

**This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.**

**Author(s):** Keskinen, Mikko

**Title:** Narrating Selves amid Library Shelves : Literary Mediation and Demediation in S. by J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst

**Year:** 2019

**Version:** Accepted version (Final draft)

**Copyright:** © Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019.

**Rights:** In copyright

**Rights url:** <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en>; <http://rightsstatements.org>.

**Please cite the original version:**

Keskinen, M. (2019). Narrating Selves amid Library Shelves : Literary Mediation and Demediation in S. by J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst. *Partial Answers : Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 17(1), 141-158. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pan.2019.0008>

# Narrating Selves amid Library Shelves: Literary Mediation and Demediation in *S.* by J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst

Mikko Keskinen

*University of Jyväskylä*

This article focuses on the various forms of narrating, mediating, and interpreting selves within and around a book object, the novel *S.* (2013) by J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst. The novel *S.* is an experiment in producing a deceptively realistic replica of a maltreated library book object, but its discursive practices also rely on familiar literary forms, harking back to epistolary commonplaces, as well as to marginalia, both ancient and modern. *S.* also problematizes narration, mediation, and the representation of textual selves through its data overkill verging on unreadability. I will consider the possible significances of “demediation” in literary experimentation with the book form.

Since the introduction of printing technologies some five hundred years ago, the entities that we are accustomed to calling literary narratives have, with high predictability, entailed signs printed on sheets of paper bound in the codex form so that leaves fastened together hinge at one side, allowing the pages to turn. Until digital publishing became possible and eventually commonplace in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the book was *the* medium of literature, so unmarked, so self-evident, and so

mundane that it easily gained the status of an immaterial transparency. The book as a platform and carrier of literature is almost too ubiquitous, too obvious to be accounted for, and for the same reason its medial quality turns into an immediacy, as if signs were communicated without the material support of the codex.

However, printed books *are* material objects, with visual, tactile, and even olfactory features. Due to their very materiality, to their three-dimensional, multilayered architecture, they are also liable to be used as a writing surface for notes and underlinings, or to serve as handy folders for loose papers and dried flowers, or to hide cash, drugs, and even handguns in. Of the possible uses of the book object, the annotations testify to our everyday experience. Book use, in the sense of reading with a pen, highlighter, or sticky notes, not to mention the more radical repurposing, leaves signs of the self or of a mind in the codex. Like all signs, these manipulations by readers are then exposed to further interpretations.

The unmarked medial characteristics or affordances of books are often foregrounded in multimodal experimental literature (cf. Gibbons 2012a, Gibbons 2012b). Both everyday and literary practices are led to seemingly chance encounters on the platform of the codex. *S.* by Dorst and Abrams epitomizes the potential of those encounters.

*S.* consists of the mystery novel *Ship of Theseus*, purportedly written by the imaginary author V. M. Straka, two college students' exchange of handwritten notes in that volume's margins, and a variety of loose materials inserted between its pages. *Ship of Theseus* itself is allegedly written in Czech, and translated into English in 1949 by one F. X. Caldeira, who also provides a foreword along with dozens of scholarly and editorial footnotes.

Attempts to make sense and communicate inform *S.* in its entirety. The translator's commentary explains the origin of the novel-within-a-novel (that is, *Ship of Theseus*), its relation to other texts, and possible meanings. The protagonist of *Ship of Theseus* suffers from amnesia and tries to find out his identity, including his real name; he is simply called S. in the novel. The life and death of the novelist Straka are likewise mysteries, which the two college students, Eric Husch and Jennifer (Jen) Heyward, set out to solve in their reciprocal annotations and inserted documents. The two students also read each other's minds inevitably inscribed in their notes. The actual reader must make sense of the whole package, complete with loose printed matter tucked between (apparently specific) pages of the bound book.

The inserted paraphernalia, 22 pieces in total, include maps, postcards, photocopied scholarly articles, newspaper clippings, telegrams, a napkin, handwritten letters, and a decoder ring (see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BEe9a\\_fXA4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BEe9a_fXA4)). All these materials are packed in a slipcover, which carries the only indication of Dorst and Abrams's authorship. Taken out of the slipcover, the cloth-bound book appears as a worn and stained copy of *Ship of Theseus*, a standalone high school library book over 10 years overdue.

I will not go into the rich multimodal features of *S.* in full detail, but focus on the marginalia written by Jen and Eric. Nor will I concentrate on *Ship of Theseus* proper but on mediality and the annotating characters' tapping into culturally available means of conveying and sharing experience.

### **Minding the Codex: Readers in and around the Text**

The first and last words in the copy of *Ship of Theseus* presented to the readers, stamped on the initial and final endpapers, are institutional markings of a lending library. The first stamp indicates, in red ink, that the volume is a “BOOK FOR LOAN.” The last one says, on the pastedown:

KEEP THIS BOOK CLEAN

Borrowers finding this book pencil-marked, written upon, mutilated or unwarrantably defaced, are expected to report it to the librarian.

These stock urgings are customarily found in American library books, and they usually include the following phrase as well: DO NOT TURN DOWN THE LEAVES. The ritual pieces of advice have some curious, if not paradoxical features. They urge the patrons not only to keep the volume in an unspecified near mint condition but also to inform on disruptions. The warnings against marking the book paradoxically stain it with that very gesture.<sup>1</sup> This may be indicative of reading as an activity that intervenes in its object, inevitably affecting and changing that object’s material status, at least to some degree. This is reflected in the very titles of such works on marginalia as *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* by H. J. Jackson (2002), *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England* by William H. Sherman (2008), and *The Reader in the Book: A Study of Spaces and Traces* by Stephen Orgel (2015). And this is what “how to read a book” often means, *pace* library policy or Mortimer J. Adler’s 1940 eponymous book on critical guidelines to understanding great books.

True, in the storyworld of *S.* the copy of *Ship of Theseus* is not exactly a library book although it originates from one library and is located in another. The

copy is the property of Laguna Verde High School library, from which it was stolen in 2000 by Eric and subsequently placed (or rather misshelved and thereby actually hidden) on a specific shelf at Pollard State University library. The book is thus taken out of library *circulation* but stays put in library *context*, with its readership radically reduced to two persons.

The printed book, which is by definition a medium of mass communication, becomes a singular copy, a platform for a private exchange of information. This privacy and even intimacy of reading and writing is expressed in the style of a commercial mass culture discourse. The blurb of *S.* is reminiscent of a movie trailer voice-over *à la* Don Lafontaine (not surprisingly, considering the cinema and television series background of J. J. Abrams). The opening of the blurb sets a dramatic tone for the novel inside the slipcase: “ONE BOOK. TWO READERS. A WORLD OF MYSTERY, MENACE AND DESIRE.” In a similar intertwining of the private and the public, of the personal and the common, Jennifer and Eric engage in the practice of marginal writing on a secretive platform. They tap into commonplace discursive modes, both in the realms of the everyday and the literary: annotation and the epistolary.

### **Marginal and Remarkable Book Users**

The attitudes to marginalia and annotations in printed books have changed radically over the centuries. In the Middle Ages, it was accepted and even expected that scholars should comment on what they read, and thus interact with the text (and its subsequent readers). In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, marginal comments could even appear in the printed form, beside the primary text, and offer dogmatically correct instructions on the right way of understanding it. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, marginalia were explicitly

regarded as a means of literary communication, at least when written by respected authors (Fajkovic and Björneborn 902–903; Jackson 155–65). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the advent of public libraries, marginalia were increasingly frowned upon as the destruction of institutionally owned property. This also marks the birth of the “cult of the clean book”: “the desire to preserve our textual heritage for those who come after us” (Sherman 157), without removals or additions. Since then marginalia have existed, literally and metaphorically, in the margins of book culture and readership, ruled (out) by institutional and ethical restrictions. It is forbidden but commonly practiced, at least in student and university libraries.

The annotation practice used in *S.* is introduced on the half-title page of *Ship of Theseus*. Jennifer finds the volume Eric has left behind, reads a few chapters of it, pens a note for him, reads the whole book, and after a reread, writes extensive comments on the volume’s pages. Eric reacts to those comments with his own. The project thus begins as a joint text-critical or scholarly enterprise, seeking the best possible understanding of the Straka novel. However, there are also other motives and emotions involved in the seemingly earnest and objective effort. Eric urges Jennifer to reread the novel so that she might see it as something beyond escapist adventure fiction. He even arrogantly emphasizes his graduate-student position against her undergrad status, and she, in turn, points out a detail that he has missed in the book. The dual effort of Eric and Jen is therefore also, from the outset, a critical, textual, or scholarly duelling, a competition complete with intimate or at least romantic overtones.

In the context of annotation, Eric’s initial reaction to Jennifer’s notes strikes one as odd. Eric bursts out on the half-title page: “I can’t believe you wrote all over my book.” His attitude is that of a meticulous book lover, except that the book he

calls his own actually *is* the property of a public library. By stealing the book, he has violated the library policies more seriously than Jennifer who merely fails to keep the tome clean. On the other hand, Eric is, before the Jennifer affair and with the exception of his initial pencilled note designed to secure the book's location, what H. J. Jackson calls a "type B reader" (a bibliophile who abstains from annotating), whereas Jennifer clearly is an "A type" (an avid annotator) (Jackson 234–48).

The two annotators' competitiveness gradually gives way to shared toil toward solving the novel's (and its author's) riddles. The self-centered "I" slips into the self-giving "we" in Jennifer's entry on the opposite side of the half-title page. The two interlocutors linger on this "mistake" or slip of the pen for quite a while, which indicates that they are aware of the intimacy involved in the exchange and the shared material support which mediates it. Simultaneously, the give-and-take of comments starts to slide towards another mode of reciprocal writing — the epistolary.

### **Epistolarity in the Margins**

There are good reasons for considering Jennifer's and Eric's annotation in terms of letter writing. True, they only exchange three actual letters written on separate sheets of paper, but their whole discourse in the margins of *Ship of Theseus* has a definite affinity with the logic and commonplaces of epistolary communication. The medium of their communication is a codex with its affordances. The white spaces between the printed lines of text and the generous margins provide plenty of room for annotation. The volume, *Ship of Theseus*, stays put on the library shelf, if not awaiting the writers then at least available for inscriptive activities. This state of



affairs is a curious twist in the logic of written communication. Why do the two students not just meet and talk, about the novel or other things? Apart from the basic fact that if they did, we would not have the novel as it stands now, there are other important reasons in the storyworld. Expelled from college, Eric is a *persona non grata* on campus, and he even uses a false ID to gain access to the library or, even more dramatically, enters the building through a steam tunnel at night. The communicative or interactive constraint is also there for effect, to give a special flavor to their relationship. That literary liaison, after all, evolves from, and revolves around, one specific book. There are also certain, and curiously mixed, medial reasons for the use of a book as a discursive platform.

Epistolary discourse is characterized by a series of narrational and thematic commonplaces as well as some recurring motifs. The tradition of the epistolary novel also significantly relates to the development of consciousness representation in narrative fiction (see Bray; Schmid 133–88). All these features tie in with the generic formation of the novel among other discourses and media technologies of the time. Letter writing was the major means of personal telecommunication during the heyday of the epistolary novel in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The innovations in electronic communication technologies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century coincided with the decline of both letter writing and the novel-in-letters. Epistolary fiction is still published occasionally, but its generic conventions are now exposed to new media contexts, including email and various social media communication practices (Keskinen 383–84).

In Janet Gurkin Altman’s definition, epistolarity signifies “the use of the letter’s formal properties to create meaning” (4). The novel in letters employs practices and resources of actual epistolary communication: writing, mailing,

receiving, and reading letters. The narration of the epistolary novel consists entirely, or in significant part, of letters by at least one person to at least one absent receiver (Altman 165; Rousset 76–78). There are, necessarily, intervals between the exchange of letters, and therefore an epistolary narrative is essentially discontinuous, although the storyline thus generated can give an illusion of a continuum (Altman 169). The meeting of opposites permeates epistolary discourse in other ways as well. The letter can mark both separation and connection, distance and bridging, absence and presence (Altman 186–87 and *passim*). All these variables meet in the materiality of the epistle, in the letter as a physical — visible, haptic, olfactory, and audibly rustling — object in the storyworld. For the reader of a non-multimodal fictional work, those qualities are accessible by experiential analogy only (tapped into by one’s own real-life experience of the features in question).

Jennifer and Eric fulfill most of the characteristics of two-person epistolarity. They are aware of the dual function of writing: it both underlines their separateness and creates a connection between them. Jennifer suggests that they meet or use email, but Eric either does not show up or insists on keeping his “life analog” by not using the computer (5) or even a mobile phone for communication until later in the novel (115). The presence/absence dialectics works in their dynamics as well although they use the same library. When either one travels away, the lack of new notes in the margins causes yearning and worry similar to that found in epistolary fiction when there is a hiatus in incoming letters. With the duo partner gone, Jennifer keeps on writing solo (109). However, as Sara Tanderup (2017) and Alison Gibbons (2017) have suggested in their readings of *S.*,

marginalia create layering of co-present temporalities in the novel's page space, which differs from the handling of time in customary epistolarity.

The themes of friendship, seduction, and love emerge in Jennifer and Eric's discourse. Their first annotations on the half-title page of the book already include rivalry, teasing, and flirtation. Soon fondness and affection are introduced to their exchange. Jennifer seems to be the one who steers the discourse in that direction (96). Predictably, the word *love* also surfaces in their exchange: it is Eric who articulates this level of their relationship. At first, the confession of his feelings is meanderingly vague: "Seriously, I've never gotten so close to loving somebody before" (281). Jennifer's reply notices this but seems to acknowledge its performative force: "That's the first declaration of not-quite love I've ever gotten" (281). At the end of the book, Eric is more explicit and verbose in his litany of love for Jennifer: "Jen – I have to tell you – I haven't said this before but I've wanted to say + now want to say it all the time: I LOVE YOU. I love you on the page + I love in the library + in the coffee shop + in the row of the Varsity + I love you here" (423). The listed love locations become increasingly concrete so that the deictic "here" appears to signify both the page and a real-world place, both the private and the public sphere.

The theme or metaphor of love is not restricted to the marginal love affair between Jen and Eric but traverses all the textual and diegetic layers of *S*. The novel *Ship of Theseus* proper features the love story of the protagonist S. and a woman called Sola; at one point S. writes "nearly without cease just on the chance he would find her [in the margins]" (380). The fictional translator and editor, F. X. Caldeira, has fashioned a cryptic declaration of love for Straka by inserting place names into the footnotes of Chapter Ten. When the coordinates of those locations are lined up

on the so-called Eotvos Wheel (included in the loose materials of the book), the code reads, “I have loved you from the beginning, I will love you to the end.” The decoder wheel is a special device for creating a special effect, as Caldeira’s initials seem to suggest. Furthermore, in the outermost paratext of *S.*, on the slipcover enclosing *Ship of Theseus* complete with annotations and paraphernalia, the blurb ends with the statement that the whole work is “Abrams and Dorst’s love letter to the written word.”

Curiously, Jen and Eric do not pay particular attention to the materiality of their respective annotations. In the epistolary, the material minutiae are, in the absence of the sender’s physical presence, of utmost importance, and if the other person is unfamiliar, then the letter’s graphic appearance functions as the synecdoche of the stranger (Altman 19). In *S.*, the annotators’ hands and writing styles are “realistically” visible in facsimile on the book’s pages. Eric’s writing tends to be a uniform, easily readable, rational letter print in capital letters. In contrast, Jennifer writes an emotive, personal hand. When in emotional turmoil, both use large capital letters, underlining, and other typographical means to convey affect. These features are present for the actual reader, but Jen and Eric seem to take them for granted, and do not engage in graphonomic analysis.<sup>2</sup> Nor are there teardrop stains or signs of other fluids visible in the pages, or at least the writers do not notice or point them out. This also diverges from the conventions of epistolarity.

For the actual reader, however, the details of the two annotators’ inscriptions are of utmost importance in distinguishing and tracking temporal layers. Even the writing implements used encodes the discursive stratum in question. The color code may not be immediately apparent to the reader, who might try to proceed with the annotations in the default left to right, top down manner used in reading Western

writing. The code is conveniently cracked on Brian Shipman’s websites “A Beginner’s Guide to Reading ‘S.’” (2015a) and “An Intermediate Guide to Reading ‘S.’” (2015b) and used with or without documentation in research articles thereafter:

1. Pencil. Eric wrote in pencil while taking notes during his early reading(s) of *Ship of Theseus* before he met Jen.
2. Blue (Jen) and black (Eric). This is the first pass of notes between Eric and Jen after they “meet” in the margins.
3. Green (Eric) and orange (Jen). This is the second pass of comments between Eric and Jen after their relationship has deepened.
4. Purple (Jen) and red (Eric). This is the third set of comments between the two, after they have met in person.
5. Black (both Jen and Eric). These are the final set of notes and include their comments after they move to Prague.

(Shipman 2015b)

Not only do the writing implements and their colors change in the course of the two annotators’ multilayered discourse — their modes of writing also undergo mutations. Doug Dorst briefly mentions this in an interview: “the writing’s not actually the same all the way through — it changes as the characters change” (Rothman 2013). Sara Tanderup adds: “Jen’s scrawl . . . becomes more stylish and stable during the fourth and fifth read-through, while Eric’s neat writing . . . is replaced by bigger letters, a writing that appears more firm and colorful, emotional even” (2017: 156). While these variations are vague and as easily missed by the

empirical reader as by the annotators themselves, the handwriting can still be interpreted as “an expression of changing selves and a growing intimate relationship” (ibid.).

The visible presence of Jen and Eric’s writing, in all its variations and temporal strata, also relates to media archeology. Curiously, the oldest form of inscription, writing by hand, resembles more recent developments in communication technologies. That the annotators occupy the same “channel” of the book alternately bears a resemblance to the technological constraints of shortwave radio communication. That the messages form one long string of turn-taking in regressive discussion is reminiscent of email conversation. That the notes are short, quick, and potentially public, bring to mind new social media communication in the manner of Facebook and Twitter (cf. Tanderup 2016: 53; see also Mäkelä’s contribution in this forum). The (at least relative) anonymity of the interlocutors and the fact that they only meet towards the end of the narrative are in tune with online communication practices (Tanderup 2016: 53). Even the very page layout of *Ship of Theseus*, with its exceptionally wide margins, suggests webpage sidebars, both affording and inviting readers’ comments. Thus, a variety of analog and digital layers of media history are present simultaneously in *S.*, and quite literally side by side on and between the pages of *Ship of Theseus*.

The fundamental question remains: when articulating their feelings, do the characters of *S.* yield to the discursive conventions of emotional expression, or is the development of affection afforded by the epistolary form and the material medium (codex) that support it? Both may hold true. The language of emotional state customarily inclines toward predictable received formulae. However, the genre and media circumstances in *S.* emphatically place the characters’ selves in given

narrative positions in the general epistolary discourse of desire (cf. Kauffman 17–27), and urge corresponding feelings to emerge. Nevertheless, not all affordances of the medium facilitate communication, or expression of self (truthful or not), but they transpose the very mediation to a conceptual level.

### **Affordances of the Codex: Mediation and Demediation**

The affordances<sup>3</sup> of the codex, or the book object, easily appear for the proverbial common reader as unmarked or seemingly self-evident. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition, a book is:

[a] portable volume consisting of a series of written, printed, or illustrated pages bound together for ease of reading. In modern use the pages are typically printed and made of paper, and are usually trimmed to a uniform rectangular or square shape, sewn or glued together along one side to form a flat or rounded back, and encased in a protective cover. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

A book can be opened. Its bound pages can be read and turned, reread and returned. Accounts of the mechanics of reading and pre-reading activities, however, do not usually mention that books afford other uses as well. Even, or especially, a small child is knowledgeable of these affordances. Drawing and doodling on a book's pages, in the margins but also over and inside the text and thus making the pages next to illegible tend to take place in small children's everyday book use — to the bibliophile's horror. Marginalia has also, of course, been a pastime of the best readers over the centuries, as noted above. The respected scholarly annotations and

marginalia mediate more than the plain book, adding value to the volume in question.

*Ship of Theseus* has exceptionally generous margins, which turns out to be convenient for the two annotators. There is plenty of room to write on, although at some points the commentary spreads between the lines, in different hands, in multiple colors, and complete with arrows, vertical lines, asterisks, square brackets, and doodles. At its extreme, this results in annotation-filled margins (for instance, on the double page spread of 328–29).

This state of affairs relates to two intertwined phenomena: the paradox of the Ship of Theseus and demediation. Plutarch's *Lives* presents the classic version of the Theseus puzzle:

The ship on which Theseus sailed with the youths and returned in safety, the thirty-oared galley, was preserved by the Athenians down to the time of Demetrius Phalereus. They took away the old timbers from time to time, and put new and sound ones in their places, so that the vessel became a standing illustration for the philosophers in the mooted question of growth, some declaring that it remained the same, others that it was not the same vessel.

(49)

The philosophical problem staged by Plutarch's parable is whether, if all the constituents of an object are replaced, it is still the same object. How much can be taken out of an entity before it loses its identity?

The novel *S.* presents the opposite of this problem. In view of its abundant marginalia and paraphernalia, the novel could be interpreted as asking: how much



can be *added* to a work before it becomes fundamentally different or other? How many annotations, loose-leaf materials, and other added texts can the novel absorb without making a leap from quantity to quality, from one category to another? What happens to mediation or narrative selves in this transition process? What is actually mediated when a novel turns into a scrapbook or a document folder?

At least one version of Plutarch's philosophical riddle can be found in the storyworld of *Ship of Theseus*, explicitly linking the changes, omissions, and replacements of drawn images of a ship in a book to the book object per se, complete with "marginal notes cataloguing the changes" (291).<sup>4</sup> The protagonist S. wonders, "Are they the same ship? Intuition tells him they are, though perhaps he is being influenced by the fact that the pages are all held together within the same covers" (292). By extension, in *S. the novel*, the pages, both those fastened together to hinge at one side and the loose ones, are predictably interpreted as belonging to one and same work. Another question is how the loose pieces of paper and cardboard are read, or apprehended, as material objects. At least on some level, all these objects make the act of reading difficult. The loose paraphernalia tend to fall from their original and presumably significant places, and the reader must fasten them with paperclips, make notes of their locations, consult a webpage devoted to the problem, or in some other way deal with the situation. Furthermore, some material, such as the map drawn on a soft-tissue napkin, is ephemeral and requires special care to keep it intact.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, the very care and nuisance that the novel's paraphernalia require foreground their importance, not only in relation to the codex as a medium but also to the characters who, in the storyworld, insert the objects inside the book. From the viewpoint of the characters, the inserts are part of their epistolary

communication, and therefore the location of each object and the moment when it is supposed to be placed there are crucial. The artifacts thus accumulated between the covers of *Ship of Theseus* also form an archive that is not merely a documentation of the characters' communicative attachments but, taken as a whole, also a dramatization of the workings of the mind, memory, and thinking. In that sense, the archive serves as a database of how each of the fictional characters' cognition gathers, classifies, and processes data from various media sources and their modalities.

The same archiving process also means that, in *S.*, non-narrative media, such as maps, photographs, and visiting cards, are narrativized when placed inside a tome containing a novel and marginal epistolary discourse. However, the situation is even more complicated. Due to the multilayeredness and multi-temporality of Jen and Eric's discourse, each insert has a bearing on all discursive strata, not just on its "correct" one (that is, the point in story-time when the object was put in its place).

Another occurrence of multilayeredness in *Ship of Theseus* and, according to critic Sara Tanderup (2016, 2017), in *S.*, is palimpsest. The character *S.*, who is stuck in the mythical Winter City and in a state between life and death, is described as engaging in manic palimpsestic writing:

the newspapers are the medium on which *S.* writes. He has filled thousands of pages, writing in the thin white spaces between lines of type, superimposing his words over the printed ones when he runs out of margin. Palimpsests atop palimpsests. (379)

Palimpsest means, in textual studies, a “parchment or other writing surface on which the original text has been effaced or partially erased, and then overwritten by another; a manuscript in which later writing has been superimposed on earlier (effaced) writing” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). What *S.* does above could indeed be dubbed a palimpsest, although he does not remove any text but merely overwrites it, for the lack of another surface, and thus presumably makes it next to illegible.

The original reasons for using actual palimpsests were economical and practical; the expensive and/or scarce writing surface was reused by scraping off the less important text. There was, thus, no intent of variation or rewriting behind those acts. In this original sense, it would be inaccurate to state that “the idea of the palimpsest certainly applies well to the concept as well as the visual design and narrative structure of *S.*” on the basis that its numerous constitutive textual layers “are all visible at the surface of the text” (Tanderup 2017: 152). That all those layers are openly exposed to the reader of *S.*, in fact makes the whole *more difficult* to grasp than it would have been in the case of actual palimpsests, with the older strata partly or totally erased and the amount of information reduced to the most recent and therefore clearest inscription. The annotation-filled double page spread of 328–29 is brimming with multi-temporal information. It is, however, important to notice that the inscriptions never hinderingly superimpose or overwrite either the original type or the previous annotations. This tendency applies to all marginalia in *S.*, so to call it palimpsestic is not accurate.

There are alternative ways of conceptualizing the archival material in *S.* At the bottom of page 76 Jen and Eric comment on the accumulation of a textual archive in the margins at two time levels. The young Eric had underlined, in pencil,

the insignificant-seeming detail “boarded up against gazes and projectiles,” which prompts Jen to start the discussion during the first passing of notes (her pen being blue, his black). She likens the layers of a subject’s past phases to “a scrapbook of all your younger selves,” but he emphasizes their (at least subliminal) presence in him. During the second round of comments, it is Eric (in green) who includes Jen in the scope of amassing data: “This is a scrapbook of you + me, too.” Jen (in green) takes the cue of the archival metaphor by introducing the idea of “permanent record” and the problem of material deterioration. This extended metaphor forms what Dorrit Cohn (37–44) calls a psycho-analogy, a metaphorical expression of a character’s interiority, such as consciousness, memory, and thought processes. Jen and Eric’s case differs from Cohn’s classic examples in that it is not a matter of individual but of collective or mutual interiority. The psyche (or, rather, the cognitive process), as shown in the margins, is an entity brought into existence and thus shared by the two characters. This could be called a social mind (cf. Palmer) at its minimum, but admittedly there are other agents at play here as well. The dialogue between Jen and Eric incorporates Straka’s fiction and its characters, commentary by Caldeira and other scholars, and inserts by various writers.<sup>6</sup>

The idea of an archive is productive in reading *S.*, not only as a possible psycho-analogy for its characters’ selves but also as an epitome of the tome itself. Records of which archives typically consist are usually unique and unpublished. Libraries, in contrast, mostly collect material that exists in identical copies, such as books and other printed matter. In the storyworld of *S.*, Eric and Jen’s copy of *Ship of Theseus* appears as a personal archival record located in a library, a mass-reproduced book made unique by various means. However, in the actual world, of course, *S.*, with *Ship of Theseus* inside it, is an extraordinary work but still a trade

book, with the initial print run of 200,000 (by definition identical) copies. *S.* thus oscillates between the personal and public, unique and ubiquitous, archive and library — and between the readable and unreadable. The unreadability or rather illegibility of *S.* as an archival object, though, raises further questions about its status as a codex.

The predicament of reading *S.* derives from its being a “treated” book object, with its affordances utilized to such a degree that the data overkill hinders the communicative functioning of the medium, at least on the linguistic level. Neither the concept of the palimpsest nor the archive fully account for the specific illegibility of *S.* The book object *S.* hosts so many foreign bodies and surplus inscriptions, in full color and a variety of textures, shapes, and sizes, that the reader may merely end up admiring them, leafing through the volume without actually *reading* anything. This phenomenon relates to *demediation* as theorized by Garrett Stewart, albeit with a difference, since he coined the concept specifically in connection with book art as visual art. In Stewart’s definition, demediation happens when an original text is “tampered with” and at least partly “detexted” so that “a transmissible text or image is blocked by the obtruded fact of its own neutralized medium” (413; italics omitted). In visual art, demediated books are not for reading but for viewing and conceptual contemplation. This does not fully apply to *S.* If demediation goes against the very prerequisite of narrative or narrativity because the mediating medium is made dysfunctional, halting transmission or communication, *S.* is still serviceable in these respects, although not quite smoothly. In demediated books, there may not be pages to turn, and if there are, the volume is often shut tight inside a glass display case. In *S.*, there are almost *too many* pages or loose leaves or marginal notes to turn and inspect.

Not all books, then, are exactly good for reading. With the printed text illegible for various reasons, a book's page will not deliver the information necessary for any verbal narrative to exist, or, as in *S.*, it will give too rich a variety of stimuli. Could there be *narrative demediation*? Stewart's use of "demediation" strictly relates to visual arts, but in my use the concept refers to similar techniques found in literature as well. There are a number of well-known works that treat, alter, or manipulate the book form of existing works in narrative fiction; for instance, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* (1970/2008) by Tom Phillips or *Tree of Codes* (2010) by Jonathan Safran Foer.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, narrative demediation points to the possible story-like qualities of the demediated book object itself, that is, to the particular ways in which it is made dysfunctional and what those ways signify, conventionally or culturally. In the case of *Tree of Codes*, the die-cut book object may evoke a tactile "reading" of the work, draw attention to its material fragility along with that of the characters' lives, and urge us to solve the interpretive riddle of text and its holes brought about by the treated medium. In *S.*, the overloaded textual apparatus may function as an apt dramatization of minds interacting in a saturated information universe where modes of writing may, for the reader, eventually turn into visually pleasing but semantically demanding graphic entities to be fully accounted for.

Thus, narrating, mediating, and interpreting minds abound within and around a book object in Abrams and Dorst's experimental novel *S.* Efforts to make sense and communicate are foregrounded in various ways in *S.*, both in *Ship of Theseus* and in its two readers' annotations and insertions. The two readers' acts simultaneously relate to mundane discursive practices and to traditional literary forms —

marginalia and epistolarity — that both afford and generate their romantic liaison. The book object, which carries the text of the novel-within-a-novel, the readers' multilayered markings, and paraphernalia, forms an archive dramatizing the workings of memory, thought, and emotion. That archive also demonstrates how the characters collect, organize, and process data from a variety of media sources.

The actual reader facing the multimodal cornucopia of *S.* may find the task of fully going through it exasperating. The book as a medium is thus on the verge of becoming dysfunctional, ceasing to communicate. Modifying Garrett Stewart, I call that narrative demediation. The very act of demediating, however, signifies conceptually, by its very presence, as conceptual art customarily does. In the case of *S.*, it conceptualizes textual communication and minds in interaction even to a degree of confusion, not-reading, or veritable library silence in reception, created by the information-theory noise of type-, annotation- and paraphernalia-filled pages — amid selves and shelves.

### **Works Cited**

- Abrams, J.J. and Doug Dorst. 2013. *S.* New York: Mulholland Books.
- Adler, Mortimer J. 1940. *How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education.* New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Altman, Janet Gurkin. 1982. *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Bray, Joe. 2003. *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness.* New York: Routledge.
- Cohn, Dorrit. 1983. *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Contzen, Eva von. 2018. "Experience, Affect, and Literary Lists." *Partial Answers* 16/2: 315–27.
- Fajkovic, Muhamed, and Lennart Björneborn. 2014. "Marginalia as Message: Affordances for Reader-to-Reader Communication." *Journal of Documentation* 70/5: 902–26.
- Gibbons, Alison. 2012a. *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature*. London: Routledge.
- , 2012b. "Multimodal Literature and Experimentation." In *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, ed. Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons, and Brian McHale. New York: Routledge, pp. 420–34.
- , 2017. "Reading *S.* across Media: Transmedia Storyworlds, Multimodal Fiction, and Real Readers." *Narrative* 25/3: 320–40.
- Jackson, H. J. 2002. *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Kauffman, Linda S. 1988. *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Keskinen, Mikko. 2004. "E-pistolary and E-loquence: Sylvia Brownrigg's *The Metaphysical Touch* as a Novel of Letters and Voices in the Age of E-Mail Communication." *Critique* 45/4: 383–404.
- Norman, Donald. 1988. *The Design of Everyday Things*. New York: Basic Books.
- Orgel, Stephen. 2015. *The Reader in the Book: A Study of Spaces and Traces*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Palmer, Alan. 2010. *Social Minds in the Novel*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.



- Plutarch. 1914. *Lives*, Vol. I: *Theseus and Romulus. Lycurgus and Numa. Solon and Publicola*. Trans. Bernadotte Perrin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Richardson, Brian. 2006. *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Rothman, Joshua. 2013. "The Story of 'S': Talking With J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst." *The New Yorker* November 23.  
<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-story-of-s-talking-with-j-j-abrams-and-doug-dorst> (October 5, 2017).
- Rousset, Jean. 1962. *Forme et signification: Essai sur les structures littéraires de Corneille à Claudel*. Paris: Librairie Corti.
- Schmid, Wolf. 2017. *Mentale Ereignisse: Bewusstseinsveränderungen in europäischen Erzählwerken vom Mittelalter bis zur Moderne*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Sherman, William H. 2008. *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Shipman, Brian. 2015a. "A Beginner's Guide to Reading 'S'" (January 10).  
<https://whoisstraka.wordpress.com/the-ship-of-theseus-by-v-m-straka-a-beginners-guide-to-reading-s/> (October 1, 2017)
- . 2015b. "An Intermediate Guide to Reading 'S' – by J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst." (May 23). <https://whoisstraka.wordpress.com/2015/05/23/an-intermediate-guide-to-reading-s-by-j-j-abrams-and-doug-dorst/> (October 1, 2017).
- Stewart, Garrett. 2010. "Bookwork as Demediation." *Critical Inquiry* 36/3: 410–57.

Tanderup, Sara. 2016. "Nostalgic Experiments: Memory in Anne Carson's *Nox* and Doug Dorst and J.J. Abrams' *S.*" *Image [&] Narrative* 17/3: 46–56.

-----, 2017. "'A scrapbook of you + me': Intermediality and Bookish Nostalgia in J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst's *S.*" *Orbis Litterarum* 72/2: 147–78.

Vries, Emma de, and Yra van Dijk. 2018. "'Book for Loan': *S.* as Paradox of Media Change." In *Book Presence in a Digital Age*, ed. Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, Kári Driscoll, and Jessica Pressman. New York: Bloomsbury, pp. 127–44.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Even librarians themselves scribble cataloguing data, shelving signatures and other information inside the covers of books. When asked provocatively why librarians write in books, a librarian answered, 'Where shall we write otherwise? Here it stays in the book'" (Fajkovic and Björneborn 914).

<sup>2</sup> The real reader may even link the writing styles to gender stereotypes: "There is the neat capitalized writing of a man . . . and the feminine scrawl of a young woman" (Tanderup 2016: 51); "the lower-case scrawl of a girl" (Tanderup 2017: 151).

<sup>3</sup> The term "affordance" is perception psychologist James J. Gibson's coinage from 1966 and refers to the possibilities of environment from the viewpoint of an individual. The concept has been later adapted to various disciplines, including intermedial studies and literary criticism; for a recent account of these developments and applications, see von Contzen 324–26. I use the concept in the design sense, as defined by Donald Norman: "a relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determine just how the object could possibly be used" (Norman 9). I therefore focus on the book object and its possible treatment in human hands.

<sup>4</sup> For other readings of this passage and its relation to *S.*, see Tanderup 2017: 169–72; and de Vries and van Dijk.

---

<sup>5</sup> The treatment of *S.* in actual libraries adds another complication to reading. The paraphernalia are usually kept separately at the library and can be accessed upon request only, or are gathered in a pocket attached to the book (these solutions are employed, for instance, in the City libraries of Turku, Stockholm, and Berlin). In both cases, the intended effect of encountering the objects as the reading progresses is cancelled or at least hindered. In library context, the same problem also applies to other archival or hybrid novels containing loose and/or fragile objects.

<sup>6</sup> The process by no means stays within the confines of the book but continues in the external world as well, in the real reader's engagement with transmedia (Tanderup 2017: 165–69; Gibbons 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Narrative demediation is not to be confused with denarration, which means, in Brian Richardson's definition, "a kind of negative narration in which a narrator denies significant aspects of his or her narrative that had earlier been presented as given" (87). The negation or abolishment of narration thus happens verbally, on the level of discourse, in denarration, not on the level of the medial support, as in demediation.