

## **Narrative in the Contemporary Novel – Some Reconceptualisations**

### **Abstract:**

This paper discusses two contemporary novels from a narratological perspective. *The Unfortunates* by B.S. Johnson and *S.* by J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst demonstrate inapplicability of narrative most commonly theorised as a representation of events. Instead, due to their unconventional usage of typography, multimodality and/or transmediality, they provoke daring attempts at reconceptualisations of this fundamental concept of modern narrative theory and novel studies. In addition, the two novels exemplify an increasingly common trend in contemporary fiction of undermining the traditional understanding of the novel as a monomodal (exclusively verbal) work and self-contained, printed entity.

**Keywords:** narrative, multimodality, transmediality, typography, novel, experimentation, narratology, Johnson, Abrams, Dorst

### **Narrative and its many turns**

Between the 1980s<sup>1</sup> and the turn of the century narrative theory took many turns which, eventually, led to its expanding across all major humanistic disciplines. Essentially, it transitioned from the structuralist studies of verbal literature to multidisciplinary projects across the social sciences. Importantly, its core remained roughly unchanged and could be traced back to the 1960s: narratology (focusing on intense research into the universal grammar of all narratives), story grammars (engaged with the so-called narrative cognition and narrative reception) and story structures in sociolinguistic contexts (mainly Labovian analyses of everyday, conversational, “natural” narratives)<sup>2</sup>. At the turn of the millennium, there was a consensus that the narrative theory of the previous two-three decades was in a need of radical change. This prompted the most recent

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<sup>1</sup> The story goes that the starting point for the first “narrative turn” occurred in 1980 and 1981 with the special editions of *Critical Inquiry* about narrative (see Anna de Fina and Alexandra Georgakopoulou, *Analyzing Narrative. Discourse and Sociolinguistic Perspectives*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2012, p. 21)

<sup>2</sup> See de Fina and Georgakopoulou, ch. 1-ch. 2; James Phelan, “Narrative Theory, 1966-2006: A Narrative”, in: R. Scholes, J. Phelan, R. Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, fortieth anniversary edition, revised and expanded, New York: Oxford UP 2006, pp. 283-336; *Poetics Today* 2003, vol. 24, no. 3, an issue on “Theory and History of Narrative”.

of the turns, from the so-called classical to post-classical narrative theory, and effectively saw a number of reconceptualisations regarding narrative theory<sup>3</sup>. However, against the trend, the very concept of narrative seems to have stood the test of time. As Marie-Ryan claims in her 2007 article, its understanding rests on the same premises: event/s and its/their representation<sup>4</sup>. To prove her point she quotes verbatim not only Gerard Genette, Gerald Prince and H. Porter Abbott but also Paul Ricoeur, Peter Brooks and others. Her arguments related to narrative and event include such concepts as temporality, causality (sequentiality), teleology and representationality, being treated as indispensable, albeit conditional, components of the conceptualisations<sup>5</sup>. However, along with their inherent conditions, the concepts of narrative as a representation of events and of event as a change of state or form of behaviour appear relatively inapplicable when investigating contemporary forms of narrative fiction, even ones that do not seem to be considered “experimental”.

In this article I will discuss two novels that pose numerous theoretical challenges, especially in terms of narrative. In two case studies I demonstrate that the narrativity of these novels is in fact founded on alternative premises, i.e. not event-dependent. Effectively, I propose to recalibrate the denotation of the term to account for phenomena found, firstly, in a 1969 classic of experimental literature, B.S. Johnson’s *The Unfortunates* and, secondly, in the 2013 multimodal novel *S* by J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst. Specifically, the former is a case of the annulment of narrative as event-representation and the latter of the complexity of event-representation.

It can be posited that both of these works exemplify an alternative approach to the novel, especially in terms of its physical, technological dimension as a bound, printed, paper object whose only substantiality is constituted verbally. That which was previously in the domain of the experimental in fiction has recently entered into a stage of popular literature. To give some examples, the typography of *The Unfortunates* has been emulated in what nowadays is called “shuffle literature” and hyperfiction (although a 1987 novel by Michael Joyce, *afternoon, a story*, originally disseminated on diskette, is usually considered as the first example of digital hyperfiction)<sup>6</sup>. When it comes to multimodality<sup>7</sup>, it is impossible to overlook Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767)

<sup>3</sup> See *Postclassical Narratology. Approaches and Analyses*, ed. M. Fludernik and J. Alber, Columbus: The Ohio State UP 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, “Toward a Definition of Narrative”, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. D. Herman, Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2007, pp. 22–35.

<sup>5</sup> See Peter Hühn, “Event and Eventfulness”, in: *the living handbook of narratology*, ed. P. Hühn et al., Hamburg: Hamburg University. URL: <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/event-and-eventfulness> [accessed 11 May 2018].

<sup>6</sup> On hyperfiction see: George P. Landow, *Hypertext. The Convergence of Contemporary Theory and Technology*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1992; *Analyzing Digital Fiction*, ed. A. Bell, A. Ennsin, H.C. Rustad, New York and London: Routledge, 2014; Astrid Ennsin, *Canonizing Hypertext*, London and New York: Continuum 2007, Maria Woźniakiewicz-Dziadosz, *Hiperpowieść czyli sieć w powieści*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS 2012.

<sup>7</sup> On multimodality see: Alison Gibbons, *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature*, London and New York: Routledge 2012; *New Perspectives on Narrative and Multimodality*, ed. R. Page, London and New York: Routledge 2010; Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Multimodal Discourse*, London: Arnold 2001.

as the forerunner of Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), Steve Tamasula's *VAS* (2002), Steven Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts* (2007), or Lance Olsen's *Theories of Forgetting* (2014). These works all comprise a heterogeneous collection of narrative, criticism, advertising, annotations, and untypical typography. Another exceptional work is *Woman's World* (2005) by Graham Rawle, a so-called collage novel. However, it was Marisha Pessl's *Night Film* (2013), combining a "traditionally" formatted thriller with a collection of web resources to augment the reading process, that took the public by storm and became the *New York Times* bestseller in the year of its release<sup>8</sup>. My contention is that the contemporary narrative theory, even in its postclassical version, is incapable of theorising typographically challenging and/or multimodal and transmedial novels. In what follows I offer a reconceptualisation of narrative so as to adjust it to the observed phenomena.

## Case studies

### 1. The unfortunate narrative

Published in 1969, *The Unfortunates* by B.S. Johnson<sup>9</sup> consists of twenty-seven unbound chapters, with only the first and the last marked as "First" and "Last", respectively. The chapters, which we may also call lexias or textrons, vary in length from just seven lines to twelve pages; they usually comprise separate sections and the sections themselves are riddled with blank spaces. The unbound chapters can be read in any order possible and preferred (fig. 1)<sup>10</sup>.

The aleatory typographic construction of the novel excludes any possibility of considering one chapter more important than the other. With the exception of the first and last ones, the author fails to provide a fixed progression of lexias and cedes his authority in constituting this progression to readers<sup>11</sup>. This is unprecedented as authors typically arrange a chapter sequence in a very specific and singular order. In *The Unfortunates*, however, there is no one sequence and the meaning derived from any pre-imposed arrangement is inexistent. This authorial gesture "frees" the chapters at the global level

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2013/09/08/hardcover-fiction/> [accessed 11 August 2018].

<sup>9</sup> All quotes from B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates*, with an introduction by J. Coe, New York: New Directions 2008.

<sup>10</sup> More on *The Unfortunates* and its construction in Greg Buchanan, "Like loose leaves in the wind': Effacement and Characterisation in B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* and Marc Saporta's *Composition No. 1*", in: B.S. Johnson and the Post-war Literature. *Possibilities of the Avant-garde*, ed. J. Jordan and M. Ryle, Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan 2014, pp. 54–70; Sebastian Jenner, "B.S. Johnson and the Aleatoric Novel", in: B.S. Johnson and the Post-war Literature. *Possibilities of the Avant-garde*, ed. J. Jordan and M. Ryle, Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan 2014, pp. 71–86; Julia Jordan, "For Recuperation': Elegy, Form, and the Aleatory in B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*", *Textual Practice* 2014, vol. 28, no. 5, pp. 745–776, Frank Kermode, "Retripotent", *LRB* 2004, vol. 25, no. 15, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n15/frank-kermode/retripotent> [accessed 20 January 2018]; Jessica Norledge, "Thinking Outside of the Box: A Text World Theory Response to the Interactivity of B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*", *Innervate* 2012, vol. 4 pp. 51–61; Philip Tew, "(Re)-acknowledging B.S. Johnson's Radical Realism, or Re-publishing *The Unfortunates*", *Critical Survey* 2001, vol. 13, no. 1 <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.000062ja2b20.han.uwm.edu.pl/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=e3ae2b78-0f2c-402a-b66a911be0d8c035%40sessionmgr4010&bdata=Jmxhbm9cGwmc202T1laG9zdC1saXZl#AN=5026878&db=a9h> [accessed 15 January 2018].

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Jenner, op. cit., p. 72.

from the shackles of paradigmatic eventfulness, cause-and-event logic and incrementally linear time. Therefore, for these rudimentary coordinates readers cannot rely on the author anymore; with no authorial and authoritative arrangement, the random chapters are all equally significant and their reader-made order arbitrary.

The arbitrary and random arrangement of the chapters leads to the collapse of narrative at the global level of the text. Without the necessity to fulfil a role in an authorially prescribed position, determined by the laws of teleology, temporality or causality, the lexias can be constantly, if not infinitely, recontextualised. Therefore, there is no narrative defined as a representation of events in a sequence: the representation is not one but multiple. Furthermore, there is no way to determine which chapter is more significant for the discourse than the others (i.e. as an exposition or climax). All of them are functionally equal, whatever their length and theme.



Fig. 1

The violation of narrative vitiates the division of narrative material into story and discourse. In Johnson's novel there is no solid or stable narrative since the discourse undergoes modification every time the readers take up the book in their hands, shuffle the sections and start to read. As well as that, it is impossible to argue for a single, unambiguous and self-consistent story to be extrapolated or inferred from the discourse. The readers encounter a series of more or less diverse and frequently contradictory

versions of the story due to insufficient and incomplete temporal markers<sup>12</sup>. Kaye Mitchell is right to claim that “we can’t talk of the ‘order of sequence’ being disrupted in *The Unfortunates*, because there is no originating order of sequence from which the ‘new’ readings can differ, only a (finite but multiple) number of possible orders of sequence”<sup>13</sup>.

Next to the story-discourse distinction being compromised, the duality of the narrated (comprising the events) and the narrating (consisting in the act of telling) exhibits an unusual set of properties. Specifically, many sections are narrated exclusively in simultaneous narration (present tense), as when Johnson arrives at the railway station, goes to a restaurant, writes a football match report or visits a marketplace; others are subsequent narrations (past tense) whose anterior status is, however, continually undermined on account of the ubiquitous present-tense intrusions, such as “I remember”, “I think”, “I forget”. The diegetic conundrums cause the duality of the narrated and the narrating to be unstable and untenable. One of the most important consequences of this phenomenon is the impossibility of accurately establishing the dominant position of the temporal orientation centre. An investigation into the lower levels of the textual organisation seems necessary.

The lower level of the textual organisation is chiefly constituted by sentences. When it comes to the sentences, it has already been mentioned that they are disrupted typographically with blank spaces. These are critical for the semantics of the novel in general and of the chapters in particular. For one, the chapters’ sections are divided by gaps of varying size, as are the sections’ sentences. Importantly, next to standard spacing between sentences and sections, which separates following parts of the text, some spacing is of specific functionality. The “Last” section is a good case in point.

The spaces, or gaps, are another typographic disruption tool in *The Unfortunates*. They substantially disrupt the narration but in a functionally different way from the loose chapters. One reason for the difference is that the chapters are offered individually for the readers to assemble and read, whilst the sections are preorganised in a concrete and unchangeable fashion. Secondly, as opposed to the chapters constituting predominantly physical disruption, the sections’ interruptions are explicitly visual as much as verbal and narrative. As a result, the novel’s narrative is violated typographically at both textual levels: globally and locally.

Finally, the narration itself offers some cues in determining the temporal orientation centre in the novel. Consider the following excerpt:

Sign to Castle Boulevard, yes, that’s right, I remember now, they call streets boulevards in this city, some streets, that is, the university is on another of them, University Boulevard, logically. And yes, there is a castle here, of course, of a kind, there, up on its stump of rock, sandstone,

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<sup>12</sup> See Brian Richardson, “Beyond Story and Discourse”, in: *Narrative Dynamics*, ed. B. Richardson, Columbus: The Ohio State University Press 2002, pp. 48–49.

<sup>13</sup> Kaye Mitchell “*The Unfortunates*: Hypertext, Linearity and the Act of Reading”, in: *Rereading B. S. Johnson*, ed. P. Tew and G. White, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan 2007, p. 53.

as I remember, pale yellow, friable, the pub at its foot with some rooms carved out of the solid rock, it is that soft, and other caves, dwellings which were used comparatively recently, until the early 1800's, did Tony tell me, he had a great mind for such historical trivia, is that the word, no, nor is detail, trivia to me perhaps, to him important, which I doubt [...]

Long, looping sentences punctuated only by commas; clause piled upon clause; qualification after qualification; and signs of orality e.g. repetitions, colloquial expressions. The section seems as if it has exploded from within: its sentences' subjects are not followed by verbs, which are not followed by objects. Instead, extraneous material is infinitely added which leads to substantial overload. Also, the number of "additional" elements gives an impression of the section of being incomplete, unfinished, or even extemporised. Indeed, the narrator intrudes upon his narration, butts in with a sudden revelation, interrupts his thoughts; the narrator, in short, goes to great pains to pass himself off as speaking spontaneously and simultaneously. As a result, the temporal orientation centre in the novel is located in the now.

At the same time very little is happening, and the narration slows down almost to a halt as there are no changes of state except a state of what is really being remembered. This frequent phenomenon, however, is not a typical description of a memory. It has an explicitly processual and dynamic quality that sanctions its status as some narrative. In this narrative, one constituent event is that of remembering a particular memory or an active attempt at recollecting it. Yet that event is treated with extraordinary meticulousness. Consequently, its narrative dynamism originates not in transformations of immediate states of situation or forms of behaviour but in the ensuing recollection and in the subtleties of the narratorial voice: phrasing, tone and rhythm (mostly anapaests and iambs).

To reiterate, the traditionally conceptualised narrative as a representation of events fails to yield much productive conclusion in *The Unfortunates*, although it is quite impossible to argue for the novel as completely non-narrative. Instead, in Johnson's work, narrativity is generated by typographically and narrationally. In other words, the novel's construction as a physical object is characterised by the unbound lexias the readers arrange in an individual and aleatoric way generating a unique and irreproducible event sequence. This environment diminishes the role of events renders them "simple" elements in a play that can be infinitely continued. As a result, the typography undermines the novel's narrative both at the global and the lower level. One of the narratologically pertinent consequences of this double undermining is the collapse of the division of narrative material into discourse and story; the former is put to a variety of different versions while the latter is irretrievable and self-exclusive. In stark contrast to Ryan's opinion, *The Unfortunates* makes it impossible for the definition of narrativity to be based solely on story<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> See Ryan, op. cit..

A clue as to what might become an alternative basis has already been suggested in the analysis of the sentence structure of the novel. I have mentioned the way the narrator recollects the past and recounts the present. His principle features are orality, spontaneity, and simultaneity. Therefore, the narrativity is generated not by the narrated but by the narrating, as the act of the narrator's active and dynamic telling of his memories and experiences. There is no, or little, need of strict temporality, logical incrementality or unidirectional teleology as the narrator's consciousness has no need of either. Once conceptualised as an expression or representation of consciousness, the narrative finds a stable point of reference as all the gaps and randomly arranged chapters serve as the portrayal of a mind in a process of remembering, and mourning, a dead friend.

## 2. The disparate narrative

Published on October 29, 2013, *S.* was conceived by J. J. Abrams and written by Doug Dorst<sup>15</sup>. In a cardboard box we find a novel that bears the title *Ship of Theseus* by V. M. Straka. It looks like an old library copy, with pages covered with handwritten annotations and with various artefacts such as postcards, letters, and facsimiles of documents included in the book. The function of the heterogeneous and multimodal material is, at first glance, to enhance the ontological illusion; the readers might be under impression that they are reading a novel whose other readers actually turn out to be overzealous fans of its author, and who filled up the margins with their notes (fig. 2).

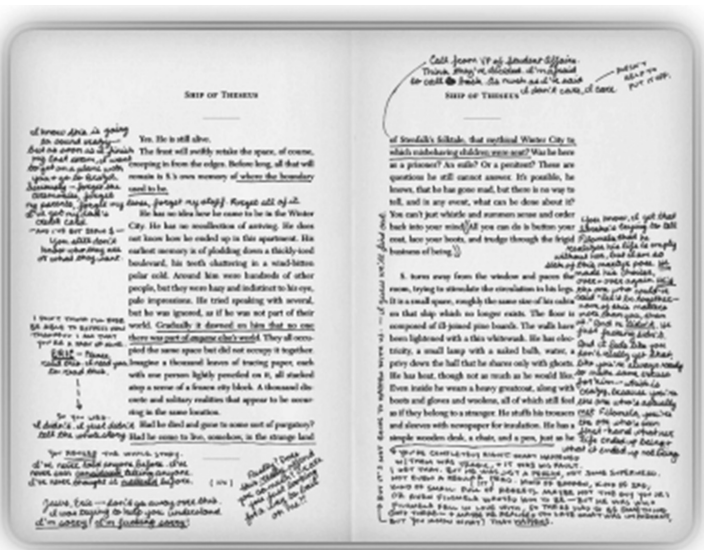
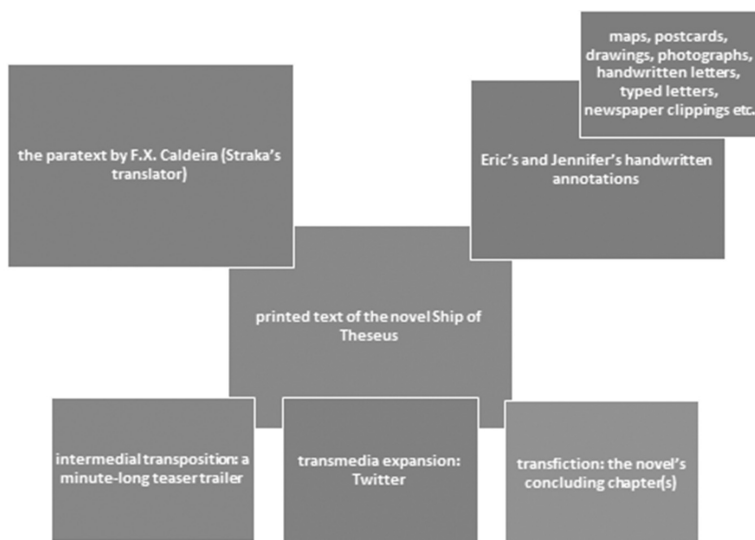


Fig. 2

<sup>15</sup> J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst, *S.*, np.: Mulholland Books 2013.

The handwritten annotations belong to two specific readers: Eric Husch, a doctoral candidate whose thesis focuses on Straka, and Jennifer Heyward, an undergraduate literature major. Jen finds Eric's copy in a library and reads it adding notes to his pencilled note; thus begins a "dialogue" between the two readers. However, the marginalia are in different colours; as one scholar explicates: "The earliest annotations are made by Eric in faint gray pencil and apparently date back to his reading of the book as a youth. The first time that he and Jen read through the text together, Jen's notes are written in blue and Eric's are in black; the second time, Jen's are orange and Eric's green; the third time, Jen's are purple and Eric's are red, and the fourth time, both are in black"<sup>16</sup>. In fact, the handwritten "dialogues" function as peculiar reading testimonies, since Eric and Jen discuss the content of the novel with a view to expressing their admiration and deciphering its coded messages, and exchanging more or less personal messages, for example the one concerning Eric's suspension from school. However, there is one more reading testimony, the translator's: F.X. Caldeira edited *Ship of Theseus* and supplemented the tenth, final, otherwise missing chapter. In contradiction to Eric and Jen's dialogue, Caldeira "monologises" about Straka's novel by paratextual means: the "Translator's note" and footnotes. As a result, the "standard" novel of *Ship of Theseus* becomes enmeshed in a complex net of Caldeira's, Eric's and Jen's annotations. Alison Gibbons in her recent article on *S.* provides a visual representation of the layered construction of the novel with the caveat that Caldeira's level, for whatever reasons, has been overlooked<sup>17</sup>.



<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Alison Gibbons, "Reading *S.* across Media: Transmedia Storyworlds, Multimodal Fiction, and Real Readers", *Narrative* 2017, vol. 25, no. 3, p. 325.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326.



Clearly, the narrative of *S.* is diegetically complex. This complexity is generated, firstly, by the text by Caldeira, included in the printed novel and forming the first layer of the reading testimonies. Secondly, there are four layers constructed by Eric's and Jennifer's handwritten annotations relating to the visual, spatial logic of the printed page. In addition, the novel *S.*, not the novel *Ship of Theseus*, comes to incorporate multimodal material: the printed and the visual substances. The other material is of various modal statuses as well: postcards, letters, photographs, Xeroxed documents, all belonging to the layer of Eric and Jen. This semiotic variety further complicates the fictional reality: it comprises the narrative of *S.*, the (secret) narrative of Caldeira, and the narrative of Eric and Jen. Hence, the reality transpires as multidiegetic, multilayered, and multimodal. In order to account for the semantic totality, all these phenomena must be taken into account.

This complex status was complicated even more. As Gibbons adumbrates, at the end of October 2013, Twitter accounts for both Eric and Jen emerged. The authorship of these Twitter accounts remains mysterious, but the consequence is what Ryan called "transmedia expansion". Moreover, two months before the book's publication, on August 19, 2013, Abrams's production company Bad Robot released a minute-long teaser trailer. The video, presenting a character from the novel, should be deemed as what Wolf terms "intermedial transposition"<sup>18</sup>.

The final aspect of *S.* which is important for the fictional world making is the novel's concluding chapter. Its story is also recounted by Gibbons so there is no point in repeating that narrative. However, what seems fundamental for my argument in this paper is the fact that with the final and alternative chapter being published on Tumblr by the fictional character, the fictional reality of the novel effectively entered yet another medial dimension. Consequently, next to the novel, its multimodal material, Twitter and film, *S.* comes to incorporate the online blogosphere as constitutive of its complete narrative (with the caveat that other multimedial material might be added at some later date).

All in all, the narrative of *S.* is not *only* a representation of events, it is much more than that. It ranges from the "standard" story of an amnesiac character to a (fictional) translator's notes to (fictional) readers' comments and to typically contemporary phenomena of transmedial expansion and transmedial transposition. All of these phenomena, in combination with the multimodally heterogeneous material incorporated in the novel, transcend the understanding of the text as narrative founded exclusively on sequential eventfulness; instead, we might do more justice to the story if we take the totality of substantial and semiotic material into account and construct a coherent world on their basis. The world rests on the increasing complexity of fictionality and reality, transcending a conveniently boxed book entitled *S*<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 326–329.

<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to note that *S.* bears significant similarities with another J.J. Abrams' project, TV series *Lost*. See Jason Mittel, "Strategies of Storytelling on Transmedia Television", in: *Storyworlds across Media*, ed. M.-L. Ryan and J.-N. Thon, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2014, pp. 253–277.

## Conclusions

*The Unfortunates* by B.S. Johnson poses a number of interpretive obstacles because of its typographic construction. The aleatoric (ergodic<sup>20</sup>) event structure undermines the narrative as a representation of events; the discourse is multiple and the story indeterminate. The narrated is punctured with gaps that disrupt the world-making process. As a result, I believe that the narrative is better conceptualised as the expression of the narrator's consciousness. Effectively, the event, generally speaking, becomes the sign of the narrating; it refers mainly to the narrating of human experience.

As should by now be transparent through my definition of the narrative in *The Unfortunates* as expression or representation of consciousness and experience, I follow Monika Fludernik's concept of experientiality. She terms the narrative as the quasi-mimetic evocation of "real-life experience" and as the evocation of consciousness or the representation of a speaker role<sup>21</sup>. In her model, there can be narratives without plot, but there cannot be any narratives without some sort of human (anthropomorphic) experiencer at some narrative level. The narrative-as-experientiality makes it possible to understand the narrative, semantic and typographic phenomena of Johnson's novel as a peculiar representation (and narrativisation) of human experience<sup>22</sup>. Such a narrative becomes, in David Herman's words, "a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change"<sup>23</sup>. It should be made clear that in my paradigm I am conceptualising a specific set of textual phenomena as experience-representing without making any reference to readers' narrative comprehension in the form of scripts or schemata. In other words, *The Unfortunates* is qualified as narrative-as-experientiality solely on the basis of the (text-internal) properties of the novel.

When it comes to S. by Abrams and Dorst, the typography of the novel questions the possibility of treating eventfulness (with its constituent conditions, i.e. teleology, causality and temporality) as the most important facet of a novel. In the work under consideration, we need to include the diegetic multiplicity, multimodality and transmediality in our examinations. Indeed, S. becomes a synergy of heterogeneous materials that all contribute to the general meaning by additions, extensions, complications, and deflections at a number of diegetic levels. In effect, the events are complexly sequenced – parallel, concurrent, and convergent resulting in a specific heteroglossia of multimodal material,

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<sup>20</sup> This is one of the observations made by Espen Aarseth in *Cypertekst. Spojrzenia na literaturę ergodyczną*, Bydgoszcz: Korporacja Halart 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Monika Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology*, London: Routledge 1996, pp. 12–13

<sup>22</sup> On the phenomenological implications of this technique see David Mitchell, "The Unfortunates: Hypertext, Linearity and the Act of Reading", pp. 51–64; on the immersiveness of the technique see David James, "The (W)hole Affect: Creative Reading and Typographic Immersion in *Albert Angelo*", pp. 27–37, both in: *Re-reading B. S. Johnson*, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> David Herman, "Introduction", in: *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. D. Herman, Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2007, p. 3.

extended through and by various media<sup>24</sup>. The novel's layered story is further developed by the phenomena of transfiction (Twitter, final chapter) and intermedial transposition (teaser).

As a result, it makes more sense to make sense of the formal and modal complexities of *S.* by conceptualising its narrative in terms of the storyworld that transcends the constraints of event-representation and the boundaries of one medium<sup>25</sup>. As such, I follow Herman's theorising of narratives as "blueprints for a specific world-creation"<sup>26</sup> and "representations of worlds located in space and time as well as populated by characters"<sup>27</sup>. He comes up with a new term for "the world evoked implicitly as well as explicitly by a narrative": storyworld<sup>28</sup>. In Uri Margolin's words, storyworlds can generally be understood as "imaginable scenarios or sets of conceivable states of affairs constructed and expressed by means of artefacts (semiotic objects), but [. . .] not identical with these objects"<sup>29</sup>. The world does not necessarily form one uniform event sequence and therefore the narrative itself becomes less interpretively relevant than the totality of multimodal worldmaking phenomena<sup>30</sup>.

## A rose by any other name

In a famous scene of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, we observe Romeo sneaking under Juliet's balcony at night. Hidden in the dark, he hears her say:

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;  
Thou art thyself though, not a Montague.  
What's Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot,  
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part  
Belonging to a man. O! be some other name:  
What's in a name? that which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet;

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<sup>24</sup> There has been a surge in publications on multimodality, multimediality and narrative theory, see for example Wolfgang Hallet, "The Rise of the Multimodal Novel: Generic Change and Its Narratological Implications", in: *Storyworlds across Media*, op. cit., pp. 151–172; *Handbook of Intermediality*, ed. G. Rippl, Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter 2015; *Narrative across Media*, ed. M.-L. Ryan, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press 2004; *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*, ed. M.-L. Ryan, L. Emerson, B.J. Robertson, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP 2014; Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York and London: New York UP 2006.

<sup>25</sup> In this conceptualising narrative, I follow suit with transmedia narratologists such as Jan-Noël Thon; see, for example, "Transmedial Narratology Revisited: on the Intersubjective Construction of Storyworlds and the Problem of Representational Correspondence in Films, Comics, and Video Games", *Narrative* 2017, vol. 25, no. 3, pp. 286–320; and Jan-Noël Thon, *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press 2016. See also Mittell, op. cit., p. 265.

<sup>26</sup> David Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. See also David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*, Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2002, p. 9

<sup>27</sup> Thon, op. cit., p. 298.

<sup>28</sup> Herman, *Basic Elements*, op. cit., p. 107.

<sup>29</sup> Uri Margolin, "The Constitution of Story Worlds: Fictional and/or Otherwise", *Semiotica* 2000, vol. 131, no. 3–4, p. 355.

<sup>30</sup> Jan-Noël Thon and Marie-Laure Ryan, "Introduction", in: *Storyworlds across Media*, op. cit., p. 14.

So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,  
Retain that dear perfection which he owes  
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name;  
And for that name, which no part of thee,  
Take all myself<sup>31</sup>.

We might feel prone to disparage the words, or indeed the whole scene, as a pompous and pathetic high school drama from an Amazon-bestselling YA book. However, it is *Romeo and Juliet*, not *Thirteen Reasons Why*, and we should not take Julia's words lightly. She makes a good point about the tyranny of naming, of ascribing an arbitrary signifier for an unaware, hapless signified. Worse still, to use another *Romeo and Juliet* quote, "these violent delights have violent ends", and both lovers are bound to pay the biggest price for the transgression of the tyrant's decree. In this paper I wanted to make a case that the time might have come for uncoupling one famous signifier from its equally well-known signified. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries novelists have been exhibiting ever new attitudes to the decree of another tyrant, the book format, impacting *Romeo* in this paper – narrative.

In the case of Johnson's and Abrams/Dorst's novels it is clear that the underlying cause of the generation of alternative narratives results from a novel approach to typography. In effect, the narrative becomes media-sensitive and influenced by its modal and medial environment. The printed book format can no longer be sustained and considered the defining novelistic format; it is simply one of many available for writers these days. As a result, *The Unfortunates* and *S.* might exemplify a type of the novel that is not chained to its paper format; one that is not monomodal but combines other semiotic systems; one that requires new conceptualisations in narratology (and the theory of the novel).

Finally, I would like to briefly mention that beside narrative-as-experientiality and narrative-as-storyworld it is also possible to bring up other cases of the narrative which fails to conform to a classical event-representation dogma. Dorothea Mastłowska's *Wojna polsko-ruska pod flagą biało-czerwoną* (2003) features another alternative type of narrative. It is devoid of causality and teleology despite its eventfulness; it is deficient in temporality and spatiality despite its location in some specific time and space; it falls short of representing believable consciousnesses with rational motivation. Instead, the novel is a series of more or less related vignettes of the protagonist, Silny, whose actions and behaviours are frequently puzzling and bewildering. Nonetheless, Silny is the main basis for the narrativity: he is the source of absurd incidents, drug-induced visions, unrealistic deeds. As a result, *Wojna polsko-ruska* might be sustainably conceptualised as narrative-as-characterisation.

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56974/speech-o-romeo-romeo-wherefore-art-thou-romeo> [accessed 14 May 2018]

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