

Abstract

House of Leaves is thus a postmodernist blend of literature, architecture, philosophy and film/documentary that self-reflexively incorporates a meta-narrative perspective of theory and criticism within the framework of the prevailing psycho-analytical theories of the uncanny. By situating elements of hypertext linking within the traditional space of the printed page, challenging the limitations of both media by melding them together into one cohesive, yet immensely complex, print text, Mark Z. Danielewski manages to weld the spatial voids found in the fabric of the text into the overwhelming feeling of disorientation caused by the mere existence of the *house* – a *house* that itself does not follow the laws of physics.

In order to contextualize and study the labyrinthine environment of *House of Leaves*, I negotiated with Freudian, Lacanian, and Žižekian psychoanalytic and linguistic approaches, Nietzschean and Heideggerian phenomenological terms, both metafictional and narratological concepts at work in postmodern narrative, and a Derridean deconstructive “reading.”

The results of this investigation could be stated as the following: the appearance of *nothingness* within *House of Leaves* serves essentially to demonstrate the absence upon which every presence is founded, not the deconstructive practice of revealing the building materials of the construct, but the very (now-absent) space upon which it is built. The entire *raison d'être* of this “*House of Leaves*” is its own erasure through unequivocal use of spatial void.

*The Labyrinthian-Built Environment in Mark Z. Danielewski's House of Leaves:
Narrative Representation through Spatial Voids*

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Dedication

To my Father,

I believe that what we become depends on what our fathers teach us at odd moments, when they aren't trying to teach us. We are formed by little scraps of wisdom.

– Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*

and

To my Mother -

without Her, I am only revolutions of ruin.

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*The Labyrinthian-Built Environment in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*:
Narrative Representation through Spatial Voids*

Introduction

Deliberate experimentation with spatial-temporal-chaos ends up creating its own looking glass and turning on itself in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000).¹ This debut novel has many layers, and like the film *The Blair Witch Project*,² or perhaps a work such as Jorge Luis Borges' *Encyclopedia of Tlön*,³ it comes pre-fixed

¹ In my experience, my first impression of the novel caused a feeling of overwhelming excitement and disorientation: the plethora of footnotes and their informative resources, as well as the dislocated text, and varying uses of fonts and their colors thereof are not only abundant, but their appearance throughout the novel seemed to be, at least, repetitive in its nature, when it didn't gradually increase. It was my experience in reading and dissecting the novel that I found myself being submerged deeper into a void created by spatial confrontation, precisely because of the abundant reference made to the ever-changing built-environment that confuses us, loses us, and eventually devours us off.

The central narrative of *House of Leaves* is conveyed through many layers of storytelling. This methodology promotes the reader's self-awareness, as well as an awareness of the 'double nature' of the text, as we then follow the story as it turns on itself *through the looking glass*, when its particular narrative presents various viewpoints. Fore-grounded in this methodology is the multiple nature of narration, as it pertains to questions of perspective; "who said what?" can be just as complex a question as "what was said?" on certain occasions in the text. *House of Leaves* raises questions about the various discourses of society by making obvious the interpretative complexities inherent in literature and in the world outside literature.

² From the beginning of this film, we are led to believe that the film footage we are watching has been recovered out of the woods and that it documents the final days in the lives of three student filmmakers searching for the "Blair Witch." A year later, their footage was found. Never once during the film are we lead to believe that "Blair Witch" isn't the real deal. The film's style and even its production strategy enhance the illusion that it's a real documentary. The characters have the same names as the actors. All of the footage in the film was shot by two cameras – a color video camcorder operated by the director, Heather (Heather Donahue), and a 16-mm. black and white camera, operated by the cameraman, Josh (Joshua Leonard).

³ Gradually it becomes apparent in this text that Tlön is a world in the flux of time, an amorphous world in the process of conforming to the full implications of its idealist premises. Following the demise of one Herbert Ashe, a Volume XI of the "First Encyclopedia of Tlön" adventitiously comes into Borges's possession. Its contradictions, when one considers the "lucid and exact...order observed in it," constitute a

in the middle of its own fictional mythology. The novel as sold purports to be the revised “second edition” of a work that was originally loosely bound and passed along through the Internet-savvy counterculture. This “second” version is said to have been “professionally edited,” binding together the work of two “authors,” Zampanò and Johnny Truant.

The bulk of the novel is a critical *explication de texte*⁴ written on the subject of *The Navidson Record*, a documentary film made about a [house](#)⁵ with more inner space than is mathematically possible.⁶ This *explication de texte* is the novel’s “inner book,”

proof that companion volumes must exist. In a postscript it is revealed that forty volumes of the encyclopedia were subsequently located “in a Memphis library.” The postscript also confirms the existence of a vast and labyrinthine conspiracy to disintegrate this world by perpetuating and spreading the habits of thought of an “imaginary planet.”

⁴ *Explication de texte* is a tradition of textual interpretation in French literary study and criticism. According to Alfred Owen Albridge there are three different methods of applying the technique of *explication de texte*:

(1) The first may be called explication, per se, a method which considers nothing but the materials inherent in the work itself. On the elementary level, it limits itself to the bare meaning of the text. On an advanced level, it becomes aesthetic analysis, as in the American New Criticism, which indicates figures of speech, symbols, and formal construction. (2) The second method is based on biography and history. The work is explained in the light of all relevant information concerning intellectual and historical background and the life of the author. [...] (3) The third method compares the text with similar passages on other literatures. (Symposium on “Explication de texte,” 1963)

⁵ Throughout the text, the word “[house](#)” will appear in blue, so that it conforms to its main usage in the novel itself.

⁶ As *House of Leaves* is relatively recent and it is a very complex text, a short synopsis is in order. The text of *House of Leaves* is actually three different narratives, united by the single theme of the [House](#) on Ash Tree Lane (the pseudonymous “[House](#) of Leaves”). The first narrative is a videocassette, *The Navidson Record*, recording the strange occurrences at the Navidson family [house](#), encompassing recordings of several explorations into the [house](#). Will Navidson is a successful photographer, best known for a picture of a girl (“Delial”) in war-torn Sudan. The second narrative within the text is a commentary on the original “Navidson Record,” written by an old blind man called Zampanò.

Zampanò’s commentary ranges from discourses about the significance of labyrinths and King Minos’ son to the physics of acoustics and geological survey information on the [House](#) on Ash Tree Lane and includes both “true” literary criticism and “faux” criticism. The third narrative consists of footnotes to Zampanò’s narrative, written by a drugged-up, dropped-out tattoo artist “wannabe” called Johnny Truant, who uncovers problems with the veracity of the Zampanò documents. Truant receives the Zampanò text following the old man’s mysterious death. Johnny Truant’s reading of Zampanò’s commentary constitutes

House of Leaves itself, which has been written by one Zampanò, who uses copious footnotes to provide a somewhat pompous sense of academic documentation. These footnotes are largely apocryphal (reminiscent of Borges). Indeed, Zampanò himself is a thinly veiled Borges figure: the old writer is blind, has a penchant for old languages, writes lonely poetry, and, like the fictional Borges of “The Aleph” counts a “Béatrice” among the great loves of his life. In addition, he is fond of mixing real sources and fictional sources in order to provide an academic veneer to his work (*or is that Danielewski and not Zampanò?*) The notations also occasionally veer into the realm of the surreal and the encyclopedic. In the chapter known (informally) as “The Labyrinth,” certain footnotes wind their way around and through the text like twisting serpents of pure data, catalogues so comprehensive as to approach an unreadable and cryptic map of a forgotten world. This chapter and its text project themselves very much as a visual labyrinth, an attempt to reflect the internal labyrinth of the *house* in the story itself.⁷ A line from “The Garden of Forking Paths” comes to mind: “No one

the temporal “present” of the text that we as readers encounter when we start reading the novel *House of Leaves*, as we the readers follow Johnny’s own reading of the Zampanò text and his life at the time.

Both the Zampanò and Truant texts are presented in different typefaces, alongside numerous editorial footnotes on both the Zampanò and Truant texts, which amend or criticize the previous narratives concerning both the *Navidson Record* and the *house*, presented in yet another typeface. There are also several appendices, by both Zampanò and Johnny Truant, containing photographs and artifacts of the *house*, poems (“The Pelican Poems”), and letters from Johnny Truant’s mother at the Whalestoe Institute (reprinted with some additions in *The Whalestoe Letters*). These letters and photographs contain coded references to the lyrics of songs by Poe (Danielewski’s sister’s band) and Borges’ stories, among other things. The text also has an index, supporting its claim to be a “critical” text, and closes on a poem called “Yggdrasil,” about the world tree of Scandinavian mythology. One of the most important features of the text is that each occurrence of the word “*House*,” in whatever language, appears in grayscale (in the first edition) or in blue (in the second edition), never in the same print as the rest of the text.

⁷ According to Umberto Eco in his Postscript to *The Name of the Rose*, there are three distinctive labyrinthine figures: 1. The Greek labyrinth (or “classical” labyrinth), where you go in, arrive at the centre, and then from the centre you reach the exit; 2. The Mannerist labyrinth (or maze), which, even if unraveled, you find in your hands a kind of tree, a structure with roots, with many blind alleys (this labyrinth is the model of the trial and error process because it has several entrances, and many dead ends, cross roads, and mis-directions); and 3. The Rhizome labyrinth (or the net), so constructed that every path can be connected

realized that the book and the labyrinth were one and the same.”⁸ Indeed, a direct reference to Borges appears in footnote 167 - which is about the very question of similarities between *House of Leaves* and its artistic predecessors:

¹⁶⁷ In her elegantly executed piece entitled “Vertical Influence” reproduced in *Origins of Faith* (Cambridge Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996) p. 261, Candida Hayashi writes, “For that matter, what of literary hauntings? Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting*, ... many stories by Lovecraft, Pynchon’s gator patrol in *V.*, Borges’ “The Garden of Forking Paths” in *Ficciones*, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, ...? To say nothing of ... Bill Viola’s *Room for St. John of the Cross* or more words by Robert Venturi, Aldo van Eyck, James Joyce, Paolo Potoghesi, Herman Melville...? To all of it, I have only one carefully devised response: Ptoeey! (Danielewski 131-135. The blue type is as it appears in the text)

Moreover, Mark Z. Danielewski’s experimental novel occupies the liminal space between traditional print narratives and the budding possibilities of hypertext

with every other one – it has no centre, no periphery, and no exit because it is potentially infinite. If the space of conjecture is a rhizome space, that is, if the labyrinth is interpreted as a rhizome, then the labyrinth is one of disorder, multiplicity, and chaos – both arbitrary and mutable. Thus, in a rhizome labyrinth a walker may move from point to point because all points are connected. Moreover, the pathways between the points are not yet fully defined and connections may still be made. Considering the labyrinthine built-environment of the *House* on Ash Tree Lane in this sense provides the reader with nearly endless possibilities for interpretation.

In fact, much like Borges’ narrator describes how his universe consists of an endless expanse of interlocking hexagonal rooms in “The Library of Babel” (with said infinite number of hexagonal galleries and invariable distribution of volumes repeated in the same disorder), through *The Navidson Record* we discover that the *House* on Ash Tree Lane is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of (multipliable and mutable) rooms and galleries, some with vast airshafts, others with very low ceilings, while others expand into seemingly immeasurable space.

In *The Poetics of Space* (1958), Gaston Bachelard looks not at the origins or technicalities of architecture, but how the lived-in and human experience of architecture affects and shapes its development. One of these experiences creates a “Desire Path” – which is a term used in landscape architecture to describe a path that isn’t designed but rather is worn casually away by people finding the shortest distance between two points. Bachelard examines how the human use of an architectural or pre-determined flow through space will sometimes over-ride the intentions of its creator.

“All really inhabited space,” writes Bachelard, “bears the notion of home.” For Bachelard it is the phenomenology of home – shelter, safety, “protected intimacy,” rootedness, comfort, centeredness, well-being, that allows us reverie. However, in *House of Leaves*, the interior space of the *house* is more labyrinth than *house* – ever to remain constructed, ever to be finite. In other words, in the *House* of Ash Tree Lane we are left to live in a state of impermanence rather than in one of finality.

⁸ Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (New York: Grove Press, 1962) 96.

fiction. *House of Leaves* represents an emerging tradition of postmodern print fiction's self-consciousness of the anxiety regarding the future of literature in an increasingly electronic culture. At times, the text itself runs amok, at others each page is like a frame of a film. This type of postmodern print fiction acknowledges the dynamic innovations hypertext systems make on the traditional notions of literature within a print-based culture.

By situating elements of hypertext linking within the traditional space of the printed page, challenging the limitations of both media by melding them together into one cohesive, yet immensely complex, print text, Danielewski manages to weld the spatial voids found in the fabric of the text into the overwhelming feeling of disorientation caused by the mere existence of the *house* – a *house* that itself does not follow the laws of physics. The intended documentary about family dynamics becomes a representation of true horror as the various high-8 video cameras Navidson has installed in the *house* record inexplicable architectural inconsistencies. What begins as a simple quarter-inch discrepancy between the *house*'s internal and external dimensions culminates in the family's realization that the *House* itself defies spatial boundaries. It is an ever-shifting, labyrinthine void of colossal proportions.

House of Leaves is thus a postmodernist blend of literature, architecture, philosophy and film/documentary that self-reflexively incorporates a meta-narrative perspective of theory and criticism within the framework of the prevailing psycho-analytical theories of the uncanny.⁹ Danielewski seems to make the task of the literary

⁹ According to Sinda Gregory, this novel can be regarded as a narrative repetition of Freud's theorization as put forward in his essay "The Uncanny," where Jentsch's postulation of intellectual uncertainty is replaced by Freud's concept of suppression. Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, "Haunted *House*: An Interview

theorist redundant. The book – the designation “novel” no longer seems to be adequate in this case, or it can only be used in a postmodernist sense – integrates literature and the study of literature and of literary criticism, both in the text itself and in an extensive system of footnotes. Danielewski alternately refers to fictitious references and to existing scientific material, including most importantly – in the light of this investigation – Anthony Vidler's 1992 study “The Architectural Uncanny.”¹⁰ This self-reflexive mode of operation is already announced in the first chapter: “Numerous professors have made *The Navidson Record* required viewing for their seminars, while many universities already claim that dozens of students from a variety of departments have completed doctoral dissertations on the film” (Danielewski 6).

From these existing and fictitious studies, Danielewski will draw an endless amount of elements in order to create an exhaustive and comprehensive theoretical discourse around his story. The reader should however not lose track of the fact that this theoretical discourse is just as much an essential part of the book, and thus of this study, as the story itself.

with Mark Z. Danielewski” from *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 44, No. 2, Winter 2003: 99-135.

The Uncanny is a Freudian concept of an instance where something can be familiar, yet foreign at the same time, often being uncomfortably strange. Naturally not everything that is new and unfamiliar is frightening, however; the relation is not capable of inversion. “*Das Unheimlich*,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Ed. and trans. J. Strachey et al. 24 vols, (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74). This concept is closely related to the concept of abject, where one acts adversely to that which has been forcefully cast out of the symbolic order. Abjection can be uncanny in that the observer can recognize something within the abject, possibly of what it was before it was “cast out,” yet be repulsed by what it is that made it cast out to begin with. Because the uncanny is familiar, yet strange, it often creates cognitive dissonance within the subject experiencing due to the paradoxical nature of being attracted to yet repulsed by an object at the same time. This cognitive dissonance often leads to an outright rejection of the object, as one would rather reject than rationalize.

¹⁰ *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (MIT Press: Massachusetts, 1992).

With this thesis, I would like to join those dozens of “intra-textual” students that delve into the *House of Leaves* (even though I myself, unlike them, will not fully investigate *The Navidson Record* – the fictitious documentary film that becomes, in the novel, a box-office success and cultural phenomenon when it was “released” to movie theaters in 1993), in order to focus on the book and more specifically on “its inherent strangeness” (Danielewski 6). I will investigate how the inexplicable spatial voids and the impenetrable and unfathomable labyrinth that suddenly appears in (or rather “becomes”) the characters’ house reveal both real and “phantasmatic”¹¹ traumas hidden in the ever-changing construction of the house itself (an explanation aided by Freud’s concept of the “death drive”¹² and the *umheimlich*).

¹¹ That is, the theory of the “phantasm” as first elaborated by Jean Laplanche and J. -B. Pontalis in their seminal article of 1964 “*Phantasme originaire, phantasmes des origines, origine du phantasme,*” and which was further developed by Gilles Deleuze first in his *Différence et Répétition* and then, more extensively, in *Logique du sens*. The phantasm is not so much a ‘fantasy’ that one *has*, as a structure wherein one is *placed*. ‘...the phantasm,’ they say towards the end of their article, ‘is not the object of desire, it is a scene.’ Laplanche and Pontalis draw attention to the particular importance Freud gives to the role of *hearing*: for the noise that impinges on the phantasm may not just be brute sound, but also might be the ‘familial noise’ (*bruit familial*) which carries the histories or legends or traditions of parents, grandparents and, indeed, the whole tribe. What these typical phantasms refer to are *origins*: in the primal scene it is the origin of the individual that is figured; in the phantasm of seduction it is the origin of sexuality; in the phantasm of castration, it is the origin of the difference of sexes. What the phantasm is, above all, is the interface of biology and culture, of the purely physiological and the quintessentially human - the phantasm is the very mechanism by means of which the human itself is constituted:

The house seems to deny all laws of nature concerning supporting power: “So that place, beyond dimension, impossibly high, deep, wide - what kind of foundation is it sitting on?” (Danielewski 355) Something without foundation, has no ground, ergo no meaning... Or: “I trace the lines, do the math, study the construction, and all I come up with is...well the whole thing’s just a hopeless, structural impossibility. And therefore substanceless and forgettable. Despite its weight, its magnitude, its mass...In the end it adds up to nothing” (Danielewski 361).

¹² For what could be more banal than death and its accompanying nothingness, something that is inevitable, predictable and utterly certain? It is banal by virtue of the fact that it is unimaginatively routine – eternal. Death cannot be waved or amended, what Heidegger avows “stands before us – something impending,” something imminent – *our thrownness* – to be postponed, even denied. For Freud, death is much more than that which stands before us; rather it resides within us, an impulse toward annihilation. Here, the banality of death is not just something that happens to us, it *is* us – our inner being, only to be experienced in novel fashions, repetitiously, circuitously, *ad nauseam*. In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920), Freud introduced the concept of the *death drive* as a negative term in opposition to the *life drive*: “The opposition between the ego or death instincts and the sexual or life instincts would then cease to hold and the compulsion to repeat would no longer possess the importance we have ascribed to it” (44). The death

In order to contextualize and study the labyrinthine environment of *House of Leaves*, I have chosen to negotiate with Freudian, Lacanian, and Žižekian psychoanalytic and linguistic approaches, Nietzschean and Heideggerian phenomenological terms, metafictional/narratological concepts at work in postmodern narrative, and a Derridean deconstructive “reading” (as the book is a digital experimentation in type blended with a Derridean embrace of the interactivity of text). Through the dialogue with this theoretical frame, I will attempt to exorcise the essence of an impossible object (the *house*) where a vertiginously perfect *mise en abîme*¹³ takes place.

instinct was Freud’s attempt to explain this repetition compulsion that overrides the pleasure principle, whether in post-traumatic dreams, certain compulsive children’s games (such as the “fort-da” game), or indeed in analyzed resistances to the treatment (the transference). He observed that “*the aim of all life is death*,” “*inanimate things existed before living ones*” and that “everything living dies for *internal* reasons.” Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1961) 38.

¹³ Or the infinite regress of mirrors. In narrative, *mise en abîme* is a term used to denote a story within a story; the internal story mirroring and therefore commenting on the framing story. Also in Deconstruction, it is used to refer to the infinite deferral of meanings. According to Gerhard Joseph, “In recent French theory, the term *en abîme* describes any fragment of a text that reproduces in small the structure of the text as a whole. Introduced by André Gide in a passage of his *Journal* in 1893, the phrase, which he intended as characterization of his own reduplicative techniques, had as its origin an ancient visual device, that of the miniature heraldic shield whose shape and inner divisions it shapes exactly. [...] From Dide’s coinage in *The Notebooks* and exemplary practice in *Narcisse, La Tentative, et Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, it is but a short step to the *mise en abîme* of post-Saussurean, post-structuralist theory, where we are invited to follow, in Jacques Derrida’s words, ‘a book in the book, an origin in the origin, a center in the center beyond the inmost bound of human thought.’” Gerhard Joseph, *The Echo and the Mirror “en abîme” in Victorian Poetry* (West Virginia: West Virginia University Press, 1985) 403.

Chapter I: *Theoretical Frame(s) – Framing/Exorcising the Dead*

*The Archi-text as Unheimlich and its Doubles*¹⁴

In “*Das Unheimlich*” (1919), an essay which has become of singular importance for psychoanalytic and critical theory, Freud sets out to trace the nature of the uncanny, “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (340). In his opening remarks, Freud observes that almost nothing has been written on the uncanny in relation to aesthetics, although he refers in passing to Ernst Jentsch’s 1906 essay “The Psychology of the Uncanny.”¹⁵ In fact, Freud mirrors Jentsch’s approach: after an initial concern with the etymology of the uncanny, he collects “all those properties of persons, things, sense impressions, experiences and situations which arouse in us the feeling of uncanniness,” then relates these phenomena to the “primary narcissism” of early childhood and “primitive” cultures. The opening section of the essay examines the etymology of the word “uncanny,” first

¹⁴ An analysis of the textual representation of space posits the notion of the *unheimlich* as central to all theories of architecture, whether physical or textual. Building is inscription-suture of the subject into a warrant of ground still warm from the previous occupant, an infracting space of indeterminate dimensionality. “What ought to have remained hidden” is of course what we came to see, the chiasmic flip that re-temporalizes space through the central function of the gap created by desire, the *objects* of desire that cannot be met, or encountered, or seized, or disowned, if only because we can only be slower or faster, but we can’t inhabit the exact same time (or space) that they do. Literally, they don’t “have time for us.”

The very word *heimlich* gives an important clue. The definition, as Freud carefully dissects from his philological investigation, has *within it* the seeds of its own conversion into its opposite. The homely gives rise to the un-homely, and the un-homely is something hidden within the homely from the start.

¹⁵ Jentsch claimed in 1906 that “ingeniously constructed dolls and automata” provide uncanny effects by not focusing on Olympia, but rather on the threat of losing one’s eyes, as the basis of the uncanny in Hoffman’s tale *The Sandman*. Ernst Jentsch, “The Psychology of the Uncanny (1906),” *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, 1469-2899, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1997: 7 – 16. Although Freud recognizes that Jentsch “has taken as a very good instance doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive” (“*Das Umheilich*” 226) as a manifestation of the Uncanny earlier in his essay, he states that Olympia “is by no means the only, or indeed the most important element that must be held responsible for the quite unparalleled atmosphere of uncanniness evoked by the story...the feeling of something uncanny is directly attached to the figure of the Sand-man, that is, to the idea of being robbed of one’s eyes... Uncertainty whether an object is living or inanimate, which admittedly applied to the doll Olympia, is quite irrelevant in connection with this other, more striking instance of uncanniness” (“*Das Umheilich*” 230).

through Greek, Latin, French, Spanish and English definitions, then through a lengthy consideration of the German words "*heimlich*" (homely, familiar, hospitable, comfortable, secret, private) and "*unheimlich*" (unhomely, unfamiliar, uncomfortable, eerie, unconcealed). Loosely related to *heimisch* (native), *heimlich* can mean familiar, intimate and cherished, but its other definitions shade into apparently opposite significations, such as concealed and secret: "Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite" (Freud 347). Linguistically, what is *heimlich* can thus become *unheimlich*, and for Freud this ambiguity is a constitutive feature of the "special core of feeling" that characterizes the uncanny.

Regarding this "special core of feeling," a few brief introductory remarks on the cultural dimension of a subjective economy of pleasure may prove the best avenue to any psychoanalytic reading of its relation to a *supernatural* horror genre.¹⁶ According to Slavoj Žižek, there are different phases in Freud's differentiation between the pleasure and reality principles.¹⁷ Freud initially posits an ideal state whereby an individual, shielded from the demands of the "reality principle," experiences a pure, undisturbed bliss. At this stage of Freudian theory, the need to accommodate the reality principle is accomplished via the subordination of pleasure to

¹⁶ Freud begins his study of the uncanny with an etymological investigation. The definition begins with what is familiar, comforting, intimate; then it moves to the theme of protection and concealment from the eyes of strangers; finally concealment becomes the hidden, occult, and fearful. As Mladen Dolar points out, this glide from comfort to fear is the key to the uncanny's spatial structure. It is both the kernel of the familiar world and the virulent contaminant, a radical Other. As such, it blurs the division between inside and outside. More accurately, it "cancels and preserves" the function of the boundary in a move that links the radically remote with the radically interior. Mladen Dolar, "I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding Night: Lacan and the Uncanny," *Rendering the Real*, October 1958, (Autumn 1991): 5.

¹⁷ *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) 25.

the reality principle, so that the direct route to pleasure becomes blocked. In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," the situation seems more complex. Phenomena like the repetition compulsion and the paradoxical recurrence of traumatic dreams lead Freud to the theory of the "death drive" that entails a different view of the nature of the pleasure principle. Thus, even in the absence of the reality principle the ceaseless drive for pleasure continuously encounters an internal obstacle. Although this hindrance is experienced as a "hard kernel," an empirical object, it only objectifies the ontological impossibility of enjoyment. The role of the reality principle becomes evident when we consider symbolic castration which constitutes the social subject imposing a traumatic loss from the outside. The initially internal conflict is transposed to another level as the differentiation between an inside and an outside occurs. The internal obstacle to satisfaction is externalized, so that the subject re-encounters this object as his "objective correlative" amidst a universe structured by the reality principle.

Therefore, crucially, the differentiation between an inside and an outside is co-extensive with the linguistic facilitation of culture. Jacques Lacan conceived the symbolic order as the *locus* of particular set of social, legal and linguistic conventions underlying society. The "Big Other"¹⁸ does not exist as substance but is nonetheless effective as it is continuously posited so that the organization of complex social forms

¹⁸ The "Big Other" in Lacan refers to the symbolic realm (the systems of laws, prohibitions, codes, arbitrary languages) which comprises the order of the social. But for both Freud and Lacan, the uncanny points toward what Lacan would call the Real, (not the Symbolic) a kind of Other (different from the Big Other) that is really an object (Lacan calls it *objet petit a*) that obfuscates, like a stain, the mirror image of the I, a supplement that disrupts the corresponding complementarity of the double. That stain enforces misrecognition within the figures of the double, spoiling the narcissistic enjoyment of mirror imaging. What alienates and terrorizes about *extimacy* (what Freud calls the uncanny) is precisely that, at the core of being lies a foreign object which does not belong, but without which the "I" could not envisage itself. (This additional commentary note was provided by Dr. Rubén Ríos Ávila on his revision of this text. March 2010).

becomes possible. For this fictional realm of structural differences (the Other) to emerge as a coherent entity, *jouissance* as the inert substance of enjoyment must be sacrificed. From a Lacanian perspective, *jouissance* is *forbidden to the one who speaks as such*. The very possibility of the free movement within the sphere of culture and meaning is opened up by this repression, yet that which has been repressed paradoxically functions as the pivot on which a social entity is suspended. With regard to this sublime object¹⁹ which appears to anchor any community, we discern a mixture of morbid fascination and attraction on the one hand, and a fervent desire to disavow and control on the other hand. The same phenomenon, a fatal attraction to the black hole of *das Ding* – the site of a traumatic, vacuous horror, threatening to overflow social structures with a terrible organic vitality and force – appears to be at stake in horror movies. From this perspective, the site of the monsters in horror films and horror fiction in the psychic economy can be defined precisely: it is at a point of intersection between a social and a psychological space.

A Lacanian concept closely related to the *real void* at the heart of the symbolic order is the “uncanny site between two deaths.” This phenomenon of the *living death* holds the key to any psychoanalytic investigation of the supernatural horror genre.

¹⁹ According to Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*,

[...] the real object is a sublime object in a strict Lacanian sense – an object which is just an embodiment of the lack in the Other, in the symbolic order. The sublime object is an object which cannot be approached too closely: if we get too near it, it loses its sublime features and becomes an ordinary vulgar object – it can persist only in an interspace, in an intermediate state, viewed from a certain perspective, half-seen. If we want to see it in the light of day, it changes into an everyday object, it dissipates itself, precisely because in itself it is nothing at all (192).

Further on, Žižek states that we must remember that there is nothing intrinsically sublime in a sublime object. According to Lacan, a sublime object is an ordinary, everyday object which, quite by chance, finds itself occupying the place of *das Ding*, the impossible-real object of desire. The sublime object is therefore an object elevated to the level of *das Ding*. It is its structural place – the fact that it occupies the sacred/forbidden place of *jouissance* – and not its intrinsic qualities that confers on it its sublimity (221).

Elevated to the site of *Das Ding* in the psychic economy, the *living dead* materialize the void, the traumatic abyss at the very heart of the symbolic order. By definition, they are excluded from ordinary, empirical reality, yet they are no arbitrary phantasms. The "gaze" of any work of art that conjures the "undead" into a virtual existence encapsulates a truth that goes to the heart of the non-symmetrical relation between the real and the symbolic in which every subject is caught up.²⁰ The "undead," in literature and film, represent the hard, traumatic kernel at the center of socio-symbolic reality which is, paradoxically, identical with the innermost truth of human subjectivity. Their position is not, as Žižek points out, that of some kind of intermediate state between the living and the dead. Rather, precisely as dead, "they are more vigorously alive than ordinary mortals subject to symbolic castration."²¹ Their tremendous psychological impact results from their imagined access to a traumatic life

²⁰ The gaze (of consciousness) always reduces the other to the condition of an object. Taking into account the long tradition of the philosophy of consciousness that makes use of optical metaphors to cope with the self-reflective processes of consciousness, Lacan points out that the gaze is a special object because it is always elided within intersubjective relationships. "The gaze is specified as unapprehensible," says Lacan, "in the sense of being non-objectifiable." Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977) 83. This is a way to insist that something fundamental of the transcendent subject finds no place in the inter-subjective field. But instead of entering in this deadlock connected with operations of a philosophy of consciousness, Lacan insists on the possibility that something that finds no place in the relationship between subjects can be posed by means of a confrontation between subject and object. To achieve this, the subject needs to have the experience that "on the side of things, there is the gaze." *Op. Cit.* Lacan 109.

To say that on the side of the things, there is the gaze, may appear simply as a blurring form to talk about the necessity of a critique capable to illuminate those relationships between subjects that were reified as relationships between things. Nevertheless, Lacan aims to something rather different. For Lacan, the claim that there is a gaze that come from things means to insist that the subject can recognize himself in the dimension of an object that is no longer based on the logic of the narcissistic phantasm. This position is possible for Lacan because the gaze appears, in his meta-psychology, precisely as one of those objects *a* within which the subject was connected in relationships of symbiotic undifferentiating before processes of socialization. Within this context, the gaze is not the source of expression of the desire in its phantasmatic search for a narcissistic object. Rather, the gaze is the non-specular object that is beyond the expressive claims of the "I" and is connected to a drive that is fundamentally a *death drive*.

²¹ *Op. cit.* Žižek 30.

force prior to symbolic mortification. Since they only materialize the void at the heart of every subject and every culture, the angle of the subjective gaze we cast at them determines their status as idealized or abject figures.

As the preceding examples indicate, the effect generated by supernatural horror depends to a large extent on a sensation of the uncanny.²² With *House of Leaves* Danielewski provides a sublime example of the condensation of an uncanny experience, like in the final scene of a movie, the signification of which all of a sudden subjects the previous content to a radical revision. The surreal imagery in the novel is thought-provoking and seems to be somewhat indebted to the films of Luis Buñuel, as well as surrealist painting, and Maurits Cornelis Escher's convoluted motif of the representational labyrinth.²³ As we will see, significantly, Truant's repeated attempts at escape all come across a mysterious barrier, for whenever he appears to be close to re-gaining his freedom, he encounters another wall, he is against yet another door, prone only to be swallowed once again within the secluded realm. The previous events thus take on an extremely uncanny, new meaning. According to Lacan, "It is a truth of experience for analysis that the subject is presented with the question of existence, not

²² Putting this simply, one could say that traditional thought consisted of the constant effort to draw a clear line between the interior and the exterior. All the great philosophical conceptual pairs – essence/appearance, mind/body, subject/object, spirit/matter, etc. – can be seen as just so many transcriptions of the division between interiority and exteriority. Now the dimension of *extimate* blurs this line. It points neither to the interior nor to the exterior, but is located there where the most intimate interiority coincides with the exterior and becomes threatening, provoking horror and anxiety. The *extimate* is simultaneously the intimate kernel and the foreign body; in a word, it is *unheimlich*. Freud writes, "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar." And it is this very dimension beyond the division into "psychic" and "real" that deserves to be called the real in the Lacanian sense. *Op. cit.*, Mladen Dolar 6.

²³ M. C. Escher (17 June 1898 – 27 March 1972) worked primarily in the media of lithographs and woodcuts, though the few mezzotints he made are considered to be masterpieces of the technique. In his graphic art, he portrayed mathematical relationships among shapes, figures and space. Additionally, he explored interlocking figures using black and white to enhance different dimensions. Integrated into his prints were mirror images of cones, spheres, cubes, rings, and spirals.

in terms of anxiety that it arouses on the level of the ego, but as an articulated question: "What am I there?"²⁴ The key to the uncanny effect in *House of Leaves* lies in the perception that an answer has actually been returned to the subject's existential question to the big Other – *the house*.

Spatial and Self-Representation through the Figure of the Intertextual, Metafictional Labyrinth

Although *metafiction*²⁵ will not serve as a methodology for analyzing *House of Leaves* in this work, I am however interested in it as a background discussion, mainly as an affirmation that this *novel* possesses a highly metanarrative text, as it exhibits various well-accomplished attempts at self-conscious fiction through the use of hyper-textual narrative.

My interest in metafiction derives from the fact that proponents believe that the metafictional novel gains significance beyond its fictional realms by outwardly projecting its inner self-reflective tendencies. Ironically, it becomes real by not pretending to be real. I posit that metafiction allows its readers a better understanding

²⁴ Jacques Lacan, "Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty: A New Sophism," *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink and M. Silver in Ellie Ragland-Sullivan (ed.), *Newsletter of the Freudian Field*, Volume 2, 1988: 194.

²⁵ Generally speaking, metafiction is self-conscious fiction and can be described with terms such as "self-awareness, self-reflection, self-knowledge and ironic self-distance." Although metafiction is not a genre, it underlies all fiction and can be located at the conscious and the unconscious level of a text. Patricia Waugh gives a more precise definition of metafiction in her book *Metafiction: The Theories and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction*:

[It is] fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text (2).

Accordingly, metafiction can be located on the dividing line between fiction and literary criticism, exploring the relationship between these two worlds. Thus, the mimetic illusion literature creates is often undermined or even destroyed.

of the fundamental structures of narrative while providing an accurate model for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as a series of constructed systems. In reflecting on the significance of metafiction, Mark Currie goes so far as to say that it provides an "unlimited vitality: which was once thought introspective and self-referential is in fact outward looking" (*Metafiction 2*). In *Metafiction: The Theories and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh further states that:

Far from 'dying,' the novel has reached a mature recognition of its existence as writing, which can only ensure its continued viability in and relevance to a contemporary world which is similarly beginning to gain awareness of precisely how its values and practices are constructed and legitimized (19).

Explicit use of metafictional technique, as Waugh describes it, stems from modernist questioning of consciousness and "reality." Attempting to defend twentieth-century metafiction, theorists link metafictional technique to older literary works. Some supporters trace self-reflexivity as far back as Miguel Cervantes' 15th-century novel, *Don Quixote*. Hamlet's references to acting in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c.1600) and Jane Austin's mention of writing the novel by her narrator in *Northanger Abbey* (1817) are also often cited as instances in which classic works display metafictional tendencies. Waugh goes so far as to claim that, "by studying metafiction, one is, in effect, studying that which gives the novel its identity" (5). Similarly, Linda Hutcheon says that "in overtly or covertly baring its fictional and linguistic systems, narcissistic narrative transforms the authorial process of shaping, of making, into part of the pleasure and challenge of reading as a co-operative, interpretative experience."²⁶

In this investigation, self-reference will be studied, as found in the way our worlds of perception reflect and intersect one another. *We are each* like a character in

²⁶ *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (London: Methuen, 1980) 154.

a book who is reading his or her own story, or like a picture of a mirror reflecting its own landscape. As is considered in Danielewski's treatment of this idea, *House of Leaves* is meant to be interactive – each of us, like the characters in the book, must in turn define the dreaded emptiness for ourselves.²⁷

Employing the term “metafiction” to refer to modern works that are radically self-reflexive as well as to works that contain only a few lines of self-reflection creates ambiguity. In her review of Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction*, Ann Jefferson argues that “the trouble is that Waugh cannot have it both ways, and present metafiction both as an inherent characteristic of narrative fiction and as a response to the contemporary social and cultural vision” (574). Other theorists often employ the same double definition of metafiction, which makes it difficult to know whether his or her definition refers to contemporary metafiction or to all works containing self-reflexivity. John Barth contributes a short blanket definition of metafiction as being a “novel that imitates a novel rather than the real world” (Currie 161).

Wenche Ommundeson also makes efforts to differentiate between aspects present in metafiction. She divides metafiction according to its use of three common allegorical plot devices. The first plot allegory is use of a sexual act as a metaphor for creating fiction. She describes the second common metaphor as the use of the detective to serve as a model for the reader's activity. The third common allegory she cites is that of the use of game structures to represent codes of fictional systems.

²⁷ In an almost parallel treatment to the spatial studies and self-representational techniques that readers detect upon their exploration of the *House* on Ash Tree Lane, graphic artist M.C. Escher makes use of the reflective properties of specific objects in his work, and so we end where we began, with a self portrait: the work a reflection of the artist, the artist reflected in his work.

Despite the subtle differences between their definitions, most theorists agree that metafiction cannot be classified as a genre or as the definitive mode of postmodern fiction. They suggest that metafiction displays, "a self-reflexivity prompted by the author's awareness of the theory underlying the construction of fictional works," without dividing contemporary metafiction from older work containing similar self-reflective techniques (Waugh 2).

Is it also possible, however, that the concept of "metafictional narrative" offers a common denominator that allows a better apprehension of the strengths and limitations in the representational power that can be found in other media, like fine arts, for example? In her essay "On the Theoretical Foundations of Transmedial Narratology," Marie-Laure Ryan discusses two main obstacles regarding the theoretical foundations of transmedial narratology:

The main obstacle to the transmedial study of narrative is a position that comes from within narratology itself, namely what I call the language-based, or rather, speech-act approach to narrative. This position defines narrative as an act of storytelling addressed by a narrator to a *naratee*, or as the recounting of a sequence *past* of events. Another position incompatible with the study of narrative across media is the doctrine of radical media relativism, which regards media as self-contained systems of signs, and their resources as incommensurable with the resources of other media. Just as two languages cannot convey the same semantic values under the doctrines of linguistic relativism, two different media cannot convey similar meanings or use similar devices under the doctrine of medial relativism (2, 3).

As a matter of fact, it could be taken under consideration that narratological terms and concepts, which originally referred to narrator-transmitted verbal storytelling, have frequently been "exported" to other fields of knowledge.

“Metafiction” and “*mise en abîme*,” as noted by Werner Wolf,²⁸ have by now become widely used notions that are also encountered, for instance, in art history. Like Ryan, Wolf states that some of these “exports” can be problematic, but that there are conditions and potentials that enable the spectator to employ narratological concepts for these phenomena, which can be resumed in four criteria. The first would be: *the export facilitating potential of the phenomena under consideration*. He says that on the one hand there are phenomena that are more genre or media specific, while, on the other hand, there are rather more transgeneric or transmedial phenomena. Secondly, he says that for both types of phenomena a *clear narratological conceptualization* and description of typical features is a precondition of a meaningful export in which the exported concept remains recognizable. Another condition refers to the *formal appropriateness* of the narratological concept for the target phenomenon in the import domain (meaning that the degree of similarity will not only depend on individual phenomena as such, but also on the media or generic contexts in which they appear). And, finally *the export condition of the heuristic value of the exported notion* for the use of the imported field, which serves to borrow from narratology in order to highlight a common range of functions of the designated phenomenon or a stylistic or other similarity among media.²⁹

²⁸ Wolf, Werner, “Metalepsis as a Transgeneric and Transmedial Phenomenon: A Case Study of the Possibility of ‘Exporting’ Narratological Concepts,” *Narratology Beyond Literary Criticism: Mediality-Disciplinarity*, ed. Jan Christoph Meister with Tom Kindt and Wilhelm Schemus (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter) 87-89.

²⁹ It should be noted that such metareference is first and foremost applicable to individual phenomena within certain works (“meta-elements”). Yet, if metaphenomena become salient features of a work as a whole, one may speak – as has been done in the aforementioned call for papers – of a “metatext,” a “metadrama” etc., and if several “metaworks” exist within one and the same medium, they may even be said to form a meta-genre. Thus, “metafiction” can refer to individual passages of a novel, to a novel as a

Two literary foundational works of metafiction are John Barth's story collection *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) and Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979). These books of course themselves show the influence of various precursors in the work of, among others, Jorge Luis Borges, Samuel Beckett, and Vladimir Nabokov, but they are the books that brought together most explicitly those characteristics of all previous fiction that work against simply producing transparent realism, that point the reader away from the unfolding narrative and toward the artificial devices by which all literary narratives are constructed and embellished. In so doing, Barth and Calvino created a kind of "self-conscious" fiction that would decidedly-and perhaps irretrievably-alter perceptions of the role of convention in fiction.

Similarly to Barth's and Calvino's, Borges' fictions deal with singular circumstances in which the relation between "representation" and "the represented" dissolves. Therefore, representation selects a certain subset of the innumerable circumstances; another selection will change the meaning of the event, and in the course of time, this meaning is a precarious entity. It might change because of the internal dynamics of the symbolic representation which is due to unconscious omissions and rearrangements of the details.

Interestingly enough, Borges has often pointed out that in Kafka's short stories (which he himself has expertly translated), the plots have a "terrible simplicity," which he sees as being responsible for the aesthetic impact they produce. This quality (which is not merely formal) defines the story "The Library of Babel" (1941). Borges has

whole or to a novelistic genre. Meta-elements occur in a remarkable variety of forms, for which some typologies have been devised with reference to fiction. *Op. cit.* Werner Wolf 93-94.

called it a “Kafkaian fiction,” whose main image, the Library, was inspired by his experience as a librarian in Buenos Aires, which the story describes, in Borges’ words, through an “oneiric magnification.”

This *structure en abîme* also appears in the form of a scholarly article in “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” (1962), which tells the story of one Pierre Menard, a French symbolist recently deceased, who had undertaken the absurd task of rewriting Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* as a product of his own creativity.³⁰ The narrator establishes Pierre Menard’s credibility as an author by listing a catalogue of his written work, his “visible *oeuvre*.” The works represent a range of types, from sonnets and letters to monographs and manuscripts. The narrator means that the modern context imbues the same words with different meanings, presaging postmodernism reader-response theories. He also puts the so-called “Death of the Author” in a pointed, hilarious perspective.³¹

In “The Aleph” we encounter an impossible object of pure spatiality where absolutely everything can be seen from absolutely every angle in a scenic orgy of visual excess, the ultimate voyeuristic experience where the whole universe can be peeped at without looking back at you, a miniaturized object that provides a fast, effortless, compressed, instantaneous transcendental experience in a truly awesome mind tool that simultaneously satisfies our unrealizable desire for transparency. If an

³⁰ Sarlo, Beatriz. *Borges, a Writer on the Edge*. Ch. 5. *Borges Studies Online*. On line. J. L. Borges Center for Studies & Documentation. Internet: (<http://www.borges.pitt.edu/bsol/bsi5.php>)

³¹ Roland Barthes’ landmark essay, “The Death of Author,” however, demonstrates that an author is not simply a “person” but a socially and historically constituted subject. Following Marx’s crucial insight that it is history that makes man, and not, as Hegel supposed, man that makes history, Barthes emphasizes that an author does not exist prior to or outside of language. In other words, it is writing that makes an author and not *vice versa*. “[T]he writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings [...] in such a way as never to rest on any one of them.” *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 146.

economy of psychic excess is embodied in this impossible object that speaks about so many impossibilities, not only is the Aleph itself an object of pure spatiality, but space in its multiplicity haunts everything. However, this absolute eye could also be seen in relationship to the history of perspectival space.

Also worth mentioning regarding the dooming of multiplicity is “The Garden of Forking Paths” (1941), which deals with the limited capacity of the narrative to represent time. Borges imagines this book where, unlike conventional fiction, the plot evolves in different directions at the same time. Borges’ metaphysical thinking mixes the concepts of multiplicity and uniqueness with reference to time. The textual representation of his aesthetics makes use of non linearity, multi-sequentiality and non conclusive endings. The Garden is full of words, sentences that seem to relate to other pieces of the story, most of them to the last two paragraphs. These trails through the text seem to construct the paths of a labyrinth. Borges builds a narrative of a labyrinthine structure to talk about a book that is a labyrinth. This literary game is evident from the title, since this short story talks about a book of the same name and itself is one of the eight stories of a *collection* named “Garden of Forking Paths.”

These types of representational multiplicities as well as the *structure en abîme* discussed are grossly evident in *House of Leaves*, and it all begins, when, while examining the crime scene surrounding Zampanò’s mysterious death, Johnny and his friend Lude uncover Zampanò’s life’s work on *The Navidson Record* (and decide to publish it). In essence, the novel *House of Leaves* is that publication. Throughout this documentation are footnotes made by both Johnny and the Editors. Through these footnotes we learn more about Zampanò, Navidson and Johnny. We also learn that the

Editors are not actually the true editors of the book, but that they are also creations spawned from Danielewski's mind.

Representation also plays an integral part in the physical format and placement of the text within the page, as the text breaks down the conventions of a typical narrative. The novel is at first familiarly book-like, that is, the body of the text contains the main narrative and the footnotes briefly comment where they are appropriate. As the reader becomes more immersed in the text, however, the predictable "book structure" begins to break down. As the footnotes begin to invade the actual main text, the body of the main text fades and melds with the footnotes. As these footnotes begin to physically merge with the text, certain concepts touched on in Zampanò's text become the subject of Truant's jaded ramblings. For example, Zampanò mentions a broken water heater that Navidson deals with in one of his films. In the footnotes of that page, Truant tells us that his water heater is also broken. At this point, it may strike the reader as an eerie coincidence, but later Truant confesses to have added the "water" to the original writing. This calls into question the reader's confidence in Truant to maintain the integrity of Zampanò's work. Soon, however, it becomes apparent that not only is Truant overstepping into the space reserved for the actual text, but Zampanò's ideas also begin to seep into his space. For example, Truant mentions that he feels "a bit like a broken thermos – fine on the outside, but on the inside nothing but busted glass." Later in the text, Zampanò describes a scenario where Navidson's abusive father batters the family car with a thermos, another coincidence that the reader can hardly ignore. With this constantly twisting narration, Danielewski involves and toys with his reader, keeping us guessing about who is telling the truth and who to believe.

The discussed virtues of multilayered mental constructions in Borges' stories – as a whole – are considered to coincide with intertextuality. As we will see clearly in *House of Leaves*, hypertext, interactive hyper-fiction, makes use of links and text blocks. It creates a text that is open, unbound and expandable. It can be described as a network with multiple entrances and exits, no specified ends or beginning. In this maze-like structure all external and internal references of the text can be visually present, unlike print. Therefore hyper-fiction is multi-linear and multi-sequential. It has no central axis on which it develops, just like Borges' "Garden of the Forking Paths," where all possibilities can be realized at the same time. Intertextuality, the dialogue between texts, a single corpus' allusions and references, can be directly linked through nodes. They are not considered marginal, peripheral pieces of writing, as there is no such hierarchy in hypertextual environments. The various interconnections constitute possible orders, in which the text nodes can be assembled and read. Each order provides a different hierarchy and orders can be infinite if the text is always expanding, through the spatial perspective of the reader's recognition.

In "What Interactive Narratives Do That Print Narratives Cannot" (2000), Jane Yellowlees Douglas seeks to define hypertext fiction and digital narratives and their capabilities by contrasting them with print literature and comparing them to their experimental print precursors. Douglas's characterizations of hypertext fiction echoes those put forth by George Landow in *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*. While print texts operate according to a single linear progression, interactive narratives (like *Lost in the Funhouse*, *If on a Winter Night's a Traveler*, and "The Library of Babel," "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," "The

Aleph,” and “The Garden of Forking Paths,”) have no definite beginning and ending. Instead, there are multiple points from which the reader may enter and exit the narrative. Readers proceed through the text only on the basis of their own choices. Compared to the passive role expected of print readers, readers of interactive narrative must, necessarily, take on an active role within the text. That role involves movement within a network of narrative segments which exist in virtual, three-dimensional space. The interactive reader is constantly aware of the text’s position within space because movement through the narrative requires navigation decisions. In contrast, an awareness of the textual space of printed text, for experienced readers, becomes a latent aspect of the reading experience. Finally, interactive narratives provide an opportunity for multi-sequential readings. Especially when considering postmodern writers, like Danielewski, whose work is firmly grounded within a context of hypertext systems, a reader's experience with the text can mimic the experience of interactive hypertext.

Danielewski situates elements of hypertext linking within the traditional space of the printed page, challenging the limitations of both media by melding them together into one cohesive, yet immensely complicated, print text. Thus, emerging genres within both hypertext and print literatures emphasize the necessity of print literature. As long as writers of print literature are willing to evolve, as Danielewski does with *House of Leaves*, hypertext and print traditions will be able to coexist.

Post-modern Exquisite Ex-timacy

Impermanence, Pluralism, dissolution, and the decay of authority constituted thematic emphases in the intellectual dimensions of postmodernism. The major influence, in the fields of language and literary theory, came heavily from the French. In the late 1960s, American students began to hear of thinkers like Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and others. They provided the lead in the redirection in American literary studies, "the linguistic turn" that would have influence in many academic disciplines. Influenced by the German philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, the French thinkers sought to deflate the pretensions of the logocentric, or word-focused, culture of Western civilization. Literary and intellectual texts, they asserted, always, when under close examination, yield both multiple and contradictory meanings. They *de-construct* themselves. They do not produce truth systems; they confront us only with an endless chain of signifiers. Meaning always recedes, and eludes the reader. Western thinking, the poststructuralists maintained, had always been a quest for metaphysical comfort—a quest for the Absolute. But the efforts, they asserted, collapse from their very excesses. Poststructuralists such as those associated with the Yale School of academics in the 1970s deprived literary texts of subject authority ("the disappearance of the author"), coherence (texts are "de-centered"), and social reference ("there is nothing outside the text"). On the other hand, according to Thomas Docherty, in poststructuralism, loss of authority also signified the positive alternative of reading as personal freedom ("re-creation"); Barthes wrote of the "pleasure of the text." In the

Yale School, Geoffrey Hartman urged that the very indeterminacy of language empowered a creative criticism that broke the shackles of univocal meaning."³²

Deconstruction, and particularly early deconstruction, functions by engaging in sustained analyses of particular texts. It is committed to the rigorous analysis of the literal meaning of a text, and yet also to finding within that meaning, perhaps in the neglected corners of the text (including the footnotes), internal problems that actually point towards alternative meanings. Deconstruction must hence establish a methodology that pays close attention to these apparently contradictory imperatives (sameness and difference) and a reading of any Derridean text can only reaffirm this dual aspect. Derrida speaks of the first aspect of this deconstructive strategy as being akin to fidelity and a "desire to be faithful to the themes and audacities of a thinking."³³ At the same time, however, deconstruction also famously borrows from Martin Heidegger's conception of a "destructive retrieve" and seeks to open texts up to alternative and usually repressed meanings that reside at least partly outside of the metaphysical tradition (although always also partly betrothed to it). This more violent and transgressive aspect of deconstruction is illustrated by Derrida's consistent exhortation to "invent in your own language if you can or want to hear mine; invent if you can or want to give my language to be understood."³⁴ In suggesting that a faithful interpretation of him is one that goes beyond him, Derrida installs invention as a vitally important aspect of any deconstructive reading. He is prone to making

³² Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (New York: Harvester, 1993) 145.

³³ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 84.

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) 57.

enigmatic suggestions like “go there where you cannot go, to the impossible, it is indeed the only way of coming or going,” and ultimately, the merit of a deconstructive reading consists in this creative contact with another text that cannot be characterized as either mere fidelity or as an absolute transgression, but rather which oscillates between these dual demands.³⁵

Deconstruction contends that in any text, there are inevitably points of equivocation and “undecidability” that betray any stable meaning that an author might seek to impose upon his or her text. The process of writing always reveals that which has been suppressed, covers over that which has been disclosed, and more generally breaches the very oppositions that are thought to sustain it.

That said, certain defining features of deconstruction can be noticed. For example, Derrida’s entire enterprise is predicated upon the conviction that dualisms are irrevocably present in the various philosophers and artisans that he considers. While some philosophers argue that he is a little reductive when he talks about the Western philosophical tradition, it is his understanding of this tradition that informs and provides the tools for a deconstructive response. Because of this, it is worth briefly considering the target of Derridean deconstruction the metaphysics of presence, or somewhat synonymously, logocentrism.³⁶

There are many different terms that Derrida employs to describe what he considers to be the fundamental way(s) of thinking of the Western philosophical

³⁵ Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) 75.

³⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 195. Moreover, metaphysical thought prioritizes presence and purity at the expense of the contingent and the complicated, which are considered to be merely aberrations that are not important for philosophical analysis. Basically then, metaphysical thought always privileges one side of an opposition, and ignores or marginalizes the alternative term of that opposition.

tradition. These include: logocentrism, phallogocentrism, and perhaps most famously, the metaphysics of presence, but also often simply “metaphysics.” These terms all have slightly different meanings. *Logocentrism* emphasizes the privileged role that *logos*, or speech, has been accorded in the Western tradition. *Phallogocentrism* points towards the patriarchal significance of this privileging. Derrida’s enduring references to the metaphysics of presence borrows heavily from the work of Heidegger. Heidegger insists that Western philosophy has consistently privileged that which *is*, or that which appears, and has forgotten to pay any attention to the condition for that appearance. In other words, presence itself is privileged, rather than that which allows presence to be possible at all – and also impossible, for Derrida. All of these terms of denigration, however, are united under the broad rubric of the term “metaphysics”, which involves installing hierarchies and orders of subordination in the various dualisms that it encounters.

In order to exemplify this duality, I shall refer to the poststructuralist theorists. As mentioned before, one of the positions taken by these theorists is that the *author is dead*. The idea of the author’s *disappearance* has a long history in the century – it isn’t a newfangled concept. Among the people who advocated the disappearance of the author from the text was James Joyce, but modernism in general has stressed that the text stands apart from and is different from the author, and modernism has endorsed the idea that literature is an intertextual phenomenon, that texts mean in relation to other texts, not in relation to the lives of the author. One of the chief theorizations of modernism, New Criticism, speaks of attempting to find the author in the work or the work through the author as the “Intentional Fallacy.” It is not a long step from the

modernist position of the retreat or disappearance of the author to the idea that the concept of the author as a concept through which to read and understand literature has lost its salience and validity and is more likely to mislead than to illumine.

Paul Ricoeur says however that quite a different tradition, that of phenomenological hermeneutics, suggested that the author is radically disengaged from the interpretive process, that "the book divides the act of writing and the act of reading into two sides, between which there is no communication."³⁷ This tradition is a main support of one of the most influential of the Reader-Response theories. As Ricoeur, commenting on the fact that writing separates the writer from the reader, remarked, "Sometimes I like to say that to read a book is to consider its author as already dead and the book as posthumous" (127).

Contemporary theorists have a number of reasons further to those above for thinking that the concept of the author; is not a profitable concept. Some of the reasons for that are based loosely, in part, on the Roland Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author" in his collection of essays *Image, Music, Text*, and on other sources:

The removal of the Author [. . .] is not merely an historical fact or an act of writing; it utterly transforms the modern text (or - which is the same thing - the text is henceforth made and read in such a way that at all its levels the author is absent). The temporality is different. The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*. The Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now* (142).

³⁷ Paul Ricoeur, "Explanation and Understanding," *From Text to Action*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John Thompson Evanston (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991) 124, 127.

Maurice Blanchot's work also had a strong influence on later poststructuralist theorists such as Derrida. His work is not a coherent, all-encompassing "theory," since it is a work founded on paradox and impossibility. The thread running through all his writing is the constant engagement with the "question of literature," a simultaneous enactment and interrogation of the profoundly strange experience of writing. According to Michael Holland, "For Blanchot, literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question."³⁸

Blanchot draws on the work of the symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé in formulating his conception of literary language as anti-realist and distinct from everyday experience. Literary language, as double negation, demands that we experience the absence masked by the word as absence; it exposes us to the exteriority of language, an experience akin to the impossibility of death. Blanchot engages with Heidegger on the question of the philosopher's death, showing how literature and death are both experienced as anonymous passivity.

In *The Space of Literature*, Maurice Blanchot connects death to the origins of writing, to writing's erasure of the thing and of the idea of the thing, and its replacement of them with itself, which is subsequently mistaken, in simplistic but seductive readings, for "things." This "error," the misreading of the word for the thing, of the literary for the 'real', and of the voice of the text for that of its author, allows space for the infinite plenitude of art, the possibility that the space of literature contains, in the repetition of symbolization, everything and nothing. Blanchot

³⁸ Michael Holland, *The Blanchot Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) 205.

describes literature's "preserve outside of time and in all times [...]," its "eternal lapping of return [...]," its "pact contracted with death, with repetition and with failure."³⁹ We are death's "contemporaries," sharing our time and our times with death and its traces, to the extent that history constitutes the possibility of our contemporaneity with the dead. Death, like history, coexists and coincides in its literary persistence with us, with our temporal existences, marking them as both limited and continuous, "excluding us," Blanchot continues, "from the limitless" and "depriving us of limits."⁴⁰ For Blanchot, the issue of transgression and the fragment is integrally enmeshed with the theme of death. Transgression, in writing, is a spectacle in which culture witnesses the illegal without committing it. In other words, "transgression" is a less compromising way to name "transcendence," since "transgression" always re-introduces the notion of the limit and the law "into every thought." In this circularity, every advance is a regression, every success a failure, every completion another opening.

As is now evident, the old rites of literature are quickly starting to come to a head, and as we move through the 21st century we will find ourselves staring into new modes of expression of literary concepts that we have known only on the printed page for centuries prior. Questioning the boundaries between the reader and the writer, the audience and the performer, the characters in the book and the ones holding it, one might say that *metafiction* was one of the first forms of hypertext mediums in which the reader was encouraged to draw on outside influences and information to arrive at

³⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1982) 243.

⁴⁰ *Op. Cit.*, Blanchot 134.

the heart of the text. This understanding of *metafiction*, then, with the help of other conceptual matrices like the uncanny, the multi-layered labyrinth, deconstructive de-centering and erasure, the relationship between presence and absence, and the notion of spatial void, makes it an appropriate place to *begin* an analysis of *new modes of discourse* and the *variability* of the messages presented.

Utilizing the rhetorical flare of the discussed foundations of psychoanalysis, as well as the postmodernist interest in hypertext and self-conscious fiction, I shall proceed to analyze the very abyssal operation of *House of Leaves*, aided by Derrida's highly-styled fragmentary and interrogative treatments of marginality and presence. In Derrida's elliptical shard, as he recounts on the abyss and nihilistic space, the fragment behaves as such: no grammatical sign to open, no period to close the period of its semantic passage: an imitative strategy of abyssal subversion. For Derrida, fragment-thinking insists on its radical liminality and leads to the most abyssal of dialectically encrypted thoughts.

Chapter II: *House of Leaves*, *House of Voids*

The Construction of Spatial Voids

Camouflaged as a tale of a haunted-house, *House of Leaves* is a metaphysical inquiry that recalls the characteristic of postmodernism in which representation is short-circuited by the realization that there is no reality independent of mediation. Rather than trying to penetrate cultural constructions to reach an original object of inquiry, *House of Leaves* uses the very multilayered inscriptions that create it as a physical artifact to imagine the subject as a palimpsest, emerging not behind but through the inscriptions that bring the book into being.

Its putative subject is the film *The Navidson Record*, produced by the world-famous photographer Will Navidson after he, his partner Karen Green, and their two children (Chad and Daisy), occupy the House on Ash Tree Lane in a move intended to strengthen their strained relationships and knit them closer together as a family. Precisely the opposite happens when they discover that the house is a shifting labyrinth of enormous proportions, leading to the horrors recorded on the high-8 videos Will installed throughout the house to memorialize the family's move. From this video footage he made *The Navidson Record*, which then becomes the subject of an extensive commentary by the solitary Zampanò. When the old man is discovered dead in his apartment, the trunk containing his notes, scribbles, and speculations is inherited by the twenty-something Johnny Truant, a tattoo parlor employee, who sets about ordering them into a commentary to which he supplies footnotes. Zampanò's commentary, set in Times font, occupies the upper portion of the pages while Johnny's

footnotes live below the line in *Courier*, but this initial ordering becomes increasingly complex as the book proceeds.

Equally complex is the ontological status of objects represented in the book and, ultimately, the status of the book itself. In his introduction, Johnny Truant reveals that the film *The Navidson Record*, about which he, Zampanò, and others write thousands of pages, may in fact be a hoax:

After all, as I fast discovered, Zampanò's entire project is about a film which doesn't even exist. You can look as I have, but no matter how long you search you will never find *The Navidson Record* in theaters or video stores. Furthermore, most of what's said by famous people has been made up. I tried contacting all of them. Those that took the time to respond told me they had never heard of Will Navidson let alone Zampanò. (Danielewski xix-xx).

Yet as the voluminous pages testify, the lack of a real world referent does not result in mere absence. Zampanò's account contains allusions, citations, and analyses of hundreds of interpretations of *The Navidson Record*, along with hundreds more ancillary texts. Johnny Truant's footnotes, parasitically attaching themselves to Zampanò's host commentary, are parasitically attached in return by footnotes written by the anonymous "Editors," upon which are hyper-parasitically fastened the materials in the exhibits, appendix, and index.

This multiplication of words happens in the represented world on astonishingly diverse media that match in variety and strangeness the words' sources. The inscription technologies include film, video, photography, tattoos, typewriters, telegraphy, handwriting, and digital computers. The inscription surfaces are no less varied, as Johnny Truant observes about Zampanò's notes, which include writings on:

old napkins, the tattered edges of an envelope, once even on the back of a postage stamp; everything and anything but empty; each fragment completely covered with the creep of years and years of ink pronouncements; layered,

crossed out, amended; handwritten, typed; legible, illegible; impenetrable, lucid; torn, stained, scotch taped; some bits crisp and clean, others faded, burnt or folded and refolded so many times the creases have obliterated whole passages of god knows what - sense? truth? deceit? (Danielewski xvii).

Despite his uncertainty (or perhaps because of it), Johnny Truant adds to these “snarls” by more obsessive writing on diverse surfaces, annotating, correcting, recovering, blotting out and amending Zampanò’s words, filling out a journal, penning letters and poems, even scribbling on the walls of his studio apartment until all available inscription surfaces are written and overwritten with words and images.

Larry McCaffery debates that none of the dynamics displayed in *House of Leaves* is entirely original, yet the bits and pieces add up to something specific, if not unique.⁴¹ He says that *House of Leaves* is distinguishable, however, due to the way it uses familiar techniques to accomplish two goals. First, it extends the claims of the print book by showing what print can be in a digital age; second, it recuperates the vitality of the novel as a genre by recovering, through the processes of re-mediation, subjectivities coherent enough to provide the groundwork for the sustained narration that remains the hallmark of the print novel.

Re-mediation, the re-presentation of material that has already been represented in another medium, has a long and rich history, as Richard Grusin and Jay Bolter point out in their book on the subject.⁴² But the cycling through media has been greatly expanded and accelerated by the advent of digital technologies. The computer has often been proclaimed the ultimate medium because it can incorporate every other medium within itself. As if imitating the omnivorous appetite from the computer,

⁴¹ *Op. cit.* Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory 105.

⁴² *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

House of Leaves, in a frenzy of re-mediation, attempts to literally ingest all the other media. This binging, however, leaves traces on the text's body, resulting in a transformed physical and narrative corpus. In a sense, *House of Leaves* recuperates the traditions of the print book – particularly the novel as a literary form – but the price it pays is a metamorphosis so profound that it becomes a new kind of form and artifact. This in turn poses an open question of whether this transformation represents the rebirth of the novel or the beginning of the novel's displacement by a hybrid discourse that has yet has no name.

The plethora of narratives that create *House of Leaves* arguably form different levels of the figure of a house (basement, first floor, second floor, loft), with each critical level adding another level of meaning and, more importantly, another level of deferral from the central narrative. Such a trope means that *House of Leaves* is both about a “House of Leaves” (a house in which there are multiple absences or a fragile figure of a house built out of leaves) and is a “house of leaves” (a text).⁴³ In this respect, it is part of the American tradition of writing about houses within the figure of a house, analyzed in critical studies such as Marilyn Chandler's “Dwelling in the Text,” Chandler argues:

Houses . . . reflect not only the psychological structure of the main character or the social structures in which he is entrapped but the structure of the text itself, thereby setting up a four-way, and ultimately self-referential analogy among writer, text, character, and house. The same architectural habit of mind that designs and builds a house both to reflect patterns within it and to configure life in certain patterns may design a narrative to reflect and recast what the author conceives to be the essential structures of our lives (3).

⁴³ The text also presents the idea that the world is in some way this fragile “house of leaves” in the Zampanò appendix to the text: “this great blue world of ours/seems a house of leaves/moments before a wind” (Danielewski 563).

This psychological understanding of the *house* is a significant aspect of *House of Leaves* inasmuch as the ideas present throughout much of the canon of this literature appear *in* the novel.

However, *House of Leaves* proposes something quite different to the reification of an architectural reality. Although Danielewski uses many of the methods that Chandler observes in prior American fiction, *House of Leaves* seeks to undermine this process of reification, the very process implicit in its creation, and reintroduce the space that existed prior to the creation of the *House*: the absence within the text, or the absence of the *House*. This textual absence differs markedly from the “homelessness or rootlessness” that Chandler observes in recent American fiction, where “the absence of *house* and home becomes a significant, defining situation of the story,” because *House of Leaves* is actually the figure of a homeless home, a *house* that is not a *house*. *House of Leaves* is not so concerned with absence *from* the *house* (although this plays its part) as with the absence *of* the *house within* the *house*.

A second door opens when we consider another architectural study, this time in connection with philosophy. Mark Wigley’s essay, “The Domestication of the *House*,” argues that the creation of philosophy is equivalent to the creation of a *house*, most notably within the works of Heidegger and Derrida. The figure of the *house* is an integral part of their philosophies, and architectural metaphors abound within their works. Although their intentions differ, in Heidegger’s case it can be argued that, like Thoreau’s *Walden*, the *house* is a shelter within the natural environment, a rural paradise (Chandler 28–30). Derrida’s case is more difficult to apprehend because, for him, the *house* must attempt to reveal the process of its construction/“de-

construction,” meaning not nihilistic destruction but the undoing of the process of construction. This deconstructive “undoing” lays bare the structure of the *house* or that upon which the *house* is predicated:

Deconstruction is...understood as an affirmative appropriation of structures that identifies structural flaws, cracks in the construction that have been systematically disguised, not in order to collapse those structures but, on the contrary, to demonstrate the extent to which the structures depend on both these flaws and the way in which they are disguised (Wigley 207).

Wigley's emphasis makes clear that deconstruction, rather than being nihilistic, is actually an “affirmative appropriation of structures” that inhabits such structures in order to reveal the metaphysical underpinning of their creation. This is an ethical attempt to reveal what is behind the façade of the *house*, whether literary, philosophical, or architectural by inverting the “violent hierarchy” of the *house*.⁴⁴

Derrida writes that “one of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.) or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given movement” (*Positions* 41). This “violent hierarchy” arises from the inherent binary oppositions that create meaning – for example, Thoreau’s underlying assumption that “rural” is a positive term whereas “urban” is negative. Within a text, one of the two terms of the hierarchy is given precedence, and it is deconstruction’s task to reveal this choice and thus the prejudices that a text implicitly promotes. In order to accomplish this task, Derrida argues that deconstruction must occur *within* the text, moving inside the space of the *house*, looking for structural instabilities, or as Wigley argues, “it interrogates that discourse from within, locating and exploiting certain openings in it” (209). This approach to reading, especially when considered in relation to *House of Leaves*, is problematized

⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981) 41.

because we cannot inhabit the text. Reading this text is difficult despite the idea promoted by Chandler that there is such a thing as “dwelling in the text” by the reader. As readers, we are unable to dwell within the space proffered by *House of Leaves*, just as Navidson finds it impossible to live within the house. The house symbolizes absence and to live inside absence is impossible.

Certainly, transformative processes that lead to this realization are on display in an early scene between Will Navidson and Karen Green, related by Zampanò, who positions his readers as first-person viewers watching the film of *The Navidson Record* along with him. Since the film does not exist, his description of it, as an act of interpretation, creates the film as an object within the text and also as a putative object in the represented world. He describes how Navidson takes Karen's jewelry box out of a crate and removes the lid and inner tray to look inside, although “[u]nfortunately, whatever he sees inside is invisible to the camera” (Danielewski 10). Later when we learn that Karen keeps old love letters in her jewelry box, the moment retrospectively becomes fraught with an invasion of her privacy and Navidson's implicit jealousy. Then Karen comes in as Navidson is pulling a clump of her hair from her hairbrush. Watching him toss it into the wastebasket, she tries to snatch the hair, saying: “Just you watch, one day I'll go bald, then won't you be sorry you threw that away,” whereupon Will grins and replies, “No.” Zampanò's commentary focuses on “the multiple ways in which these few seconds demonstrate how much Will values Karen” (Danielewski 11). Despite the casual way Will handles her things, Zampanò's interpretation claims that Will has “in effect preserved her hair” and “called into question his own behavior” through the way he edits the images, thus contrasting his

attitude at the time he edited the video with his apparent disregard for her privacy at the time that the high-8 camera caught his actions.

The layering here is already four-fold, moving from Will and Karen at the time of filming, through Will as he edits the film, to Zampanò's initial viewing of the film, and then to his re-creation of the scene for us, the putative viewers, who of course read words rather than see images and so add a fifth layer of mediation. The layering is further complicated when Zampanò introduces "Samuel T. Glade," a critic who points out the ambiguity of Will's "No," arguing that it could refer to " 'watch,' 'bald,' or 'sorry' or all three" (Danielewski 11). As the meanings proliferate, Will's relationship with Karen becomes similarly multilayered and complex, combining disregard with tenderness, jealousy with regret, playful resistance to her chiding with a deep wish to recover what he has thrown away. But these complexities all come from the multiple re-mediations of the supposedly original moment, recorded on a film that does not exist in a [house](#) that cannot possibly exist because it violates the very fundamental laws of physics.

This pattern repeats throughout the text. For example, Karen's distrust of Will grows as he becomes increasingly infatuated with exploring the [house](#), and only when she makes a film about him, "A Brief History of Who I Love," can she see him with fresh eyes and rekindle her love. Here is Zampanò's interpretation of the process: "The diligence, discipline, and time-consuming research required to fashion this short – there are easily over a hundred edits – allowed Karen for the first time to see Navidson as something other than her own personal fears and projections" (Danielewski 368). Despite obvious technological limitations, the cuts are clean and sound beautifully

balanced with the rhythm and order of every shot, only serving to intensify even the most ordinary moment, "...If Sorrow is *deep regret over someone loved*, there is nothing but regret here, as if Navidson with his great eye had for the first time seen what over the years he never should have missed" (Danielewski 274).

Therefore, the actions and events of the *Navidson Record* are screened through a complex temporality, which proceeds from the narration of the film as a representation of events to its narration as an artifact, in which editing transforms meaning, to the narration of different critical views about the film, to Zampanò's narration as he often disagrees with and reinterprets these interpretations, and finally to Johnny's commentary on Zampanò's narration. Onto this already complex pastiche is layered a related but distinct temporality constituted by the different processes of inscription. This sequence begins with articles and books that Zampanò collects and reinscribes in his commentary, proceeds to Johnny's writing as he orders Zampanò's notes into a manuscript, and supposedly ends with the editors' corrections and publisher's interventions as they convert the manuscript to a print book. Onto the chronology of events and the order of telling are thus overlaid further temporal complexities introduced by recognizing that the narration is not an oral production but a palimpsest of inscriptions on diverse media. At the same time, the text insists on its specificity as a print novel, showing a heightened self-awareness about its own materiality.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ *House of Leaves* emphasizes that the nascent relationship between print and hypertext literatures presents innovative artists an opportunity to evolve new genres of literature within both media. As Danielewski states regarding his novel, "It was first serialized on the Internet. There's the Web page, there's the technology needed to typeset it. And there was the correspondence. There was an amazing range of people who wrote to me from the site and I think that helped me get through some of the publishing hurdles. The publishers wanted it to be a 300 page trade paperback and I was saying 'No, that's not the way it's going because I know there is this old guy in Norway that's reading this and a cop in the South reading it.' That is where the Internet is very valuable, where you see the direct pay-off, it was a great information-gathering tool." [...] "But then there is another irony in that we always knew this book could not just exist on the

As a matter of fact, it is not difficult to hear in some of Zampanò's remarks the views of the author as he draws attention to this fusion.⁴⁶ The most dramatic centers on Navidson's relation to the photograph that won him a Pulitzer Prize, a representation of a starving Sudanese girl gnawing on a bare bone while a buzzard perches to one side.⁴⁷ Navidson's torment focuses not so much on the morality of representing the girl as on the priorities that made him take the photograph first and run for help second, a hopeless dash that failed to rescue her from death. By calling the image "Delial," he imprints the name to himself, thereby awakening Karen's jealousy when she hears him murmur the name in his sleep and he refuses to tell her who it is. She finally makes the connection while filming "A Brief History of Who I Love," when she discovers the name penciled on the back of the photograph. That the name refers to the photographic image is made clear in the tortured letter Will writes to Karen on the eve of returning to the *house*, confessing that it is "the name I gave to the girl in the photo that won me all the fame and gory [one of the significant typos

Internet: it is a three dimensional object. On the screen you cannot turn it upside down, you do not have double-sided pages, you can't cross-index with your finger on the dog-eared pages as well as the artwork inside. That I always love. At the same time it was using the Internet to say look how particularly unique this analogue computer we have that is called a book, this codex." Ashley Crawford. *Danielewskibyte: House of Leaves and the digerati*. [<http://old.disinfo.com/archive/pages/dossier/id638/pg2/index.html>] December 8, 2000.

⁴⁶ In "Haunted *House*: An Interview with Mark Z. Danielewski," Larry McCaffery uncovers the following, as stated by the author: "But the main thing is the way this book started was with a series of essays that I wrote for myself about how I could use cinematic grammar in a textual way. My father was a filmmaker and he would bring home 16-mm films and my sister and I would watch and in between film rolls he would grill us about what was going on. 'OK, forget the story, why this long shot? Why this composition? What's the key of the editing? Where is the focus of the frame?' And I became aware of how specific and well documented the grammar of film is by people within the industry and it's completely unknown to the public." *Critique*. Winter 2003; Volume 44 NO. 2: 103.

⁴⁷ As Zampanò informs us, Navidson's photograph has a real life source: Kevin Carter's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph. Information on how Carter was able to get the photograph and his subsequent suicide can be found in Scott's McLeod's "The Life and Death of Kevin Carter," *Time*, September 1994: 70-73.

Danielewski inserts], that's all she is Karen, just the photo" (391).⁴⁸ Although meant to reassure Karen that Delial is not her rival, Navidson's letter assigns the name to the image, not to the girl herself. A few lines later he tries to recover the girl – "Not the photo – the photo, that thing – but who she was," but he concludes this line of thought with the mediating phrase "you should have seen her," re-imagining her as a picture he is taking now for Karen's benefit. When this thought is followed by "i miss miss miss," we can assume that his consciousness veers for a moment to the girl, but then it just as quickly slides back to the photograph – "but i didn't miss i got her along with the vulture in the background." The disgust that accompanies his assertion does nothing to mitigate its inevitability: "the real vulture was the guy with the camera preying on her for his fuck pulitzer prize" (Danielewski 392).

This interpretation of Navidson's letter is however refuted by other critics in Danielewski's book, who characterize the letter as drunken babble chock-full of expected expressions of grief, re-identification with a lost object, and plenty of transference, having less to do with Navidson's semi-concoctions of assertion and more to do with the maternal absence he endured throughout his life. The desire to save Delial must partly be attributed to a projection of Navidson's own desire to be cradled by his mother. Therefore his grief fuses his sense of self with his understanding of the other, causing him not only to mourn for the tiny child but for himself as well (Danielewski 397).

This refutation in fact points back to Freud's concept of transference, according to which on every woman falls the shadow of the mother, what immediately imparts

⁴⁸ Johnny Truant's comment on the errors is significant: "I've come to believe errors, especially written ones, are often the only markers left on a solitary life; to sacrifice them is to lose the angles of personality, the riddle of a soul." (Danielewski 31)

her with the power, possibly the omnipotence, of the mother. Indeed, the repressed keeps popping up where it is least expected. Danielewski suggests that only after “finding” Delial and reaching an understanding about his own life, Navidson will be able to properly escape the *house*. To Navidson, the *house* (and only the *house*) offered “the possibility that he could locate either within himself or ‘within that vast missing’ some emancipatory sense to put to rest his confusions and troubles, even put to rest the confusions and troubles of others, a curative symmetry to last the ages” (Danielewski 402). During his very last exploration of the *house*, the somatic and psychological symptoms of everyone exposed to the *house* decreased (Danielewski 406):

[e]ven more peculiar, the *house* became a *house* again. As Reston discovered, the space between the master bedroom and the children's bedroom had vanished. Karen's bookshelves were once again flush with the walls. And the hallway in the living room now resembled a shallow closet. Its walls were even white. The sea, it seemed, had quieted.

‘Was Navidson like Jonah?’ The Haven-Slocum Theory asks. ‘Did he understand the *house* would calm if he entered it, just as Jonah understood the waters would calm if he were thrown into them?’ (Danielewski 406)

In the scraps of paper to be found in the Appendix, however, this positive outcome is refuted, suggesting Navidson did not wholly come to terms with his own past:

The only ominous note was struck by the ambulance driver who took Navidson and Karen to the hospital:

It was late afternoon, nice, real peaceful, and we got him on a stretcher and loaded up, and she started to cry a lot, sort of coming out of the shock of it, I seen that happen a lot. It was real intense - he being about to die and she crying and all - so I shouldn't have noticed anything else but I kept hearing this banging. Over and over, bang, bang, bang. So finally I lookt over at the *house* and sure enough their screen door was slamming open and shut. I forgot about it until I'm driving back

to the hospital. See, I told you it was nice out. Well that was true. Real nice, there weren't no breeze to speak of. The trees weren't swaying, nothing, just still. But that screen door was banging open and shut like we were in the middle of a darned hurricane. A few weeks later I drove by the **house** but the door was closed and they'd started putting up that big fence. [...] The **house** still stands on Ash Tree Lane. Karen still owns it. It is not for sale. As she warns: "There is nothing there. Be careful." (Danielewski 550)

Navidson's last enterprise seems to have failed too. The reason for this new failure – again expressly offered in the book itself – can be found in his unconscious desire for death:

Navidson began believing darkness could offer something other than itself. [...] 'Even the brightest magnesium flare can do little against such dark except blind the eyes of the one holding it. Thus one craves what by seeing one has in fact not seen. [...] That **house** answers many yearnings remembered in sorrow. The point of recounting these observations is simply to show how understandable it was that for Navidson the impenetrable sweep of that place soon acquired greater meaning simply because [...] it was full of *unheimliche vorklänger* and thus represented a means to his own personal propitiation. [...] when Tom died every 'angry, rueful, self-indicting tangle' within Navidson suddenly 'lit up,' producing projections powerful and painful enough to 'occlude, deny and cover' the only reason for their success in the first place: the blankness of that place, 'the utter and *perfect* blankness.'

It is nevertheless the underlying position [...] that Navidson in fact relied on such projections in order to deny his increasingly more 'powerful and motivating Thanatos.' In the end, he sought nothing less than to see the **house** exact its annihilating effects on his own being. [...]

Thus emphasizing the potentially mortal price for beholding what must lie forever lost in those inky folds. (Danielewski 387-388)

Navidson's return to the **house** could, in the last resort, be regarded as an encounter with the threat of death, which, as a photographer, he never had felt, because he had always placed someone else between himself and the threat.

Returning to Ash Tree Lane meant removing the other. It meant photographing something unlike anything he had ever encountered before, even in previous visits to the **house**, a place without population, without participants, a place that would threaten no one else's existence but his own." (Danielewski 422)

Only my end exists. [...] Maybe that is the something here. The only thing here. My end (Danielewski 472).

It is as though, at the end of the tunnel, Freud's death drive was awaiting him, "Non enim videbit me homo et vivet." (Danielewski 388)⁴⁹

The nature of Navidson's return to the house could be interpreted as a phenomena of self-destructiveness, which is, according to Freud in his observations of the nature of psychopathology itself, the "compulsion to repeat" trauma via symptom formation, a topic he addressed earlier in "Recollecting, Repeating, and Working Through" (1914). That is, death is manifested in repetitions of thought, fantasy, and behavioral action, parapraxes, in masochism and sadism, in symptoms such as melancholia, paranoia, and psychosis, and finally, in the *uncanny*.

A Labyrinthine De-Construction of Das Umheimlich

The appearance of deconstructive strategy within *House of Leaves* is indicative of the way in which the text seeks to avoid leaving any trace of meaning, though this claim does not necessarily mean that the text itself is deconstructive. Rather, it is more accurate to say that the use of poststructuralist ideas allows the text to approach nihilism and that there is, thus, some form of extreme deconstruction at work within the formulation of nihilism that is presented. Within *House of Leaves*, this deconstructive tendency manifests itself in certain figures of the text, for example, in its use of mirror-writing, in its use of footnotes (supplements) and footnotes of footnotes (supplements of supplements), its faux critical tone mixed with fiction, and its exploration of labyrinths

⁴⁹ "Maurice Blanchot translates this as 'whoever sees God dies.' –Ed. " (Danielewski 388). The literal translation goes as follows: 'The man who sees me and lives does after all not exist.' In his letter to Karen, Navidson writes: "God's a house. Which is not to say that our house is God's house or even a house of God. What I mean to say is that our house is God." (Danielewski 390).

and echoes. This texturing could imply that *House of Leaves* presents the reader with a continually deferred sense of meaning, a play of *différance*.

However, what we see at another level of textualization is not a chain of (deferred) meaning, with footnotes referring to footnotes referring to footnotes, but a structural nightmare of rooms within a house. Like Massimo Cacciari's definition of the city, leading to "no place," "a context of roads, a labyrinth without center, an absurd labyrinth" (200), *House of Leaves* promotes the visualization of this (non)space within the House as the labyrinth of a series of rooms within or, rather, underneath, the larger space of the House.⁵⁰ This is to the extent that the narrative itself, this "House of leaves" hiding its own absence, is textually presented as a maze of rooms within a house. The footnotes themselves break into the text, interfere with the reading of the text, but are always segmented off by a thick black box or line (see, for example: notes 119–44). These are not truly "footnotes" but *rooms within a house*, sometimes empty (the blank boxes), sometimes full of people (lists of people such as the "authors of buildings" – section on page 121). They also include store cupboards (the supplies and objects of footnote 144, pages 119–42) and libraries (footnote 167, pages 131–35, on "literary hauntings," including texts by Borges and Rushdie). Each of these sections takes us further and further from the original *Navidson Record*, or even the original "text" of Zampanò's, but through a labyrinth, not along a chain. This labyrinth forms a major part of both the structure and content of the text involving the production of Zampanò's text and the subsequent creation of further stories (critical and personal) that revolve around it. The exploration of the Navidson House labyrinth is combined with a treatise on

⁵⁰ Massimo Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

labyrinths (109–15) within the Zampanò text that actually provides (on page 112) a quotation from Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play" essay:

This is why the classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality) the totality *has its center elsewhere*. The center is not the center. (*Writing and Difference* 279).

This *centerless* center informs a major part of *House of Leaves* and is the reason why it eventually becomes a nihilistic space. Within the *House* there exists (or does not exist) a nihilistic space that is paradoxically the center of the *House* – that which defines the totality of the *House* – and yet is absent from the *House* itself because the *House* has been constructed over it. Although Derrida uses this argument to justify the removal of transcendent signifiers, it works equally well in demonstrating that the nihilistic space within the *House* is a figure of impossibility. This means that, rather than deconstruction removing the possibility of nihilism from the text, it actually demonstrates that nihilism is, indeed, reflexive, and must disprove its own existence in order to remain nihilistic.⁵¹ What occurs within the *House*, then, is the construction of a blank circle labyrinth that may open to accept you, but whose starting point is arbitrary, whose walls are mutable, and whose starting point actually disappears as the internal architecture of the *House* changes, meaning that you cannot

⁵¹ This is somewhat problematic in relation to the *House*, as the text points out: "Can Navidson's house exist without the experience of itself?" (Danielewski 172). There is also the problem of the explorers themselves shaping the *House* – Is it possible to think of that place as 'unshaped' by human perceptions?" (Danielewski 173) – although this does confirm that the *House* can only be appropriated into thought and not thought of in its own terms. For Bemong, the answer to this is clear – "the anomaly of the house, the terrifying dark hallways, are thus a projection of one's own fears" – but this seems unnecessarily specific. Unbeing, or non-Being, is arguably the primal fear at the heart of all Being.

follow your path back, only go onwards, realizing that there is no escape – lost in the twist of so many dangerous sentences” (Danielewski xviii).

This labyrinth of the *House* is allied closely with the principle of deconstruction and is seen throughout the text in a number of different figures, but perhaps most especially in the narrative and structural use of both echoes and mirrors, two phenomena closely related to deconstructive practice. Both of these are similar to the mentioned play of *différance*.⁵² Echoes transform secure auditory communication to a deferred state that fragments meaning by the continued recurrence of a sound, slowly fading into silence. Mirrors function in a similar manner, deferring the justificatory identity of the self by the self, by reflecting an image that both *is* and yet *is not* the individual. In *House of Leaves* there is a protracted study of both echoes and mirrors, for example, when the Zampanò text says, “It is impossible to appreciate the importance of space in *The Navidson Record* without first taking into account the significance of echoes” (Danielewski 41). This is indeed true, for as the Zampanò text notes, “When a pebble falls down a well, it is gratifying to hear the eventual plunk. If, however, the pebble only slips into darkness and vanishes without a sound, the effect

⁵² *Différance* is an attempt to conjoin the differing and deferring aspects involved in arche-writing in a term that itself plays upon the distinction between the audible and the written. After all, what differentiates *différance* and *différence* is inaudible, and this means that distinguishing between them actually requires the written. This problematizes efforts like Saussure’s, which as well as attempting to keep speech and writing apart, also suggest that writing is an almost unnecessary addition to speech. In response to such a claim, Derrida can simply point out that there is often, and perhaps even always, this type of ambiguity in the spoken word - *différence* as compared to *différance* - that demands reference to the written. If the spoken word requires the written to function properly, then the spoken is itself always at a distance from any supposed clarity of consciousness. It is this originary breach that Derrida associates with the terms arche-writing and *différance*.

Of course, *différance* cannot be exhaustively defined, and this is largely because of Derrida’s insistence that it is “neither a word, nor a concept,” as well as the fact that the meaning of the term changes depending upon the particular context in which it is being employed. For the moment, however, it suffices to suggest that according to Derrida, *différance* is typical of what is involved in arche-writing and this generalized notion of writing that breaks down the entire logic of the sign. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976) 7.

is disquieting” (Danielewski 41) In the case of the verbal echo, the spoken word acts as the pebble and the subsequent repetition serves as “the plunk.”

In this way, speaking can result in a form of “seeing” (Danielewski 46–47). The echo of *House of Leaves* can therefore be understood as either a deconstructive deferral, slowly fading, or a nihilistic absence. When the explorations of the *House* take place, a deconstructive echo slowly turns into the complete absence of any defined sense of space, as the internal geographies of the *House* shift and become larger than the physical space that the *House* can actually occupy.

What begins as an echo, and thus describes a “sizeable space” (Danielewski 50), becomes, as the text progresses, too large for even echoes to function within the range of the human ear. This alteration of space beyond physical possibility accomplishes for Tom, Navidson’s brother, “a goddamn spatial rape” (Danielewski 55), which is in fact the entire message behind the *House* – the rape of this space is accomplished by the very act of construction of the *House* over nothing – the triumph of Being over non-Being. The construction of the *House* is later found to be over a mysterious set of stairs cut into the earth, first discovered in the middle of a forest during Lord De la Warr’s Hudson expedition in 1610 – “Ftaires! We haue found ftaires!” (Danielewski 414) – evoking the psychoanalytic interpretation of the *House* as something repressed, something “underground.”⁵³ All of the people from this expedition disappear into “a labyrinth without end” (Danielewski 136–37), and we hear little more from the *House* historically until the entry of the Navidson family.

⁵³ As has already been shown in other parts of this analysis, psychoanalysis plays an important part within *House of Leaves*, from continued references to the unconscious and to family relations, such as those between Zampanò and his son and between Johnny Truant and his mother, and provides another, equally valid, means of interpreting the text.

Violating these preconscious assumptions, the impossible *House* nevertheless enters the space of representation and with it, of the *uncanny*, much like Maurits Cornelis Escher's staircases in the lithograph *Ascending and Descending*.⁵⁴ The *House* is undeniably present within the text, yet in crucial aspects it remains unrepresentable. The interior hallway that mysteriously creates a door in the living room where there was none before leads to spaces supposedly contained by the dimensions of an ordinary two-bedroom family *house* that are greater than the diameter of the earth and older than the solar system.

Already in chapter IV of the novel, an *uncanny* change occurs in the *House* bought by the Navidsons: after a four-day visit to Seattle, all of a sudden, they find a dark room between the parental bedroom and that of the children:

[T]he change was enormous. It was not, however, obvious - like for instance a fire, a robbery, or an act of vandalism. Quite the contrary, the horror was atypical. No one could deny there had been an intrusion, but it was so odd no one knew how to respond. On video, we see Navidson acting almost amused while Karen simply draws both hands to her face as if she were about to pray. Their children, Chad and Daisy, just run through it, playing, giggling, completely oblivious to the deeper implications. (Danielewski 24)

⁵⁴ The dissociate-built environment identified with Danielewski's labyrinthine metanarrative is present in M. C. Escher's drawings through an innovative mathematical use of perspective. In fact, among the theoretical concepts that underline Escher's work, none is as pervasive as the insistence on the illusionist character of the image, an illusionism based on a firm foundation of perspective and awareness of optical laws, even though Escher's art is also known for revolving around its relationship to the fields of information science and artificial intelligence.

Of the themes recurring in Escher's work, it is possible to draw some clear conclusions about the sources that inspired him: the structure of the plane, the structure of space, the relationship between these two. On the basis of this system, there are a total of seven themes with which Escher was concerned in his 'mathematical' prints: (1) penetration of worlds; (2) the illusion of space; (3) the regular division of the plane; (4) perspective; (5) regular solids and spirals; (6) the impossible; (7) the infinite. After 1947, the problem of the relative nature of vanishing points and lines of perspective continued to intrigue Escher. In 1951 he came to the general conclusion that you could choose a number of vanishing points and connect them alternately with bundles of diagonal lines. This gives a network for spatial pictures in which top, bottom, and straight ahead cannot be distinguished. *House of Stairs* and *Convex and Concave* are exemplary in this study.

Furthermore, the concept of the ‘uncanny’ in *House of Leaves* is extensively introduced, described and theoretically studied in the footnotes, where Danielewski combines the theories of Freud, Lacan and Heidegger:

In their absence, the Navidsons' home had become something else, and while not exactly sinister or even threatening, the change still destroyed any sense of security or well-being. (Danielewski 28) What took place amounts to a strange spatial violation which has already been described in a number of ways – namely surprising, unsettling, disturbing but most of all uncanny. In German the word for ‘uncanny’ is ‘unheimlich’ which Heidegger in his book “Sein und Zeit” thought worthy of some consideration: [...] In anxiety one feels uncanny. Here the peculiar indefiniteness of that which Dasein finds itself alongside in anxiety, comes proximally to the expression: the ‘nothing and nowhere.’ But here ‘uncanniness’ also means ‘not-being-at-home.’ [das Nicht-zuhause-sein]. (Danielewski 24) Nevertheless [...] Heidegger still fails to point out that unheimlich when used as an adverb means ‘dreadfully,’ ‘awfully,’ ‘heaps of,’ and ‘an awful lot of.’ Largeness has always been a condition to the weird and unsafe; it is overwhelming, too much or too big. Thus that which is uncanny or unheimlich is neither homely nor protective, nor comforting nor familiar. It is alien, exposed, and unsettling, or in other words, the perfect description of the *house* on Ash Tree Lane. (Danielewski 28)

In other words: there is a “general drift of the uncanny movement from homely to unhomely, a movement in most ghost stories where an apparently homely *house* turns gradually into a site of horror.” (Vidler 32) This is exactly what happens to the *House* in Ash Tree Lane.

With *House of Leaves*, Danielewski upholds a prolific tradition stemming from the nineteenth century.⁵⁵

By far the most popular topos of the nineteenth-century uncanny was the haunted *house*. A pervasive leitmotiv of architectural revival alike, its depiction in fairy tales, horror stories and Gothic novels gave rise to a unique genre of writing that, by the end of the century, stood for romanticism itself. The *house* provided an especially favored site for uncanny disturbances: its apparent

⁵⁵ A frequently asked question at the publication of *The Navidson Record*, was: “was the subject a haunted *house*?” (Danielewski 6).

domesticity, its residue of family history and nostalgia, its role as the last and most intimate shelter of private comfort sharpened by contrast the terror of invasion by alien spirits (Vidler 17).

Vidler even specifies his definition of “the *uncanny*” by giving a special status to “the spatial *uncanny*”:

one no longer entirely dependent on the temporal dislocations of suppression and return, or the invisible slippages between a sense of the homely and the unhomely, but displayed in the abyssal repetitions of the imaginary void. [...] This endless drive to repeat is then uncanny, both for its association with the death drive and by virtue of the ‘doubling’ inherent in the incessant movement without movement” (37-38).

In Vidler's terminology, we could speak of “repetitive stages toward infinity,” especially when taking into consideration the endless character of the labyrinth. This view is also explicitly uttered in *House of Leaves*, “But, what is the meaning of this labyrinth? Does it even have a meaning?”⁵⁶ The formulation of such answer will however take the shape of an exploration in itself, albeit not of a labyrinthine *house*, but of a text - itself a construction in its kind.

The position that the dark hallway offers no “answers” and “remains meaningless” (Danielewski 60) is refuted only a few pages later in the book (in the meantime, Tom has installed a door to barricade the hallway): “Sadly, even with the

⁵⁶ The house seems to deny all laws of nature concerning supporting power. “So that place, beyond dimension, impossibly high, deep, wide – what kind of foundation is it sitting on?” (Danielewski 355) Something without foundation, has no ground, ergo no meaning... Or: “I trace the lines, do the math, study the construction, and all I come up with is... well the whole thing’s just a hopeless, structural impossibility. And therefore substanceless and forgettable. Despite its weight, its magnitude, its mass... In the end it adds up to nothing” (Danielewski 361). “Just as a nasty virus resists the body's immune system so [...] the *house* resists interpretation.” Meaning could only originate “if you tied the *house* to politics, science or psychology. Whatever you like but something” (Danielewski 356). Moreover, one should keep in mind one issue: “It could represent plenty of things but it also is nothing more than itself, a *house* - albeit a pretty weird *house*” (Danielewski 361).

unnatural darkness⁵⁷ now locked behind a steel door, Karen and Navidson still continue to say very little to each other, their own feelings seemingly as impossible for them to address as the meaning of the hallway itself” (Danielewski 61). The hallway, and the labyrinth that is shaped by its windings do not seem to be as meaningless as what may appear from the previous pages of the book. What their exact meaning might be still remains an unanswered question. It does however look as if there will be more than one meaning to it. The text itself offers a whole series of possible interpretations. “Is it merely an aberration of physics? Some kind of warp in space? Or just a topiary labyrinth on a much grander scale? Perhaps it serves a funereal purpose? Conceals a secret? Protects something? Imprisons or hides some kind of monster? Or, for that matter, imprisons or hides an innocent? As the Holloway team soon discovers, answers to these questions are not exactly forthcoming” (Danielewski 111):

[N]o one, not even a god or an Other, comprehends the entire maze and so therefore can never offer a definitive answer. Navidson’s *house* seems a perfect example. Due to the wall-shifts and extraordinary size, any way out remains singular and applicable only to those on that path at that particular time. All solutions then are necessarily personal. [...] While some portions of the *house*, like the Great Hall for instance, seem to offer a communal experience, many inter-communicating passageways encountered by individual members, even with only a glance, will never be re-encountered by anyone else again. Therefore, in spite of, as well as in light of, future investigations, Holloway’s descent remains singular (Danielewski 115, 118).

On closer examination, the *house* primarily seems to externalize the psychic problems and anxieties of its inhabitants in its architectural structure, corresponding to

⁵⁷ The darkness reigning in the hallway is not coincidental. At the end of the 18th century, the fear of darkness brought about a great fascination for everything concerning the dark side of life, for a fantastic world, filled with dark stone walls, hiding places and dungeons. A spatial phenomenology of darkness came to life. “Absolute darkness [was] the most powerful instrument to induce that state of fundamental terror claimed by Burke as the instigator of the sublime.” *Op. Cit.*, Vidler 169.

Vidler's characterization of the *uncanny* as "outgrowth of the Burkean sublime": "[i]ts favorite motif was precisely the contrast between a secure and homely interior and the fearful invasion of an alien presence; on a psychological level, its play was one of doubling, where the other is, strangely enough, experienced as a replica of the self, all the more fearsome because apparently the same" (3). The anomaly of the *House* and the terrifying dark hallways are thus a projection of one's own fears. Or, as Vidler states:

the 'uncanny' is not a property of the space itself nor can it be provoked by any particular spatial confirmation; it is, in its aesthetic dimension, a representation of a mental state of projection that precisely elides the boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming. (Vidler 11)

One could say that the buildings and spaces that have acted as the sites for *uncanny* experiences have been invested with recognizable characteristics. These almost typical and eventually commonplace qualities – the attributes of haunted *houses* in Gothic romances are the most well known – while evidently not essentially *uncanny* in themselves, nevertheless have been seen as *emblematic* of the *uncanny*, as the cultural signs of estrangement for particular periods. Likewise, the mutations in the *House* on Ash Tree Lane reflect the psyche of its owners:

[...] reflect the psychology of anyone who enters it. Dr. Haugeland asserts that the extraordinary absence of sensory information forces the individual to manufacture his or her own data. Ruby Dahl, in the stupendous study of space, calls the *house* on Ash Tree Lane 'a solipsistic heightener,' arguing that 'the *house*, the halls, and the rooms all become the self – collapsing, expanding, tilting, closing, but always in perfect relation to the mental state of the individual. (Danielewski 165)

In many ways, Navidson's *house* functions like an immense isolation tank. Deprived of light, change in temperature and any sense of time, the individual begins

to create his own sensory state, “[]d depen[]ng on the duration of his stay begins to project more and more of [] personality on those bare walls and vacant []allways” (Danielewski 330). However, the absence at the center of this space is not merely nothing. It is so commanding and absolute that it paradoxically becomes an especially intense kind of presence, violent in its impossibility and impossible to ignore. Navidson, insisting that his documentary should be taken literally, is quoted by Zampanò as saying: ‘And if one day you find yourself passing by that [house](#), don't stop, don't slow down, just keep going. There's nothing there. Beware’ (Danielewski 4). Only if we read “nothing” as a substantive does this passage make sense, a negation converted into the looming threat of something, although it is impossible to say *what* unless it be negation itself, working to obliterate our everyday assumptions about reality

One of the tropes for this threat is the beast that manifests itself through physical traces that always remain shy of verifiable presence. So we read about the mysterious claw marks of some enormous paw that Johnny finds alongside Zampanò's dead body; the deep growls that issue from the [House](#), untraceable traces that may be the sound of the beast or perhaps just the [House](#) groaning in its endless rearrangements: the rending of the fluorescent markers with which the explorers try to map the [House](#)'s interior, along with the destruction of their supplies; the rank odor that Johnny first encounters in Zampanò's apartment and that he identifies then with the smell of history; the ominous creatures that populate the margins of Chad and Daisy's classroom drawings, with the intense black square in the middle that grows larger in each painting; the black hand of darkness that swipes into the camera frame to consume Holloway's dead

body. Representing both the interiority of psychological trauma and the exteriority of raging appetite, the beast, like the *House* itself, inhabits a borderland between the metaphoric and the literal, the imaginary and the real.

Nowhere is the dance between presence and absence, illusion and reality, more deftly executed than in the scene where Johnny goes into the storeroom at the tattoo shop to load a tray with ink. As the door swings shut behind him, he suddenly senses that something is going “extremely wrong” and thinks he sees the beast’s eyes “full of blood.” The narration from this point on is full of contradictions. He smells a stench, and we may believe it is the rank smell of the beast until Johnny confesses: “I’ve shit myself. Pissed myself too.” Increasingly incoherent, he sees the “shape of a shape of a shape of a face dis(as)sembling right before my eyes” (Danielewski 71). He bolts from the storeroom through a door that is inexplicably open rather than shut and tumbles down the stairs as “[s]omething hisses and slashes out at the back of my neck.” Although a client in the shop later calls Johnny’s attention to the “long bloody scratch” on the back of his neck, other details he reported come undone in the continuing narration. He discovers, for example, that he has not soiled his pants after all. Moreover, the scratch that remains the only verifiable evidence of the encounter recalls the half-moon cuts his mother left on his neck when she tried to strangle him at age seven. Is the triply mediated “shape of a shape of a shape of a face” the face of the beast or of the mother who remains an incomprehensible object for Johnny in the intensity of her love, equaled only by the ferocity of her insanity and abuse?

The ambiguities already inscribed in the scene intensify when Johnny looks down at his body covered by the ink spilled in his mad dash down the stairs and sees it as an “omen.”

I’m doused in black ink, my hands now completely covered, and [I] see the floor is black, and – have you anticipated this or should I be more explicit? – jet on jet; for a blinding instant I have watched my hand vanish, in fact all of me has vanished, one hell of a disappearing act too, the already foreseen dissolution of the self. lost without contrast, slipping into oblivion. (Danielewski 72)

At this point the “foreseen” dissolution of his identity connects with the beast as a signifier of absence, a negation that spreads like an inkblot to encompass his subjectivity. But then the passage continues by recovering, through a doubly mediated reflection, the blotted-out subject:

until mid-gasp I catch sight of my reflection in the back of the tray, the ghost in the way; seems I’m not gone, not quite. My face has been splattered with purple, as have my arms. Granting contrast, and thus defining me, marking me, and at least for the moment. preserving me. (Danielewski 72)

The purple ink that brings back portions of his splattered face recalls the purple nail polish his mother wore the day her fingernails dug into his neck, marking him in a complex act of inscription that here merges with the purple and black ink to form an over-determined double writing that operates simultaneously to negate and assert, obliterate and create, erase and mark.

The labyrinthine and emblematic uncanniness of the [House](#) represents the marginal, the fragmentary. But, how is one to map this exchange, of terms and of texts, and how will this economy of the marginal, the transgressive, the nameless, or unnamable, operate within the aestheticized space of writing and reading?

The Built and Dissimilar Gaze: Through the Looking Glass Darkly

Through innovative typography and other devices, *House of Leaves* foregrounds its materiality, which depends on physical properties, though not in a naive or unequivocal way, because the number of physical properties that can be brought into play is essentially infinite. Of all the attributes we might potentially notice about a book, a small number are selected by the semiotic content and mobilized as resources so that they become part of the book's signifying practices. According to Neil Badmington, materiality thus *emerges* from the interplay between physical attributes and semiotic components.⁵⁸ He adds that verbal content gives meaning to physical properties, which inflect the verbal content at the same time. The verbal and nonverbal evolve together toward emergent meanings that change dynamically as the narrative progresses (15). So, when physical properties enter deeply into the text's signifying practices, as they do with *House of Leaves*, a mode of analysis attentive to the specificity of the medium is required to account for the full range of semiotic strategies the text employs.⁵⁹

This is the other interesting deconstructive feature of *House of Leaves*. Similar to their use in Escher's work, mirrors in Danielewski's novel appear within the text as mirror-writing that recreates the general feeling of both "Through the Looking Glass" (the alternative world of Lewis Carroll's *Alice* sequel) and "In a Glass Darkly."⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Neil Badmington, "Theorizing Posthumanism," (1971) *Cultural Critique*, Vol. 53, Winter 2003: 12-15.

⁵⁹ Mark Poster, "Everyday (Virtual) Life," *New Literary History*, Vol. 33, No. 4, Autumn 2002: 687.

⁶⁰ To Escher, the mirror image was no ordinary matter. He was particularly fascinated by the mixture of ordinarily-conceived reality (the mirror itself and everything surrounding it) with the "other" reality (the reflection in the mirror). Examples of this can be seen even in his early work. For instance in 1920 he made a large pen-and-ink drawing of the interior of the *St. Bavo Church in Haarlem*.

Within the text, mirrors force the reader to face the text and realize that they are only seeing what they themselves place within it. The idea of the mirror is the simultaneous rendering of a reflection of the reader and that of an image – an opposite image – in its own right.

The mirrors appear within the *House of Leaves* in a number of different ways. The section on architectural objects and traveling supplies that is footnote 144 (Danielewski 119–42) is especially interesting from a structural point of view, as Danielewski presents the reader with a hole in the text by providing a lengthy list of items *not* present in the *house*. Each recto page is mirrored on the following verso page and is given exactly the same space as the preceding one, but is written in “mirror-writing.” This footnote itself shifts form, from a bordered box-out, first part of a list and then empty white space, to a black box, to an un-bordered white space

In addition, much like the construction of the *structure en abîme* and the uncanny in *House of Leaves*, M. C. Escher’s lithograph *Magic Mirror* (1946) proves to be a singular case. In this print, Escher plays with the whole mirror idea à la Lewis Carroll as well. Mirrors can enclose within their small surface the limitless depth of space and sky, which is mystery enough; but they may also puzzle and surprise us with the sharpness of their images, and with their curious deviations from what is expected. Mirrors thereby presume an inner authority, which disconcerts us by contradicting what we feel sure we know. They make us see ourselves as other, because they do not conceal what we usually conceal from ourselves. But in fact there is no authority that could be identified within a mirror. And the glass as metaphor can deceive, too; the mirror of art presents images structured according to the shapes desired by the perceiving mind. Mirror images, therefore, leave us with two uncomfortable paradoxes. The first is that two worlds can be made to occupy one space, the world of the mirror in the world that is being mirrored. The second is that one world can double itself into two spaces.

This experience of mirrors, of one world inscribed in the second world that it resembles. All these varied textual manifestations and modalities of the mirror – real mirrors, the imagery of reflection, reversals of figure and of structure, repetitions with a difference – they all elide into one another, beyond the capacity of a single figure to hold them together. The mirror effect, with its invisible surface and its illusory depth, its reciprocal gaze and reversed image, is central to much of the imagery of *House of Leaves*, for it produces kind of magnet image that others cluster around. However, in the *House*, much like in Escher’s *Magic Mirror*, both mirror and spatial representation (the labyrinth) contain their own binary oppositions. Each one can serve as an ambivalent, antithetical sign: for loss of self, and death, on the one hand, but also for recognition and self-discovery on the other. *House of Leaves*, indeed, incorporates this model of verisimilitude, and converts it into a structural necessity.

delineated only by the text that surrounds it. This shift in form raises questions of windows or mirrors within the text, a two-way mirror image that allows the readers to see through the space and yet to see only themselves or what they impose upon the text. It is both a repetition and at the same time something turns backwards, something that cannot be read according to the normal rules. The mirror reflects and creates the infinite regression presented by a deconstructive reading of a deconstructed space, losing any coherent notion of meaning on both a literal and personal level, destabilizing the entire notion of reading the “house of leaves.”

Within the text, there are moments of elucidation that deconstruction would argue to be deferrals – the lists of items taken on expeditions, the footnotes to Zampanò’s text, the footnotes to those footnotes, and so on, in an eternal deferral of revelation. However, these moments are present to enforce meaning upon the text – to give structure to that which is without structure – an attempt by the text to “fast-talk” itself out of the realization that it is always teetering on the abyss of non-meaning. Thus, the inventories of styles, items, and people are actually mantras to Being that both the explorers, and, more importantly, the text/s serve to delineate and quantify the contents of the House. Thus, although the text seems to be characterized by the sense of poststructuralist or postmodern play, we can in fact see that this “play” is an attempt by Being-in-language, or by Being-through-language, to destroy any trace of the “nothingness” upon which it was built, to be “everything and anything but empty” (Danielewski xvii). The entire *House of Leaves* is concerned with the attempt, by both language and culture, to overcome “nothingness.” When the text narrates, it is not to communicate, but to try to fill the void of silence that would otherwise be there. It is a

language based upon fear, diacritically, of course, but the diacritic is not formed by what else is present within language, but by what language hides, by what language can never elucidate, namely, silence, the *Other* of language.

This linguistic self-immolation manifests itself in the fact that physical descriptions of the *house* within *House of Leaves* always involve the creation of a new format. Rather than use traditional prose descriptions to define the *House*, the language shifts to incorporate the spatial dimensions of the *House*, and so as the “walls and doorways recede and vanish” (Danielewski 432) the same thing occurs in the text: Soon the walls and doorways recede and v a n i s h. Arguably, this unusual typography is meant to evoke the feeling of the space that Navidson is inhabiting, just as “concrete” poetry makes concrete what the reader is reading by the appearance of the object itself. However, this reading is undermined by the awareness that rather than helping us to elucidate the text, language cannot entirely deal with the phenomenon within the *House*. That is, prose description alone cannot match the reality of the *House* and so another mechanism must be put in place by which meaning will be conveyed. However, introducing a spatial aspect to the language of the text admits not only that language is somehow flawed communication, but that it, too, partakes in the experience of *House of Leaves*.

The “concrete” structure of these sections raises questions about the possibility of reading texts constructed in such a way. As the reader tries to follow the thread of the sentence, what actually occurs is that the sentence switches angles, bifurcates, and finally disappears, just as the “concrete” walls of the *House* do. Thus, just as the internal environment of the *House*, shifting and mutating, resists interpretation in

terms of floor plans and schematics, so too the *House*, as text, resists interpretation. When the text says, “direction no longer matters” (Danielewski 433), referring to the *House*, we see that this statement doubles back upon itself and that whether we try to read paradigmatically or syntagmatically, we are not reading “anything.” We are left with only a void and a maze of words that tries, and ultimately fails, to cover it.

This labyrinth of language leads to the idea, presented in the *House*, that the written word, anything that may be construed as a sign, is erased. The *House*-as-text and *House*-as-house must both use language that cannot clarify or explain itself. Although it must be “within” language in order to be imagined, the *House* attempts to undo this language as it is being written. The *House* becomes trapped within its own description of itself, and its only escape is to somehow attempt to devalue the language that is being used, un-write what is being written, and make absent what has been made present.

This un-making is signified at many stages in the text, for example, in the ellipses that creep into Zampanò’s text (Danielewski 327–38), in the missing pages of the geology report (Danielewski 372), or in the editorial note that, “[i]nexplicably, the remainder of this footnote along with seventeen more pages of text vanished from the manuscript supplied by Mr Truant” (Danielewski 376). Sense thereby becomes a product not of signs but of their absence, and indeed “sense” and “meaning” become a product of the sustained lack of indicative signs. This lack is seen in several passages of the text, for instance, at the start of the reportage of the second *Navidson Record* entitled *Exploration #5*:

The walls are endlessly bare. Nothing hangs on them, nothing defines them. They are without texture. Even to the keenest eye or most sentient fingertip, they

remain unreadable. You will never find a mark there. No trace survives. The walls obliterate everything. They are permanently absolved of all record. Oblique, forever obscure and unwritten. Behold the perfect pantheon of absence. (Danielewski 423)

This passage is written in *faux braille*, using the pattern of dots on the page that are not imprinted upon the page. This is a crucial distinction, showing that even the blind cannot read the *House* by its surface.

The same applies to the signifying principle of music/sound such as when the reader is presented with musical notation that cannot make a sound (479) or with Navidson's return to the *House*: "Very soon he will vanish completely in the wings of his own wordless stanza" (Danielewski 484). Navidson, like the *House*, is moving around at close to Absolute Zero. This is the nihilism of the *House*: a cold, dark, mutable labyrinth, without waypoints or markers, in which no sound occurs past those that the psyche of the explorer takes with it. As *House of Leaves* suggests, it is the very result of this blankness that creates a sensory craving for "something:"

This desire for exteriority is no doubt further amplified by the utter blankness found within. Nothing there provides reason to linger, in part because not one object, let alone fixture or other manner of finish work has ever been discovered there. (Danielewski 119)

There exists within the *House* "nothing." That is, it is not that the *house* is empty *per se*; it is that the *House* is full – so full in fact, as to promote claustrophobia – of *Nothing*. It is the ultimate nihilistic premise of construction, founded on a blank space that forever inhabits the *House*.

But indeed, there is something far more dangerous about the *House of Leaves* than merely an absent presence of a *House* in that this nihilistic space functions in a

manner akin to a black hole, seeking to absorb all traces of Being with which it is presented. This absorption is normally situated at the threshold of the nihilistic space – “the doorway” – within the *House*, but there are elements in the text that indicate a much more proactive stance by the *House* towards this destruction of Being. As the nihilistic space of the *House* expands, it kills Navidson’s brother, Tom (Danielewski 346), “literally” devouring him. This figure also occurs when Holloway goes insane because he thinks that he is being stalked within the labyrinth of the *House* by some kind of wild animal and disappears forever within the *House* (Danielewski 124–26). This animal can in fact be compared to the minotaur within the labyrinth at Minos, something that *House of Leaves* itself proposes (Danielewski 110–11).⁶¹ Finally, and most importantly, there is the appearance of the beast that hunts Zampanò, through which the labyrinth thus becomes a trope for incomplete knowledge as well as a site where paradoxical inversions become highly energized as absence flips into presence, the contained stretches far beyond its container, and outside becomes inside becomes outside.

To exemplify this further, it must be noted that the beginning of the text, in which Johnny Truant first gains access to the original Zampanò text, is concerned with the introduction of the idea that Zampanò’s death may actually be the result of the *House* itself. Therefore, it could be concluded that Zampanò’s sole meaning in life is the collation and extrapolation of all materials relating to the *House* on Ash Tree Lane,

⁶¹ The Minotaur is introduced in typically circuitous fashion by the theory that Zampanò summarizes from an article variously entitled “Birth Defects in Knossos” (which footnote 123 identifies as published in the *Sonny Won’t Wait Flyer*, Santa Cruz 1968) or “Violent Prejudice in Knossos” (identified by footnote 124 as appearing in the *Sonny Will Wait Flyer*, Santa Cruz 1969 and followed by footnote 125 by Johnny, which says he does not know why the two citations differ [111-12]). In this monstrously double-headed article, Zampanò suggests that the Minotaur was actually the deformed son of King Minos, who is ashamed of his offspring and hides him in the labyrinth.

and toward the end of his life, he feels that, as a result, some unnatural creature is stalking him. This is Zampanò's attempt to reconcile the *House* with Being, appropriating the *House* into rational forms of discourse. Thus, the stalking of Zampanò by the creature of the *House* (the "minotaur") may be the response of the *House* to this invasion of its (non)identity. Following this through to its last consequences, we see that this may be another ouroborotic trope of the text, since it is with Zampanò's death that Truant gains access to the material that then begins his descent into madness and its accompanying nightmares. Toward the end of the text, we see Johnny Truant becoming slowly more unhinged until he becomes a kind of murderous avatar of the *House* itself:

Here then at long last is my darkness. No cry of light, no glimmer, not even the faintest shard of hope to break free across the hold. I will become, have become, a creature unstirred by history, no longer moved by the present, just hungry, blind and at long last filled of mindless wrath (Danielewski 497).

This passage presents the reader with the picture of a blindly destructive force: arguably, *nihilism* in the process of trying to unmake Being. The *House* has permeated Johnny Truant, destroyed his sense of being (thus resulting in a fugue that is, strictly speaking, ego-less), and caused him to seek to destroy all Being. He becomes an anathema to creation, without history (no temporal roots), without even presence (the pun on "no longer moved by the present" meaning emotionally, spatially, and existentially), seeking to bring about the undoing of creation. This later development is foreshadowed at the beginning of the text as Johnny writes that, after reading *House of Leaves*, the reader will be "fighting with everything you've got not to face the thing you most dread, what is now, what will be, *what has always come before*, the creature you truly are, the creature we all are, *buried in the nameless black of the name*" (xxiii;

emphasis added). Underneath all forms of identity – the “house” of consciousness – lies the drive toward “nothingness.”

Irrevocably so, rather than a spatially continuous narrative in which different voices speak in turn, as when dialogue is indicated by paragraph breaks in a realistic novel, *House of Leaves* creates spatially distinct narratives with multiple cross connections, as if multiple voices were speaking simultaneously. Instead of temporal sequence indicated by spatial continuity, *House of Leaves* uses spatial discontinuity to indicate temporal simultaneity.

This multiplicity is characteristic of hypertext, which Karl E. Gwiasda and others have defined as a rhetorical form having multiple reading paths, chunked text, and a linking mechanism connecting the chunks.⁶² Page position also serves as an important linking mechanism, especially in chapter 9, enabling the reader to follow one path (for example, the potentially infinite list in the blue-lined boxes on pages 119 through 144) or skip between paths. Alternative narrative strands include such supplementary material as footnote 182 extending over four pages and listing documentary filmmakers in no apparent order (Danielewski 139-42). Like the text in the blue box, footnote 182 is printed with the text appearing backward on the reverse page. Now the reverse text does not repeat the filmmakers' names but, instead, lists the names of their films. Rather than signifying a transparent window, the page functions here like a film screen, where in front sit the filmmakers and behind the page are the titles signifying the represented world of their films. We read these titles as if we were positioned behind the screen, a typographic effect signaling an ontological

⁶² “Relations of Literature and Science,” *Configurations*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Fall 1998: 12-18.

distinction between us as readers in the real world (backstage of the action, as it were) and the filmmakers' names as marks within the represented world. The text of footnote 182 runs at 90 degrees to the blue box, suggesting an orthogonal relation between the page as window and the page as screen surface. Whereas the box lists everything that is not in the [house](#), footnote 182 lists all the filmmakers who presumably might have made a film like *The Navidson Record* but did not. One signifies the absence of objects, the other the absence of inscriptions that could represent these objects.

Chapter 10, in contrast to the densely worded pages of chapter 9, uses large expanses of white space to create visual patterns that mirror the narrative action. The typography in this chapter is basically mimetic. When the rope holding the gurney stretches as the stairway suddenly begins expanding, for example, the text also stretches, taking three pages to inscribe the word "snaps" (Danielewski 294–96). Other passages show the amount of text on the page decreasing as Navidson crawls into tighter and tighter passages, as if the body of the text were getting squeezed along with the photographer's body. Even a subtler correspondence between reading speed and the emotional pacing of the narrative can be traced. Drawing an analogy with filmmaking techniques that correlate the intensity of the scene with how much the viewer's eye has to move across the screen, it can be understood that the typography creates a similar correspondence between how much time it takes to read a page and the represented action.

An even more radical subversion is staged by the check mark that appears in the lower right corner of page 97. Before we arrive at this inscrutable sign, we read on

page 72 in fool note 78 the advice from “Ed.” to skip forward to Appendix II E, the letters Pelafina writes to Johnny. If we follow this advice, we come upon the letter in which Pelafina, infected by growing paranoia, suspects the staff of interfering with her correspondence and asks Johnny to place a check mark in the lower right corner of his next letter if he has received her letter intact (Danielewski 609). Breaking the boundary of the page, the check mark crashes through the narratological structure that encapsulates Pelafina’s letters within the higher ontological level of whomever arranges for the deceased woman’s correspondence to be included in the manuscript (presumably Johnny) and the published book (presumably the editors).

The implications of these subversions are extended by Pelafina’s letter, dated 5 April 1986, in which appears a semicoherent series of phrases encapsulated within dashes. If we use the simple coding algorithm Pelafina suggests to Johnny in an earlier missive of forming messages by taking the first letter of each word, we are able to decode the sentence “My dear Zampanò who did you lose?” (Danielewski 615). The intimation that Pelafina can speak about Zampanò implies she may be the writer who creates both the old man’s narrative and her son’s commentary. Combined with the check mark, this coded message suggests that apparently distinct ontological levels melt into one another. The subversion includes the reality that we as readers inhabit, for the page margins into which the check mark intrudes exist in a space contiguous with our world and *House of Leaves* as a book we can hold in our hands.

These paradoxical inversions prepare us for the unforgettable scene in which Navidson, deep in the bowels of the *House* and floating suspended in space, uses precious matches (which have their own history) to read the book *House of Leaves*.

When he is down to his last match he lights the page, his eyes desperately racing to finish before the fire consumes it (Danielewski 465–67). The image of his reading the story that contains him presents us with a vivid warning that this book threatens always to break out of the cover that binds it. It is an artifact fashioned to consume the reader even as the reader consumes it. We cannot say we have not been warned. We have seen the writing devour Zampanò's life, render Johnny an obsessive wreck, and compel Navidson to reenter the *House*, though he knows he may die in the attempt. This is a techno-text so energetic, labyrinthine, and impossible to command that we will not be able to leave it alone because it will not leave us alone. It grabs us, sucks out our center, and gives us back to ourselves through multiple re-mediations, transforming us in the process.

The final figure of impossibility, which undermines the entirety of the text, is seen in the possibility that the text as we read it is in the process of absorbing itself. That is, as quickly as it is read and consumed by the reader, the text is in the process of consuming itself. This is seen in *Exploration #5*, where, toward the end, when everything around Navidson is blank and he is lost in the *House*, the text says, "Taking a tiny sip of water and burying himself deeper in his sleeping bag, he turns his attention to his last possible activity, the only book in his possession: *House of Leaves*" (Danielewski 465). This reference disputes a standard linear chronology by referring to a text to which Navidson cannot possibly have access because by the act of Navidson reading *House of Leaves*, and thus its appearance within the original *Navidson Record* upon which the text is constructed, Danielewski takes the entire notion of a linear chronology and replaces it within an internally inconsistent series of

narrative events. He thus opens up the possibility, once the reader dismisses the fact that this may be a different text, of internal, reflexive paradox.

These narrations entail neither a cyclic chronology nor a Nietzschean eternal recurrence, but blank circles, ouroborotic tropes that eat their own tails [tales]. In order for cyclicity or recurrence to occur, there must be progression and regression, or at least a revolution of some kind. *House of Leaves* accomplishes the unsettling idea that within the *House* there is (or rather, there is not) a space where the *House* is destroying itself, a space in which the destructive tendency of nihilism is not to eradicate Being but to eradicate itself from Being. Of course, this is not entirely possible (as it can only “exist” in tension with Being), but the *House* nevertheless attempts to un-write its own space.

As readers enmeshed in the book, we find ourselves, like Will Navidson, positioned *inside* the book we read, receiving messages but also constituted by the messages that percolate through the intersecting circulatory pathways of the book called *House of Leaves*. As readers, *logically*, we assume that Johnny’s commentary encapsulates Zampanò’s notes, since it is Johnny who orders, edits, restores, and amends them. He can comment upon Zampanò, but not the other way around; in this sense, Johnny has ontological priority. As Kinbote observes in *Pale Fire*, “For better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word.”⁶³ But these commonsense rules no more hold in *House of Leaves* than the maxim that the inside of a *house* cannot be bigger than the outside. Musing on his commentary, Johnny senses a *vertiginous inversion* of inside and outside:

⁶³ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: Vintage, 1962) 29.

More and more often. I've been overcome by the strangest feeling that I've gotten it all turned around, by which I mean to say to state the not-so-obvious-without it *I* would perish. A moment comes when suddenly everything seems impossibly far and confused. My sense of self derealized & depersonalized, the disorientation so severe I actually believe-and let me tell you it is an intensely strange instance of belief-that this terrible sense of relatedness to Zampanò's work implies something that just can't be, namely that this thing has created me; not me unto it, but now it unto me, where I am nothing more than the matter of some other voice, intruding through the folds of what even now lies there agape, possessing me with histories I should never recognize as my own; inventing me, defining me, directing me until finally every association I can claim as my own ... is relegated to nothing; forcing me to face the most terrible suspicion of all, that all of this has just been made up and what's worse, not made up by me or even for that matter Zampanò.

Though by whom I have no idea. (Danielewski 326)

Johnny's intuition that he is "made up" by someone he cannot see opens onto the higher ontological level of Danielewski, the creator of this fictional world. These connections make clear that the book refuses to lie quiescent in its "binding tomb," just as the *House* walls endlessly rearrange themselves, so the ontological distinctions that separate Navidson from Zampanò, Zampanò from Johnny, Johnny from Danielewski, and Danielewski from the reader keep shifting and changing.

According to Mark Wigley, focusing on materiality allows us to see the dynamic interactivity through which a literary work mobilizes its physical embodiment in conjunction with its verbal signifiers to construct meaning in ways that implicitly inscribe readers as well as characters.⁶⁴ It gives us a way to think about the construction of subjectivity as something that happens outside as well as inside the text. He adds that, "The writing machines that physically create fictional subjects

⁶⁴ Mark Wigley, "The Domestication of the House: Deconstruction after Architecture," *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*, eds. Peter Brunette and David Wells (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 203-27.

through inscriptions connect us as readers to the interfaces that transform us by reconfiguring our interactions with textual materiality”⁶⁵:

Moreover, *House of Leaves* grounds subjectivity in a dynamic, ongoing material relation with the richly diverse medial ecology in which we are all immersed, including computers, television, and film, as well as print books. Participating in a medial ecology from which it could not isolate itself even if it wanted to, *House of Leaves* makes a strong claim to reposition (remediate) the reader in relation to the embodied materiality of the print novel. It implies that the physical attributes of the print book interact with the reader's embodied actions to construct the materialities of the bodies that read as well as those that are read. Inscribing consequential fictions, *House of Leaves* reaches through the inscriptions it writes and that write it to redefine what it means to write, to read, and to be human. (Wigley 23)

In this impossible simultaneity of thinking, lies the seed of an impossible presence which, as irreparable loss of presence, reveals the *death drive* as a theoretical condition at the center of every human exchange, every “economy.” Thus the death instinct is not merely nihilistic or morbid, which would be but another inscription of modernism, but a parallel or virtual subject-position for the concept, as Derrida has shown:

The signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself. Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences. (*Margins of Philosophy* 11)

Any play of differences must of course involve both space and time, and must involve the re-theorization of the space in which it occurs. In so doing, these spaces enact their own tightrope walk of steps taken and not taken. Danielewski is obsessed in this text with both the texture and the tendentiousness of additive fragments oscillating within a strategic slippage.

⁶⁵ Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art 1909-1923* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) 20-23.

House of Leaves enters the marketplace of reversal in which nothing is absolutely assured – neither the linking nor the order that gives and carries a sentence of death. Just as Nietzsche's paramodern aesthetics enact at once the prohibition/denial and the transgression/displacement of the subject/artist, this space is prohibition and transgression, denial and passing (not) beyond of the subject.

Conclusion

The pages of *House of Leaves* are interlinked and intersected by a mixture of synthesis and paraphrase of its dedication (“This is not for you.”), extremely long citations and footnotes, with some very explicit references to literary, philosophical and artistic contemporaries. As I have demonstrated, these references have led us to negotiate with Freudian, Lacanian, and Žižekian psychoanalytic and linguistic approaches, Nietzschean and Heideggerian phenomenological terms, metafictional/narratological concepts at work in postmodern narrative (which frame Barth’s as well as Blanchot’s reflection), and a Derridean deconstructive reading, in order to provide a critical *explication de texte*.

The terms of these theoretical frame resurface constantly because the question of the authenticity of experience and of the legitimacy of its communication throughout the novel concern the narratological approach employed by Danielewski to construct our fear toward the labyrinthian built-environment of the house. Through the use of spatial voids, Danielewski leads us through two ways of understanding self-consciousness – first, there is the consciousness of oneself as a receptacle for the play of appearances in inner sense, and then there is the consciousness of oneself as the one who acts, one who makes, who synthesizes, who combines – one who unifies, to later on disintegrate.

According to Waugh, “Frames in life operate like conventions in novels: they facilitate action and involvement in a situation” (30). However, as we have seen, in self-conscious fiction these frames are broken and reality as we know it evolves, now

having the ability to influence and build upon or destroy the larger frames in which we live in.

Within *House of Leaves* is an attempt to bring forth “nothingness” into literature, not by writing about it, but by showing literature destroying its own literariness from within. Although *House of Leaves* uses deconstructive strategies, it uses these strategies upon the very potential of a house to be a house (whether metaphysical, textual, or domestic) and demonstrates that all such houses (or texts) are predicated upon nothing. This “nothingness” never actually moves, just haunts the place where Being has tried to eradicate it. Thus, the appearance of the *nihil* within *House of Leaves* is not through the text, but in spite of the text; not a result of the language, but in its (dis)appearance as language attempts to control it.

My investigation, then, argues that the appearance of nihilism, or nothingness, within *House of Leaves* serves essentially to demonstrate the absence upon which every presence is founded, not the deconstructive practice of revealing the building materials of the construct, but the very (now-absent) space upon which it is built. The entire *raison d'être* of this “House of Leaves” is its own erasure through unequivocal use of spatial void, as Danielewski writes, “Make no mistake, those who write long books have nothing to say. Of course, those who write short books have even less to say” (Danielewski 545).⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Though I am conscious of the fact that this novel is built on proliferation of resources and that these resources act as elements that could lead to the reading of this novel as one of “fullness” and “plenitude” I, however, have opted for my reading to be based on the deconstruction of these elements, based on the quotes I have chosen to include in my analysis, as well as the following, which is found at page xv of *House of Leaves*:

Ever see yourself doing something in the past and no matter how many times you remember it you still want to scream stop, somehow redirect the action, reorder the present? I feel that way now, watching myself tugged stupidly along by inertia, my own inquisitiveness or whatever else, and it

House of Leaves is a huge book, but with all the blank spaces and continually self-immolating narrative, it finally has nothing to say. Paradoxically, because it has nothing to say, it may say a lot about nothingness itself. The problem for us is the fact that, as we exist in the realms of language and Being, we can never appreciate this absence for what it is and can only appropriate it into whatever discourse we use to describe the text, as with this essay. As I have already mentioned, the dedication page states, “This is not for you” and it is not for us because whoever approaches the text can never grasp the absence within the *House* (of course, this could also mean that the text *is not* in order for us diacritically *to exist*). The *House* may be a haven, but it is a haven that we can never fully access or accept. All we can do is leave the text, as those characters in the text leave it, with a partial understanding of its meaning. We can only live in the margins of this text, haunting a text that is itself haunted by absence, and try to protect this haven from our own violent hierarchy of proposing Being over nothingness.

must have been something else, though what exactly I have no clue, maybe nothing, maybe nothing’s all – a pretty meaningless combination of words, “nothing’s all,” but one I like just the same. It doesn’t matter anyway. Whatever orders the path of all my yesterdays was strong enough that night to draw me past all those sleepers kept safely at bay from the living, locked behind their sturdy doors, until I stood at the end of the hall facing the last door on the left, an unremarkable door, too, but still a door to the dead.” (Danielewski, xv)

In other words: the over-saturation of text, through its self-awareness, as well the inter-textual treaty, ends up annihilating and destroying itself, so much like *all* becoming *nothing*, where *nothing* was once *all* and eternally vice-versa through the labyrinthine spatial construction of the *House*. In the end, it is the nothingness – the negation of the self – that prevails. See Footnote 1.

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