the infinite alternatives that could be extracted from the original text. Thus, readers could go back to Schulz's work, manipulate it, and build their own narrative out of it. Foer deforms *The street of crocodiles* by transforming it into a digital text, which then undergoes a process of design to adapt it to the die-cutting.<sup>139</sup> This way of proceeding roots the resulting narrative to the materiality, which means that any other reading would result in a different alternative, thus expanding the constellation of *Tree of codes* and transforming Foer's work into one 'plateau' among many others, one plane within the assemblage of the narrative rhizome. In this way, all three novels break the boundaries that for centuries defined the printed book as a closed and finished entity. They could be seen as an 'open work', to put it in Eco's (1962, 3) terms: novels that appeal 'to the initiative of the individual performer', and thus resist to be finite and enclosed within a defined printed object.

The difference between these three examples is the fact that *House of leaves* is a turn-of-the-century work and is probably more influenced by the digital development of the 1990s than by the changes that came with the twenty-first century.<sup>140</sup> However, even if the novel was published more than twenty years ago, it is still relevant in regards to the response it gives to the digital realm.<sup>141</sup> When interviewed by Cottrell in 2002, Danielewski explains that even if the structure of his novel looks difficult to read, he is only making use of reading abilities that everyone possesses: 'Whether it's dealing with magazines, newspapers, radio, TV, and of course the Internet, most people living in the '90s have no trouble multi-processing huge sums of information. They may not know it but

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<sup>139</sup> This process is explained and analysed in more detail in Chapter 5.

<sup>140</sup> As Chapter 5 shows, *House of leaves* took Danielewski ten years to write, which means he had probably started writing by 1990.

<sup>141</sup> This is evidenced by the fact that recently the novel has been translated to other languages and is on display in mainstream bookshop chains.

they're doing it' (2002, n.p.). More than two decades later, the amount of information has grown exponentially, and readers live immersed in a continuous digital connection. Interacting with different platforms and living surrounded by disruptions have become a norm, almost an inherent part of any reading process. As D'Ambrosio (2018) suggests, this makes it easier for readers to engage with unconventional writing practices that constantly demand to shift focus and attention. Therefore, nowadays readers have less difficulty in traversing complicated narratives, and are more accustomed to the challenges dynamic narratives such as *House of leaves* offer.

By the time *Tree of codes* is published the print-digital discussion has already moved forward, and thus the novel reflects the dependence print developed with the digital world. This is an effect of the 'convergence paradigm' described by Jenkins, as explained in Chapter 2. Foer's novel could be seen as a representation of this convergence: a book created using digital writing, design, and production tools but that is ultimately analogue and physical. The result is a novel that blurs the line between media and speaks about the way in which older and new technologies could work together.

At the same time, *Tree of codes* represents the distress undergone by the book as an artefact, which has seen its traditional territory colonised by new media (Hayles, 2007). The response to this trauma is to challenge, explore and change what a novel can offer in print. *Tree of codes* is more than an exercise in nostalgia. It comments on the simultaneous reality brought by the digital age. As Tanderup (2014, n.p.) identifies, simultaneity is a characteristic of digital media that 'replaces a sense of time and narrative.' Information is accessed constantly and limitlessly, with a sense of here and now. This inevitably changes communication and reading practices, together with the way in which data is interpreted and stored. Therefore, memory also changes. It dissolves and transforms, becomes transient and even less reliable. Thus, the simultaneity of the digital also results in amnesia and nostalgia.

Texts and books are read, forgotten, and then remembered almost simultaneously. This is reflected in the material dimension of the book, in the holes that present the text of several pages all at once, confusing readers and forcing them to decode the different layers of information. In this way, the novel hinders retention. With such a continuous flux of information to be dealt with on every page it becomes difficult to remember what has been read in previous pages. The holes simultaneously foreground the book, the expression of a media nostalgia that views it as a stable and physical object, and that break its material reliability. They open the object to a process of ‘mutating memory’ (Tanderup, 2014, n.p.), reflecting how literature has changed under the evolution of new media but also how this has influenced memory and relationships with the past. The interaction with the perforated pages makes readers aware of the change in reading practices, which will never be the same as they were before the appearance of the digital, but hybrid in every sense.

As in *Tree of codes*, simultaneity is crucial in S. Abrams’ novel takes further the claims of convergence and creates visually and narratively complex pages where different structures converge at once. Similarly to what happens in websites and social media platforms, readers receive constant ‘visual feedback’ (Ghosal, 2019, 203), a huge amount of information that needs to be visually and narratively decoded as they move forward with the act of reading.

In this sense, Ghosal (2019) recognises that the marginal comments direct the eye movements of readers across the page. These movements evoke the reading style of hyperlinks or even the topological connection used to direct reading movements online in a UX-like manner. However, the random placement of the handwritten text on the page also breaks the conventional way of reading printed texts from top to bottom and left to right. The tension in *S.* is created by the fact that the pages of the analogue

object are designed to provoke nonlinear saccades,<sup>142</sup> thus generating an unstable reading experience. According to Wocke (2014), the constant distraction and interruption created by the margins is related to the economy of attention that characterises readers' productivity in the age of digital media. In this new economy, as Lanham (2006) describes, readers live immersed in a space of continuous oscillation between style (the visual characteristics of the information displayed) and substance. The margins in *S.* reflect the constant interruptions derived from the multiple screens, apps, and programs that readers nowadays handle simultaneously, which results in a lack of concentration. They demand close attention and at the same time foster distraction. The huge amount of information that *S.* presents on the page also defies the levels of stability associated with print. Due to the interruptions and overloaded narrative, the physical apparatus of *S.* almost becomes dysfunctional and complicates communication rather than facilitates it (Keskinen, 2019).

In fact, the three novels reflect the age of distraction brought by the digital realm.<sup>143</sup> In the case of *House of leaves*, it not only comments on the fears of the death of the printed book, but also on the rapid expansion of the Internet and the anxiety of dealing with such a large amount of immaterial information. This idea is reflected in the significant quantity of footnotes and references present throughout the narrative, which at some point mix real and fictional sources indistinctly, adding to the sense of overabundance of online information. In *Tree of codes* the distraction is brought on from the very first page, in the way in which the novel displays an overwhelming quantity of layers, with or without printed text on them. This recalls the amount of information displayed on a screen when using a search engine or when accessing a social media platform. Readers need to decide how to untangle, decipher and

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<sup>142</sup> 'Saccades' is the term that defines the eye movement when reading.

<sup>143</sup> Wurth (2011, n.p.) uses this expression, 'the age of distraction', when analysing *Tree of codes*.

interact with such a large amount of information, also choosing from what is relevant or not for their reading journeys.

Another point that these novels achieve to comment on is that of authenticity and claims of authorial manipulation in the age of the digital. In *House of leaves*, this can be seen from the very start of the book. In the title page, and within the conventional space for the author's name, two characters are listed (Zampanò and Johnny Truant). As Hagler (2004) notes, this strategy opens the narrative by confusing readers, who have difficulty separating created character with creator. Besides, the mysterious Editors appear throughout the novel as an authorial editing presence that is above the other two characters and has power over their narratives. This is reinforced by the suspicions that the film, which generates the whole narrative universe, does not exist. Especially because Zampanò, a blind old man, is commenting on a film which he was completely unable to watch. As Brick (2004) also notes, everything in the novel, from the mysterious house to the contradictory characters and labyrinthine references, incites readers to continuously question the author (i.e., Danielewski).<sup>144</sup>

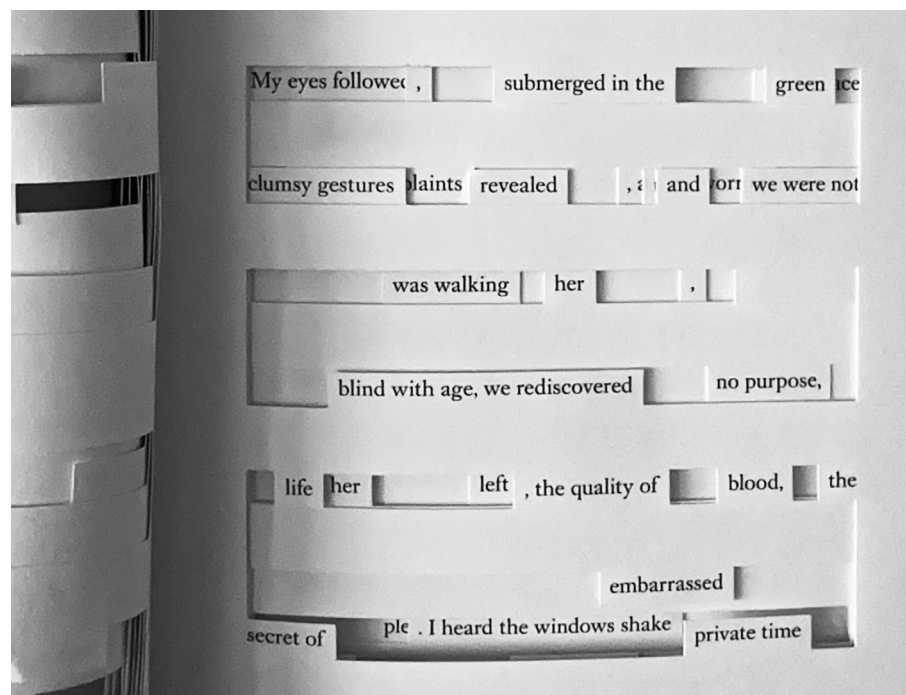
A similar thing happens with *S*. Due to the fact that the whole printed object is part of the fiction, there is a lack of authenticity throughout the novel. Readers hold the volume of *Ship of Theseus* knowing that it is a forgery and that its real author is not Straka but Abrams and Dorst. However, the narrative strengthens the fiction by constantly reminding readers that the object in their hands is the actual book which Eric and Jen exchanged and intervened on with their comments. The blurring of the authorial line is reinforced even more by the fact that, throughout the narrative, the two characters on the margins have their own doubts about the authenticity of Straka's figure and the role played in his fictional novels by the translator.

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<sup>144</sup> From the perspective of fake news and the confusing social media environments, the fear of digital manipulation could be regarded as more relevant nowadays than it was at the start of the twenty-first century.

In the case of *Tree of codes*, instead of raising uncertainties about the authorial figure, the materiality of the novel questions authorial manipulation. This is not a unique and exclusive object but a mass-produced one. Even if readers might not be aware of the production process, they are probably conscious that Foer did not work directly onto the very same volume they are holding. In order to transform *The street of crocodiles* into *Tree of codes*, the text underwent a series of deformations to get into its final shape, and thus it raises doubts about the extent that the author manipulated the original work to achieve the desired outcome. This is evidenced in the way the text is broken down and placed strategically to help bring forward the materiality. At several points, words, that in the original text from Schulz belong to the same sentence, become separated by longer blank spaces and gaps than what would accurately be required. For example, on page 15, and as Szymanska (2020) also notes, it takes Foer several lines to break the phrase ‘the quality of their blood, and the secret of their fate’ (Schulz, 2008, 8) into scattered words: ‘the quality of’ ‘blood,’ ‘the’ ‘secret of’ (Foer, 2010, 15) (Figure 4.81).

**Figure 4.81** A close-up of page 15 from *Tree of codes* (Foer, 2010), which shows that the text is placed strategically on the page and appears separated differently to Schulz’s original text.



As a final point, it is important to mention that these three novels (and in general, all the unconventional novels of the twenty-first century) have been made possible by using digital design and

production technology. This does not mean that they could not have been created in the pre-digital era. It has been shown that unconventional typographic arrangements existed already in the eighteenth century; and also, actual holes in a novel in the twentieth, as Johnson's *Albert Angelo* is proof of. However, it would probably have been very difficult and costly to mass market and produce them in large quantities. In these three examples, it is possible to see a gradual increase in the way in which digital tools are made explicit. While *House of leaves* could be regarded as a 'traditionally' printed book, *Tree of codes* manifestly evidences the need for a complex process of production that makes the die-cutting possible. *S.* replicates an aged book from the mid-twentieth century that has been written over: it imitates handwriting, presents yellowing pages, and includes inserted ephemera. However, every single detail in it is a fiction, and thus speaks about the involvement of digital design and production processes.

What makes these novels a response to the digital era is not the fact that they are produced through digital means, but mainly that they include digital conventions in print to simultaneously embrace and question them. These novels could have existed in the pre-computer era (although production would have been much more difficult); however, what makes them belong to the digital era is that narrative and materiality are combined to generate a hybrid reading experience made out of analogue and digital conventions. The three novels reflect the technological shift towards the digital realm and can be seen to illustrate Bahktin's (1941) theory about the novel having a plastic quality and being able to adapt to reflect new conditions. Printed literature can respond critically to the digital form and question the possibilities still to be explored in the material medium (Fan, 2009). These examples use digital conventions to question analogue and electronic behaviours at once, creating hybrid reading experiences that are fully dependant to their material dimension.

## 4.5 The superiority of print

Unconventional novels in the digital era are print-specific and resist being transferred to another medium. The three case study examples used in this research fit within this description and the previous analyses on the different reading experiences evidence the relevance materiality has for narrative development. These are novels that have been created for the printed medium and work only in print. Even if they might expand the narrative through the digital realm or exist in combination with other digital elements that contribute to the narrative, their reading experiences unfold at the point of the interaction with the materiality of the printed book. Changing the medium would result in a change of narrative development and reading experience altogether.

In the case of *House of leaves*, the novel was originally posted online as a PDF. As Brick (2004) mentions, the possibility of creating a digital hyperlinked version of the work seemed at first as a convenient thing for the narrative. However, Danielewski, who posted the novel with a layout designed by himself,<sup>145</sup> found the reading experience not dynamic enough and too linear. This is not surprising. The disembodied nature of the digital medium obscures rather than enhances the narrative structure of the novel, stripping it out of its material dimension and the sense it generates in readers of actually traversing the labyrinth while reading. The narrative of *House of leaves* is dependent of the physical dimension of the printed book, which creates an embodied reader: holding the object and physically interacting with it are essential elements in the novel. Without the material layer, Danielewski's work fails to develop its full narrative potential.

In *House of leaves* the importance of materiality unfolds gradually as the reading progresses. Instead, in *Tree of codes* materiality is

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<sup>145</sup> This process is explained in more detail in Chapter 5.



always present and the importance of the print medium acquires full sense: the narrative cannot be separated from its physical dimension. Taking from Liu (2009) that nowadays every format has become a ‘deformational’ document, the key to *Tree of codes*’ difficulty in changing medium might be the fact that Foer previously deforms Schulz’s original text to create a volumetric narrative. According to Hayles (2013), the novel at the same time is subjected to and resists further deformation. Due to the three-dimensional treatment of the narrative, it cannot be deformed again. Thus, print becomes the exclusive medium for the narrative.<sup>146</sup>

This exclusivity is evidenced by the numerous instances in which academics have tried to digitise the text and convert it into a traditionally quotable document. Hayles (2013), Pressman (2018), Winters (2020) and Szymanska (2020) attempt to find a way to quote *Tree of codes* and translate gaps and show-throughs to typographical characters, or differentiate depth through typographical strategies (e.g., using bold and cursive, or using slash bars and dashes). Some of these attempts are more accurate than others, but they also are unsuccessful because separating text from form in this case results in a loss of physical experience, material interaction, and therefore a loss in meaning. None of these strategies can reflect the depth of the volumetric narrative created by the printed version of the book. In an interview with Steven Heller (2010), Foer summarises the novel in one sentence: ‘in the brink of the end of paper, I was attracted to the idea of a book that cannot forget it has a body.’ This is a book that cannot be separated from its material dimension and become digital.

*S.* presents an object that is an illusion and at the same time part of the fiction it creates. Even if the narrative is generated and

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<sup>146</sup> Despite the fact that *Tree of codes* might be the least susceptible to changing medium of the three novels, most interestingly, in 2015, it was translated to contemporary ballet. Commissioned by Manchester International Festival, Wayne McGregor collaborated with visual artist Olafur Eliasson and composer Jamie xx to create a work inspired by Foer’s novel. The ballet translated the physical language of *Tree of codes* into a ‘constellation of light, shadows, bodies, objects and sound dance at the edges of darkness’ (Studio Wayne McGregor, n.d.)

expanded through hybrid practices, it works solely within the printed medium. The activation of the fiction and the readers' intervention occurs only through the interaction with the physical object. The characteristics and the form of the printed book are the elements that shape and develop the narrative and the reading experience. A point that establishes a difference from the two other novels is the fact that *S.* originally had an e-book version.<sup>147</sup> According to Wocke (2017), the digital edition included all the inserts and cipher wheel. However, even if the narrative could be replicated in a digital version (as *House of leaves* and *Tree of codes* obviously also could), it would strip the novel from its tactile and material aspect<sup>148</sup>. Readers would not experience the illusion of holding the actual library book in which Jen and Eric had been exchanging handwritten messages. The fictional storyworld of *S.* is incomplete without the printed book, the sequence of worlds is thus interrupted; in Abrams words, 'the fun of *S.* is having the book itself. To physically hold it is kind of the point' (Hill, 2013, n.p.). The novel works better in print because it enables a full interaction from readers and an access to the enriched reading experience: 'We want people to feel as in love with the experience of being enveloped in the mystery of reading a book.' Similarly, in another interview, Dorst also comments on the relevance of the printed book format:

JJ's been pretty clear all along, saying we're making a book, this is the format this story was made for, and let's not [make a movie]. [...] And book is the ideal form for this, so why bother with forms that wouldn't be ideal? (Vineyard, 2014, n.p.).

From this perspective, the three novels claim the superiority of print. Even if they are highly hybrid artefacts, they put materiality at the front of narrative and reading development. In the case

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<sup>147</sup> The e-book version is not available nowadays. This fact reinforces the idea that the narrative works better as a printed medium and that the electronic version offered a simplified narrative experience.

<sup>148</sup> There also exists an audiobook of the novel, but it only focuses on the narrative of *Ship of Theseus*. In fact, the audiobook editors state on the website that all the margins and ephemera have been excluded from this version: <https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/titles/vm-straka/ship-of-theseus/9781478928225/>

of *House of leaves*, this is also made explicit by the fact that the novel is able to contain and connect both printed and digital worlds within the physical pages of the book. As Hayles (2002, 111–112) points out, the novel in itself is an act of remediation where print ‘eats all the other media’, such as film, video, photography, tattoos, typewriters, telegraphs, handwriting, and digital computers. In particular, film and video have a strong presence in the narrative. However, Danielewski is aware that they are very different languages to that of the written word, and thus he does not consider adapting the novel for the cinema, as he explains in an interview with Cottrell:

As Will Navidson says of the house on Ash Tree Lane: Not For Sale. Too many books these days are written with film rights in mind, which I believe limits the vast potential of the written word. I mean any author who has done any amount of reading and writing should know films are a different medium. They’re a completely different language. If you’re thinking the Hollywood deal while you write, you’re already selling out all the possibilities you have right there on the page. I love films but *House of leaves* is not about that experience. If you want to see this movie, you’ll have to read the book (2002, n.p.).

Even if *S.* also leaves out the option of moving into film, it is important to remember that J. J. Abrams is behind it, and as a filmmaker and film producer the novel can be considered as a ‘product of a Hollywood-style formula’, to borrow from Pressman’s (2020, 100) analysis. This is seen, for example, in the way in which the novel is created, with Abrams directing a big team of creatives such as writers, designers, printers, producers and marketing professionals, as Chapter 5 will explain. Or also in the fact that it was preceded by a mysterious trailer that showed images related to the narrative of the novel, as if what was being released were a film and not a book.

In this sense, *S.* is not a novel like *House of leaves*, in which Danielewski builds and writes a complex narrative by embodying readers in a labyrinth of intricate relationships, references, and deep reading. Instead, *S.* creates the illusion of narrative complexity, but in the end, it is one more layer among the many

visual dimensions of the project. However, it would be a mistake to disregard the novel because it puts the material dimension before its narrative. As Lanham explains (2006, 81), since the development of digital technology, information can be displayed in many forms (words, sounds, images), and thus choosing one of them is a 'stylistic decision'. *S.* is therefore a conscious choice of materiality over narrative. The physical object is not only helping to reinforce the narrative, but is in itself the narrative, the fiction; by doing this, it breaks the idea that unconventional novels are difficult. *S.* requires an effort, but it is more physical than intellectual. Reading the narrative here is an intentional choice from readers, as it is as well in the digital world. One might decide to scroll quickly through a webpage or choose to go deeper into the reading experience.

In the three examples, the visibility and awareness of the space of the page results in the active participation of readers. The novels demand reader involvement and interaction, giving them the power to decide not only what to read, but, more interestingly, how to read the multilayered options offered by the printed narrative. In these works, the reader becomes the most important figure. Danielewski explains that there exist a lot of layers in *House of leaves* that he would not comment about, because he would not like to 'compromise the personal experience of a particular reader's discovery' (Brick, 2004, n.p.). He even comments that the book is 'personal in a way that is specific, not so much to me but to the reader.' This statement, which could be applied not only to the three examples in this research but to all unconventional novels, shows that by foregrounding the material dimension personal experience is placed at the heart of the narrative.

Materiality in these examples opens the door to reader participation, and therefore, to personal experience, which is unique, singular, and unrepeatable. In an age defined by the fluidity and interchangeability of information; marked by the ability to record and share any kind of event; and represented

by the omnipresence of dynamic content and digital stimuli, unconventional novels claim the uniqueness and unrepeatability of personal experience (Hansen, 2004). One might try to photocopy the novel, translate it into a PDF, record it for an audiobook, maybe even project it on a screen; however, one would never reach to the core of the narrative experience unless sitting down with the physical volume in their hands, face to face with narrative and material dimensions. The superiority of print in these novels is made evident in the fact that despite nowadays print is dependent on the digital realm, it still is able to offer unique reading experiences that could not work without the physical embodiment and interaction of readers. Borrowing from Bolter (1991, 2), even if print no longer seems indispensable, it nonetheless remains indispensable.

This statement verifies yet another characteristic of narratives (either conventional or unconventional) in the digital era: print is a choice. In the case of unconventional novels, it is an intentional choice that foregrounds materiality and generates an embodied reading experience. The three novels in this thesis are complex narratives to read and deal with, but this difficulty is deliberate. Unconventional novels demand an effort, not only from readers but also from writers, who need to make an intentional choice to include materiality as part of the writing process. Consequently, this intentional effort foregrounds yet another important aspect of these novels, one that becomes more poignant with the digital influence (and that is explained in more detail in the next chapter): the role of the design process.

## 5 Unconventional examples: insights from the design process

The exploration of graphic and spatial qualities in the book foregrounds the material dimension in unconventional novels. This chapter examines the influence of design strategies as part of the writing process: writers become active agents and consider narrative and materiality together from early stages of their projects. Section 5.1 defines the concept of ‘designwriting’ and compares various examples that show an anticipatory collaboration between narrative and book layout to create dynamic narratives, such as *The bald soprano* and *The telephone book*. In addition, this section examines *Woman’s world*, an unconventional novel born out of a process of writing and design simultaneously.

Section 5.2 analyses the design process of the three case study novels: *House of leaves* (Danielewski, 2000), *Tree of codes* (Foer, 2010) and *S.* (J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst, 2013). By examining how writers and designers worked on them, it becomes evident that the three examples are a result of very different creative processes but share an intentional use of the material dimension of the printed book. The chapter concludes with Section 5.3, which draws attention to the different design methods employed in each novel.

### 5.1 Designwriting: the making of the unconventional novel

In ‘To write: an intransitive verb?’, Barthes (1966) identifies two types of writing roles: the author (*écrivain*), who just focuses on the writing without aiming to take readers anywhere beyond those words, and creating what can be labelled as a passive connection, author-reader; and the writer (*scripteur écrivain*), who effectively

aims to engage readers in an active way and make them part of the text. Thus, the latter is the producer of *writerly* texts.

The idea of the ‘writerly text’ can mean different things depending on the context in which it is applied. According to White (2005), Barthes focuses on the creation of meaning and regards the medium of print as a secondary device. He is not writing about design and does not refer directly to the physical dimension of literature. Yet, the context of this discussion is a consideration of how Barthes’ theory could be interpreted as a design situation and what it means in terms of book layout and design. The distinction between passive and active writers and texts can be applied to the context of unconventional novels: writers become active agents who not only conceive the narrative as text but also take the material dimension into account.

It is important to recognise that authors (them being *écrivains* or *scripteur écrivains*) can be involved in the way their texts look, this is not a unique aspect to unconventional novels. The difference lies in the intention of that involvement. What the writers who concern themselves with the material dimension are striving for is the creation of an active form of reading, one that is intentional and differs from a ‘traditional’ authorial interest. In this respect and for the purpose of this research, a further distinction seems appropriate in order to include the idea of the design interest, a sublevel to the *writerly* texts that is more specific to the consideration of book layout and design.

Sadokierski (2010, 3) uses the term ‘designerly’ to define the way in which writers combine words and images, borrowing from the working modes of designers. This definition is relevant as it adds up to a new dimension of these kinds of novels and creates a connection with design methods. However, describing the *designerly* process as a combination of words and images would be to oversimplify a complex creative process and give it an ornamental signification, which would also transform the writing of this type of novel into, indeed, a gimmick. In a process of design, there is a need to understand the contingency that the text designers are working with

in order to create its graphic dimension. Therefore, authors can explore, in a more integral way, the dynamic idea of the narrative, by concerning themselves with layout and typography. This is in line with Starre's (2015, 169) term of 'writer-designer', which he uses to describe authors who not only care about the look and feel of the book, but 'in their texts, the components of form, content, and medium converge into a tightly knit signifying structure whose parts cannot be interchanged without altering the overall effect.' In fact, he mentions Danielewski as a literary writer who could also be seen as a designer considering his approach to embodied narratives.

In the novel *Circular 22* (2022), in a section written as an experimental sort of diary,<sup>149</sup> Mora explains that his subconscious has been, for two days, thinking about the novel he started 'designing' in July and of which he only has some sketches and a rough 'design' for several chapters (Mora, 2022, 601). This is not a random choice of words. In 2012, Mora already stated that the contemporary novels born in a digitally connected world need not only to be written, but also need to be designed. The term 'design' in this context does not literally refer to the arrangement of images and text of the editorial piece but, using the definition from the Oxford English Dictionary (2023), to the 'purpose or planning that exists behind an action, fact, or object'. This does not mean that writers nowadays need to have a thorough knowledge of graphic and book design to be able to create a novel. The term 'design', in this case, refers to a writing process that looks beyond the mere inscription of words on a paper or digitally, and considers the material level as essential for the development of an unconventional narrative. As the analysis of the creative process of the three main novels shows, in order to be able to effectively integrate the material dimension within the narrative, writers need to be aware of the

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<sup>149</sup> The writer explicitly defines this experiment: 'The procedure is simple: a discontinuous writing, held for a month and based on two rules: first, write about the present, about what is happening at the time of the very act of writing; the second rule consists of the fact that what has been written can be corrected, but not retouched' (Mora, 2022, 519).



significance design has in the writing process. Indeed, they do need to write in a '*designerly* way' as defined by Sadokierski (2010, 3). Therefore, unconventional novels are *designerly* texts in which the writer includes materiality and design as part of the narrative during the writing process.

As Chapter 1 indicates, *Tristram Shandy* is a good example of this because Sterne experiments with language and materiality, overseeing all dimensions of his novel and employing printing resources available in his time. To achieve this, he works hand-in-hand with printers and publishers to supervise and manage the production process of his *Tristram Shandy*, meticulously correcting every proof and making sure the visual features of the work are as he intended them to be. It is possible to recognise a *designerly* method of working in the way in which Sterne regarded layout and typography to break the fixed form of the narrative. As Williams describes Sterne's work:

The novel and its wrapping are one, inseparable, revealing his subversion of traditional practices of eighteenth-century book production. [...] Sterne shows that this is not just a narrative but a three-dimensional artwork of which he is the designer (2021, 116).

This involvement is also seen in Mallarmé and the 'very careful study [...] of the effective distribution of blacks and whites, the comparative intensity of typefaces' (Valéry, 1972, 312) he explores when working on *Un coup de dés*. Likewise in Johnson's way of working in his novels, as Jonathan Coe (2004, 122) depicts in the writer's biography:

Constable [the publishers] were soon to find out, in fact, that they had an unusual author on their hands. Johnson wished to be involved in every stage of the production of *Travelling people*, and even asked for a meeting with the Garden City Press, the book's printers, so that he could discuss the various typographical challenges it posed.

It is possible to identify these writers as the *scripteur écrivain* from Barthes who works in a *designerly* way and gets involved with book layout, typography, and materiality to generate a dynamic narrative. This fact does not turn their works into artists' books (or precursors

of them), but it does connect on some level with the exploration undertaken by conceptual artists in the mid-twentieth century, especially when the conceptual element is achieved through the control of forms of layout and design.<sup>150</sup> This integral way of working is perceived in Ulises Carrión's 1975 statement: 'In the old art the writer writes texts. In the new art the writer makes books.' As Schraenen (2016) explains, Carrión participated in the whole process of book production and was responsible for both form and content. Thus, including a design process within the writing, as Langdon (2021, 36) also notes: 'Carrión would perhaps have shared Bolter's assertion that writing and designing are in one sense so closely related that writing can be considered a process which already requires an anticipation of design.'

The late twentieth-century notion of the designer working as a visible figure in the creation of the book emerges as a result of poststructuralist and deconstructionist ideas developed in the last decades of the century. Designers aim to expose the object rather than to produce a 'crystal goblet', thus contributing to the poststructuralist idea of 'the death of the author' and empowering readers to build their own meaning and reading experience. The emerging ideas and new graphic experiments generate a debate within the design sphere, during the 1990s, between those with more modernist views and those with a deconstructionist approach. For Robin Kinross (1994, 345) 'the idea that design should act out the indeterminacy of reading is a folly', because to him giving designers such power means to feed their vanity and offer readers a frozen interpretation of the text. This view is contested by Jeffery Keady (1995, 3), who defends the 'relative' approach of postmodernism and the need 'to not impose a single reading given the subjectivity and multiple readings contained in a text.' Kinross

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<sup>150</sup> Some conceptual art deals with typographic layout and pictorial layouts, such as John Baldesarri's *Brutus killed Caesar* (1976) or *A sentence of thirteen parts* (1977); Alighiero Boetti's *Dossier postale* (1969–70); Ulises Carrión's *Looking for poetry / Tras la poesía* (1973) or *Dancing with you* (1973); or Marcel Broothaers' *Pense-bête* (1964) and *Vingt ans après* (1969).

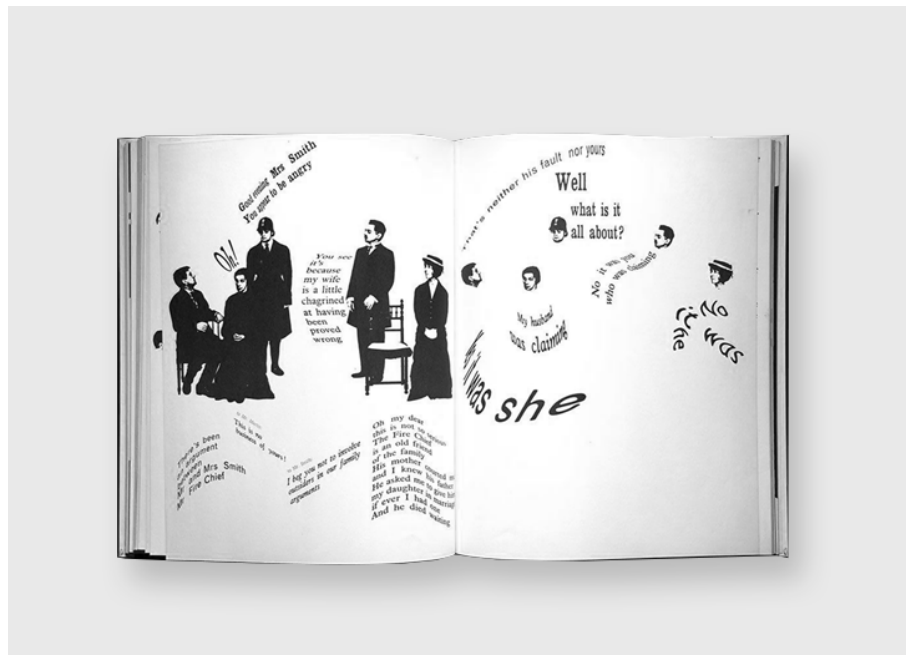
believes that instead of giving freedom of interpretation, the approach defended by deconstructionists imposes a single reading (the designer's) onto the readers; a point of view utterly rejected by Keedy (1995, 3): 'it doesn't make any sense to make the text even more "difficult to fathom" unless you absolutely hate the reader.'

A point that Kinross might have decided not to consider in this discussion is the ability of the designer to build from the writer's intentions and expand the reading experience of a given work. These ideas of the role of design in a narrative can be seen well represented in a literary precursor (not a novel in this case, but a play) which is nowadays considered as a paradigm of both postmodernist writing and postmodernist design. In 1948, Eugène Ionesco wrote the revolutionary play *La cantautrice chauve*, first performed in 1950. *The bald soprano* (the title in the English version) inaugurates the genre of the Theatre of the Absurd and the traditional conventions of the theatre are 'supplanted by surreal, nonrepresentational techniques representing human powerlessness' (Meggs, 1994, n.p.). The one-act piece is defined as an 'antiplay' that challenges time and logic. The six characters meet, chat, and argue until the dialogue becomes nonsensical and exposes the inadequacies of verbal communication. In 1954, the text of the French version was first published. As Meggs (1994) observes, by reducing the play to print, the expressive characteristics and dramatic techniques that defied conventions, such as characters shouting and talking simultaneously or actors facing away from the audience, are lost and the script becomes monotonous.

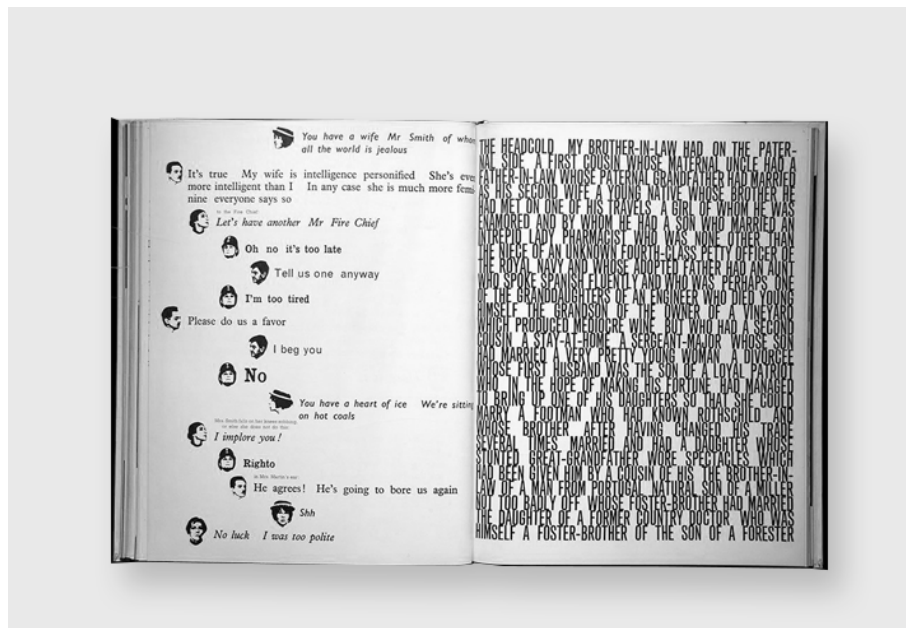
Ten years after that, designer Robert Massin (who at that moment is art director at Éditions Gallimard), attracted by the audacity of the play, approached Ionesco and offered to translate 'the atmosphere, the movement, the speeches, and the silences in the play' (Massin, 1970, 226) by bringing to the book format some of its theatrical qualities (Figure 5.1). Massin plays with typography and the connection of image and text, aiming to convey the sense of time and space on the stage and introduce it to the printed page:

‘I wanted to reproduce for the reader the experience of being in the theatre [...] reproduce not only the words, but the inflections, intonations, and pauses of the actors’ (Wolff, 2002, 42). In order to achieve this, he chooses different typefaces for the different characters and plays with text scale, position, and layout to indicate intonations, volumes, strengths and speaking traits. He also uses typographic experimentation to break formal material conventions of book layout and linear structure (Figure 5.2).

**Figure 5.1** A spread from *The bald soprano* written by Ionesco and designed by Massin (1964). The visual experiments with layout and typography bring the experience of theatre into the structure of the printed page and the codex book.



**Figure 5.2** A spread from *The bald soprano* (1964). Massin’s design aims to bring into the pages the simultaneity of the conversation that takes place on stage.



As Massin (1970) explains, an essential thing for Ionesco, who was hesitant with the project at first, is that the rhythm of the play needs to be respected. This is reflected in the pacing of the book and the way in which the designer works with white space and contrast. He also removes all punctuation from the original script and only keeps exclamations and interrogations. The effect of this visual strategy shows that Massin's work is not changing the meaning of the play, but expanding it (Gall and Brower, 1996, n.p.). This is made especially evident in what has been called the silence moment, where two minutes of stage silence are represented in forty-eight pages (out of the total of 192). Thus, the two minutes of silence are not lost in the printed translation but exaggerated and made physical (Figure 5.3).

**Figure 5.3** A spread from the silence moment in *The bald soprano* (1964). Silence is also conveyed in Massin's work through an explicit use of blank space in combination with the figures of the characters.



Massin's intention is to bring temporal and spatial qualities into the book. By dismantling graphic, visual and editorial conventions, he manages to create a printed work that appropriates theatrical techniques and characteristics through the use of graphic resources and puts 'the stage space into the two dimensions of the book page' (Hollis, 1995, n.p.). He does not only translate a theatrical play into a printed publication, but he also interprets it. He uses the material dimension of the book to expand the reading experience and include time, space, and performative qualities in it:

To achieve a genuine expression of the absurd, Ionesco had to invent his own language and create forms that are not those of rational discourse. Massin was able to reinvent his graphic design language to create an appropriate vehicle for Ionesco's imagination (Meggs, 1994, n.p.).

As pointed out in previous sections of this thesis, Ionesco's initial hesitation to Massin's reimagining of *The bald soprano* through graphic language can be seen as part of a general resistance to include design as part of the writing process and foreground visual and material dimensions in a narrative. From this perspective, it is possible that this resistance results from a fear of renouncing the notion of traditional authorship. During the last decade of the twentieth century, this idea is reinforced—and at the same time contested—by the development of electronic writing and hypertextual narratives. Hypertext opens up the door to an active reader, one that 'infringes upon the power of the writer, removing some of it and granting that portion to the reader' (Landow, 1997, 90). Until then, print established the sense that the text (together with the printed artifact) belonged to the author. Hypertext changes this perception, removing the isolation of the text and creating a networked system:

Hypertext changes our sense of authorship and creativity (or originality) by moving away from the constrictions of page-bound technology. In so doing, it promises to have an effect on cultural and intellectual disciplines as important as those produced by the earlier shifts in the technology of cultural memory that followed the invention of writing and printing (Landow, 1997, 110).

In this way, hypertext encourages the evolution in the perception and understanding of writing and authorial practices. Due to the advent of hypertextuality, it is possible to look at previous linear and printed narratives from a new point of view, and explore new fluid, dynamic and unconventional territories. This exploration opens the door for design to acquire a significant position and, as the following sections show, to become more poignant as the digital age advances. However, this does not act to the detriment of the writer's position, but also, as Mora (2012) notes, the introduction

of design emphasises the role of the writer as the active agent who constructs the narrative structure from an integral point of view. This shift was described in the early days of digital development by Bolter (1991) as a transformation in the way writers conceive their narratives. Rather than thinking about them as a single and unitary structure, they need to open up to a system of other structures and take into consideration ‘the special contribution of the electronic medium to the history of literature’ (1992, 144). As has been seen, this ends up influencing conventional printed narratives and changing the ways in which writers approach the construction of fiction.

In unconventional novels, ‘design happens prior to the text, it means a reflection that goes before the actual writing and develops in parallel to literary creation’ (Mora, 2012, 101). Therefore, the process that combines writing and design strategies in the conception of a narrative can be defined as *designwriting*, a practice in which writers are consciously using design strategies to produce *designerly* texts, working simultaneously with narrative and material dimensions during the creation process.

The notion of difficulty that has traditionally been associated with unconventional literary works has also changed since the development of digital technology. The way in which readers apprehend information has been transformed by the fluid and visual nature of the digital realm. Mora defines today’s reader as a ‘*lectoespectador*’ (2012, 19) or ‘reader-viewer’, a receiver of an artistic form made of text and image that expands the possibilities of the information flux. In other words, readers are now more familiar with the manipulation of text and page than back in the pre-digital era. Nowadays, Barton (2016) explains that readers are accustomed to distractions and disruptions to conventional page layout, with many readers now pursuing narratives that challenge the conventional idea of how a printed page should look. This connects with Emerson’s (2014) allusion of how the new writing interfaces create a constant connection to a network that, obviously, transforms the role of the writer and the practice of writing.

For Emerson, writing through a network means that ‘the network is itself constantly reading our writing and writing our reading’ (2014, 163). Therefore, she refers to the exploratory changing practices in writing influenced by the evolution in media as ‘readingwriting’. Taking the previous definitions into account, this term could also be taken a step further to represent the kind of reading that the unconventional novel demands: a *readingwriting* process where readers decide how and what to read, thus building their own reading experience from the writer’s narrative.

The pre-digital examples that have been mentioned in previous chapters can be seen as an anticipation of the shift brought by computers and electronic writing, an anticipation of the fluid and hybrid nature printed narratives could develop, and the involvement of designers with fluid form and the hybridity of information.<sup>151</sup> The unconventional novel in the twenty-first century reflects, in fact, this evolution in communication practices. As Tomasula claims: ‘at this early date in the twenty-first century, it seems that the novel [...] is once again a design problem’ (2012, 445). Inevitably, in the process of constructing unconventional novels, and thus of making the page visible, giving authorial agency to readers and changing the role of the author, the figure of the designer also becomes more relevant and gains importance as a connection point between the writer’s *designerly* idea and the *designwriting* of the physical object.

The following sections in this chapter highlight two things. On the one hand, the authorial engagement with materiality is well exemplified in the novels of Danielewski, Foer and Abrams, who, from different perspectives, get involved in the creation process

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<sup>151</sup> Nowadays, design schools train designers in this territory, preparing them to understand the need for fluid form and the fact that hybridity is now a norm rather than the exception. By looking at the curriculum of the Yale School of Art, for example, it is possible to see a focus on a hybrid training that teaches both print and digital, with courses such as ‘Expression, structure, and sequence: Typography’, ‘Programming as writing’, ‘Networks and transactions’, ‘Intermediality: Topography’ or ‘Print to screen’.



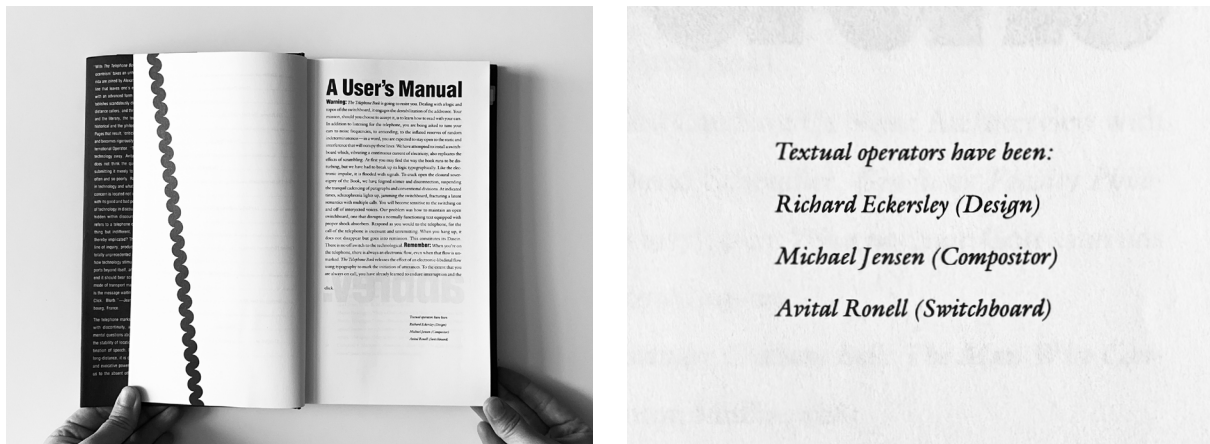
of the novel. This confirms D'Ambrosio's (2018, 87) claim that 'the development of new digital printing technologies gives the writers easier access to explore the countless possibilities of page design, while also make it less expensive for the publisher to actually put to print such [explorations].' On the other hand, and as digital development advances, design becomes more present in unconventional novels, which also opens the door to the need for a design figure (or design team) who works together with writers to materialise their *designerly* ideas.

### 5.1.1 *The telephone book*: the role of design in unconventional narratives

*The telephone book* is not a novel but a philosophical narrative about the age of the telephone and all the changes in communication it has entailed. The relevance of this book in relation to the unconventional novel is based on two main points: first, it was published in a period of transformation and adjustment, when analogue communication practices were giving way to digital ones; second, it serves as an anticipatory point of reference as to how a collaboration between writer and designer can make apparent complex concepts to create unconventional narratives.

Avital Ronell's 1989 work is a good example of a book that reflects a transitional moment in history. At that point in time, digital development was on the rise and therefore manual design and production techniques were starting to be replaced by digital processes. This is reflected in the book's narrative, but also in the intentional design that underscores the instability and agitation produced in the age of 'phonocentrism', thus creating a connection between 'its medium and its semantics, computer technology further enhancing its thematics of another communication technology, the telephone' (Royston, 2019, 12). The relevance of design in *The telephone book* becomes obvious in the fact that it is not possible to talk about the book without mentioning its designer.

The front matter introduces this work as a piece of collaboration between three agents, described as ‘textual operators’: Richard Eckersley as designer, Michael Jensen as compositor, and Avital Ronell at the switchboard (or writer) (Figure 5.4).



**Figure 5.4** The image on the left shows the ‘User’s manual’ in *The telephone book* by Ronell (1989). This section evidences that the book is a collaboration between writer, designer and compositor, as can be read on the close-up image on the right.

The ‘hyperdesigned discourse’, as DiSalvo (1996, 74) describes it, in an article for *Emigre* 39, is a challenge to conventions and rules associated with reading and the book. The term ‘hyper’ is not coincidental. The book is published at the end of a decade, the 1980s, characterised by the appearance of hypertext and hypermedia, which also places the work within the trend of early designs influenced by digitisation and defined by Heller (1993) as ‘the cult of the ugly’. According to Heller, this current of experimentation results from postmodern design and breaks classical notions of design (e.g., balance and harmony by layering unharmonious graphic forms and creating confusion). Ugliness, as Heller argues, might be seen as superficially misusing typographical concepts, but ‘as a tool, a weapon, even as a code is not a problem when it is a result of form following function.’

All this is well reflected in Ronell’s words: ‘Thanks to Richard, *The telephone book* breaks up the sovereignty of the Book and becomes a child of *techné*’ (Royston, 2019, 12). Ronell and Eckersley worked on every page and every typographical detail to create a book about the telephone, but also about how the new communication technologies were influencing the conventionally printed book.

Ronell also refers to *The telephone book* as ‘the first work that owed its graphic existence and stance entirely to the computer’ (Royston, 2019, 12). This, however, is not entirely accurate.<sup>152</sup> Even if the computer had an invaluable and unquestionable relevance in the creation of the book, its existence is more dependent on a hybrid combination of both handmade and electronic design practices, which provides a good reflection of the historical moment of transition into the digital era. In the article ‘About the making of *The telephone book*’ (2006), Michael Jensen (the compositor) explains how he helped to materialise Eckersley’s typography and layout ideas through the use of different manual typesetting methods and some of the first digital experiments with the Macintosh computer:

Most all of *The telephone book*’s base typography was not done on the Mac, but, rather, with ‘traditional’ tools of phototypesetting, design creativity and visualization, creative use of darkroom equipment, and a lot of razorblade work (Jensen, 2006, 352).

As it appears, at that point in time the different technologies available for designing on a Mac were still on their infancy, and it was easier to go through some processes ‘manually’ rather than to employ a tedious digital process even if in the end it was supposed to allow for more freedom. *The telephone book*, in Jensen’s words, is ‘the last, forward-looking work of the pre-laser, pre-desktop age’ (2006, 357). Thus, a hybrid book in every sense. In fact, the book is also a good example as to how the new electronic practices were starting to influence design practices. Behrens (2001) comments on the transparency of the design that normally characterises most of Eckersley’s works, and which is unusually lost in the experimental quality of *The telephone book*, the first book he creates using a computer.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> In light of what Michael Jensen (2006) describes, it is possible that Ronell claims it in such a certain way because she prepared and wrote the text entirely on a Mac.

<sup>153</sup> Even so, Ronell’s work was not the first book to which Eckersley applied unconventional typographic treatment. In 1986 he designed an edition for Derrida’s *Glas* (Figure 1.14), which allowed him to work on breaking typographic conventions and book design rules: ‘In a way you could say it was a dry run for *The telephone book* in some ways, which was very much about the relationship between designer and translator/author-figure.’ (Kindel, 1993) (See footnote 150 on page 282 for an explanation of the interview’s source)

The black and sober cover of the book makes a reference to a phone, and the debossed squares, a reminder of a telephone keyboard (Figure 5.5). Yet, at the same time, it regards the printed book as technology and associates it with a black box: a technological object that readers use with familiarity but without understanding the complex system that exists behind the final product (Royston, 2019).<sup>154</sup>

**Figure 5.5** Cover of *The telephone book* (Ronell, 1989). The design strengthens the idea of the book as a black box, which is then dismantled by the unexpected layout.



The cover establishes a comparison between book and telephone, both different communication tools but also commonplace objects that users employ without knowledge of how they are produced or how they work. However, once readers access the book, at the graphic level there is an explicit intention to alter the logics of hierarchy and formatting in traditional printed texts, purposely avoiding an easiness in reading and stopping readers from ignoring the material dimension of the narrative. This is well represented in pages 46 and 47 (Figure 5.6), where the left-hand page presents a mirrored image of the text on page 47. While the content of the

<sup>154</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 3, in *Pandora's hope: essays on the reality of science studies* (1999), Latour explains that 'blackboxing' is a process that obscures the process behind artifacts, making them completely opaque.

discourse focuses on ‘The subject of philosophy’ and the identity of the author, the material level challenges conventional reading by first confronting readers with a reflection of the text (page 46) that they will be able to read once they move forward (page 47). Unquestionably, the mirroring strategy dismantles the regular use of the spread in a book: it fades the double page but, at the same time, also strengthens it by creating a reflection. Thus, readers are forced to become aware of the structure of the book and question the true identity of the text.<sup>155</sup>

**Figure 5.6** Spread from *The telephone book* (1989, 46–47). As the image shows, at some points, the visual strategies become three-dimensional and challenge the physical structure of the book. In this case, page 46 mirrors the text on page 47.



As Eckersley explains in an interview with Eric Kindel (1993),<sup>156</sup> *The telephone book* counteracts ‘the way one usually approaches the book, which is to leave people as unaware of what is making the thing work as possible.’ This de-blackboxing process aims to create an illegibility that foregrounds the ways in which design

<sup>155</sup> Danielewski also uses this visual strategy when he mirrors the content of footnote 144 in Chapter IX of *House of leaves*. Thus, he foregrounds the material dimension of the narrative (Figure 4.26).

<sup>156</sup> This interview was conducted by Eric Kindel on 14 September 1993 by telephone. The transcription was reviewed and approved by Richard Eckersley in a letter in May 1994. The interview is currently unpublished. Kindel has given his permission to use extracts for the purposes of this research.

plays a fundamental role in the construction and shaping of communication. Writer and designer ‘wanted the book to do that, to make references to the established conventions of book typography but also to turn them upside down—to make people really aware of them’ (Kindel, 1993). A good example of this is found on pages 152 and 153, in which vertical ‘rivers’<sup>157</sup> are forced and exaggerated, thus breaking the uniformity of the text and provoking a discontinuous reading experience (Figure 5.7).

**Figure 5.7** Spread from *The telephone book* (1989, 152–153). The vertical rivers break the conventional single column of the text, which results in a discontinuous and slow reading experience.



In this sense, a similarity can be established with Sterne's ambition to generate an explicit and conscious reading experience by intentionally interrupting communication. In fact, there are two parts in the book that could be connected directly with Sterne's tradition: the four white pages that interrupt the discourse after page 253 (Figure 5.8), and the black page on page 293 (Figure 5.9). In both cases, the visual strategies interrupt the

<sup>157</sup> In *Details in typography* (2015, 47), Jost Hochuli explains that ‘vertical “rivers” of white space occur on a page when the wordspaces in several lines fall exactly, or almost exactly, under one another. As they disturb the flow of the text, the page make-up should be adjusted to avoid them’. In *The telephone book*, Eckersley works in the opposite direction, contravening the traditional good practice of typography and exaggerating the white space between words.

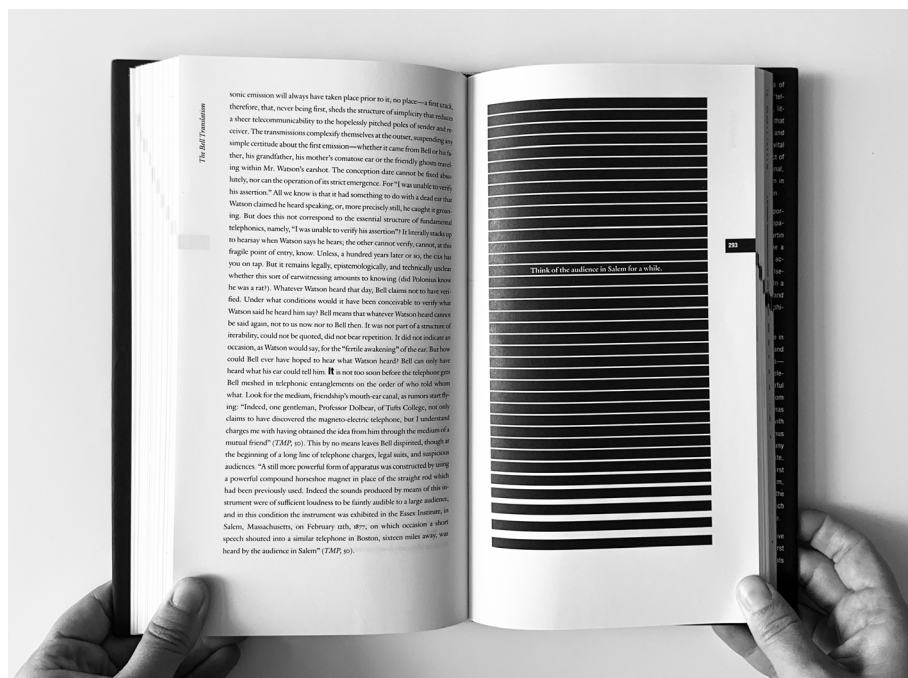
discourse and force readers to stop, wonder and pay attention to the material discourse of the book:

She [Ronell] wanted it to be a very deliberate experience of reading. You're never allowed to relax into the text or into a particular attitude or interpretation [...]. We wanted to make people conscious of the machinery in the language itself. So, I used the equivalent technique of defining the convention of the book, if you like, of making people very aware of the way the book was made (Kindel, 1993).

**Figure 5.8** Blank spread from *The telephone book* (1989, 254–255). While in Sterne's novel the blank only takes one page, in *The telephone book* the blank continues for four pages.

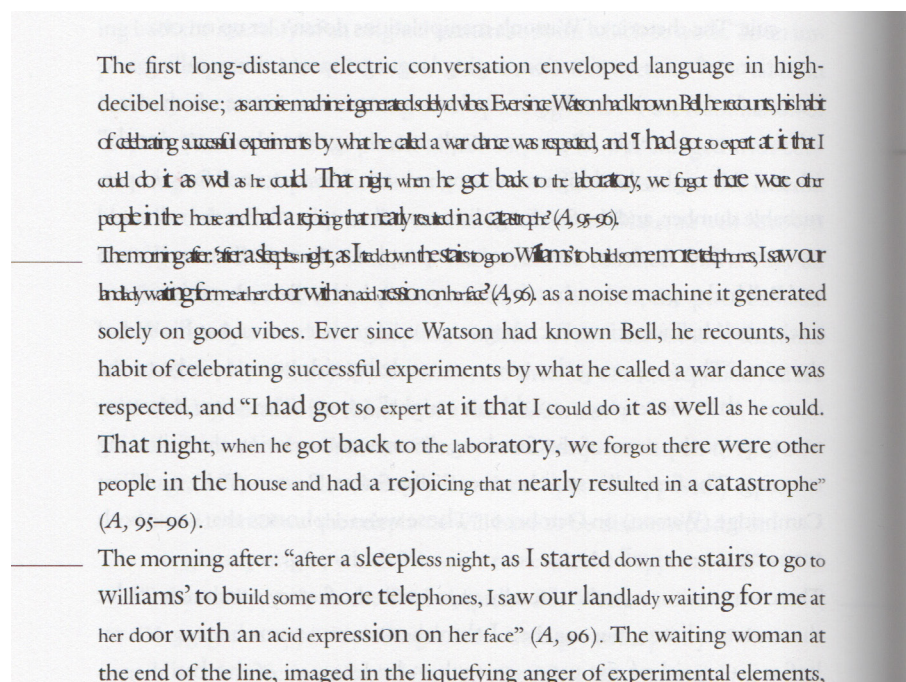


**Figure 5.9** The black page in the *The telephone book* (1989, 292–293) speaks directly to readers: 'Think of the audience in Salem for a while.' It also represents the connection and noise of the telephone call that is being described on the previous page.



In this last sentence, another connection with Sterne can be found: Eckersley employs conventions to break conventions. He also defines the format as ‘quite a classical one’ and ‘a curious amalgam of conventions’ (Kindel, 1993). Thus, Eckersley dismantles the traditional good practices of book design and typography (type hierarchy, balance, and harmony) by employing the emerging conventions of digital design, which allow for freedom of layout and exploration of new design territories. This can be seen in page 262, where the change in size on every character of every word creates an undulating movement and forces readers to slow down the reading pace in order to make sense of the text. In addition, at some points, the kerning is altered, and characters and words overlap, making some lines illegible (Figure 5.10).

**Figure 5.10** Close-up of page 262 from *The telephone book* (1989). By breaking the regularity in the size of the typeface, Eckersley creates an undulating effect that interrupts the normal reading pace.



However, and despite the criticisms received for foregrounding the material dimension, such as Robert Coover’s (1990, n.p.) claim of the design as being only ‘visual pyrotechnics’, the intentional interruptions are not just ‘design stunts’ or gimmicks, but they are crafted intentionally for and by the text, and at the same time help readers to navigate the content as the deconstruction unfolds, as Eckersley explains:



It begins with a very close analysis of Heidegger [...] that's handled in a fairly straightforward way. It's only later in the text where her [Ronell's] own interpretations are more primary that the typography becomes more experimental; it works toward a disintegration, in fact. The text becomes correspondingly easier for the reader, though there was a deliberate pacing to that: the layout is suggesting things that might be confusing in the text (Kindel, 1993).

Even if the work was criticised for creating too much of a difficulty in reading, that very illegibility helps to make the philosophical ideas more accessible or apparent to readers.<sup>158</sup> The point that Coover misses is that *The telephone book* constitutes an anticipatory exercise, similar as to that of *Emigre* magazine,<sup>159</sup> a publication that prepared the ground for the dynamic and fluid narratives and layouts that would develop with the digital realm, and that would become the norm years later. The fact that Eckersley's work is acknowledged by Ronell as part of the creative process also points to the relevance design has in the construction of the narrative through book layout and typography.

Because the narrative is created by an amalgam of voices and quotations, the different visual treatments of the text allow for a clearer connection of differences between the varied sources cited in it (DiSalvo, 1996). This can be seen on Figure 5.11 and Figure 5.12. Apparently, as DiSalvo explains, many academics were put off by the fact that the first sentence in the User's Manual confirms that it is not going to be an easy read: '*The telephone book* is going to resist you. Dealing with a logic and topos of the switchboard, it engages the destabilization of the addressee' (Ronell, 1989, np). Coover (1990, n.p.), for example, dismisses the design by stating that the book is in the end a 'fairly conventional academic paper'

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<sup>158</sup> In the case of *Glas*, for example, Eckersley makes more apparent what Derrida already said when the book was first published in 1974. *The telephone book* is also about making apparent Ronell's words.

<sup>159</sup> *Emigre* was a design magazine published between 1984 and 2005, created by Zuzana Licko and Rudy VanderLans. It was one of the first magazines to be designed on Macintosh computers, and one of the first to explore digital layouts and typography, thus anticipating fluid and dynamic narratives and the influence of digital communication on print.

once readers manage to ignore the visual aspect. Thus, he fails to read *The telephone book* as an integration of narrative and material dimensions. Or, as Eckersley explains, fails to understand that if the book had been handled ‘in a very conventional way, it would have been infinitely more difficult to approach’ (Kindel, 1993).

The typographic play creates a discontinuous reading, one that reminds the disruptions in communication generated by telephone interruptions when the connection is poor (or nowadays they

**Figure 5.11** Spread from *The telephone book* (1989, 188–189). The text is broken in fragments that refer to different voices. These pieces are distinctly differentiated by their positions on the page.

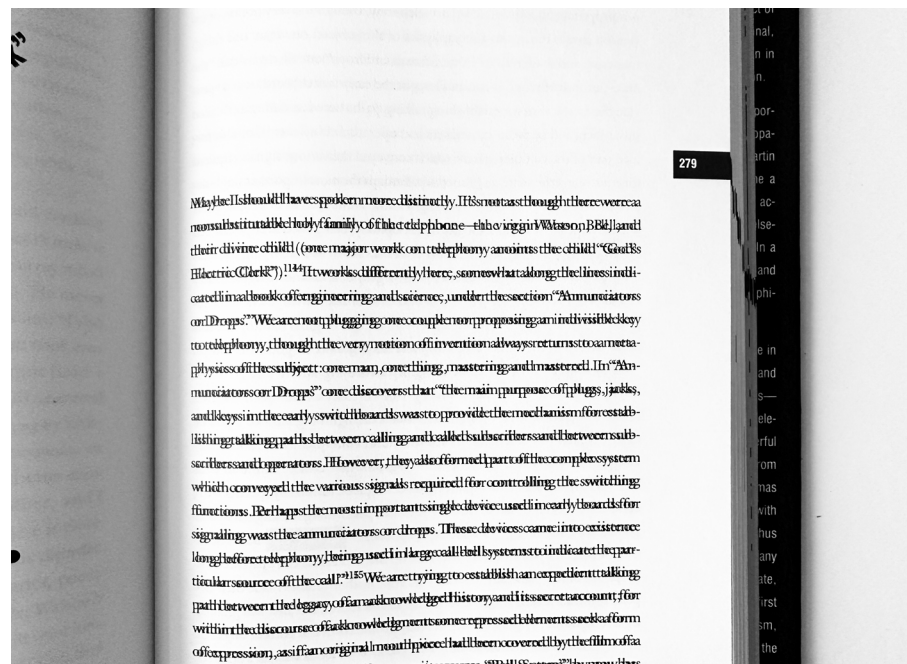


**Figure 5.12** Spread from *The telephone book* (1989, 298–299). The change in type treatment also contributes to establish a clear difference between the voices present within the text.

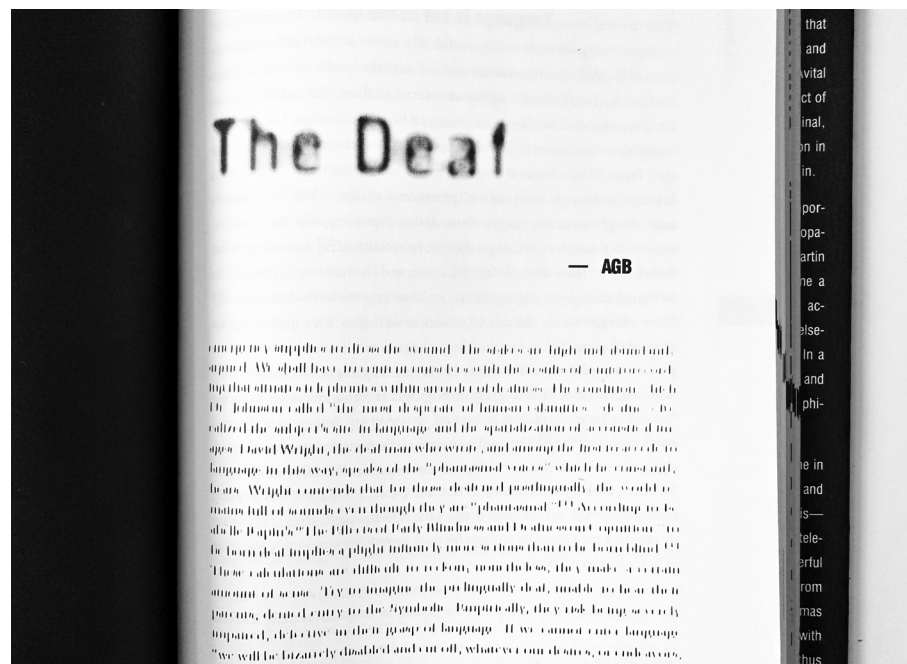


can be seen as Internet interruptions, an overload of information and stimuli). The material form of the book creates a difficulty, an ‘illegibility’ as Royston (2019, 30) puts it, that resembles ‘static’. The representation of static is altogether an expression of noise through an integral consideration of discourse and design. Noise is extremely perceptible, in particular on pages 279 and 327 (Figure 5.13 and Figure 5.14), which both present manipulated text that has become unreadable. The entropy of the communication system is made visible to challenge the idea that electronic communication is always

**Figure 5.13** Close-up of page 279 from *The telephone book* (1989). The expression of noise becomes evident through the illegibility of the repeatedly overlaid text. The characters are still recognisable, and thus the eyes search through the lines trying to decode the words.



**Figure 5.14** Close-up of page 327 from *The telephone book* (1989). The eyes can still recognise the lines as configuring a text, but it is impossible to extract meaning from them. It is significant that the title refers to ‘deafness’, which is then represented by an effect of ‘blindness’.



reliable and accessible, but users in that system learn gradually to inhabit and interact with that discontinuity:

*The telephone book* releases the effect of an electronic-libidinal flow using typography to mark the initiation of utterances. To the extent that you are always on call, you have already learned to endure interruption and the click (Ronell, 1989, np).

In *The telephone book* the text emerges as an active collaboration between writer, designer, and compositor, and thus generates an ‘object of discourse’, defined by DiSalvo (1996, 74). As Poynor (2003, 69) describes:

The point of these typographic modulations is not that they offer the reader a set of competing visual amusements, or encouragements to read, or doubtful graphic mnemonics, but that they arise from the text, in a close cooperation between writer, designer and compositor, and serve textual meaning.

However, what can be concluded is that Ronell did not go through an initial process of *designwriting*. The discourse was written before its design aspect was considered. Book layout and design came afterwards when she actively worked with Eckersley to create the book. Even if the material dimension in *The telephone book* is not created simultaneously with the writing, it serves as a good example of how a collaboration between narrative and book layout can influence the attention and engagement of readers, encouraging their active participation. Thus, *The telephone book* can be seen as an anticipatory exercise of how book layout and design would later on be used to create hybrid and dynamic narratives developed with the advent of digital technology. Besides, it sets the ground to understand the role design plays in the unconventional narratives of the twenty-first century.

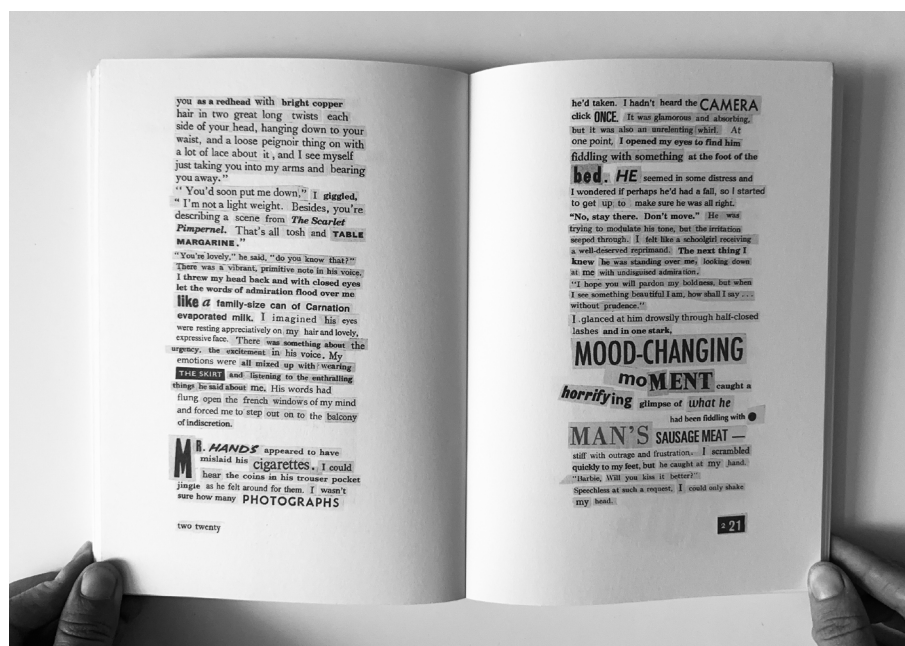
### 5.1.2 *Woman’s world*: writing as a design process

In contrast to *The telephone book*, *Woman’s world* is an unconventional novel of the twenty-first century fully born under the influence of the digital shift. Both works have been chosen to illustrate different ways in which design can contribute to

create hybrid and dynamic narratives. While Ronell's book is an anticipation of fluid constructions that would be brought by the digital realm, *Woman's world* is a novel that has absorbed the hybrid writing practices of its time. It serves as an example of 'the permeable boundaries between designers and writers', defined by Starre (2015, 171) as a result of the convergence between print and digital worlds. This convergence and the interest in embodied narratives results in writing learning the tools or methods of design (as is the case for *Woman's world* and *House of leaves*) or employing professional designers to build the material dimension of their novels (as the analysis of *Tree of codes* and *S.* shows in following sections). The significance of *Woman's world* for this thesis is related to the fact that it thoroughly foregrounds the role of design and openly exposes the concept of designwriting that the author employed to create it.

*Woman's world* is a novel written by Graham Rawle and published in 2005. As briefly explained in the previous chapter, it is a novel created using cut-up and collage methods: the author cuts fragments from women's magazines from the early 1960s and puts them together to compose a new narrative. Contrary to *Tree of codes*, rather than creating by removing parts from an existing work, this novel emerges as a result of the combination and addition of pieces from different texts (Figure 5.15).

**Figure 5.15** A typical spread from *Woman's world* by Rawle (2005, 220–221). The novel is constructed with numerous cut-up fragments from women's magazines of the 1960s. It works on two levels: the regular reading of a narrative and at the same time the slow reading that the visual level of the pieces demand.



On the cover, it is defined as a ‘graphic novel’. However, this appears as a misconception, a term that might have been chosen because of its strong visual dimension, but it is not ‘a full-length story published in comic-strip format’, as the *OED* defines the genre. *Woman’s world* is a novel and an unconventional one. Despite the fact that the collage technique imparts a strong graphic dimension to each page, these images do not have narrative value unless the text is read in a conventional fashion. As Rawle explains in a conversation, he wanted the novel to work on two levels: one is the fast reading of being engaged with the narrative, and the other is the slow reading and figuring out how the novel has been created as an artwork and what the source material might have been.<sup>160</sup>

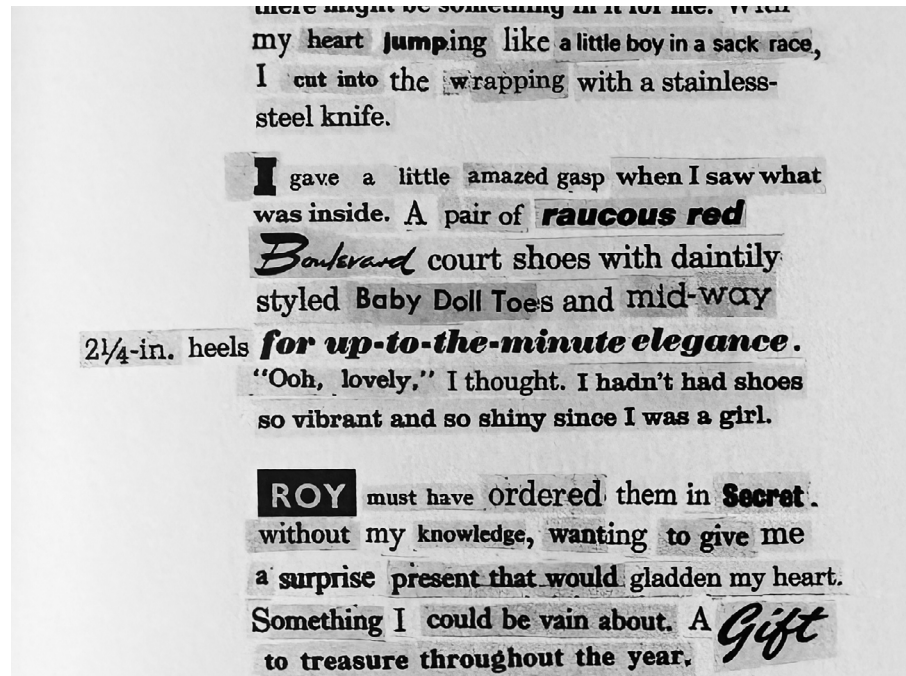
The novel recounts the life of Norma Little, a woman from the 1960s who lives in a small British town and appears to have built her character by constantly reading the women’s magazines of her time. Gradually, as the story develops, it becomes clear that Norma is in fact attached to her brother Roy. Attached, in the sense that she only exists as part of his personality: he is a man trying to be a woman. The novel is written in the first person, narrated by Norma. Rawle explains that the magazines were the perfect material to use because of the self-righteous and opinionated point of view they provide to the narrative, with a very dogmatic voice about how women should conduct themselves to be perfect in the world, without any mention of real issues or daily problems. For the author, it made sense to have this woman from a working-class background whose only access to a ‘woman’s world’ is through the expectations of the magazines. Also, because, as a man, the only available way for Roy to create a female persona is through the source material of the magazines, which leaves a

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<sup>160</sup> Online conversation between the author and Graham Rawle, 11 September 2023. The conversation is unpublished, but Rawle has given his consent to use extracts for the purposes of this research.

big gap of information. A gap that is indeed reflected in the cut-up style of the pages, which gives the feeling that thoughts have been left unsaid (Figure 5.16).

**Figure 5.16** Close-up from *Woman's world* (2005, 23). The collage of the different fragments bring the self-righteous voice from the women's magazines of the time into the narrative. This contrasts with the fact that the main character is a working-class woman who can only create her female personality through those magazines.



*Woman's world* is the product of a complex development that combines narrative and material dimensions, each one simultaneously influencing the other. The idea originates with Rawle's previous work, *Diary of an amateur photographer: a mystery* (1998), which is also built using bits of text and images this time, from 1950s books and magazines. In this process, he discovers that these fragments bring a voice over from the time in which the magazines were published, thus generating a deeper connection with the characters and the narrative.

Once the decision was made to work with women's magazines, Rawle wrote a first draft for the narrative. Simultaneously, he started cutting up and gathering together the pieces from the magazines that caught his attention and that could be a good fit for the story. Thus, he generated a sort of scrapbook or catalogue of fragments that allowed him to reference and consult while developing the narrative. The next step for Rawle was to create a digital document in Word in which narrative and fragments

converge: each time he found an appropriate piece from the catalogue, he replaced the original text in the document with the one from the magazine. Progressively, the narrative changes and evolves guided by the found text, shifting in ways that could not have been expected when writing the first draft. In this process, Rawle sometimes found it difficult to locate a specific piece from the magazines that fit the narrative, and at some points it became necessary to go back to the draft to understand what the original intention of the narrative was, and adapt it to be able to include the most fitting bits from his archive. As Rawle recounts, the initial narrative presented Norma and Roy as twins. Gradually, in the process of gathering the pieces and rewriting, the narrative changes and the two characters transform into the same person. At that moment, Rawle realised that form and content had become one: by constructing them simultaneously the narrative evolves and is influenced by the design process that builds the materiality.

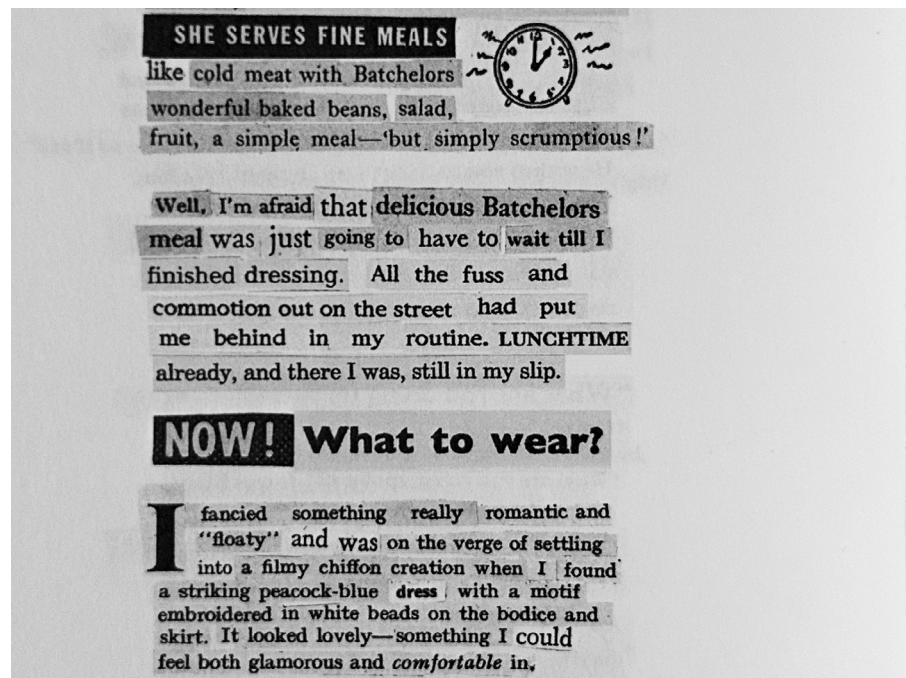
It is important to understand that the novel is not built out of single cut up words, which in a way would have been easier, but from fragments. These consist of entire paragraphs that enable the narrative to adopt the tone of voice and turn of phrases from magazine's articles and adverts. These fragments eventually needed to be crafted or intervened with single words or elements from other fragments to provide the text with the adequate emphasis and allow for it to blend with the narrative (Figure 5.17).

Even if the gathering of the magazine fragments was manual and handmade, this first part in the creation of the novel was focused on building the digital manuscript. As Rawle explains, at some point in the process the initial text disappeared from the document and was replaced by the new text from the fragments, with numbers that reference the actual pieces in the physical catalogue he had built. Once the manuscript was reviewed and finalised, the process of building the physical manuscript began.



Rawle worked on one side of loose pages that match the size of what would be the printed book. He started with just a piece of paper and a column drawn in it to represent the type area. As he explains, he had not tried to put together the pieces until this moment and so the visual dimension of each page appeared progressively as a surprise for him (Figure 5.18).

**Figure 5.17** Close-up from *Woman's world* (2005, 18). The novel is made of fragments which are at some points, as the image shows, intervened with single words or elements from other fragments to provide continuity in the narrative.



**Figure 5.18** Original collage from one of the pages of *Woman's world* (2005) that shows the variety of colours from the different fragments and magazines. Image provided by Graham Rawle.

the number correctly? I opted for the one labelled Syms. I half wondered if I would be greeted by SYLVIA SYMS, star of stage and screen who keeps her skin so young-looking. There was a pane of frosted glass set into the front door but no light from inside the house, except a gleam here and there at the downstairs window where the curtains were not quite drawn. After a moment, there was movement from within and a light shone in the hallway. The door was opened by a wheezy, WIDE-HIPPED WOMAN whose resemblance to Miss Syms could be measured in nautical miles. She had thin, frizzy hair and cheeks that looked as if they had been slapped

**FORTY** TIMES.

At her feet, a small, highly strung poodle WRIGGLED and worried itself into a rich, creamy lather. She hooked her index finger into its COLLAR to restrain it, though this did nothing to curb its

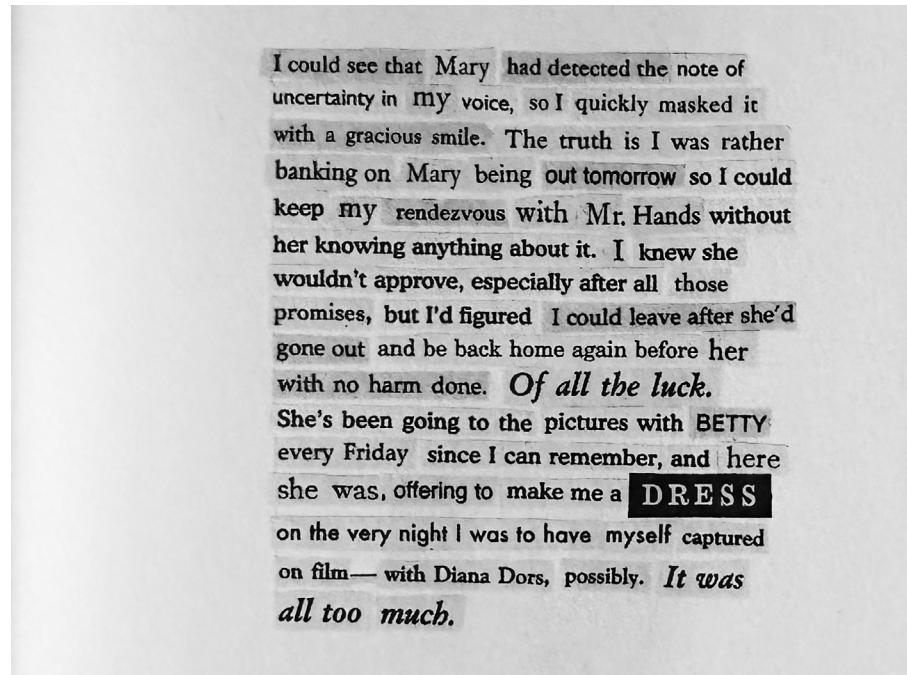
At this stage in the process, this approach gave him the creative freedom to play with the position of specific details and choose the best option for each composition (Figure 5.19). For example, he could choose from a selection of words that read ‘mother’, selecting the most appropriate one on each occasion, and even play and surprise readers by creating an unexpected emphasis on a particular sentence.

**Figure 5.19** Spread from *Woman’s world* (2005, 264–265). While Rawle constructs each page, he plays with the composition and experiments with layout options to find the right visual emphasis for the narrative.



The last stage of the process consisted of scanning all the pages, which Rawle did himself, and used Photoshop to finalise some details, such as giving a bit more breathing space to some of the text like the one from page 121 (Figure 5.20). A deliberate and important decision at this point was to remove the colour from all the pages and turn them to black and white. Even if the final layout is interesting in its original status, removing the colour meant stripping the pages from a layer of information that does not necessarily add anything to the story and that might end up confusing and distracting readers rather than fostering a close reading. As Rawle observes, the ultimate purpose of the project was to create a novel and not an artists’ book or a unique expensive visual piece. The focus was put into creating a work that has a narrative and that can be read rather than just looked at. Therefore, finding a balance between narrative and material dimensions was essential.

**Figure 5.20** Close-up of page 121 from *Woman's world* (2005). Once the pages were scanned, the author used Photoshop to remove the colour and give more space to some pieces of text that appear too tight.



The creation process of *Woman's world* gives full sense to the concept of 'deformational forms' defined by Liu (2009). This is a hybrid work that combines analogue and digital techniques simultaneously. It starts off as a digital text that is influenced by fragments of print, the digital manuscript is then transformed into a physical document crafted by hand by the author, who scans the resulting pages and brings the deformed document back to a digital format to be finalised and prepared for printing. The result is a novel that completely foregrounds the designwriting process applied by the author. This process is made evident from the first interaction of readers with the book: the pages make explicit the attention put on every word, sentence, or paragraph, both at narrative and material levels. Designwriting in this novel ensures that narrative and materiality are integrated as a whole and separating them would mean a loss for the reading experience.

As a result, print is an intentional choice for this novel and prioritises the physical object to the digital version. Even if the scanned pages could be easily put together to create an e-book

version, the result resists to be read as such.<sup>161</sup> Through the many deformations suffered by the text, at both digital and analogue levels, the outcome is locked into its final form. The resulting pages work as images (as JPEGs even, to make more evident the hybrid nature of the novel), and therefore the text they contain is not fluid or responsive. It does not adapt flexibly to format changes or scaling as a conventional text would do. The text is created specifically to be contained within a defined page format, in combination with other words and layout elements that are also fixed. *Woman's world* is a novel that demands an effort because hinders automatic linear reading. Due to its nature as 'image', it takes a greater effort for the eyes to run through the words on the page (texts changes several times in size, shape, style, etc.), and thus the reading requires a slower pace to take in all the changing details of the page. If adding this to a digital experience through an e-book, the result would be an even more strenuous reading.

At the time of the conversation with Rawle, he was working on a film version of the novel. As he explains, the idea is not to adapt the film, but also adapt the creation process. For this purpose, Rawle uses an archive of clips from film footage to create a sort of collage film. This process makes it problematic at some points to find specific clips that replicate exactly the details from the narrative. For example, there is a moment in which the main character breaks the heel of her shoe. The difficulty in finding footage with the appropriate content (it was never the appropriate shoe or the correct shot), made Rawle understand the need to go back to the original narrative. In order to translate the novel into film, it becomes necessary to go back to the initial idea: rather than looking at the final text, he should look at the intentions of the narrative and see how the shoe moment (to continue with the example) can be replaced by another element that conveys the same sense of tension or despair intended with the original scene.

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<sup>161</sup> If there originally was an e-book version of the novel, it is not available anymore.

Therefore, *Woman's world* in particular, and unconventional novels in general, work in print and resist being moved to another medium. This resistance is created because in order to change platform and format the narrative has to undergo, one more time, a process of designwriting and of deformation, in order to integrate narrative and materiality specifically for the new medium. *Woman's world* shows that unconventional novels require a process of re-design in order to change medium, as they are not playing just with the text's fluidity, but with the dynamism of narrative and material dimensions together as one.

## 5.2 The design process in twenty-first century examples

After studying the two previous works and the relevance of the design process in creating dynamic narratives that break conventions, this section analyses the insights from the design development of the three case studies at the core of this research. The three novels are born out of a *designwriting* process, as will be explained, in which the writers take into consideration the material aspect of the narrative from early stages of the writing process. In fact, in all three cases, materiality constitutes the first step towards the development and construction of the novel.

Equally, in the three examples a graphic design process becomes essential to build and expand the writers' narrative ideas. According to Offermanns' (2022, 24) definition of contemporary creative processes, the aim of design work in these novels is not about merely following established directions from the writers' side, 'but rather exploring, perceiving, and revealing options.' This process of design exploration is particularly evident in the creative development of *Tree of codes*, as the following discussion shows.

Even if these novels are a result of *designwriting*, they also have very distinct design processes. This fact speaks to their needs and

their moments in time, but also reveals that each of them is, as B. S. Johnson would indeed put it, a unique solution to a specific narrative problem.

### 5.2.1 *House of leaves* and the design process in Danielewski's novels

*House of leaves* took more than ten years to create. In 2003, Danielewski explains that the writing process of the novel starts at the end of the 1980s as a series of disconnected ideas, pieces and characters (McCaffery and Gregory, 2003). He had a mental picture of a house that was bigger on the inside than on the outside, but it took him several years to understand that all the fragments he had been imagining and working on were all part of this house:

One night, completely out of the blue it seemed, I had one of those flashes of recognition that every struggling artist dreams about, and I suddenly found myself saying 'Oh, my god! All the characters I've been working on *live in this house!* And all the theoretical concepts that I have been wrestling with *are represented in this house!*' (2003, 105).

This statement points to the fact that the house is at the core of the novel. *House of leaves* needed the 'house' to become alive, as the articulation or territory that ties together all the pieces and activates the rhizomatic system of the novel. Drawing from the previous analysis in Chapter 4, the house is represented conceptually in the narrative plane and in the materiality of the printed book, and thus tied to the physical dimension of the object. The house provides a point in space for the assemblage of multiple voices; at the same time, the assemblage of these voices builds the house. One could not be without the other; or, if they could, they would create an entirely different system.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> There exists a relationship between the spatial territory of *House of leaves* and the spatial representation of architecture in books like the 'three-dimensional manuscripts' of the Vedute Collection, within the library of Het Nieuwe Instituut, in Rotterdam (Macken, 2016, 32). Architects and architecture scholars have explored the connection between architecture and books, such as Beatriz Colomina, or Alison Smithson, who claimed that 'a book is like a small building for us' (Smithson, 2002, 97).

Taking this into consideration, it seems natural that Danielewski felt the need to go beyond traditional authorship methods for the creation of the novel. He had to build narrative and house simultaneously. Therefore, it is not surprising that when asked about the writing process of the novel, he states that he wrote ‘the entire thing in pencil’ (McCaffery and Gregory, 2003, 117), because he found the apparent freedom of electronic word processors more restrictive than writing on paper. Even today, more than twenty years after the novel was published, it would be difficult and tedious to write such a convoluted structure on a word processor, a programme conventionally used to write documents, often in a linear fashion, regardless of what its material output should be. In particular, it would be quite hard to build the narrative and textual material complexity of Chapter IX in *Word*. But even if a more flexible software for laying out texts could be used (such as Adobe InDesign), writing directly on it would still make the creation process difficult, because these kinds of digital programmes allow only for a flattened vision of the document; and Danielewski’s is first and foremost a three-dimensional narrative.

The deep connection the novel has to film also reinforces this need for a space that enables the development of visual ideas: ‘I even used a pencil to storyboard the labyrinth section in the novel, which was by far the most complicated thing to write from a design standpoint’ (McCaffery and Gregory, 2003, 117–118). Therefore, the freedom he is looking for when stepping out of the electronic word processor, would not only be a way of making a point of how analogue writing practices are more liberating than digital ones; but is also related to the need to visualise, through sketching and storyboarding techniques, his narrative ideas before being able to typeset them digitally<sup>163</sup>. With this process, Danielewski is in search of a convergence point between writing

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<sup>163</sup> This way of working could be compared to Vicente Luis Mora’s own description of his preparation methods for his novel through sketches and design.

and design, a point in which writing expands through a design strategy and, therefore, becomes *designwriting*:

I simply said, ‘Okay, I can place text this way on the page, so it has that effect. And I can use the shape and design of text not just to conjure up some static visual impression but use it to further enhance the movement of meaning, theme, and story.’ (McCaffery and Gregory, 2003, 106).

However, this does not mean a rejection of the digital dimension from Danielewski’s side. Nor does this suggest that there was no digital writing or design process involved in the creation of the novel. Danielewski is aware that *House of leaves* is very much indebted to computers and that they made it easier to materialise the whole thing, which probably would have been extremely complicated to be produced with pre-digital methods: ‘I could insist on certain things because I knew computers could handle them’ (McCaffery and Gregory, 2003, 118). Actually, despite the use of digital means to design and produce the novel, it was indeed too difficult for the publisher to deal with such a complex project. As Hayles (2002, 126) recounts from a conversation with Danielewski:

The publisher [Pantheon] accepted the manuscript when it was a continuous typescript, without any of the design elements that would become such a prominent feature of the published book. During production he tried to communicate to the press’s designer what he had in mind and found it impossible; the design was too complex. So he flew to New York and sat for a month in the press’s offices, typesetting the book himself on a computer.

Thus, Danielewski ended up typesetting the manuscript himself. He not only did the sketching and storyboarding of the narrative, but he worked hand-in-hand with a designer to materialise his ideas and *designwriting* process for *House of leaves*. This involvement resembles Sterne’s concerns with the production process of *Tristram Shandy* and how he talked and worked with printers to ensure the results he specifically had in mind for his novel. Both writers crafted their novels using the technology available to them: the hand-marbled page in the case of Sterne, and the mapping out and design layout of Chapter IX for Danielewski. As for the latter,

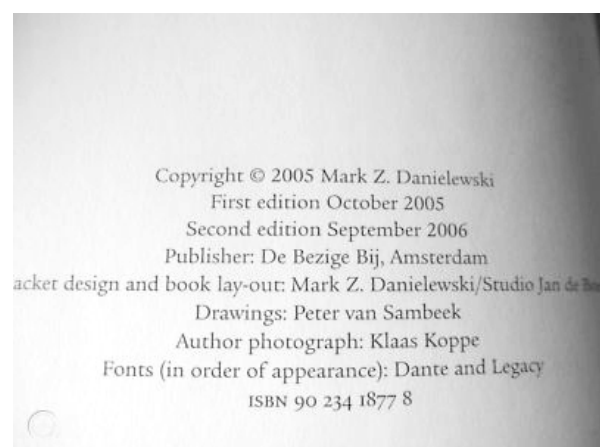
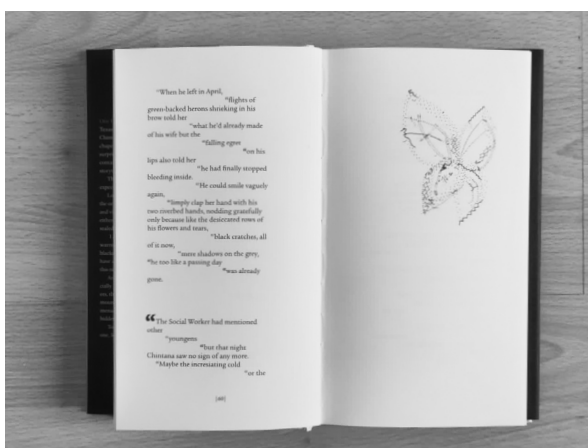


it also becomes obvious that the narrative of the novel undergoes a process of deformation before acquiring its final form: *House of leaves* goes from a handwritten shape to a digital version and then becomes a printed book.

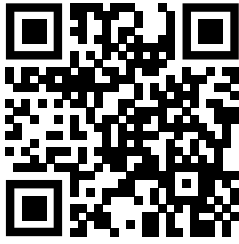
The writer's involvement in the design process becomes more evident in some of his subsequent works, which also help to explain his way of working on *House of leaves*. In 2005, *The fifty year sword* was published, a short story constructed as a dialogue of five different narrators that are distinguished by typographic treatment and colour (Figure 5.21). In the credits page of the first edition, published by De Bezije Bij in Amsterdam, Danielewski himself is credited as the designer of the work: 'Jacket design and book lay-out: Mark Z. Danielewski / Studio Jan de Boer' (Figure 5.22). This is interesting because of the two things present here. On the one hand, Danielewski's involvement in the design of the short story is openly evidenced, something that did not happen in *House of leaves*. On the other hand, even if he might have conceived the whole thing himself, the fact that a design studio is credited points out to a more relevant presence of the process of design in the creation of the work.<sup>164</sup>

**Figure 5.21** A typical spread from the 2015 edition of *The fifty year sword* (Danielewski, 2015, 60–61).

**Figure 5.22** Close-up of the credits page from the 2005 edition of *The fifty year sword* (Danielewski, 2005), which identify the role Danielewski had in the design process.

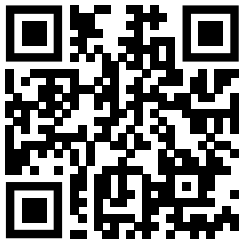


<sup>164</sup> *The fifty year sword* was published in 2015 by Pantheon, but design and layout credits have completely disappeared from this edition, which obscures once more the creation process of the work.



Video 5.1 A typical reading of *Only revolutions* by Danielewski (2006). The novel is best read by alternating between narratives every eight pages.

By the time Danielewski's second novel was published in 2006 his work had become recognisable because of the careful thought he puts to the material dimension that accompanies his narratives. *Only revolutions* (2006) is no exception to this. In the novel, a pair of teenagers embark on a road trip adventure across the United States. The story is told twice, once in Sam's voice and the other from Hailey's point of view. The main characteristic of the narrative is that each version starts at the opposite end of the printed book, which is designed to be read in two directions. The main text on the pages is split in two: the upper part is meant to be read from top to bottom, and the lower part appears upside down. Therefore, to read the other version of the story readers need to move to the other end of the book and rotate it 180 degrees (Video 5.1).



Video 5.2 This video from *Only revolutions* (2006) shows the gradual progression in text size. The two narratives increase and decrease as readers progress through the pages.

As McHale (2011) describes, the two narratives mirror each other from opposite sides of the book. The primary text on each direction (the one that faces readers in a 'typical' fashion) starts in a larger font size (16–18pt, approximately) and diminishes in size as the narrative progresses (up to roughly 7–8pt); while at the same time the 'secondary' narrative (the upside-down text) grows in size. The change in size is gradual and barely noticeable page by page (Video 5.2), and mostly becomes evident when the two narratives converge in the middle, when both become the same size (pages 180–181, Figure 5.23). The book is 'designed to be read in so many different ways' (Danielewski in an interview with Benzon, 2007, n.p.), although a note from the publishers on the flaps of the dust jacket recommends 'alternating between Sam & Hailey, reading eight pages at a time' (Danielewski, 2006).

Structure and page composition become fundamental in this novel. Whereas *House of leaves* is a chaotic (almost) assemblage of documents, '*Only revolutions* presents a much more regulated and refined formal system' (Benzon, 2007, n.p.). Each page is divided in two parts: the narrative for Sam and the narrative for Hailey, each one rotated 180 degrees from the other. Each of these parts are divided in two other parts as well: the main narrative of the character and a smaller column on the left which represents a

chronomosaic with different moments in the history of the US. This results in each page having a fixed number of words, a total of 360 (approximately 90 words per narrative: Hailey's + Sam's + Hailey's chronomosaic + Sam's chronomosaic), which also represents the 360 degree-movement that reading the novel entails (Figure 5.24).

The play with symmetries, directions, and increasing and decreasing compositions inevitably reminds of Oulipo's constraints and their way of working with strict writing rules. However, in Benzon's interview (2007, n.p.), Danielewski explains that the novel

Figure 5.23 Spread from *Only revolutions* (2006, 180–181) that shows the middle point of the novel, in which both narratives have the same size and visually mirror each other.

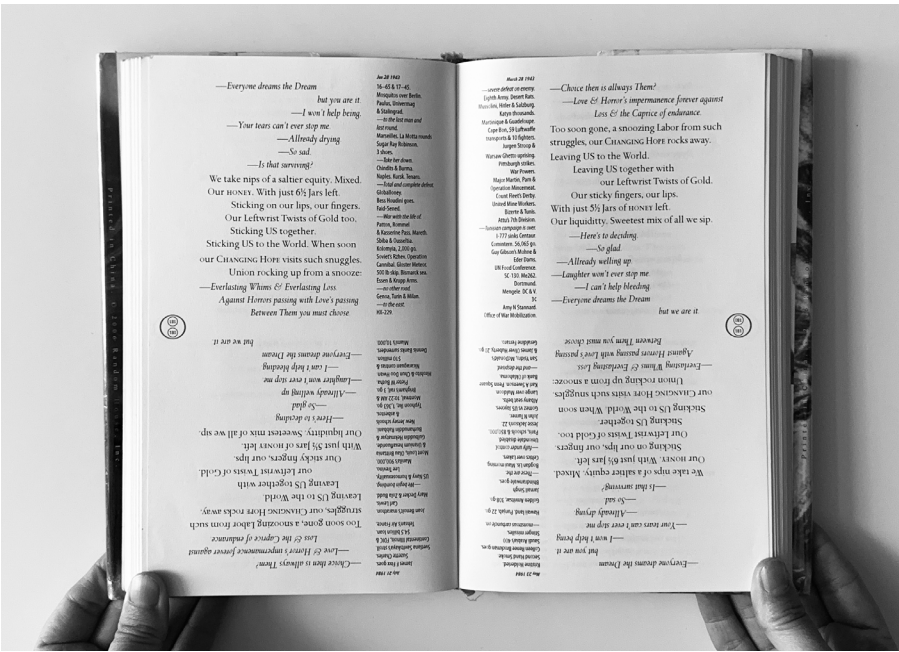


Figure 5.24 A diagram of *Only revolutions* that shows the structure of a typical page in the novel, which is divided in four parts (two parts per narrative).



is not just about Oulipo's methods, normally too focused on the constraint, but also approximates to 'alcoholic writing: it tends to be about the drug.' What becomes clear when reading the novel is that there are no elements left to chance in it, every detail on every page is carefully considered and placed there for a reason.

Due to this, it comes as no surprise when Danielewski (2007) explains that structure and content evolved simultaneously when developing the novel. He worked with the book as a three-dimensional object that represents the relationship between the two characters. This process of *designwriting* is clearly evidenced in the drafts for page 1 of Sam's narrative that Danielewski published in *Gulf Coast Journal* (2007), which show the evolution of both narrative and material dimensions as the project progressed.<sup>165</sup>

In the case of *Only revolutions*, Danielewski has stated that he wrote the main narrative 'initially in pencil on paper' as he also did in *House of leaves* (McHale, 2011, 179).<sup>166</sup> As the first three versions show (Figure 5.25, Figure 5.26, and Figure 5.27), the project evolves from a handwritten manuscript in 2002 to a first typewritten version in 2004 that starts to present visual features and to include annotations for details such as the chronomosaic. In the fifth version in 2004 (Figure 5.29), the page already resembles the final layout that would become part of the printed novel. In this case, Danielewski is already considering the structure of the two mirroring narratives, even if Hailey's has not been included yet. Figure 5.31 shows the final version of the page already prepared to go to print, with final typographic details included such as the difference in colour for some characters and bold fonts.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> The drafts are reproduced on the following two pages. For an enlarged version of the images see Figure E-1 in Appendix E (page 425).

<sup>166</sup> This was originally stated by Danielewski in a video posted on the *Only revolutions* website, which is no longer active.

<sup>167</sup> There is one missing part of the four sections in which the pages are divided. The chronomosaic for Hailey does not appear for seventy-six pages. The reason for this is that the dates in the chronomosaic reach the present time (29 May 2005) and the rest is left empty because it represents the future and the events that have not yet happened.

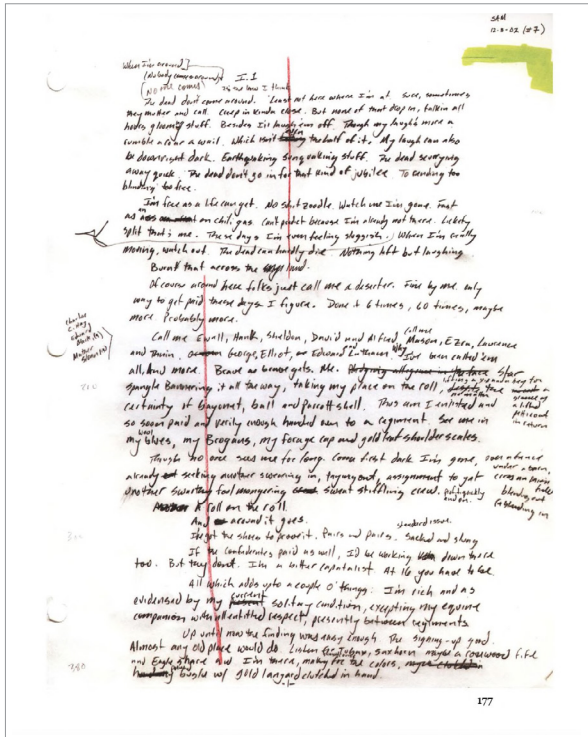
A number of drafts from *Only revolutions*

Figure 5.25 December 3, 2002 Written by hand.

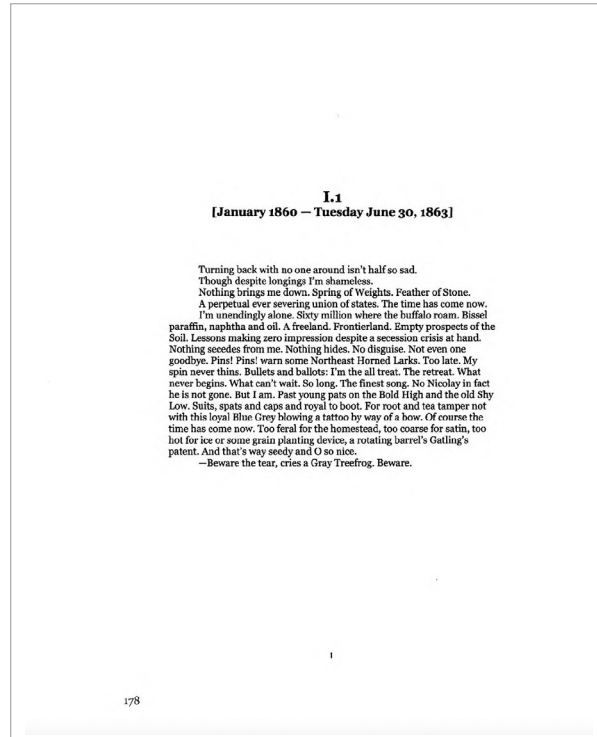


Figure 5.26 March 13, 2003. Written in Word.

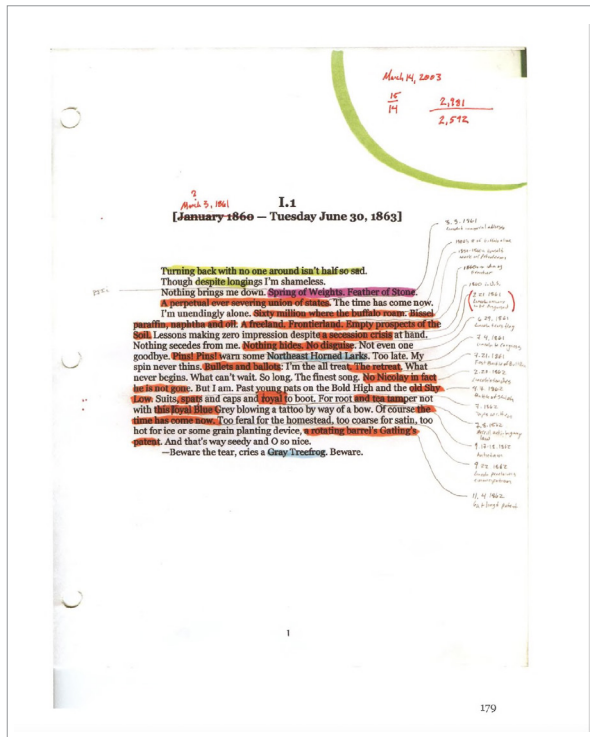


Figure 5.27 March 14, 2004. Written in Word and annotated by hand and highlighted extracts.



Figure 5.28 April 2, 2004. On InDesign and layout already considers the space for the mirrored narrative.



A number of drafts from *Only revolutions*

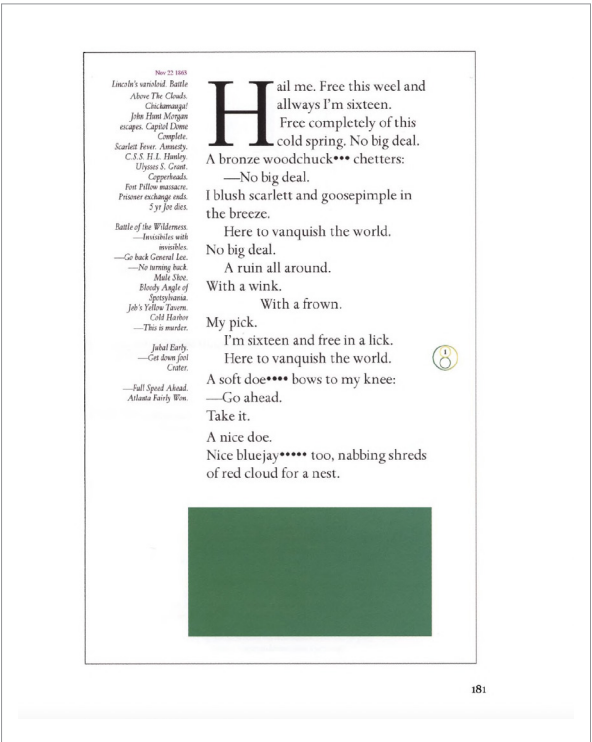


Figure 5.29 June 20, 2004. The chronomosaic is included and the structure of the page becomes divided in three parts.

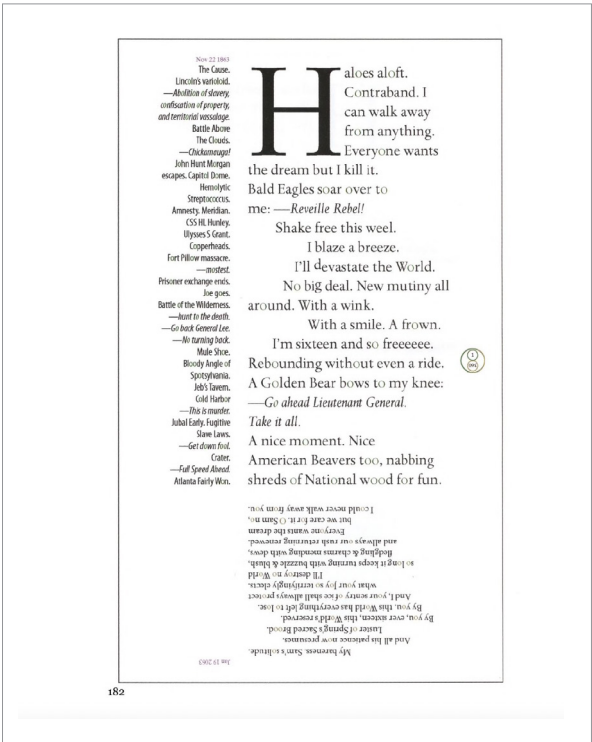


Figure 5.30 July 21, 2005. Hailey's narrative is included, and the page starts to resemble the final version.

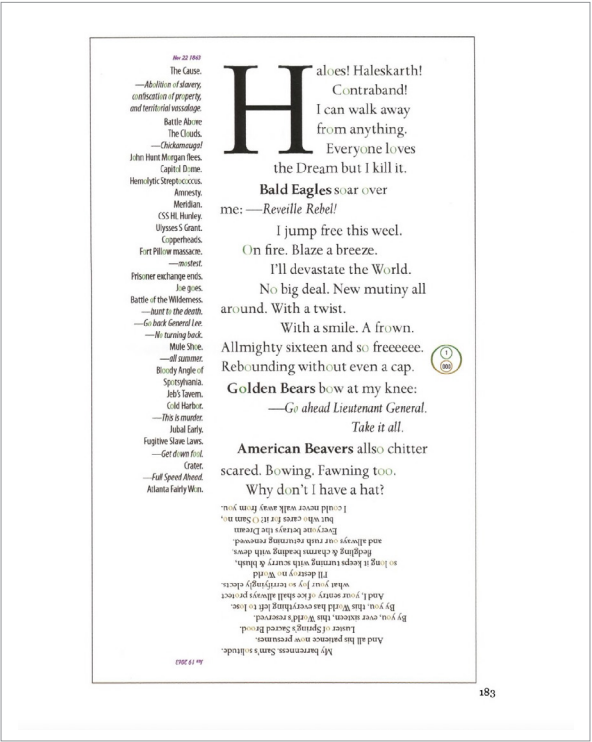


Figure 5.31 January 21, 2006. Final printed version of Sam's page 1.

The fact that Danielewski shared these drafts is evidence that he has been more explicit and aware in regards to the design process and his own involvement with the construction of the narrative. As Danielewski explains to Benzon (2007, n.p.), he is aware that writers are not usually concerned in this way with the writing and design of narratives, and ‘aren’t necessarily familiar with the language of composition.’ At the same time, and similarly to *House of leaves*, even if the first stages of *Only revolutions* involved sketching and writing by hand, Danielewski recognises the importance of technology for the existence of the novel, but also of design software:

As archaic as it is [*Only revolutions*], with its illuminated text and its ribbons, this book could not exist without technology. Without my G5 and 23-inch screen, with two pages on the screen at one time. [...] Adobe InDesign CS. I had—Font Pro, I think—I had like 10,000 fonts, which is also a huge deal to manage. Online resources, certain archival things (Benzon, 2007).

In *House of leaves* typography has a functional purpose that goes beyond the mere aesthetic choice and helps to distinguish and visually recognise the several voices that develop through the narrative. In fact, Danielewski has recognised his own interest in ‘how fonts, aside from instant readability, can create a sensation that you don’t have to articulate but that communicates’ (Miller, 2007, n.p.).

In a different way, in *Only revolutions* the use and choice of typography does not aim for a distinction between characters, as Spectrum MT is used for both narratives. However, typography is employed to reinforce the design concept and make the narrative work at the material level of the book. When asked by Miller (2007, n.p.) about the choice of typeface, Danielewski explains:

Obviously that name has a lot to it [Spectrum MT] and the font has a certain thinness that I liked. As the text got smaller and smaller, readability would be an issue. But it was my theory that by that time, the plot is slowing down and so it is sort of an aria at the end. That you would want to slow down and read it and you’re struggling to see.

Danielewski's relationship with design details, and thus with the textual dimension of the pages is also evidenced on his annotations for the page 1 drafts, which show an evolution and work upon typography and the choice of typefaces (Figure 5.32). In the third version draft, he was still considering using different typefaces for each of the two characters (Georgia, in this case, for Sam). In the following draft he had already made the decision to use Spectrum MT throughout, as he understood such a distinction between the two characters was not necessary. Probably, with so much information already crowding the pages, it would have been too chaotic to include different typefaces that might not be as distinguishable from a reader's perspective. It is also significant that from the fourth draft onwards (Figure 5.28), Danielewski is already considering colours (the Pantone values also get more refined as the project evolves). Another detail that these annotations show and that evidence the *designwriting* process developed by Danielewski, is the way in which he works with different software to develop and design the final narrative. He starts writing and sketching the entire thing in pencil on paper, then moves on to Word for an initial typesetting and visualising of the narrative; then uses InDesign to work with the final layout, and finally adds Illustrator to finalise and refine any details.

The way in which Danielewski refers to the design process might also reveal that he is not a designer, but a writer working in a *designerly* way. Evidence of this can be seen, for example, in the fact that *Only revolutions* has 360 pages, which purposely reinforces the centripetal concept of the novel and the 360-degree interaction it demands from readers. However, the original manuscript was 350 pages, an odd number that could come from a lack of understanding that the page count should normally be divisible by 4. As he explains, the resulting solution was to increase the size of the text: 'The original was 350 pages though, so then it was ... do we make the font bigger?' (Miller, 2007, n.p.). The fact that the ten-page difference is solved by increasing the font size has a result on the visual aspect of the page, which could be seen as



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Mark Z. Danielewski

## Only *Evolutions*

Page 179, *Take #7 – December 3, 2002*

471 words. Font: Hand. Black: #2 pencil. Trim size: 8.5 X 11. Software: paper.

Page 180, *Run-Through Dailies – March 13, 2003*

210 words. Font: Georgia (Sam). Trim size: 8.5 x 11. Software: Word.

Page 181, *Annotated Run-Through Dailies – March 14, 2004*

210 words. Fonts: Georgia (Sam); Hand (Z). Black: 2H lead + Assorted highlighters. Trim size: 8.5 x 11. Software: Word.

Page 182, *History Rushes – April 2, 2004*

180 words. Fonts: Spectrum MT (Sam); Times (Date); Times (Folio). Green: Pantone 348 C. Gold: Pantone 116 C. Violet: Pantone 259 C. Trim size: 5.4375 x 8.4375. Software: InDesign.

Page 183, *Paratactic Rough Cut – June 20, 2004*

77 words (Chronomosaic + Date) + 90 words (Sam). Fonts: Spectrum MT (Sam); Spectrum MT (Chronomosaic); Times (Date); Times (Folio). Green: Pantone 348 C. Gold: Pantone 116 C. Violet: Pantone 259 C. Trim size: 5.4375 x 8.4375. Software: InDesign.

Page 184, *End Of All Roads Assembly – July 21, 2005*

90 words (Chronomosaic + Date) + 90 words (Sam) + 93 words (Hailey + Date). Fonts: Spectrum MT (Sam & Hailey); Myriad Pro (Chronomosaic); Times (Date); Times (Folio). Green: Pantone 348 C. Gold: Pantone 871 C. Violet: Pantone 259 C. Trim size: 5.475 x 9.125. Software: InDesign.

Page 185, *Final Print Submission – January 21, 2006\**

90 words (Chronomosaic + Date) + 90 words (Sam) + 93 words (Hailey + Date). Fonts: Spectrum MT (Sam & Hailey); Myriad Pro (Chronomosaic); Tempo (Date); Univers 57 (Folio). Green: Pantone 355 U. Gold: Pantone 146 U. Violet: Pantone 2602 U. Trim size: 5.475 x 9.125. Software: InDesign & Illustrator.

\*Excerpted from *Only Revolutions* by Mark Danielewski © 2006. Reprinted with permission by Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc. Available in bookstores now.

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**Figure 5.32** Danielewski's notes explaining the changes throughout the drafts of page 1 of *Only revolutions* (Danielewski, 2007, 183).

a bit crowded and unrefined. Perhaps there could have been a way of exploring different solutions to fill the ten pages by playing with white space or composition details that would have helped to create a more refined outcome from a design perspective. This could also be suggested by the way in which he regards his choice of typefaces from their names, a gesture that could be seen as superficial, but which at the same time reinforces the fact that he is in authorial control of every tiny detail of this novel. As the following quote indicates, his choice of colour was also focused on a symbolic nature:

The names of the fonts are important. Sans Serif was important for time in *Only revolutions*. Readability is obviously a factor. The colors are probably more influenced by designers and painters, simply because there's a specificity to the symbolic nature of colors. The gold (used in *Only revolutions*) was a huge issue (Miller, 2007, n.p.).

However, at the same time, and due to the postmodern inheritance of Danielewski's works,<sup>168</sup> this way of regarding the page could also be related to 'the cult of the ugly' described by Heller (1993). As Heller argues, ugliness for its own sake means nothing, but if ugliness has a reason and is at the service of something, then it cannot be rejected. In Danielewski's works, and especially in *House of leaves* and *Only revolutions*, the *writerly* and *designerly* decisions are all intentional and have a clear purpose:

One of the things I'm interested in is that all of these elements are in service to the themes and the story as opposed to being cute for its own sake and 'Oh look what we can do' (Miller, 2007, n.p.).

*Only revolutions* is a more structured novel than *House of leaves*. In the former, every design detail is taken in consideration and is chosen to contribute to the narrative development. This is also true for *House of Leaves*, there is no doubt about it. However, in this case, and even if Danielewski states that 'there are no errors in the

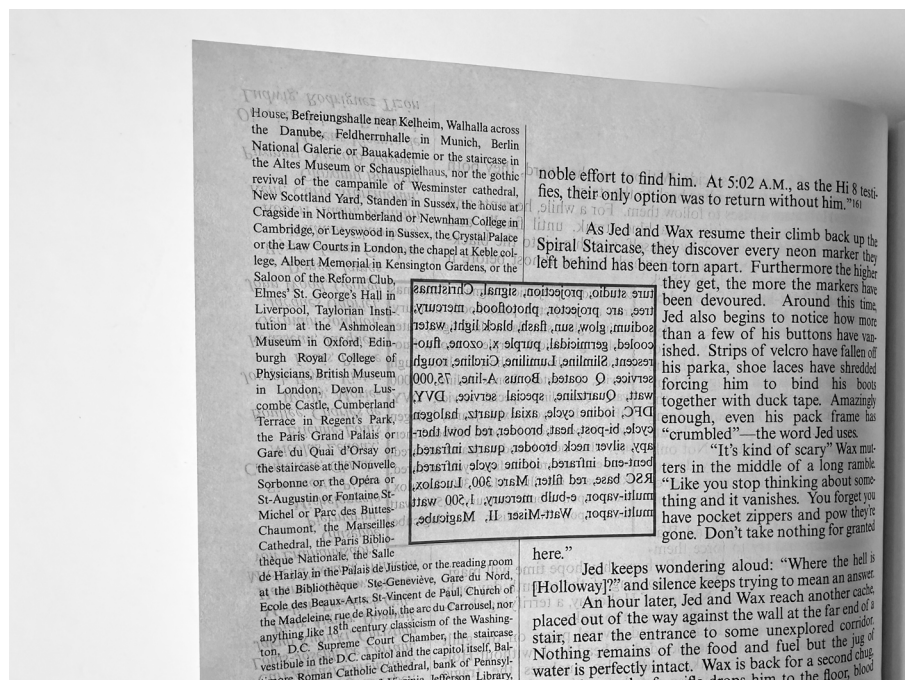
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<sup>168</sup> As McHale (2012, 148) observes in 'Postmodernism and experiment', one of the aspects of *House of leaves* that connects it with postmodernist literature is the nesting of secondary worlds within the primary story and the fact that 'the other truth of the pages is that the work exists on one, [...], bound in a book ...'

book' (McCaffery and Gregory, 2003, 114), the analysis of Chapter IX shows some discrepancies in the design outcome that not only evidence the complexity in producing such a convoluted printed labyrinth, but also that the writer's approach to the *designwriting* process evolves and becomes more mature in his second novel. These discrepancies can be seen on pages 119 to 144 in *House of leaves*, where the blue square that includes the text of footnote 144 creates a duct through the section (Figure 4.26). At first glance, the square is placed identically on every recto page, in which the text contained within appears mirrored on the verso. On a closer examination, it is possible to see that the square on the verso sides moves slightly from page to page and does not coincide with the square on the recto page. This points to a possible miscalculation with the registration of the pages when preparing the files for printing (Figure 5.33).

As a last point, it is also important to mention Danielewski's process in the creation of *The familiar*, his latest literary project that is set to be composed of twenty-seven volumes, of which five have been already published.<sup>169</sup> In an interview with Driscoll and Van de Ven (2020, 146), Danielewski explains that he pays a lot of attention to the materiality of the book and 'to how the book is created'. He in

**Figure 5.33** Close-up of page 126 from *House of leaves* (2000) that shows the small discrepancies in the square position and indicate a possible miscalculation in page registration.



<sup>169</sup> At the moment the project has been cancelled due to insufficient readers.

fact builds dummies of the books ‘in order to experience what 880 pages feel like, and how thick or thin the paper should be so it’s manageable. Even the weight is important.’ This is a relevant stage in the design process of a physical object, such as Danielewski’s books are. Something that is going to occupy space, that is going to have a certain weight and a certain physical presence.

By looking at the way Danielewski worked not only in *House of leaves* but also in other novels, we can see how he purposely and effectively considers the material aspect of the narrative and creates literary works that take into account print and its physical dimension. Danielewski’s designwriting process becomes more obvious with time, which also relates to the fact that, as the digital age advances, the presence of design in unconventional novels becomes more evident and necessary.

### 5.2.2 *Tree of codes* and the design of the cut-out strategy

*Tree of codes* has a very different approach to the writing and design process compared to that of *House of leaves*. While Danielewski controls every single detail in both narrative and materiality during the writing process, Foer’s novel is the result of a collaboration between publisher, writer, designer and printers; but especially between writer and designer. The following pages give a detailed account of the development of the project as an embodied narrative and how this made necessary the involvement of a designer from its early stages. However, the role of the design process in *Tree of codes* and its influence on the narrative generally goes unnoticed in many of the analysis written about the novel.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Szymanska (2020, 32), for example, comments that ‘turning to a London-based independent publisher, Foer pushed the erasure technique to an extreme’ (as this section shows, this is not completely accurate). Similarly, Pressman (2020, 129) mentions that Foer reflects the changing ways of the world ‘by using a digitally enhanced process of die-cutting to carve into Schulz’s book’, as if not only the idea but also the design and technical process were his doing.

*Tree of codes* was published in 2010 by Visual Editions, a London-based publisher established around that same time. Launched by Anna Gerber and Britt Iversen, the company's vision was grounded on the belief that 'books should be as visually interesting as the stories they tell; with the visual feeding into and adding to the storytelling as much as the words on the page', as it is described on the back-cover blurb of the book (Foer, 2010). They define this as 'visual writing', a concept not far from that of *designwriting* and which expands the narrative by bringing forward its material dimension.

Visual Editions focused on publishing these kinds of books for five years. In 2015, their emphasis shifted as the work moves towards a broader vision of storytelling and its connection with digital reading experiences. This is when Editions At Play appeared as a collaboration between Google Creative Lab and Visual Editions, an opportunity for both businesses to work together and make digital books, even if the latter continued publishing print books that explored the material dimension of the narrative (an example of this is *Don Quixote* published in 2015). As Anna Gerber explains in a conversation, the collaboration happened at the right time and was not a conscious decision to stop making the books, but more of an overlap. She sees this as different ways in which stories can be told using the most innovative tools that can be found at each moment to reach audiences in the most interesting way.<sup>171</sup>

A good example of the focus of Visual Editions innovative storytelling is *Where you are* (2013), a collection of writings, drawings and photographs that explore and reinvent the classic concept of geography and the map. Out of the collaboration between the publishers and Google Creative Lab, this compilation of ideas of what a map can be evolves into a digital reading experience with seventeen microsites created expressly for the

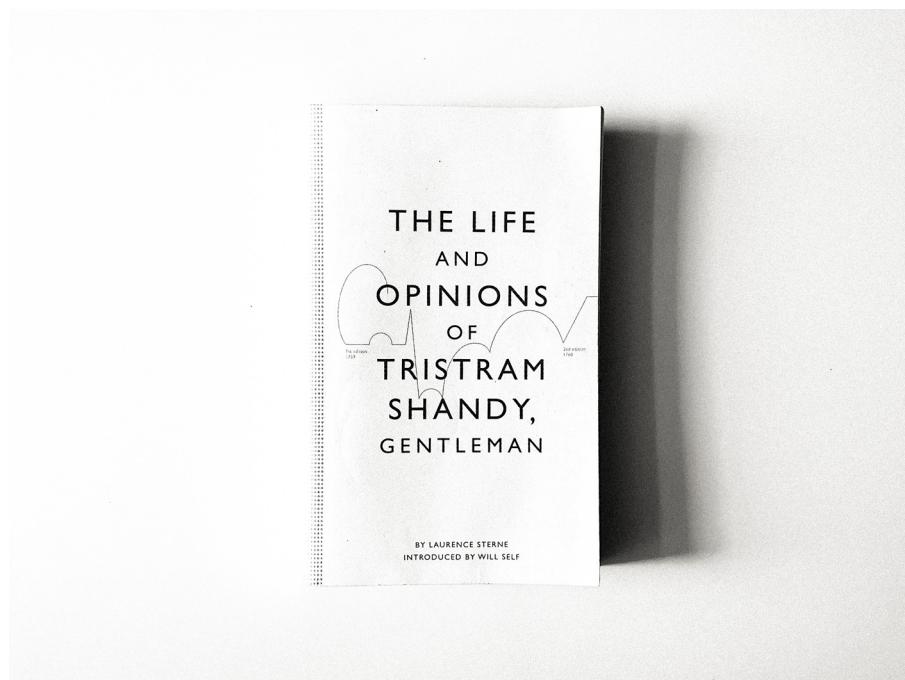
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<sup>171</sup> Online conversation between the author and Anna Gerber, 9 March 2023. The conversation is unpublished, but Gerber has given her consent to use extracts for the purposes of the research.

project. Another product of this collaboration is *Seed* (2017), written by Joanna Walsh, which is a digital story ‘that grows and decays’ (as described on the website of Editions at Play), and which allows readers to create their own reading path of the book.<sup>172</sup> The last project developed by Visual Editions in collaboration with Google Creative Lab and Google Assistant was launched in 2020, in the midst of the lockdown that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Stories of splendid isolation* consists of twenty stories written by twenty different writers that are voice-activated, using the available technology of Google Assistant.

Gerber describes the first chapter of the business as breaking the boundaries of the physical book: Visual Editions focuses on publishing unconventional books. In fact, not coincidentally, the first book published in 2010 was a new edition of *The life and opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* designed by APFEL (A Practice For Everyday Life) (Figure 5.34). This is significant because the decision of publishing *Tristram Shandy* first, comes

**Figure 5.34** Cover for the 2010 edition of *Tristram Shandy* designed by APFEL and published by Visual Editions.



<sup>172</sup> The novel can be read here: <https://editionsatplay.withgoogle.com/#!/detail/free-seed>. As mentioned in Chapter 3, in 2021 the book becomes a printed novel and Visual Editions are not involved in it. Gerber explains that ‘the printed edition of *Seed* ran counter to the idea of the digital book not being able to exist in print.’

after *Tree of codes* has already been started as a project. At that point, Visual Editions was still a new and unknown company, and they did not want to risk Foer's novel to be seen by the public as a mere playful gimmick on form. Thus, *Tristram Shandy* was produced as the mission statement for their beliefs as publishers. This fact reinforces the connection point between Sterne's exploration of materiality in the act of reading and the unconventional novels of the twenty-first century.

The 2010 edition of *Tristram Shandy* employs visual elements to highlight and exaggerate the author's intentions. The designers at APFEL play with Sterne's text to enhance the digressions of the narrative and foreground the material dimension from a contemporary point of view (Figure 5.35). As Gerber explains, the strategy behind the *Tristram Shandy* edition was to give a foundation for *Tree of codes*. As publishers, their main concern was the reception from readers, and thus they wished to avoid the project to be seen as a simple experiment with form. By publishing *Tristram Shandy* first, they aimed to make readers aware of *Tree of codes*' rich lineage and foreground the history of writers that have previously used visual narrative techniques.

**Figure 5.35** The black spread in the 2010 edition of *Tristram Shandy* by Visual Editions (44–45) is represented through the overlaying of text, which makes the content unreadable.



*Tree of codes* is born out of a desire for creating a book in which narrative and material dimensions are woven together creating a unique whole. The foundation bed for this desire is expressed by Gerber and Triggs in a previous article published in *Print* (2006). In ‘Acrobat reader’ (Gerber and Triggs, 2019) they reflect on mainstream novels that play with visual devices such as cut-ups, blank and block-out pages, photography, and typographic games. Visual elements in a narrative can be regarded as a gimmick, but when successfully employed they ‘can open up a powerful visual surface that runs parallel to the narrative’ (2019, 512). This interest on how graphic strategies can add to a narrative was what later prompted Gerber and Iversen to establish Visual Editions, and to contact Foer.

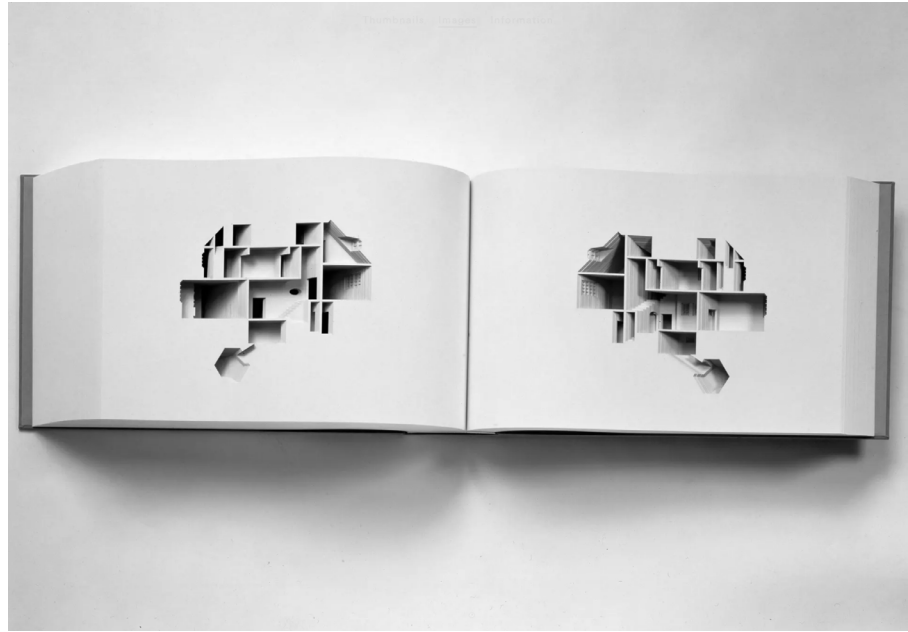
As Gerber recounts, initially she emailed Foer out of pure admiration for his work. Both Gerber and Iversen were familiar with the writer’s previous works and his past visual experimentation in narratives. This is evidenced as well in Gerber and Triggs’ (2019) article, where they mention some of the strategies employed by Foer in *Extremely loud and incredibly close* (2005). As the designer of the novel explains: ‘Jonathan was very interested in how the book was going to look and in the technical aspects of his visual elements’ (Chalmers, as quoted in Gerber and Triggs, 2019, 511), which also shows the interest a project like *Tree of codes* could generate in Foer.

In 2006, artist Olafur Eliasson published a limited-edition artists’ book titled *Your house* (Figure 4.36). In this work, the artist laser-cuts an impression of his own house in Copenhagen into 454 pages, each of them individually cut and corresponding to 2.2 cm of the actual house. In this case, moving through the pages of the book means moving through the rooms, the structure, and the architecture of the house: a spatial narrative in the most literal of senses.

As Gerber explains, Eliasson’s work proves to be an essential reference for the project. Foer responds to the first email by expressing his interest and willingness to work with Visual Editions, regardless of the limitations they might have as a new publishing



**Figure 5.36** A typical spread from *Your house* by Olafur Eliasson (2006). The work is a physical representation of the space of a house created by cutting-out the model in the pages of a book.



house or their lack of funding. When the publishers give him freedom to propose an idea, Foer's first suggestion is to create a similar book to that of Eliasson: a cut-out volume with no printed text in it. However, this clashes with Visual Editions' main objective to create books that integrate narrative and materiality. Gerber explains that at some points in the conversations with Foer he questioned whether or not to include text, but that they were very firm: the book needed text and Foer's words, as a writer, needed to be present. A short while later he came back to them and suggested working on his favourite book, removing words to create a new one.

This is the point when Foer starts working with Schulz's oeuvre and indicates that *Tree of codes* is originally conceived from the standpoint of its materiality. The connection with a narrative is developed after a research process, which results in choosing a text that fits the concept and can also expand it. In *Tree of codes* the concept of the house is less obvious than in *House of leaves*, nevertheless the house can be identified within the materiality of the book, which also references the house that is at the heart of Schulz's stories. This house, in which the family present on each one of the short story's lives, is a complex building with intricate passages and unexpected spaces, very much as *Tree of codes* itself:

We lived / in one of those dark houses / , so difficult to distinguish  
one from the other. / This gave endless possibilities for mistakes. /  
The wrong staircase, / unfamiliar / balconies, / unexpected / doors  
/ strange empty courtyards (Foer, 2010, 22–23).

Even if *Tree of codes* starts with the material dimension, Foer's work on the text of *The street of crocodiles* is one of intimacy between writer and narrative, what could be defined as a 'traditional' writing process but in reverse. Instead of building a narrative by putting words together, this process consists of digging a narrative out of an existing work. According to Foer's explanation (Heller, 2010), the first approach to the text is not one of erasure, but one of looking closely at Schulz's stories and constructing the best possible connections for the narrative he wants to bring out of it:

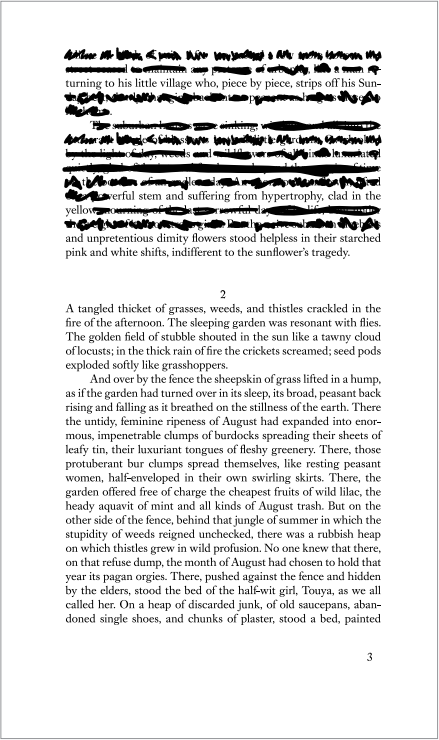
For about a year I also had a printed manuscript of *The street of crocodiles* with me, along with a highlighter and a red pen. The story of *Tree of codes* is continuous across pages, but I approached the project one page at a time: looking for promising words or phrases (they're all promising), trying to involve and connect what had become my characters. My first several drafts read more like concrete poetry, and I hated them (Heller, 2010).

This suggests that the first deformation of the text happens at this point. According to Sara De Bondt, designer of *Tree of codes*, she received the manuscript from Foer as a Word document with crossed out parts (Figure 5.37).<sup>173</sup> This indicates that the manuscript the writer worked with consisted of the printed pages from this initial document. Therefore, Schulz's text probably suffered a transformation from the published book (Penguin's 2008 edition) into a digital document on a word processor. From this stage, and as it will be explained, the text would still be subjected to several deformations before acquiring the final form of the physical printed book.

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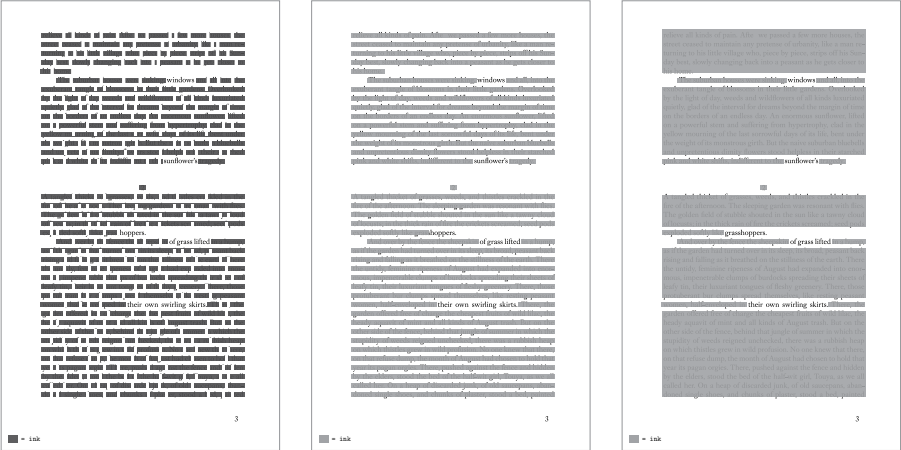
<sup>173</sup> Two online conversations between the author and Sara De Bondt, 12 March 2021 and 25 January 2023. The conversations are unpublished, but De Bondt has given her consent to use extracts for the purposes of the research.

**Figure 5.37** A simulation of the way in which the designer received the manuscript of *Tree of codes* with crossed out parts by hand. Image provided by Sara De Bondt.



Even if the device of cutting out words from the pages is an early decision in the project, the images provided by De Bondt (Figure 5.38) show that other strategies for blacking out the text were also contemplated during the first stages of the design process. As Gerber explains, the voids on the pages could have been achieved in different ways (e.g., blank spaces or black-outs). However, that would have meant losing the physicality of the die-cuts, which is essential for the project, and thus creating a completely different experience. The gaps are difficult and purposefully so.

**Figure 5.38** Digital experiments conducted by the designer to test different strategies of hiding the text before deciding on the cutting-out technique. Blacking-out the text with ink was an option, as the key at the left bottom area of each page indicates. Images provided by Sara De Bondt (for an enlarged version see Figure E-2 in Appendix E, page 432).



Once the decision to work with cut-outs was made, the next question was about how to produce them. De Bondt explains that the first strategy contemplated was laser-cutting. However, this would end up not only being too expensive and labour intensive but also would have the risk of burning the edges of the paper. What follows is an account of the evolution in the creative process for the cut-outs of *Tree of codes*. This examination is based on the images provided by De Bondt, which are arranged following the visual progression seen in the previous section for the design stages in *Only revolutions* (Figures 5.39 to 5.45).<sup>174</sup>

The die-cutting route starts as a two-dimensional approach that translates the crossed-out parts from Foer's digital document into holes. The first explored option looks quite different to what, in the end, becomes the final outcome. In this initial stage, the paragraphs on the page are removed and what is left are the words chosen by Foer, connected through paper bridges (Figure 5.39). However, this option is too fragile: the bridges would break easily, and it would be nearly impossible to physically bind the book. At this point, layout details need to be considered, such as calculating the maximum amount of paper that can be removed without jeopardising the structure of the page and turning it into a flimsy surface, or, what is a sensible arrangement of the actual gaps on the paper to ensure an appropriate space for binding and a comfortable turning of the page.

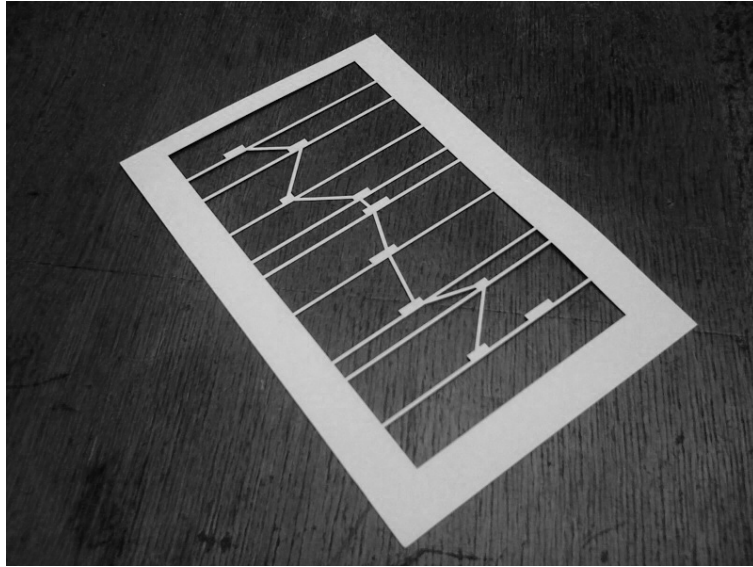
A natural subsequent option to explore consists of cutting out every word and creating a hole for each (Figure 5.40). This strategy generates a more solid page but results in extensive labour for the printers who would have to remove every cut-out piece by hand, as the machine is not able to do this. The next version is similar, with every word linked by fine lines that create a cut-out unit per line (Figure 5.41). However, this option creates tiny corners that

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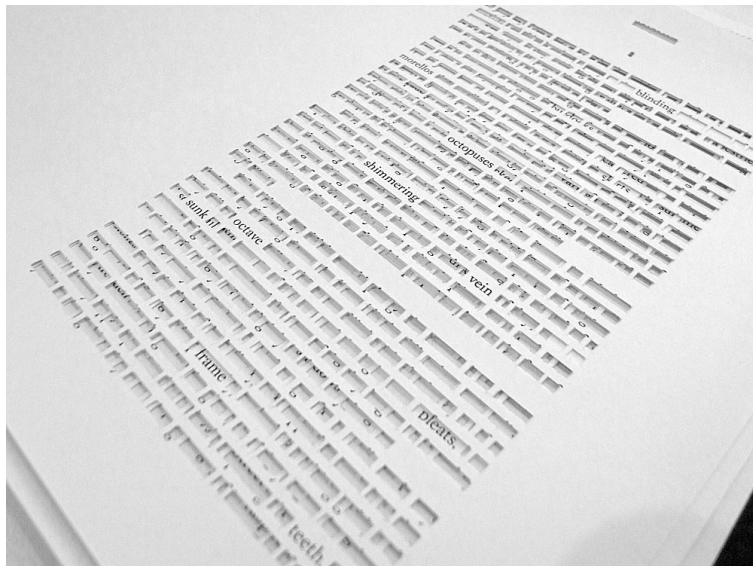
<sup>174</sup> The images are reproduced on the following two pages. For an enlarged version of the them see Figure E-3 in Appendix E (page 435).

A number of drafts tests for the gaps in *Tree of codes* (Images provided by Sara De Bondt)

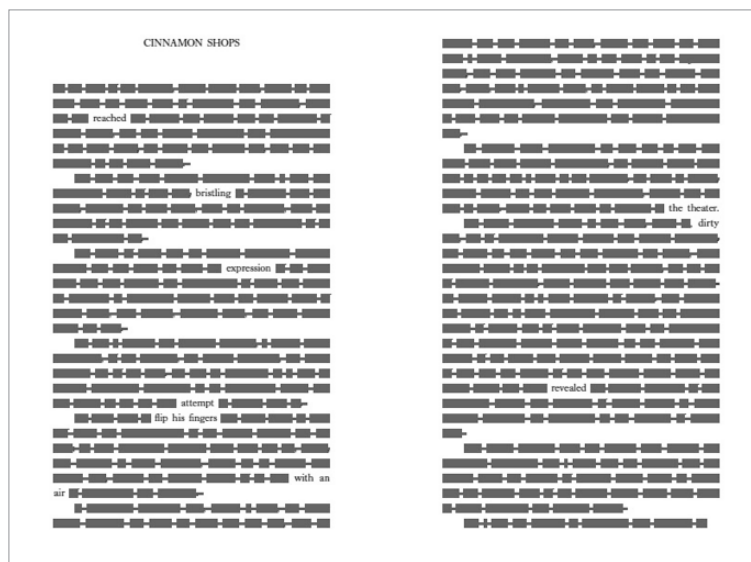
**Figure 5.39** Draft 1. Words connected by bridges. Unbalanced proportions between words and gaps.



**Figure 5.40** Draft 2. Cut-out words. Too labour intensive.

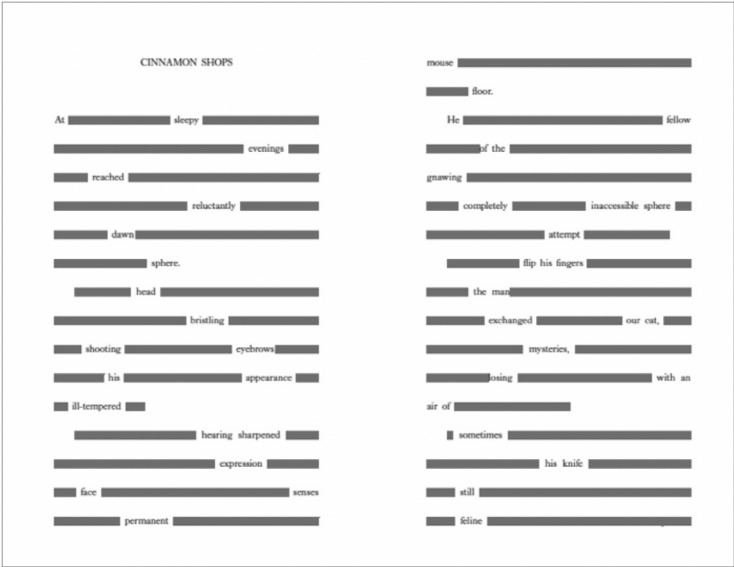


**Figure 5.41** Draft 3. Words connected by lines. Fragility in tiny corners and difficulty in production process.

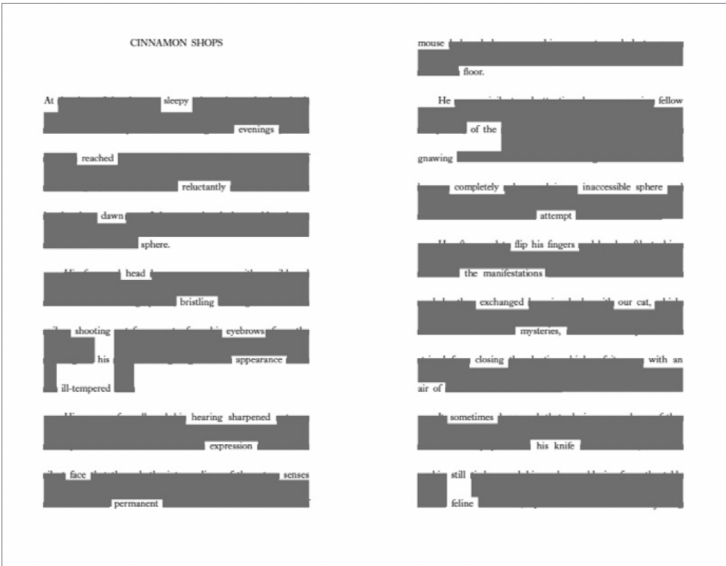


A number of drafts tests for the gaps in *Tree of codes* (Images provided by Sara De Bondt)

**Figure 5.42** Draft 4.  
Cut-out lines. Unbalanced proportions between gaps and paper.



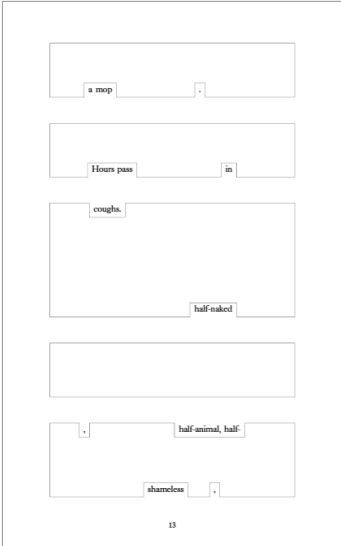
**Figure 5.43** Draft 5. Cut-out paragraphs. Search for a balanced proportion between void, text and paper.



**Figure 5.44** Draft 6. Final version with adequate proportions between gap and paper (left image).



**Figure 5.45** Draft 7.  
Illustrator files for the production of a dummy (right image).

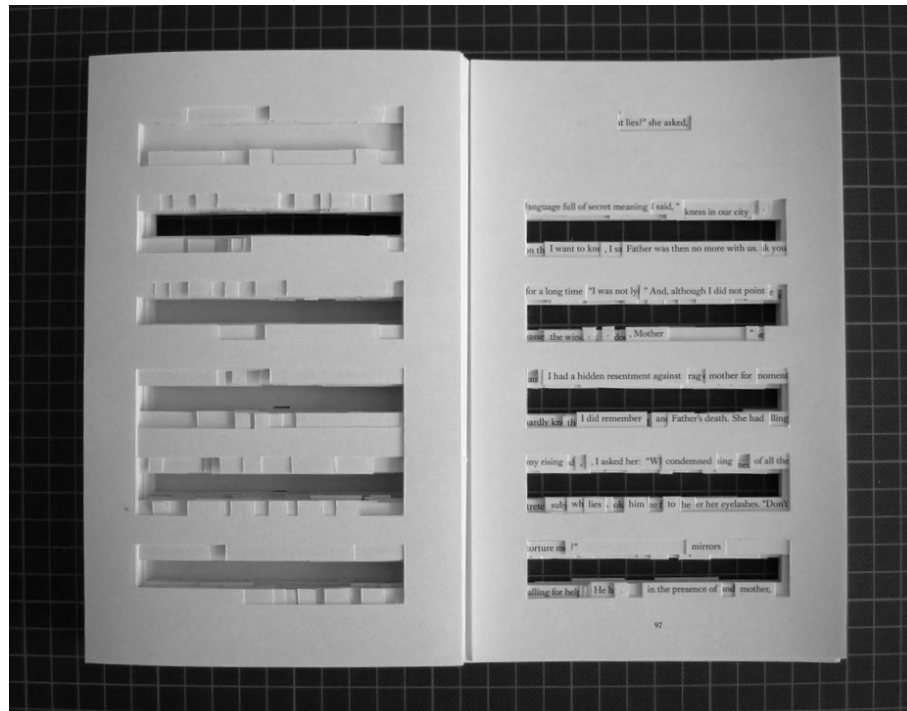


can be broken easily and complicate the production even more. From here, the following approach is to create lines (Figure 5.42), which still has the problem of finding a balance between the gaps to paper ratio. As De Bondt explains, in this version the gap has to be big enough for the paper to be poked out, and simultaneously the paper that is left over has to be wide enough for it to stay intact. Gradually, through different tests and approximations (Figure 5.43) the appropriate ratio of gaps and paper is found (Figure 5.44). In addition, a machine is finally found that can do the die-stamping and at the same time push the cut paper out, thus reducing the amount of labour.

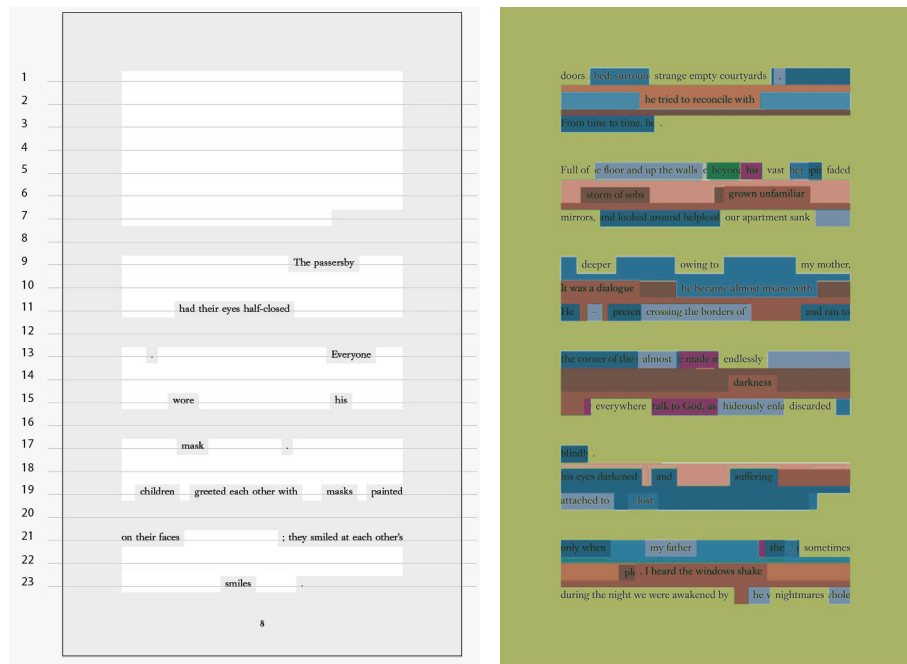
Once the appropriate gap-paper per page ratio is found, it becomes necessary to create the files for every page and manually produce a physical dummy (Figure 5.45). Up to this point, the approach to the text has been two-dimensional, working on the design of single pages without considering the whole object. However, when put together, the cut-out pages inevitably become three-dimensional and develop physical volume. The focus shifts from how the gaps look on a single page to how they work together as a whole. As De Bondt explains, the first time the pages were put together, it becomes obvious that the overlapping of the holes had not been previously considered. This results into continuous gaps on the pages that were placed almost identically on every page, and thus they cut across the whole thickness of the piece (Figure 5.46), which is not what had been intended. Therefore, it becomes necessary to work on the layout by considering the three-dimensional object and creating double leading for the lines of text and testing different placement of the words.

The last stage of the design process consists of working on the text as a physical object and layering the gaps and words accordingly, to create the desired volumetric landscape (Figure 5.47). It is in this stage where the act of deformation is mostly evidenced: the text and the gaps are forced and placed intentionally on the page to produce a layered result, regardless of what their position had

**Figure 5.46** First physical mock-up of *Tree of codes*. The test shows that all the gaps are in the same place on every page, creating an unwanted sense of continuity without the desired overlapping structure. Image provided by Sara De Bondt.



**Figure 5.47** Final drafts for *Tree of codes*. It becomes necessary to force the overlapping of the gaps and words in order to ensure an effective placement of voids, text, and paper to create a volumetric landscape. Image provided by Sara De Bondt.



been in the original version of Schulz's text. By this point, Foer's narrative becomes completely independent from its original form. In the end, the only printed text is the one of the words chosen by Foer. The gaps represent what could have been there, but in reality, there is no text printed on the fragments that are removed and the die-cutting is made on blank paper. As De Bondt explains, at this point the erased text is nonexistent. The gaps are also fake,



because there is a lot more text removed than you see sometimes, or the other way round.

In 2010, Heller asks Foer if ‘after all this, do you see yourself as an author or a designer? Aren’t they often one and the same?’ The answer from Foer is ambiguous. He sees himself ‘as someone who makes things’ and does not want to be included within any category. However, in this case in particular, perceiving the role of the writer and the designer as one and the same may cause confusion as it obscures the more complex creation process of the novel. As has been evidenced, the idea of cutting paper out of the book was there from the outset of the project. Yet, the conversation with De Bondt shows that a design process was still necessary to shape and materialise that idea, even if Foer was writing in a *designerly* way. De Bondt is not merely ‘facilitating’ (as Foer describes her role to Heller) his idea, but she is actively participating in the act of expanding the text into a physical narrative.

*Tree of codes* is the result of an active participation of publishers, writer and designer. The designwriting process in this case involves the collaboration of the three agents in order to materialise and build the narrative. Due to the novel’s embodied nature, the role of design is present in it from the start. Designwriting *Tree of codes* is a case of step-by-step problem solving, working out the most convenient process to shape the narrative in the best way possible.

### 5.2.3 *S.* as a result of a collaborative creative process

*S.* was born in an airport. As Abrams explains, he found a book, when travelling, that had been left behind on purpose (Rothman, 2013). It included a prompt for the finders to take the book with them, read it, and leave it somewhere else to be found again by a different person. Abrams was struck by the handwritten note and the idea that the book could be a platform to foster conversation. The object could go beyond the static printed content and become a dynamic space that could be the grounds to develop a dialogue and

an intimate relationship. Moreover, it also reminded him of when he was in college and checked books out of the library in which he found notes that people left in the margins:

And then, I started to think: what if there were a very cool book that was *completely* annotated—just covered in marginalia and notes between two people? And—what if a conversation, or *relationship*, began inside a book? That was the beginning of the process, maybe fifteen years ago (Rothman, 2013, n.p.).

Similarly to *House of leaves*, *S.* also took more than ten years to be created. In fact, as the latter was published in 2013, it was probably by the time Danielewski was typesetting his novel, when Abrams encountered the annotated book that would initiate his idea: a library book with an annotated conversation in the margins. *S.*, therefore, also starts from a materiality point of view. In this case, the house at the conceptual basis in the two previous examples, is here replaced by the library. The library as the home for books, readings, and encounters. Even if it is not represented physically in the narrative, the library is ever present in the object readers hold in their hands. The fictional book belongs to the library, and therefore the readings and conversations that develop in the margins are always connected to that space, which provides and opens up the space of the printed book. The fiction becomes physical through the space of the book retrieved (or stolen) from the space of the library.

*S.* starts with the materiality and is then built by layers, at narrative, material, and creative levels. After finding the book in the airport, one of the first things Abrams does is to tell his idea to Lindsey Webber, Head of Film at his production company, Bad Robot (Rothman, 2013). It appears that, initially, the idea they considered was based in using a pre-existing novel as the found library book in which the two characters write in the margins. This would certainly have been an interesting point of departure for the novel. It would have reinforced the idea of the found object while at the same time blurred even more the line between fiction and reality: a library book with a ‘real’ narrative that is found by two ‘fictional’ characters

who develop a ‘fictional’ relationship through the ‘real’ but, at the same time, ‘fictional’ book. Probably, this idea would have created a strong connection with *Tree of codes*, as would represent another possible way to create a narrative out of a pre-existing work.

However, when the producers found Doug Dorst, they decided he would write the fictional narrative. Therefore, *S.* is not the direct result of a writer who works on all aspects of the narrative, including its materiality, but the writer’s participation is one more layer within the bigger picture of the novel. *S.* is conceived by the producer-director, who then puts together a creative team to materialise his idea for the novel.

As Dorst recounts, in an interview with Vineyard (2014), he writes the narrative of *Ship of Theseus* first, followed by the marginal stories. Both layers develop as separate narratives until later stages when the two plot lines are connected and made to work together, which mean editing parts of both texts. Then, the combination of the two narrative layers encounter the third one: the material dimension. For this, the team works with Melcher Media, a company known in the business as a book packager. According to Megan Worman, Senior Editor at Melcher, they are not a publisher, but are hired by a publisher to produce a book.<sup>175</sup> They handle art direction and design, hiring a creative team and overseeing all the design process of the book. In this instance, Mulholland Books hired Melcher Media because they knew that *S.* was a complicated book to make, from a production standpoint, and they did not have the resources in-house to manage it.

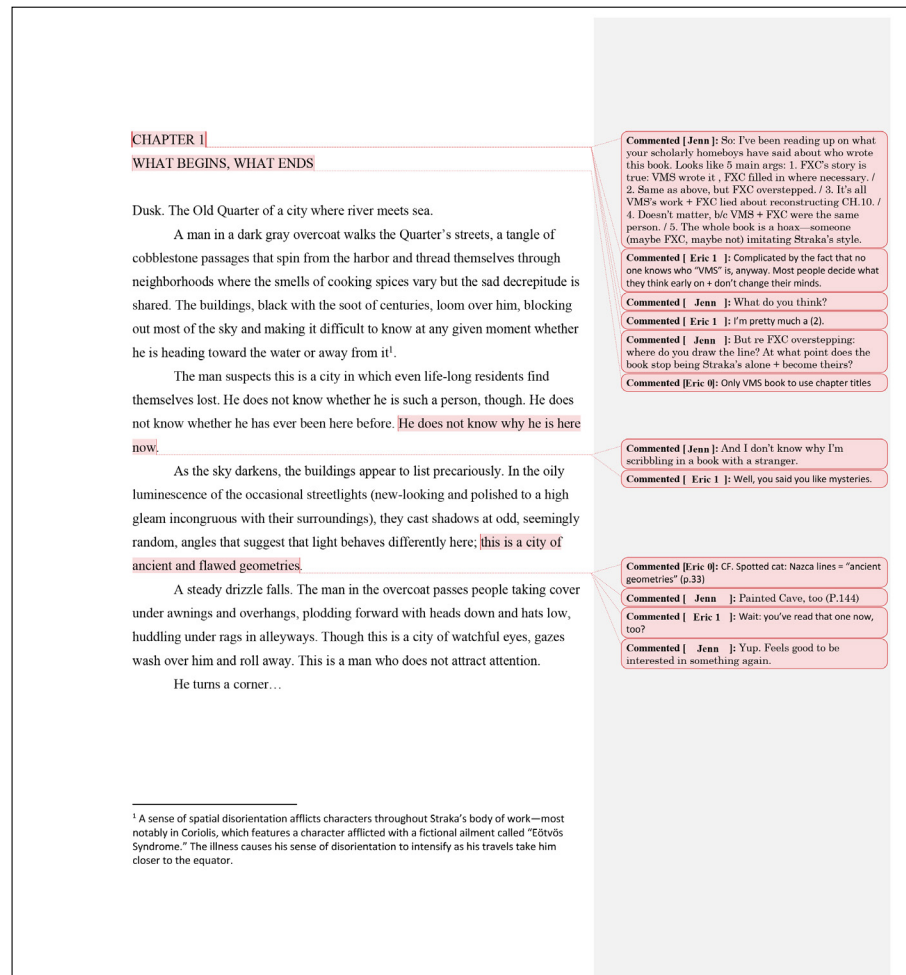
Dorst worked mainly on writing the text for the novel. The outcome of his work is a Word document in which *Ship of Theseus* appears as the main text and the annotated dialogue as comment boxes on the margins of the page-screen (Figure 5.48). The

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<sup>175</sup> Online conversation between the author and Megan Worman, 29 March 2023. The conversation is unpublished, but Worman has given her consent to use extracts for the purposes of the research.

manuscript arrived to Melcher Media as a digital document that lacked physical shape, with no visual idea for what it should look like, which they had to conceptualise, working together with a design company called Headcase.

**Figure 5.48** This simulation gives an idea of how Melcher Media received the manuscript from Doug Dorst written in Word and using the comments tool. The text that has been used for the simulation is from page 1 of *S.* (Abrams, 2013).



From this moment onwards, Melcher Media and Headcase started to shape the novel. As Worman explains, they knew it was going to be this idea of a book within a book, but they did not want it to feel like a typical published book with the publisher's name on the spine.

Thus, research was essential for the project, to make things look authentic. Paul Kepple, designer at Headcase, explored the aesthetics of books and illustrations from the 1940s, the time period when *Ship of Theseus* is supposed to have been published. They worked together on all the details that would reinforce the concept of the old library book with the faux fabric for the cover,



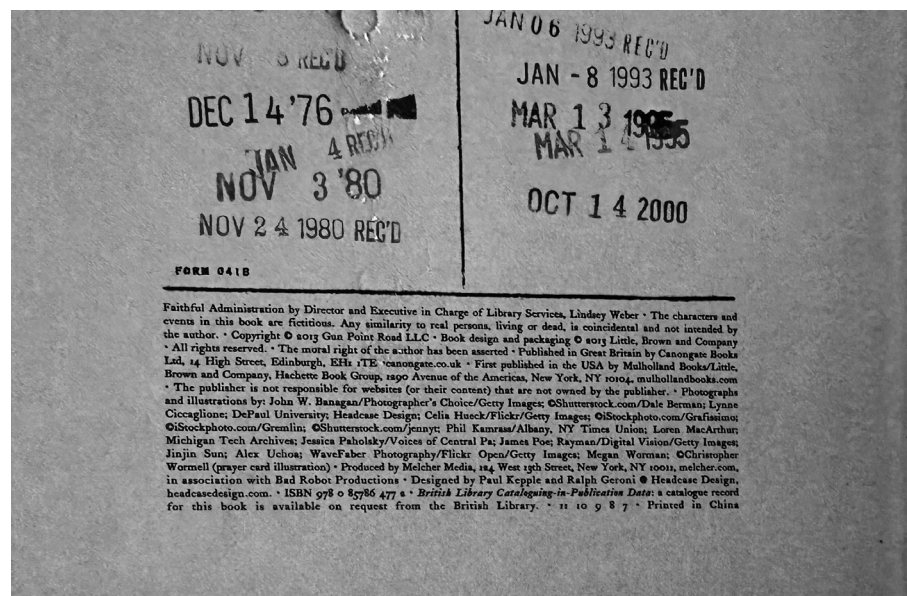
**Figure 5.49** Spine from *S.* (Abrams, 2013). The sticker present on the spine of *Ship of Theseus* reinforces the fiction of the library book.

**Figure 5.50** Publisher details on the bottom of the case from *S.* (2013). The publisher information that typically is presented on the spine is placed on the bottom side of the case.

the library sticker on the spine (Figure 5.49), and the stamps inside (Figure 5.50). Another important detail was how to hide the usual editorial and copyright information to make the final outcome (and especially the case) to look like a standalone object (Figure 5.51).

Handwriting plays an extremely important part in *S.*, especially because it has the power to represent ‘the intimacies that might come from sharing a book’, as Abrams observes in an interview with Rothman (2013, n.p.). The relationship between Jen and Eric evolves and becomes more intimate as the narrative progresses, and so their handwriting also changes with them. As Dorst also explains (Vineyard, 2014), together with the people from Melcher Media who worked on the handwritten texts, they decided very quickly how the handwriting for Jen and Eric would look:

**Figure 5.51** Credits hidden within the information contained in the library stamp place on the back endpaper of *S.* (Abrams, 2013).

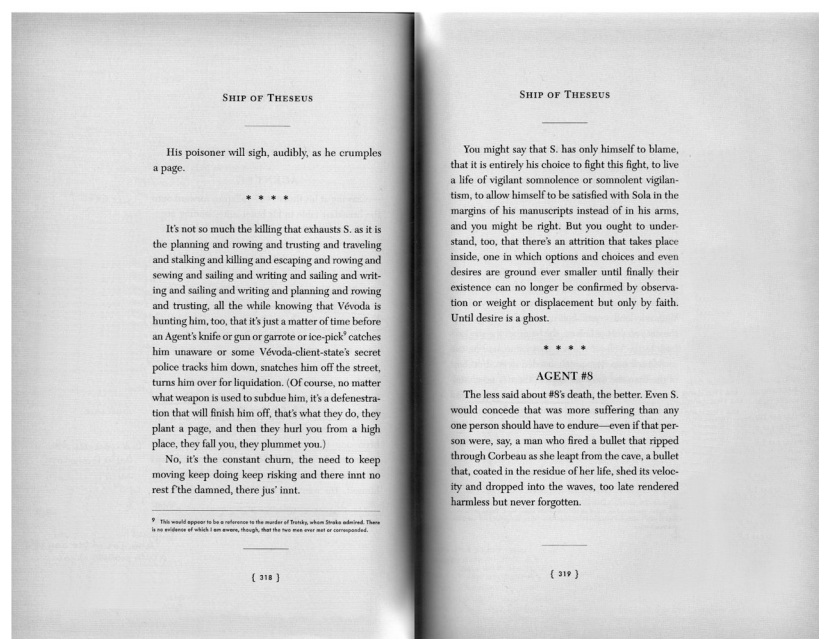


And we talked about how the handwriting should be able to convey emotional content, like when one's getting agitated and pressing down harder, and there are little evolutions in the handwriting as the story goes on. It was important that it look like what our sense of the characters was (2014, n.p.).

Worman was not only involved in the art direction, but she was also involved in doing the handwriting for the narrative in the margins. As she recounts, the handwritten annotations were done by her and another employee at Melcher Media. Worman did the handwriting for the character of Eric and for some of the smaller pieces of ephemera for minor characters, like one of the letters or the hand drawing on a napkin. At first, they planned to hire external people to do the handwriting, but they realised there was a large amount of labour involved in the process, and it was necessary to read the whole text first and understand how it worked. However, what made them decide on working in-house on the handwriting was the necessity to write in batches and send the progress to the designer.

The design process of *S.* happened in layers, as its narrative. The first thing the design team worked on was the layout and the typographic details for the main running text, *Ship of Theseus* (Figure 5.52).

**Figure 5.52** A simulation of *Ship of Theseus* without the marginal annotations. This evidences how the design has forced generous margins to provide space for the handwritten narrative.



The design for this narrative needed to be final and fixed before inserting the handwritten layers. As Worman explains, once the layout was decided it could not move because the marginal handwriting is so perfectly tied to specific points in the text that moving bits of text to other pages would mess up the placement of the type. Therefore, the designer typeset *Ship of Theseus* with very generous margins to make space for the handwritten notes. Then, the team printed out the pages of *Ship of Theseus*, in-house and on regular copy paper, and used a light-box and tissue paper to do all the handwriting page by page. After that, the translucent paper was scanned and sent to the designer who placed the scanned pages as a layer in the InDesign file.

As with the two previous novels, the narrative of *S.* suffers several processes of deformation before acquiring the final printed form of the novel. The digitally written text underwent a process of sketching, then the narrative of *Ship of Theseus* was typeset in InDesign while the handwritten annotations were done manually and thereafter scanned and translated to a digital design layer. Together with this, the ephemera pieces were also being designed, each one with its own design considerations. As Worman concludes, it was like designing three different books that become one.

In the case of *S.*, the *designwriting* process does not come directly from the work of a single authorial figure or the collaboration between author and designer. Even if Abrams thought about the concept and the materiality, and Dorst actually wrote the entire text; the final outcome is a result of the work of a bigger team of creatives: Abrams, Lindsey Webber, the team at Bad Robot, Dorst, the team at Melcher Media, the team at Headcase Design, and the team at Mulholland Books. Whereas the *designwriting* process of *House of leaves* depicts an author in control of every aspect (even if there were designer, publishers and printers involved), *S.* can be compared to a big production in a Hollywood-like manner. This novel is a good example of how relevant and present design is as a fundamental part for the writing and creation process of unconventional novels in the twenty-first century. It also

represents ‘the disappearance of the name and the presence of the author because the text is constantly modified by a multiple and collective writing’ (Chartier, 2004, 144). This is not only a result of the influence of the digital and the convergence between different media that creates new spaces for readers to interact with the narrative, but also because building a novel that includes its materiality as part of the narrative opens up the door to new ways of writing collaboratively.

### 5.3 Foregrounding the role of design

The three examples that constitute the main basis for this thesis are relevant for the development of the unconventional novels in the twenty-first century. The three works are very different to each other, both from a narrative and a design point of view, but they are connected by a desire to challenge conventional reading practices and include the new modes of communication that keep appearing and developing in the age of the digital. Obviously, these are not the only examples that have been published within the first three decades of the twenty-first century (some others have been mentioned in previous chapters), but they certainly make a good point as to how printed literature, and novels in particular, have been influenced by emerging communication practices.

It has been explained throughout the thesis that unconventional novels are not a new thing of the twenty-first century and are very much indebted to previous literary and artistic explorations. Yet, these three examples are relevant because they evidence the important role design has when bringing forward the physical dimension of literature, and thus creating a reading artefact where narrative and material dimensions are purposely woven together as one. None of these examples would have been the same without an authorial part that thought about materiality from the beginning of the writing process, and without a designer or design team to shape those initial ideas and expand the narrative dimension. According



to Starre (2015, 171), the influence of digitisation is made apparent in the fact that book materiality is gaining importance and, thus, graphic design is turning out to be ‘the missing link between medium and content.’

Writing a novel is always a complex process. Yet, *designwriting* an unconventional novel demands a greater effort from the authorial figure as it adds an extra layer of participation to the process. It involves thinking about materiality and conceives the physical reading experience from early stages, perhaps even before any words are written, as the analysis of the examples has shown. However, this does not mean that for creating an unconventional novel a writer needs to have design skills or even knowledge of how the process of book design works. Not every writer can have Sterne’s willingness or ability to marble a page, or Danielewski’s film and visual background together with his desire to explore graphic design and typesetting. Neither Foer or Abrams worked directly on the layout of their novels, but they were keen to explore the limits of narrative and expand it through design and materiality. As Abrams explains in the video presented on the website of the design firm that worked on *S.*:

Melcher Media kept promising us that it would look legitimate and would feel real, and I kept feeling like ... can they do this? Like is it actually possible for them to do this? And when we got the first copy of this thing my jaw slammed to the ground and I couldn’t believe that they actually pulled it off (Melcher Media, n.d.).

The fact that the case studies evidence the importance of design does not mean that the design process is the same in every instance. The aim of design is to give specific solutions to specific problems. Writing a novel means also to give a specific solution to a literary problem, not only through narrative but also through form. Therefore, it is only natural that each unconventional novel employs its unique and specific *designwriting* process. As for the case studies in this thesis, each of them is a good example of a different creative journey, and between the three, provide a general picture of design approaches that could be taken when dealing with an unconventional narrative:

The author concerned with narrative and material issues

*House of leaves* is the novel that can be connected more directly with *Tristram Shandy* in terms of design process and the way in which Sterne involved himself in it. Even if publishers and printers are involved in the production of the novel, Danielewski works as the sole author of it, concerning himself with narrative and design issues, writing in pencil and typesetting the entire work. Even if he blurs the limits of traditional authorship and creates a novel that demands the physical participation of readers, and also digital interaction by expanding the narrative outside of the print realm, Danielewski nonetheless remains the authorial figure that controls every detail of the novel. The different narrative voices that appear in it aim to confuse the authenticity and authorship of the assemblage of documents that is *House of leaves*. They also reinforce the fact that behind all these voices there is one authorial figure in control of every detail, being it narrative or material.

Conversation between author, designer, publisher

*Tree of codes* was initiated as a conversation between publisher and writer, who conceptually conceive the grounds for the development of the novel. From this point onwards, it becomes a collaboration between writer and designer, after the former chooses the pre-existing text and works out the bits that need to be taken out to create the desired narrative. The work of designer Sara De Bondt is fundamental to shape the novel and build the spatial landscape of the narrative. Despite this process, Foer is still regarded as the sole authorial figure in a traditional way.

Collaboration of different creative figures

*S.* is also a case of collaboration of different creative figures and processes, although in this case there are two things that differentiate it from such a controlled and small design environment as the one in *Tree of codes*. On the one hand, *S.* is a big production and is treated as such, with a big team that includes

a producer-director, a writer, a production company (Bad Robot), a design firm, external collaborators, publishers, etc. On the other hand, even if materiality is taken into consideration from the start, design comes ‘externally’ and is not involved in the process from the very first stages of the project.

Despite the differences in the design processes, the three novels have in common that they are a result of a *designwriting* process, and all are born out of an initial idea of the material dimension that shapes and develops the narrative and the reading experience. For *House of leaves*, the material concept is that of the house that is bigger on the inside than on the outside. For *Tree of codes*, the concept of materiality comes from the cutouts, the idea of playing with the spatiality of the codex book by removing parts of it. For *S.*, materiality is the book itself, the physical construction of a fake library book.

In the three examples, design is not only a tool to give shape to a narrative, but a process that expands it. By weaving together narrative and materiality, it creates a unique object that offers a particular reading experience. These examples also show how the presence of design has become more prominent. *S.* regards more openly the role of design and designers. As it was explained at the beginning of this thesis, unconventional novels are defined by making the page visible, giving agency to readers and changing the role of the author. The further we move into the twenty-first century and the digital realm, the more evident it becomes what Chartier already expressed in 2004 (148): ‘in contrast to the death of the author, according to Roland Barthes’s expression, it emphasizes that the author can play, along with others (the publisher, the printer, the typesetters, the editors) in the always collective process that gives texts their materiality.’

# Conclusion

This research examines unconventional form in relation to the printed novel, aiming to understand the status of materiality within the digital era. For this purpose, a central research question is raised: what can materiality in printed unconventional novels offer to the act of reading in the digital era? This main point of interrogation is then dissected into a number of questions:

- How are book layout and design strategies in twenty-first century examples indebted to earlier unconventional predecessors?
- What is the status of the printed novel in the digital era?
- How do unconventional novels foreground the physical dimension in the act of reading?
- How are book layout and design integrated with narrative in unconventional novels?
- How does design contribute to the integration of materiality and narrative in printed unconventional novels?

These build a progressive development of the thesis, which is offered up by the last two questions, which focus on the importance of book layout and design when it comes to integrating materiality within the narrative of unconventional novels. This conclusion revisits these progressive research questions and offers a reflection on what they point to.

## How are book layout and design strategies in twenty-first century examples indebted to earlier unconventional predecessors?

As Chapter 1 made evident, the questions raised by contemporary authors to challenge reading and writing traditions are not that much different from the ones posed by earlier figures such as Sterne in the eighteenth century. Technology might have changed, modes of working and communication practices might have evolved, but by challenging book layout and design conventions the aim of unconventional novels is still to offer particular reading experiences that are far from automatic and habitual. These novels play with expectation and create interactive experiences that require attention and physical involvement. They put the act of reading at the forefront and make it explicit.

When Sterne played with book layout and typography conventions to disrupt the narrative in *Tristram Shandy*, he was already, as early as the second half of the eighteenth century, introducing a break from fixed-form media and anticipating the modernist collapse of medium specificity that would mostly characterise the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>176</sup> Works, such as Johnson's *The unfortunates* or Saporta's *Composition No. 1*, explored nonlinear writing practices and reading modes decades before the development of digital communication.

Essentially, what characterises unconventional novels is their anticipatory quality. The pre-digital examples examined in this research could be seen as pointing towards the fluid and hypertextual narratives developed by desktop computing. However, contemporary unconventional novels cannot be labelled as such

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<sup>176</sup> The break from the 'purity' of the medium described by Clement Greenberg (1940) in the early twentieth century is well-described in Rosalind Krauss' *A voyage on the North Sea: Art in the age of the post-medium condition* (2000), where she explains that the idea of wholeness and purity was rejected by the heterogeneity of media that appeared during mid-twentieth century (especially with television), and that brought forward interdependence and intermediality.

just for their hypertextual character, and thus it becomes necessary to understand how the digital environment influences them. By looking at pre-digital unconventional novels it becomes clear that the thing all these works have in common is their challenge to the established status of the bound book.

### **What is the status of the printed novel in the digital era?**

As Chapter 2 explains, during the 1990s and early 2000s, influenced by the new technology, books began to be written, composed, and designed digitally on the computer. Gradually, hybridity became the norm: the convergence between analogue and digital technologies. Nowadays, this translates into a fluidity of information, a constant flow of immaterial data that transforms books into fluid documents that can easily adapt to different platforms (physical or digital) simultaneously. The conventional novel in the twenty-first century has evolved from a printed object to a genre that flows with no resistance from one form to another.

Therefore, unconventional novels nowadays are a response to the conventions brought upon by the digital realm. While common narratives are exposed to a deformational status and shift platforms indistinctly, unconventional novels make an intentional choice by using print as their primary medium.

This reaction to hybrid and fluid reading practices comments upon the immateriality of information, the fast-paced virtual environments, and the permanent connection to digital devices. Print is a choice, and the authors of these novels choose to put it at the front in order to integrate narrative and material dimensions as one, generating embodied reading experiences that cannot be obtained on any other medium. They represent a statement of the essential role print still plays in literature.

## **How do unconventional novels foreground the physical dimension in the act of reading?**

Unconventional novels in the twenty-first century are a product of the digital and they are born under its influence: written using digital software, designed with digital tools, produced and printed with digital technology, even expanded upon through digital networks. As Chapter 3 demonstrates, they not only constitute a response but also an acceptance of the new forms of reading, writing, and communicating, which they include within their narratives. Unconventional novels in general tend to demand an attentive reading because they require an effort. However, the ones from the twenty-first century emphasise this aspect as a counter-reaction to the speed at which information moves within the digital realm. Danielewski uses the intricacy of the footnotes to confuse readers and hinder their progress; Foer employs the holes as a physical obstruction to an automatic reading; Abrams combines the interruption of handwriting with loose fragments that force readers to pay attention to the object. They foster slowness and physical awareness, a thing that the digital world lacks.

There have been numerous predictions about the future of the book and the future of print, and not all of them have been accurate (as Chapter 2 showed). However, this demand for slowness could be seen from a wider perspective as an anticipation of a need for a slower stance in the publishing industry. It is now quite obvious that the production of printed books could never equal in numbers that of the digital, as it makes it easier for individuals to publish their own work effortlessly. Perhaps there is no need for printed books to equal this. Unconventional novels demand time, attention, patience, and a physical involvement that generates an intimate and personal reading experience. This is probably what these works are anticipating: reading print in a digital era means a unique embodied connection, physical interaction and a slow but deliberate movement through the materiality of the narrative.

In conversation with Gerber, she mentioned the fact that these kinds of works are very difficult to translate into other languages and thus, it makes them less attractive for publishing houses.<sup>177</sup> The reason for this is that a book like *Tree of codes* would require from a publisher more than just a translator and a printer to produce it in a different language, the whole narrative and the design would need to be revisited in order to do that. It would be costly (definitely more expensive than a conventional novel, as the original book also was) and it would take time.

However, *House of leaves* has already been translated into a number of languages, the Spanish version (*Casa de hojas*), published in 2013, is already in its ninth edition; and the Italian translation (*Casa di foglie*) is in its second edition since 2019. More recently, in October 2023, *S.* was translated to Spanish as *S.: El barco de Teseo*. The Spanish edition keeps the same design as the original in English but with every element adapted to the new language. This points to the fact that even if these novels constitute a unique solution for a particular literary problem (as Johnson would say) and that they require a longer and slower process of translation/adaptation into another language (ten years for *S.*), there exists a growing interest in the embodied and personal experiences these works offer.

### **How are book layout and design integrated with narrative in unconventional novels? And how does design contribute to integrate materiality and narrative in printed unconventional novels?**

In *House of leaves*, *Tree of codes* and *S.*, the resulting materiality of the narratives is a consequence of a deliberate use of digital tools to create a printed book. The three novels use design strategies (unexpected text layout, die-cut pages, and handwritten margins,

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<sup>177</sup> From the online conversation between Gerber and the author on 9 March 2023.



respectively) to challenge and foreground digital and print conventions of the twenty-first century.

As this thesis shows, design has an essential role in unconventional novels. Certainly, design has always been a part of the editorial process, but rather ‘invisibilised’ and generally at the service of the printed content (as the views from Tschichold and Warde account for in Chapter 3). The fact that these novels require design methods and professionals to integrate narrative and materiality speak about the significant part design plays in them (and in book production in general). Besides, this could be seen as a reaction to the seamless digital procedures that obscure production processes (the blackboxing effect, as Latour explained) with online self-publication and print-on-demand services that most of the time seem to leave design to the side. By making visible the role of design, unconventional novels allude to its essential role within the publishing industry.

As explained in Chapter 5, design had an important part in the explorations with dynamic narratives during the 1980s and ’90s, as shown by the Keedy-Kinross debate or the exploration conducted in book layout and typography seen in *The telephone book* and *Emigre*. These were anticipatory exercises with fluidity ahead of the development of hybrid practices. Even if these designers did not know that a shift was coming, they were already pointing to a much more active engagement of the reader, despite the views that labelled these explorations as obstructing reading. Therefore, the collaboration between writer and designer seen in *The telephone book* was preparing the ground for the hybrid reality that has by now become a norm. The collaborative dimension in these works does not seem as innovative these days because it is expected from designers. At the time, designers attempted to draw attention to themselves and to the way in which design could influence the narrative. They were experimenting with something they felt was going to become important. Nowadays, both acknowledgement and collaboration have become more habitual, and designers are

expected to be trained to work with fluid and dynamic narratives. Perhaps, what unconventional novels in the digital era (and especially in the first decades of the twenty-first century) point to is a renewed collaboration between authors and designers (or a whole creative team), in which design is acknowledged as an integrated part of the process and that, in most cases, could happen simultaneously to the writing or construction of the narrative. Likewise, this points, as well, to a shift from the side of writers, who, in order to build integrated and embodied narratives, need to include materiality and design within the early stages of their projects. Going back to Mora's (2012) words: nowadays the novel needs not only to be written but needs to be designed.

To conclude, it is important to acknowledge that the future of the printed novel will probably be influenced by upcoming technological changes. In all probability, the current understanding of communication practices will be changed in a number of years and conventions taken for granted now will shift in different directions. However, at this point it is possible to speculate that the printed unconventional novel will continue to challenge the fast-paced environment of digital media by foregrounding the physical body of the narrative and by offering embodied experiences in which the act of reading is slowed-down and made visible to resist the fluid and immaterial ways of the digital.

This can already be seen in more recent examples of unconventional novels such as Martín Rubén Giráldez's *Magistral* (2017) or Ryan Hughes' *XX* (2020). This will probably result in hybrid narratives that explore print and digital platforms simultaneously to create works that span print and digital and seek to link the relationships between the two. A good example of this is Daniel Solana's *Material prescindible* (2024), which exists as a printed book with a carefully created content and materiality, and also as an 'extended' digital book, an experiential audiovisual platform that expands the printed narrative.

The author's creative and research work as Arquitecta de libros (or Architect of Books)<sup>178</sup> also aims to contribute to the ongoing interest in unconventional book forms and digital technologies, and the embodied experience of reading print. By delivering workshops, seminars and lectures, the purpose is to create spaces for reflection and exploration of the book, of unconventional narratives, and of the act of reading in the digital era. Workshops such as *HYPERTANGIBLE, Broken Narratives* or *The Architectures of the Book* (delivered to international schools, universities and institutions), and courses such as *Unfolding Narratives* at the MA Communication Design at the University of Reading, seek to broaden the discussion about the materiality of the book and the possibilities of print in an age of screens and fluid information.

In this context, this thesis contributes to the field by analysing and exploring the materiality and physical experience in unconventional novels. More generally, it foregrounds the importance of reading, and the interaction with print and the book; and it contributes in creating awareness and reflection about the possibilities of print reading. This work plays a relevant part in the current conversation that reflects on the implications of digital technology in reading practices and the possible reactions to it, provided by authors such as Vicente Luis Mora, Irene Vallejo, Jorge Carrión, or Jaime Narváez.

The purpose of this thesis has been to study the material and graphic strategies that make possible the integration of materiality and narrative in literature. At the same time, this has revealed the significant role of design when it comes to challenging conventions and the foregrounding of, not only the materiality of the printed novel, but also the importance of physical reading in the age of the digital.

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<sup>178</sup> See Instagram account: [@arquitectadelibros](https://www.instagram.com/arquitectadelibros).

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# **Appendix A**

## **Index of unconventional narratives**

## 253

Geoff Ryman, 1996-1998

*253* was published online in sections between 1996 and 1998. In this hypertextual novel, each of these sections describe each of the 253 passengers that fill a tube train on the Bakerloo Line in London during the seven and half minutes that the train takes to complete the journey from Embankment Station to Elephant and Castle. Each passenger is described in three ways: outward appearance, inside information, and what they are doing and thinking. Some highlighted words link to other descriptions and connect the passengers through different aspects of their lives.

## *A humument*

Tom Phillips, 1973

*A humument* is an altered book that results from an alteration of a preexisting nineteenth-century novel, *A human document* by W. H. Mallock (1892). In 1966 Phillips bought a second-half book for threepence and set himself the task to alter every page employing painting, collage, and cut-up techniques. In this way, Phillips creates a new story out of an existing one found by chance.

## *Albert Angelo*

B. S. Johnson, 1964

*Albert Angelo* tells the story of a substitute teacher who in reality would like to work as an architect but is not accomplished enough to do so. Among some visual devices, the novel is famous for the hole cut at the bottom of some pages to allow readers to see future events.

## *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*

Raymond Queneau, 1961

Published in 1961 by Éditions Gallimard and designed by Robert Massin, this work is a significant example of one of the major

exponents from the Oulipo collective, Raymond Queneau. As a result of the combination of literary form and mathematics, *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* is a machine for making poems. It consists of ten sonnets with fourteen verses each that are cut in strips. This strategy creates a potentially infinite work and gives readers agency to build their own poems by interacting with the possible combinations.

### ***Circular 22***

Vicente Luis Mora, 2022

*Circular 22* is a novel which Mora started writing at the end of the 1990s. It has been described as the ‘integral novel’ or ‘textual rhizome’. The novel is composed of literary fragments that explore both the limits of the genre and the contemporary city.

### ***Clarissa, or, the history of a young lady***

Samuel Richardson, 1748

*Clarissa* is an epistolary novel that tells the story of a young woman in her quest for virtue that is continually thwarted by her family. Richardson included a musical score in the original edition that unfolded to more than twice the size of any other page in the book, and also used an unexpected layout to represent visually the distress and agony of the main character after suffering a rape.

### ***Composition No. 1***

Marc Saporta, 1962

The novel consists of one hundred and fifty loose A5 sheets placed inside a box with a set of operating instructions that ask readers to shuffle the pages as a deck of cards. Each of the one hundred and fifty pages is printed on one side and includes a text that describes a specific moment in the life of X, the main character. Each reading of the narrative is dependent on the position of the pages at a particular moment in time.

***Everything is illuminated***

Jonathan Safran Foer, 2002

The first novel by Jonathan Safran Foer switches between two autobiographical narratives that connect through time and a trip to Ukraine in search of the remnants and memories of the family Jewish past in Poland.

***Extremely loud & incredibly close***

Jonathan Safran Foer, 2005

Foer's novel tells the story of nine-year-old Oskar Schell, who embarks on to solve a mystery after his father dies on 11 September 2001. The novel explores mourning and loss and uses visual devices such as typographic plays that transform text into unreadable black pages, includes photography and handwritten symbols.

***Glas***

Jacques Derrida, 1974

Originally published in 1974 by Editions Galilée and translated and published by the University of Nebraska Press in 1986 (with a design by Richard Eckersley), *Glas* represents Derrida's breakage with linear ways of writing and reading. The square format of the book, the text presented in two columns and the intrusions by other voices, foreground the materiality of the page and destabilise traditional layout.

***Griffin & Sabine: an extraordinary correspondence***

Nick Bantock, 1991

The narrative of this novel unfolds through postcards and letters exchanged between two strangers living thousands of miles away from each other. The letters appear inside their envelopes. These demand an intimate interaction from readers, who need to manipulate them in order to access the narrative made out of visual ephemera and loose pieces.

***Hopscotch***

Julio Cortázar, 1963

*Rayuela*, in the original Spanish, is a stream-of-consciousness novel in which two reading paths are offered to readers. The first path follows the conventional order of the chapters while the second one invites readers to read the chapters in a particular given order, which the author explains in the ‘Table of instructions’ at the beginning of the book.

***House of leaves***

Mark Z. Danielewski, 2000

*House of leaves* is a novel about a house that is bigger in the inside than what it shows from the outside: the interior hides a growing labyrinth of unknown proportions. Through unexpected layout composition, the printed book mirrors the house: by reading and turning the pages, readers immerse in the intricate labyrinth and challenge conventional reading practices.

***JPod***

Douglas Coupland, 2005

*JPod* is a novel written and designed by Douglas Coupland. It explores the unconventional life of a team of video game programmes at a big company whose last names all begin with the letter ‘J’. This narrative is combined with spam and junk emails, online adverts, and other digital material.

***Magistral***

Rubén Martín Giráldez, 2016

Martín Giráldez’s novel represents an attack to established conventions in literature, language, and readers. It has no specific narrative but can be described as a novel about its own reception, which is then combined with inserts from another work, *Notable*

*American women* by Ben Marcus. Drawing from Sterne, who places the endpapers at the middle of *Tristram Shandy*, Martín Giraldez puts in the middle of his novel the cover, back cover, and some other parts from Marcus' book.

### ***Nox***

Anne Carson, 2010

Anne Carson's *Nox* is published in a concertina format and is built with scanned material including photographs, fragments of letters and pieces of printed text. The work acts as a scrapbook made in honour of the author's brother who died suddenly in 2000, like an epitaph in the form of a book.

### ***Only revolutions***

Mark Z. Danielewski, 2006

In *Only revolutions* a pair of teenagers embark on a road trip adventure across the United States. The story is told twice, once in Sam's voice and the other from Hailey's point of view. Each version starts at the opposite end of the printed book, which is designed to be read in two directions. The main text on the pages is split in two: the upper part is meant to be read from top to bottom, and the lower part appears upside down. Therefore, to read the other version of the story readers need to move to the other end of the book and rotate it 180 degrees.

### ***Pale fire***

Vladimir Nabokov, 1963

The novel presents a poem with its commentary, written by two fictional authors (one of them editing the other, which is the author of the poem). The commentary appears in the form of endnotes and give readers the agency to move in different directions through the various parts of the text. The unicursal and multicursal nature of



the novel create a choice for readers and at the same time make it easier for them to get back to the main track.

## **S.**

J. J. Abrams, 2013

Within the fiction of *S.*, two narratives develop together. *Ship of Theseus* is a novel written by V. M. Straka in 1949. The narrative presents an amnesiac character, also named S, who sails against his will on a ship with a terrifying crew of sailors that have their lips stitched shut. More than five decades later, and on the margins of this novel and also through loose paraphernalia, two characters exchange handwritten messages and try to unveil the true identity of the author (Straka). This marginal dialogue reverses the conventional hierarchy of the page and force readers to reconsider their physical relation to the book.

## ***Seed***

Joanna Walsh, 2017

Originally published by Visual Editions as a digital novel, *Seed* is composed of narrative threads that explore themes of restriction and desire. The book uses a digitally-native canvas that fosters readers to create their own unique reading of the novel.

## ***The bald soprano***

Eugène Ionesco, 1964

*La cantautrice chauve* was originally written in 1948 by Eugène Ionesco and first performed in 1950. In 1954 the first text of the French version was published, which was, in 1964, expanded upon and redesigned by designer Robert Massin. The play inaugurated the genre of the Theatre of the Absurd. It is a one-act piece that challenges time and logic. The six characters meet, chat, and argue until the dialogue becomes nonsensical and exposes the

inadequacies of verbal communication. Massin's design brings temporal and spatial qualities into the book by dismantling graphic, visual and editorial conventions.

### ***The fifty year sword***

Mark Z. Danielewski, 2005

*The fifty year sword* is a short story constructed as a dialogue of five different narrators. Each narrator is distinguished and identified through an intentional typographic treatment and the strategic use of colour. The text only appears on the verso pages while the recto pages only include illustrations and photographs.

### ***The life and opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman***

Laurence Sterne, 1759-1767

A nine-volume opus written between 1759 and 1767, usually considered for its influence in the development of the novel. The novel claims to be the biography of Tristram Shandy narrated by the hero himself, although the work is not focused on a faithful representation of his life and adventures. Instead, the novel is characterised by interruption and digression, which dismantles the linearity of a conventional plot and narrative structure. Digressions are also accomplished by the use of graphic devices such as blank, black, and marbled pages.

### ***The people of paper***

Salvador Plascencia, 2005

*The people of paper* is a novel about the pain and wounds inflicted by first love and sharp objects, which also includes paper. The novel, which describes a war against Saturn and an omniscient narrator, employs visual devices such as columns of text running in different directions across the page, blacked-out sections and illustrations.

***The raw shark texts***

Steven Hall, 2007

This novel comments on the unreliability of digital information, which is invisible and spreads virally, the same characteristics as one of its main villains, a conceptual shark made out of data that mutates across spaces and platforms. In Hall's novel, this shark and the threat to memory and information appears in the form of concrete poetry and the use of a flip-book strategy.

***The telephone book***

Avital Ronell, 1989

Ronell's work is not a novel but a philosophical narrative about the age of the telephone. It is a 'hyperdesigned discourse' (DiSalvo, 1996, 74) that reflects a transitional moment in technology through the narrative but also through the intentional design that underscores the instability and agitation produced in the age of 'phonocentrism'.

***The unfortunates***

B. S. Johnson, 1969

*The unfortunates* is a novel about memory and the recollections from the author of his friendship with a colleague who dies of cancer. The book consists of twenty-seven unbound sections put together in a box, which readers are then asked to shuffle before starting to read.

***Todos los museos son novelas de ciencia ficción***

Jorge Carrión, 2022

This is a transmedia exhibition transformed into a book. Not a catalogue, but the exhibition made a narrative and printed object. In this work, the images intertwine with the first-person narration of an overwhelming encounter with an Artificial Intelligence from the future.

***Travelling people***

B. S. Johnson, 1963

*Travelling people* was B. S. Johnson's first novel and recounts the trip of its main character, Henry Henry, to Ireland after graduating in philosophy. The novel uses the visual devices of the black page to represent the heart attack and later death of one of its characters.

***Tree of codes***

Jonathan Safran Foer, 2010

*Tree of codes* is a book born from another book. Foer uses Bruno Schulz's text *The street of crocodiles* (1934) to build his own story by removing words, sentences, and paragraphs of the existing one through the die-cut technique.

***Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard***

Stéphane Mallarmé, 1897

Mallarmé's most famous poem is characterised by the words and verses scattered across each spread. The poem is about a shipwreck, represented and emphasised in the typographical play, unexpected punctuation, the combination of upper and lower case, and also most significantly, blank space.

***VAS, an opera in Flatland***

Steve Tomasula, 2002

The novel adapts several characters from Edwin A. Abbott's novella *Flatland: a romance in many dimensions* (1884). Set in a post-biological future at the turn of the twenty-first century, *VAS* tells the story of a family through differing narratives and through different explorations of body representation. Printed in two colours that represent flesh and blood, the novel explores the theme of materiality and physical contact in an age of cloning technologies.

***Woman's world***

Graham Rawle, 2005

This is a novel created using cut-up and collage methods. Rawle cut fragments from women's magazines from the early 1960s and put them together to compose a new narrative. The novel works on two levels: one is the fast reading of the narrative, and the other is the slow reading of the artwork and navigating through the materiality of each page.

## Appendix B

Material from *House of leaves*

**Figure B-1.**

Spreads from Chapter XX, from pages 423 to 489.

The progression shows the importance given to blank space and how the space of the spreads becomes flexible and dynamic. (Page 1/3)

**Figure B-1.**  
Continued (Page 2/3)

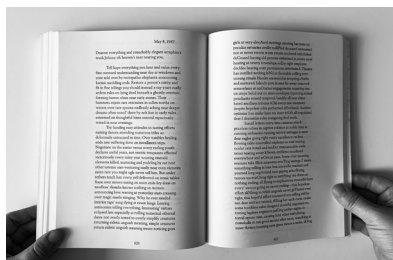
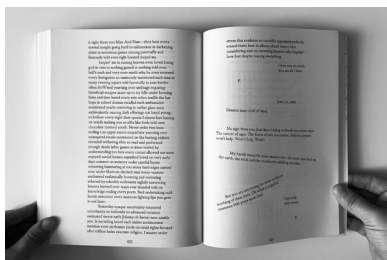
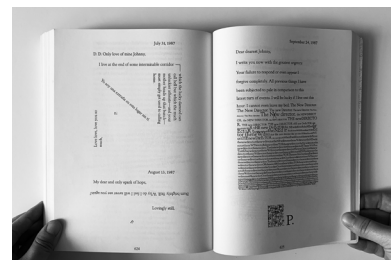
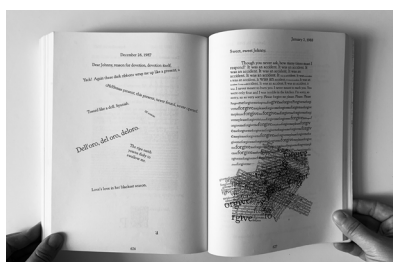
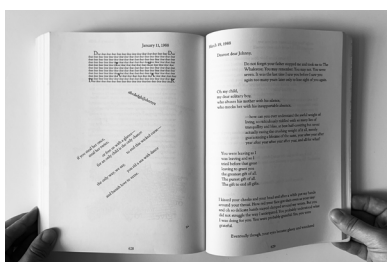
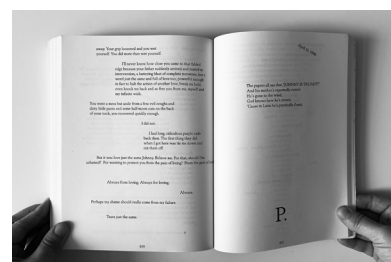
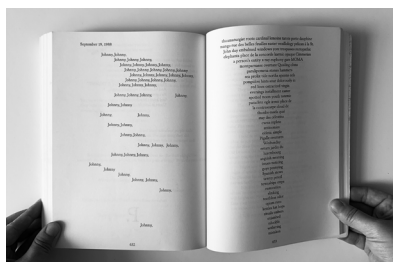
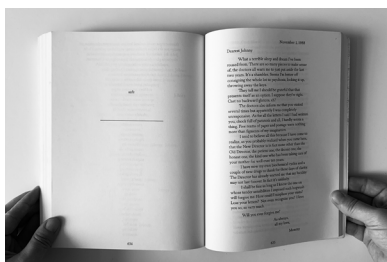


**Figure B-1.**  
Continued (Page 3/3)

**Figure B-2.**

Spreads from 'The Three Attic Whalestoe Institute letters' (Pages 586–644).

Spreads from pages 620 to 635. The sequence shows the progression in Pelafina's distress (the author of the letters) reflected through the layout of the text.

**B2.1.** Pages 620–621.**B2.2.** Pages 622–623.**B2.3.** Pages 624–625.**B2.4.** Pages 626–627.**B2.5.** Pages 628–629.**B2.6.** Pages 630–631.**B2.7.** Pages 632–633.**B2.8.** Pages 634–635.

**Figure B-3.**

Diagram of Chapter IX, from pages 107 to 152.

The flat outline illustrates the connections created through the footnotes.

The arrows show the reading connections and the image changes once the reading moves to a different page. (Page 1/8)

**Figure B-3.**  
Continued (Page 2/8).

**Figure B-3.**  
Continued (Page 3/8).

**Figure B-3.**  
Continued (Page 4/8).

**Figure B-3.**  
Continued (Page 5/8).

**Figure B-3.**  
Continued (Page 6/8).



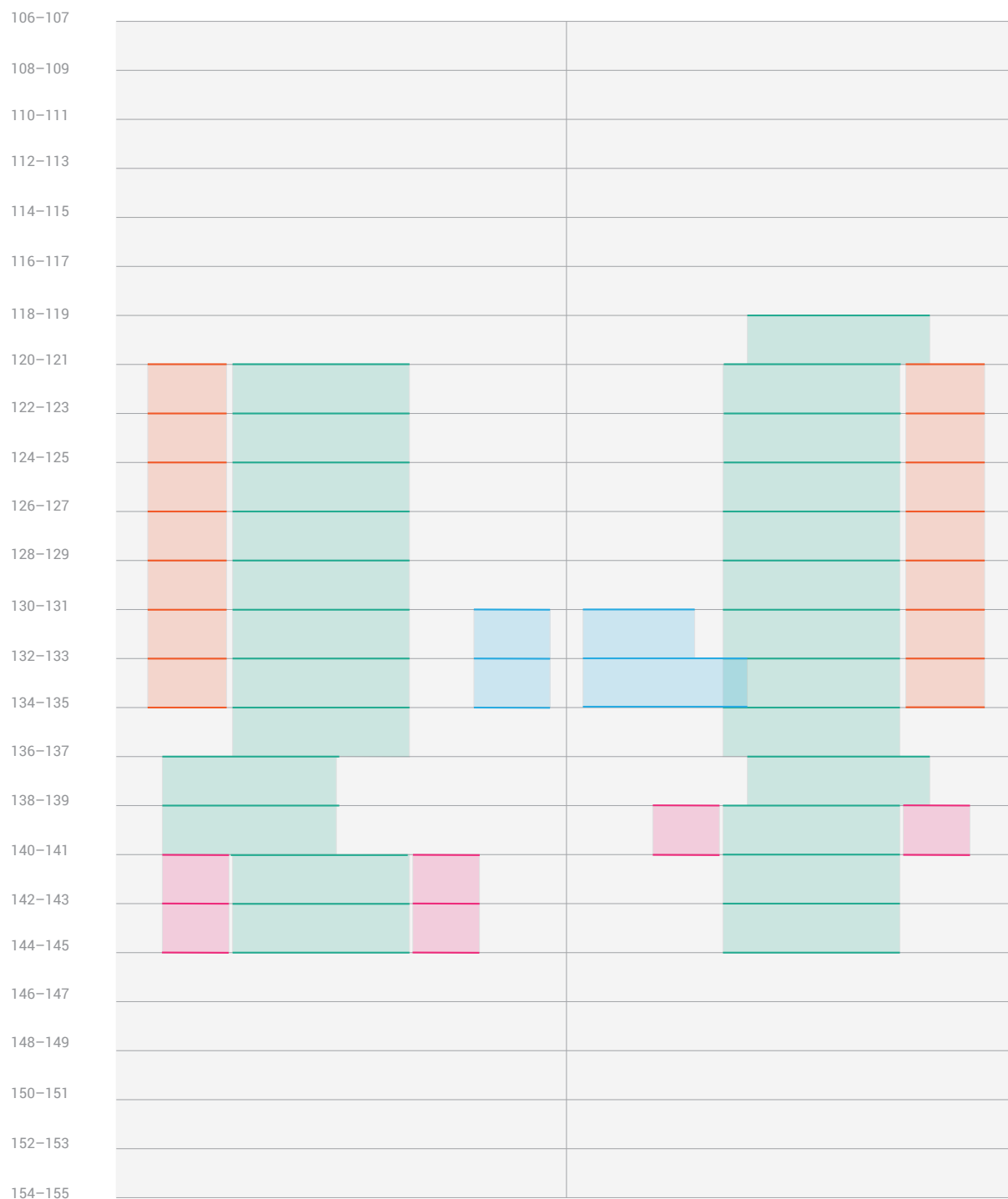
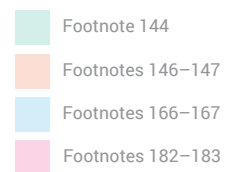
**Figure B-3.**  
Continued (Page 7/8).

**Figure B-3.**  
Continued (Page 8/8).

**Figure B-4.**

Cross-section of Chapter IX from pages 107 to 155.

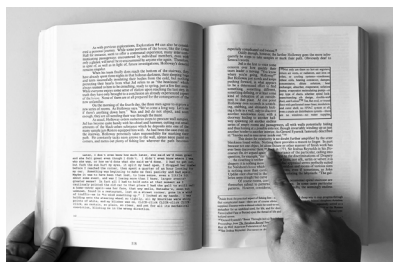
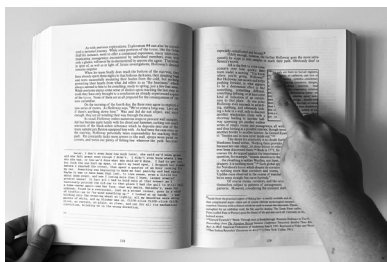
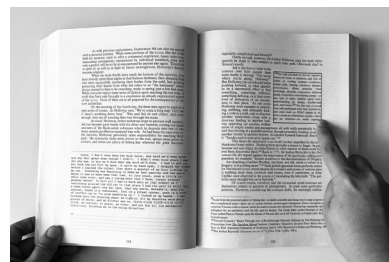
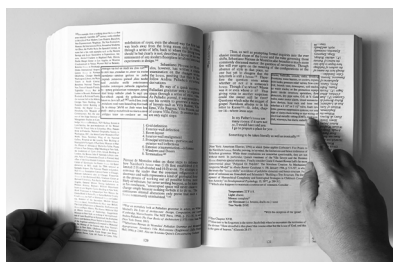
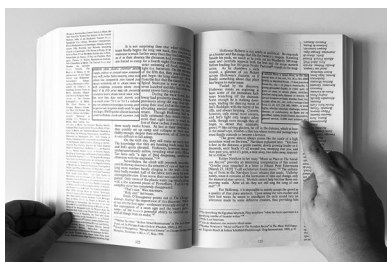
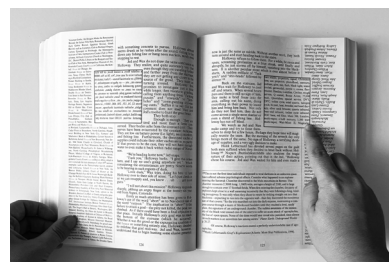
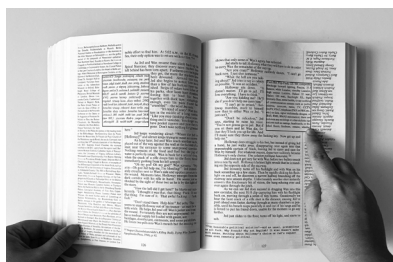
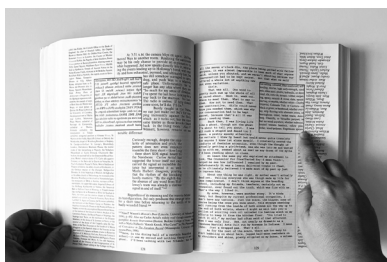
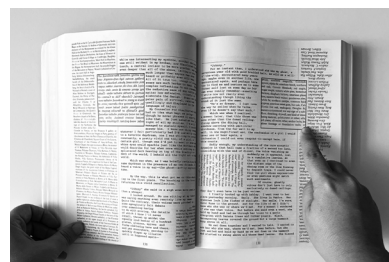
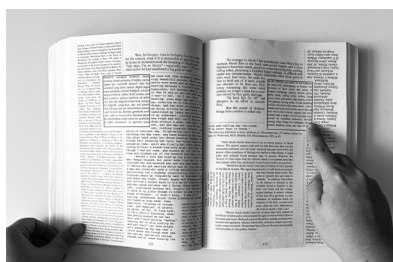
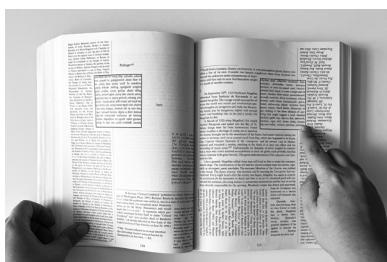
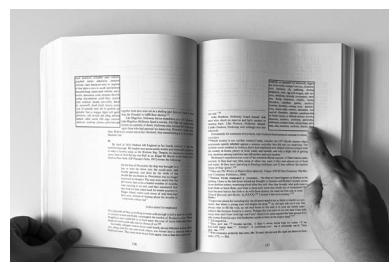
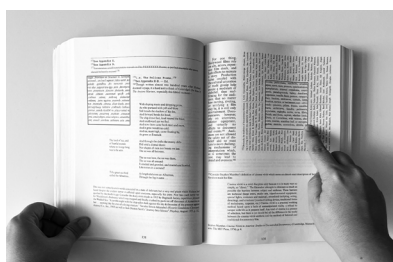
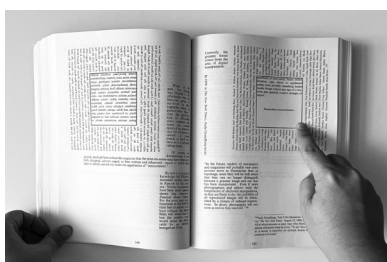
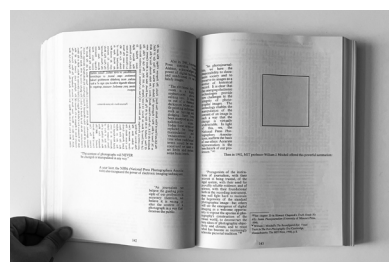
The diagram shows vertical reading that footnotes 144, 146, 147, 166, 168, 182 and 183 create.



**Figure B-5.**

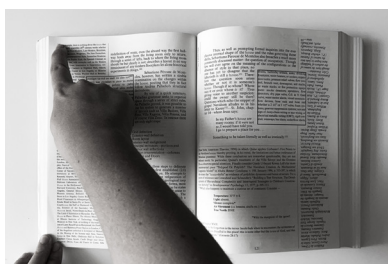
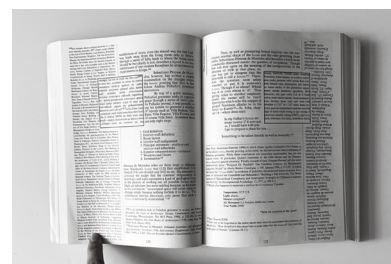
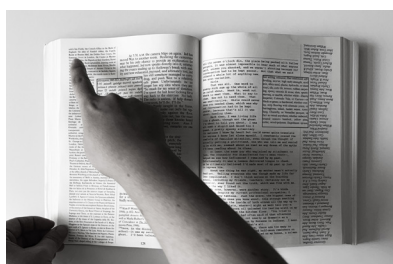
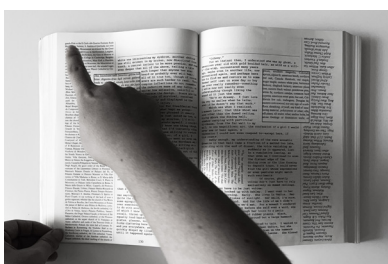
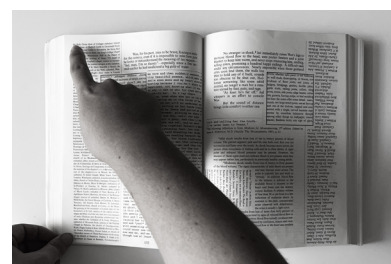
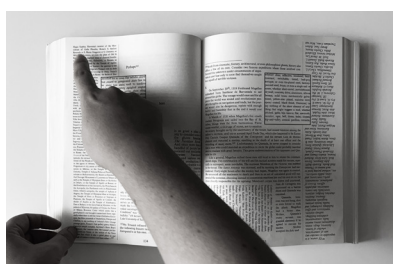
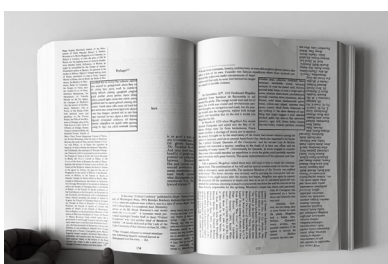
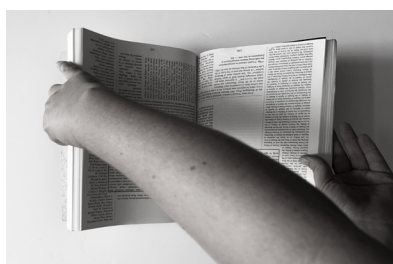
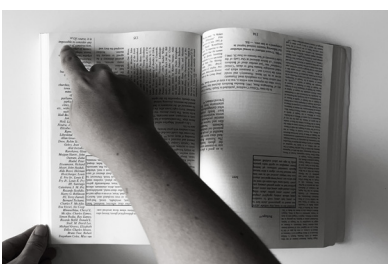
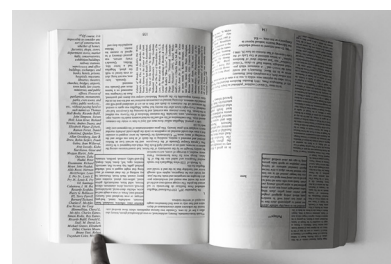
Spreads of footnote 144 from Chapter IX, pages 119–143.

The progression shows that the reading happens only on the recto pages and within the square of text.

**B5.1.** Page 119. Footnote number in text.**B5.2.** Page 119. Start of footnote 144.**B5.3.** Page 119. Reading of footnote 144.**B5.4.** Page 121.  
Footnote 144 continues.**B5.5.** Page 123.  
Footnote 144 continues.**B5.6.** Page 125.  
Footnote 144 continues.**B5.7.** Page 127.  
Footnote 144 continues.**B5.8.** Page 129.  
Footnote 144 continues.**B5.9.** Page 131.  
Footnote 144 continues.**B5.10.** Page 133.  
Footnote 144 continues.**B5.11.** Page 135.  
Footnote 144 continues.**B5.12.** Page 137.  
Footnote 144 continues.**B5.13.** Page 139.  
Footnote 144 continues.**B5.14.** Page 141.  
Footnote 144 ends.**B5.15.** Page 143. Empty square.

**Figure B-6.**

Spreads of footnotes 146 and 147 from Chapter IX, pages 120–135.  
The progression shows the columns that guide the reading and lead to  
a 180-degree change in text direction. (Page 1/2)

**B6.1.** Page 120. Footnote number in text.**B6.2.** Page 120. Start of footnote 146.**B6.3.** Page 120. Reading of footnote 146  
(column on verso pages).**B6.4.** Page 122.  
Footnote 146 continues.**B6.5.** Page 124.  
Footnote 146 continues.**B6.6.** Page 126.  
Footnote 146 continues.**B6.7.** Page 128. Footnote 146  
continues.**B6.8.** Page 130. Footnote 146  
continues.**B6.9.** Page 132. Footnote 146  
continues.**B6.10.** Page 134. Footnote 146  
continues.**B6.11.** Page 134. Footnote 146 ends  
and connects with footnote 147.**B6.12.** Page 135. Footnote 147 starts.**B6.13.** Pages 134–135. Book needs to  
be turned 180 degrees.**B6.14.** Page 135. Footnote 147 starts  
with a change in text direction.**B6.15.** Page 135. Reading of footnote  
147 (column on recto pages that appear  
as verso due to the 180-degree change).

**Figure B-6.**  
Continued (Page 2/2).



**B6.16. Page 133.**  
Footnote 147 continues.



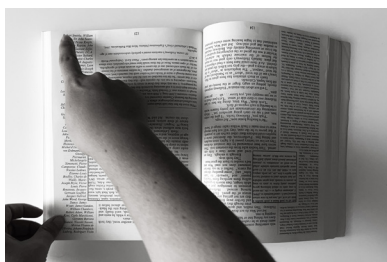
**B6.17. Page 131.**  
Footnote 147 continues.



**B6.18. Page 129.**  
Footnote 147 continues.



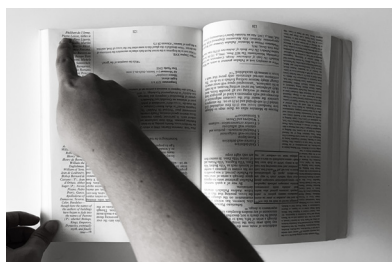
**B6.19. Page 127.**  
Footnote 147 continues.



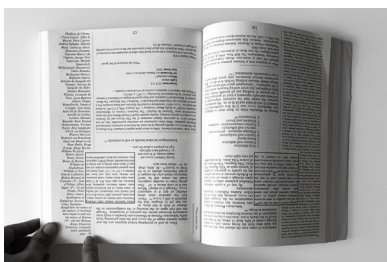
**B6.20. Page 125.**  
Footnote 147 continues.



**B6.21. Page 123.**  
Footnote 147 continues.



**B6.22. Page 121.**  
Footnote 147 continues.



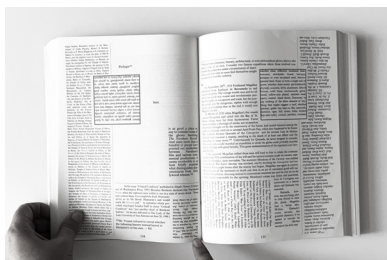
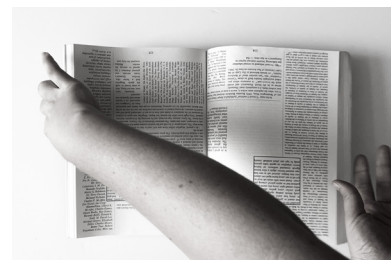
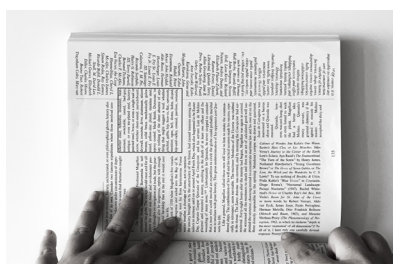
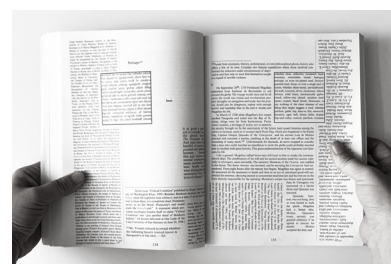
**B6.23. Page 121.**  
Footnote 147 ends.



**Figure B-7.**

Spreads of footnotes 166 and 167 from Chapter IX, pages 130–134.

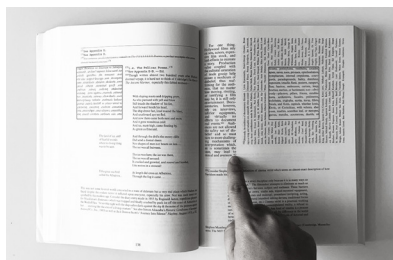
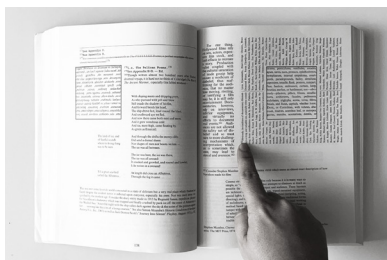
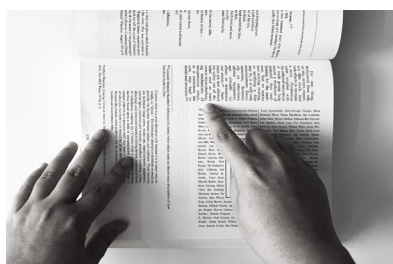
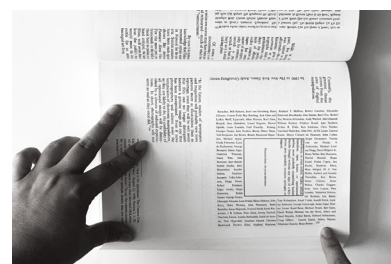
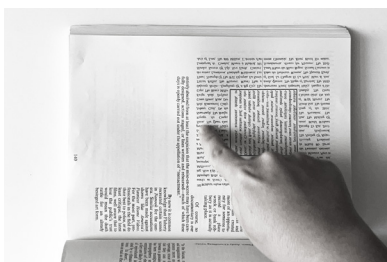
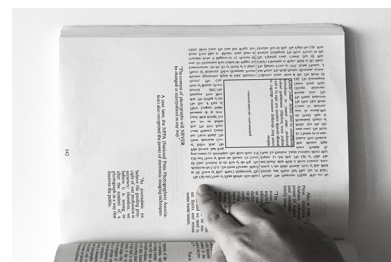
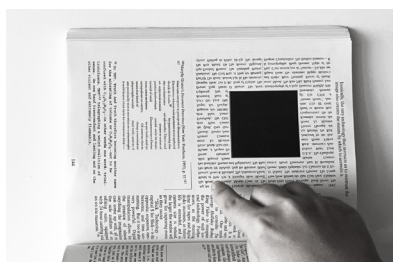
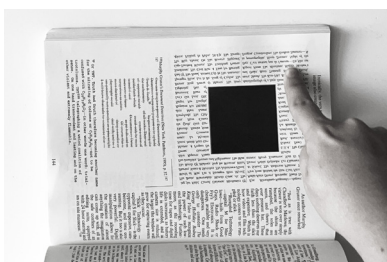
The progression shows texts that guide the reading and lead to a 180-degree and 90-degree change in reading direction.

**B7.1.** Page 134. Footnote number in text.**B7.2.** Page 134. Start of footnote 166 at the bottom of the page.**B7.3.** Pages 134–135. Book needs to be turned 180 degrees.**B7.4.** Page 134. Footnote 166 starts.**B7.5.** Page 132. Footnote 166 continues.**B7.6.** Page 130. Footnote 166 continues.**B7.7.** Page 130. Footnote 166 ends and connects with footnote 167.**B7.8.** Page 131. Start of footnote 167 on the recto page.**B7.9.** Page 130–132. Book needs to be turned 90 degrees.**B7.10.** Page 131. Footnote 167 starts.**B7.11.** Page 133. Footnote 167 continues.**B7.12.** Page 135. Footnote 167 continues.**B7.13.** Page 135. Footnote 167 ends and connects with footnote 168.**B7.14.** Page 135. Footnote 168 starts with a change in text direction.**B7.15.** Page 135. Book needs to be turned back -90 degrees.

**Figure B-8.**

Spreads of footnotes 182 and 183 from Chapter IX, pages 139–144.

The progression shows texts that guide the reading and lead to a 90-degree change in reading direction. Footnote 183 needs a mirror to decode the text.

**B8.1.** Page 139. Footnote in text.**B8.2.** Page 139. Start of footnote 182.**B8.3.** Pages 138–139. Book needs to be turned 90 degrees.**B8.4.** Page 139. Footnote 182 starts.**B8.5.** Page 141. Footnote 182 continues.**B8.6.** Page 141. Footnote 182 ends and connects with footnote 183.**B8.7.** Page 140. Footnote 183 starts.**B8.8.** Page 140. Footnote 183 is best read with a mirror to decode the text.**B8.9.** Page 142. Footnote 183 continues.**B8.10.** Page 144. Footnote 183 continues.**B8.11.** Page 144. Footnote 183 ends.



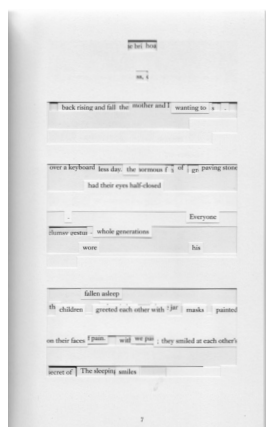
# Appendix C

Material from *Tree of codes*

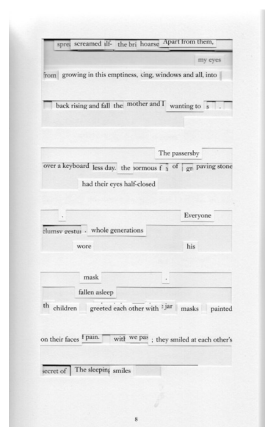
Figure C-1.

Pages from Unit 1 in *Tree of codes*, pages 1–16.

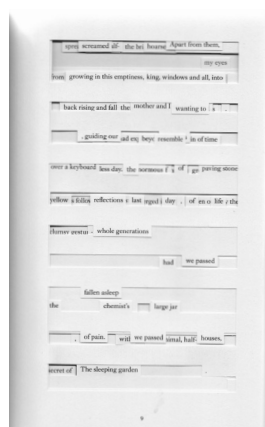
The progression shows the depth of the unit and the changing topography.



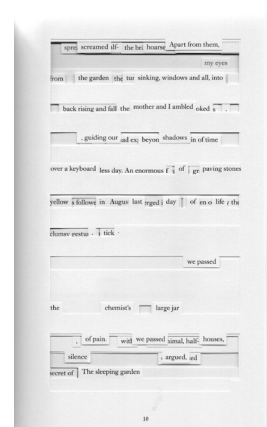
C1.1. Page 7.



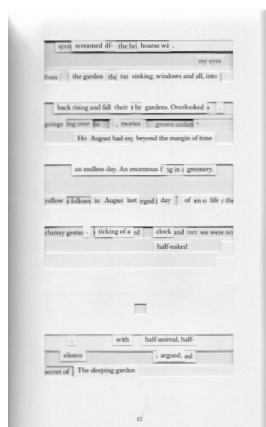
C1.2. Page 8.



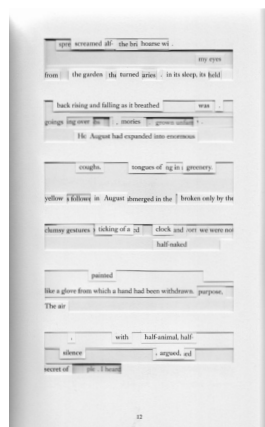
C1.3. Page 9.



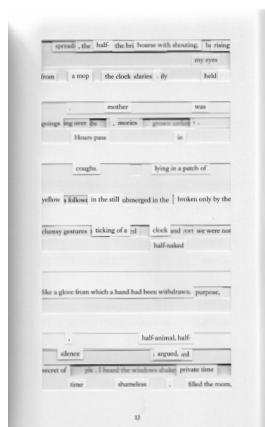
C1.4. Page 10.



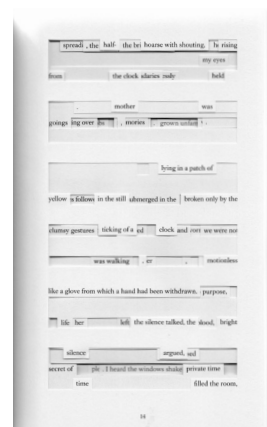
C1.5. Page 11.



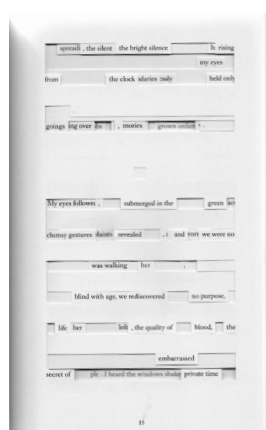
C1.6. Page 12.



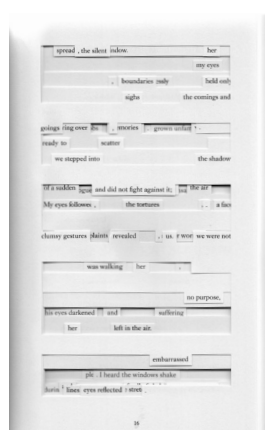
C1.7. Page 13.



C1.8. Page 14.



C1.9. Page 15.

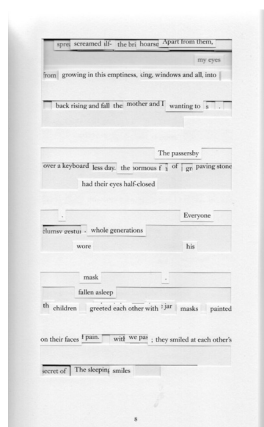


C1.10. Page 16.

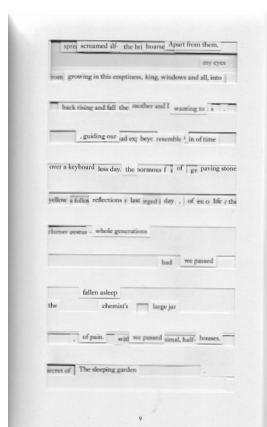
Figure C-2.

Pages from Unit 2 in *Tree of codes*, pages 8–22.

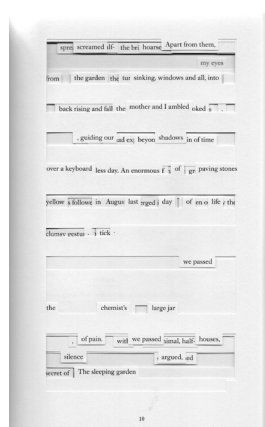
The progression shows the depth of the unit and the changing topography that intertwines with the pages of Unit 1. (Page 1/2)



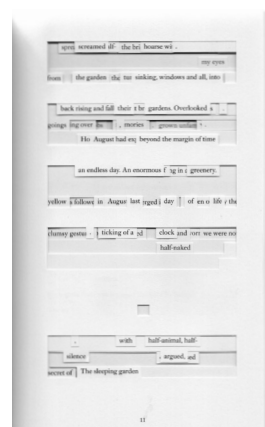
C2.1. Page 8.



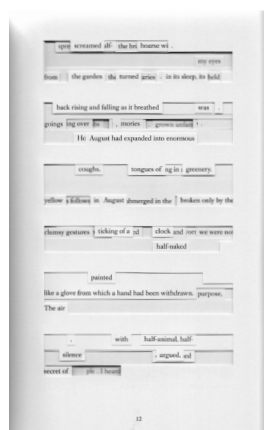
C2.2. Page 9.



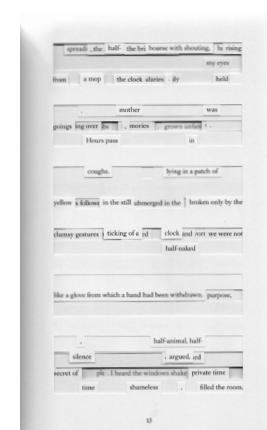
C2.3. Page 10.



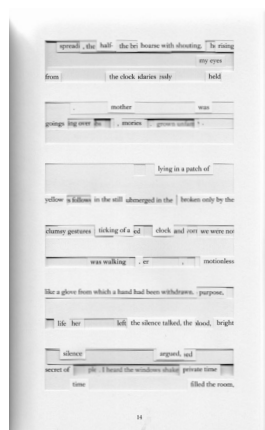
C2.4. Page 11.



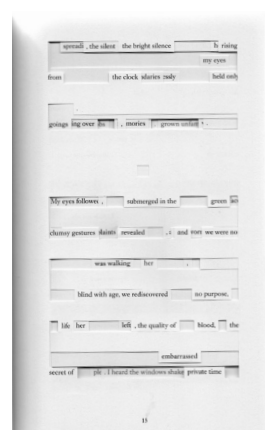
C2.5. Page 12.



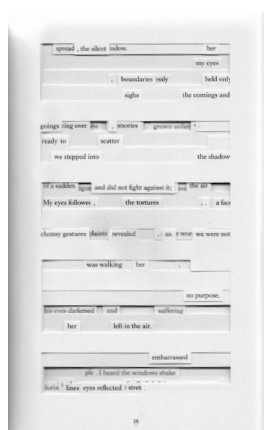
C2.6. Page 13.



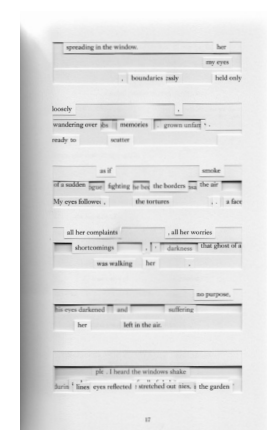
C2.7. Page 14.



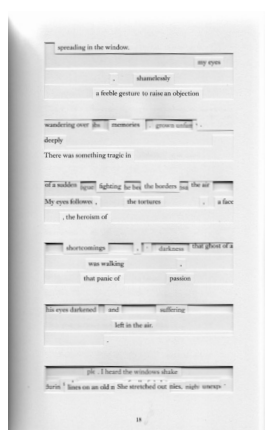
C2.8. Page 15.



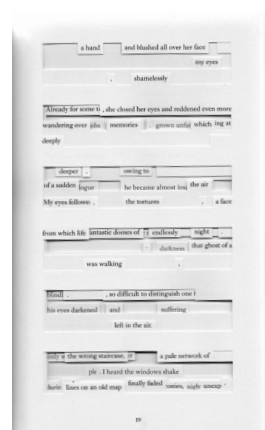
C2.9. Page 16.



C2.10. Page 17.

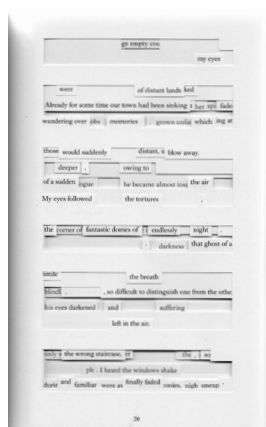


C2.11. Page 18.

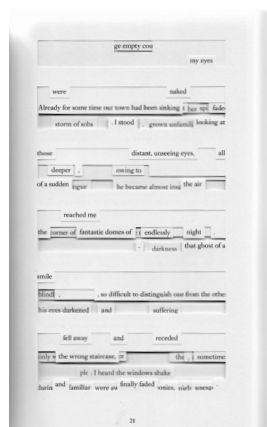


C2.12. Page 19.

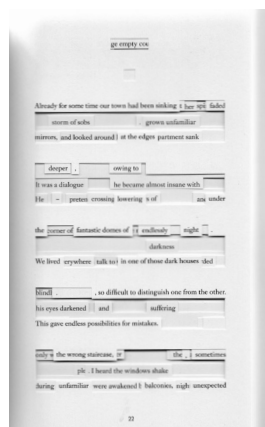
Figure C-2.  
Continued (Page 2/2).



C2.13. Page 20.



C2.14. Page 21.

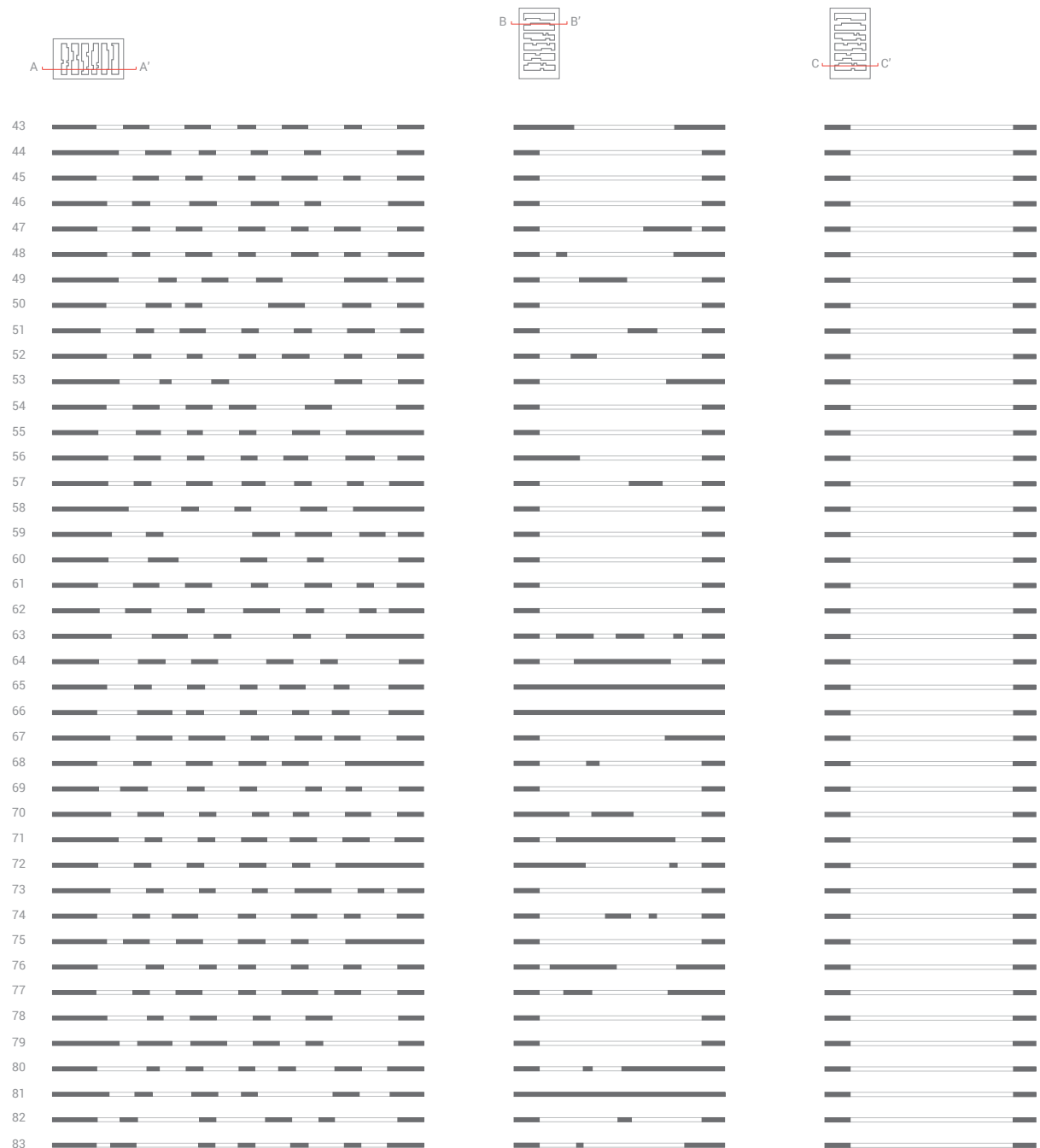


C2.15. Page 22.

**Figure C-3.**

Cross-sections of Unit 9 from *Tree of codes*, pages 43–83.

The transversal (left) and longitudinal (right) cross-sections show the way in which the gaps overlay page by page and create the volumetric narrative.



**C3.1.**  
Longitudinal section A–A'.

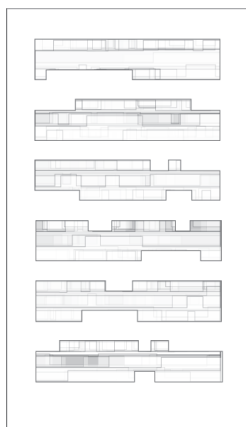
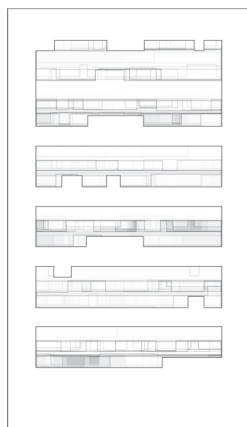
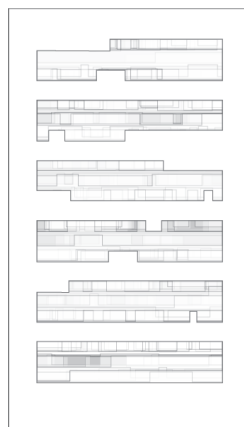
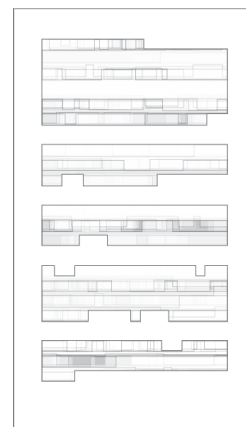
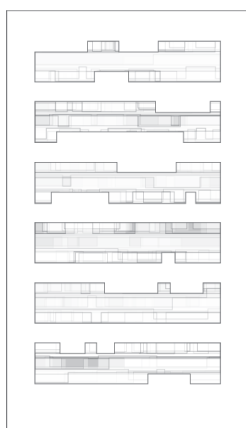
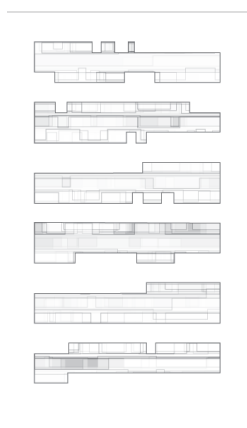
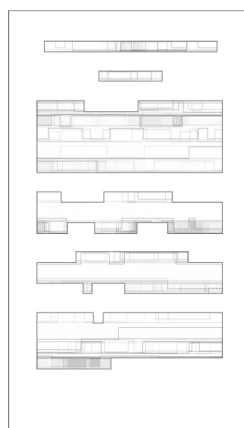
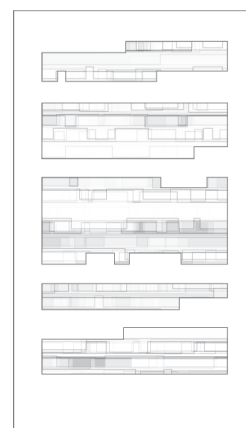
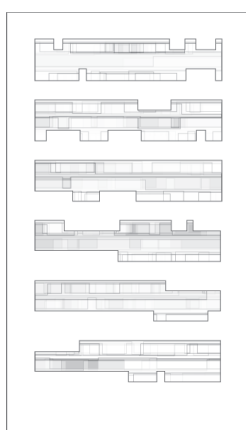
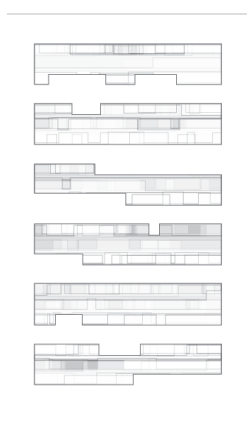
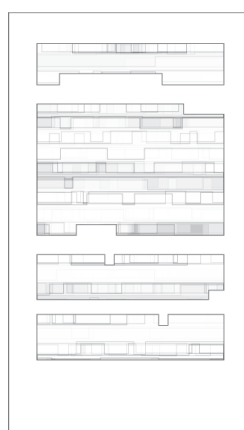
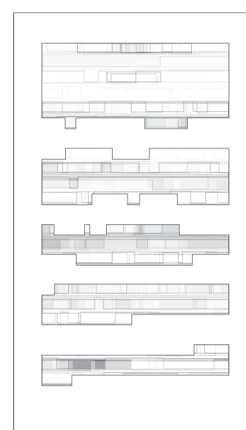
**C3.1.**  
Transversal section B–B'.

**C3.1.**  
Transversal section C–C'.

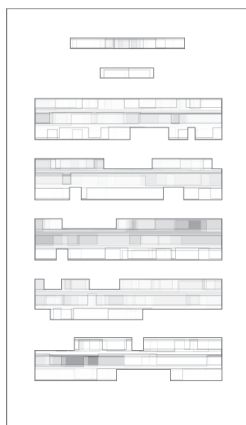
**Figure C-4.**

Layout progression of Unit 9 from *Tree of codes*, pages 43–83.

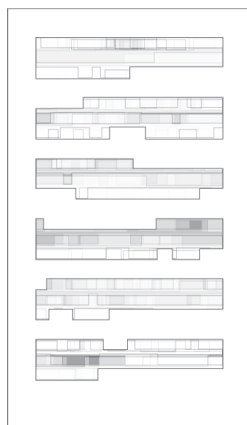
This abstract sequence shows the change in layout from page to page that builds the depth of the unit and the volumetric narrative, and how it gradually shows the deepest pages of the section (the darker areas evidence this). (Page 1/4)

**C4.1.** Page 43.**C4.2.** Page 44.**C4.3.** Page 45.**C4.4.** Page 46.**C4.5.** Page 47.**C4.6.** Page 48.**C4.7.** Page 49.**C4.8.** Page 50.**C4.9.** Page 51.**C4.10.** Page 52.**C4.11.** Page 53.**C4.12.** Page 54.

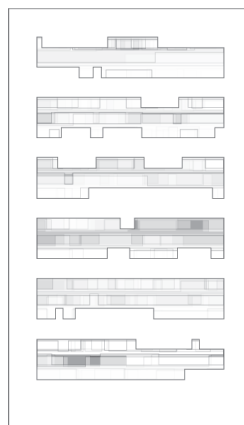
**Figure C-4.**  
Continued (Page 2/4).



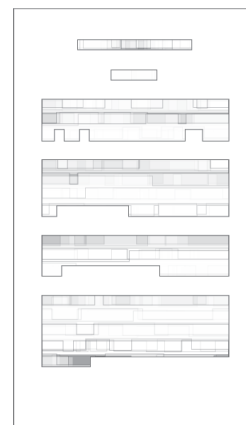
**C4.13.** Page 55.



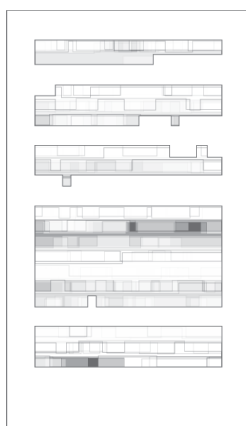
**C4.14.** Page 56.



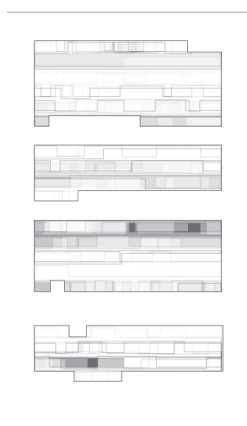
**C4.15.** Page 57.



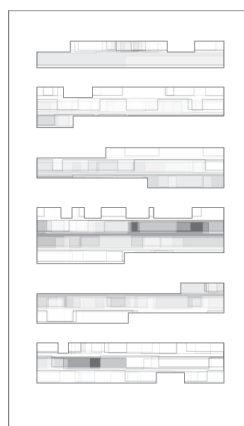
**C4.16.** Page 58.



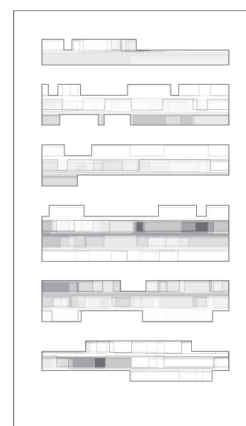
**C4.17.** Page 59.



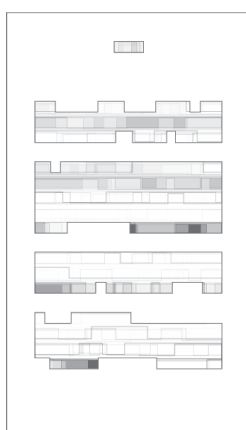
**C4.18.** Page 60.



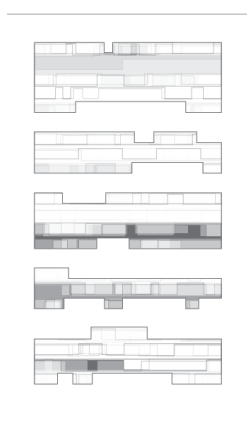
**C4.19.** Page 61.



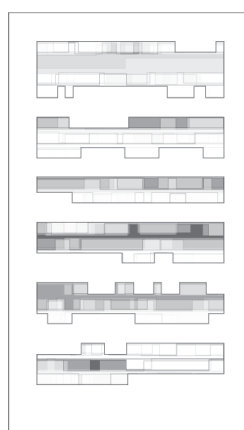
**C4.20.** Page 62.



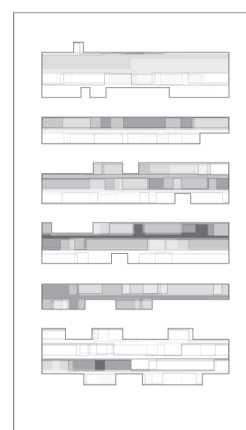
**C4.21.** Page 63.



**C4.22.** Page 64.

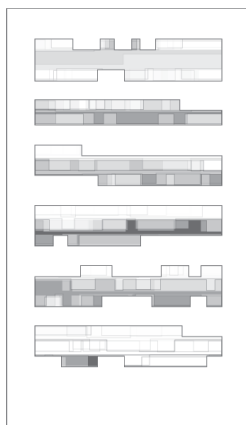


**C4.23.** Page 65.

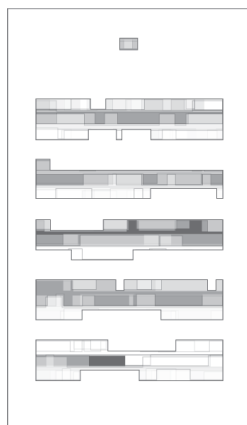


**C4.24.** Page 66.

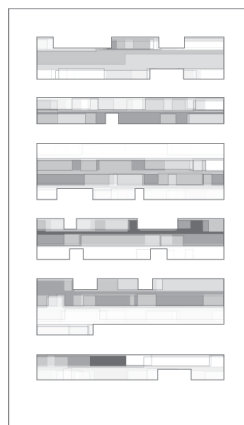
**Figure C-4.**  
Continued (Page 3/4).



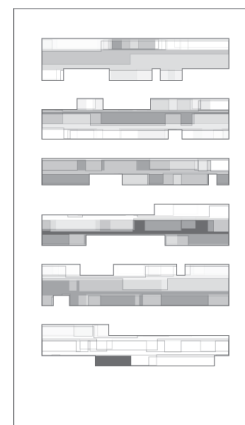
**C4.25.** Page 67.



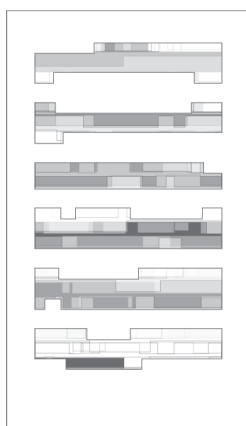
**C4.26.** Page 68.



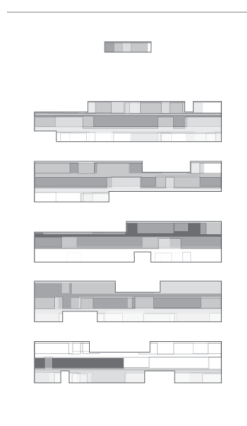
**C4.27.** Page 69.



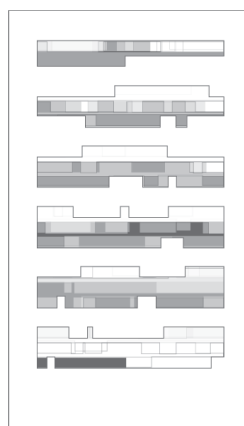
**C4.28.** Page 70.



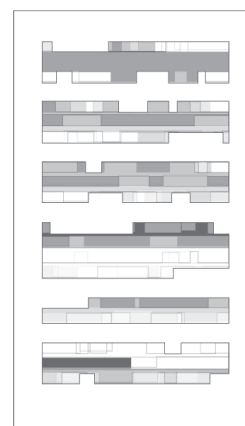
**C4.29.** Page 71.



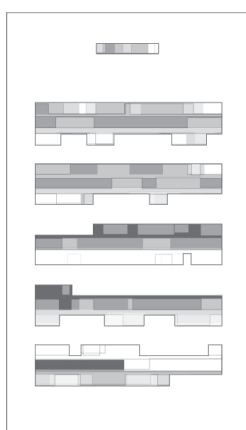
**C4.30.** Page 72.



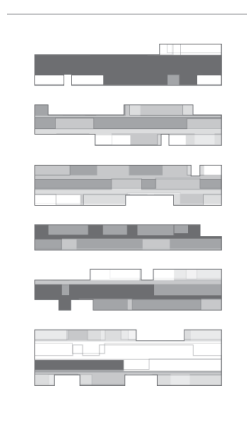
**C4.31.** Page 73.



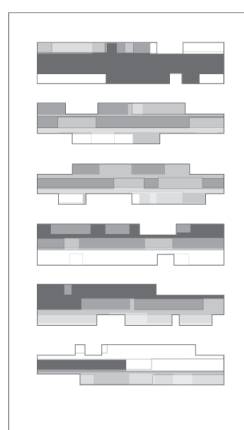
**C4.32.** Page 74.



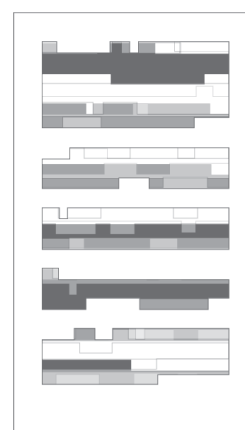
**C4.33.** Page 75.



**C4.34.** Page 76.



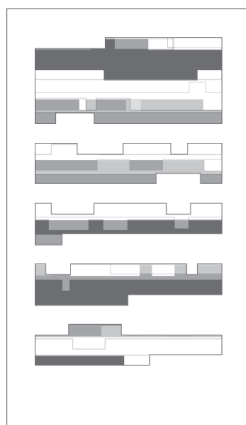
**C4.35.** Page 77.



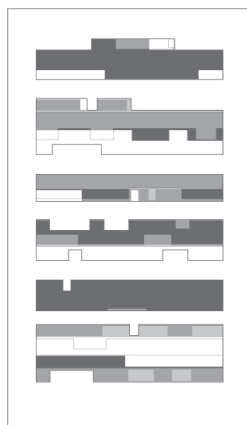
**C4.36.** Page 78.



**Figure C-4.**  
Continued (Page 4/4).



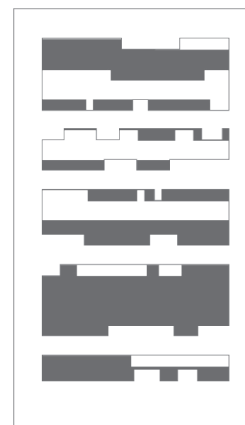
**C4.37.** Page 79.



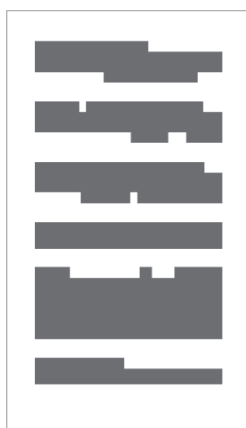
**C4.38.** Page 80.



**C4.39.** Page 81.



**C4.40.** Page 82.



**C4.41.** Page 83.

**Figure C-5.**

Pages of Unit 9 from *Tree of codes*, pages 43–83.

The progression shows the gradual progress that happens through the reading and the sequential change in the volumetric narrative. (Page 1/4)

**Figure C-5.**  
Continued (Page 2/4).

**Figure C-5.**  
Continued (Page 3/4).

**Figure C-5.**  
Continued (Page 4/4).

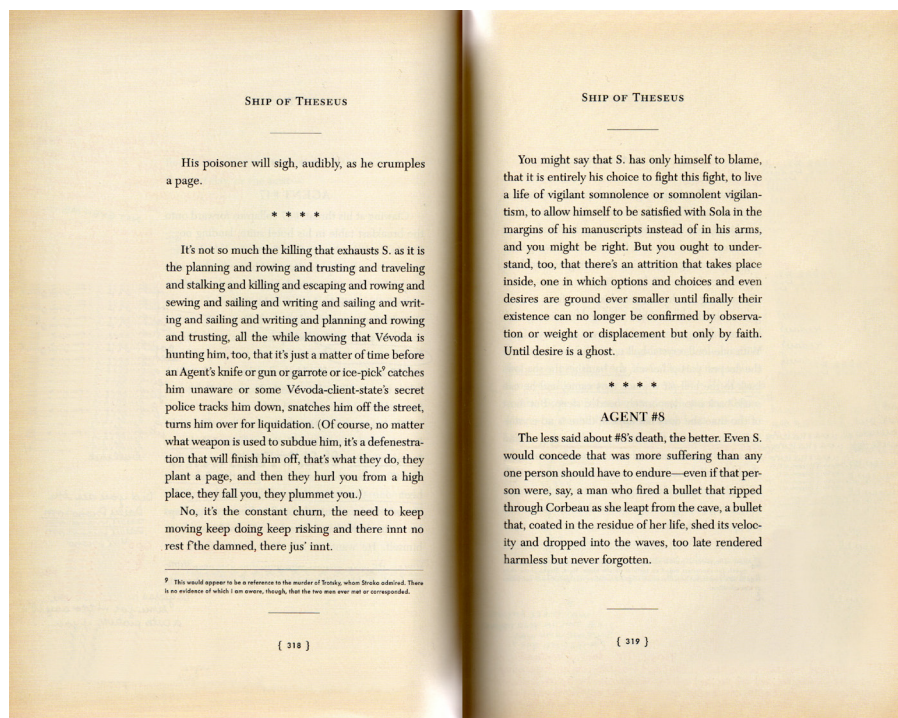
## **Appendix D**

### **Material from *S*.**

**Figure D-1.**

Spreads of the timeline simulation from *S.*, pages 318–319.

The progression illustrates the chronological evolution of the handwritten margins and shows them in their order of appearance. (Page 1/3)

**D1.1. Original state.**

No handwritten comments, only the typewritten narrative present.

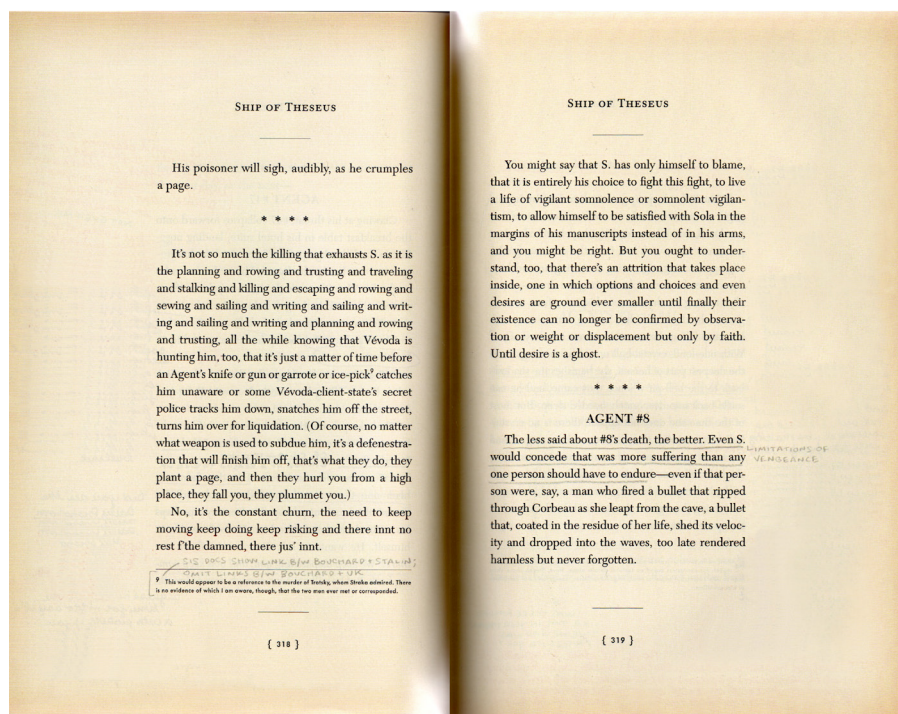
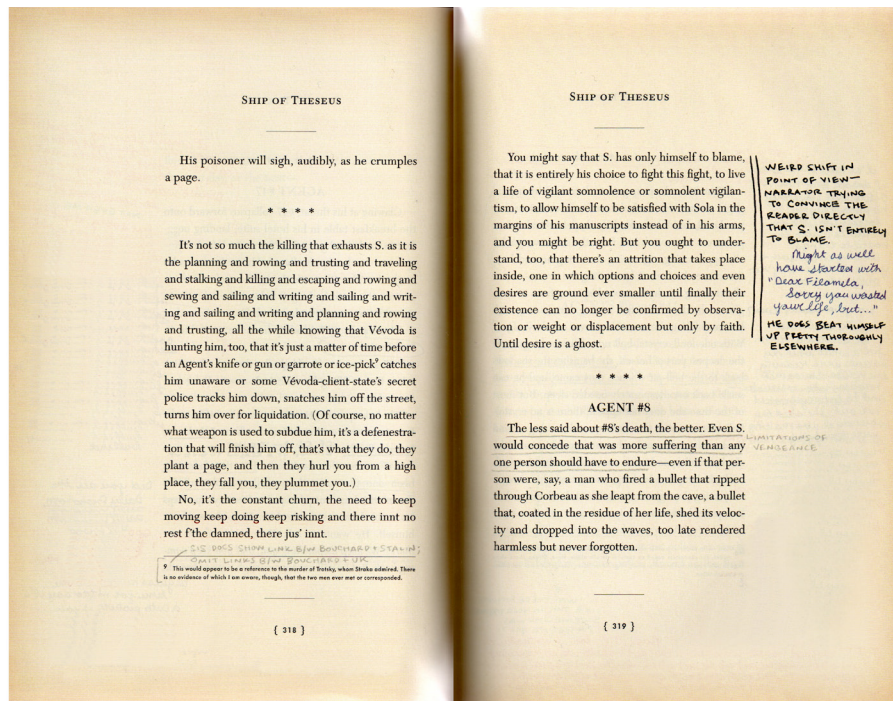
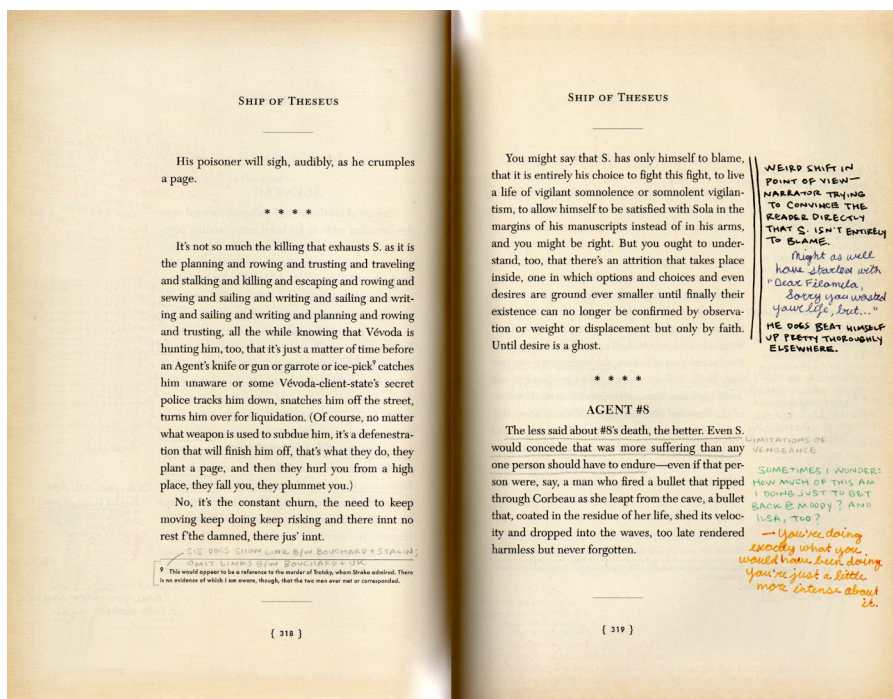
**D1.2. First period. Eric's annotations in pencil.**



Figure D-1.  
Continued (Page 2/3).



D1.3. Second period. Eric's comments appear in black and Jen's comments in blue.



D1.4. Third period. Eric's comments appear in green and Jen's in orange.





**Figure D-2.**

Sequence of spread diagrams from *S.*, pages 3–15.

This abstract progression shows the changing nature of the margins and how their layout shifts with every turn of the page.

**D2.1.** Pages 2–3.**D2.2.** Pages 4–5.**D2.3.** Pages 6–7.**D2.4.** Pages 8–9.**D2.5.** Pages 10–11.**D2.6.** Pages 12–13.**D2.7.** Pages 14–15.

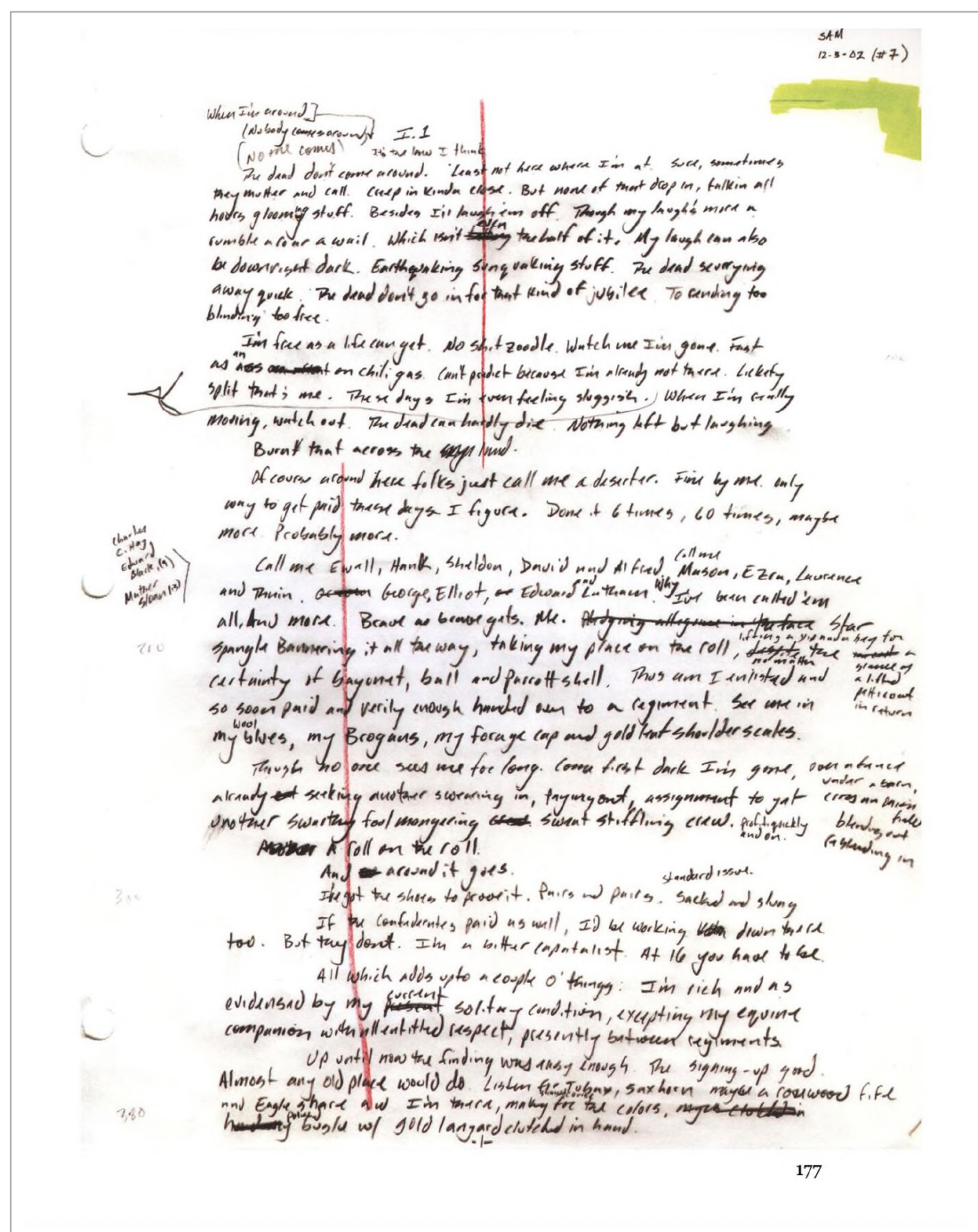
# **Appendix E**

## **Material from Chapter 5**

Figure E-1.

A number of drafts from *Only revolutions*.

The progression shows the evolution in the creative process of the novel and how Danielewski worked on layout and typographic details. (Page 1/7)



E1.1. December 3, 2002 Written by hand.



Figure E-1.  
Continued (Page 2/7).

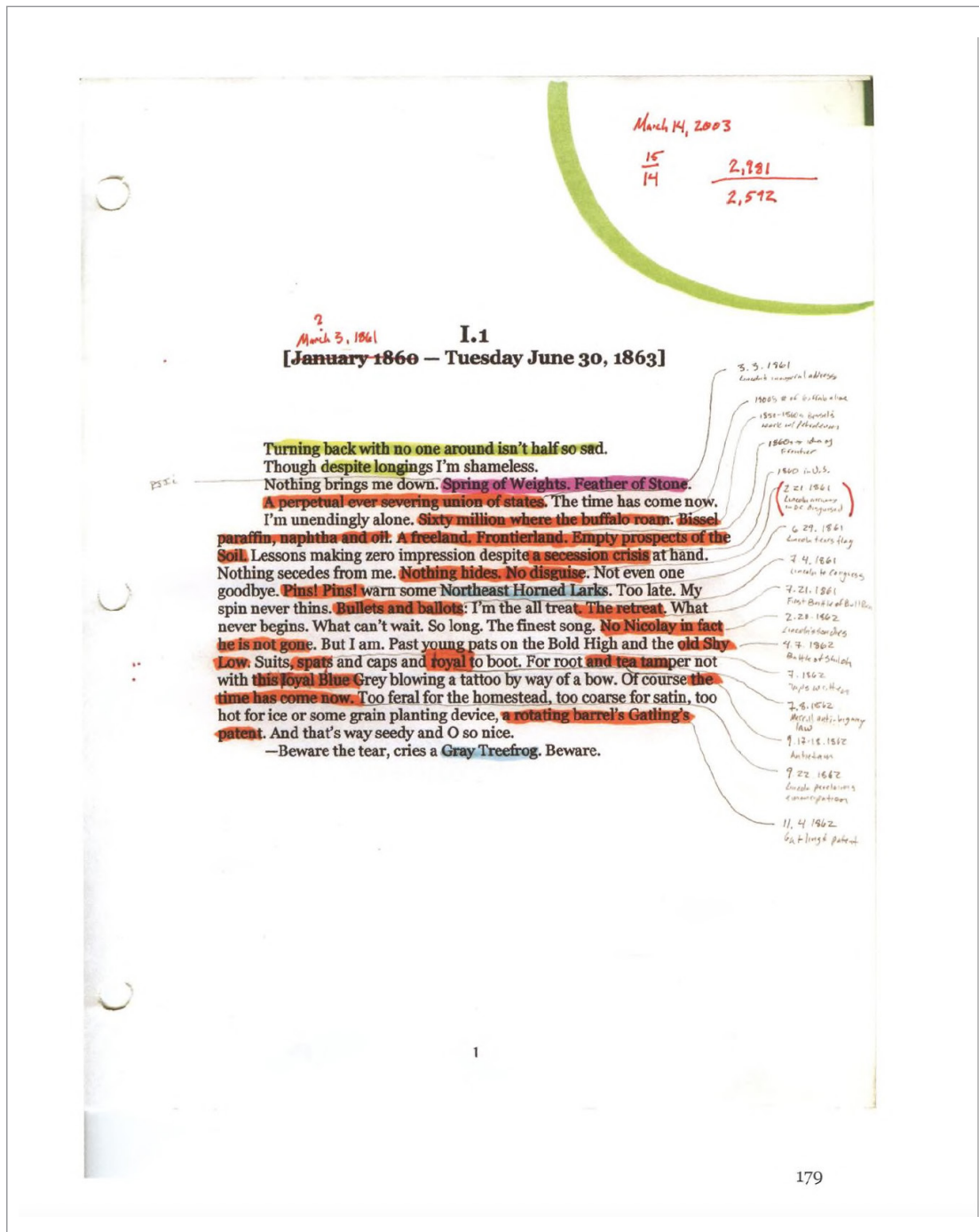
**I.1**  
**[January 1860 — Tuesday June 30, 1863]**

Turning back with no one around isn't half so sad.  
Though despite longings I'm shameless.  
Nothing brings me down. Spring of Weights. Feather of Stone.  
A perpetual ever severing union of states. The time has come now.  
I'm unendingly alone. Sixty million where the buffalo roam. Bissel  
paraffin, naphtha and oil. A freeland. Frontierland. Empty prospects of the  
Soil. Lessons making zero impression despite a secession crisis at hand.  
Nothing secedes from me. Nothing hides. No disguise. Not even one  
goodbye. Pins! Pins! warn some Northeast Horned Larks. Too late. My  
spin never thins. Bullets and ballots: I'm the all treat. The retreat. What  
never begins. What can't wait. So long. The finest song. No Nicolay in fact  
he is not gone. But I am. Past young pats on the Bold High and the old Shy  
Low. Suits, spats and caps and royal to boot. For root and tea tamper not  
with this loyal Blue Grey blowing a tattoo by way of a bow. Of course the  
time has come now. Too feral for the homestead, too coarse for satin, too  
hot for ice or some grain planting device, a rotating barrel's Gatling's  
patent. And that's way seedy and O so nice.  
—Beware the tear, cries a Gray Treefrog. Beware.

1

E1.2. March 13, 2003. Written in Word.

Figure E-1.  
Continued (Page 3/7).



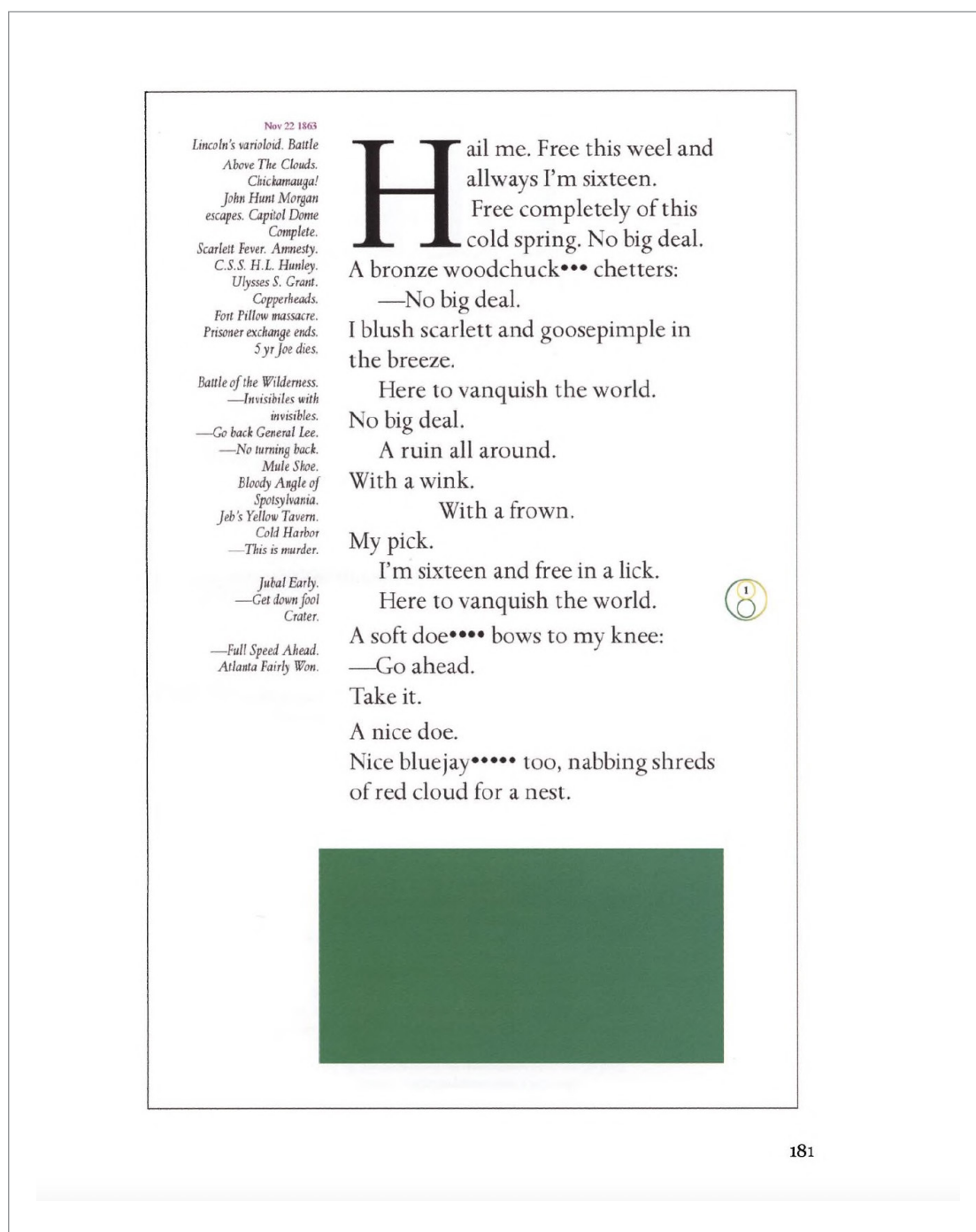
E1.3. March 14, 2004. Written in Word and annotated  
by hand and highlighted extracts.

Figure E-1.  
Continued (Page 4/7).



E1.4. April 2, 2004. On InDesign and layout already  
considers the space for the mirrored narrative.

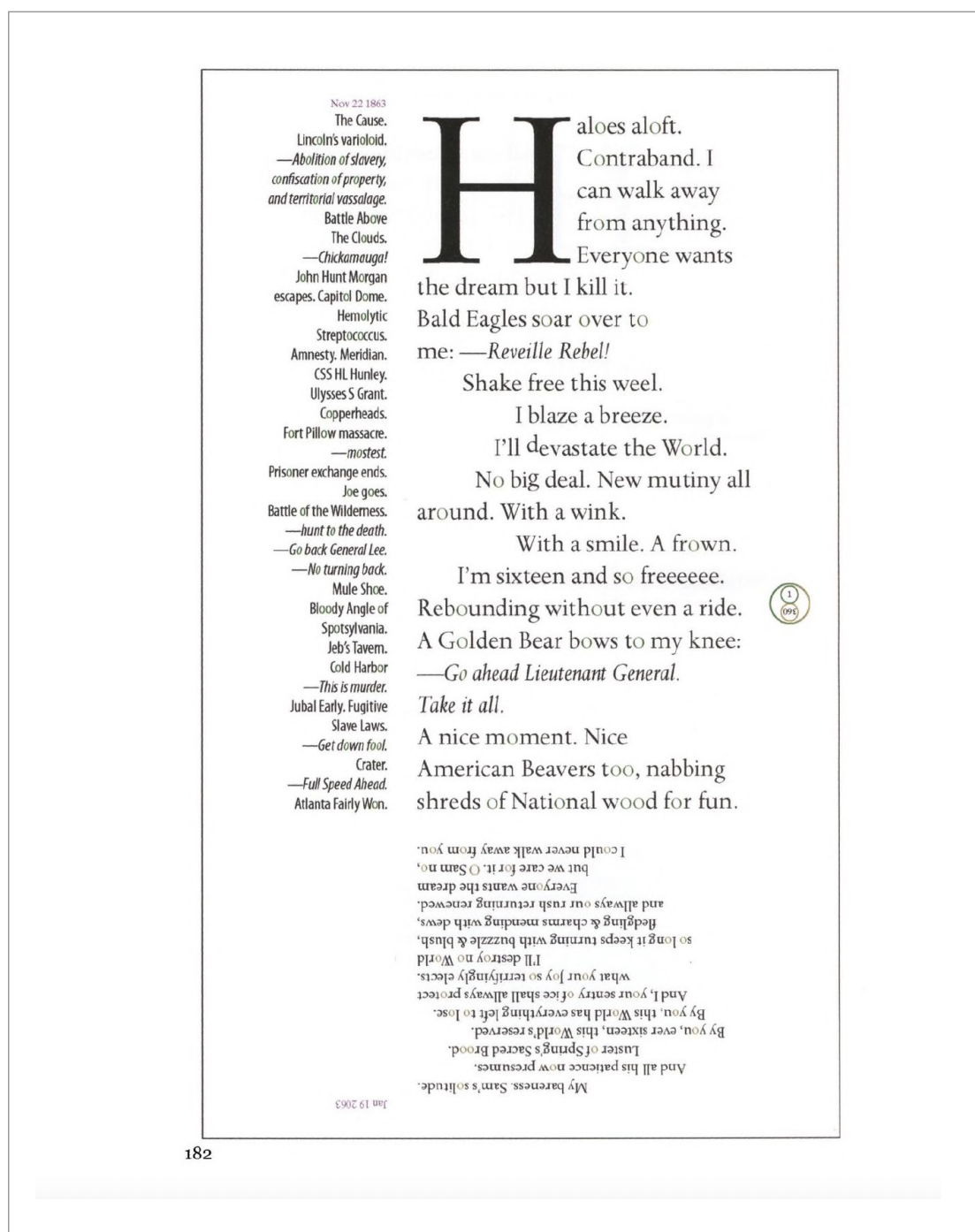
Figure E-1.  
Continued (Page 5/7).



E1.5. June 20, 2004. The chronomosaic is included and the  
structure of the page becomes divided in three parts.



Figure E-1.  
Continued (Page 6/7).



E1.6. July 21, 2005. Hailey's narrative is included and the  
page starts to resemble the final version.

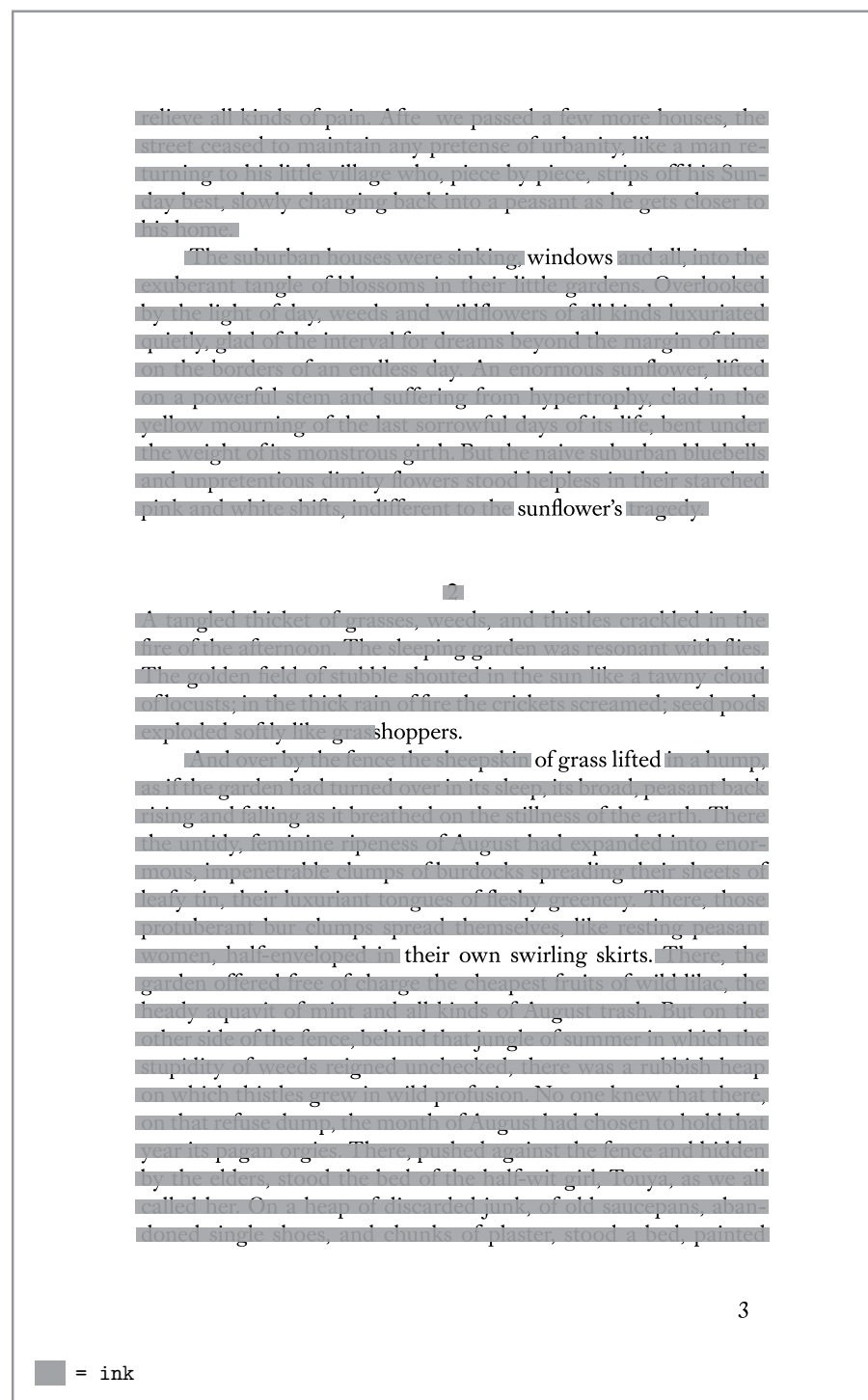
Figure E-1.  
Continued (Page 7/7).



E1.7. January 21, 2006. Final printed version of Sam's Page 1.

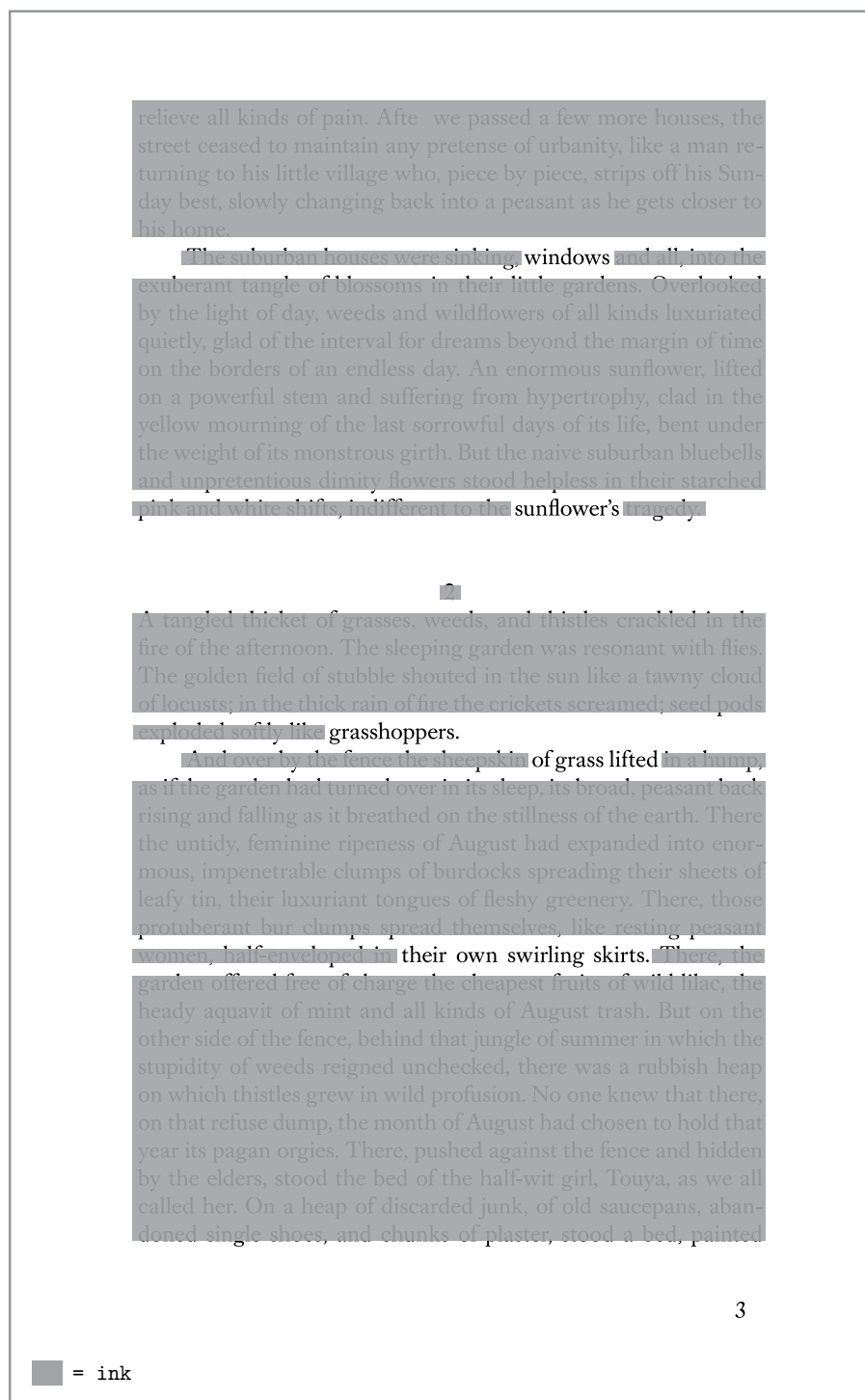


Figure E-2.  
Continued (Page 2/3).



E2.2. Test 2. Ink applied to entire lines of text.

**Figure E-2.**  
Continued (Page 3/3).

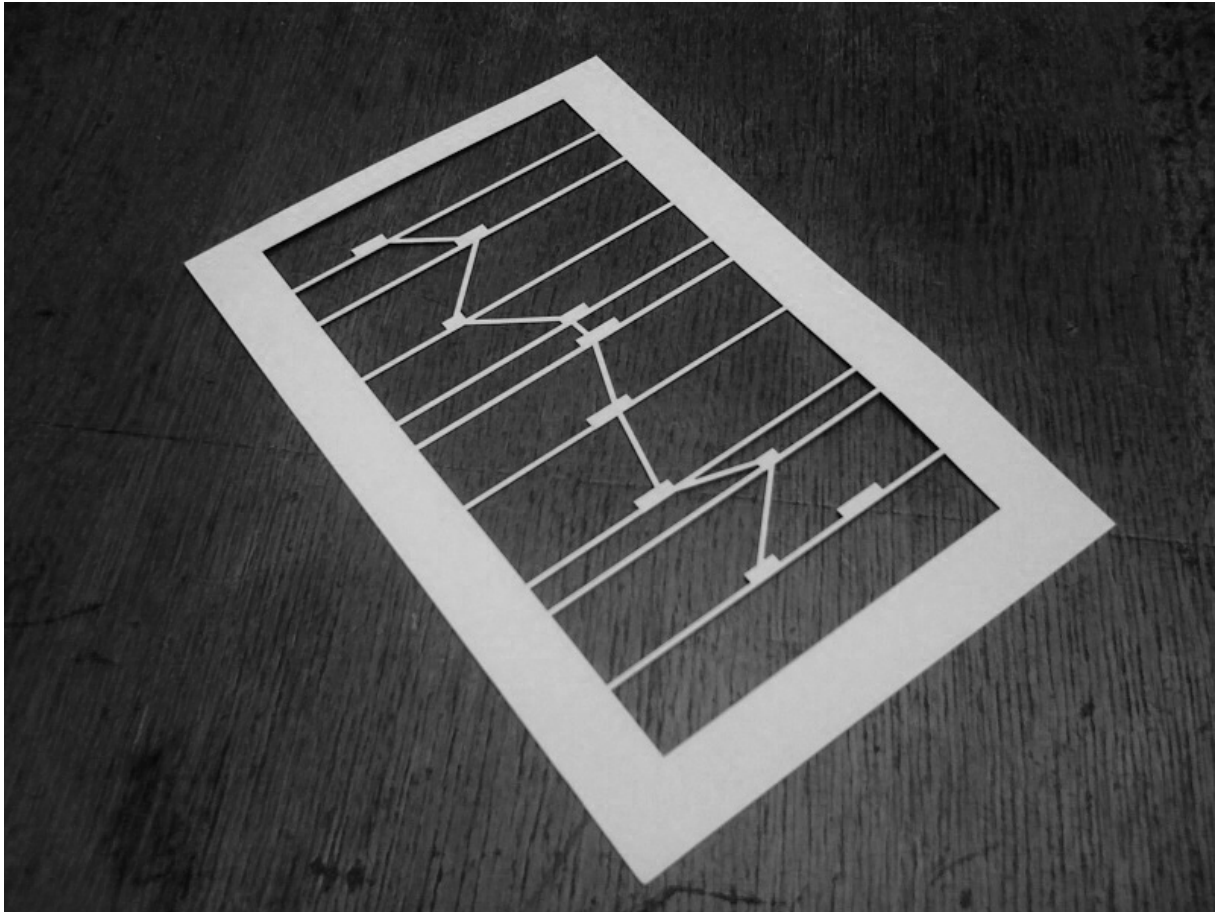


E2.3. Test 3. Ink applied to entire paragraphs and some lines of text.

**Figure E-3.**

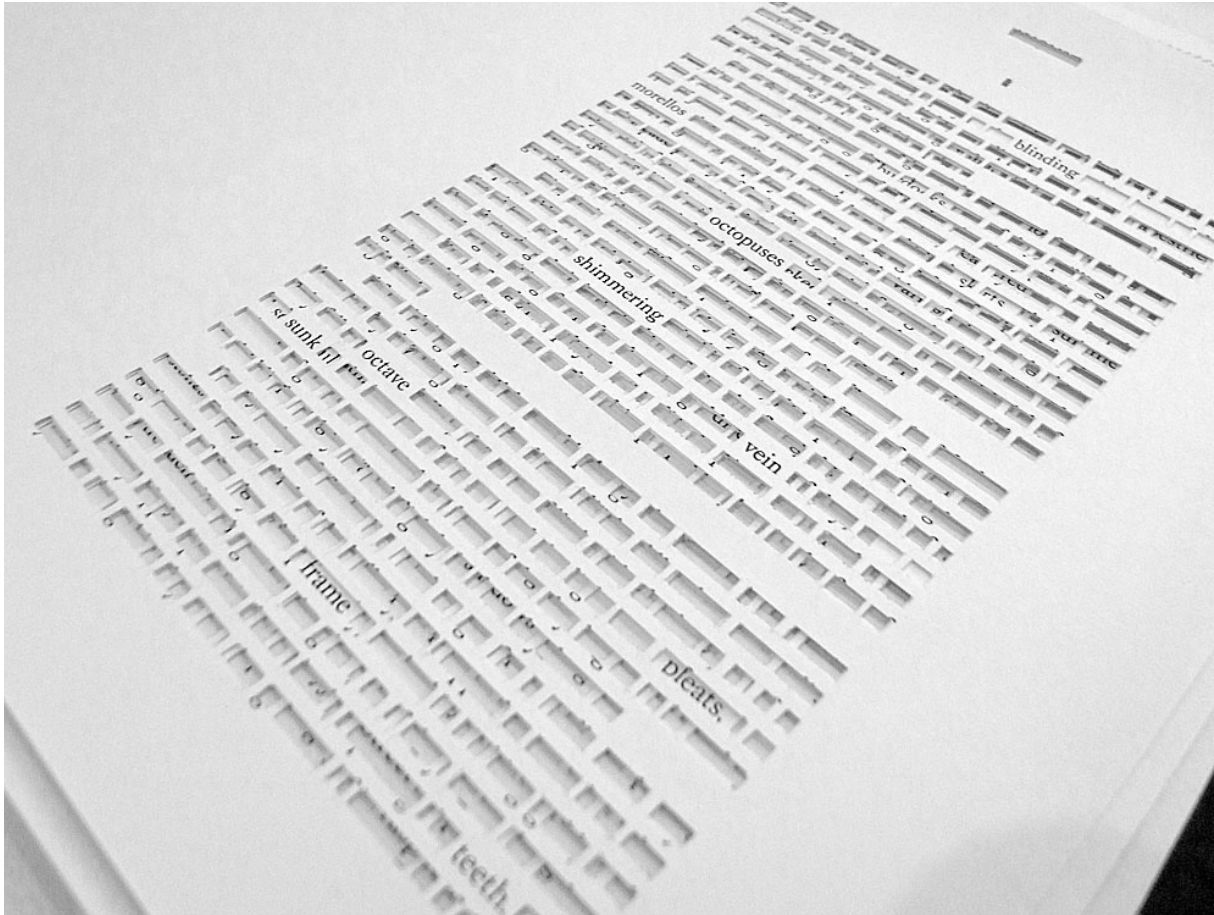
A number of drafts for the gaps in *Tree of codes*.

Images provided by Sara De Bondt. The images show which strategies were evaluated to find the best way to create the gaps and reach the adequate proportions between gaps and paper. (Page 1/9)



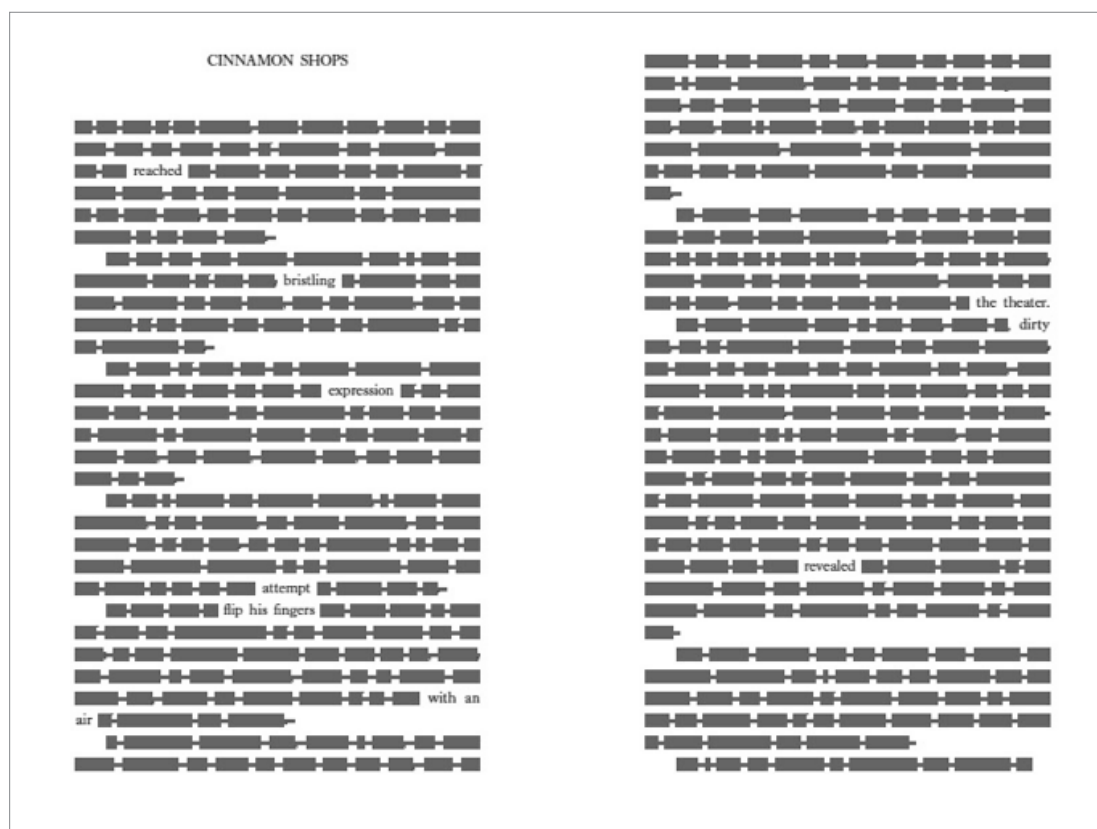
**E3.1.** Draft 1. Words connected by bridges. Unbalanced proportions between words and gaps.

**Figure E-3.**  
Continued (Page 2/9).



**E3.2.** Draft 2. Cut-out words. Too labour intensive.

Figure E-3.  
Continued (Page 3/9).



E3.3. Draft 3. Words connected by lines. Fragility in tiny corners and difficulty in production process.

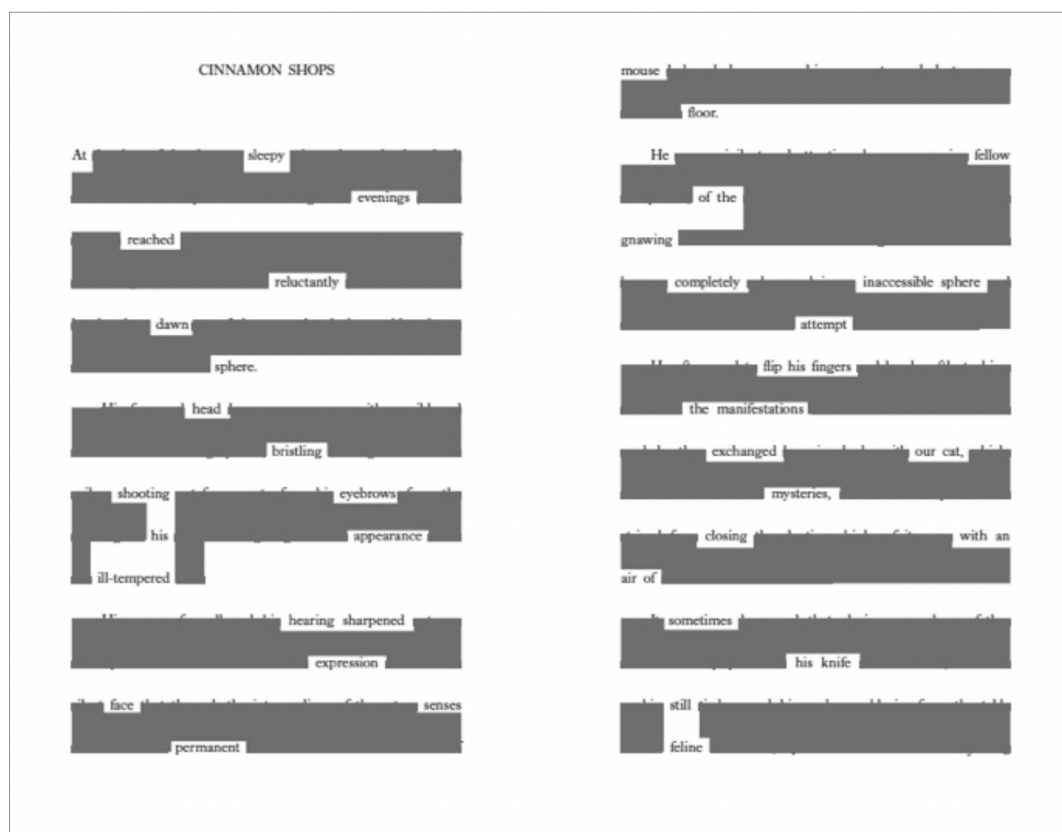


**Figure E-3.**  
Continued (Page 4/9).



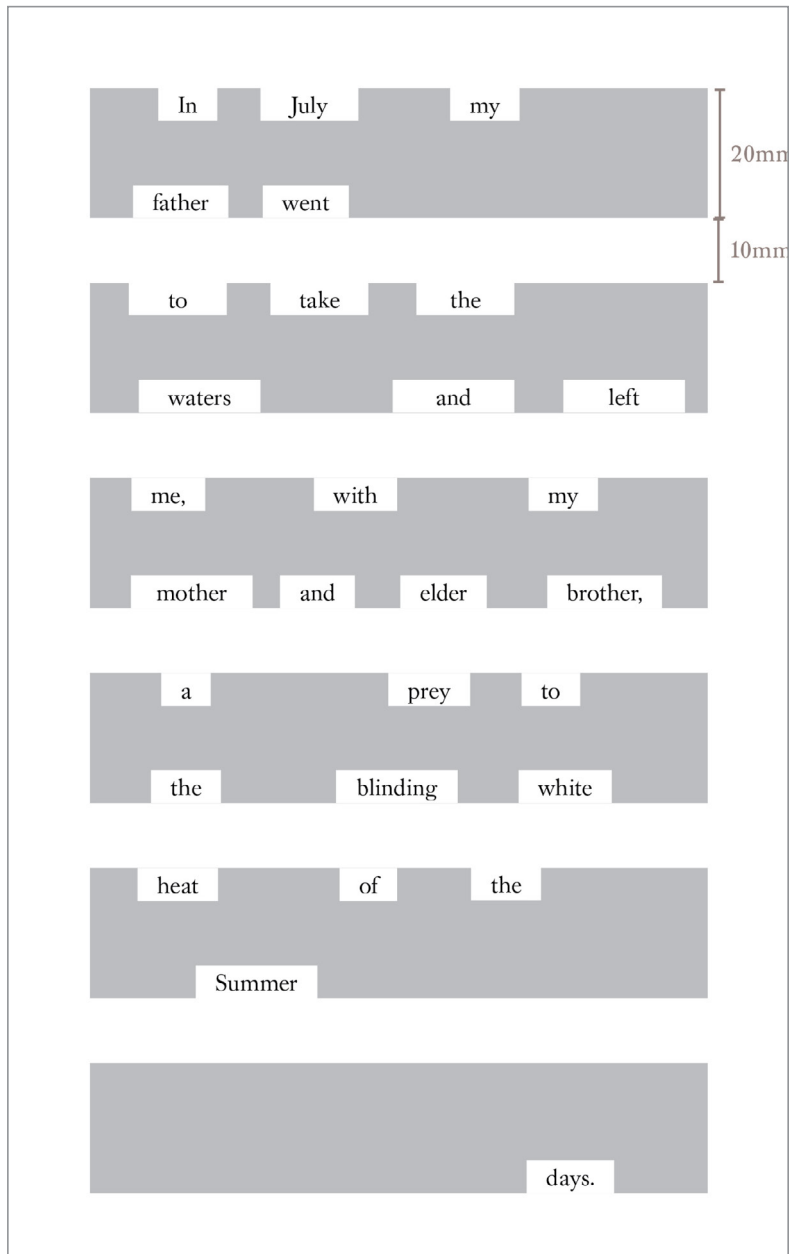
**E3.4.** Draft 4. Cut-out lines. Unbalanced proportions between  
gaps and paper.

**Figure E-3.**  
Continued (Page 5/9).



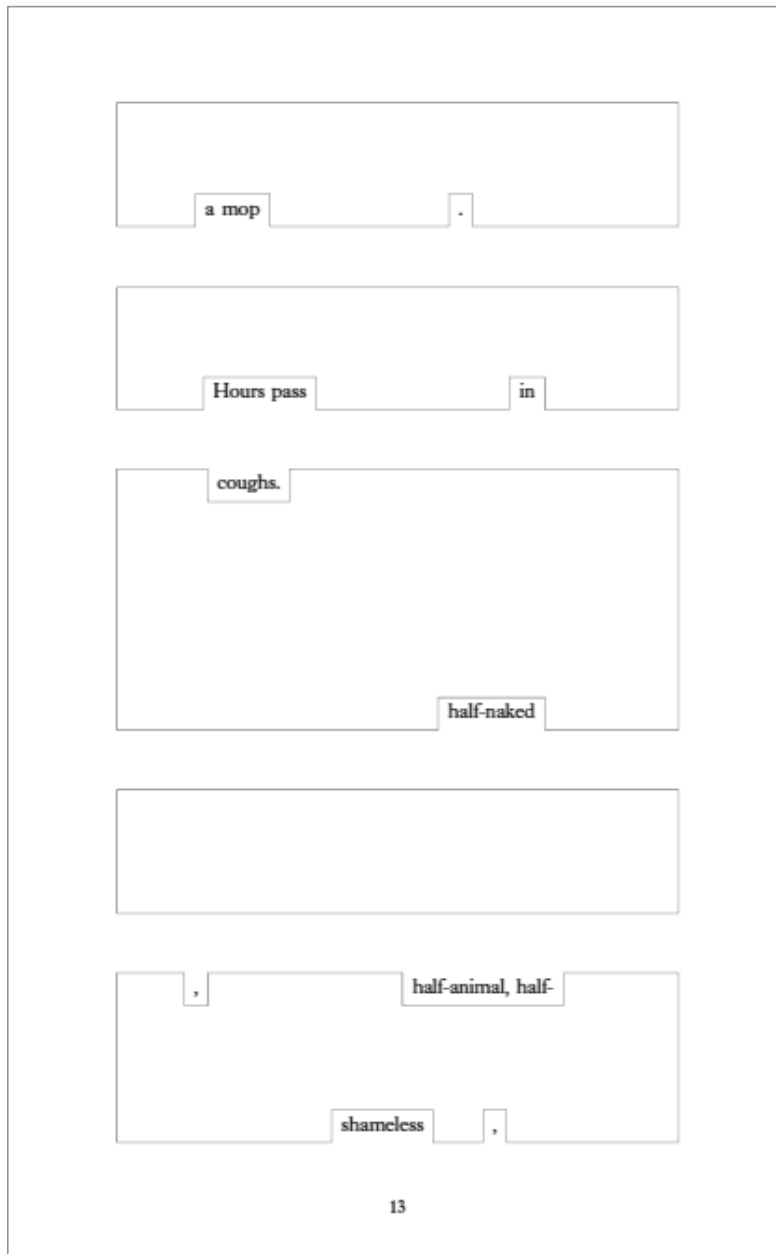
**E3.5.** Draft 5. Cut-out paragraphs. Search for a balanced proportion between void, text and paper.

**Figure E-3.**  
Continued (Page 6/9).



**E3.6.** Draft 6. Final version with adequate proportions  
between gap and paper.

**Figure E-3.**  
Continued (Page 7/9).



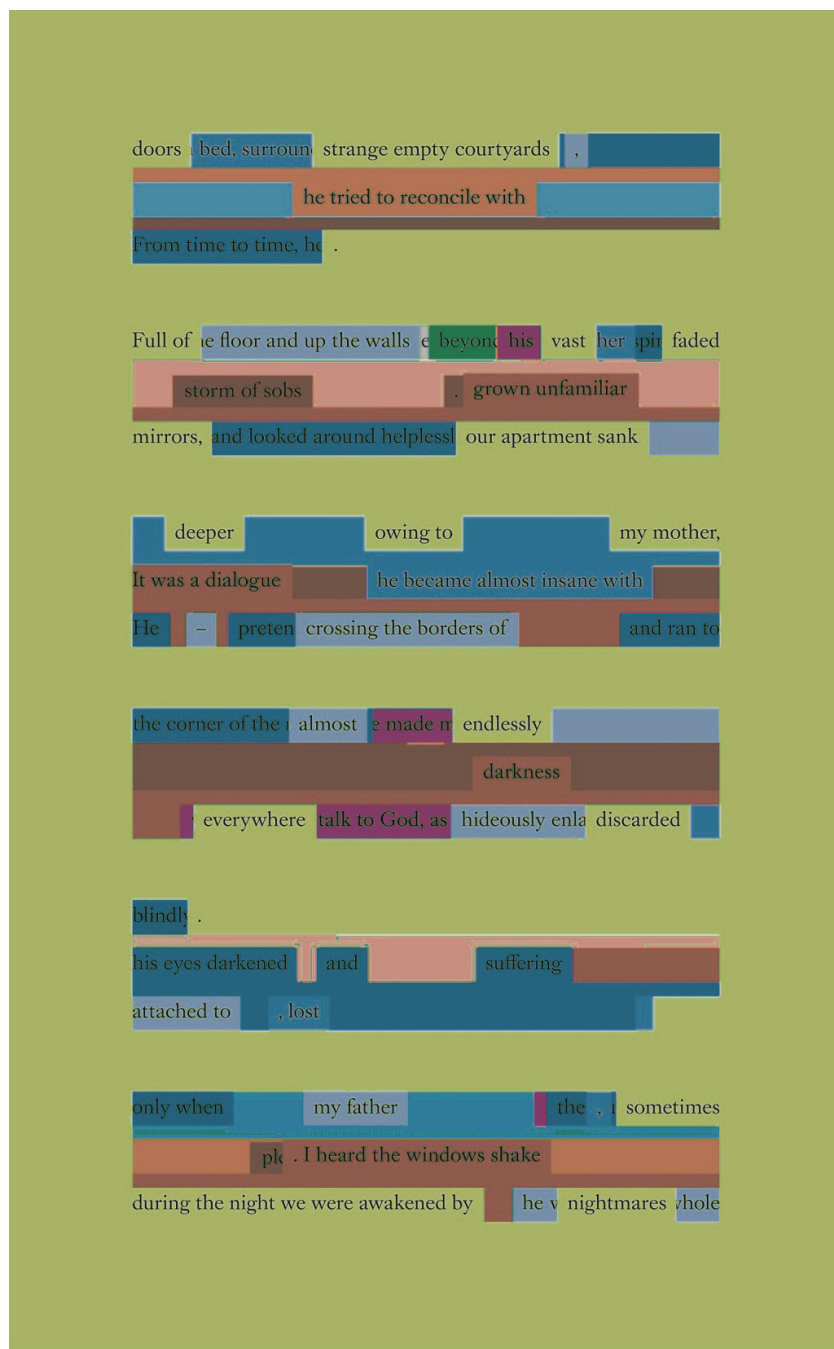
**E3.7. Draft 7.** Example of an Illustrator file for the production of a dummy.

**Figure E-3.**  
Continued (Page 8/9).



E3.8. Final draft for the production of *Tree of codes*, with the tested proportions of words, gaps and blank space.

**Figure E-3.**  
Continued (Page 9/9).



**E3.9.** Final draft to test the overlapping of the pages and confirm the correct position of words and gaps. Each colour represents a different page that is seen through the top layer (green page).

[END]

If readers prefer not to accept the order in which they receive this thesis, then they may re-arrange the sections into any random order that they like. Whether the conclusions make sense or not depends on the concatenation of circumstances...