Author(s): Joensuu, Juri; Kilpiö, Juha-Pekka

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The Black Block

Opaque Page as a Graphic Device

Juri Joensuu and Juha-Pekka Kilpiö

Résumé

Le *black block*, un rectangle d'encre noire imprimée sur la page d'un livre et entourée de marges blanches, est une pratique typographique singulière. On estime que son premier usage littéraire remonte au roman *Tristram Shandy*, qui contient une célèbre page noire en mémoire de « poor Yorick ». Cependant, le truc de Sterne peut également être vu comme une allusion à une tradition typographique plus ancienne, celle des pages de deuil, qu'on trouvait déjà dans des ouvrages écrits en souvenir des morts plusieurs décennies avant *Tristram Shandy*. Dans cet article, nous analysons les usages du pavé imprimé noir dans le corpus littéraire narratif, en nous appuyant sur des exemples essentiellement empruntés à la fiction expérimentale du 20ᵉ siècle. Le pavé noir y apparaît comme une technique ambivalente, dans la mesure où il oscille entre texte et image, voire entre le monde du récit et le monde du livre. Dans bien des cas, le pavé noir souligne la dimension technologique de la littérature publiée sous forme livre, mais en même temps il produit aussi bien des effets comiques.

Abstract

The *black block*, a rectangle of black printing ink on the page of a book, surrounded by blank margins, is a peculiar graphic device. Its literary tradition has usually been considered to start from *Tristram Shandy*, which includes a renowned black page in memory of "poor Yorick". Nevertheless, Sterne's gimmick can be seen as an allusion to an older typographical tradition of the so-called mourning pages, which were featured in books remembering the departed decades before *Tristram Shandy*. In this article, we analyze the ways in which the black block is used in narrative literature, with examples chosen mainly from 20th century experimental fiction. The block proves ambivalent in that it seems to fall somewhere between text and image and, moreover, between the storyworld and the world of the book. Often, it underscores the technological aspect of print literature but, at the same time, gives rise to comical effects.

Keywords

abstract text; black block; graphic device; *House of Leaves*; illegibility; page

This article examines what we have termed the *black block*, a rectangle of more or less even black ink printed on the page of a book. The black block can be considered a graphic device in the sense described by Glyn White: "an intentional alteration or disruption of the conventional layout of the page of a text which adds another layer of meaning" (2005, 6). Though basically illegible, the black block is, in one way or another, related to text. We will focus on cases where the block is placed amid a narrative literary text, and discuss especially the formal and medial issues related to its use.

In what might be considered the most basic case, the black block covers the so-called text area, or the frame within which the text would be placed in a conventional novel or other prose texts. In realist prose fiction, the text is usually viewed as a kind of window that opens onto the storyworld, as in Henry James's metaphor of the "House of Fiction", with its "one million windows" – sight, of course, being the sense that tends to be foregrounded in most realist descriptions. In our examples, the visuality of the page is indeed highlighted but the supposed transparency is subverted by the opaque page. Yet, in these cases, the suggestion of a space beyond the page, an opening or a portal to somewhere else, might feel all the stronger. There is a constant tension between looking at and looking through.

In the following, we will sketch the black block's historical background, even though its genealogy is somewhat disjunctive. Then, we will offer some theoretical remarks concerning mediality, materiality, and information. The article concludes with text analyses of selected examples. The choice of samples may be eclectic, but their purpose is to show variety and illustrate the different functions that the black block can serve. Thematically and affectively, two aspects seem particularly prominent: the machinic and the comic.
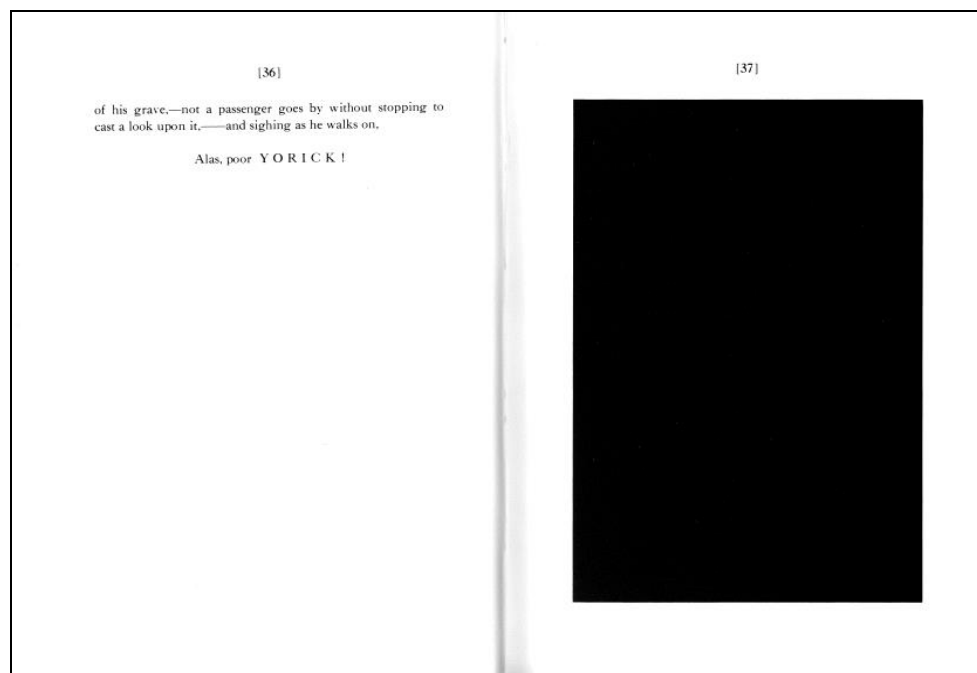
The Tradition – A Short Overview

Fig. 1. The spread featuring the black page in *Tristram Shandy* (Sterne 1978, 36–37).

In literary history, the use of the black block has usually been considered to start from Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–1767) and its black page commemorating the death of Yorick, the pastor who baptized Tristram (figs 1 & 2). Even though a contemporary reader might easily interpret Sterne's page as a comically or ironically used experimental device, black pages already constituted a tradition long before *Tristram Shandy* – a tradition that was neither comical nor experimental. Black blocks were used in books about – or for – the dead and, in this context, were called *mourning pages*. Graphically, mourning pages varied from full-page blackness to rectangles of black ink that were the size of the text area or even smaller. Usually, the book was dedicated to a noble departed, such as the mourning book published in memory of the beheaded king Charles I, written by John Quarles in 1649 (cf. Trettien 2012). The book repeats the black page on every spread (on the verso side).

Tristram Shandy's mourning page to "poor Yorick" has a parodic relationship to the historical mourning pages, given that the deceased is not only less than noble but also a fictional character. Alternatively, in a more concrete and iconic (and perhaps ironic) sense, the page could be viewed as the interior of Yorick's coffin. This interpretation is supported by the rectangular outlines around his name on the previous page – Yorick is literally placed in a box. Further, the block could even allude to the grave itself, to the hollowed-out space in the ground.

johtava käytävä kulkee läheltä hänen hautaansa, —— eikä kukaan
kulje ohi pysähtymättä luomaan siihen katsetta, —— ja huokaamatta
jatkaessaan matkaa:

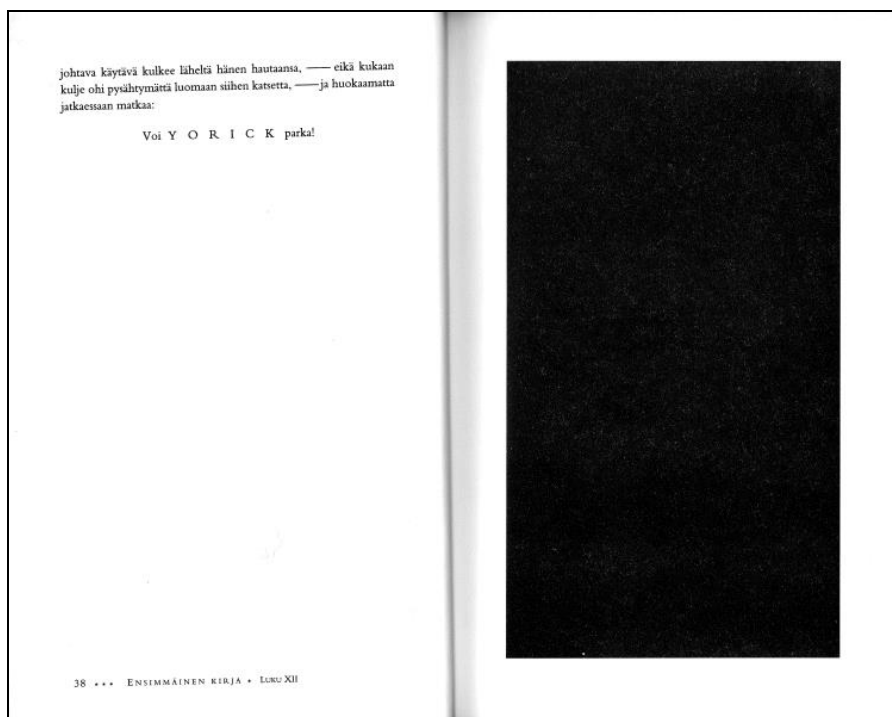Voi Y O R I C K parka!

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Fig. 2. *Tristram's* black page in Finnish (Sterne 1998, 38–39).

Besides grief, black color on the pre-modern printed page has represented other ethereal or intangible states and substances as well. English natural scientist and occultist Robert Fludd (1574–1637) uses the black block to symbolize infinity or nothingness in his book *Utriusque cosmi* (1617–24). The phrase "Et sic in infinitum" ("and so on forever") surrounds the block on every side (fig. 3), so that the spatial and material resources of the printed page are used to illustrate something non-spatial and immaterial.
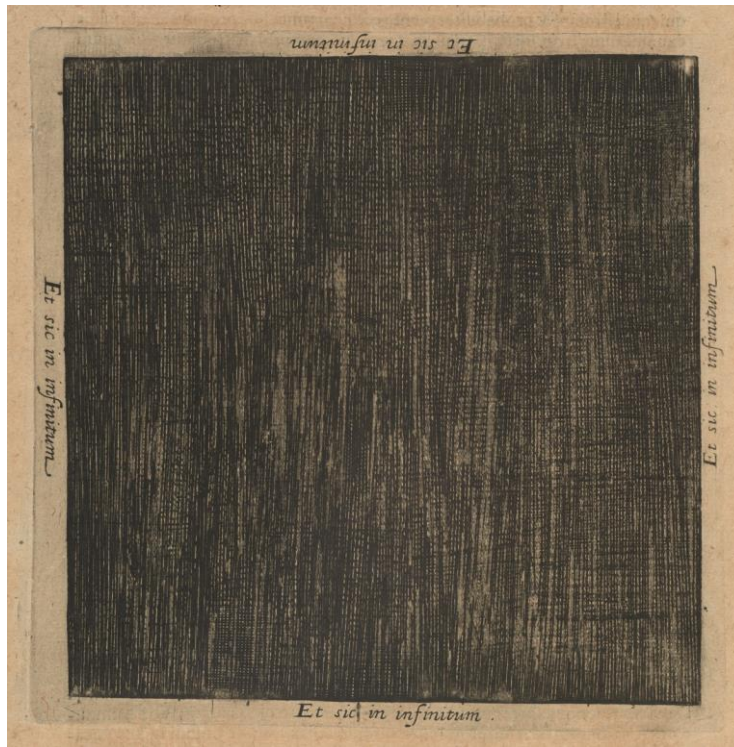
Fig. 3. Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atque technica historia* (1617–24). Electronic reproduction. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard College Library Digital Imaging Group, 2012, 2013. Copy digitized: Houghton Library: EC.F6707.B638p v.1.

The apparition of the black blocks in Fludd's and Sterne's texts may feel startling, especially since they refer to elusive metaphysical concepts, such as infinity, nothingness, and death – the blocks are abstract in both senses of the word. Nevertheless, their meanings are given rather clearly in the texts. In the 20th century, when the black block re-emerges and becomes increasingly prominent, its meaning is usually less obvious. Rather, the modern black block tends toward ambivalence. In this, it has affinities with abstract visual art.

The most notable and influential instance is, of course, Kazimir Malevich's suprematist painting *Black Square*, which he painted and first exhibited in 1915. This oil paint monochrome, which measures 79,5 by 79,5 centimeters, is often considered the starting point for abstract art.[1] It drew a response from Aleksander Rodchenko, who painted a series titled *Black on Black* in 1918. Malevich himself painted several versions of the black square as well as monochromes in other colors, such as the "beautiful" *Red Square* in 1915 and the "iconic" *White on White* in 1918, to quote Craig Dworkin's appraisals (2013, 118).

The next time the black monochrome made a notable appearance was in the American abstract expressionist scene in the mid-20th century. Barnett Newman painted a horizontal black rectangle titled *Abraham* already in 1949, but it was Ad Reinhardt who developed the form to its full potential. From 1957 onward, Reinhardt painted nothing but black monochromes and eventually restricted himself to black squares only. He acceded to comment on them verbally, but usually in a rather apophatic manner: "No object, no subject, no matter. No symbols, images, or signs. Neither pleasure nor paint. No mindless working or mindless non-working. No chess-playing." (Quoted in Rosenthal 2006, 40.)

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[1] Malevich's work is predated by a few more humorous black paintings, such as "Combat de nègres dans un tunnel" ("Negroes Fighting in a Tunnel at Night", 1882) by the French poet Paul Bilhaud. Alphonse Allais seized this humorous idea and produced several monochrome pictures with amusing titles, such as the red monochrome "Récolte de la tomate par des cardinaux apoplectiques au bord de la Mer Rouge" ("Tomato Harvest by Apoplectic Cardinals on the Shore of the Red Sea") in 1884.

Comparable developments can be found in cinema. Guy Debord's debut film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (1952) alternates between sections in completely white and completely black. It is mostly in black, punctuated with shorter white moments, until the film ends with 18 minutes of black screen. The white sections feature a soundtrack consisting of collaged dialogue, whereas the black sections are mute. Derek Jarman's film *Blue* (1993), made at a time when the director was dying of AIDS and had already lost his sight, displays nothing but an unmoving surface of Yves Klein blue throughout the film. The soundtrack provides a poetic meditation on – or mediation of – sight and vision. Blue – Jarman perhaps suggests – is the last color to persist before blindness, or to linger most forcefully in the mind's eye even after that. Of course, it is not uncommon for conventional narrative feature films to include brief black moments, when the lights go out in the storyworld or a hood is pulled over the focalizer's head, for instance. Another, slightly longer black scene occurs in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Volume 2* (2004), when the protagonist is buried alive in a wooden coffin and it takes her a while to get the flashlight working.

The painterly monochromes can be regarded as inspirations for some of the modern literary black blocks, for their outward appearances are very similar. The difference in context, however, is significant: the book as a platform and as a material-semiotic environment brings with it particular features that set the black block apart from monochromatic (oil) paintings. A painting is, as a rule, a stand-alone work. Reinhardt's paintings may have been exhibited as a series, but there is no prescribed order for them, for instance. By contrast, the black block is placed, firstly, on the page of a book and, secondly, in a narrative context. In a book, the block is doubly framed: materially by the page's white margins but also by the narrative in which it is embedded.

Furthermore, books are created and distributed by different technological means than paintings. It is, of course, customary that paintings should be unique, whereas books are printed in editions, and this has bearing on the block as well. The surface of an oil painting is slightly textured and uneven – Malevich's cracks are especially prominent, and Reinhardt deliberately created geometrical shapes on his paintings' surfaces, which are visible only on close examination. The process of producing a literary black block, on the other hand, is more technological, because it is usually not based on handwriting but on typesetting. We could even claim that the literary black blocks aim to constitute as even and as automated surfaces as possible.

Toward a Theory of Black Blocks

In his book *Ecology without Nature*, Timothy Morton examines the ways in which literary writing conjures up an environment or, more precisely, produces the idea that there is, indeed, such a thing as environment. He suggests an *ambient poetics*, "a materialist way of reading texts with a view to how they encode the literal space of their inscription – if there is such a thing – the spaces between the words, the margins of the page, the physical and social environment of the reader" (2007, 3).

Ambient poetics includes the concept of *re-mark*, borrowed from Jacques Derrida's *Dissemination* (1972/1981) and *The Truth in Painting* (1978/1987). In Morton's application, the re-mark is the basic function that makes any sort of difference possible in the first place:

> It is a special mark (or a series of them) that makes us aware that we are in the presence of (significant) marks. How do you discriminate between the letters on this page and random patches of dirt, or

patches of paint and "extraneous" matter on the canvas? Or between *noise* and *sound* (how about *harmony* and *dissonance*)? Or between *graphics* and *letters?* (2007, 48–49)

The idea of re-mark resonates well with the black block. The block reduces the differences between black and white, figure and ground, foreground and background, signal and noise to their bare essentials. The black block is the re-mark at its most striking – it may be the difference as such. Then again, even if the difference between figure and ground was clear-cut and a sign could be distinguished from another without a doubt, it is perhaps not possible to say which is which: Does the block fall on the side of the signal or on the side of the noise? Are the white margins the background or the foreground?

The re-mark applies to signification in general. In a more specifically literary and narrative context, Brian McHale (1987, 180) argues that there exists a "major ontological 'cut'" between the material book object and the fictional world depicted within it, and this cut becomes particularly foregrounded when the text's materiality makes itself palpable to the reader. The black block calls attention to the basic elements of print and to the technology of the book, highlighting especially the page as a material and structural unit. In this sense, the block can also be conceptualized as *hypersemanticization*, by which Didier Coste (1989, 87) means the act of challenging the "insignificance" of signifiers and taking "a secondary profit (semantic and sensual-emotive) from their materiality, their disposition, their individual and systemic relations with the corresponding signifieds in language and discourse". Although it is not certain what the "signifiers" *in* or *of* the black block are, hypersemanticization can also function on the material level of the printed book, which involves "the quality, thickness, and colors of the paper support, the color of the ink used, the weight, size, and binding of a volume, the shape of the pages, the size of the print, the margin width, and so on" (Coste 1989, 88–89). In this respect, the black block hypersemanticizes *ink* as a potential for writing, a pre-condition of letters, as well as the spatial surface of the *page*, the fibrous exterior of paper. At the same time, texts that utilize black blocks often thematize questions concerning technology on the narrative level, which forges a self-reflexive link between the two levels – the technology both *in* and *of* the text.

The block is not narrative as such, at least not in the classical sense that it would represent events,[2] but it still relates to the surrounding narrative. In other words, it is necessary to address what the narrative implies that it represents or what kind of an iconic resemblance the reader could attribute to it. Usually, literary texts with black blocks include no explicit, unequivocal references to the images – there are no parenthetical references to "see image one", for example. In its own way, however, the block hints at the fact that in a printed narrative, the temporal dimension, as Genette (1980, 87–88) notes, is always transposed into and represented as space.

Black Blocks: Some Examples

We have identified the black rectangle with white margins as the basic type of black block, but there are other varieties and limit cases as well. Firstly, the block can belong to a subtype of rectangles, such as the square. This is typically the case if the page itself is a square. Sami Liuhto's poetry book *Canti di Assisi* (2017) measures 20,5 by 20,5 centimeters. It makes extensive use of the word square, an acrostic (poetic) form of which the so-called Sator Square dating back to Roman antiquity is probably the best-known. Inspired by

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[2] According to Genette (1988, 19), at its most basic, a story consists of one event, "a transition from an earlier state to a later and resultant state". It is open to question whether a single image with a uniform surface can represent such a transition from one state to another.

both *Tristram Shandy* and Kari Aronpuro's *Aperitiff* (discussed below), which are referenced in the text, Liuhto's work has on one page an exact black square measuring 17,6 by 17,6 centimeters.

Secondly, the block can sometimes cover the entire page. This is the case with Jean Keller's *The Black Book* (2013) whose every page is entirely black – there are no margins. *The Black Book* is a conceptual work that uses the practice of print-on-demand self-publishing to address the economic value of literature and its entanglement with the material book-object. As Keller writes, "a Lulu book of blank pages costs an artist as much to produce as a book filled with text or large photographs. Furthermore, as the number of pages increases, the price of each page decreases. A book containing the maximum number of pages printed entirely in black ink therefore results in the lowest cost and maximum value for the artist."[3]

The block relates to the genre of overwritten literature, which can be considered a subtype of erasure literature – a kind of "blocking" of text, if you will. An example would be Marcel Broodthaers's artist's book version of Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* – Broodthaers's work (1969), in turn, is titled *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard: Image*. In Broodthaers's version, all the words of Mallarmé's original work are covered with small black rectangles but their placement on the page is preserved, which brings Mallarmé's dispersed layout (flotsam and jetsam, as it were) very much to the fore. This raises an intriguing question that concerns all black blocks: is the black all there is, or is it superimposed on something else? In principle, all blocks could conceivably be covered-up versions of pre-existing texts.

As a complement, there is a vast tradition of its own that consists of blank books, white books, and books without text. Usually, they use the codex format and bear such common paratexts as a title and the author's name, but the actual pages are blank (see Mœglin-Delcroix 2009). The classics of the genre include Herman de Vries's *Wit is overdaad* (1960), Isidore Isou's *La Loi des purs* (1963), and Aram Saroyan's *@1968* (1968), though Saroyan's work is simply an unbound ream of paper. It may be, however, that the black block's potential is realized most fully in a narrative context, as we aim to demonstrate with the following case studies.

Donald Barthelme's short story "The Explanation" (in the collection *City Life*, 1970) includes four identical black blocks amid a dialogue taking place between an "A" and a "Q". In this instance, the block seems to represent a "machine", the overwhelming muteness of technology (fig. 4). It appears four times, interrupting the dialogue suddenly, and the questioner notes changes in its appearance, even though the graphic sign remains the same across all iterations – almost like a graphic equivalent to the word "nevermore" in Poe's "The Raven"[4]. The function of the machine remains unknown, but it does have error as a built-in feature: the fourth point in the instruction manual states that "you have made a serious mistake" (Barthelme 1970, 77). The effect of the block is comical, which stems partly from the inexplicability of the block as a literary device – in a way, the blocks "steal" space from the text – and partly from the impossibility of explicating *what* and *how* the block is in the storyworld. If it represents a "machine" in the storyworld, how could its transformation into a printed black block on the page be explained in narrative terms? Like every black block, these instances, too, have "a certain…reticence" (ibid., 70) that calls the reader to interpret the graphic device.

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[3] The quote is taken from the author's description of the book on Lulu's online store. See also Bajohr 2018.

[4] Yet another block appears in the next short story of Barthelme's collection, "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel" (1970, 90).

City Life   70

A: It offers no clues.
Q: It has a certain . . . reticence.
A: I don't know what it does.
Q: A lack of confidence in the machine?

Q: Is the novel dead?
A: Oh yes. Very much so.
Q: What replaces it?
A: I should think that it is replaced by what existed be-
fore it was invented.
Q: The same thing?
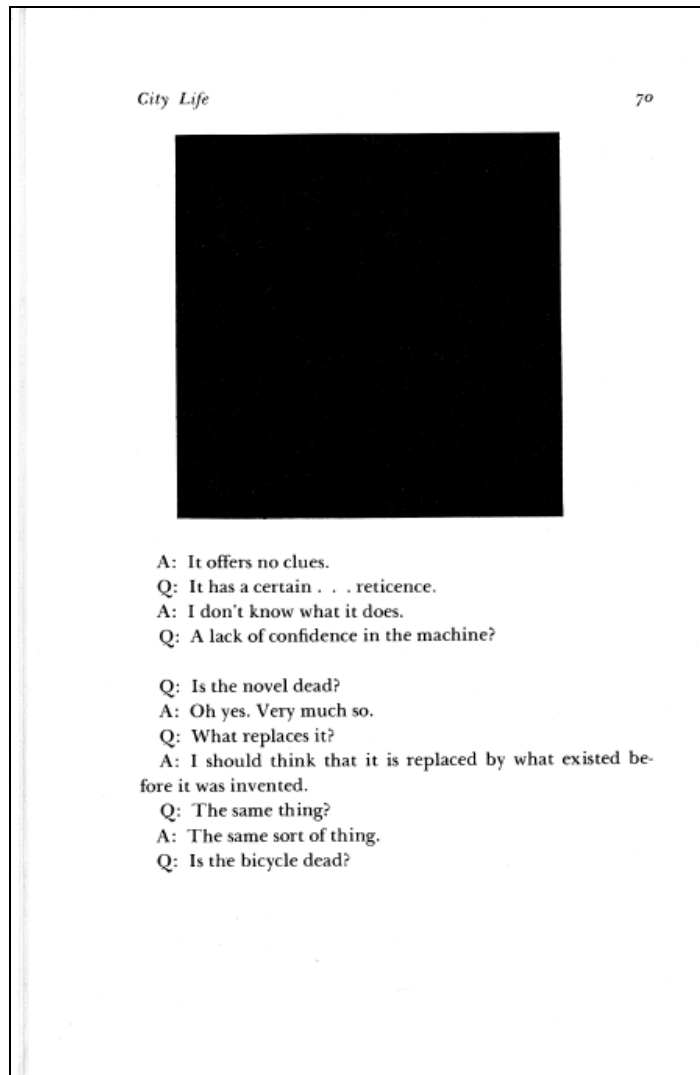A: The same sort of thing.
Q: Is the bicycle dead?

Fig. 4. Donald Barthelme, "The Explanation" (Barthelme 1970, 70).

Aperitiff – avoin kaupunki ("Aperitiff – Open City") by Kari Aronpuro (b. 1940) was a part of a veritable boom of collage novels that emerged in Finnish literature in the mid-1960s. It incorporates text from a number of sources (though their typesetting is mostly unified in the book), but also facsimile passages, such as various catalogues, that combine verbal and visual elements.

Though the novel is low on plot, there are two main narrative threads. The first is the diary of one Reino Salmi, who competes in television quiz shows, specializing in burial customs of the world. The second thread involves his brother, who falls off a roof and dies, so that Salmi must sort through his posthumous documents. They include a series of unpaid bills from an electric company, based in the Finnish city of Tampere, and finally a notice saying that the power in the brother's apartment has been cut. This notice is followed by the black block, which – given its context – can be interpreted as an image of the dark apartment (fig. 5).
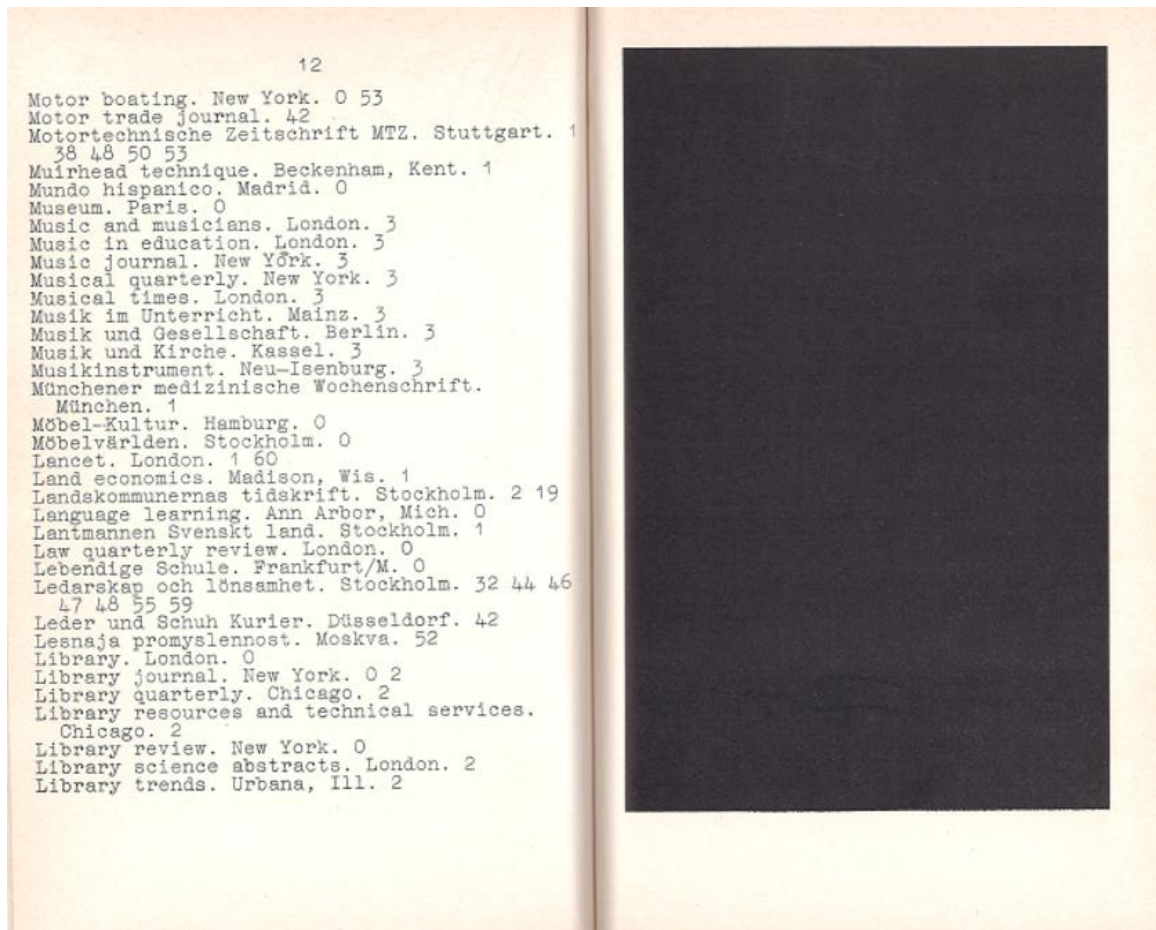
Fig. 5. *Aperitiff – avoin kaupunki* (Aronpuro 1965, unpaginated).

Aperitiff is fundamentally a novel about information. Reino Salmi is a quiz show master, and brother Tauno Salmi, before his untimely death, works at a library's warehouse. In a way, the abundance of books and written material found in the storyworld is transposed to the formal level of the collage novel. The block, too, can be analyzed with reference to media and information, and even viewed as a comment on contemporary media theory. Specifically, it could be read in relation to Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, which had come out the year before *Aperitiff*, in 1964. McLuhan (1987, 8) writes about electric light:

> The instance of the electric light may prove illuminating in this connection. The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name.

Aperitiff's black block represents or, rather, incarnates the darkness in the room. Electric light is information in its essential form, as McLuhan notes. Thus, it is possible to calculate how much information *Aperitiff's* page with the block carries. Electric light has two states, on and off, or 1 and 0 in binary digits, so there is exactly one bit of information.

An older and definitely less known example of Finnish prose fiction's black blocks can be found in *Olenko minä nyt kuussa?* ("Am I on the Moon Now?", 1944) by Veikko Karumo (1913–1994). An abundance of graphic devices – such as the black block, a *grey* block (a rectangle of raster film or screen), and a rather eclectic group of found pictures – create a humorous, even light atmosphere to this parodic sci-fi novel. The story is about a man from ancient Rome named Metculus,[5] his dog called Naxu, and their adventures with a time machine, which resembles a rocket-like tower. The comicality of the pictures derives from particularly descriptive captions, which claim that the blocks are precise and representational pictures (photographs), when they clearly are not. The heterodiegetic narrator thus attributes highly precise content to somewhat random pictorial elements. The reader, who can plainly see the exact characteristics of the visual material, will possibly be amused by this early example of material comicality and the sense of playful metafiction it evokes.
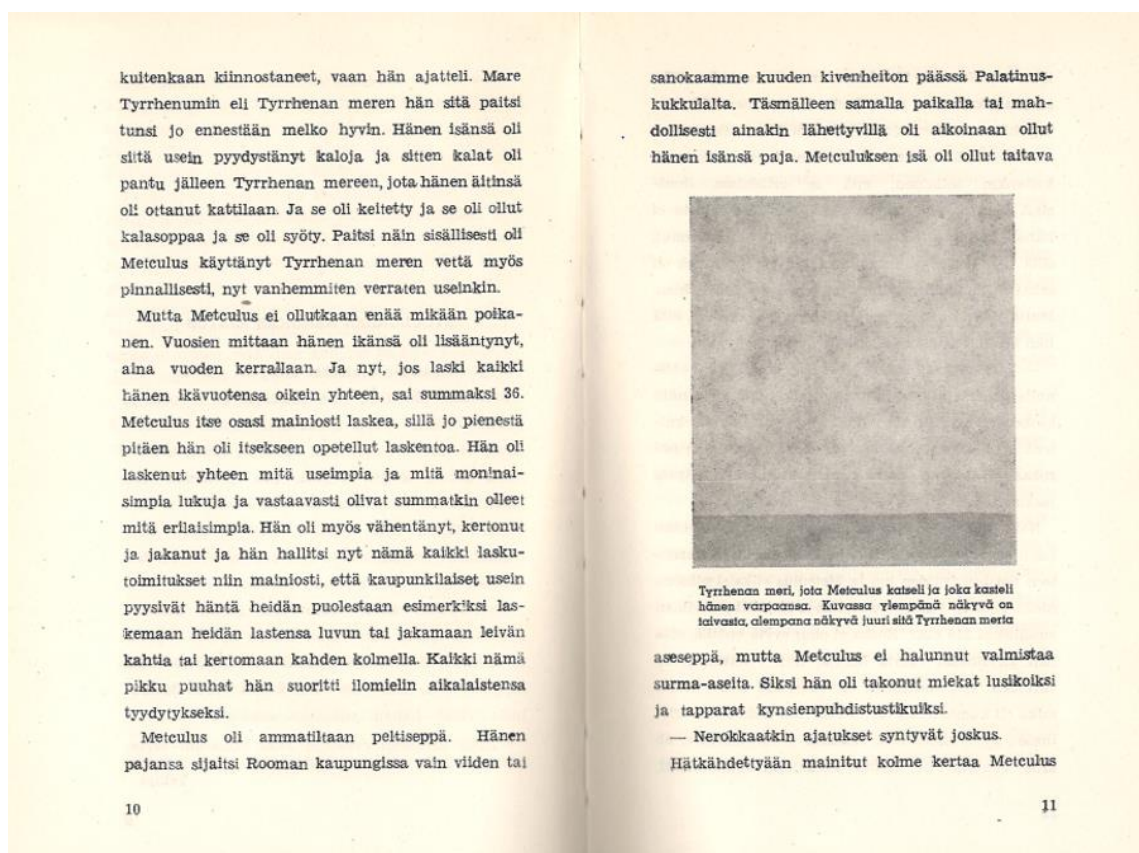
Fig. 6. The Tyrrhenian Sea in Veikko Karumo's *Olenko minä nyt kuussa?* (Karumo 1944, 10–11).

On closer examination, the spread with the grey block is revealed to be a piece of raster film (fig. 6). The caption claims that the upper part is the sky, and the lower one the Tyrrhenian Sea.

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[5] Metculus may sound like Latin but is, in fact, a pun playing on the Finnish word *metku*, which means a 'jest' or a 'trick'.

Tosin Metculus ei saattanut erottaa Naxun ilmeitä, sillä tornissa oli aivan pimeätä. Sisällähän ei ollut mitään valaisulaitteita. Vain pienestä ikkunasta saattoi auringonsäde tunkeutua torniin ja sekin vain silloin, kun ulkona paistoi aurinko. Mainitusta ikkunasta ei nyt tunkeutunut minkäänlaisia säteitä. Metculus koetti kauan aikaa kurkistella ikkunasta ulos pimeyteen, mutta ei nähnyt mitään. Vasta sitten hän sormillaan tunnustelemalla huomasi, että hän ei ollutkaan yrittänyt katsoa läpi ikkunan, vaan läpi seinän. Nyt hän pienen etsinnän jälkeen löysi oikean ikkunan, mutta siitä hän ei nähnyt sen enempää. Tuntuipa hänestä, että hän näki vähemmän. Hän siis istuutui lattialle Naxun viereen ja tuijotti seinään.

— Niinkuin veli huomaa, niin täällä on jollakin tavalla pimeää, lausui Metculus. — Valoa ei näy missään. Mitään muutakaan ei näy missään. En erota edes oikeaa kättäni, vasemmasta kädestäni puhumattakaan... Mutta miksi minä oikeastaan tästä sinulle puhun. Onhan sinulla itselläsi silmät päässäsi nähdäksesi, että et näe mitään.

Vanha totuus on, että vaikka ihminen ei näekään, niin hän silti voi kuulla. Tämän muistaen Metculus kuunteli. Ja hän kuuli. Hän kuuli oman hengityksensä ja Naxun hengityksen ja äännähdyksen tai rasahduksen, jos hän äännähti tai rasahdutti, ja

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toisen äännähdyksen tai rasahduksen, jos Naxu äännähti tai rasahdutti. Aina puhuessaan hän erotti selvästi oman äänensä, sitä kovemmin, mitä kovemmin hän puhui. Ja kaiken tämän lisäksi hän kuuli

Metculus ja Naxu kahden lentävässä tornissaan. Kuten kuvasta ei näy, niin molemmat istuvat lattialla. Kuvan pimeys johtuu tornin pimeydestä

heikkoa pihinää ja sihinää. Varmistauduttuaan siitä, että se ei ollut lähtöisin Naxusta tai hänestä itsestään, hän päätteli, että se lähti jostakin muualta. Ja sitten hän muisti uuninsa ja sen moninaiset putket ja laitteet. Hän teki terävän johtopäätöksen: pihinä ja sihinä lähti niistä.

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Fig. 7. The dark tower in *Olenko minä nyt kuussa?* (Karumo 1944, 42–43).

The spread with the black block (fig. 7) has a caption that translates as follows: "Metculus and Naxu in their flying tower. As you cannot see [*sic*] in the picture, both are sitting on the floor. The darkness of the picture is due to the darkness in the tower." Again, the black block acts as an iconic representation of darkness, and this time, this is explicitly explained to the reader in the text.

A Black Hole in *House of Leaves*

As discussed above, the black page in *Tristram Shandy* can be considered a reference to poor Yorick's grave, whereby it would suggest an extension of about six feet. The illusion of depth is further accentuated by the reverse page, which features a similar black block, as though the blackness was seeping through the leaf. The black block is at the same time a black box. This reminds the reader that a single leaf is always, if only slightly, a three-dimensional object. Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves* (2000), however, goes further, or deeper, still.

The novel is about a photojournalist named Will Navidson and his family, who discover that their new house has a portal to an immense labyrinthine underground space, which defies the laws of physics and proves impossible to map. Navidson and his companions search the space and record their explorations on film and video. He then compiles this material into a feature-length documentary titled *The Navidson Record*. The most extensive diegetic level of the book comprises an exegesis of the film and the labyrinth represented in it.

In *House of Leaves*, the black block refers to the underground labyrinth, the exploration of which forms the main plotline. The block – a black square – on page 144 is rather small in itself (it measures 5,5 by 5,5 centimeters), but it is preceded by 25 squares that are placed on the same spot on the previous pages[6]. These squares are similar in shape and size as the black block but filled with text and surrounded by very thin frames. The frames, in turn, are the same color as the word "house", which is printed in blue every time it appears in the book. Though the pages are not actually perforated, this creates a kind of virtual tunnel of approximately 4 millimeters through the book itself, which further foregrounds the codex as a three-dimensional space.

It seems that the labyrinth, which is possibly of alien origin and predates the birth of the Earth, is completely devoid of any relation to human culture, and it rejects most types of recording media. In fact, the text within the framed squares contains an apophatic list of things that will not be found there. (This might remind an avid reader of Barthelme's "Nothing: A Preliminary Account".) Technology breaks down in the labyrinth but, at the same time, some sort of non-human agency is implied. In *House of Leaves* especially, the technological and machinic motifs of the storyworld and the discourse are transposed to the act of reading. We could even claim that the black block tends to appear in books with at least some ergodic features, which require, as Espen Aarseth (1997, 1) phrases it, "non-trivial effort" from the reader.

If we consider the labyrinth as a text or as a support for inscription, its interior has apparently suffered some kind of material deterioration. Even though its exact chemical consistency remains unknown, the labyrinth's interior is frequently described as "ashen-like". If the walls have functioned as a writing surface, they have likely been burnt by fire. Alternatively, the blackness may be the result of such overdetermination and material excess – of being completely covered in inscription – that it has obliterated all distinctions between the material support and the graphic signs on it. Either way, the labyrinth proves resistant not only to representation but to the addition of signs as well, since it destroys the neon markers with which Navidson and the others attempt to mark their path, for example. As Navidson points out, "[i]t looks like its [sic] impossible to leave a lasting trace here" (Danielewski 2000, 162). At the end of his exploration, Navidson runs out of flashlight batteries and all other lighting equipment and is unable to film or photograph anymore. The audio track of the film remains, but "nearly six minutes of screen time is black" (ibid., 468). This adds another, intermedial layer to the block. It refers not only to the pitch-black interior of the labyrinth but also to the cinematic representation of this interior and, furthermore, to the labyrinth's resistance against the cinematic representation.

Fade to Black

In this article, we have analyzed different varieties of the black block. In one way or another, they always disturb the conventional literary expectations whenever they appear in the middle of the text – since a literary text is supposed to consist of legible words – and in doing so, they draw attention to the medial and technological aspects of printing and the book form.

As for its relation to the surrounding narrative and the storyworld, the block tends to foster a certain ambivalence, since it may remain unclear to which narrative agent it should be attributed. Even if a character narrator writes down their own discourse within the storyworld, who then sets the type and produces the book

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[6] On a few pages, the placement varies slightly.

with its graphic devices? Genette considers typesetting a part of the paratextual repertoire, but he attributes it quite simply to the publisher (1997, 33–36). The block is part of the typesetting, but it resists Genette's attribution since it can be interpreted as something that exists simultaneously in the storyworld. The block hovers between the storyworld and the world of the reader. In the hermeneutic sense as well, the block remains opaque.

By contrast, in some cases, the block may appear subservient to the verbal description, especially if there are captions, as in Karumo's *Olenko minä nyt kuussa?*. The block's signifying potential is almost limitless, but the captions can narrow their meaning down by linking them to highly specific and highly unlikely narrative situations. Yet, the captions typically suggest that there is an expansion beyond the page, a storyworld with its spatial dimension. In the end, this highlights the basic fact of all literary fiction, namely, that the storyworld is never visible as such but has to be inferred from textual cues – fundamentally, that is, from graphic signs.

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Juri Joensuu works as a literary researcher in the Department of Music, Art, and Culture Studies of the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Since completing his doctoral dissertation on experimental, procedural, and conceptual writing in Finnish literature (2012), he has taught creative writing and published – among other things – on literary humor, conceptual writing, and the experimental movements in Finnish literature of the 1960s.

Email: juri.m.joensuu@jyu.fi

Juha-Pekka Kilpiö is finishing his PhD thesis in Literature at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. The thesis focuses on kinekphrasis, or the verbal representation of cinema, in US postmodernist fiction and poetry. Kilpiö's article on Danielewski's *House of Leaves* was published in *Reading Today* (UCL, 2018). He has also studied, and published in, other media-related issues on literature, such as the use of typewriter in concrete poetry. Kilpiö doubles as the editor in chief of the leading Finnish poetry periodical *Tuli & Savu*.

Email: juha-pekka.j-p.kilpio@student.jyu.fi