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Author(s): Piippo, Laura

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The brain in our hands: the materiality of reading *Neuromaani*

Laura Piippo

So, you have taken yourself quite a handful here with this book. Many others have probably forsaken this endeavour after a couple of pages. First fall those who lack either one or both of the two main preconditions of learning, namely resiliency and liberality. Luckily you're not cut from the same cloth; you don't give up that easily, otherwise you wouldn't be reading this footnote.¹

Neuromaani (2012), a Finnish experimental novel by Jaakko Yli-Juonikas, is indeed quite a handful. Its non-linear structure, combined with a vast amount of themes, motives, references, characters, footnotes and intertexts, creates a rhizomatic narrative that is difficult to handle or grasp. The title of the book translates as 'neuromaniac' or *nouveau roman*, already giving the reader some hints regarding its style and its thematic and literary origins – here we clearly have a work that challenges our conceptions of reading and handling prose literature.

This chapter focuses on reading the special characteristics of *Neuromaani*'s ergodic structure and material body, and the affects and affections the novel produces. It is important to clarify the distinction between the concepts of affect and affection (see Colebrook). Understood in the Deleuzian sense, affection refers to the state of the affected body and includes the presence of the other body that produces the affection (Deleuze, *Spinoza* 63–4). Therefore it is a relation. Affects, on the other hand, create these different kind of affections – the codependent state of both the affecting and the affected body – depending on the bodies involved. Affects do not come down to affections, even though the latter presume the former (Deleuze, *Kriittisiä* 214). In this

chapter, I discuss the affections created in the reader's engagement with *Neuromaani*.

Neuromaani is a novel that on various levels challenges the traditional views on linear reading, and the book as a finished, polished and closed object. The most striking feature of *Neuromaani* is indeed its sheer excessiveness, and with its 650 pages it is also literally quite a handful. But how does it handle the reader, and how could it be handled 'properly'? Bearing in mind the focus on affections and acknowledging the sheer vastness of *Neuromaani's* layers, features and quirks, a solely thematic or textual reading falls short. Therefore, I will introduce the principles of a more materialist approach to reading, simultaneously showing its analytical potential. After briefly introducing *Neuromaani*, I will map out the theoretical premises as well as the concrete tools and precise goals of my reading. These notions are then applied to the key features of *Neuromaani*: (1) its position in the field of, especially, Finnish literature; (2) its ergodic and linked structure; and (3) its metafictional elements. In the conclusion, I will sum up the affections caused by the previously mentioned elements in order to observe the pattern they form.

Patient and prescription: on *Neuromaani* and the materialist approach

To start from the beginning – the material body of the work – let's judge the book by its cover. *Neuromaani* is very appealing to both the visual and tactile senses. Its covers are designed by Markus Pyörälä, a renowned cover designer of contemporary Finnish literary works, probably best known for his collaborations with experimental writers. This feature strengthens the work's ties to this literary tradition. It is indeed a very vivid and beautiful piece of art and received the prize for the most beautiful Finnish book in 2012 (Koivuranta). The cover is of a lively pink colour, and when turned upside down and opened at the centrefold, it depicts a red and blue graphic illustration of the nervous system of the human brain and spinal cord. The lines of the spinal cord then continue as two bookmarks, hanging from the cover of the book. The texts and markings on the lower half of the front cover resemble those of an academic dissertation or other scientific publication. One might ask what is the purpose or benefit of describing a book's cover or feel, but from a materialist point of view this has everything to do with the process of mapping out the different elements that form the experience of a literary work. Focusing

on the look of the book also leads us to consider the materiality of the reader.

In terms of plot, *Neuromaani* can be viewed as a fragmented narrative about a convict named Silvo Näre, who has been consigned to a mental institution for mental and neurological examination, and as a story about a fraud pertaining to sizeable research funds committed by two neuroscientists assigned to examine Silvo Näre. These scientists are called Paavo Riekkinen Señor and Jr, a reference to real-life Finnish neuroscientists, the father and son Riekkinen, the former of whom was sentenced to two years in prison for defrauding research funds. This starting-point provides a good example of the way the novel mixes fact and fiction. There is also a curious character called Gereg (whose name intriguingly resembles that of Georges Perec), but it is uncertain whether he exists on the same plane as the other characters or is just a voice in Silvo Näre's dysfunctional mind – or even the other way round.

The chapters are quite short and (almost) all of them end with the possibility of choosing how the story will continue: the reader is usually presented with at least two different chapters with which to proceed. If readers try to read the book in a conventional manner by moving linearly from page to page, or from one chapter to the next, they are bound to lose track of the plot completely. Readers are provided with instructions on how to proceed, making choices based on their emotions, ethics or sense of humour – the novel is, after all, very humorous, and full of both subtle and banal comic variations. Sometimes they even seem to be left with no choices, thus shattering the newly created illusion of freedom:

No alternatives are being presented or given; the poor soul can't shake off its obsessions; the heavy hand of fate squeezes you, feels you up, mangles and manhandles you, and enslaves you mercilessly; and therefore you, too, are robbed of the right to make independent choices. From now on, in order to proceed with your adventure, you are forced to follow the orders that are given to you. Turn to chapter 132.²

But all the choices the readers make will inevitably lead to loops or dead ends. Therefore *Neuromaani* is always already unfinished, and linear reading strategies will always collapse.

So from the initial pages on, readers are challenged to find a suitable reading strategy for this puzzling book. Such a strategy, however, cannot rely on the thematic framework alone, and a solely narratological approach will also miss the mark by a mile. Readers who try to construct

a coherent narrative, to assign a key metaphor or a discursive framework, are also quite soon left to their own devices, feeling puzzled. There are too many narrative or thematic routes to follow, and each of them – no matter how promising it may seem at first glance – will let the reader down. It also seems very difficult to keep the characters alive (and finish the book). No matter how the reader chooses to continue the story, the characters tend to end up dead surprisingly often, repeatedly forcing one to go back a few chapters for another go.

In order to find a suitable reading strategy for such a challenging narrative structure and a mixture of textual styles and layers, it seems reasonable to start from the very beginning: from the book as a material object, the sole existence of which always precedes the actual act of reading. Even if its contents are ungraspable and difficult to map out, at least its material body provides a solid starting-point for reading. The book as a material body is the container of all its textual material(s), but also a creator of affects and meanings. This material, so to say, signifies on its own (Dolphijn and Van der Tuin 15). This so-called materialist approach to literature seeks to map out the book in its entirety, combining its textual contents – subtexts, paratexts, allusions and so on – with its material and historical conditions such as the author, reception, editing process, different readings, acts of reading and, of course, the material body of the book. Here ‘discursive’ or ‘textual’ is actually always already material as well (Barad 148).

Nevertheless, the aim of this particular reading – or the materialist approach in general – is not to present a complete, fixed interpretation of a literary work, but rather to open it up to new possibilities for further readings and links, shedding light on areas formerly left in the dark. This point of view does not abandon the textual or linguistic aspect of literature, but emphasizes that the experience of an artwork always consists of both matter and meaning (Dolphijn and Van der Tuin 91). The focus of this kind of materialist reading lies primarily in the material traits and affects of the book, and much less on its textual and thematic analysis. The latter are mentioned only when they support the analysis of the former. The materialist point of view, then, provides not only the starting-point for the analysis but also its main question: what are the affections produced in the reading of *Neuromaani*? How do they make us feel and what do they make us do?

The materialist reading of *Neuromaani* presented in this chapter seeks to map out at least some of the novel’s material aspects: its connections to both the postmodernist and the Finnish traditions of the novel, as well as its textual contents and unreadable qualities, such as look and

feel. Here the use of the term ‘material’ follows the definition offered by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, referring to both the actual and the virtual materiality of the book. For Deleuze and Guattari, the actual and the virtual are equally real, but differ from each other in quality (Taira and Väliaho); not everything that is virtually contained – or immanent – in this world is or becomes actual. Actual is our everyday world at the present moment in time; virtual on the other hand refers to all its possible and impossible pasts and futures (Taira and Väliaho 75; Grosz 228). According to a widely cited quotation, “‘virtual’ is not opposed to ‘real’ but opposed to ‘actual’, whereas ‘real’ is opposed to ‘possible’” (Deleuze, *Bergsonism* 96–8). In this sense, the materiality of literature is created in a process in which actual objects emerge from the virtual (Deleuze and Parnet 148). Literature itself is ‘permeated by unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities and by singularities’ (Deleuze and Guattari 11).

Talking about the materiality of a book, or the reading of it, one should also include the virtual aspects – for example, the possible reading strategies, what-ifs, implicit and explicit allusions, reader’s reactions, and the very act of reading – in the analysis. By following and mapping out the lines of different forms of repetition³ in *Neuromaani* – the compulsory rereading of chapters, the genre-related traits such as metafictional elements and the use of found material – and by following its dual-core impulse of simultaneously binding and breaking apart, it is possible to analyse closely the material aspects of reading *Neuromaani*.

Medical background: *Neuromaani*’s history and close relatives

Neuromaani’s closest relatives can be quite easily identified because of its connected and ergodic structure and the striking number of metafictional elements that place the novel within the postmodernist tradition (Waugh 2). According to Brian McHale’s definition, only works with clearly metafictional elements can be considered postmodernist (*Postmodernist Fiction* 9–10). He also points out that these works tend to juxtapose different registers and discourses and overlap various ontological levels with different spaces and feelings (227). This tendency is also present in *Neuromaani*:

And there I was, in the lousiest sailors’ bar in Rio de Janeiro, celebrating this new millennium of great hopes and fears, rounded

up with the good old usual suspects: Small, S. A., Perera, G. M., DeLaPaz, R., Mayeux, R. and Stern, Y. 1999, and all we had in mind was 'Differential regional dysfunction of the hippocampal formation among the elderly with memory decline and Alzheimer's disease'. *Annals of Neurology* 45. 466–72.⁴

Neuromaani is related to several prominent works in the post-modernist tradition of the novel. It shares, for example, the pseudo-academic discourse with *House of Leaves* (2000) by Mark Z. Danielewski; the hallucinations and psychotic atmosphere with *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) by Thomas Pynchon; the overwhelming footnotes with *Infinite Jest* (1996) by David Foster Wallace; and the embedding of large bodies of documentary material with *La vie mode d'emploi: Romans* (1978) by Georges Perec.

These novels also represent an assemblage of distinctively experimental works. 'Experimental' by definition questions the dominants, tastes and structures of current literary and cultural fields (Manninen 26). It is literature that poses the ontological question of its own *literaturnost*: is this literature, or could it be? And if it is not, what is it then and why (Bray et al. 1)? These novels are also examples of literary works that use excessive numbers of (source) materials and/or footnotes.

In the Finnish context, experimentalism has, especially in the 2000s, concentrated on poetry. Even though the Finnish tradition of the novel is strongly characterized by realism – later on also by modernism – and its style and ideals, a few exceptional works have been produced along the way. For example, such novels as the excessive pseudo-historical *Harhama* (1901) by Irmari Rantamala; the fragmented and partially ergodic novels *Nonstop* (1988), *Semtext* (1990) and *Interface* (1997) by Markku Eskelinen; and the expansive metafictional novel *Romaanihenkilön kuolema* (1985) by Matti Pulkkinen differ significantly from mainstream novels in their own respective periods (see Helle, Joensuu, Kurikka, Lindstedt, Peltonen). *Neuromaani* alludes to several of these novels (Yli-Juonikas 344, 336, 495).

There seems to be no other previous novel in the Finnish literary tradition that resembles *Neuromaani*'s footnote- and reference-laden composition, or its style and ergodic structure. *Neuromaani*, however, pays homage to the tradition of digital literature and hypertext novels, such as *Hegirascope* (1997) by Stuart Moulthrop (Eskelinen, *Kybertekstien* 1). It is nevertheless important to bear in mind that regarding structure and narration, on an ontological level the digital platform and the traditional book do not differ from each other (Eskelinen, *Cybertext* 22).

In comparison to the historical avant-garde movements, works of contemporary experimental prose do not seem to follow or stick to a clear political agenda or manifesto, even though they often include elements of some sort of activism (Haapala 299–300; Katajamäki and Veivo 11–16). *Neuromaani* is no exception to this rule. Curiously enough, recent examples of literary experimentalism in Finnish literature follow in the footsteps of the realist tradition: they are aware of contemporary social dynamics and problems (Rantama). This tendency is, however, subtler than that of the historical avant-gardes, relying more on affects than representations.

Brain scans: the reader's place(s) in *Neuromaani's* structure and composition

Neuromaani's structure and composition can be considered to be ergodic (see Kursula, for example). The term ergodic, coined by Espen J. Aarseth, is often defined as follows:

In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. If ergodic literature is to make sense as a concept, there must also be non-ergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages. (Aarseth 1)

Neuromaani consists of 229 chapters, most of which include directions for proceeding through the book. The first two chapters function as a preface of sorts: after them, the reader must choose a path to follow, to proceed either to chapter 146 or 122 (Yli-Juonikas 17). This structure resembles the choose-your-adventure gamebook genre, a hybrid between role-playing and traditional literary fiction. It also mocks this heritage by forcing the reader to read the same chapters repeatedly, and by failing the reader even when one meticulously follows the orders, or order-words, given in the text:

I am a clueless slob; I need the help of a personal trainer, your help that is to say. Attention, wake up. It's morning; the interactive part begins. Now you have to decide whether I get up and start exercising or stay in bed. If you want Gereg to start the *exercise*, turn to chapter 146. If you prefer *passivity*, turn to chapter 122. If, on the

other hand, you are a true brainiac like the neuroscientist Paavo Riekkinen Señor and you can handle large ensembles, you can go forth in a more traditional manner or jump from one chapter to another in a random order, completely disregarding the instructions. It is way too straining for the brains of a regular forgetful moron, the plot won't hold together, but you can always try ...⁵

Following the suggestions, or more accurately orders, works up to a point. After that, the obliging reader faces a dead end in a repetitious loop of chapters with no way out. The reader is bound to fail, either by proceeding with her reading or by following the orders, and is thus denied the feeling of being a 'sufficient' or 'competent' reader. As the traditional page-to-page reading clearly is not the suggested reading strategy for *Neuromaani*, with no given directions the reader is left to her own devices and with the constant worry of reading wrongly. And not all the choices the reader is forced to make are harmless: some of them inevitably lead to either the death or severe mutilation of one of the characters, and the reader's only real choice is between different weapons – or one can always give up reading completely and toss the book aside. Moving from one chapter to another, either by following the provided instruction or the reader's own decisions, produces quite a significant affection: the reader loses the air of seriousness and competence in the eyes of possible observers, because she is turning the book round and round and going back and forth in the text, and these activities do not fit into the pictured ideal of immersion in a piece of high literature.

The whole composition of *Neuromaani* is networked in more ways than one. Mimicking the academic style of writing, with footnotes, references and citations, it urges the reader to look these references up in order to find a key metaphor or the hidden meaning of the text. These endeavours are nonetheless often doomed to fail. Some of the references are correct and accurate, leading to other texts, but some are fictional, leading either nowhere or to somewhere completely unexpected. For example, journals and articles mentioned are often mixtures of both fact and fiction, like the aforementioned article in *Annals of Neurology*. A game of chess, referred to as an actual historical game in chapter 58, can be traced back to a game depicted in Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* (1938).

Such mixing up of textual material is common in postmodernist fiction (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 202–3) and interesting from the perspective of the affections of reading. The conscientious reader who tries to track down and map out every quotation and reference very soon becomes overwhelmed with the sheer quantity of material, and even

sooner feels betrayed by the book: the links that initially seem to be vital clues turn out to be plain mockery of the reader's endeavours regarding the topics at hand:

The slavish way of hanging on to external advice doesn't seem very wise if the alternative is to navigate without any artificial rules. I therefore encourage you to plan the schedule of your sightseeing all by yourself. Do whatever you want, go wherever you please – that is my new principle and it oozes scientific and philosophical realism and urges you to innovate inquisitively and open-mindedly.⁶

The large quantity of referenced material – whether actual or virtual, already existing or purely fictitious – affects the reader, creating a strong feeling of uncertainty and inadequacy: am I missing something important, should I try harder, am I not competent enough? One may apply different strategies in order to arrange the cognitive quantities of the novel (see Kyllönen, for example). There is, however, so much to map out that it would be nearly impossible to do so within what is considered the 'normal' time limit for reading a single book. Therefore the affection, the feeling of lacking in either skills or knowledge, is general rather than merely subjective.

Traditional reading moves linearly from page to page, from start to finish in a straight line, only interrupted by possible pauses in reading, such as, for example, when the reader leaves the book on the nightstand and goes to sleep. But with *Neuromaani*, the act of reading looks different. In the possible outsider witness's eyes, the reader appears to skim haphazardly back and forth through the book, having no consistency of consideration, seemingly paying no attention to or having any respect for what he is reading. The reader might even turn the book round and round, observing it in a way that makes him seem completely oblivious to the concept of a 'book' and how one should approach it.

These antics continue *Neuromaani's* project of juxtaposing different textual spaces and styles: the cover of the book mimics, to an extent, the style of an academic study – for example, the name of the author is presented with the epithet 'Dr Alt Med, M.H.Q.S, G.T.o.t.D.' – which broadens the gap between the supposed fictional and narrative content of the book and its cover. They also leave – and this is a very crucial matter in this analysis – the reader torn between the conventions of reading a novel and the orders and instructions given in the book. The poor reader, who appears utterly clueless with the book, is merely to play by the rules the book lays out. This reading strategy leads, however, to a

double failure – both in the social context of a ‘competent reader’ and in proceeding through the book itself, since the instructions eventually lead to a dead end.

This focus on discontinuity, however, also brings up another matter: it forces us to reconsider the so-called traditional reading, pictured earlier. Do we really read in a straight line, focusing meticulously on every single word and syllable? Do we not, in fact, skip over some sentences, guess the words, go back a few chapters to revisit a particularly hilarious or exquisite scene, or even turn to the very last chapter to discover the identity of the murderer and ease our tension? Academic reading is, if possible, even more discontinuous. Studies and articles are skimmed through in search for possible references and sparse key points. Yet when it comes to prose literature, we still tend to think of the act of reading as continuous, uninterrupted and linear. The non-linear reading of *Neuromaani* may also make the reader more aware of her reading when reading other literary works.

Metafictional elements of *Neuromaani*: reading with power tools

As was seen above, the most striking metafictional elements of *Neuromaani* are the links between chapters. With impressive frequency the book also addresses – or, more truthfully, mocks and even name-calls – the reader, and gives some specific and straightforward instructions for reading and handling the book:

Close your eye, place the book 15 cm away from your face and focus on the number 150 in the upper-left corner of the textbox for three minutes. Then open your eye and move your gaze slowly down and right; focus on the diagram, the middle-section of the beaker-shaped blob that says ‘dada’. If you did everything right, you’ll be able to observe what sort of ‘running costs’ the considerable funds received from the Finnish Funding Agency for Innovation, TEKES, and appointed to Neuropositron in 2010 were actually spent on.⁷

In chapter 113 (Yli-Juonikas 322–3), precisely at the centrefold of the book, the reader is told that Silvo Näre’s corpus callosum is damaged and needs to be fixed in order to get his psyche – one of the suggested metaphors for *Neuromaani*’s structure – to function. To rebuild or install the corpus callosum, the reader must drill through the pages, loop the

two attached bookmarks through the holes and tie them together in a somewhat complicated manner.

This procedure causes several affects. Again, as in the case of skimming through the pages and turning the book round and round, the reader is brought even further away from traditional ways and bodily manifestations of reading. What is new here is that if the reader decides to follow the given instructions, he destroys the very body of *Neuromaani*. Silvo Näre's psyche and neurons are now fixed and functioning, but the reader can no longer observe this new development, since it has become impossible to turn the pages. Taking the instructions literally destroys the act and possibility of reading itself. This is no longer only a fictional actualization of the matter, since there is at least one documented case of the act of rebuilding the corpus callosum. This act was conducted, documented and later exhibited in a blog-post by the editor of *Neuromaani*, Antti Arnkil (Arnkil).

This is a unique and vivid example of the process of actualization and virtualization in reading. The reader actualizes the orders of the book by drilling through it, thus finishing one possible line of reading. This whole new actualization of *Neuromaani* – a drilled-through, unreadable version – is indeed 'embedded in a "mist" of virtual images' (Pisters). The book is permanently rendered unclosable, and the reader is forced to come up with new ways of using and placing it as an object – be it on the mantelpiece or in the dustbin.

Conclusion: the brains are in our hands

What sort of interpretation or reading does the material focus on *Neuromaani* provide us with? Even when *Neuromaani* offers us various pleasures of the text, it also denies us the pleasure of completing or finishing it. The reading will never be complete in the same sense as it is with more traditional novels. The material quirks, like referenced bookmarks and page numbers, which fade towards the end of the book, make the reader more aware of the process of reading, not allowing her to settle down or immerse herself in the story or the act of reading. The metafictional elements, such as addressing the reader and referring to the *Neuromaani*'s entity as a literary work, continue to cause and enhance this affect.

The at least seeming impossibility of properly finishing the book because of its overly complicated structure and excessive use of textual materials and references is another important point of this reading. It

takes the feeling of uncertainty to another level, which also seems to be an expected affect, since the book openly comments on and mocks the struggles the reader is bound to face. We are given numerous silly or false clues and soon learn not to trust anything the book states or suggests. The book also gives us different kinds of orders and instructions, from plain ridiculous or questionable to borderline immoral, forcing us to question the suggested behaviour in a more serious manner:

Now you need to decide quickly. Will Silvo grab a shovel and free his father from the web of an electric outburst by hitting him in the back with the shovel? Turn to chapter 215. Or will you just stand by, looking as daddy is fried? Turn to chapter 18.⁸

It is quite easy to let a fictional character fry on an electric fence, but when asked to destroy the book by drilling a hole through it, we should wonder what might come next and whether we should still follow the orders.

This moral ambiguity also draws our attention to how we perceive reading from an external perspective, and therefore also to the definitions of what is considered normal. The person pretending to read *Neuromaani* would probably seem more coherent and competent than the one trying to complete the book's deeds, which is also one of the thematic aspects of *Neuromaani*: the traitorous academics flourish, while the scrupulous perish. The affects of this theme, however, are much more tangible and strong when enhanced by the materiality of the book; the affection would not be as vivid if it were only represented in a narrative. The same applies for other affects of the materiality of reading *Neuromaani*: they are embodied in us as affections, and therefore stay with us far longer than a regular reading session. This is probably the single most important affect of the material reading of *Neuromaani*. It leaves the future open and the reader's brain muddled with uncertainty and discomfort, ready to create new virtualities with whatever the reader chooses to pick from their brain next.