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## PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE AMERICAN MULTIMODAL NOVEL: EXPLORING J.J. ABRAMS AND DOUG DORST'S S.

The proliferation of media technologies and the concerns regarding the future of the print book medium have triggered the emergence of multimodal literature. Featuring an array of modes of representation as intrinsic parts of the narrative, multimodal novels have reconfigured the space of the print book, suggesting and pursuing narrative possibilities. The integration of exquisite typography, maps, photographs, graphic design elements, and material artefacts, only to name a few, has resulted in what Alison Gibbons has described as "a literature of experimentation" (2012, 421). This body of literary texts foregrounds the visual aspect of the narrative and the material qualities of the medium in diverse manifestations of creative experimentation. By integrating "nonverbal modes of signification" (Hallet 2014, 154) as constitutive forces of the narrative, multimodal novels have renounced the predominant role of verbal representation, disrupting literary conventions. In this article, I will examine the use of photography in the American novel *S.* (2013), conceptualized and co-authored by J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst.

In his study *Photography and Literature*, François Brunet suggests that "literature has increasingly turned to photography for the renewal of its sources and forms — to the point of producing a hybrid, a 'photo-literature' or 'photo-textuality' concerned primarily with the exploration of its own structures and practices" (2009, 11). In his seminal *Postmodernist Fiction*, McHale highlights "the book's potential for incorporating paintings and photographs," producing what he identifies as a collision between "worlds of discourse, visual and verbal" (1987, 189-190). Indeed, interactions between photography and literature have existed for a number of years, as it has been noted by a range of scholars (Hunter 1987; Schloss 1989; Rabb 1995; Bryant 1996; Mikulinski 2009; Luke 2013). The embedding of photography in fiction and the intersections between photographs and literature in narratives have resulted in the introduction of a wide spectrum of terms such as "photofictions" (Roche 2009), "hybrid texts" (Luke 2013), "image and word-narratives" (Lefèvre 2010), "photopoetics" (Robinson 2006), "iconotexts" (Wagner 1996), and "imagetexts" (Mitchell 1994) among others. It is not one of the objectives of the present essay to engage in the examination of, or a dialogue with all these terms. Rather, I will attempt to examine how the integration of photographic images in conjunction with other visual strategies posit *S.* within the multimodal framework of narrative experimentation.

In their insightful study *Eloquent Images: Word and Image in the Age of New Media*, Mary E. Hocks and Michelle R. Kendrick suggest that

to attempt to characterize new media as a new battleground between word and image is to misunderstand radically the dynamic interplay that already exists and has existed between visual and verbal texts and to overlook insights concerning that interplay that new media theories and practices can foster. (2003, 1)

In its integration of photographic images, Abrams and Dorst's *S.* can be considered as belonging to an ever-growing body of literary works that feature photographic images as an integral part of their narratives.<sup>1</sup> Some notable examples of this practice are Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), the work of W.G. Sebald, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), and Anne Carson's *Nox* (2009). The recent re-imagining of a literary classic by Visual Editions, Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (2015), can also be viewed as belonging to these works, since selected photographs have been placed within the original verbal narrative,

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<sup>1</sup> Compiled by Terry Pitts, a comprehensive list of literary works embedding photographs can be found here: <https://sebald.wordpress.com/photography-embedded-fiction-lists/>



following a process of commissioning a photographer to spend two weeks in Spain in order to “trac[e] Don Quixote’s journeys throughout La Mancha” (personal interview).<sup>2</sup> Photography can therefore constitute a core part not only in the production of a new novel, but also in the re-imagining of an existing one.

The narrative complexities of Abrams and Dorst’s novel become apparent from the reader’s very first encounter with the volume. The sealed black slipcase of *S.* uncovers the core of the narrative layers: *Ship of Theseus*, the nineteenth and final novel of the enigmatic fictional author V. M. Straka, whose identity remains a mystery, spiraling the formation of rumors linking him to “tales of sabotage, espionage conspiracy, subversion, larceny, and assassination” (2013, vi). *Ship of Theseus* is centered on the experiences of a character named *S*, who awakes onboard a floating ship with no memories of his past, discovering that the mouths of everyone else on the ship are sewn. Inside his coat pocket, he finds “a sludge of ink-stained paper on which he believes something important was once written, though all he can make out clearly is an ornate S-shaped symbol” (2013, 6). The controversy surrounding the author is indicated in the second layer by the translator of the novel, F.X. Caldeira, who suggests in his “Translator’s Note and Foreword” that Straka’s identity “has been more intensively studied than his body of work” (2013, vii). Caldeira notes Straka’s mysterious disappearance casting further mystery on his alleged death, and informs the reader of the missing last page of the novel; unable to retrieve it, she will attempt to reconstruct it. The codex appears as property of the fictional Laguna Verde H.S. Library (part of the also fictional Pollard State University), featuring a Dewey classification number as well as several other indicators of a library item.<sup>3</sup> On a third level, Eric, a disgraced postgraduate scholar, and Jen, an undergraduate student, take turns in checking Straka’s novel out of the library, and start producing handwritten notes to each other on the margins of the book. What initially begins as commentary on the complexities of Straka’s novel and an avid exploration of its concealed mysteries swiftly transforms into a different kind of communication: Eric and Jen develop a romantic relationship materially mediated through the codex.<sup>4</sup> In their interaction, they leave a range of ephemera for each other to find: from newspaper excerpts and postcards, to photographs, letters, and even a napkin depicting a sketched campus map. Challenging literary norms and publishing conventions, the marginalia are inserted in the pages of the novel as distinct material artefacts.<sup>5</sup> The monomodal verbal text of *Ship of Theseus* is thus enhanced via the contributions of Caldeira,<sup>6</sup> a margin narrative, as well as an array of material artefacts. The multi-layeredness of the narrative can be illustrated in the following schematic approach:

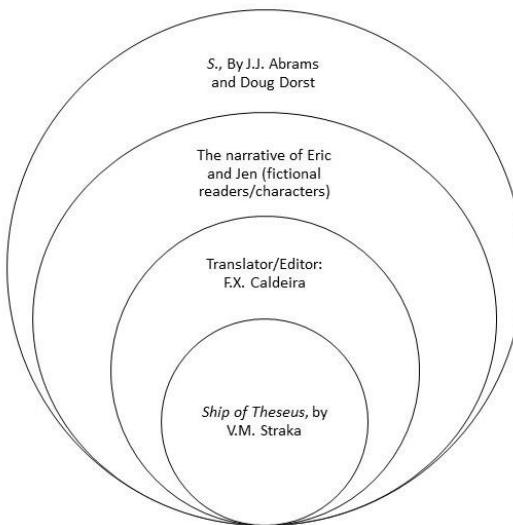
<sup>2</sup> An interview with Anna Gerber, one of the founders of this innovative London-based publishing house, sheds light into the rationale behind their project of re-imagining *Don Quixote*. She notes that it was realized with the aid of photographer Jacob Robinson, who “introduced [to the novel] a contemporary approach because of photography” (personal interview).

<sup>3</sup> Opening the book, the reader encounters the note “BOOK FOR LOAN” in what appears to be a reproduction of a red stamp. A purple stamp of the fictional library appears on the title page (2013, iii), while the inside of the back cover features the collection of stamps marking the dates in which the book was borrowed and recovered. Interestingly, the top of the page features another red stamp with the note: “KEEP THIS BOOK CLEAN: Borrowers finding this book pencil-marked, written upon, mutilated, or unwarrantably defaced, are expected to report it to the librarian.”

<sup>4</sup> The margin narrative is not uniform but rather appears in different colors and styles; Eric’s handwriting appears in capital letters, rather neat and organized, whereas Jen’s handwriting is in lower case letters. Eric starts writing in black and Jen in blue; later on, they change to green and orange, before they finally switch to red and purple, respectively. As Brendon Wocke suggests in “The Analogue Technology of *S*: Exploring Narrative Form and the Encoded Mystery of the Margin,” “the three sets of notes share the margins of *Ship of Theseus*, and thus require the reader to not only decode the chronological complexity of Eric and Jennifer’s story, but to choose how to read it” (2014, 1). The color-coded annotations can be viewed as representing the stages in the development of Eric and Jen’s relationship.

<sup>5</sup> In total, there exist 22 material artefacts throughout the volume.

<sup>6</sup> Apart from the “Translator’s Note and Foreword,” Caldeira has produced footnotes throughout Straka’s text that contain ciphers, urging real-life readers (and Eric and Jen as readers) to decode them.



**Fig. 1:** Diagram of Narrative layers in *S.*

The photographic images are not part of Straka's *Ship of Theseus*, nor do they belong to Caldeira's foreword and footnotes. Rather, they are inserted into the book by Eric and Jen. By not being projected or reproduced upon the pages of the book, the very physicality of the artefacts denies their containment. As a result, the inserted artefacts transcend the rigid boundaries of the book, thereby expanding the space of the narrative as well as that of the print book medium. Their narrative dependence is therefore coupled by their material independence.

The title of Straka's novel, *Ship of Theseus*, is reminiscent of a myth that has spurred philosophical inquiry over the centuries. According to ancient Greek mythology, the original ship symbolized the victory of Theseus over the Minotaur, and thus acquired prominent significance for the people of Athens. When essential for its preservation, several of the ship's original wooden components were replaced. However, once parts of the original ship have been replaced, can it still be considered the same ship? Thus emerged the 'Ship of Theseus Paradox,' a debate that Plutarch, Plato, Heraclitus, Socrates as well as more recent philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke delved into. This debate is manifested in the questions raised by that the structure of Abrams and Dorst's novel. Do the recurring processes of annotation and its range enable the novel to be still viewed as Straka's *Ship of Theseus*? Is the inclusion of photographic images an ontological play on the authenticity of Straka's narrative? Moreover, can the ever-changing and ever-flowing ship be interpreted as a metaphor for the print book transformations that multimodal works exemplify?

Abrams and Dorst's novel features multiple authorial layers that transform Straka's narrative. Although the "inner novel" is still present, the interventions by Caldeira and the two fictional readers have resulted in a radical transformation of how Straka's original narrative ultimately appears on the page; though the verbal text of *Ship of Theseus* has not been defaced, the added foreword and footnotes by Caldeira have re-framed Straka's novel, negotiating its borders; the handwritten inscriptions have re-located the narrative upon the space of the page,<sup>7</sup> drawing attention to the margins and essentially "transform[ing] them into a semantically meaningful

<sup>7</sup> The typewritten narrative of *Ship of Theseus* is not placed on the exact center of the page, but instead closer to the spine of the book, leaving a relatively wide margin on the side as well as on the top and bottom of each page. This results in the creation of space upon which the handwritten narrative is built and placed. A calculation of the dimensions of the printed text shows that the narrative of *Ship of Theseus* covers only 37% of the total space of each page of this book. The manipulation/arrangement of space on the page thus enables the realization of the "inner novel" and the "margin novel." This becomes more visible by projecting the layers of the narrative upon a temporal continuum:



site, a site teeming with signs asking to be interpreted" (Fjellestad 2010, 15).<sup>8</sup> This manifests into a diverse page layout throughout the novel; while the inner novel remains stable in terms of its orientation on the page, the margin novel continuously shifts into varying visual arrangements. The existence of photographic images in the context of newspaper excerpts, postcards, or by themselves, further complicates and networks the reading experience. The inserted artefacts — among which the photographic images — enhance the possibilities for the novel's layers to function as semiotic elements that inform, illuminate, construct, and determine each other. The visual layout of Abrams and Dorst's *S.* does not allude to the notion of finiteness, but rather signifies a work in progress, inviting prospective readers to contribute to its formation.

Despite its very recent publication in 2013, critical scholarship on Abrams and Dorst has already begun to emerge. Brendon Wock explores the margin narrative and the analogue technology of the novel, suggesting that the latter proposes "a decentered narrative structure" (2014, 4). Sara Tanderup in turn focuses on the notion of "the book as an auratic object, a tangible material artifact that is surrounded by cultural nostalgia" (2016, 47). In another article, Tanderup explores how the novel both celebrates the aesthetic of bookishness and is an example of the material turn, while at the same time existing beyond the book and between media. Danuta Fjellestad has centered her approach to the novel on the notion of collaborative authorship, suggesting the term 'web-augmented novels' to address the multimedial location(s) of Abrams and Dorst's novel. Following Fjellestad, Alison Gibbons uses the term 'transfictional storyworld' to demonstrate the existence of *S.* across media platforms, in effect transcending the domain of print fiction.

In his essay "The Rise of the Multimodal Novel: Generic Change and Its Narratological Implications," Hallet suggests that "the multimodal novel directs the readers to explore the book page and interrelate its different semiotic elements" (2014, 155). In the case of *S.*, the photographic images do not exist upon the book page, but rather beyond it, as distinct physical objects. By foregrounding the materiality of its semiotic modes, Abrams and Dorst's novel distances itself from conventional practices in multimodal texts, inviting the readers to experience the narrative as a constellation of visual and material semiotic modes. The shaping of the world of the novel therefore entails the interweaving of the diverse elements into the fabric of the reading experience. Apart from contributing to the expansion of the physical space of the narrative, the inserted ephemera can be viewed as constituting material traces of the reading process. Functioning as a vessel for the communication between the two fictional readers, the codex is enabler to, as well as the result of a set of reading experiences. It spurs communication while at the same time inscribing its visual, verbal, and material marks upon its body.

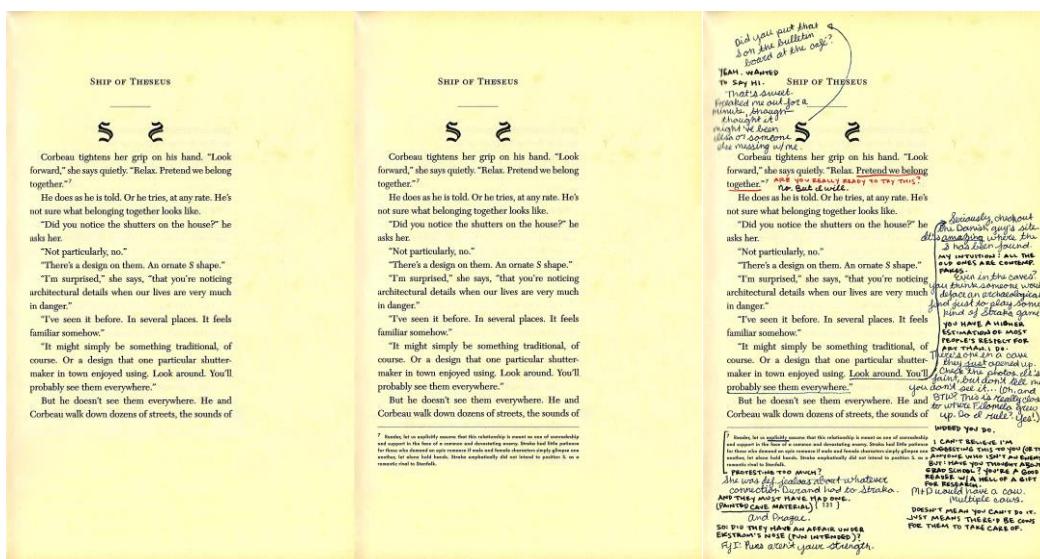


Fig. 7: Narrative layers and spatial arrangement on the page, 131

<sup>8</sup> Fjellestad has created this particular argument with respect to Reif Larsen's novel *The Selected Works of T.S. Spivet* (2009); however, I believe that it can be considered as applicable to the margin narrative in *S.*

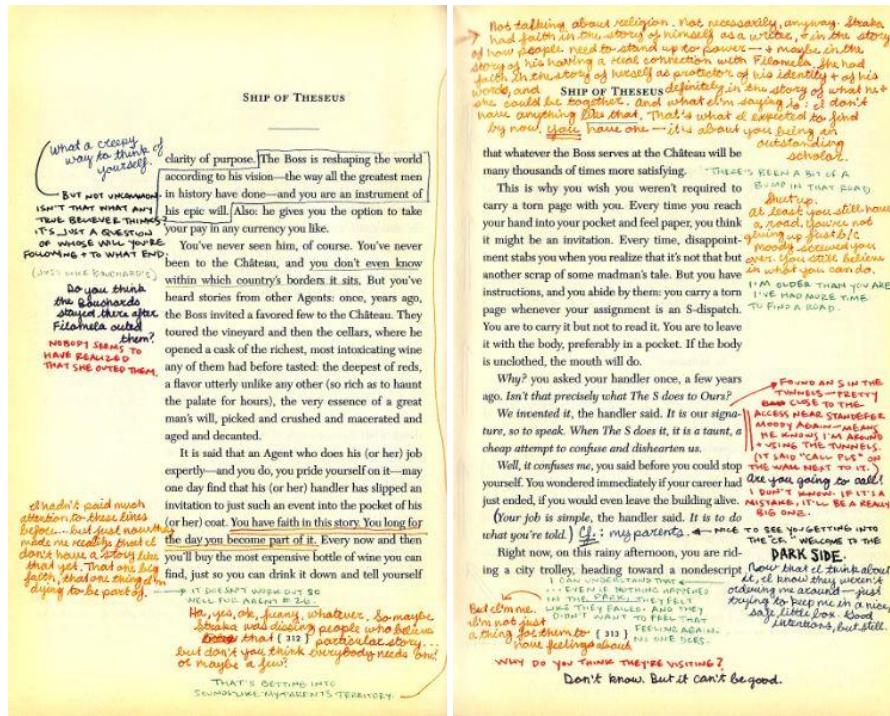


Fig. 2: Crafted authenticity and traces of reading experiences in S., 312-313

The prospective reader encounters the layers of Eric and Jen's reading experiences inscribed upon the pages of Straka's novel, making them reminiscent of the quality of palimpsests; in this case, the pages do not feature the inscription of completely different texts, but rather exemplifications of individual reading experiences that are collectively displayed. Their personalization of the book does not only result in the making of the margin narrative, but it also entails a substantiation of their reading process. The latter is manifested visually via the margin notes and sketches as well as materially via the embedded ephemera. The codex thus becomes a repository of visual and material traces that substantiate reading experiences. In the following figure, I have artificially manipulated a page of the novel using Adobe Photoshop in order to demonstrate the different stages leading up to its final form:

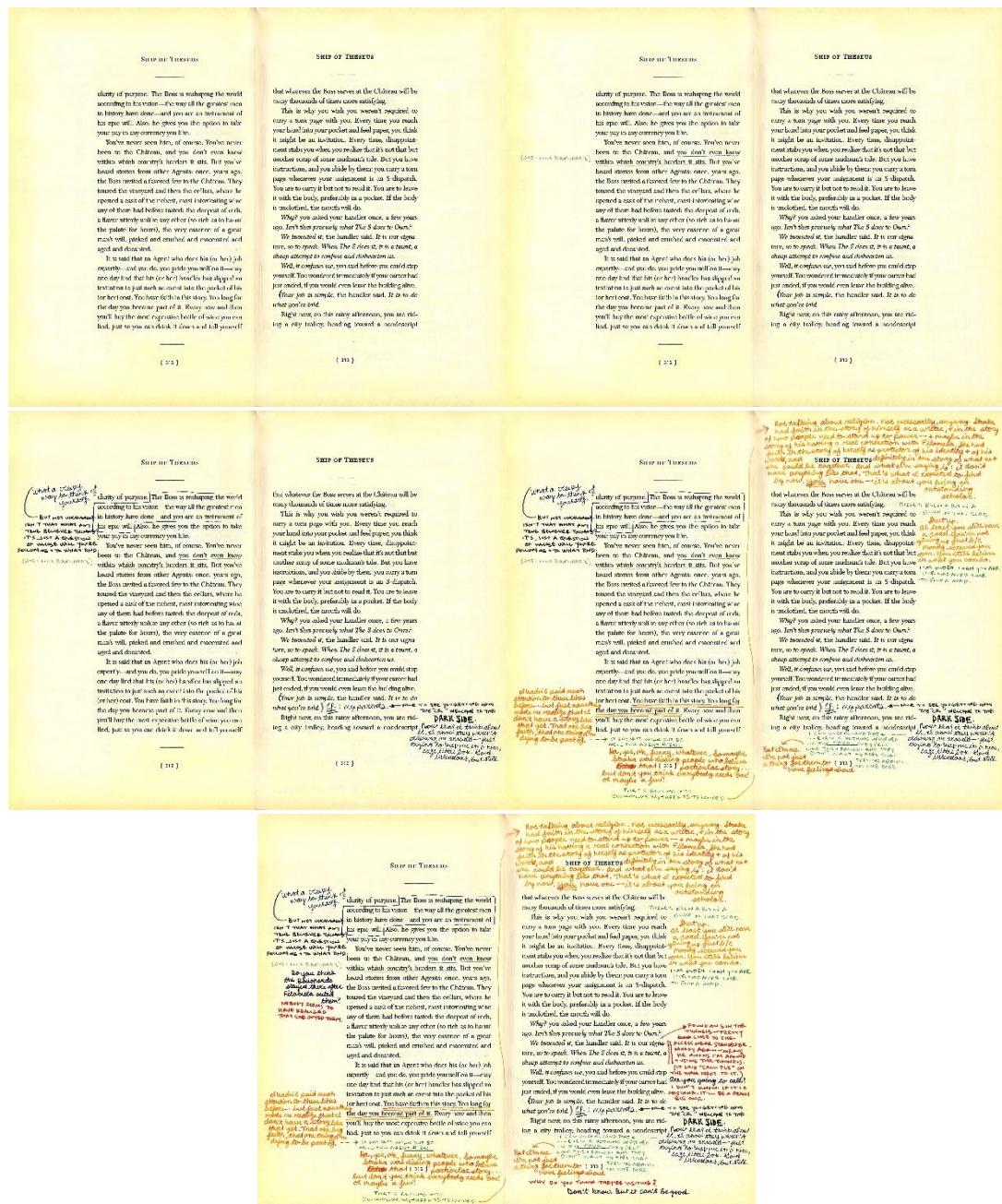


Fig. 3: Stages in the development of reading experiences, 312-313<sup>9</sup>

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes suggests that “every photograph is a certificate of presence” (2000, 87); along similar lines, in her study *On Photography*, Susan Sontag notes that photography can be described as “a way of certifying experience” (2008, 9). The photographic images in Abrams and Dorst’s *S.* thus appear as a material manifestation of haptic and visual reading experiences, remediated within the literary discourse of the novel. In order to experience the physical artefacts, the prospective reader is asked to remove them from the codex; existing in-between the physical pages of the volume rather than upon them, the reader’s physical engagement with the inserted artefacts provisionally eclipses the fictional world of Straka’s novel. As a result,

<sup>9</sup> I would like to thank Ms. Konstantina Georgiadou for her valuable assistance with Adobe Photoshop in this endeavor.



the unfolding of the narrative entails a haptic and visual reading experience inasmuch as the overall volume constitutes an emanation of such a process.

In her article “Multimodal Literature and Experimentation,” Gibbons (2012) has created a thorough taxonomy of multimodal works, classifying them into six categories: illustrated works, concrete/typographical fictions, altered books and collage fictions, tactile fictions, ontological hoax, and multimodal (re)visions. The intricate landscape of Abrams and Dorst’s novel renders it difficult to ascribe to a specific category, even within the genre of multimodal literature. Following this taxonomy, *S.* can be considered as belonging to four of the identified subcategories; “illustrated work” for its integration of photographic images; “concrete/typographical fiction” for the use of diverse typeface and style in the margin narrative; “tactile fiction” for the physical artefacts and the physical engagement it demands in order to be unfolded; and “ontological hoax” for its overarching attempt to create a manufactured authenticity.<sup>10</sup> One can observe that such a classification system does not erect barriers and boundaries between practices, as a significant number of multimodal texts can qualify for more than a single category. What the classification manifests is both the awareness of an ever-growing body of literary works that creatively experiment in these directions, and an understanding that the visual strategies employed in multimodal narratives cut across categories.

Throughout Abrams and Dorst’s novel, there exist seventeen photographic images in total; nine of them appear embedded in the context of two newspaper excerpts, six of them as part of two postcards, and two as distinct photographs. Mediated through other discourses — that of the newspaper and the postcard — or not, all of them are located in-between the pages of the codex, existing as autonomous material entities. For the purposes of the present article, I will now focus only on the two photographs, exploring their specific functions in the novel. Arriving at pages 130-131, the reader encounters the following photograph:

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<sup>10</sup> In order to attest to the year of Straka’s fictional novel (1949), meticulous design practices have been employed. As Sara Tanderup notes in her article “Nostalgic Experiments: Memory in Anne Carson’s *Nox* and Doug Dorst and J.J. Abrams’ *S.*,” “the work is designed to look old and worn while it is in fact an appealing new book.” She suggests that it can be described “with the notion of ‘manufactured aura’” which reflects an idealized “nostalgia for the old media, for handwriting, yellowing pages and for the book itself” (2016, 53). However, the very consciousness of the practices adds to its perception as an instance of “ontological hoax.” Adding to the self-reflexive dimensions of the narrative layers, the character *S* experiences an encounter with a print volume: “The man hefts the book, a thick tome bound in brown leather that is cracked and covered with dark, oily stains, and opens it up, as if he aims to start reading it right there at the stall. It is at this moment that the murmuring voices return, overlapping, sharpening, then fading, twirling through one another in a chorale of lament” (2013, 233).

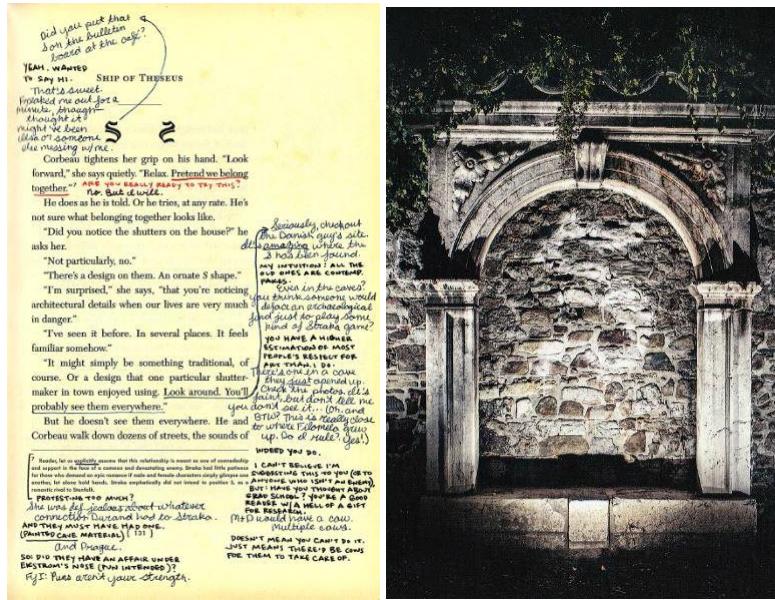


Fig. 4: Inscription as (non)defacement, 131- n.pag.

At this stage in Straka's *Ship of Theseus*, S finds himself in a city with another character, Corbeau, and sees the symbol 'S' inscribed on the shutters of a house. The existence of the symbol — as well as its mirror image — upon the page sparks a discussion between Eric and Jen on the margins of the page. The dialogue between the two characters of *Ship of Theseus*, S and Corbeau, thus initiates a dialogue between the fictional readers of Straka's novel. Spurred on by Corbeau's comment "[...] look around. You'll probably see them everywhere" (2013, 131), they start speculating on the emergence of the particular symbol in different parts of the world. In her contribution to *The Photography Reader*, Liz Wells suggests that "words may be used to describe images and their import, but they cannot convey the affective impact of objectness — scale, physicality and presence within the space of the gallery, website or publication" (2003, 429). This is precisely what differentiates Abrams and Dorst's integration of photographic images from other novels; their existence as physical entities enables them to convey the "affective impact of objectness" that Wells notes.

At the same time, this instance (Fig. 4) allows us to consider the interrelation between the photographic images and the other visual strategies in the novel. In their exchange of views concerning the citing of the symbol, Jen invites Eric to check "this guy's website" (2013, 131) wherein he can access the areas where the symbol has been found.<sup>11</sup> In her article "Dancing with the Digital: *Cathy's Book* and S.," Fjellestad observes that "the Internet is cunningly woven into the very fabric of the narratives [...] the two readers record their use of the Internet resources to track down information" (2016, 81). This particular photograph features what appears to be the arch of an old structure, with a brick wall behind it. The symbol 'S' is faintly visible upon the wall. Contrary to certain other elements of/in the codex, the photograph is new, bearing no marks of wear. The state of the photograph indicates that it has been produced recently, in contrast to the temporal implications of the margin narrative's color-coding pattern. At the same time, the manufactured authenticity permeating the novel creates a sense of skepticism about this. Placed within literary discourse in general, and the discourse of manufactured authenticity of S. in particular, the photograph does not need to "ratify what it represents" (Barthes 2000, 85). The recontextualization of the photograph in the novel opens up malleable possibilities for interpretation, since

<sup>11</sup> The website [[http://swiki.zachwhalen.net/s/danish\\_website](http://swiki.zachwhalen.net/s/danish_website)] is merely one of several platforms that exist alongside Abrams and Dorst's novel. The extensive network of S.-related material available online features blogs on how to decode the mysteries of the novel, radio broadcasts, alternative endings to chapter ten, and even Twitter accounts belonging to some of the characters. It seems difficult to determine who is behind the creation of all these websites, but Abrams and Dorst have explicitly stated that they might be behind some of them. The expansion of narrative space across digital platforms not only complicates the notion of authorship, but further enhances the feedback loop possibilities between these sources, leading to a process of constant re-coding of the narrative.



the visual mode no longer confines itself to the function of ratification. The view of the photograph as a “thin slice of space as well as time” (Sontag 2008, 22) is complicated, given different dimensions in the fictional landscape of Abrams and Dorst’s novel.

Another photographic image can be found inserted between pages 242-243; it is a photograph of F.X. Caldeira that Eric provides for Jen, when she asks him on the margin narrative how Straka’s translator looks. The photograph displays a woman standing on a dock, her clothes suggesting that the image belongs to early-to-mid twentieth century. The edges of the photograph are deckled, and its appearance emulates the time that has elapsed since it was taken; green stains, scratches, and white patches — instances where the photographic information has worn out — can be discerned. Upon closer inspection, one can observe a black-lined mosaic pattern. This can be viewed as another strategy for manufacturing authenticity; the mosaic lines are not related to what the image depicts, but rather to what the image is — a material object. The handling of the object over time has resulted in the creation of an uneven surface. For all the challenges overcome in the publication of this particular codex, reproducing physically creased photographs would have been next to impossible.



**Fig. 5:** Photography in S., n.pag.

In his article entitled “Looking through, Looking into and Looking at the Book: the Materiality of Message and Medium,” Phil Jones suggests that “the material itself possesses rather than represents the properties concerned,” and that it is “consequently more than a medium for a message; in some ways it becomes the message” (2011, 260). In this case, the photographic image of Caldeira would not convey its complete meaning, had it been displayed upon the pages of the book. Its existence as a distinct material artefact enables it to foreground its inherent material quality, thus making the marks of weariness and time possible. The mosaic pattern does not reflect the influence of time upon what the photographic image represents, but rather on how it is represented, indicating the intrinsic properties of the photograph’s material independence.<sup>12</sup> As a result, Abrams and Dorst’s novel demands more than the reader’s exploration of the space of the page; it invites them to physically manipulate the space of the narrative via the inserted material artefacts, and to navigate between

<sup>12</sup> At the same time, this also demonstrates the dependence of literary production on the affordances of digital technology, with the constraints that this inevitably signifies.



the semiotic resources on and off the page, floating through visual and material properties that enable diverse media constellations.

In their article “Visual Text and Media Divergence: Analogue Literary Writing in a Digital Age,” Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, Sara Rosa Espi, and Inge van de Ven have noted that since the 1990s, authors have “reinvented the literary as a hybrid genre that hovers between the verbal and the visual, and foregrounds its paper-based, ‘analogue’ materiality” (2013, 93). Jessica Pressman has also suggested in “The Aesthetic of Bookishness in Twenty-First-Century Literature” that there is “a trend in novels published since 2000” (2009, 465), the primary feature of which is that “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, 465). In its creative experimentation with the visuality of the narrative and the materiality of the print book medium, Abrams and Dorst’s *S.* can be linked to the body of literary works that do not denounce the affordances of digital technology, but rather utilize and embrace them so as to transform and re-imagine possibilities for the print novel. The manipulation of the photograph described above (see Fig. 5) exemplifies their intention to engage the reader in a playful process of oscillating between photographic truthfulness and ontological uncertainty.

Alluding to Abrams and Dorst’s novel — a meta-narrative reference — the character *S* “begins to carve his story into the ship itself” (2013, 107). In *Metamedia: American Book Fictions and Literary Print Culture after Digitization*, Starre considers the physical codex “more than just the container of a story [...] function[ing] as a narrative device in and of itself” (2015, 6). The act of leaving a mark upon the vessel suggests a customization of the body of the ship, echoing Eric and Jen’s process of customizing Straka’s novel via their interventions/annotations. I therefore suggest that the ship can be viewed as a metaphor for the print book medium. Along with the main character, the ship is thus found in a process of constant re-formation. The changing space of the ship is experienced by the character: “the dimension of the cabin feels subtly different, why there’s something so disorienting about the space” (2013, 203).<sup>13</sup> However, this can also be interpreted as a change in the perception of space; as *S* constructs his own identity, his perception of, and relation to the space upon which his experiences are oriented, is inevitably altered. His experience of the ship thus orbits around the perception of his own identity.

In a similar vein, the reader’s experience of *S.* is dependent on their perception of their own identity and role(s) as readers. By becoming a vessel for the communication between two individuals, an object that both spurs and, in its manifestation of visual and material traces, stems from their communication, Straka’s novel exemplifies a different kind of participatory reading experience. The prospective reader can view his or her identity as one that shapes and determines the narrative. In the fluid and transitory environment of twenty-first century media networks, Johanna Drucker notes that “the tension between the fluid, conditional text and the bounded, delimited book will only increase” (2017, 75). Wells views tensions as opportunities for creative experimentation, suggesting that “fluidities heralded through the digital era [...] open space for more discursive, creative engagement with artifacts and ideas and for enjoying dissonances between words and pictures” (2003, 433). From this perspective, Abrams and Dorst’s *S.* can be viewed as manifesting how the diverse integration of photographic images can augment the visual strategies in which the narrative is produced and communicated to the reader.

Upon breaking the seal of the codex, the reader immerses her/himself into a relentless feedback loop<sup>14</sup> among the multiple intersections between the verbal and the visual. In their experimentation with the space of the narrative and the codex, Abrams and Dorst invite re-imaginings of what constitutes a novel. The use of manipulated photographic images adds to the notion of manufactured authenticity, as well as to the ontological

<sup>13</sup> In an interesting intertextual reference, this particular incident brings to mind the physical impossibility of the changed dimension of the house in another multimodal novel, Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*. Following a trip, a family discovers that “something in the house ha[s] changed” (2001, 24). More precisely, what is “anything but comforting” is the fact that “the width of the house inside would appear to exceed the width of the house as measured from the outside by ¼” (2001, 30).

<sup>14</sup> I am using the term following Jessica Pressman, who suggests that “the multimedia entities spring from, feed off, and filter back into the novel through references and clues that illuminate its narrative” (2006, 107).



play of the novel. The shifting arrangements of the narrative layers in the novel reflect the ever-floating ship in *Ship of Theseus*. Marked by incessant modification of its constitutive elements, the ship in turn pursues fixedness and identifications inasmuch as it resists it. By exploring the photographic capturing of elusive identities in Abrams and Dorst's *S.*, I suggest that the floating ship functions as a metaphor for the transformations that the print book medium currently undergoes.

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