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Thinking Outside of the Box: A Text World Theory Response to the Interactivity of B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*

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At the close of his second novel, *Albert Angelo*, B. S. Johnson (1964) emphatically notes, 'A page is an area on which I may place any signs I consider to communicate most nearly what I have to convey: therefore I employ […] typographical techniques beyond the arbitrary and constricting limits of the conventional novel' (176). As such Johnson clearly underlines the formal experimentation that characterises much of his literary canon. Indeed, not only does the above statement reflect the columns and cut-out windows of *Albert Angelo* (1964) but also encompasses the tall page format of *Trawl* (1966), the blank sections in *House Mother Normal* (1971), and most explicitly the unbound pages of Johnson's book-in-a-box, *The Unfortunates* (1969). It is the latter novel that will take the focus of this essay. Comprised of twenty-seven individual sections, *The Unfortunates* is designed as 'a physical tangible metaphor for randomness' (Johnson, 1973: 25) and therefore presents neither corporeal nor textual linearity. It is to be read in any chosen order aside from the marked first and last parts, to be shuffled and restructured by each individual reader, so as to imbue 'an enactment of randomness which the bound book simply cannot achieve' (Coe, 2004: 8).

For Johnson the form of *The Unfortunates* 'reinforced its themes and enhanced its veracity' (Tredell, 2000: 99), by reflecting the random workings of memory and the affliction of cancer that claimed the life of his friend, whilst preventing his reader from committing to the fictional reality of the narrative world. The novel serves as a preeminent example of Johnson's obsession with the artificiality of fiction, impelled by his belief that 'telling stories really is telling lies' (Johnson, 1973: 14). As such, by overtly presenting the materiality of the book Johnson positions his readers at an emotional distance, only allowing them to fully engage with the novel externally, through the interaction with form. In order to explore this interactivity I will attempt to determine the relationship between the reader and the novel, both in its physical and literary capacities, by applying features of hypertext and multimodal approaches in correlation with recent developments in Text World Theory. In particular I will address the relationship between what Werth (1999) terms the discourse world and the text world using Gibbons' (2012) development of figured trans-worlds, which I will go on to argue defines the reading experience of *The Unfortunates*. I will begin by mapping out the literary critical responses to Johnson's text so as to consider the perceived effectiveness of its unusual and unique form.

Originally published in 1969 *The Unfortunates* takes for its focus the interwoven memories of B. S. Johnson whose professional return to Nottingham reverts his mind to thoughts of his university friend, Tony Tillinghast, who died of cancer a few years prior to the time of the opening part. In accordance with Booth's (1961) seminal work on the implied author, I will here make the distinction between the author B. S. Johnson who died in 1973 and the implied authorial voice of Johnson who narrates and projects the memories that construct the novel. This identification will become important when negotiating the world

levels of the text. The novel is predominantly autobiographical, illustrative of Johnson's view that authors should restrict their subjects to 'the simple facts of their own lives' (Coe, 1999: vii). The unreliability of the implied author, evidenced by the continual blanks and white spaces that disrupt the narrative, reflects the authenticity of the account by representing the fragility of Johnson's memory. The novel is therefore presented as a textual parallel for the workings of the mind, which in a similar way to the text is fragmented, selective and frequently unclear.

It is this projection of randomness that is at the centre of the novel's literary critique for despite Johnson's belief in the novel's formal and thematic implications critics such as Parrinder (1977) argue that 'the demonstration is pointless' (54). More specifically, he argues that the subject of cancer 'contrasts sharply with the whimsical randomness that results from putting the novel into a box' (54). However, as Johnson continued to attest, although elements of the novel are slightly flawed, the unbound narrative of *The Unfortunates* offered a 'better solution to the problem of conveying the mind's randomness than the imposed order of a bound book' (Johnson, 1973: 26).

It was arguably Johnson's attempt to '[reintroduce] the risk into experimental writing by publicly setting himself tasks which were in fact impossible' (Parrinder, 1977: 45) that determined his position as a forerunner of the early postmodernist movement. According to Brian McHale (1987), the 'classically modernist interior monologue' (253), which frames the memories and present events of *The Unfortunates*, acknowledges its classification as a late-modernist rather than postmodernist text. Its concern, in correlation with McHale's categorisation is therefore predominantly epistemological, engaged with the interpretation of the world rather than the ontological questions of 'being' projected by postmodernism. However, divisions such as this seem too restrictive as the ontological, 'post-cognitive' challenges McHale draws from Higgins (1978) such as 'which world is this? what is to be done in it? which of my selves is to do it?' (101) are equally pertinent in discussing *The Unfortunates,* as Johnson projects a slightly different version of himself within each digressive memory. As such the reader must engage with the above questions as they actively map the position of the implied Johnson through time and mentally track the worlds that he occupies (see Emmott (1999) and Ryder (2003) for discussion of narrative comprehension).

Additionally, McHale's (1987) extended argument that the unbound sections of the novel do not 'interfere very profoundly with the structure or stability of the fictional world' (253) is also slightly inaccurate. Indeed, although the time period encompassed by the novel can be reconstructed the continual disruption of the narrative through formal techniques challenges the 'stability' of the fictional world by foregrounding the object of the book, rather than the textual narrative, in the reader's consciousness.

The interactivity of *The Unfortunates* is therefore grounded both in the non-linear ordering of the sections, which are governed by the choices of the reader, and the physical object of the book determined by its multimodal quality. I will therefore address the reader's agency imposed by the novel in relation to its position as 'hypertext' or 'ergodic literature'. As noted by Mitchell (2007) 'the active construction of sequence […] that *The Unfortunates* demands its reader to undertake, figures the work as *virtual* in a certain way' (52, original emphasis) and can thus be positioned alongside hypertext fiction (see Landow, 1994 and Bell, 2007, 2010). For example, the development of the narrative is triggered by the reader's selection of the twenty-five individual sections much like the choice of 'links' in digital story texts, which propel the discourse forward. Both therefore rely partially on the agency of the reader. However, as hypertext is typically an online form the term 'ergodic literature' coined by Aarseth (1997) is more useful here as it refers to the 'nontrivial effort […] required by the reader to traverse the text' (1) and is unspecific as to textual medium. The reader is to be understood therefore in Gibbon's (2012) terms as 'a sophisticated implied reader, but one

that, crucially, is seen to physically engage with the novel in an actualised way' (4). This is particularly evident when considering the multimodality of the text and the relationship between the text and discourse worlds, which will now be addressed.

Initially developed by Paul Werth (1994, 1995, 1999), Text World Theory is a deictic discourse model designed to account for and explore the mental spaces that construct all spoken and written discourse. Drawing on theories of 'mental spaces' and earlier 'possible worlds' models Werth proposes a series of rich, interlinked textual worlds, which are mapped out in the consciousness of the individual in accordance with their personal knowledge and perceptions. The first, termed the discourse world encompasses the immediate situation of the discourse participants, their understanding of the actual world around them and their personal position within it. In the case of this essay the discourse world contains the author and the reader. As such the world is defined as being 'split', for the temporal and spatial locations of the two participants are distinct (Gibbons, 2012: 35). *The Unfortunates* presents a clear example of this divide, as although the narrative is focalised from the perspective of B. S. Johnson he is present only within the subsequent levels of the model, such as the text world.

The text world contains both world-building elements, which reflect the setting and time of the text and the objects and characters that inhabit the narrative level, in addition to function-advancing propositions that determine progression. Werth (1999) also classifies a series of sub-worlds, which identify extensions of the text world, triggered for example by the expression of beliefs or desires, metaphorical imagery, direct speech, flashbacks or flash-forwards. Such worlds have since been redefined by Gavins (2003) into two categories, *world-switches* that reflect direct changes to the focus of the discourse, and *modal worlds*, which are triggered by modalisation (131). This development of Werth's initial framework removes the sense of subordination implied by the prior term (Gavins, 2007: 52) and shall therefore be employed throughout this essay

In the opening part of the novel the text world is constructed around an unknown city and encompasses an unspecified temporal frame. The only enactor in the world is B. S. Johnson who has arrived at the station of 'this city' (Johnson, 1964: First, 1, *all further textual references are to this edition*). The reader is immediately pushed into Johnson's consciousness in the opening sentence, as the use of the mental verb 'know', 'I know this city' triggers an epistemic modal world-switch. The first experience of the present surroundings is therefore partially referential as it is reflected on in relation to Johnson's memory and narrative perspective. However, the use of proximal deictic markers in the preceding sentences, evidenced by the use of definite demonstratives such as 'this', 'this green ticket hall' (First, 1) ground the reader in the prominent text world space of the station in its present reality.

Indeed, the description of Johnson's surroundings is particularly detailed evident by the string of successive world-building elements in the second sentence:

This green ticket-hall, the long office half-rounded at its ends, that ironic clerestory, brown glazed tiles, green below, the same, the decorative hammer beams supporting nothing, above, of course! (First, 1)

In my mental construction of this environment, the ticket hall and the office in particular are figural, both because of their pre-modification and also because of connections I can map across from the discourse world. Indeed, having read the introductory note to the text I understand the unknown city to be Nottingham. Having often visited Nottingham station I can strongly construct an image of the ticket offices thus combining both my personal knowledge in the discourse world with narrative description in the text-world. The importance of the relationship between the two worlds is therefore immediately evident.

Arguably, any reader, who has read the introduction, has any previous knowledge of B. S. Johnson or of Nottingham can move between the text and the discourse world so as to form a more complete image from Johnson's ambiguous and indefinite narration.

In addition to making inferences as to the spatial parameters of the initial text world the reader must also move between subsequent overlapping text worlds within the narrative so as to map the oscillation between present events and Johnson's memories. The sections comprised of such memories are particularly difficult to follow, as they approximately span a time period of ten years and due to the ergodic nature of the novel appear in a randomly selected order. The reader must therefore map the development of the different characters throughout the varying memories and trace the temporal shifts between the individual sections. Moreover, as argued by Emmott (1999) 'to understand a story fully […] the reader needs to make inferences about what is not mentioned' (105) and as such must account for the time between the sections where narrative is missing. Such interpretative actions can only be performed in the discourse world, as the reader must draw upon their knowledge of the preceding sections so as to construct an inferred temporal frame. With the selection of each new part the reader must therefore shift between the text and discourse worlds so as to successfully piece together the fragmented narrative thus acknowledging the interconnected nature of Werth's model.

As noted by White (2005) the fact that the reader can follow the chronology of the novel at all arguably challenges the randomness of Johnson's text for as she accurately states 'Johnson's metaphor only fully relates to the *experience* of the text in a random order' (115, original emphasis). However, it is arguably the experience of reading *The Unfortunates*, which defines the poignancy of the text, as each reader will interact with the novel in a unique and personal way due to the differences in discourse world knowledge.

The inferences made by the reader in the discourse world are particularly necessary to account for the blank spaces, which disrupt Johnson's narrative. As noted by Mitchell (2007) 'The frequent textual blanks suggest gaps in knowledge, imagination or inspiration, the mind's own blanks; such gaps apparently wilfully diminish the authority of the author, inviting the reader to fill them in' (61). This is apparent in the first line of the novel:

'I know this city!   This green ticket hall…' (First, 1).

There can be multiple readings of the blank space here. It is perhaps reflective of Johnson's thought process, a metaphor for the gaps in his memory. It could reflect the narrator's visual perceptions as he scans the familiar environment or simply a pause in the narrator's stream of consciousness. Although opposing Johnson's desire to prevent reader interpretation, the technique does distance the reader from the narrative as with every blank gap the text world becomes unstable and the reader is pushed back into the discourse world. Indeed, the 'filling in' of the gaps can only be performed in the discourse world, yet, conversely has an immediate effect on the development of the text world. It is at this point that Gibbons' work on multimodality, specifically in the development of figured trans-worlds becomes highly useful for addressing reader interactivity.

According to Gibbons (2012) 'Multimodality, in its most fundamental sense, is the coexistence of more than one semiotic model within a given context' (8). Such modes exist as 'part of an open-ended set' (Page, 2010: 6) and include systems such as language and typography. These are notably salient in discussing *The Unfortunates*, specifically in relation to its numerous blank spaces. In multiple examples throughout the novel the gaps in the text seem to expect the reader to become involved in completing the narrative. For instance, consider the following line:

> 'These melodramatic idiotic moments in which life is completely   ' (His Dog, 4).

The space here seems to infer the word 'blank' or 'empty' through the correlation between the physical gap in the structure of the sentence and reader knowledge of idiomatic language in the discourse world. By supplying the missing word in the narrative the reader therefore projects an interpretation onto the text world.

However, as the process of filling in the gap is a conscious activity, it occurs from the discourse world and is therefore ontologically distinct from the textual narrative. The action therefore relies on insinuation and active reader involvement, yet does not suggest a merging of worlds or complete immersion in the text. According to Gibbons (2012) this conceptualisation can be defined as a figured trans-world which is 'generated when the reader is required and/or directed by the text into a performative role in the discourse world, a role that calls upon corporeal activity and insinuations, to a greater or lesser extent, active reader involvement in the narrative' (80). This is represented below in Figure 1.1.
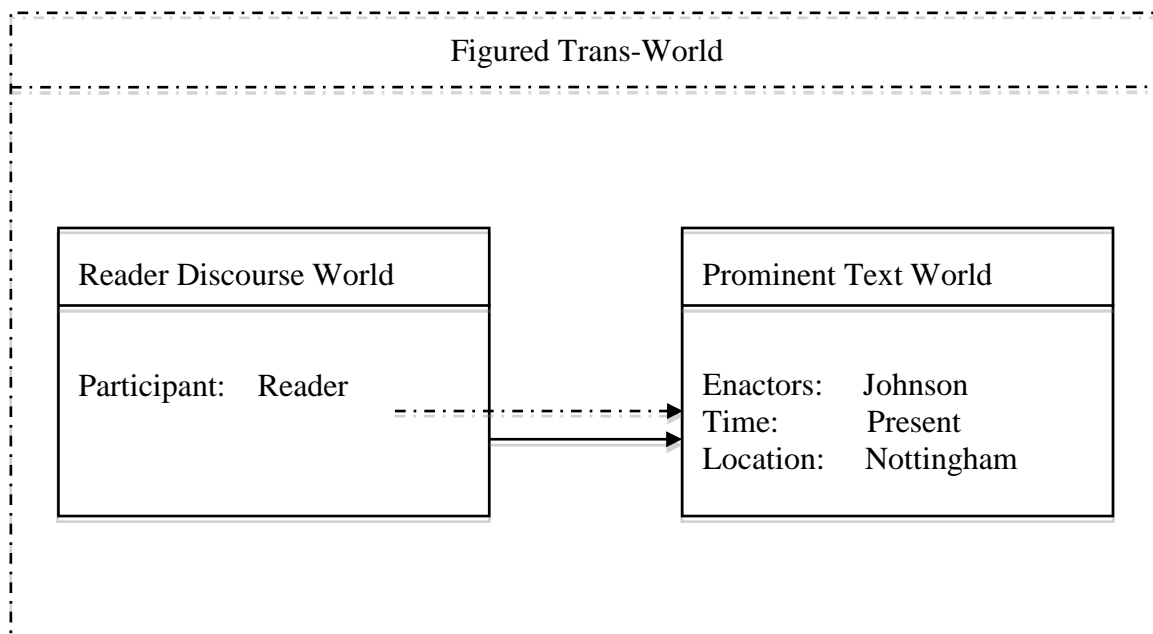

Figure 1.1, Figured Trans-World of Johnson's (1969) *The Unfortunates*, (adapted from Gibbons, 2012:80).

In similar circumstances the text actively directs the reader to become involved in the formation of the narrative in the same way as he or she must structure the fragmented sections. The following example is particularly notable: 'a curious thing to remember, all memories are curious, for that matter, the mind as a   think of an image' (The estate, 5). The closing imperative clause creates a modal world switch that, despite being two worlds removed, directly addresses the reader to perform an action in the discourse world. The novel is therefore interrupted as the reader must ironically abandon the narrative of the text in order to fully engage with it, albeit from an external, ontologically distinct position.

The box, which contains the novel, also emphasises its multimodal quality and the subsequent interactivity of the text. For instance, there are three quotations on the inside edges which reflect Johnson's belief in the art of writing and the importance of recording the life of his friend. In order to read the quotations the box must be rotated thereby increasing the level of physical interaction with the text and drawing further attention to the materiality of the book. However, it is the imprinted article on the inside base of the box which is

perhaps the most interesting. The article is representative of the football match that Johnson is working on during the present moments of the narrative. Indeed, throughout the varying sections the commentary of the match, the writing process and the transcription of the article are presented. In particular the relationship between the initial commentary and the finished piece is specifically notable.

The part opening 'the pitch worn', which presents the thought process of Johnson as he constructs his commentary, spans across twelve pages in contrast to the diametrically concise page of the article. In the text section, the reader is predominantly positioned within the text world of the City Ground football stadium acknowledged by prominent world-building elements such as a 'football', 'a score indicator', and 'the referee'. However, attention is continually drawn away from the match in the text world to the meta-fictional commentary of the game. As such the use of italics, blanks and lists of pre-modifiers continually move the reader between the prominent text world where Johnson is writing, the epistemic modal world where he mentally forms his article, and the discourse world. The experience of the commentary from within the text world of the narrative and that of the imprinted article are therefore significantly different despite being fundamentally interlinked.

For instance, within the novel the description of the match is much more detailed, evidenced by numerous function-advancing propositions such as 'the ball spun lazily slowly inevitably off his boot' (9) and 'the United defence had fallen back sufficiently' (8). Unlike the function-advancers within the article the propositions within the novel represent both material processes (as seen in the above phrases) and mental processes such as 'Gordon [...] felt' (8). The reader can therefore directly engage with Johnson's assessment of the match, including his personal perceptions that are not presented in the finished piece. Moreover, at the close of the narrative passage when he states 'now I must hack this into some shape, now I must make it into 500 well-chosen words' (9) the incomplete and finished commentaries can simultaneously be conceptualised. Despite being projected further into Johnson's consciousness through two consecutive epistemic modal worlds, both triggered by the modal verb 'must', the reader can therefore move between the overlapping text worlds and the discourse world to create a more vivid mental image of the development of Johnson's article.

It is the continual oscillation or 'toggling' (Stockwell, 2002: 142) between the discourse and the text-world that therefore defines the unusual narrative of *The Unfortunates*, as Johnson objectively presents highly personal memories whilst continually preventing his reader from becoming fully immersed in the textual events. As such the reader can only temporally 'project' into the narrative. A perfect example of this occurs in the one paragraph page, which accounts Tony's death, reproduced below:

> June rang on the Saturday, was it, or the Thursday before, no, quite late, we had already arranged to go, though what arrangements could we have needed to make, saying there was no need for us to come down now, on Sunday, for he had died that evening, had not recovered consciousness that morning from his sleep, but previously there had been the opposite of a relapse, three days when his mind had been virtually normal, for which she had been grateful, June, it had seemed like a miracle, though he still could not move, his mind had come back and they had talked very seriously about everything, for the first time had talked about death (1).

Immediately, the use of the past tense 'June rang' marks the section among those representative of Johnson's memories, as a flashback, enhanced by the proceeding negated epistemic modal world triggered by the interrogative 'was it', which challenges the reliability of the narrative account. There then follows a consecutive three world switches, the first attached to the qualitative negation of the connective 'or', the temporal time change induced

by 'the Thursday before' and finally the negative particle 'no' all of which push the reader further into the confusion of the narrator's consciousness. The use of direct speech in the second and third line then moves into the present tense through a deictic world switch and represents the voice of June. Arguably, this presents a stronger sense of immediacy as the message is momentarily conveyed that Tony has died, enhanced by the present tense markers 'now', which gives the statement greater poignancy.

The use of additional negated world-switches triggered by 'no need', 'had not recovered' and the negative verb 'died' increases the emotion of the passage. As noted by Werth (1995) 'negatives always operate in contrast to an expected state of affairs' (196) and therefore in order to conceptualise Tony's death the reader must first visualise his recovery. Gavins (2007) supports this in her development of Werth's framework when she notes that such 'events must first be brought into focus in the discourse to then be negated' (102). The reader must therefore envision a Tony who did fully recover and did participate in the visit with his friends in order to construct the negated world, and as such the reversal of the image increases the despair of the narrative's actuality.

Further to this, the distressing nature of Tony's death is enhanced by the temporal shift triggered by the adverb 'previously', which creates a mental space where Tony appeared to be recovering, when 'his mind had been virtually normal'. In a similar way to the negated worlds, the world-switch forces the reader to construct the image of a healthy Tony. The emotive transition to June's point of view reflected by triggers such as 'she was grateful, June' and 'it seemed like a miracle' also enhances the sadness of Tony's relapse by projecting the perspective of his closest loved one. The negative associations of the epistemic modal verb 'seemed' also supports this by reflecting June's hope for her husband's recovery, which was only temporary identified by the use of the past perfect 'had been'. Arguably, the reader can sympathise with June's character at this moment as both have recently constructed mental images of Tony's recovery only then to be faced with his death.

However, despite the unequivocal emotion of the passage the reader is quickly pulled back into the discourse world thereby disrupting any empathic connection with the narrative. Additionally, due to the prior information provided on both the binding of the box, the introductory note on the text and indeed the overwhelming images of death and decay in the first part of the novel the reader has already been made aware of Tony's death. As such, although the passage is truly emotive the realisation of the event is not in any way unexpected. Indeed, considering the unbound quality of the book and the addition of the random order it is more than possible that the reader has already witnessed Tony's funeral sufficiently prior to reading of his death.

This further supports the position of the figured trans-world which, Gibbons (2012) argues, 'encompasses the reader's performance in the discourse world, that is, their figured representation of the action in the narrative of the text world without assuming absolute transportation or compression of worlds' (80). As such the multimodal nature of the text, evident by the single page and the emptiness of the blank space, reflects the emotion of the passage yet the materiality of the page still evokes distance, as the emptiness is experienced from the discourse world. Additionally, having to select the next section averts the reader's attention from the distress of the passage and depending on their selection leads into a completely different memory. In my reading of the novel this led to the section opening 'Sometime that summer' which concludes with Tony being told he is cured. This moment, which on a normal reading should have felt celebratory, was thus shattered by the preceding image of his death.

Finally, it is in the conceptualisation of the final line in the novel that the blurred relationship between the text and the discourse world is particularly crucial. Preceded and followed by extensive white space the novel concludes with the following:

> Not how he died, not what he died of, even less why he died, are of concern, to me, only the fact that he did die, he is dead, is important: the loss to me, to us (Last, 6)

Toggling between the switches between the text and discourse world initiated by the blank space the reader is immediately pushed through six negated worlds in the first line. These are triggered both by the use of negative particles and qualitative negations such as 'less' and 'dead'. The word 'concern' is therefore experienced from deep within the consciousness of the narrator thus qualifying the following deictic phrase 'to me'. Arguably, this typifies the narrator's emotional representation in the novel, as *The Unfortunates* is not simply a memoir or a eulogy to Tony but a psychological exploration of B. S. Johnson himself.

It is however, the final use of the first person plural pronoun 'us' which epitomises the significance of the discourse and text world divide, due to its closing ambiguity. It is unclear as to whether the pronoun refers to the discourse participants of Johnson and the reader experiencing the novel, more generally to the world as a whole or to the narrator B. S. Johnson and the other enactors within the text world. These are all possible readings of the closing line and each interpretation leaves the reader in a different world level. For instance, if the pronoun is referring to the discourse participants the narrative concludes in the discourse world. However, this seems unusual, as it would surely assume a higher level of reader sympathy and immersion in the narrative than initially intended. Indeed, for Tony's death to be felt as a loss by the reader a stronger sense of projection would arguably have been necessary, as evidenced by the review of one reader: 'I definitely felt for the narrator and his ailing friend. Just not that much.' (Paul, 2009: 1). The reading that takes the pronoun to be reflective of the characters in the novel appositionally leaves the reader within the text world. The lack of a full stop at the close of the line further enhances the sense of uncertainty as *The Unfortunates* 'ends with questions, not conclusions' (Mitchell, 2007: 63) and leaves the reader with the sense of confusion that defines the novel as a whole.

The importance of reader interactivity to *The Unfortunates* is therefore clear and certainly reflects the reviews of the novel by its contemporary readership. As one reader notably exclaimed *The Unfortunates* is the 'only book I have ever bought edited read and then changed' (Captain Tryps, 2011, 1). The focus of attention is therefore centred on the interaction with the text as an object. It is concerned with the actual tangible experience of reading the novel. Such responses would suggest that Johnson was justified in his assessment that the focus of a novel should not be in its content but on its form, for as he argues it should be an author's 'choice of words, his style, which ought to keep the reader reading' (Johnson, 1973: 14).

To dismiss the formal innovations of *The Unfortunates* as ineffectual or overtly solipsistic is therefore misguided for despite its occasional flaws in technique it is both compelling and highly intricate in its narrative form. Indeed, as White (2005) argues 'without a clear concept of the graphic surface, critics are ill-prepared to deal with the formal diversity of Johnson's novels and tend to go little further than list their idiosyncrasies' (85). In addressing the multimodality of the novel using Werth's model of text world theory this essay has aimed to engage with 'the graphic surface' and in doing so surpass such narrow readings. As I have argued, it is the interactivity imposed by the unusual form of the text that defines the unique experience of reading *The Unfortunates* and as such is far from pointless. The relationship Johnson builds between the discourse world and the text world through the development of the figured trans-world unequivocally supports this assertion as it both reflects his intention of distancing the reader from any notions of fiction, whilst simultaneously relying on reader interaction. Rather than being a contradiction in form or purpose, the outcome is quite ingenious as it is arguably the involvement of the reader in the

physical handling and construction of the text that acts as Johnson's primary distancing device. The moments when the reader must take a performing role in the narrative are similarly the moments when complete projection into the text is impossible.

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