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Textual Treatment in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes*
Mikko Keskinen

Michelangelo famously stated that every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it. And indeed one only needs to visit South Dakota, USA, to see that the granite of Mount Rushmore secretly harbored, for millions of years, the gigantic heads of four United States presidents before the artists Gutzon and Lincoln Borglum painstakingly revealed them with their chisels and dynamite between the years 1934–41. It is equally well-known that almost all the possible literature in the English language can be generated by using the 26 letters of its alphabet.[1] Hence, a closed character set in a way contains most of the masterpieces of English literature before an author discovers them by discarding the unnecessary combinations of letters and by selecting the right ones from that pool of elementary linguistic particles.

These self-evident and almost cliché statements about the material conditions of visual and verbal art are analogous in the sense that the already existing makes the new possible. But the analogy between the two art forms is sometimes more sustained and fundamental than that, making the visual and the verbal coincide in exciting ways. There are works of literature that are brought into existence by retouching, erasing, or editing out the words of another piece of fiction. The new work is hence found in (and founded on) the text or texture of an already existing literary work. A previously completed piece is thus treated as new raw material, turned back into basic constituents, and exposed to new artistic formations and visions. The Michelangelo analogue becomes less fitting here. He did not mean that every *statue* hides another sculpture, waiting to be revealed by a boldly visionary artist – who by the same gesture will destroy the original. His implication was not that, say, the Venus de Milo could or should be turned into Michelangelo's David,

although the former perhaps, on the level of sheer materiality, potentially contains the latter.

Nor is the alphabet analogy fully compatible with the literature coming into existence through the manipulation of a finite set of words found in a given work. Both the alphabet and the completed text are closed sets but in radically different ways. The alphabet has no copyright, moral or legal, whereas a published work usually does. One exists, as it were, on the level of mere atoms; the other dwells in the sphere of higher-order molecular combinations which form functioning organisms, or at least recognizable physical objects.

I approach the treatment of existing narratives for the purpose of bringing other narratives into existence by analyzing one exemplary case, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010). Foer's book is based on the English-language edition of Bruno Schulz's short story collection *The Street of Crocodiles* (1963; originally published in Polish in 1934 as *Sklepy cynamonowe*, or "cinnamon shops"). Foer (b. 1977) is a contemporary American novelist, with an oeuvre of four volumes of fiction,[2] whereas the Polish Schulz (1892–1942) published only two books before he was shot dead by a Gestapo officer. Referring to his own construction of *Tree of Codes*, Foer cut into the pages of *The Street of Crocodiles* "in order to carve out a new story" from it (Foer 2010d). Schulz's original collection consists of a dozen interconnected short stories depicting the colorful and even surreal life of a merchant family in an unnamed Polish town at the beginning of the 20th century. All the stories are narrated by the adolescent son of the family, which gives Schulz's book novelistic continuity and concentration.

In his Afterword to *Tree of Codes*, Foer reveals that for several years he was planning to "create a die-cut book by erasure, a book whose meaning was exhumed from another book" (Foer 2010a, 138). He considered using a dictionary, an encyclopedia, a phone book, and a number of fictional and non-fictional works, including his own volumes. The author rejected all of these options, for he thought that they would have resulted in mere conceptual works or exercises (Foer 2010a, 138). Instead, Foer chose a work to which he has a special relation, namely his all-time favorite among all books, Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles*. Foer's love for the book made a difference, but also, one could imagine, made it difficult to tamper with a work that he considers as an impeccable masterpiece. By deleting the majority of the original text and cutting a

new story out of it, Foer, in spite of the ostensible violence of the very method of treatment, apparently did it with respect and as a sign of appreciation. Foer's method reminds one of how badly, or liberally, poor volumes can be treated in visual arts. Books (or book objects as they are called in book art) are routinely "plastered, slashed, trashed, […] piled up, pinned down, or disintegrated, nailed, scaled, or raked, pummeled or simply dummied" (Stewart 2011, xv). A singular-looking sculpted book object, *Tree of Codes* could indeed be called an artist's book, were it not reproduced and sold to the general public.

Foer's project started as a conventional book-lover's enterprise. He went through Schulz's book with a highlighter and red pen, looking for promising words or phrases, like any fan would do with a favorite piece of fiction (Foer 2010b). Only later, after several pen-marked versions, was the actual carving and cutting of unwanted textual material introduced to the process. Finally, at a Belgian printing house, the pages were individually die-cut according to Foer's copy and bound in book form. The treatment of Schulz's original thus mimicked the procedures customarily encountered in copy-editing (red pen), graphic art (highlighter), and (book)sculpture (cutting and carving). In addition, the unusual production of text at the printers makes "every copy [of *Tree of Codes*] the primary artwork, its meaning richest in its inclination as a mass(ish)-market paperback, not as the collection of Foer's scrawled-on printed sheets" (Hayler 2012, 35). Although *Tree of Codes* is not a rare or Walter Benjamin-esque auratic object in the sense that unique or limited-edition artists' book are (cf. Drucker 2004, 93–120), it certainly bears marks of a hand-made object that standard trade books typically lack.[3] Figure 1 gives some idea of how unusually *Tree of Codes* is constructed.

Foer's method of deleting and cancelling major parts of an existing text resembles British artist Tom Phillips's practice in *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* (1970/2008).[4] *A Humument* is an altered book based on W.H. Mallock's 1892 novel *A Human Document*. Phillips treated the pages of Mallock's novel by drawing, painting, and making collages over them, allowing only small parts of the original text to show through. The text thus created does not always run line by line, but words and phrases are often linked by undulating amoeba-like forms, sometimes resembling comics balloons. The variety of treatments results in a new story that uses Mallock's text as mere raw material or as a surface for inscription. For instance, Phillips created a new protagonist
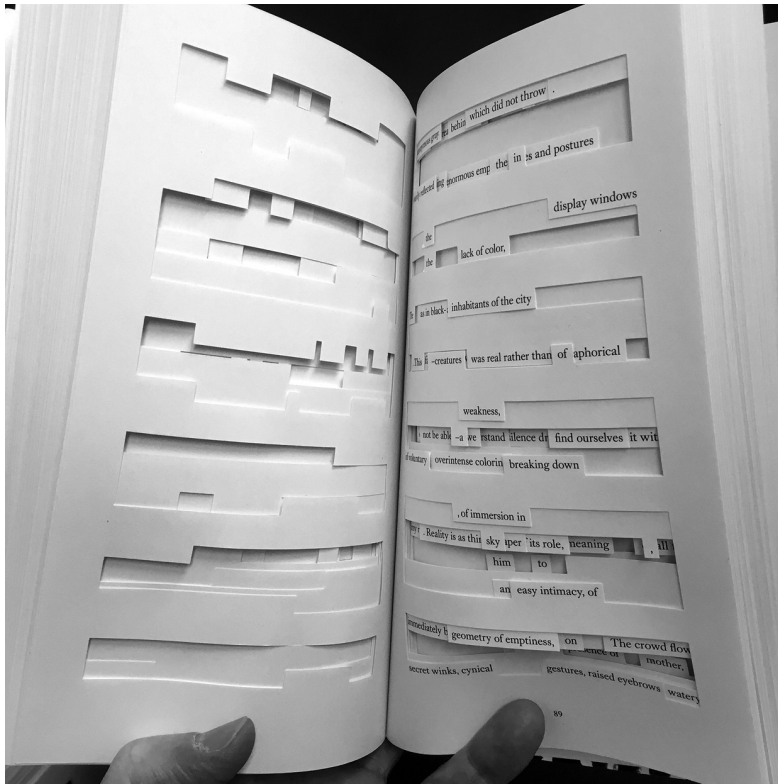
Figure 1. Foer's Tree of Codes (Image: Mikko Keskinen).

for the novel out of the adverbs "together" or "altogether," resulting in one Bill Toge. William Hurrell Mallock (1849–1923) was a late Victorian novelist and conservative economics writer who opposed radical and socialist theories and promoted dogmatic views on religion. *A Human Document* is, at least seemingly, a conventional late Victorian novel which would probably have sunk into oblivion without Phillips's treatments or reconstructions. In spite of its resurrection as *A Humument*, however, Mallock's novel itself is not widely available. Compared with *Tree of Codes*, Phillips's version diverges from his source text more radically – and especially in an ideological respect – than does that of Foer.

Both *Tree of Codes* and *A Humument* are experimental multimodal works. Such texts "experiment with the possibilities of the book form, playing with the graphic dimensions of the text, incorporating images, and testing the limits of the book as a physical and tactile object" (Gibbons 2012, 420). *Tree of Codes* is an altered book, systematically treated in such a manner that especially its visual and tactile qualities become foregrounded. This means that "reading" Foer's book includes not only decipherment of printed signs but also viewing the volume's sculptural composition, touching its fragile structure, and feeling its surprisingly light weight. These are some of the narratives that the act of carving generates.

Codes of Treatment

Foer's treatment of Schulz deserves to be studied closely. I first consider the actual execution of the treatment, reflect on its various implications and associations on the level of the codex as a material support for writing, and read two passages, from the viewpoint of textual altering, in more detail.

The first treated facet of Schulz's book is its very title. The English-language edition of his short story collection bears the name *The Street of Crocodiles*, from which Foer omits letters (~~The~~ *Street* of ~~Crocodiles~~), leaving visible the reduced version, *Tree of Codes*.[5] This simple act of treatment can be read as an instructive key to the "code" of Foer's whole project. The text material of Schulz's book is exposed to manipulation that does not respect word or sentence boundaries, or line breaks, but opens linguistic constituents to new, but by no means free, combinations. The reader is to follow the rules of *top down* and *left to right* to make sense of the altered text. This also means that there are a number of possible manipulations which give the same outcome. For instance, this alteration of Schulz's title (~~The~~ *Street* of ~~Crocodiles~~) results in the identical *Tree of Codes* in the reader's perception. The former version is, however, the one that Foer chose to use systematically in the text (Foer 2010c, 88, 92, 94, 95, 96; in the following, TC).

Moving on from the encoded manipulation of the linguistic raw material to its semantic content, we notice that the paratext of the title points to a number of relevant interpretive directions in Foer. For

instance, in Kiene Brillenburg Wurth's media-historical reading, the title triggers surprising but pertinent associations to computer science and technologies of data management:

> Tree may refer to a directory tree, which could be any virtual container within a digital file system […] In this light, *Tree of Codes* could be read as a directory (re-)structuring the data of *Street of Crocodiles*: a couple of words on a page compressing the larger, original text. We could even regard *Tree of Codes* as a virtual container of *Street of Crocodiles*, the former a condensed version of the latter, epitomizing it in coded form–or providing entries to it. (Brillenburg Wurth 2011, 6.)

More specifically, the altered title draws attention to the recurrence, and possible meanings, of the string "tree of codes" within the text. Indeed, the five mentions of that phrase all seem to have metatextual or metapoetic qualities:

1) That tree of codes shone with the empty unexplored (TC, 88; quotations turned into standard prose for legibility).
2) We find ourselves part of the tree of codes (TC, 92).
3) The tree of codes suddenly appears: one can see the line transform the street. Our city is reduced to the tree of codes (TC, 94).
4) And yet, and yet – the last secret of the tree of codes is that nothing can reach a definite conclusion (TC, 95).
5) The tree of codes was better than a paper imitation (TC, 96).

Thus, the appearances of the title phrase relate to a hollowed out materiality and the consequent textual functioning of Foer's book (examples 1, 3 and 5), the participation of the reader in the production of meaning (2), and the openness of work (4). The title *Tree of Codes* is by no means a master key to Foer's book, but it does foreground important aspects of the work, both materially and semantically.

Tree of Codes may look and feel, to quote one critic, like "a wad of defenseless print has been fed through an office shredding machine" (Faber 2010). As a book object, it looks fragile, vulnerable, and delicate, and, tactilely, it feels light and hollow. N. Katherine Hayles (2013, 227) likens the novel's brittle texture to lace, to hand-made textile. Although the author tells that he "wanted to create a die-cut book by erasure, a book whose meaning was exhumed from another book" (Foer 2010a,

138), he worked on Schulz's text on the surface level, not in the 3D format that we encounter as the final outcome. He erased the text (the print on the paper surface) but apparently did not cut through the sheets, although he uses terms like the "process of carving" (but seemingly in a metaphorical sense). He operated on "one page at a time, looking for promising words or phrases," although the narrative of *Tree of Codes* continues across pages (Foer 2010b). This, in fact, diverges from Schulz's original, since that book consists of short stories, not of chapters of a novel. Although the stories feature the same narrator, recurring characters, the stable setting of the town, and the temporal continuity brought about by the changing seasons of one calendar year (from late summer to the end of winter), the narratives are independent wholes, with a beginning, middle, and end of their own. *Tree of Codes*, however, in spite of its blanks, line breaks, and holes in its pages, reads like a continuous narrative, without even chapter divisions hindering the flow of narration.

At the same time, in *Tree of Codes*, the textual treatment is hence executed in a concrete fashion by actually cutting words out of *The Street of Crocodiles*. Through the holes thereby created, parts of text in the succeeding pages become visible on several layers. On the material level, the outcome of this treatment is given to the reader as a book with holes on its pages, not as a continuous text of the customary codex format. This decision has interesting effects on narrativity. The three-dimensionality, i.e., the view into the book's interiority, at least seemingly problematizes the difference between story and discourse (or the "what" and "how" of narrative), and the succession of narrative sequentiality. Because the text literally reveals some of its parts that are located several pages away, they are coexistent in both the present and the future of the discourse. By the same gesture, sequentiality turns into simultaneity. These manipulations of temporality also relate to thematic issues. As Matt Rager (2012) shows, pregnant words and expressions such as "secret", "suffering", and "almost unbearable" are visible through several pages but their actual context is kept in tension until the page in question is turned. The same tendency applies outside the book proper, on the extratextual level, as well. In Rager's reading, the die-cut erased material page "embeds multiple temporalities connecting reader, writer, and the long string of history between" (2012).

The holes on the novel's pages not only fragment the narration, but also reveal the possibilities of the simultaneous use of its elements. This also applies to the ungrammatical or infelicitous positions of linguistic constituents, drawing attention to the "peripheral" connotations that the haphazardly coexisting phonemes and morphemes create. On the other hand, how *Tree of Codes* is actually read, how a holey page is made whole again by holding it in a way that separates it from the text beneath it, or by sliding a blank sheet of paper under it, cancels the material particularity of the book object (and its, as it were, 3D linguistic noise) and turns it into a more conventionally readable narrative. Admittedly, there are other alternatives for the reader to handle *Tree of Codes*, and for good reason. Brian Kim Stefans's literally immersive handling is but one option:

> The only way to block out the words of future pages, which often confuse the reading of the present page, is to insert something between the pages, such as a blank sheet of paper. However, this renders the forthcoming pages completely invisible and therefore obliterates a very poignant quality of the book's central theme, the painful hemorrhaging between past, present, and future. My solution is to put my own flesh into the structure of the book. The words that I want to read are now no longer framed by the uniform white of a flat piece of paper but by the variable skin tones of the textured palm of my hand. I can also, of course, feel the page I am holding – Foer's die-cut pages have the fragility of doilies – and because my hand does not completely obscure the following pages, I continue to have some access to the future of the text. (Stefans 2014, 179.)

Stefans's postulated flesh and blood "reader in the text" literalizes the familiar metaphor used in reader-response criticism.[6] The living hand inside the body of a book that Foer systematically connects to death – exhumation, erasure (Foer 2010a, 138–39), and gravestone rubbing (Foer 2010b) – also revives the papery book object and at the same time brings it back from the literary to the worldly.

Foer's method in creating *Tree of Codes* certainly gives the impression of violence, even death. To delete the majority of the original text and to (*die-*)cut a new story out of it indeed seems, at least ostensibly, an aggressive act. Especially so when we keep in mind that *The Street of Crocodiles* is Foer's favorite work of fiction. Foer loved the book dearly

but cut it severely. There thus appears to be an intriguing discrepancy between the book-lover's declaration of affection and the performative power of his acts, a tension between friend and foe. However, that incongruity may be ostensible rather than real. As Gérard Genette (1997, 93) puts it, in the "allographic regime" of print, a favorite book does not usually mean a favorite edition of that work. Therefore, the altering of a particular volume, no matter how cherished it might be, can be seen as leaving the work's text intact. Moreover, on an even closer look, Schulz's original itself can be interpreted as exactly giving consent to Foer's kind of treatment.

Schulz's Open Source Code

Schulz's book contains passages that open up or even invite the possibility of liberal reuse of its materials. For example, the father figure in *The Street of Crocodiles* lectures to a group of sewing women on his heretical doctrine of creation ("Treatise on tailors' dummies, or the second book of Genesis"):

> Matter has been given infinite fertility, inexhaustible vitality, and, at the same time, a seductive power of temptation which invites us to create as well. […] Matter is the most passive and most defenseless essence in the cosmos. Anyone can mold it and shape it; it obeys everybody. All attempts at organizing matter are transient and temporary, easy to reverse and to dissolve. There is no evil in reducing life to other and newer forms. (Schulz [1963] 2008, 31.)

This freewheeling rambling of the father, who is gradually sinking deeper and deeper into madness, could be interpreted as giving Foer (or any other writer or reader) a license to reorganize Schulz's literary materials, or to open the work's source code, in order to create another work. Foer's version of this passage reads as follows: "All attempts ~~at organizing matter~~ are transient and temporary, easy to ~~reverse and to~~ dissolve. ~~There is no evil in~~ reducing life ~~to other and newer forms. Homicide~~ is not a sin". (TC, 49.) It is close to the original but omits the very issue, that is, the nature of matter itself. The father figure's emphasis on the general rule of the malleability of matter and the transience of its organization justifies, by extension, Foer's project. But the resulting

Tree of Codes erases that very rule and thus nominally solidifies matter, making it intransient, stable, and irreversible. As a book object, however, *Tree of Codes* dramatizes the defenselessness of matter, printed or other.[7]

On the previous page of *Tree of Codes*, we find the father avowing, "How beautiful is forgetting! what relief it would be for the world to lose some of its contents!" (TC, 48). This statement is in unison with the promotion of change and reorganization presented in the father's first lecture to the seamstresses, and could be read as metacommentary on Foer's work, or at least on its material existence. In Schulz, the passage reads:

> How beautiful and simple is the truth which is revealed by your lives. And with what mastery, with what precision you are performing your task. If, forgetting the respect due to the Creator, I were to attempt a criticism of creation, I would say, 'Less matter, more form!' Ah, what relief it would be for the world to lose some of its contents! (Schulz 1963/2008, 30.)

In *Tree of Codes*, there is indeed less printed matter and content left from the Schulz original and more unlikely and therefore noteworthy variation of the codex form.

In his next lecture ("Treatise on tailors' dummies, continuation"), the father refines his meditation on matter. The principle of material malleability turns out to have some restrictions, ethical or other:

> Matter never makes jokes: it is always full of the tragically serious. Who dares to think that you can play with matter, that you can shape it for a joke, that the jokes will not be built in, will not eat into it like fate, like destiny? Can you imagine the pain, the dull imprisoned suffering, hewn into the matter of that dummy which does not know why it must be what it is, why it must remain that forcibly imposed form which is no more than a parody? (Schulz 1963/2008, 35.)

If Foer took these statements seriously, *Tree of Codes* is not a playful experiment on the book form but a grave meditation on and reshaping of the Schulz book's matter and content.

Foer's rendering of the passage quoted above (and the paragraphs surrounding it) is sparse and does not include the word *dummy*, a possible keyword in connection with *Tree of Codes* (TC, 55–56). The

dummy in the English translation of Schulz refers to a tailor's mannequin (*manekin* in the Polish original), a life-size doll or torso standing for the human body and used for making and fitting clothes. In the context of computer science, we can encounter "dummy code," or skeleton code, which is not actually used in the finished product, but is merely allowed to remain in order to avoid creating bugs. At the risk of overextending the analogy, one could regard the very word *dummy* a dummy code in Foer. The keyword is nowhere visible in the book but its referents secretly inform the tome's very being on several levels: as a material object, *Tree of Codes* relates to dummy books, hollowed-out books, book art, and to "demediated" media, to mention but a few.

It is, of course, questionable whether the mentally unstable father's views on universal matter can justifiably be used in reading Foer's treatment of book matter. Nevertheless, the tension between unrestricted manipulation and the ethical implications present in the father's second lecture is relevant and potentially productive when interpreting *Tree of Codes* vis-à-vis the original. One could perhaps detect a performative paradox in the father's words and deeds. His ostensible respect for matter and pity for the dummy is expressed in a rhetorical situation in which he is giving a lecture, twisting and turning his subject matter in front of the circle of transfixed sowers, who more than metaphorically resemble the inanimate mannequins in question. That paradox has its relation to Foer's conduct, as testified by *Tree of Codes* as a heavily treated book object.[8]

Dummies for Books

Tree of Codes is 127 pages long, as is the edition of *The Street of Crocodiles* used in the project, but Foer's text includes, in N. Katherine Hayles's (2013, 227) count, only 3815 of the 37483 words in the Schulz volume. Hence, some 10 percent of the original is left standing in Foer's carved-up version. Foer himself has described the "slight feeling of hollowness or lightness that is inevitable when so much material is removed from the center of a book" (Heller 2010). Altering books like this may be a relatively rare experimental practice in literary circles but in other walks of life it is encountered more commonly or even on a regular basis, or so we are led to believe by popular culture.

In the publishing world, in the actual manufacturing of books, the effaced keyword of *Tree of Codes* appears in connection with dummy books. It refers to a model of a book, having no content except for page numbers. Sometimes, when it is used as part of the bookcase props in theaters or furniture shops, it does not even have separate pages, but features a lightweight cardboard or Styrofoam body between its covers. Although material experimentation with the book form relates, in the art world, to artists' books and conceptual art, this kind of use of a book as a medium or form without semantic content is unobtrusively present in mundane instances where a tome is merely needed as a shell for practical purposes. The line between the two worlds is sometimes a thin one. A dummy book as a model for an actual one provides a medial support only, and the book as a prop, unreadable or not, signifies the various cultural and symbolic properties of the codex. This quality of the book as a material object has some relevant implications in connection with *Tree of Codes*. Most importantly, the Foer book appears illegible at first sight, although it clearly contains semantic information (albeit in a scrambled form). This state of affairs foregrounds the book's materiality, which is usually by-passed, upon opening, as a necessary support or container for the semantic content. When opened, *Tree of Codes* remains closed – on the level of linguistic meanings – until the individual pages are descrambled. What is readily exposed to reading is the codex as a medium and material object.

At the same time the book can also function as a literal container of other entities besides the predictable semantic, symbolic, or medial ones. Handguns, money, and drugs are conveniently hidden inside innocent-looking hardback volumes in many a film and television series. Less dramatically, there are internet instructions on how to make a hollow book for storing household paraphernalia, and laptops can be found slid between hard covers, as MacBooks inside BookBooks. The holes on the pages also hark back to the dawn of the computer age by evoking "the look and feel of those ancient punch cards with holes in predefined positions to store and process data: a paper materiality 'before' the digital" (Brillenburg Wurth 2011, 6).

The hollowness of *Tree of Codes* hence activates associations of espionage, code language, and other attributes of secrecy and mystery. Or, put in another way, these are some of the messages that the book object manages to convey on account of cultural connotations. Moreover,

Tree of Codes is a secret in more senses than one. It takes some time before the unsuspecting reader finds out how to read the novel's pages, or, in other words, cracks its code on the basic level of media interface. The meaning of the textual treatment itself is another secret, and the very fragility of the book's organization makes it something of a mystery to hold and behold.

I argue that the very act of carving or hollowing of Schulz's book forms a narrative of its own. It is not expressed verbally but in lack of words, as the omitted parts of linguistic signifiers in the book's pages. Those holes and the lightness that they produce narrate a tactile-visual story, or perhaps point to the possible existence of such stories, by their very nonverbal quality. In N. Katherine Hayles's (2013, 227) reading, novels such as *Tree of Codes* "displace some degree of narrative complexity from the semantic register of words to the physical forms they present". Foer's project therefore carves out other narratives instead of just one. The primary (in the sense of sustained) narrative cut by Foer is certainly the verbal one, the one that is left visible on the pages. But the other one, the holey text, should not be overlooked for it may even be the more intriguing and inspiring of the two, at least when it comes to the search for meanings. To "read" this kind of narrative is to touch its delicate texture, to feel its weight, to look inside its multilayered structure, and to find ways of relating these dummy-like qualities to various cultural strata.

But the semiotic complexity of *Tree of Codes* is not limited to the printed text and the holes in it. As a treated book, Foer's work rearranges and problematizes one of the most established norms of codicology and the printing-press, the so-called "recto-verso" distinction. The right-hand side page of a bound item is called recto and the opposite one verso. In book publishing it is conventional to begin the volume on the recto side and paginate it with an odd number (but not necessarily with number one). The text of *Tree of Codes* is printed on the recto pages only, as is the continuous pagination, starting from the initial seven and finishing with 134. That only the recto pages have verbal information, however sporadic, directs the reader's attention to the right side of the book, and in effect merely to one half of its total composition.

The pages of *Tree of Codes* do, obviously, have their verso sides, as all sheets of paper necessarily do. In Foer's volume, the verso side is systematically unprinted, empty but by no means devoid of information.

As a matter of fact, the same principle of carving informs the verso pages as it does the verbal material of the recto. The hollowed out blankness of the verso can stand out as an even more devastating materialization of fragility, precariousness, or silence. But not only that. Given Foer's Judaic heritage and its influence on his project as clearly stated in the "Author's Afterword" (Foer 2010a, 137–139; with references to Bruno Schulz's personal history, Jewish folklore, and the idea of The Book of Life), one is tempted to read the book the Hebrew way, as if it were a right-to-left script. Although neither Schulz nor Foer writes in Hebrew, its conventions may activate an alternate set-up of reading. In that scenario, the recto page would be on the left, and what remains there to be perceived is the cut-in blankness, the spaces and the support of invisible inscription, and the lightness of the carved out book matter. The right-to-left first page (recto) of *Tree of Codes* is blank and unpaginated; the book would thus appear as shown in Figure 2.
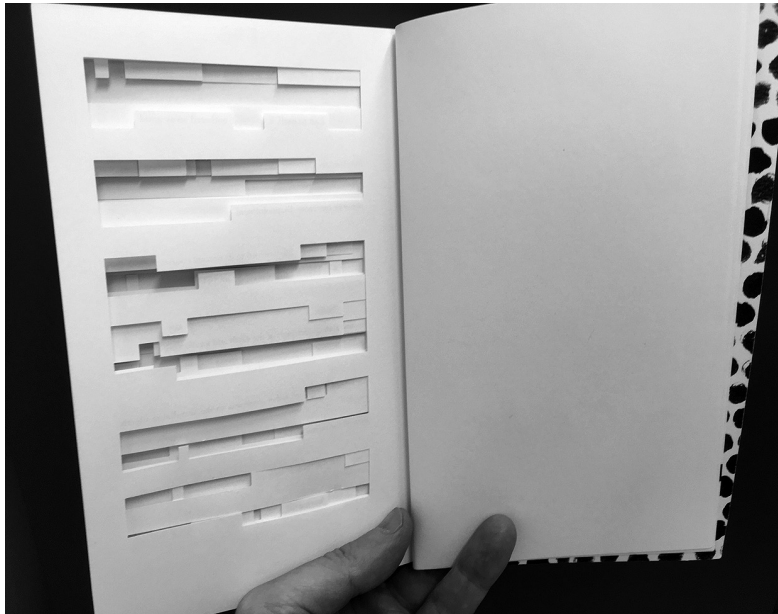

Figure 2. The reverse view of Tree of Codes (Image: Mikko Keskinen).

And, conversely but analogously, the left-to-right last page (verso) shows what remains of the book the reader has just finished. Both readings are exposed to multilayered whiteness or blankness, to the three-dimensional vision of the paper sculpture, to the hollowed out codex. In this sense, *Tree of Codes* is quite literally an open book, a volume slit, incised, and cut into.

Thus, the "dummy reading" of *Tree of Codes* that I suggested above may appear far-fetched or gimmicky but it is supported by a relevant historical writing system (Hebrew) and the principles of conceptual art that Foer is applying to the medium of the book, both relating to the general Judaic context of his project. The result is hollowed-out blankness, erased but not cancelled nothingness.[9]

Dummies for Highbrows: Treatment as Demediation

Dummies can indeed be for highbrows as well. On the high culture side of the phenomenon, hollowed out or in other ways treated books are, in the art world, known as "book art, book sculpture, book objects, not-books, dummy books, book-works; books found, appropriated, altered, distressed" (Stewart 2011, 17). Garrett Stewart (2011, 31, 18) suggests the term "bibliobject" for covering many of these cases where "the found book, once adopted from the archive of print circulation, is then 'adapted' to some new protocol of museum display." *Tree of Codes* is not a bibliobject in the sense that it is not mainly meant to be displayed in a museum. However, Foer's work to some extent resembles a book-object, book-work, or altered book, in its radical manipulation of the original codex format. The Schulz original is "tampered with" and at least partly "detexted," to use Stewart's terms (2011, 25). Stewart (2011, 102) calls this phenomenon *demediation*, or "the process, carried out in whatever primary medium of its own, by which a transmitted image of text is stalled or cancelled over the obtruded fact of its own neutralized mediality in one aspect or another". In other words, demediation blocks the book's ability to convey linguistic messages; what remains functional is the material support only (Stewart 2011, 236n). This also applies to *Tree of Codes*, but only partly.

One could say that the remediating alteration of a book into a sculpture-like object, from verbal to visual art, cancels or forgets (some

of) the message transmission functions or abilities of the print medium. It is also, so to speak, a matter of dementing (in the sense of causing an entity to lose its capacities), and hence demediating the previous message form.

In this sense, *Tree of Codes*, is at first glance is utterly unreadable, suggesting a visual art object. However, when one learns how to treat the treated text – that is, how to read and make sense of this kind of text solution, by turning the page in a particular manner, or by placing a blank sheet of paper under it "so as not to be distracted by the layers beneath" (Faber 2010) – the object becomes an almost customarily legible book with a continuous narrative in it. Both modes of being are present in the physical object. Which of these alternatives becomes manifest depends on the way of looking at (and holding) the book. This flickering between unreadability and readability, between the visual-tactile and the verbal, between the codex as an empty form and as a container of language, forms one of the narrative tensions in *Tree of Codes*. That narrative is dependent on the treated medium, on the interplay of what is and what is not, on the text and its holes.

Finally, when finishing *Tree of Codes*, we may also begin to think that the tactile is *the* way to experience the novel, that it should be read with closed eyes. *Tree of Codes* is not available in Braille or in audiobook versions, perhaps for good reason. It may be that what appears as demediation in fact generates a medium for a purely tactile reading, a code for a blind (or non-visual) reception of *Tree of Codes*. That code is not, of course, as systematic and precisely signifying as Braille, but it does convey the novel's general concerns regarding senses and sense-making in effective ways.

Tree of Codes, with its multimodal and intermedial strategies, can be seen as participating in the "aesthetics of bookishness" as theorized by Jessica Pressman (2009, 465), and expressing "media nostalgia, celebrating the book as an agent of stability, materiality and memory" as suggested by Sara Tanderup (2014, 2). However, as a partly demediated book object, Foer's novel also tells another story. The auratic quality of the book turns out to be ambiguous and problematic, both dysfunctional and open to transformations (cf. Tanderup 2014, 6). As an agent of memory, *Tree of Codes* is indeed an unstable container for recall but, as a medium, also stages the temporal porousness of retention, allowing for the simultaneity of the past, present, and future. Thematically, the

material fragility of Foer's book dramatizes concerns whose importance rise to ontological proportions. To quote *Tree of Codes*: "Reality is thin as paper. [O]nly the small section immediately before us is able to endure, behind us sawdust in an enormous empty theater" (TC, 92–93).

Notes

[1] English, of course, includes a great number of borrowed words, some of which have umlauts, diacritics, and ligatures not recognized by the modern English alphabet. Therefore, the 26 letters are not sufficient to bring all English-language literature into existence, not even all ice-cream brands (Häagen-Dazs) or heavy metal band names (Blue Öyster Cult, The Accüsed, Queensrÿche).

[2] His novels include *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), *Tree of Codes* (2010), and *Here I Am* (2016). *Tree of Codes* has also been adapted for the ballet (2015) and the opera (2016).

[3] *Tree of Codes* is currently out of print. Its original 2010 list price was circa 24€, whereas currently an unused copy sells at about 225€. In this sense Foer's book has become "rare."

[4] *A Humument* exists in five considerably different print editions, the latest of which was published in 2012. There are also digital versions of the work, with applications for iPad and iPhone available. For online variants of *A Humument*, visit http://www.tomphillips.co.uk/humument/slideshow/1–50.

[5] I indicate the cuts here and elsewhere in strikethrough.

[6] See e.g. the 1980 anthology *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, edited by Susan Rubin Suleiman and Inge Crosman.

[7] There is also another omission in the same passage, perhaps for reasons relating to the fact that Schulz was murdered by a Nazi officer eight years after the publication of the blunt statement "Homicide is not a sin." In Foer, that phrase is generalized and by the same token enfeebled into "reducing life is not a sin" (TC, 49).

[8] Berit Michel (2014, 171) finds that Schulz's "modernist abstract meditation on labyrinthine organizing structures provides extremely fertile ground for the die-cutting project; in fact, it seems to be the one narrative text that invites such a treatment as undertaken by Foer." The latter statement can be seriously doubted. Of all the available modernist texts, *The Street of Crocodiles* is

hardly the singularly inviting one. More likely, in retrospect, it appears as such because it *was* chosen. In any case, a similar anticipation of procedure can be detected in Mallock's *A Human Document*, which, as noted earlier, Tom Phillips's *A Humument* famously transforms. In Daniel Traister's (2016) reading, the Mallock novel's fragmentary structure prefigures future alterations, providing a "recipe for its own construction."

[9] Medial decisions do not lack thematic underpinnings. In Brian Kim Stefans's interpretation, the fact that *Tree of Codes* only has print on one side of the page "dramatizes, in ways normal books do not [...] the inaccessibility of the past by the present. Once you turn the page, you are left with a blank reverse-silhouette of the page you have just read, the *form* of reading without letters" (Stefans 2014, 179: emphasis original).

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