

“Book for Loan”

S as Paradox on Media Change

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Introduction

Anyone interested in the topic of book presence in a digital age, finds this interest exquisitely served by J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst’s *S*. (2013). Too exquisite, perhaps, not to be suspicious. Too exquisite, moreover, not to take such suspicion as the driving force of this chapter. The work appears a most felicitous offering to the curiosity about the question whether the book continues or ceases to play a role in the history of cultural forms. Contending efforts at saving and destroying are the motor of the story of *S*, which unfolds through a concatenation of images of creation, communication and expression. These evocations are textual, but material too. *S* is a sealed cardboard black box. The slipcase is the only element that names *S* as the box’s title, Doug Dorst as its author, and J.J. Abrams as its ‘conceiver’. Inside is a book that pretends to be library copy of an annotated edition of V.M. Straka’s 1949-novel *Ship of Theseus*. On almost every page of the book the margins are covered in penwork, a multicolored whole of questions, facts, guesses and hypotheses, academic annotations, personal and random associations. It is through making these notes, that (former) students Jennifer Heyward and Eric Husch accidentally meet, intentionally fight and flirt, and naturally fall in love. They hide the thus appropriated book in the most public place of all: the library itself. An irony enforced by the fact that the reader can purchase a mass produced copy of their secret book with ‘handwritten’ notes for a mere 21,99 dollars. This tension between the private and the public is mirrored in their textual criticism. While Eric and Jen find each other and themselves, they set out to search for author Straka and his translator Caldeira, whose identities are as unknown as their love story, which Eric and Jen discover in the coded footnotes of the book.

Inserted in *Ship of Theseus* are various quasi-unique ephemera: a Xerox copy of a journal article, a memo, three newspaper clippings, a telegram, a greeting card, four postcards, five letters, an ‘In memoriam’-card, two photographs, a map on a napkin, a decoder wheel. This novel is not also scribbled upon but also boxed and stuffed.

S seems a perfect example of what Jessica Pressman describes as ‘the aesthetic of bookishness’ (2009).¹ From here it comes as no surprise that the critics of *S*, as well as the authors of *S*, insisted in interviews that *S* is “a celebration of the analog, of the physical object” (Rothman 2013), “a celebration of the book as a physical thing.” (Tsouderos 2013), and some scholars too, have taken *S* to defend [...] books against every effort to destroy them.” (Regier 2015, 163).

This celebration of the analog is ironized by *S*. The digital realm that envelops the “book-box *S*” is an intrinsic part of “project *S*,” as we here propose to call *S* in its full bandwidth, scope and potential. For an exhaustive inventory of the components of *S* would not be restricted to the straightforward contents of the black book-box: the novel and those twenty-one inserts. It would also make mention of two anticipatory trailers, a reader’s kit, accompanying websites,² the e-book version, the digitally published inserts that form an addition to the analog ones; the alternative ending(s) that Doug Dorst posted online and announced by Twitter,³ the fictional Twitter- and

¹ ‘An emergent literary strategy’, Pressman calls it, of 21st century novels that ‘exploit the power of the print page in ways that draw attention to the book as a multimedia format, one informed by and connected to digital technologies’, ‘presenting a serious reflection on the book’ (2009).

² See for instance <http://sfiles22.blogspot.com/> and <http://www.eotvoswheel.com/>.

³ See <https://whoisstraka.wordpress.com/chapter-10-alternative-endings/>

Tumblr-accounts run by the protagonists of *S*;⁴ and “Radio Straka”: three radio broadcasts and an introductory emission, dedicated to the question *Who is Straka?*⁵ In addition to these authored ‘paratexts,’ there is a series of websites and “readers blogs”⁶ that pretend independence.⁷ The *rapport* between these digital components and the book-box *S* is bidirectional: while these assumed “fansites” refer to book-box *S*, *S* reciprocates the gesture. The comments in the margins of the novel inside *S*, for instance, explicitly refer to the very sort of website that it is itself commented by.⁸⁹ Project *S* is what Jenkins and Pressman call a ‘transmedia’ constellation (Jenkins 2010, Pressman 2006): a work of fiction that is dispersed across a hybrid and expansive media constellation, of which the book-box *S* is just one object among many others..

We attribute *S* great interest and importance for the inquiry into the media-technological change in general, and the book in particular. Yet we challenge the understanding of *S* as an instance and celebration of the book. As much as they are glorified, the book, its culture, cult and cultivation, are also mocked in *S*. Our counterclaim is based on the observation of an age old philosophical paradox that pivots at the center of project *S*, powerfully pervasive, yet faintly noticed: the paradox of the ‘Ship of Theseus.’¹⁰ This riddle asks the question whether a ship can still be called the same ship, if we change all its elements.

As this chapter will demonstrate, in ways both textual and material, *S* invites us to take the paradox of the ship as an allegory of the book. This is more than an exploration of the question whether the book will prove persistent throughout time; whether the book has a future in a digital age. It moreover examines the stakes of the book’s perishing or persistence. In what ways does our culture depend on the book? And in what ways can it do without? Using media-theorists Shannon and Siegert, it is argued that *S* focusses these questions on the tradition of hermeneutics. Not just as a way to look at books, but as a way to look at ourselves and the world; not merely as a reading strategy but as the modern mode of being-in-the-world. Accordingly, the philosophical paradox of the Ship-of-Theseus shows us how object identity is caught up with *personal, cultural and relational*

⁴ See @VMStraka, @EricHusch, @JenHeyward, @FXCaldeira, <http://jenheyward.tumblr.com/> and <http://isla-dirks.tumblr.com/>

⁵ See <http://radiostraka.com/> This website has ceased to exist, but the broadcasts are still available via <https://www.mixcloud.com/NTSRadio/radiostraka-show1/>

⁶ See for instance <https://whoisstraka.wordpress.com> and <http://swiki.zachwhalen.net/>

⁷ Through its general concern with pseudonyms, anonymity and the notion of collaborative authorship, *S* itself stresses the relative irrelevance of the question whether these websites are part of the project or not. The presenter of Radio Straka, for instance, opens his show declaring irrelevant both his own name, and of the ‘show’s leading question ‘Who is Straka?’

⁸ See for instance the margin note on page 23: ‘So the Danish guy’s website has about 50 theories about what the symbol [S] means’ (*S* 23).

⁹ Not all scholars that copy Abram and Dorst’s claim that *S* is a celebration of the analog physicality of the book, are neglectful of the work’s digital *parergon*. Nicole Howard provides a neat (though necessarily incomplete) overview of digital references that place *S* in a “paratextual relationship with the internet” (Howard 2014, 92), yet leaves the implications of the relationship unexamined. While Brendon Wocke acknowledges the fact that despite its old appearance, a book like *S* could never have been technically mass-produced without today’s cutting edge printing technologies (Wocke 2014, 9), let alone for such a low sales price (around 20 dollars), he accords the digital no other role than a technological condition of possibility. Yet at variance with these mentions to “digital *paratexts*” that stand in a mere relation of “tension and ambiguity” (Tanderup 2016, 53) with what *S* first and foremost is considered to be - a book, in celebration of the book,- we propose an inverted reasoning. Both Genette (1997) and Derrida (1987) describe the paratext as a threshold phenomenon. For us, that relative externality is reason to disqualify the word “digital paratext,” as well as “supplement,” “appendix” or “addenda.” Instead of *paratexts*, we consider these elements *proper texts*.

¹⁰ Only a post on whoisstraka.com (<http://whoisstraka.com>), and a master’s thesis (Krasenberg 2014) take notice of the Ship-of-Theseus-paradox. Whereas the former does not move beyond mere mention, the latter reads the paradox only as a puzzle on *personal identity*, and not as the reflection on *object identity* that we primarily take it to be.

identity.

Accordingly, *S* will be claimed not just to set forward a philosophical paradox, but to *function* as a philosophical paradox. Paradoxes are meant to uncover, analyze and illustrate the principles underlying different manners of reasoning. Oftentimes it thereto uses the method of the argumentation *ad absurdum*, a method of testing a claim by carrying a logic to its utmost lengths. As a true philosophical paradox, *S* is thus taken to explore our media culture, its underlying principles, the consequences of such principles, and to gauge their limitations. At the same time it takes the paradox further than the mere thought experiment that it is to philosophers. In *S*, the paradox becomes just as much a formal, material and medial experiment.

The Ship-of-Theseus-Paradox

In *Ship of Theseus*, the fictional novel in book-box *S*, the nameless and amnesiac protagonist ('S') is held on a horrible, haunted ship. Unintentionally, whenever the ship comes to a coast, he is involved in the freedom-struggle against a totalitarian and destructive regime, in which he seems to unintentionally play a decisive role.

At a certain point during these unwanted adventures, *S*. is confronted with “a charcoal drawing of his ship. (*No*, he reminds himself, *the ship on which I've been held*)” in which he hardly recognizes “the ship as he knows it; a horrible thing,” a “mad assemblage.” The drawing, by contrast, depicts “an earlier version of it, when it was a harmonious whole, a shipwright’s realization of a xebec that would fly across the main and leave sailors aboard other vessels dumbstruck with envy.” Perplexed by this dissimilarity he wonders: “Are they the same ship?” (Abrams and Dorst 2013, 290) In raising this question, the protagonist *S*. reinvents the ancient paradox after which Straka’s novel is named: The Ship-of-Theseus-paradox.

This old philosophical puzzle is based on an early case of cultural heritage. After Theseus returned from Crete, so writes Plutarch, after slaying the Minotaur, the Athenians expressed their appreciation for Theseus by preserving the ship with which he had returned. Over the ages, they honored the vessel that had brought back their children by maintaining it in a seaworthy state:

The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place (..) ¹¹.

The ship that makes its appearance in Straka’s *Ship of Theseus*, has much in common with the ship that the Athenians maintained:

The ship itself is an archaic looking vessel. [...] And it is improbable-looking as well, in a state midway between decrepitude and tidy *renovation*, albeit *renovation* performed by a shipwright working against reason. The ship is freshly replanked in some places, while in others the wood has rotted [sic] away. [...] Two of the three lateen sails look fresh from the nearest sail loft, while the third is torn and frayed [...]. (Abrams and Dorst 2013, 28, emphases added)

As Plutarch points out, the thus conserved ship became 'a standing example among the

¹¹ Plutarch, “Theseus.” In: *Parallel Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans*. Translated by John Dryden. Classics Internet Archive. <<http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/theseus.html>> Accessed May 2016.

philosophers': was the ship of Theseus with its new parts still the same ship, or was it no longer the same? Since Plutarch, generations of philosophers have returned to the Ship-of-Theseus, as an image of *diachronic identity*. How to understand identity over time? Are sameness and changeability commensurable attributes? Can something change without ceasing to be what it was? How do present and past identity relate? What discontinuities does the persistence of identity allow for and what continuity does it demand?¹²

Plutarch's account is concise: it sketches the quandary in a single sentence, and its solution as a choice between two viewpoints. The actual philosophical debate, however, has given rise to a multitude of theories, schools, stances, and applications. Abrams and Dorst's *S*, and especially its 'inner novel' by V.M. Straka, reflect part of this 'journey' of Theseus' ship since Plutarch's times. The detail and explicitness with which it does so attest to the pivotal role the paradox has in the book, and in the larger transmedia constellation that we consider project *S*.¹³

In ways both textual and material, *S* invites us to take the paradox of the ship as an allegory of the book. In the novel *Ship of Theseus*, the specificities of the ship's itinerary remain mysterious, yet its destination and destiny are clearly bound up with those of writing. On the orlop deck (the deck deepest down in this sort of ship) the crew takes turns in frantic writing practices. And when the ship harbors, it is to offload the crates stuffed with their production, text, ink-stained piles of paper. Like the book, this ship is a carrier of writing. In another scene, ships and books are visually juxtaposed in lengthy, detailed description, here cut: 'A bookcase covers the entirety of the far wall, holding similarly sized books [...] Covering the other three walls are paintings and drawings of ships.' (Abrams and Dorst 2013, 285).

Yet the parallelism between ships and books is not only drawn textually, but materially too. Analogous to the ship that "again and again, [...] sheds a feature and dons a new one, reinterpreted and remade," (ibid,290) project *S* presents a text that is in a permanent state of alteration. These alterations can imply an extension, when elements are added through its alternative endings,

¹² Similar questions are invoked by yet another philosophical image to which *S* refers repeatedly, both directly, and by way of its derived motif 'What begins at the water shall end there / And what ends there shall once more begin.' Heraclitos' dictum 'You could not step twice in the same river; for other and yet other waters are even flowing on' (Chisholm 1976, 89). Since Plutarch's paradox already gives more food for thought than a single text can cover, we leave this reference here further unaddressed.

¹³ This detail goes further than this text can account for. For instance, *S* seems to account for the complexity that Thomas Hobbes, in 1656, added to Plutarch's paradox, when it describes the ship not only as 'renovated' but also as 'reassembled' (290). Hobbes introduced an extra element in the thought experiment, by proposing to imagine that 'some man [who] had kept the old planks as they were taken out, and by afterwards putting them together in the same order, had again made a ship of them' (Hobbes 1839,136). Accordingly, in addition to the original ship, and the renovated one 'made by continual reparation in taking out the old planks and putting in the new'(ibid.), the ancient riddle now involves a third element: a reassembled ship. Both ships can be convincingly argued to be Theseus' ship. This observation however, has the surprising effect of a magical multiplication: if we accept both views, we end up with two Ships of Theseus. Whereas Hobbes disclaims the possibility of doubling, project *S* is an eager exploration of that possibility: one chapter is called "The Drifting Twins," another (the final) "Ships of Theseus" [in plural], while all chapters abound in Doppelgängers, 'composite theories,' and plural personalities. In this play with doublings and parallels references to yet another engagement with the Ship-of-Theseus-paradox can be found: the philosophical position of the 'four-dimensionalists' that project *S* repeatedly mentions explicitly (for instance viii). The four-dimensionalist take on the Ship-of-Theseus-paradox emanates from their specific understanding of time. Other than the presentists, who believe that only the present has reality, while the past is a product of memory and the future a mental construct, four-dimensionalists sustain an eternalist notion of time, following which past, present and future are regions of time that are equally real, and that exist simultaneously. Accordingly, objects are considered to extend in time in a manner analogous to their extension in space. Thus a fourth dimension is added to an object's length, width and height. The sort of world that this perspective allows for, is that of the *S*'s inner novel: a world where in different places, time unfolds in a different pace: compared to the mainland, on board of the ship time is 'accelerated' (224-225, 26).

additions in the margins, foreword, footnotes, be it on paper, be it in the digital ambits of this transmedia project. Yet at the same time, the alterations can imply a loss. Like *S*'s ship, which continuously loses parts, the inserts in book-box *S* expose the object to amputation and change: these can easily get lost, or displaced.

A compelling image to understand this dynamics of “shedding” and “donning” is the odd contradiction between the stamped texts on the first and the last page of the library copy of *Ship of Theseus*. “KEEP THIS BOOK CLEAN,” the last page of the book instructs. “Borrowers finding this book pencil-marked, written upon, mutilated or unwarrantedly defaced, are expected to report the librarian.” Accordingly, this last page forbids the appropriation to which the first page seems to invite: “BOOK FOR LOAN.” Strangely enough, project *S* can be taken to appease the tension between these contradictory instructions, by repeatedly assimilating external elements. Through every shift of the project’s boundaries, paratext becomes text proper. Accordingly, the translator’s preface and annotations that once were an external addition to Straka’s manuscript of *Ship of Theseus* become an intrinsic part of the 1949 book edition of the novel. Subsequently, the marginalia and ephemera that Eric and Jennifer include in that margin of that copy, become an intrinsic part of the book-box *S*. We propose to regard project *S* as a result of yet another episode of this incorporation of external additions. The book *Ship of Theseus* is, just as Pressman argued about *House of Leaves*, “a central node in a network of multimedia, multi-authored forms” (2006, 107). By resurrecting the paradox of the Ship of Theseus within this constellation, it raises questions about the identity of this object, and the implication of its expansive, integrative dynamics.¹⁴

By drawing a parallel between the dynamics of change and continuity in the riddle of Theseus’ ship and media-technological transformation, project *S* hints at the applicability of this philosophical paradox to debates about today’s media culture. The paradox makes these debates—among, primarily, literary scholars and media theorists, archeologists and historians—recognizable as structured by the same question. For the question of the future of the book is essentially a question of the diachronic identity of objects, an inquiry into the persistence of a medium throughout time. This enables us to use the simplicity of Plutarch’s account to create some overview in the complexity.

Three perspectives on the future of the media can be identified. First, the debaters can be divided in two camps: of those claiming *continuity* (what Plutarch calls the “side holding that the ship remained the same”) and others claiming *discontinuity* (“contending it was not the same”). Continuity can be identified as the import of scholars who structurally unmask the historical precedents of media, hence the “oldness,” of everything we tend to consider “new” (Cf. Huhtamo and Parrika 2011). Discontinuity, on the other hand, appears to be the central claim of media scholars who attribute new media with a “newness” that renders the vocabulary of old media invalid to describe its poetics. (Cf. Morris and Swiss 2006). Whereas the a-historicism of the latter can result in a short-sighted presentism, the former runs the risk of disregarding the particularity of the present. Therefore, recently a third perspective has come to prevail, which pleads a discontinuous continuity, a reinvention of the old, a replanking to keep the ship seaworthy.¹⁵

The first, the continuity claim, which unmask the new as old, resonates in the way project *S* scatters our attention. By forcing the reader to shift between the main text, the margin notes, the inserts in the book-box, *S* offers a media-archaeological refutation of the new media criticism that blames the distractedness of digital reading for the decline of the “intellectual tradition of [...] single minded concentration.” (Carr 2011, xxx). This position resonates with the *trust* of the protagonist of the main text, whose main activities are even described in terms of trust: “planning and rowing and

¹⁴ See appendix for a visualization of this dynamics.

¹⁵ See for instance Brillenburg Wurth 2012, Hayles and Pressman 2013, Gitelman 2006.

trusting and traveling and stalking and killing and escaping and rowing and sewing and sailing and writing and sailing and writing and sailing and writing and planning writing and planning and rowing and *trusting*.” (Abrams and Dorst 2013, 318, emphasis added)¹⁶ This trusting also returns in the repeated claim that protagonist S. “has put his faith in the ship’s continuity” (ibid. 396)¹⁶, echoing the faith that scholars of the first position have in the continuity of the book.

The second position, the claim of discontinuity, is countered by the description of the ship full of writing as “a dying aviary.” (ibid, 326). Faith resulting in scenes of saving of cultural heritage (Abrams and Dorst 2013, 239-244), the skeptical voice in *Ship of Theseus* denies the need for and use of preservation practices: “All that ink, all that pigment, all that desperate action to preserve that what has been created” (Abrams and Dorst 2013, 450).¹⁷

The third position, too, is present in the project. By erecting a multimedia spectacle, Abrams and Dorst *replank* the ship that the book is, to prevent it from “becoming an anachronism in the modern seas.” (Ibid, 28). This medial hybridism makes of project S a grand affirmation of the “new assemblages” (Hayles and Pressman 2013) that Jessica Pressman, Katherine Hayles and Kiene Brillenburg see emerging in the middle of the “binary oppositions between electronic and paper-based writing.” (Brillenburg Wurth 2012, 97).

The alternative endings of *S*, to which we will return later, seem an attempt to cover all possible positions on the axis between this faith and skepticism. In the allegorical reading of project *S*, in which the paradox of the Ship of Theseus applies to the state of the book, compelling questions emerge: what does it take to keep the book afloat, as the Athenians demanded of Theseus’ ship? And inversely, what would it take to sink the book-ship? How do losses and additions, alterations and expansions change the book, or even determine whether it is still worthy of that name? *S* also raises questions about the complex constellation it erects. How to consider the components of this media spectacle? Are these new planks to the old ship, or would it be more appropriate to speak of a different ship altogether?

Bookish Hermeneutics

These questions, however, are not the driving perplexity of project *S*. Rather, we claim, *S* examines why these questions matter altogether. What is at stake in the question of diachronic object identity? Why would we wonder whether the book will persist throughout time? Like the philosophers who picked up the debate after Plutarch, *S* emphasizes that the paradox is not just a riddle of object identity but also of *personal and cultural identity*. It shows that the question of objects is not just about objects, but fundamentally about the people that interact with them, and the culture that is the sum of these interactions.¹⁸

¹⁶ Compare: “the ship’s rebirth gives him hope.” (339) “Do you always travel with such cumbersome books?’ / ‘I don’t trust anyone who wouldn’t.’”(21)

¹⁷ Often this voice is spoken by the ghost ship’s captain Maelstrom: “At any point you could have said no and stop sailing hither and yon trying to save whatever cramped and dark and past some little niche of the world you’ve been trying to save.” “It’s part of the tradition, but it doesn’t have to be”.(Ibid, 406).

¹⁸ In 1689 Locke engaged Ship-of-Theseus-paradox in his quest for the ‘criterion of personal identity.’ If we are, as Plutarch calls it, ‘[some]thing that grows,’ that alters throughout time, how does that change impact who we are? If something like personal identity exists, what is its constituent? While protagonist *S*’s repeatedly raised ‘Who am I?’ echoes Locke’s inquiry, his amnesia points towards the outcome of this quest: Locke indicated *memory* as the criterion of personal identity across time. The memory loss of Straka’s protagonist seems to bring along identity loss. Not only does *S*. suffer from an uncertainty about his own identity, also to others he appears unidentifiable: repeatedly, he is described as the sort of man that passes without being noticed or remembered. *S*. is ‘the transparent man,’ ‘a man that does not attract attention [...], grown complacent with being overlooked.’ In compliance with Locke’s dictum *S* here shows: no recognition without

Of the three perspectives on media culture outlined above, each resonates in *S*. Yet by structurally reflecting these stances in terms of desperate hope or detached skepticism, *S* emphasizes that the question of object identity has larger stakes than a mere nominalistic dubbing whether something is worthy of a particular name. What values are honored by the hope, faith and trust of *S*'s protagonist, and loathed by the skepticism of their antagonists? What depends on the continuity of the ship? And—if we once again allow ourselves to compare ships and books—what depends on the continuity of the book? We will now show how *S* identifies *hermeneutics* as the core of these (dis)concerns, and how it tests the solidity of this base by taking it to extremes, driving hermeneutics *ad absurdum*.

Yet before carrying it to its extremes, project *S* drives the culture of hermeneutics back to its origins. According to Bernhard Siegert, the hermeneutic principles and practices that we have come to associate with the book, originally spring from yet another medium: that of the letter. Remarkably, this medium also has a pervasive presence in project *S*.¹⁹ Almost half of the inserts in book-box *S* is postal in kind: amongst the twenty one ephemera, we find a greeting card, four postcards and five letters. Moreover, throughout the story of *S*, other elements of the project are identified as epistolary texts. What at first seem margin notes to a novel, develop into a correspondence between Eric and Jen.²⁰ Likewise, it is suggested that the footnotes to *Ship of Theseus* are, rather than an *annotation* system, a *communication* system: the novel and notes compose a secret exchange between Straka and his translator.²¹ It is by having a closer look at these letter-like dynamics that we can explain the notion of hermeneutics.

The letter,²² Siegert explains, possesses specific properties that the modern subject has come to identify with. This property is what he calls the “relay.”²³ It is an interval, a delay, and a withholding. In the relay, myriad things can occur. Interferences might delay or distort the message, or overpower the signal to such extent that the message is altered or intercepted altogether. Yet in this danger zone meaning does not only become unstable, but also possible. The “relay” is the place (and time) where meaning can get lost, *and* it is the place where meaning is to be found. Found by whom? By the hermeneutic reader, Siegert would answer (Siegert 1999, 248). This hermeneutic reader, he explains, is who the modern subject has come to identify him/herself with. Hence beyond a mere literary reading strategy, hermeneutics is the modern mode of being-in-the-world: the relay is not only the place where meaning gets lost and found, but also where the subject realizes itself in the act of searching for meaning. Similarly, in *S*, what these two couples encounter through their marginalia and footnotes, what they find in the epistolary dynamic of their interpretive act is, rather than meaning, themselves and each other. Here one sees how this notion of hermeneutics propagates an understanding of personal and cultural identity that is profoundly relational. The

recollection.

¹⁹ See, for a more expansive analysis that does more justice to this pervasive presence: De Vries, *The Postal Imagination: Returning Mail in Contemporary Culture*, 2018.

²⁰ Eric and Jen repeatedly refer to their margin notes as correspondence. See for instance Jen's admonition to Eric: “People might enjoy corresponding with you more if you weren't so condescending” (2).

²¹ ‘I know the footnotes are really strange but what if they weren't supposed to be informative? What if they were signals or messages to someone – like Straka himself?’ (Margin note Jen, page 0). “What if they were sending messages to each other in the book? Both directions. [...] why not by phone / letter / telegram [...]?” (Margin notes Eric 232).

²² The scope of this text forces us to this generic indication. Siegert's analysis is, however, all but generic. ‘The letter’ that set the parameters for the core concepts of Western thought and sensibility, implies a specific design of the mail medium, as it functioned within a particular arrangement of the postal system in a demarcated historical period.

²³ See also the title of Siegert's study: *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*.

modern concept of literature, Siegert claims, came to fully coincide with the concept of the letter: as a communication between the individual interiority of an authentic author with his interpreting reader. And where literature developed into hermeneutics' form par excellence, the book became its monumental carrier.

To ponder about the consequences of media-technological change for this modern self-understanding, Siegert recurs to the information theory of Claude Shannon (Siegert 1999, 255). With Shannon, one can redefine the relay in terms of *entropy*. The measure of uncertainty in a transferred message that the term "entropy" denotes, depends on delays and disturbances in the communication channels: noise. A high level of entropy implies that signals come through, but in too confused a manner to impose a single interpretation. It is a state in which the facts of the matter are obscure, unclear, uncertain, ambiguous. In digital media, Shannon observes, entropy is generally far lower than in analogue media. Returning to Siegert, we can explain why this distinction between analog and digital media is so often assessed in a way that might sound counterintuitive: the disqualification of the medium that entails greater clarity, and smaller uncertainty. Yet now that we know how modern self-understanding depends on this uncertainty, we can understand the attachment to entropy. Or to rephrase it again in terms of the philosophical paradox: we get a sense of the personal and cultural implications of particular object properties. When the relay is minimized, Siegert explains, ambivalences are enervated to errors, meaning is condensed to information, and interpretation replaced by cryptanalytics, understanding by calculation (Ibid, 207-265). Then there would no longer be need for the Hermeneutic. Accordingly, Siegert claims, digital technology renders the human redundant.

The bookbox *S* seems designed as the Hermeneutic's ultimate playground and pleasure garden, densely packed with poetic symbolism. The full repertoire of grant literary topoi is present (Love, Death, War, Time, Space, History, Memory, Identity, Language, Communication, Expressiveness, Culture). So are the textual genres of which the book used to be the main carrier (in playing with the traits of the scholarly publication, the biography, the Cold War novel, the detective novel, the romantic novel, the saga, the odyssey, the epistolary novel and the postal plot). There are allusions to ancient mythology, biblical references, intertextual dialogism with the modern classics,²⁴ Gordian knots of intersecting plotlines, mirror games of parallelisms and multiplications, and a labyrinth of contradictions and brain-breakers. Whereas digital media's 'optimal coding' aims to minimize entropy, its maximization seems the aim of bookbox *S*, expressed by its title: in information theory, as in thermodynamics, "*S*" stands for *entropy*.

While the letter *S* indicates entropy, the interferences responsible for the delays and distortions that augment entropy, are referred to as 'noise.' *S* is not only noisy in its abundance of ambiguity. Noise also has an explicit presence in *Ship of Theseus*. It is the 'static of radio frequencies' that is used to subliminally hide 'secret messages,' (Abrams and Dorst 2013, 325). and the sound or static that protagonist *S* observes buzzing around the ship, and intensifying as the story proceeds. By the end of the book it is increasingly unbearable: "that terrible resonance that saturates the air." (Ibid, 325).

The sound here described resembles the sound that repeatedly invades the first broadcast of "Radio Straka": an uncanny interweaving of maritime sounds—waves, seagulls, and vibrating rope—with a high frequency buzz.²⁵ "Radio Straka" is a podcast-series and a Twitter stream, presented as a

²⁴ Such as Homer's *Odyssey* and its reinvention in Joyce's *Ulysses*, the Orpheus myth, Plato's allegory of the cave, Melville's *Moby Dick* or Cervantes's *Don Quixote de la Mancha*.

²⁵ This 'noise' is most prominent around 22'30 and during the last minutes of the broadcast. <http://podgallery.org/radio-straka/>

recurring radio show, which was launched online in the months after the publication of *S*. The broadcasts treat the question ‘Who is Straka?’ through free association and wild speculation. (‘Straka was born in the same year in which football was invented. Could there be a relation between Straka and football?’²⁶). The suggestions on the website “<https://whoisstraka.wordpress.com>” are often not less improbable and far-fetched. By this observation, we do not disclaim the interest of Radio Straka, or the analytical powers of (assumed) readers. Both provide information that often makes sense and sometimes is useful or even illuminating.²⁷ Their greatest interest, however, lies in the fact that a major part of these post and comments is devoid of any explanatory use. These resemble the translator’s notes in *Ship of Theseus*: they aim to hide, rather than reveal. They appear ubiquitously, but hardly ever where you would expect or want an explanatory note. Obvious references are left unmarked, while contestable and far-fetched associations are highlighted. To stick to the Theseus-theme: they send you deeper into the labyrinth rather than handing you Ariadne’s thread.

In maximizing entropy, *S* uncovers the hermeneutic underpinnings of book cult(ure) and drives these to a point of absurdity. In the first place, this *ad absurdum* argument concerns hermeneutics as *reading strategy*, particularly the sort of literary criticism that is focused on authorship, and that lets itself be bamboozled by the overdetermination of language. This interpreting reader is granted a pleasure garden and simultaneously send into a bush of confusion, entropy. Likewise the anti-hermeneutic reader is shown what he misses: how an interpretive investigatory eye can perceive a full philosophical history in a book, that would otherwise remain unnoticed. Yet the ridicule of the hermeneutic reader proceeding backs the anti-hermeneutic’s point. Alongside the text, *S* offers its own hermeneutic readers: Eric and Jen and their scholarly dialogue on *S*, which evolves into a dialogue on themselves and their relationship. Their practice, and the querulous academic realm it forms part of, is clever, but also implicitly criticized and ridiculed. As it unfolds, project *S* comes to stress the utter self-referentiality of these interpretive practices, which gradually cease to touch upon a reality more external than either academic discourse, or the personal biographies of the interpreters.

In the second place the *ad absurdum* argument of project *S* question hermeneutics at large: not merely as a reading strategy but as the modern self-understanding that culminates in book culture. In maximizing perplexity, *S* celebrates analog entropy and the hermeneutics this entropy allows for. At the same time project *S* demonstrates how digital media, despite Shannon, can generate entropy just as well as their analog counterpart. The association of “informational culture” as “post-hermeneutical” (Hansen 2004, 599) hence attests rather to the new medium’s prevailing application, than its irreducible *property*.²⁸ Moreover, in creating, in Shannon’s terminology, just as many ‘cloud spheres’ as ‘signal points,’ *S* results not to be the grant hermeneutic indulgence that we first took it for: hermeneutic readership is just as much thwarted and teased here, as it is facilitated.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the extent in which project *S* is of interest and importance for the inquiry into

²⁶ Paraphrase [Listen XXX for exact quote].

²⁷ For this text, for instance, the earlier mentioned webpage that track all recurrences of the word ‘absurd’ in *S* is of great help, even though –like, significantly, most posts on these websites- it provides no interpretation beyond mention.

²⁸ Similar points have been made by Johanna Drucker and Mark Marino. While Marino demonstrates how code can be just as much the object of hermeneutics, Drucker reminds us of the fact that computers should not be fully equated with binary systems, since the most dominant programming language (html) still depends on the alphabetical system. See Drucker 2013 and Marino 2013.

the media-technological change in general, and the book in particular. It questioned the idea that the project's interest can be described as a 'celebration of the book.' If taken as a celebration, that only in the sense of the festival, in which celebration connotes *excess*, a pushing toward, and beyond extremes.

We addressed both the question what *S* is and what it *does*. *S* is better described as a transmedia constellation than as a book, we argued. Through its voracious integration of media systems, *S* plays with many forms: it is part book, part correspondence, part commercial stunt, short film, social network, sound art, etcetera. *S* is a formal experiment that raises questions about the identity of this object, and the implication of its expansive dynamics.

By relating a paradox of rupture and continuity to cultural artifacts, and their renovation, preservation or innovation, project *S* also makes contemporary debates on media-technological change recognizable as recurrences of an age-old puzzle. The way in which this paradox is re-enacted in *S* in the form of an ever changing ship, is to be read as an allegory of media chance, and of the book in particular. The paradox that *S* forms: the multi-media constellation celebrating the book, the hermeneutic endeavour that unearths only superfluous information, is designed to foreground the issue of the relation between media, hermeneutics and modern subjects.

It is there that *S* proves the interest of the Ship-of-Theseus-paradox for the question on the persistence of the book in a digital age. By simultaneously underlining and undermining the cultural association between the book and the possibility of hermeneutics, project *S* incorporates opposing voices, one faithful and another skeptical of the preservation of the book.²⁹ Even more, the project provides insight in one of the principles underlying these positions.

Philosophical paradoxes force us to inquire *where* we stand and *why*, on the basis of what principles. *S* is understood by us as an *argument ad absurdum* – the method philosophical paradoxes use to think through matter to its ultimate implications. It drives to its extremes the stakes of the culture, cult and cultivation of the book. From here, it is normal to wonder where *S* stands. Does it end up taking position in this quandary? The pervasive presence of the paradox throughout the project, as well as its structure of *opera aperta* time and again resist against pinpointing any stance. Is it hence, as the paradoxes in medieval times, a true *insolubilia*?

The alternative endings to the inner novel that are published on the internet, confirm this thesis of unresolvability of the riddle. While the final chapter of the book reads 'destroyed, and it is worth preserving. And if it can't be preserved, then it should be released and cycled.' (451), "Version 273"³⁰ reads "'destroyed. But it must circulate. It must not be contained,' which is again contradicted by "Version 288"³¹: 'destroyed. And it is worth preserving'. All conflicting ends seems to mount up to "Version 291,"³² a grand affirmation of the puzzlement resulting from the *opera aperta* structure of this project. Here the end reads: "'Where will their steps lead?"

Appendix: [See separate document for word-art-piece].

²⁹ In that sense it is comparable to Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. Hansen observes that the book does not claim a 'pregiven privilege' over all the other media that figure in it: '*House of Leaves* thereby opens itself to the infinite matrix of information outside of it in a way that is almost unprecedented even among contemporary novels (Hansen, 628). Like our stance on *S*, Hansen claims that *House of Leaves* foregrounds hermeneutics. The difference is that Hansen finds *House of Leaves* to foreground a 'bodily hermeneutics', whereas we think that *S* focuses rather on the relational aspects of hermeneutics.

³⁰ Version (2)73. The first and only Doug-Dorst-Authorized Chapter 10 Alternative Ending (juli 2014)

³¹ Version 288. Posted by @CFish6

³² Version 291. Posted simultaneously here and by @Osfourcage and @JillaggieARG

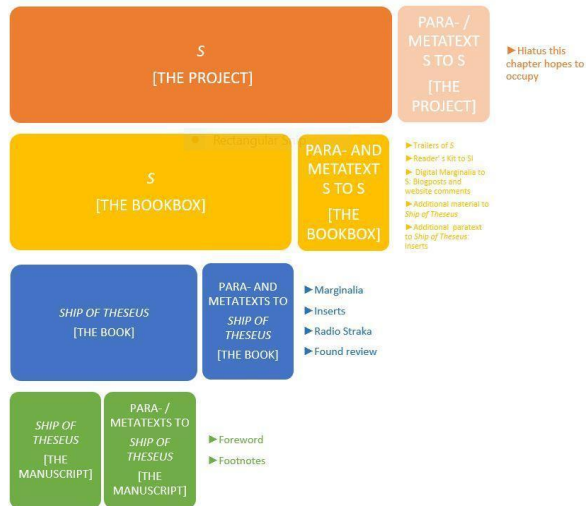


Figure 1: Schematic rendering of our understanding of S as an expanding, aggregative transmedia constellation, that encompasses not only the fictional novel, inserts and marginalia that the bookbox S envelopes, but also the meta-and paratexts that accompany this bookbox. The accumulative process of inclusion that this figure tries to schematize, also shows how the notion of ‘metatext or paratext’ is rendered senseless every time these elements become an integrative part of the next dimension of the project, and appendices and addenda become proper parts.