

# The Analogue Technology of *S*: Exploring Narrative Form and the Encoded Mystery of the Margin

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The 2013 publication of *S*, a novel which the authors, J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst, describe as their «love letter to the written word», represents a particular intervention in the debates surrounding the future of the book and the relationship between analogue and digital publication. In *S* we see how the analogue nature of this particular book drives much of the narrative structure of the text; the physical presentation of the book informs much of the imaginative contents of the narrative.

*S* presents itself as a found object; a (fictional) library book entitled *Ship of Theseus* by V.M. Straka. Within *Ship of Theseus*, two readers (Eric and Jennifer) correspond, leaving notes for one another in the margins of the book as they work towards uncovering the true identity of the author V.M. Straka. Their notes encompass three distinct narrative moments, appearing in blue and black, orange and green, and finally, in red and purple, detailing not only the various phases of their search for the identity of V.M. Straka as they unravel a series of encrypted clues buried within the text, but also their growing affection. These narratives appear in parallel, 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. *Ship of Theseus* is furthermore accompanied by a number of marginalia: photographs, maps, postcards, newspaper clippings, and private correspondence, all of which play into the

central thrust of the novel. Taken together, these various elements, the library book (*Ship of Theseus*), the marginal notes, and the additional artifacts, comprise *S*.

In interviews with *The New York Times* and with the *New Yorker*, Abrams and Dorst have emphasized the beauty of the book and its materiality, implying that their novel represents something of a response to the increasingly digital distribution of popular novels. There is however a degree of irony in this as it is only with digital typesetting and printing that such a book could be brought to market. In this article I would like to consider the theoretic bounds of this novel and its form, from the question of marginal (and fragmented) writing that is evoked in the work of Jacques Derrida, to the importance of the medium and the message that it carries as described by Marshall McLuhan. *S* integrates itself into the imagination of the reader both in textual and in literal terms that can be read in light of Umberto Eco's notion of the "open work," but can also be considered in terms of the work undertaken by Barthes in *S/Z* and in "The Death of the Author," emphasizing the creative role of the reader faced with certain types of texts. *S* evokes an aesthetic, analogue technology, which may seem at odds with the future of the book but which, in embracing interactivity and hypertextuality on a fundamental narrative level, reflects much of what is at stake in the development of digital literature.

## **The future of the book and the decentered novel**

As a creative intervention in the debate surrounding the impact of digital technology on the printed novel, *S* echoes many of the questions that are brought to the fore by the numerous contributors to *The future of the book*, as well as by authors such as Katherine Hayles in *Writing Machines*, and Janet H. Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*.

Whereas many of the aforementioned authors and contributors are clear that the book as such is here to stay, George P. Landow, for instance, in his contribution to *The Future of the Book* entitled "Twenty

minutes into the future, or how are we moving beyond the book,” states that «printed books are technology, too» (Landow 1996: 214); both the conceptualization of the book as a cultural artifact, and the act of reading are nevertheless set to change. The longevity of the book as such is related to its status as a symbolic object, as Régis Debray underlines in his contribution to *The future of the book*. At stake in the hypertextual future is what Debray terms “textual dematerialization” in which thought is released from “the weight of things,” its mobility increased, its possibilities multiplied. The reader is «no longer simply spectator [...] but coauthor of what he reads» (Debray 1996: 145). Similarly Patrick Bazin, in reading the borders associated with the printed text, considers the implications of what he terms “polytextuality,” the integration of «diverse types of texts and images, sounds, films, databanks, mail services, interactive networks» which interfere and mutually resist one another, and which result in a progressively new dimension of reading that is «polymorphic, transversal and dynamic.» (Bazin 1996: 154)

The reinvigoration of reading and the emphasis on the agency of the reader is a theme that underlies much of Janet H. Murray’s work in *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. The reader’s immersion (Murray 1997: 97) and agency (*ibid.*: 126), together with an emphasis on the experience of reading, ultimately underscore what Murray describes as the procedural nature of authorship in electronic media (*ibid.*: 152). That is to say that electronic or digital authors define «the rules for the interactor’s involvement, [...] the conditions under which things will happen in response to the participants actions» (*ibid.*), creating a world of narrative possibility. The experience of a given text can also be seen to be at the heart of Katherine Hayles’ *Writing Machines* in so far as she refers to the special role that artists’ books play in the conception of the future of the book, opening up new structural and expressive possibilities (Hayles 2002: 64). Coining the term “technotext,” Hayles considers this to be «when a literary work interrogates the inscription technology that produces it» thereby mobilizing «reflexive loops between its imaginative world and

the material apparatus embodying that creation as a physical presence» (*ibid.*: 25).

As a creative intervention in this debate, *S*, as we shall see, deploys not only a sophisticated understanding of the reader's agency, but in the inclusion of a number of artifacts, recalls Bazin's "polytextuality," as well as well as Murray's notion of procedural authorship. The central interest of *S* however lies in the manner in which it remains decidedly analogue despite being cast as a "technotext." *S* evokes the epistolary novel, the found object and its own coded creation in the complex process of reading it invites, generating a reflexive loop between the physical notion of the book and the complex interweaving elements of which this particular book is composed. Despite the analogue nature of *S* it should be noted, as both Geoffrey Nunberg (in his introduction to *The Future of the Book*) and Luca Toschi (1996: 193) in his contribution to the same volume mention, that electronic media and digital printing technology are precisely what facilitate the production of such advanced books. *S* is once again a particularly salient reminder of this, in so far as the color coded marginal texts and the various artifacts, including a map on a paper napkin, could not have been (mass) produced without the aid of modern digital printing processes.

The particular interest of *S*, as a work of popular fiction is not only in the manner in which it decenters certain aspects of the debate surrounding the future of the book (in proposing a thoroughly analogue vision of the digital future), but in the manner it proposes a decentered narrative structure. This decentered narrative structure and its concern with the margin can be understood in terms of what Jacques Derrida in his essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" considers as one of the central problems of the Western thought: its articulation in terms of a point of origin or center.

The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might

call the play of the structure. By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form. (Derrida 2001: 352)

To this Derrida opposes what he terms a rupture in the thinking of structurality, which opens the structure to a «process of signification which orders the displacements and substitutions» (*ibid.*: 353). The center is no longer «a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions» (*ibid.*). That is to say that «the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences» (*ibid.*: 354), rather it can be seen as a result of the play between these differences. While Derrida, in his argument, refers primarily to the Western philosophical tradition (in general) and to Claude Lévi-Strauss (in particular), we could ask ourselves how this play of signifiers might translate in literary terms, not merely as concerns the structure of meaning and the play that Derrida evokes, but rather in terms of the manner in which the structure of a novel might become a function of sign substitutions.<sup>1</sup>

Such an example might be found in Laurence Stern's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759) in which the narration of the birth of the title character is constantly deferred, only taking place in volume III. Moreover, towards the end of volume IV Tristram offers a number of squiggled plot maps as a means of explaining his various digressions, promising the reader a more linear plot, before himself becoming lost in a digressive explanation and finally abandoning the chapter. *Tristram Shandy* is however a notable exception, breaking the structure of a singular central organized in terms of an originary structure. Rather the plot digresses, and ultimately turns on itself; the fictional narrator addresses the reader, fraying the thread of what one

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<sup>1</sup> In the course of his essay Derrida makes particular reference to Claude Lévi-Strauss' *The elementary structures of Kinship* (Lévi-Strauss 1971) and to *The raw and the cooked* (Lévi-Strauss 1983).

could consider the linear and centrally structured narrative of Tristram's life.

If the revolutionary nature of *Tristram Shandy* remains a touchstone for many of the authors mentioned in the context of the debate on the future of the book, the "New Novel" movement presents us with series of more contemporary examples which explore a decentered notion of the genre, and of which Alain Robbe-Grillet is seen a primary exponent. The structural displacements that underscore this movement can be seen in Robbe-Grillet's 1957 novel *La Jalousie*. Eschewing a chronological structure, *La Jalousie* confronts the reader with an absent narrator whose painstaking descriptions of objects, scenes, and shadows is at odds with his lack of self reflectivity. The silent observations that the unnamed narrator makes of his wife («A..») and his neighbor Franck are interspersed with what could be interpreted as imagined scenarios (such as a centipede attack), although the novel makes no distinction between these various moments which seem to exist suspended in time, without order or governing structure. These are but two examples of what could otherwise be an extensive examination of revolutionary textual forms, evoking the experiments of William Burroughs in *Naked Lunch* (Burroughs 1959) and his subsequent novels, or of Vladimir Nabokov in *Pale Fire* (Nabokov 1962), to name but two examples.

## **S and the encrypted textuality of dislocation**

S comes to us in the wake of this experimentation as a decentered novel, one in which the strict linear narrative structure makes way for a veritable field of play, and the novel, in very literal terms arises as a function of the "system of differences" at work within the text. The reader is confronted with a disparate system, introduced on the title page when Jen, reading Eric's pencil note («If found please return to workroom B19, Main Library, Pollard State University»), replies:

Hey – I found your stuff while I was shelving. (Looks like you left in a hurry!) I read a few chapters + loved it. Felt bad about keeping the book from you, though, since you obviously need it for you work. Have to get my own copy! – Jen. (Abrams 2013: i)

This short exchange sets the scene for the decentering of the novel; the narrative structure becomes increasingly dislocated by the marginal comments of Eric and Jen as their romance blooms and their writing fills the margins. The notes operate on a meta-narrative level: they inaugurate a form of structural play, a series of commentaries on the novel *Ship of Theseus* in the manner of a medieval manuscript. In seeking to uncover the identity of the author of the book, Eric and Jen explore various codes and ciphers that are hidden in the book, ultimately uncovering a series of messages that are sent by the fictional “translator” of *Ship of Theseus* (using the printed book and the footnotes) to the author. Consider for instance the handwritten notes on page 27 of *Ship of Theseus* wherein Eric and Jen discuss the message “Argosy every 19<sup>th</sup> 19Hrs” which the “translator” of the fictional novel *Ship of Theseus* (FX Caldeira) has encoded into the footnotes of the preceding pages. Their discovery is evidence of the metanarrative qualities of the marginal notes, Eric and Jen exchange notes in the margins of a book only to discover notes which are already encoded within the text. This forms part of the structural displacement at work within the text – we come to doubt the integrity of *Ship of Theseus* through the marginal notes, which furthermore sensitize us to a number of parallel narratives at work within the integrated text. We are thus confronted with, not only the shipwreck narrative of *Ship of Theseus*, but with a narrative detailing Eric and Jen’s search of the identity of the author (a narrative which is itself expressed in two different time-scapes), and a narrative regarding the writing and translation of the novel as encoded in the footnotes of *Ship of Theseus*.

The marginal structure which decenters the narrative and incorporates an element of play interlacing the various elements of the novel, without ever moving towards a definitive interpretation of the identity of V.M. Straka (the fictive author). That is to say that the

marginal notes act as a supplement, to employ a Derridean term. The supplement which Derrida details in *Of Grammatology*<sup>2</sup> is not merely that which augments the subject at hand, rather it may act in a dangerous and unpredictable manner.<sup>3</sup> The supplementary nature of the handwritten notes lies in the manner in which they at once augment and enhance our reading of the work, not only uncovering the ciphers and codes that are embedded within *Ship of Theseus*, but aiding in the integration of this work into the readers world. For *Ship of Theseus* presents itself as a “found work,” a book upon which we have stumbled and it seeks to reach beyond the literary imaginary and integrate itself into our world. The danger of the supplement lies in the manner in which it destabilizes the whole, and in this case the marginal notes deeply problematize the reading experience, distracting the reader and undercutting the perceived unity of the novel. This can however also allow the reader to enter into what Richard Lanham describes as an economy of attention, a creative space in which the reader is drawn into a constant oscillation between style and substance. For Lanham this state of oscillation is a key driver of productivity in the age of digital media (Lanham 2006).

The marginal notes between two ‘real’ people (Eric and Jen) are accompanied by a large number of artifacts (photos, postcards, letters,

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<sup>2</sup> “The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence. It is thus that art, *techne*, image, representation, convention, etc., come as supplements to nature and are rich with this entire cumulating function. This kind of supplementarity determines in a certain way all the conceptual oppositions within which Rousseau inscribes the notion of Nature to the extent that it should be self-sufficient. But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void.” (Derrida 1997: 144-145)

<sup>3</sup> “The dangerous supplement, which Rousseau also calls a ‘fatal advantage,’ is properly seductive; it leads desire away from the good path, makes it err far from natural ways, guides it toward its loss or fall and therefore it is a sort of lapse or scandal (scandalon).” (*ibid.*: 151)

maps and a cipher wheel) that bring the integrated book to the fullest degree of presence moving it from the realm of the strictly imaginary into the tactile and thus problematizing the 'fictional' nature of the book. Not only do we have the notes between Eric and Jen, but we also have the 'proof' of their interaction. The dual nature of the supplement, both beneficial and dangerous, opens up a field of play in which the originary, central or foundational structure is called into question. This movement is furthermore reflected in the inserts and marginalia which, while enhancing the 'presence' of the book, derail any notion of a centralized or unified structure. The reader's attention is constantly drawn to the marginalia, literally seduced by the *mise-en-page*. It is not by accident that in *Glas* the inter-columnar paragraphs that disturb the structure of the work (and problematize the bi-columnar layout) are referred to by Derrida as the "Judas," a biblical reference to the (necessary) betrayal from within. Likewise, the marginalia and inserts in *S* betray the structure of *Ship of Theseus*.

The structure of betrayal, displacement and dislocation that forms the crux of the *mise-en-page* of *S* underlies a powerful intervention in the conception of the influence of technology on imaginative and narrative form. It is clear that the commercial publication of this novel (given the elaborate *mise-en-page* and the large number of inserts) has only been made possible given the advances in digital typesetting and printing. While a digital version is available, complete with digital inserts and rotating cipher wheel, J.J. Abrams, in his New York Times interview, nevertheless recommends the hardback version in order to get the full tactile and aesthetic experience of the book (Hill 2013). Whereas the visual aspect of the book can be understood in terms of the author's vision of the future of the printed word, in which ink-on-paper books become works of art, we can however also read *S* as an experiment in the deployment of an analogue literary technology. This technology is a product of the strategy of dislocation and layering that is reflected in *S*. The decentered narrative and the particular *mise-en-page*, both marginal and supplemental in Derridean terms, open up a space of play which favors the construction of what one may (following George Landow) consider a "hypertext." In underlining the

convergence between the ideas of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault and those which underlie the technology which powers the world wide web, Landow sketches an integrated view of the hypertext as non-hierarchically, dynamically, and non-sequential linked.

One of the fundamental characteristics of hypertext is that it is composed of bodies of linked texts that have no primary axis of organization. In other words, the metatext or document set – the entity that describes what in print technology is the book, work, or single text – has no center. Although this absence of a center can create problems for the reader and the writer, it also means that anyone who uses hypertext takes his or her own interests the de facto organizing principle (or centre) for the investigation at the moment. One experiences hypertext as an infinitely decentreable and recenterable system, in part because hypertext transforms any document that has more than one link into a transient center, a partial sitemap that one can employ to orient oneself and to decide where to go next. (Landow 2006: 56-57).

Landow touches on two key issues that will frame our consideration of *S* from this point on. First is the question of technology as expressed through hypertextuality, and the manner in which we can read this in *S*. Derrida similarly refers to the text as being the result of a function, or of a process, and this process can not only be seen (more generally) in the layering of the text and its marginal, dislocative *mise-en-page*, but also (more particularly) in the manner in which encryption plays a role within the text. The second key issue raised by Landow is that of interactivity. The interactivity which underlies *S* is a consequence of the highly material and highly hypertextual nature of the book, and plays a particular role in the reader's reception of the work and in the manner in which the work can be seen to interpolate the reader's imagination.

One of the key intrigues contained within the marginal narrative concerns Eric and Jen's detailed study of the encrypted notes left by the

fictional translator of *Ship of Theseus* in the footnotes of the book. Each chapter contains a specific message pertaining to the circumstances surrounding the writing and the translation of the book and which Eric and Jen hope will shed light on the identity of the author V.M. Straka, and their study is structured in such a way as to interpolate the reader. That is to say that the reader is drawn into the fictional universe of *Ship of Theseus* in trying to understand or work out the codes themselves, raising the interactivity of the novel in much the same way that a childhood puzzle book might. The reader is not left completely in the dark and book is peppered with clues as to the ciphers used in order to encode the message in each chapter. Chapter 1 for instance contains a message which is hidden in the first and the last letters of each footnote, taking its clue from the title of the chapter "What begins, what ends." Eric and Jen solve this cipher on page 27, and their discovery, as with each code they uncover, represents a form of apprenticeship in which the reader is sensitized to the particular dynamics of the text. The hypertextual element arises out of the manner in which the cipher invites a particular re-reading of the chapter in terms of the parameters given. So the encrypted structure of chapter 1 (which runs from page 3 to 35) is only given on page 27, and while Eric and Jen share their discovery with the reader («ERIC – check this out! First + last letters in Ch. 1 footnotes gives you: [AR GO SY EV ER Y19th 19 00 H RS] and there was an Argosy Hotel on East 38<sup>th</sup> Street!!») this is not always the case. The hypertextual nature of the codes and ciphers embedded within the text extends beyond the limits of individual chapters. Take for instance the encrypted message embedded within the final chapter. The solution of this cipher relies on the use of the code wheel or "Eötvös wheel" (as mentioned in the notes on page 3 and page 270 by Eric). The clue for the solution of the cipher can be found in the words "Spinning compass" and "locate" which appear in italics in the first footnote of the chapter (Abrams 2013: 415). In selecting the latitude and longitude of each of the locations

mentioned in the footnotes, the cipher wheel decrypts a series of letters which can be read if written in a grid<sup>4</sup>.

By arranging the longitude and latitude of the locations, the cipher wheel produces a series of letter groups which can be arranged to produce the following message: «I HAVE \*OVED YOU FR\*M THE BEGIN\*ING I WILL L\*VE YOU TO TH\* END.» The missing letters (here represented by asterisks, concern note 6 where the location given as Calais produces a letter group that does not match the encrypted sentence. Rather another letter group, elsewhere in the cipher wheel, completes the missing letters, allowing us to read the message as: «I have loved you from the beginning I will love you to the end.» However, this letter group (LONDOE) corresponds to a location at 14S 39W, near the town of Maraú in Brazil where Eric, in the postcard dated 20 April (and inserted on page 201), says «I have found her» (ostensibly referring to Caldeira, the translator). One could consider, within the context of the story that the final location was double encrypted into chapter 10 as a “message” to the V.M. Straka character, enabling him to find F.X. Caldeira, his translator with whom (in the fictional universe described by S) he was romantically involved.

The complexity of the double encryption and the decryption process tie together the information contained in the footnotes, the cipher wheel, and other inserts such as the postcard on page 201. This hypertextual relationship undercuts the reader’s understanding of the book; the book is decentered, recast in terms of a hidden metatext

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<sup>4</sup> Note 1 refers to Bergen, Norway (Abrams 2013: 415) which is 60N 5E; note 2 refers to Biabou St. Vincent (*ibid.*: 416) at approximately 15N 60W (the longitude and latitude are approximate in order to account for a degree of play in the cipher wheel); note 3 refers to Portland, Oregon at 45N 121W (*ibid.*: 418); note 4 refers to Thunkar, Bhutan at 26N 91E (*ibid.*: 420); note 5 refers to Santiago, Chile at 34S 70W (“the prince of Santiago” on page 422); note 7 refers to Morondava, Madagascar at 20 S 44E (*ibid.*: 433); note 8 refers to Havana, Cuba at 23N 83W (*ibid.*: 437); note 9 refers to Sofia, Bulgaria at 40N 25E («Victor and Sofia», *ibid.*: 440) and note 10 refers to New York City at 40N 74W (*ibid.*: 446).

which acts as a partial node or sitemap. One can furthermore pursue a reflection on the analogue technology of the encryption process in referring to the cipher wheel as a 'technological' tool, assisting the reader in the resolution of the forward and backward looking cryptographic problem. Reading *S* as a hypertext evokes the second key issue upon which Landow touches in his *Hypertext 3.0*: interactivity. For ultimately in decoding the hidden messages, or merely in paging through *Ship of Theseus* and leafing through the array of documents that accompany the book, the reader becomes unusually active. It is not a coincidence that, in many respects, *S* resembles a childhood puzzle book which requires a certain degree of action on behalf of the reader in order to give the story meaning. Over and above the obviously interactive nature of the encrypted aspects of the text, the particular nature of the text, the inserts and the *mise-en-page* of the marginalia invite a certain aesthetic interactivity. That is to say that (to a degree) the reader is integrated into the fictive world through his interaction with objects from the fictive world of *Ship of Theseus*. In its tactile interactivity, *S* recalls Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poemes* (1961), a book in which Queneau constructs a system in which the reader is free to compose a poem of their own. Each line can be turned, allowing the reader to select the lines of his choice generating a single poem among the hundred thousand billion unique poems that can be generated using the book. In the same manner, leafing through the objects, the inserts and the pages of this abundantly tactile novel, allows the reader to experience his own particular version of the story, focusing on one nodal element or another.

In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Marshall McLuhan, while considering the manner in which content has become secondary to form ("the medium is the message"), establishes what Lewis H. Lapham, in his introduction to the MIT Press Edition of McLuhan's book, considers a dichotomy between print and electronic media. This dichotomy is, in no small part, based on one of McLuhan's Delphic maxims that Lapham cites in his introduction: «We are moving out of the age of the visual into the age of the aural and tactile» (McLuhan 1994: x). McLuhan associates print media with the visual (including the

technology of typography), while considering that electronic media, notably radio and television, are evocative of the tactile.

The stipple of points of Seurat is close to the present technique of sending pictures by telegraph, and close to the form of the TV image or mosaic made by the scanning finger. All of these anticipate later electric forms because, like the digital computer with its multiple yes-no dots and dashes, they caress the contours of every kind of being by the multiple touches of these points. Electricity offers a means of getting in touch with every facet of being at once, like the brain itself. Electricity is only incidentally visual and auditory; it is primarily tactile (*ibid.* 249).

Electronic media, according to McLuhan, is tactile in so far as it engages with «every facet of being at once», it allows the phantasmal presence of an object to be projected, permitting the sensation of having a performing instrument «right in the room with you» (McLuhan 1994: 282). Read in light of McLuhan's definition it is interesting to note how the particular structure of *S* reflects many of the elements that McLuhan ascribes to electronic media. Not only is *S* interactive, but through this it is abundantly tactile, concerned with the production of a fictive presence through the myriad inserts and marginalia. As concerns *S* the "medium is the message" in so far as it reflects the particular destiny that J.J. Abrams sees for the book. Let us not forget that *S* represents, as he states on the back cover of the book jacket, his "love letter to the written word." The aesthetic of *S* implies a vision of the book as an object, and more particularly as an object of entertainment. Given the debate surrounding the future of the printed word and the manner in which electronic publishing affects the distribution of print editions,<sup>5</sup> the message contained within the from

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<sup>5</sup> At the time of writing an on going public feud has, over the past few months, simmered between Amazon and the Hachette publishing group. The nature of the dispute is primarily centered on the model used to determine the sales price of electronic books. It goes without saying that the

of the novel points to an understanding of the book as occupying a particular aesthetic space, an *objet d'art*, or an imaginative springboard that would lose something in being rendered electronically. The existence of an iPad version of *S* notwithstanding, the tactile interactivity of the book, its “electronic presence,” to paraphrase McLuhan, (perhaps ironically) loses something when published and distributed in a digital and ephemeral form.

The dynamic and organic form at work within *S* furthermore reflects the core of what McLuhan considers as the underlying nature of modern electronic media. Once again, the degree of engagement that McLuhan sees in electronic media should be underlined even if he considers paperbacks to be tactile, and thus engaging (*ibid.* 325), and we should be mindful of the manner in which he contrasts this to “older mechanical time” (*ibid.* 147).

In so far as the “medium is the message,” the changing technological paradigm can alter (even if subtly) the very structure of our imagination. This is what is at stake in the structure and the layout of *S*, in the hybrid and fragmented vision that it brings forth, and in the place that this book carves out for the printed word and the manner in which ink and paper books can evolve as we move forward.

## **The death of the author and the resultant agency of the reader**

In his seminal essay, “The death of the author,” Roland Barthes argues for the restoration of the place of the reader, for writing which «is the destruction of every voice of every point of origin» (Barthes 1977: 142). Barthes identifies the reader as a convergent space, as a nexus of agency where the removal of the authority of the author renders the claim of deciphering a text redundant. Rather than

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result of this dispute will have a substantial impact on the nature of electronic book distribution and thus, upon traditional paper and ink publication.

imposing a limit on the text (as a author might propose a final signified) the “space of writing is to be ranged over,” ceaselessly positing meaning which is infinitely deferred.

The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination (*ibid.*: 148).

Barthes concludes in saying that «to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author» (*ibid.*). This powerful literary agenda, blending the agency and proposed power of the reader with the reinvigoration of the subject (in the exclusion of a final signified), is no mere theoretical position, as Barthes' seminal work *S/Z* testifies.

In proposing a radically novel form of interpretation, of reading, and of textuality, in *S/Z* Barthes separates *Sarrazine*, the short story by Balzac into a series of *lexias* which he uses to illustrate a number of key concepts. For Barthes, «the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text» (Barthes 1974: 4) and in this he defines the “writerly text” as

a perpetual present, upon which no consequent language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world (*ibid.*: 5).

Dynamism and readerly agency are equally at the heart of what Barthes terms the plural text in which «the networks are many and interact, without anyone of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds» (*ibid.*: 5). Barthes' understanding of the structures and forms which shape the texts to come and the nature of the future of the book allows us, once again, to measure the issues at stake in the vibrant and multifocal novel penned by J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst. Their plural, writerly text invites an

active reader, offering the him a particularly powerful experience of exploratory agency and freedom.

In conclusion, *S* can be seen as representative of a popular work of fiction which gestures towards an underlying theoretic debate. It is in the movement beyond itself that *S* echoes aspects of Umberto Eco's *The Open Work*. For Eco, referring to a number of contemporary musical compositions one of the key elements of an "open" work is the manner in which «considerable autonomy [is] left to the individual performer in the way he chooses to play the work» (Eco 1989: 1). Certainly this is reflected in the manner in which *S* leaves the reader to solve many of the codes and to construct his own path through the labyrinth of intersecting narratives. Reading Mallarmé, and the use of space in works such as *Un coup de dés*, Eco underlines the importance of the typographical and visual layout of the word upon the page and the manner in which the form informs much of a given work's message.

The important thing is to prevent a single sense from imposing itself at the very outset of the receptive process. Blank space surrounding a word, typographical adjustments, and spatial composition in the page setting of the poetic text—all contribute to create a halo of indefiniteness and to make the text pregnant with infinite suggestive possibilities (Eco 1989: 8-9).

Eco recalls the approach that Derrida takes in *Of Grammatology* and in *Structure Sign and Play*. He stresses the interactivity that is implied in a given "open" composition, that is the nature of the text dislocative and open to possibility, opposing the formation of closed structure or interpretation. This approach is common to both Derrida and Eco (as well as McLuhan and Landow together with Hayles, Barthes and Murray) who all emphasize the dynamic nature of what Eco might term an "open" text. The layering of *S* and the interweaving of an untold number of hidden codes, artefacts and marginalia, make of this novel a dynamic system in which the various nodes compete for the attention of the reader. The book demands an active reader, one

who engages with the material, who is interpolated by the mystery in a very real sense. Yet this is not in order to solve the mystery, in the manner in which a stereotypical detective might, at the end of an investigation, calmly explain the chain of clues which led him to his ultimate conclusion. Rather the reader's activity only serves to deepen the mystery. The double encrypted final location of F.X. Caldeira does not reveal the ultimate identity of the author V.M. Straka, rather each clue brings a new dynamic into play, opening the space of new ambiguity. The message of the book is that of the future of tactile entertainment, rendered as an imaginative labyrinth for the adept in this modern melange of analogue technological invention.

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## **The paper**

Date sent: 30/08/2014

Date accepted: 30/09/2014

Date published: 30/11/2014

## **How to quote this paper**

Wocke, Brendon, "The Analogue Technology of S: Exploring the Margins of Narrative Form", *Tecnologia, immaginazione e forme del narrare*, Ed. L. Esposito, E. Piga, A. Ruggiero, *Between*, Vol. IV.8. (2014), <http://www.betweenjournal.it>.