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The unconventional form of the novel as a place of encounter: the reader's self-awareness

BERTA FERRER *University of Reading (UK)*

ABSTRACT

Conventional narrative fiction has been defined over the centuries with a linear structure and lack of visual intrusions. In a standard novel, each page looks more or less the same as the others, connected by the uniformity of page design to avoid distractions on the reader's side. This article analyses the way in which Laurence Sterne made the reader self-aware through the use of unconventional visual devices in his novel *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767) and transformed the act of reading into a physical dialogue between author and reader. In addition, it examines its influence on the graphic dimension of contemporary works concerned with the unconventional form of the novel, such as B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969), Mark Z. Danieleweski's *House of Leaves* (2000) and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010).

KEYWORDS

Reading experience, materiality, novel, unconventional form, visual dimension

Introduction

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman (1759–1767) is considered as one of the main precursors of experimental literature, understood as literature that interrogates itself, challenges conventions and looks for alternative ways of thinking and writing. However, the term *experimental* is usually employed in a general way to dismiss and label works that challenge the established conventions of *traditional* literature. The British author B.S. Johnson[1] was convinced that *experimental* is commonly used as a synonym for unsuccessful. Since mainstream novels do not require any physical response or manipulation from the reader, the works in which the form and the pages of the book interrupt what would in normal conditions be a fluid and passive reading are commonly regarded as difficult and obtrusive experiments.

> "Experimental" to most reviewers is almost always a synonym for "unsuccessful". I object to the word experimental being applied to my own work. Certainly, I make experiments, but the unsuccessful ones are quietly hidden away and what I choose to publish is in my terms successful: that

[1] B.S. Johnson (1933-1973) was a British postmodernist novelist, poet and literary critic, known for his unconventional use of narrative structure and the form of the book in literature. In his novel *Albert Angelo* (1964) the author cut a hole through the pages as a narrative technique. *House Mother Normal* (1971) explores thought and memory through an unorthodox use of structure, pages and space. His most relevant novel is *The Unfortunates* (1969), a book that consists of twenty-seven unbound sections put together in a box, which the reader is then asked to shuffle before starting to read.

> is, it has been the best way I could find of solving particular writing problems. (1973, 19–20)

This article examines some of the main visual devices used by Laurence Sterne in *Tristram Shandy* to challenge printing and writing conventions in the eighteenth century and its ensuing influence in later and contemporary works that also bring forward the non-verbal dimension of the novel. Thus, the purpose of the article is to look at the unconventional form of the novel not as an odd experiment, but as a means to transform the passive receptive role of the reader into an active and participatory movement. By treating the graphic dimension of the novel as an integral part of the narrative development, these works generate the reader's self-awareness —who consciously navigates and manipulates the text— and make the act of reading an explicit and physical experience. As it will be seen, this paper studies the use of blank space by B.S. Johnson in *The Unfortunates* (1969), as he is considered one of Sterne's main heirs; the black space employed by Mark Z. Danielewski[2] in *House of Leaves* (2000); and the turning of the page present in Jonathan Safran Foer's[3] *Tree of Codes* (2010).

The unconventional form of the 18th century novel

The history of the novel, especially in the early days of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is intimately connected to the development of print. Since the rise of the genre, standard novels have been dominated by the linear sequence of language, which fits into the structure offered by the lines of print and the sequentiality in the body of the book. Karen L. Schiff (1998) describes that this linearity in the development of narrative fiction has encouraged the modern notion of the book as a technology that offers only one fixed way of reading, from the first page to the last.

The eighteenth century saw a continuous growth in print culture, moving gradually towards mass-production and commercial literature. As Michael E. Kaufmann (1994) explains, for many early English novelists printed form offered a 'truth', despite it being fact or fiction, and that truth served as a tool to objectively document reality, or to claim to do so. Examples such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) create the illusion of the book being an objective document where the writer is merely an editor of a manuscript or journal; in this way, the reader becomes a sort of viewer of the events unfolding within the pages. Their intention was to justify the form of the book, including it into the fiction they created and presenting it as a 'document amidst other documents' (Kaufmann 1994, 18–21) Thus, they used the physical body as a surface to present the fictions claimed as real events, turning and fading it into a secondary part of the document, a sort of

[2] Mark Z. Danielewski (1966) is an American author widely known for his novel *House of Leaves* (2000) and his use of unconventional page layout and typographical structure that bring forward the materiality of the book and the physical reading experience. Other relevant works are *Only Revolutions* (2006) and *The Familiar* (2015-2017), which also regard the book as a device that can include other media.

[3] Jonathan Safran Foer (1977) is an American novelist known for his works *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005). In *Tree of Codes* (2010), Foer experiments with memory, loss and treats the book as a sculptural object that enhances the physical dimension of reading.

subordinate background.

Despite the move towards the invisibility of print[4], reinforced by the appearance of copyright and the importance it gave to the text rather than to the form of the book, there exist early instances of novelists that were concerned with the interrelationship between the creative work of the author, the form it took and the reproduction of the printed artefact (Regan 2002). This is the case of Samuel Richardson and Laurence Sterne, who were involved with both the process of writing and of printing in their works. As Shaun Regan (2002) explains they were interested in how the manipulation of the printed medium could create a dialogue between writer and reader, and how the visual aspect of the book could control and influence the interpretation of the text. In particular, Sterne endeavoured 'to force the readers to think about the material they are reading instead of blindly forging ahead through the text' (Schiff 1998, 51) and used blank pages to request the contribution of readers, a marbled page placed on the wrong position, or a blank page to evidence the death of a character. Because of this concern in the process of meaning-making through the material form of the book and its active manipulation, they could both be regarded as early authors concerned with the form of the novel.

It is important to indicate that Sterne's and Richardson's works have arrived to us altered by reprintings and changes in trends and technology. Janine Barchas (1995) states that modern editions of eighteenth-century novels have not kept the original design of the early versions, being thus exposed to modifications of layout, typography, and ornamentation. For example, page sizes have changed over the centuries, which inevitably have had a direct impact on the visual games that Sterne played in *Tristram Shandy*, thus affecting his way of treating the turning of the page[5]. The variation in book format affects directly 'the amount of text that can fit on one page, and few editors have seen fit to replicate the large amounts of blank space that add to Sterne's printed text' (Schiff 1998, 116), which inevitably also changes the inflection of the images that are dwarfed or given less space. Besides, the rise of digital technology and our living surrounded by a constant and fluid exchange of information has enhanced the value of content over form, which probably adds to the reasons why these works might not be considered nowadays as unconventional as they once were.

In his book *Textual Bodies* (1994), Kaufmann argues that by using an epistolary theme in his novels, Samuel Richardson aimed for a collapse of the distance between author and reader, but at the same time the technique also presents the events as simultaneous to the writing of the letters, fading towards narration and hiding the printed body of the work. However, Barchas (1995) claims that the printing knowledge Richardson had and his involvement in the production of his novels gave him the opportunity to use the printed medium to influence and control the interpretation of the readers.

[4] Kaufmann refers to this as a dissolution of print into the voice, narrative turning gradually to be the central point no longer defined by the physical form of the book (1994, 27).

In particular, *Clarissa* (1748) anticipates Sterne's unconventional treatment of the novel and the relation author-reader. A good example of this might be the musical score, which has disappeared from later editions of the novel. This page originally unfolded to more than twice the size of any other page in the book, thus disrupting the physical boundaries of the text (Barchas 1995) and overlapping three levels of content: the visual device of the oversized engraved page, the verbal text of the fiction, and the auditory material of the score. 'Like the marbled page in *Tristram Shandy*, Richardson's musical page alludes to the materiality of book-making' (Barchas 1995, 126) and, in a very modern way, entreats the reader's participation, as it can be read, performed or sung[6].

> Indeed, in its unusual combination of image and text, Richardson's musical page resembles, or anticipates, the work of Laurence Sterne. Like Sterne, Richardson violates a novel-reader's expectations by self-consciously incorporating a familiar cultural artefact into the novel. And like Sterne's unconventional marbled page, Richardson's musical page calls attention to itself because it is visually and genetically inconsistent with the rest of the novel's format. (Barchas 1995, 107)

The fact that Richardson kept altering the content and appearance of his books in subsequent editions is also very significant, as it evidences an interest in the interpretive possibilities of the visual rendering of the novel through print. In the case of *Clarissa*, he used marginalia, indices, dots, and ornaments to 'tell the readers what to read and how to read it' (Barchas 1995, 141). He intended to guide readers and grab their attention through the application of print and the visual presentation of the text:

> His innovations in form are not innovations in technology, but in technique: here, as elsewhere, Richardson conceives of new interpretive possibilities for the novel's visual rendering through innovative applications of established print conventions. (Barchas 1995, 161)

Barchas also explains that this concern with the visual aspect of the novel is also made obvious in Paper X, where very unexpectedly Richardson makes an unconventional use of margins and violates the layout of the page. Here he defies both the linearity of the discourse and the conventions of printing by fragmenting the page, distributing the text in multiple directions and creating a collage-like sense, somehow anticipating the way in which modernist writers and poets will later experiment with the physical page; and therefore creating an unavoidable connection with the visual strategies that contemporary authors such as Mark Z. Danielewski in *House of Leaves* will use to build their innovative works. In fact, it is important to mention that both Paper X in *Clarissa* and Appendix II-E (The Three Attic Whalestoe Institute Letters) from page 626 to 628 in *House of Leaves* do not only share the visual aspect but represent the rage and distress of the main characters after suffering a rape.

[6] In fact, the absence of this page in some of the early editions points towards the possibility of a reader having torn it out to place it upon the harpsichord stand for playing it (Barchas 1995).

The use of visual devices in the early unconventional novel

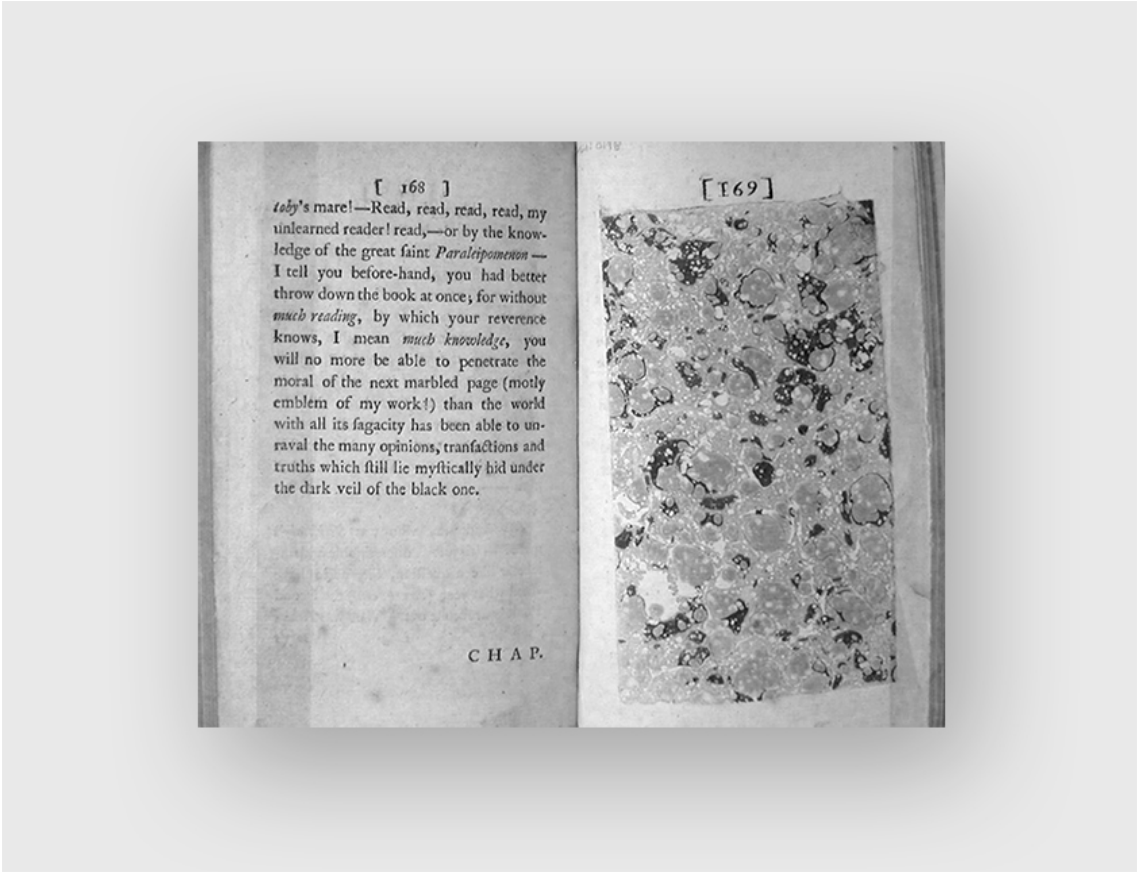
The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman is a nine-volume opus written by Laurence Sterne between 1759 and 1767. The work, usually considered for its influence in the development of the novel and as a source of inspiration for numerous writers, is not focused on a faithful representation of the life and adventures of its hero, as was the literary tradition of the time, but is a story about interruption and digression, which dismantles the linearity of a conventional plot and creates an heterogeneous piece. The novel fluctuates through subjective ramifications, interior adventures of the mind and movements of the subconscious (Schiff 1998; Kundera 2006).

As mentioned previously, conventional narrative fiction has been defined over the centuries with a linear structure and lack of visual intrusions. In a standard novel, each page looks more or less the same as the others, they are related by the uniformity of the page design, which renders reading consistent and avoids distractions on the reader's side. It is all about focusing on the story and the content rather than on the physical medium. In *Tristram Shandy*, however, Sterne intervenes in the regularity of the continuous text in order to bring forward the non-verbal dimension and 'make the act of reading explicitly and consciously physical' (Schiff 1998, 47). For this purpose, he uses digressions; marbled, blank and black pages; punctuation and typographical elements. He plays both with language and materiality, employing design and printing resources available in his time, to create an unfamiliar form, an unconventional literary structure that the reader needs to learn how to navigate. Sterne's intention was to make the reader conscious of the very process of reading, portraying it as an integration of physical and narrative experiences of the text. He wanted to avoid reading to be seen as a passive activity:

> Tis to rebuke a vicious taste which has crept into thousands besides herself; — of reading straight forwards, more in quest of the adventure, than of the deep erudition and knowledge which a book of this cast, if read over as it should be, would infallibly impart with them. (I, xx, 48)

Unlike Samuel Richardson, Sterne was not a printer himself, although he had much experience in it, which accentuated his need to be involved in the composition of the book. The author of *Tristram Shandy* worked hand in hand with printers and publishers to oversee and manage the production process, meticulously correcting every proof and making sure the visual features of the work were as he intended them to be. This is the case of the famous marbled page, the emblem of Sterne's work that has never been reproduced in the same conditions as he devised it for the original edition (fig.1). Certainly, the production process was complicated, expensive and time-consuming. Instead of cutting pages out of already marbled paper and inserting them in the book, Sterne used sheets of paper that matched the size of the volume and folded the margins to leave the identical rectangle of the print area; and 'after marbling this central rectangle only, the marbler would remove the sheet, dry it, fold the margins back in the other direction, and repeat the entire process for the other side' (Schiff 1998, 59–60). The first edition consisted of around four thousand copies, which means the marbling process had

to be repeated at least eight thousand times.



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toby's mare!—Read, read, read, read, my unlearned reader! read,—or by the knowledge of the great faint *Paraleipomenon* — I tell you before-hand, you had better throw down the book at once; for without *much reading*, by which your reverence knows, I mean *much knowledge*, you will no more be able to penetrate the moral of the next marbled page (motly emblem of my work!) than the world with all its sagacity has been able to unravel the many opinions, tranſactions and truths which ſtill lie myſtically hid under the dark veil of the black one.

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Figure 1. Marbled page from *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman.* First edition (1761). Publisher Hogarth; Ravenet; Dodsley, R.; Wood, H.; Monkman, Kenneth; Apencer, Walter T. Courtesy of the Laurence Sterne Trust at Shandy Hall.

The marbled page is one of the many materials and visual digressions that Sterne uses in his novel, defining its reading experience[7] and dismantling its expected outcome. It not only interrupts the continuous progress of the text, but also disrupts the predictable composition and structure of the physical object. Conventionally, marbled paper is used as endpaper, fixed to the inside covers of the book; however, as Schiff describes, here the endpapers are placed in the middle of the volume, reflecting 'the Shandean habit of telling a story not from beginning to end' (1998, 83). In this way, the material body of the book is included as a part of the story and transmits the individuality of the work by means of a mass-produced object. Regan argues that even though Sterne's invitation to the reader, through other visual printed elements, to play and be involved with the book generates an individualised experience of the text, 'the productive multiplication of copies again ensures that the texts purchased by separate readers will remain identical' (2002, 308). It is through the marbled pages that Sterne accomplishes originality and individuality. 'The

[7] 'Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine; — they are the life, the soul of reading; — take them out of this book for instance — you might as well take the book along with them.' (Sterne, 1759-1767, I, xxii, 58)

fact that each handmade page is unique means that the experience of reading each book is different' (Schiff 1998, 68).

Laurence Sterne's interest in the participation of both the author and the reader is made obvious through the use of the black and blank pages in the book. The black pages have a sense of erasure, of information hidden beneath the ink, and the reader needs to unravel what lies behind the 'dark veil'. They also mean the death of a character. The blank pages, instead, signal the missing information, the part that the reader is asked to provide. These graphic devices work as another kind of punctuation, more visual and physical, creating digressions and interruptions of the text that, as Mariano D'Ambrosio describes:

> convey at the same time a sense of trauma, the impossibility or the suspension of communication; and, on the other hand, an invitation to the reader; who is provided with a space intended to trigger his interpretation and creativity. (2018, 84)

Blank space between paragraphs is also used as a means of punctuation, bringing the attention of the reader back to the physical page. In *Tristram Shandy*, punctuation plays a very important role. As Roger Moss (1981) points out, Sterne uses dashes and asterisks as silent signifiers, graphic artefacts that mark emptiness, a silent space; which aligns with Keith Smith's claim that 'every writer uses the space between words, between lines as pauses for rhythm. Layout of the page may also be a form of punctuation' (1991, 16). Furthermore, Moss describes the use of visual interventions as a way to make the reader aware of punctuation and recognise the assumptions about the nature of reading, but at the same time defines these elements as uncomfortable devices: 'Just as you cannot be conscious of the mechanics of walking without being in danger of tripping up, so these devices, once focused on, make reading dangerously ludicrous and uncomfortable' (1981, 194). In a similar way, Kaufmann believes that 'readers usually see the printed body of a book only when some irregularity—a misspelling or a broken character—calls their attention to it' (1995, 14). However, a definition of this kind seems to look at the visual interventions from an incomplete point of view, forgetting that they are a part of the narrative and belong intrinsically to its construction: Sterne intended to create those interruptions and digressions, the awkward feeling of noticing the physical body of reading[8]. He used printing in an unconventional way, as a tool to represent a narrative idea, an instrument to defy conventions and challenge the reader to determine what is happening within the unfamiliar form. A couple of centuries after him, B.S. Johnson (1973) would declare that for him the novel was a device for solving certain literary difficulties, which in their turn could not always be overcome through text. Sometimes the only available way to successfully express the writer's ideas is through an unconventional form.

In *Textual Bodies* (1994), Kaufman concludes that, even if *Tristram Shandy* contradicts

[8] When it comes to the body of the book, the easy choice for the writer is to deny it, as Alan Trotter (2015) argues, or to risk it to be considered strange and difficult.

the uniformity and linearity sought by eighteenth century novels, Sterne still aimed for a transparency of print. However, and according also to D'Ambrosio (2018), the attention he brings to the physical page and his concern with the materiality of the book point in another direction, which will also be concretised later on with the modernist experiments with the physical page (Paradell, 2018):

> Sterne encourages readers to recognise their own bodies, instead of sublimating them in the habitual experience of reading. He finds ways to highlight a handling of the book as object, eye movement, and physical participation in the narrative's creation. Sterne's invocation of these elements disrupts the reader's usual pattern of taking them for granted. (Schiff 1995, 105)

Visual devices in the unconventional novel

Conventional novels usually offer a reading experience focused on the verbal dimension, which is enhanced by the unobtrusive treatment of the physical shape of the text or the book. In *Tristram Shandy*, however, Laurence Sterne takes this material aspect into consideration and enhances the visual dimension to complement the basic narrative development. This visual layer offers a challenge and demands an effort from the reader, creates a system in which participation becomes fundamental in the process of generating a complete reading experience. It invites collaboration in order to activate the whole meaning of the text: 'the dialectic of the verbal narrative and the physical book only becomes activated in the presence of a dialectic between the author and the reader' (Schiff 1995, 123). This request of agency from the reader was to be explored in depth by poststructuralists some centuries later. In *S/Z* (1970), Roland Barthes differentiates between *readerly* and *writerly* texts. The *writerly* texts, in opposition to the *readerly*, are those works which give readers a role and turn them into active contributors in the development of the reading activity and the construction of their own world together with the author. Thus, *writerly* could be associated not only with *Tristram Shandy* but also with the works where the visual and verbal dimensions are built together and demand an active participation from readers in order to complete the reading experience.

As it has been explained, the works that require a physical response and manipulation from the reader are usually regarded as difficult and obtrusive, mainly because they interrupt the passive flux of reading. This was the very exact thing that Sterne wanted to avoid: 'I wish … that all good people, both male and female, from her example, may be taught to think as well as read' (I, xx, 49).

In a conversation with Kari Driscoll and Inge van de Ven (2020, 145–160), Mark Z. Danielewski explains that he feels as if nowadays it was assumed any reader could read any novel, without realising that 'difficult' (i.e. experimental) books need a different kind of effort and involvement, a familiarity that can only be achieved with time and practice. This was concluded as well in a research project in 2008–2010, conducted at the Media and Design Academy in Belgium, where graphic design students collaborated with novelists to create prototype experimental books to be tested on a sample of thirty-one

adult persons (Bazarnik 2014). The more traditional readers complained that they found their reading experience restricted by disruptions and incompleteness; but, on a more general conclusion, 'after being exposed to several experimental works, the readers became more accustomed to the characteristic devices' and they gradually paid more attention to the visual part of the narrative (Bazarnik 2014, 69–70). On the other hand, digital technology has helped to raise an awareness of the unconventional form in literature and readers are now more used to the manipulation of text and page than back in the 18th century or the pre-digital era in general: 'the contemporary reader has no problem navigating disruptions to conventional page layout. In fact, many readers now actively pursue texts that challenge and alter their preconceptions of how a page of text should traditionally look' (Barton, as cited in D'Ambrosio 2018).

For Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), the novel is characterised with a plastic quality, it is a genre immersed in continuous development and connected with the present. Even if the novel in question is distant in time, it creates a relationship with the current time in which author and reader participate. 'In many respects the novel has anticipated, and continues to anticipate, the future development of literature as a whole' (Bakhtin 1981, 7). In particular, *Tristram Shandy* constitutes a good example of this, due to its recognised influence in the contemporary novel[9], and more specifically in experimental literature from the 20th and 21st centuries, 'the progenitor of all the avant-garde novels of our century', as Italo Calvino defined it (D'Ambrosio 2018, 81).

> Novels that feature graphic elements are by no means a recent development in literary innovation. An early, canonical example of a novel with graphic elements is, of course, Laurence Sterne's much celebrated and sometimes berated *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. The book plays with the very form of the novel itself, in both a visual and narratological sense, a facet made all the more remarkable in recent revisionings such as the 2010 release of the book by Visual Editions. (Gibbons 2012, 1)

The use of page sequencing

Despite the two centuries that separate them, both Laurence Sterne and B.S. Johnson 'pushed the novel to its limits and beyond' (Coe 2004, as cited in D'Ambrosio 2018, 84). This relationship is evidenced by Johnson himself, who quotes Sterne in the inside of the box that contains the loose chapters of *The Unfortunates* (1969):

> I will tell you in three words what the book is. —It is a history. —A history! Of who? What? Where? When? Don't hurry yourself. ——It is a history-book, Sir, (which may possibly recommend it to the world) of what passes in a man's own mind.

[9] Virginia Woolf, Julio Cortázar, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Raymond Queneau, Michel Butor, are some of the authors that have recognised the influenced received from Tristram, as D'Ambrosio points out in Black Pages and Blank Pages (2018).

Sterne wanted the readers to be involved in the story and the book, to think and be part of the experience of reading and not just progress mechanically through it. For Johnson (1973), instead, literary texts should attempt to tell the truth. He saw the novel as a device for solving certain literary difficulties, which could not always be overcome through the verbal dimension and needed an unconventional form to express the ideas and challenge the linearity of the object.

Figure 2. B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates* (1969). Reissued by Picador in 1999. Photograph by Berta Ferrer.

The opposition to that linearity is represented in *The Unfortunates*. The novel presents the recollections of the author's friendship with a friend who died of cancer. It is about loss and the randomness memory encounters through mourning. The aleatorism of the mind is here conveyed to the reader through the form of the physical object and the 27 unbound sections (fig.2). Therefore, the shuffleable quality of the novel is linked to the way in which memory works. This idea is implied in the aleatory text, which the reader is asked to re-arrange in any random order, and also in the graphic layout of each page, as he uses non-uniform sentence and paragraph spacing to underline the discontinuity of these recollections (Jordan 2014) (fig.3). As D'Ambrosio (2018) points out, Johnson is a master in arranging blank space on the page. While Sterne uses blank space to interrupt with conversation and invite the reader to participate and add to the story, Johnson's blanks are silent, they represent the unreliability of memory. Besides, he creates another layer of blank space by leaving the chapters unbound, underlining the idea that these are separate moments in time. These are fragments, floating memories put together in a box to challenge the concept of unrepeatability, of the conclusiveness of death.

> We acknowledge the possibility of re-reading even while reading, because it will be different each time we do; we invoke a state of possibility which, if it is not quite infinite, is still vast and unimaginable. (Jordan 2014, 755).

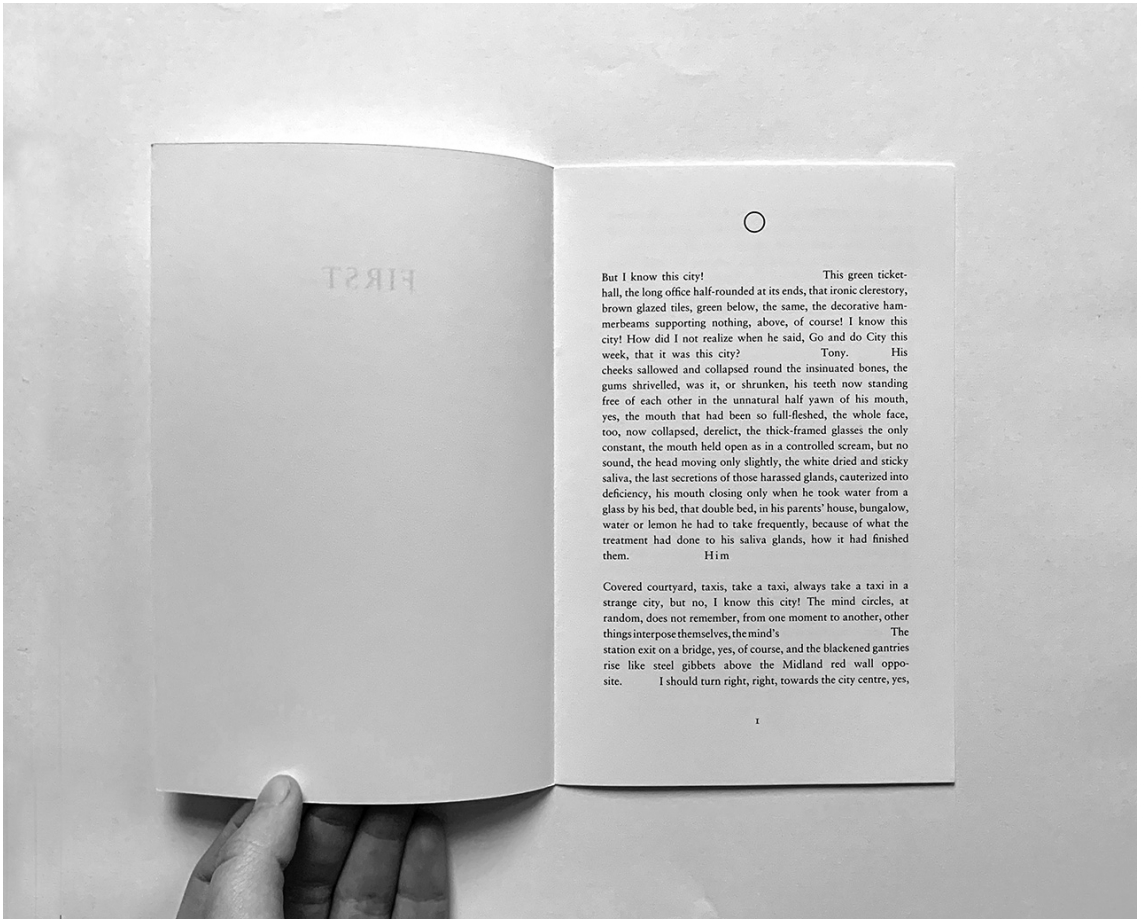

Figure 3. B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates* (1969). Reissued by Picador in 1999. Photograph by Berta Ferrer.

The use of page interruption

House of Leaves (2000) marks the starting point of what has been called 'the aesthetic of bookishness' by Jessica Pressman (2009), a trend that has been growing among novels published since 2000 that brings the attention to the page and the format of the object, utilising it as a multimedia artefact, a physical media for readers to manipulate and interact with. These works use the 'threat' posed by digital technologies and experiment with the possibilities of the physical book in a time of electronic devices.

Despite *House of Leaves'* commercial success and the fact that it has been labeled as a 'wonderful experimental novel' mainly because the graphically innovative pages, Mark Z. Danielewski is aware that his work is indebted to previous authors such as Sterne, Mallarmé, or B.S. Johnson: 'anyone with a real grasp of the history of narrative can see that *House of Leaves* is really just enjoying the fruits of a long line of earlier literary experimentation' (McCaffery and Gregory 2003, 106).

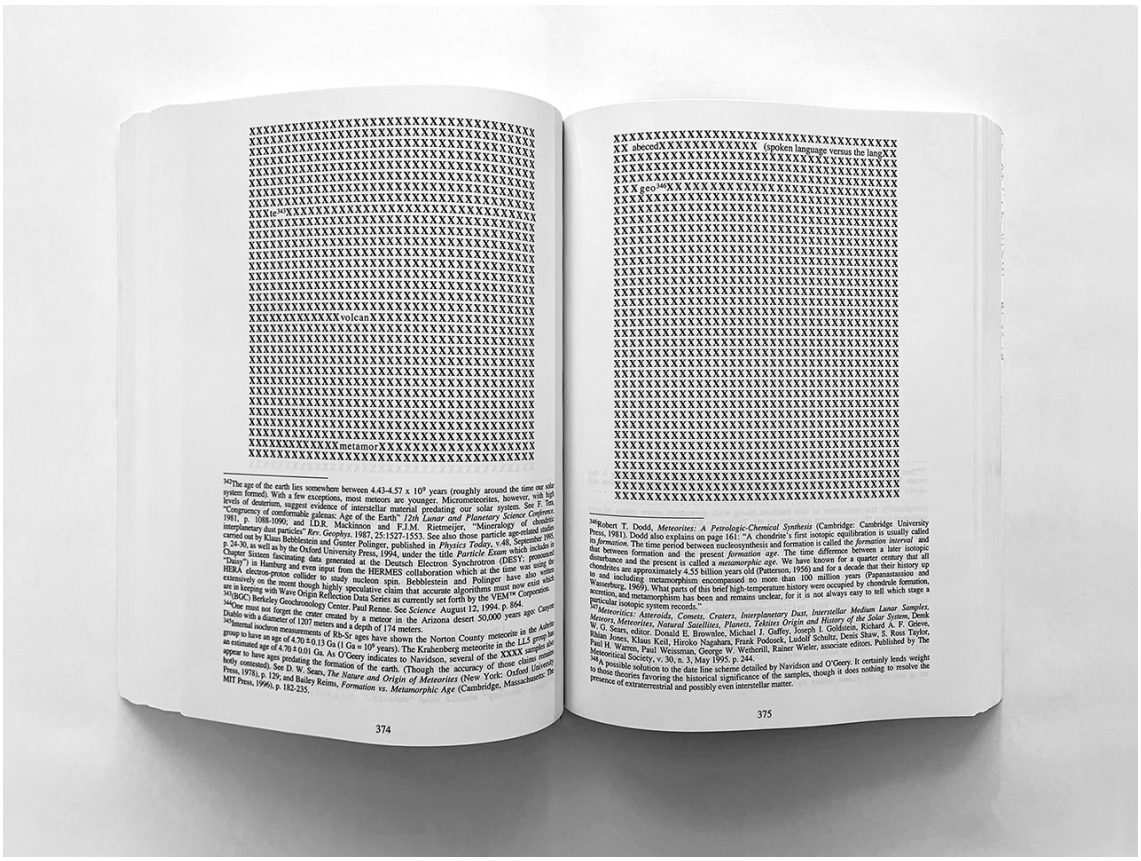

Figure 4. Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2000. Photographs by Berta Ferrer.

Among many other visual techniques, Danielewski makes use of black and blank devices as part of the page layout. He employs black Xs instead of a solid block of colour to represent missing information (e.g. pages 373–76 in *House of Leaves,* fig.4). While in *Tristram Shandy* the black page signifies the death of one of the novel's character, here it represents the incompleteness of the records presented within the story. A black square is also used in opposition to a white square (in pages 144 and 143 of *House of Leaves*, respectively, fig.5), to generate a kind of maze. The reader is then confused and slowed down in this labyrinth, trying to move within a chapter characterized by the unconventional layout of the pages: blocks of unjustified white space, columns of text placed in challenging positions. Again, like Sterne, Danielewski aims to evidence the act of reading and moving within a page. In addition, the blank space of page 310 in *House of Leaves* is an antithesis to Sterne's use of black colour, although it works in a similar way: the black page in *Tristram* is contained within margins and the type area; in *House of Leaves*, the pages are numbered, thus creating a sense of place and composition. Both devices are to be read 'as meaningful text, rather than as total absence of text' (D'Ambrosio 2018, 91).

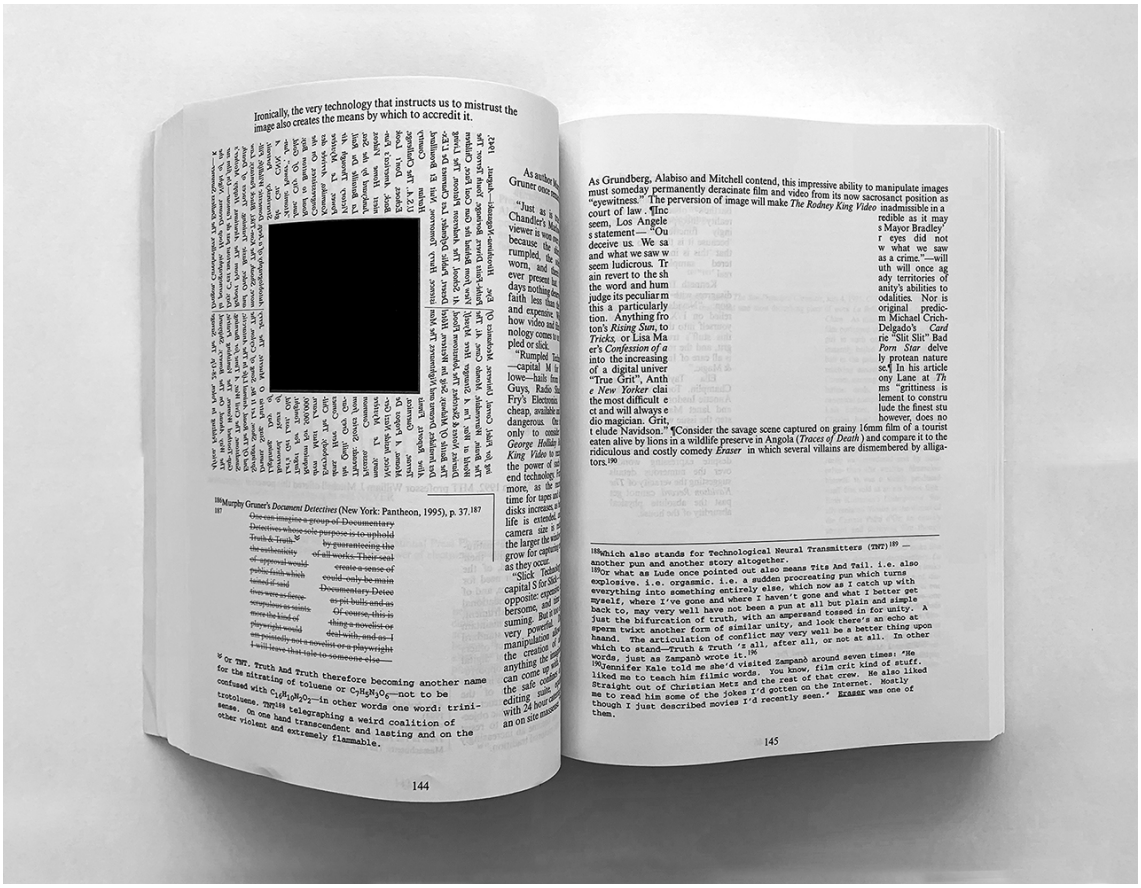

Figure 5. Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2000. Photographs by Berta Ferrer.

The use of omissions

Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* also makes use of blank space, but somehow in reverse to how Sterne uses his white interruptions. Here blanks represent a physical void, they are die-cut into the book, building their own story by removing words, sentences and paragraphs from an existing one (Bruno Schulz's 1934 *The Street of Crocodiles*). While in *The Unfortunates* Johnson employs blanks to stitch the random memories together, in *Tree of Codes* the void space represents a process of erasure of memory, of things lost by remembering, evolving and moving forward (fig. 6). Foer sculpts a ruin by leaving the open gaps for the eyes of the reader to skip, to overlook and forget. As in *Tristram Shandy* where Sterne uses the visual interruptions to create an awareness of the act of reading, the die-cut holes in *Tree of Codes* halt the progress (working as well as a sort of punctuation) and make the reader aware of the blank spaces, evidencing and reinforcing the existence of that loss and the missing parts, and 'what appeared to be a (physical) act of forgetting becomes a roundabout or peripheral mode of remembering' (Brillenburg 2011, 5).

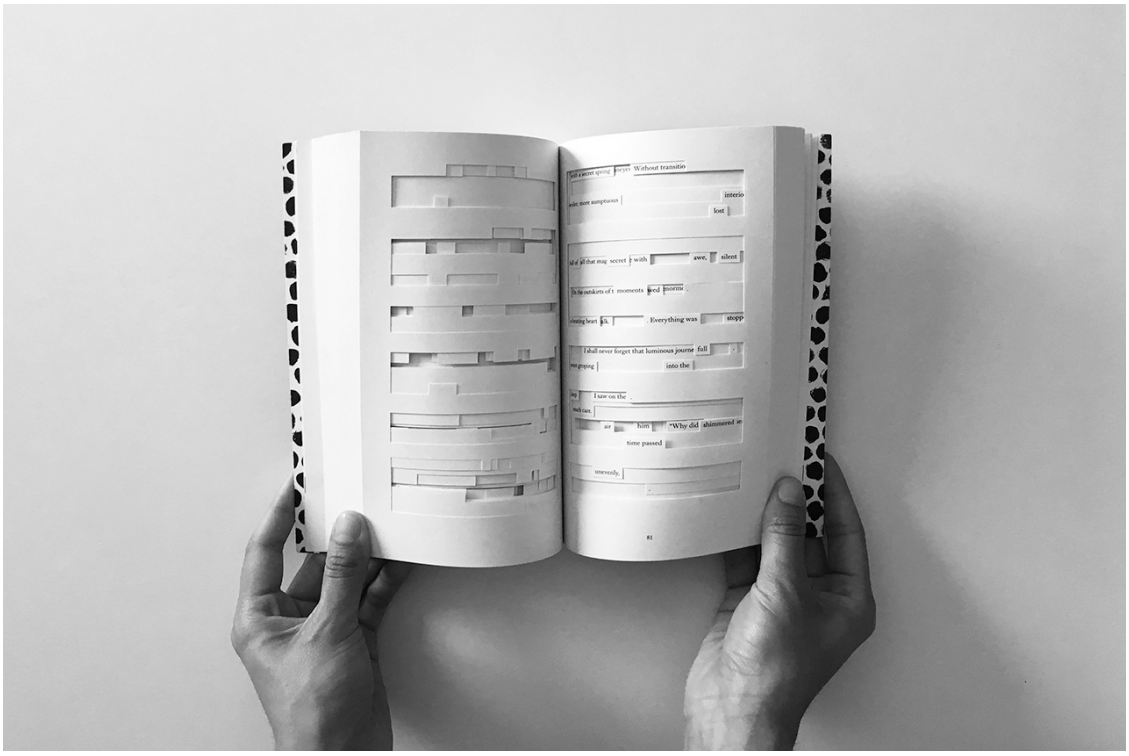

Figure 6. Jonathan Safran Foer, *Tree of Codes*. Visual Editions, 2010. Photograph by Berta Ferrer.

One of the strategies Sterne develops is to interrupt the text intentionally at the end of a recto to increase the sense of drama and even to ask the reader to go back an read again a previous section[10]. By doing this, the author brings the attention back to the act of reading, to the physical action of turning pages (Schiff 1998). In the case of *Tree of Codes*, Foer uses the whole materiality of the object to achieve this self-consciousness of reading. The book is only readable when the hand moves slowly through the body: it picks the page and separates it from the rest, then the eyes can scan the space, discover the few words scattered between the die-cut holes and read them in a linear and meaningful order (fig.7). In this way, the content of the book unravels page by page, little by little. It is a process: the experience of the act of reading, the physical involvement of the reader in turning the page. As Kiene Brillenburg Wurth describes (2011):

[10] 'immediately turn back, that is, as soon as you get to the next full stop and read the whole chapter over again.' (Sterne 1759–1767, I, xx, 48)

> *Tree of Codes* is about the kind of reading it requires: the careful handling of the pages, the mindful scanning of the words. You become aware of your fingers and hands in the process of reading: of reading as a physical intervention in the text. You experience this text, which is about fragmentation, and about the idea of a fragmented reality in the text it scatters to pieces, to your hands touching the pages. Today we are mostly touching screens: Foer has us touch paper again, as if we were discovering the medium anew.

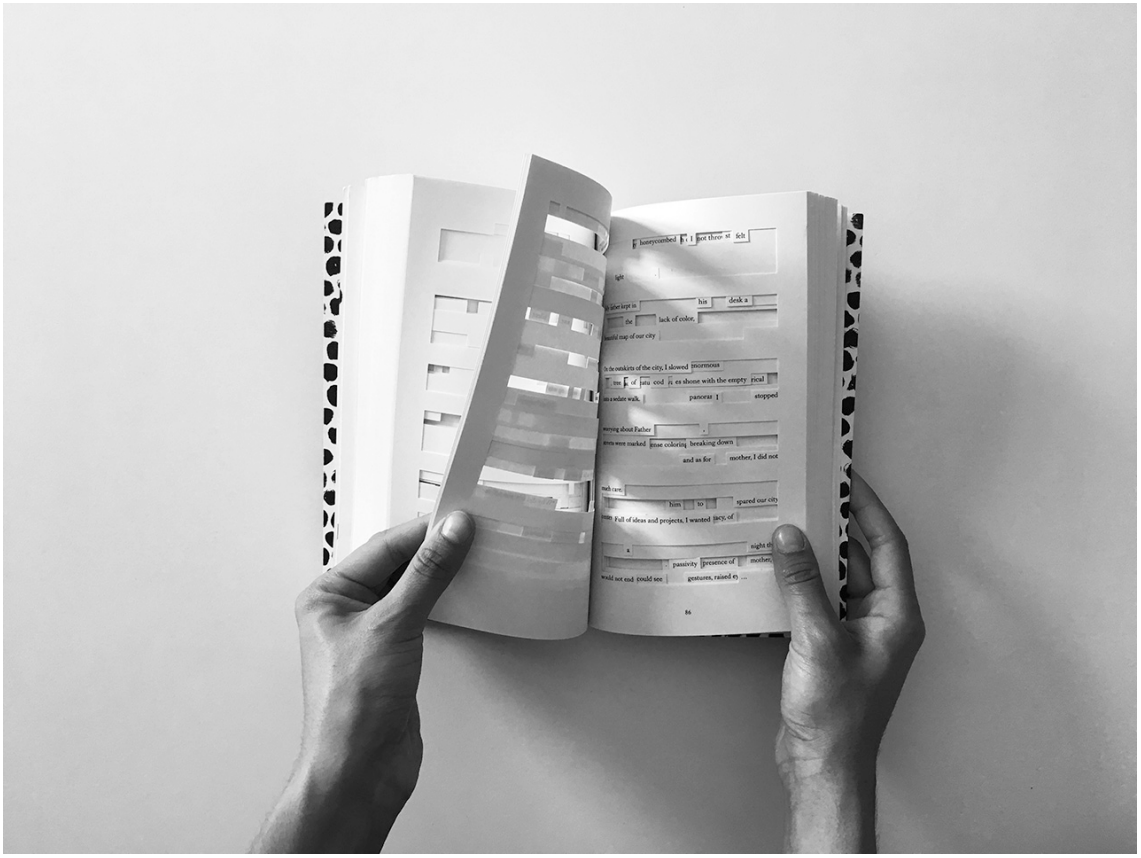

Figure 7. Jonathan Safran Foer, *Tree of Codes*. Visual Editions, 2010. Photograph by Berta Ferrer.

Tree of Codes belongs to the category of literary books that react to the incorporeality and transposability of digital media by exploiting the material quality of the reading artefact to enforce an intimate relationship of the reader with the object through physical manipulation (Hayles 2013). Nevertheless, it cannot be separated form the fact that it exists on account of the digital realm. *Tree of Codes* does not disregard technology, because it would not have been possible to publish it otherwise[11]. On the contrary, like Sterne, Foer innovates with the materiality of the book by using the existing technologies

[11] 'The development of new digital printing technologies gives the writers easier access to explore the countless possibilities of page design, while also make it less expensive for the publisher to actually put to print such experiments.' (D'Ambrosio 2018, 87).

of his time[12]. He appropriates digital characteristics to 'exploit the power of the print page in ways that draw attention to the book as a multimedia format' (Pressman 2009). As in *Tristram Shandy*, Foer's novel creates an interaction between verbal and visual dimensions to explore the changing role of the book as a reading artefact in a time of screens.

Conclusion

Digital technology has altered our perception of the world. Literature and the act of reading are not regarded as fixed and immutable fields anymore; books are not the main medium of information, but objects challenged by the immediacy, dynamism and fluidity of digital media. As reality changes and reframes the way in which reading and writing are understood, there increases the need to analyse what the book and its materiality have to offer in a time of screens.

The aesthetic of bookishness, the trend that has grown among novels published since 2000, brings the attention to the *multimedia* qualities a book can offer by considering its materiality and form as inseparable elements of the narrative dimension. However, in order to fully understand the ways in which the book can become an interactive object in our digital age, it is important to look at previous examples that have challenged the conventional form of the novel and the connection to its verbal dimension to bring forward the physical quality of the act of reading. *Tristram Shandy*, with its visual intrusions and its unconventional use of narrative structure, has had a great influence in the development of contemporary literary works that aim to exploit the power of the print page and react to the incorporeality and mutability of digital media by making the reader aware of the physical medium and the act of turning a page, by transforming the book into a place of encounter where author and reader work together to shape the physical reading experience.

Contrary to what it might seem, books such as *House of Leaves* and *Tree of Codes* are not announcing the end of the codex as a literary platform but evidence the reinvention of the physical medium in a time of screens. As Safran Foer explains: 'on the brink of the end of paper, I was attracted to the idea of a book that can't forget it has a body' (Heller 2010).

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[12] Johnson's *Albert Angelo* (1964) constitutes a previous example to *Tree of Codes* that also uses the technology available at the time and challenges the printing conventions of its era by cutting a hole on every page. 'While some of the reader's of Johnson's *Albert Angelo* found the challenges to conventional page design hard to understand and comprehend in 1964, the readers of more recent novels such as *House of Leaves* seem more able to deal with its graphically innovative pages because they have possibly encountered similar devices in earlier works.' (D'Ambrosio 2018, 88).

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Berta Ferrer is Architect of Books (@arquitectadelibros). A graphic designer, researcher and writer specialised in book and editorial design. She combines her creative and academic work with the development of her Ph.D. at the University of Reading (UK), which focuses on the possibilities for communication offered by the book as a physical object in the digital era. She lectures Graphic Communication at the University of Reading and delivers book design workshops to international schools and universities, which aim to challenge the conventions of reading and the materiality of the object.

Email: b.m.ferrerandres@pgr.reading.ac.uk