

Revolutionary Leaves

Revolutionary Leaves:
The Fiction of Mark Z. Danielewski

Edited by

Sascha Pöhlmann

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In memory of Hedwig Kukla and Walter Reichel.

THE DEMOCRACY OF TWO: WHITMANIAN POLITICS IN *ONLY REVOLUTIONS*

SASCHA PÖHLMANN

Anyone who might inquire into the importance and relevance of Mark Z. Danielewski's works finds a simple answer in Larry McCaffery's statement he made in response to the call sent out by *American Book Review* to comment on the future of fiction. While other comments offer a variety of adjectives such as "dismal," "strong," "virtual," "neural," "transnational," "anonymous, viral, collaborative, ephemeral," and while they are undecided as to whether the book "will persist" or is already "going the way of the dodo," McCaffery's answer consisted of only a single straightforward sentence: "I have seen the future of fiction, and its name is Mark Z. Danielewski" ("Fiction's Future"). Nothing underscores the truth of this statement more than the fact that it can seriously be made without risking immediate ridicule or incredulity; even if some may debate the truth of the statement, they would not even consider it worthy of a debate if it was about another author. Imagine how many other contemporary writers you could really name in a statement like this and you will find that Danielewski truly occupies a special place in American fiction today. The publication of his first novel *House of Leaves* in 2000 not only gave him a cult following of readers but also the highest acclaim of literary critics both inside and outside academia. While his 2005 novella *The Fifty Year Sword* confirmed his reputation as an author of experimental fiction especially in his use of typography, color and the materiality of text and the book, it did not attract attention on a similar scale due to the fact that it was only published and sold in the Netherlands and was and is harder to come by. Yet his second novel, *Only Revolutions*, published in 2006, impressively proved that Danielewski was neither a one-hit wonder nor a one-trick pony: the book was not only again radically experimental but also radically different from *House of Leaves*. It makes use of Danielewski's trademark elements but in a way that changes them utterly in style and effect; one can only be amazed at the fact that both *Only Revolutions* and *House of Leaves* are instantly recognizable as Danielewski's

works at first sight but at the same time could hardly be any more different. If Danielewski was a band, he would be Radiohead, and these novels would be his *OK Computer* and *Kid A*.

Given his importance as a writer and the fascination of so many readers with his work, it may seem surprising that academic literary studies have taken a while to engage it critically on a larger scale. While there is an ever-active forum on the Internet in which fans debate his work with a fervor and love of detail only known from Pynchonites and Joyceans, academic criticism has mostly been limited to individual papers and essays published by enthusiasts in different journals. So far, no monograph deals exclusively with Danielewski's works, and the first collection of essays on them was published only as late as in 2011: the groundbreaking *Mark Z. Danielewski*, edited by Joe Bray and Alison Gibbons. Most importantly, there had not been a forum where scholars working on Danielewski could meet, exchange ideas and engage in academic debate in person. It was high time to create such an opportunity, and so, in May 2011, the Amerika-Institut of Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich cooperated with Junior Year in Munich to organize the first international conference devoted exclusively to this subject, with the title "Revolutionary Leaves: The Fiction of Mark Z. Danielewski." The present book is the result of this two-day event, and the eleven essays collected in it represent the diversity and richness of the scholarly discussions that took place there not only in the papers presented and the Q&A sessions that followed but also during coffee breaks, subway rides, visits to the famous *Schellingsalon* and a sunny beer garden, and generally every minute two or more Danielewski enthusiasts would spend with each other. These texts incorporate approaches that are as multifaceted as the novels they analyze, addressing ideas of structuralism and poststructuralism, modernism, postmodernism and post-postmodernism, philosophy, Marxism, reader-response criticism, mathematics and physics, politics, media studies, science fiction, gothic horror, poetic theory, history, architecture, and mythology, to name just a few of many more.

After this introduction, the collection opens with Hans-Peter Söder's essay "Writing in the Electronic Age," in which he theorizes the cultural and literary space in the digital era with special regard to the development from *readers* to *users* who are always also *critics*. He argues that electronic literature requires new, advanced, critical models of interpretation that do not resemble the poetics of the past, focusing less on notions of *docere et probare* than *delectare*. Asking whether these new aesthetic and medial spaces will bring about a new *Weltliteratur* or whether the 'new Futurism' will cause linguistic sprawl and dislocation,

he especially concentrates on the modernist components of the new Avant-garde in the Electronic Age.

Aleksandra Bida begins the discussion of Danielewski's novels by considering how the reader may or may not feel welcome in the text in "Hauntingly Sweet: Home as Labyrinth and Hospitality in *House of Leaves*." She presents the complexities of the metaphor of home with reference to the Minotaur myth and Jacques Derrida's work on hospitality in order to explore how it frames identity, belonging and agency in the novel.

Nathalie Aghoro then focuses on the materiality of book and text in "Textual Transformations: Experience, Mediation, and Reception in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*." She analyzes how the interplay of several intradiegetic layers and the multiple (re)mediations in the novel turns its reception into an unconventional experience for readers that forces them to construct the narrative world while being constantly aware of its printed materiality.

Julius Greve addresses the political potential of *House of Leaves* in "Danielewski, or, Metacommentary as Literary Production" with reference to theories of Fredric Jameson and Gilles Deleuze. He argues that Danielewski's fiction once more raises questions similar to those Jameson was responding to in 1971, only that now the concept of 'metacommentary' has moved from the realm of literary criticism to literary production itself.

Using an even more explicit Deleuzian approach, Ridvan Askin in "'Folding, Unfolding, Refolding': Mark Z. Danielewski's Differential Novel *House of Leaves*" argues that the aesthetic experimentation in *House of Leaves* is grounded in an ontology of difference, and that it thus can be conceived of as a 'differential novel' on the levels of both story and discourse.

Sebastian Huber then goes against the grain of the most common categorization of *House of Leaves* as a postmodernist work. In "'A House of One's Own': *House of Leaves* as a Modernist Text" he analyzes the novel's representation of spatiality, myths, and structure and argues that adding the prefix *post-* may not be necessary, since the text nostalgically celebrates certain modernist doctrines that ultimately lead to the epistemological center of the archive.

Brianne Bilsky addresses a related subject in "(Im)Possible Spaces: Technology and Narrative in *House of Leaves*" as she considers how information storage technologies affect the construction and function of narratives. She argues that *House of Leaves*, with its radical approach to space at the level of form and content, stages a confrontation between analog and digital technologies that exposes the mediatedness of all

narrative, regardless of the technology used to record it, and that it ultimately attests to the value of interpretation in a hypermediated world.

Considering ontology rather than epistemology, Alison Gibbons argues in “‘You were there’: The Allways Ontologies of *Only Revolutions*” that the novel offers a multivalent system that manifests a polychronic topography of time and space. She shows through close textual analysis that the spatio-temporal planes in the novel appear to congregate and fragment, fuse and digress, to reveal the reader at the heart of this play.

Joe Bray focuses on the role of the reader from a different perspective in “Going in Circles: The Experience of Reading *Only Revolutions*.” He argues that the novel’s patterned, symmetrical structure calls for a process of continual and endless rereading. The history gutter in particular is shown to be of importance in that respect, since it can be considered a form of code that invites the reader to discover its hidden messages and resonances.

Finally, Hanjo Berressem analyzes *Only Revolutions* as a whole from a theoretical viewpoint that combines mathematics and physics with Deleuzian philosophy, developing the notion of ‘reinforced materialism.’ “The Surface of Sense, The Surface of Sensation and the Surface of Reference: Geometry and Topology in the Works of Mark Z. Danielewski” argues that what is at stake in Danielewski’s work is not only the materiality of the signifier and thus the ‘material’ playfulness of deconstruction, but *the materiality of the books themselves*. It reads both *House of Leaves* and *Only Revolutions* with regard to the reciprocal relation between materiality and poetics, addressing Deleuze’s “reciprocal presupposition” of intension and extension as well as the topological figure of the “projective plane” and its use as a poetological device.

All these essays and their approaches, which are very different but at the same time interlink with each other in many ways, show that Danielewski’s novels invite just the complexity they themselves espouse, and that readers—professional ones or fans—are far from exhausting the critical possibilities. Instead, this collection aims at being one important foundation among the other groundbreaking efforts that are currently carried out at many different sites, whether it is online forums, academic texts, or others; it does not seek to unite its essays along the lines of a single approach, but it rather strives to offer the diversity necessary to enable future criticism to grow into many different and indeed surprising new directions.

Faithful to that goal, this introduction now seeks to address a question that is crucial for an analysis and evaluation of Danielewski's work but that has yet to be discussed in greater detail. Most critics have (quite naturally) focused a great deal on the aesthetic aspects of Danielewski's fiction, its mediality, its typography and visuality, its play of narrative layers, and all those other things that make it 'experimental.' Yet of course this focus has also had the effect of placing other concerns in the background that are no less important. I would argue that one of the most crucial of these issues is this question: Are the works of Mark Z. Danielewski political? In what way can they be understood as political, if at all, and what kind of politics do they espouse? In asking that question, it is important to avoid generalizations that simply claim that all literature is political, and to draw the wrong conclusions from Fredric Jameson's statement that "there is nothing that is not social and historical—indeed, [...] everything is 'in the last analysis' political" (5). While Jameson is certainly right in his assessment, it should not be taken as an easy solution to the question of the political nature of a literary text. Merely claiming such a political universality would mean dismissing rather than addressing the issue; saying that all texts are political can only be the beginning of a political analysis and their entanglement in social and historical contexts, not the end of it. In the case of Danielewski's fiction, it is precisely this assertion of the political nature of literature that gives rise to the question instead of offering an easy answer. Because of their foregrounded radical aesthetic experimentation, *House of Leaves*, *The Fifty Year Sword* and *Only Revolutions* all face the very same charges that can be leveled against all experimental fiction, and that have been raised especially with regard to postmodernist novels in one way or another: they are only concerned with their own textual surface; they are all form and devoid of content; they are self-absorbed in playfully creating a world that bears no connection to the one they are read in; they are relativist in doing so, and ultimately they are, in a phrase, *l'art pour l'art*. Of course, there *is* a political aspect to such art that should not be underestimated, for example in its claims to aesthetic autonomy, but this will matter little to counter these arguments. Instead, we need to ask what political potential there is in radical experimental fiction in general, and I would argue that Danielewski provides a particularly striking example of such potential in *Only Revolutions*. (Julius Greve addresses the question of the political with regard to *House of Leaves* in his essay in this collection, so I will only analyze Danielewski's second novel here, also because I believe that both are as different in their political outlook as they are in their strategies of representation as well as their content.) I argue that *Only Revolutions*, in form and content, espouses,

adapts and expands a Whitmanian politics of radical democracy and individualism. This is not an attempt to find evidence in Danielewski's works that the "transcendentalist undercurrent" in American literature that Roger Asselineau identified in 1980 (13) is continuing in the twenty-first century, although that would be a fascinating project. Rather, this introduction seeks to show how *Only Revolutions* draws on Whitman's poetry and its major motifs and concerns in order to imagine a "Democracy of Two" that builds on his ideas but modifies them to establish its own democratic duality and thus translates Whitman's nineteenth-century vision into the twenty-first century.

This notion is grounded on the full title that is printed only on the copyright page of the novel but not its actual title page: "Only Revolutions//The Democracy Of Two//Set Out & Chronologically Arranged." This "Democracy of Two" is never mentioned in the novel, but as its subtitle—and thus a framing device—it is of immense significance, especially as the main narratives themselves are utterly devoid of any similar references to a political and social system. This numerical qualification is precisely what constitutes the crucial modification *Only Revolutions* is making to the Whitmanian imagination of democracy. Walt Whitman struggles in all his writing to fuse the concepts of individualism and democracy that seem to be at odds to him in the radical forms he conceives of:

For to democracy, the leveler, the unyielding principle of the average, is surely join'd another principle, equally unyielding, closely tracking the first, indispensable to it, opposite, (as the sexes are opposite,) and whose existence, confronting and ever modifying the other, often clashing, paradoxical, yet neither of highest avail without the other [...]. This second principle is individuality, the pride and centripetal isolation of a human being in himself—identity—personalism. ("Democratic Vistas" 982)

He summarizes his aesthetic and political agenda in one programmatic sentence about the democratic masses and the individual: "The two are contradictory, but our task is to reconcile them" ("Democratic Vistas" 965). Reconciliation means avoiding political solipsism on the one hand as well as the eradication of the subject on the other, and for Whitman one way of doing so was to imagine the individual and the universal as radically intertwined. The inscription that prefaced *Leaves of Grass* after 1881 gives a programmatic statement regarding "the paradox of many in one" (Erkkilä 94) and indeed of one in many:

One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person,
 Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.
 ("One's Self I Sing," *Leaves of Grass* 1891-92 165)

In the end he may always be more of an individualist than a democrat, no matter how hard he struggles to keep both in balance, since he argues that "[e]ven for the treatment of the universal, in politics, metaphysics, or anything, sooner or later we come down to one single, solitary soul" ("Democratic Vistas" 984). However, Whitman also always considers the individual in connection to others, probably most notably in his theory of comradeship: "Not that half only, individualism, which isolates. There is another half, which is adhesiveness or love, that fuses, ties and aggregates, making the races comrades, and fraternizing all" ("Democratic Vistas" 973). Especially in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which I quote from in this essay unless indicated otherwise, Whitman explores "democracy's cosmic dimensions" (Mack 135) and not only its relevance for the single individual.

This is where *Only Revolutions* offers a fascinating and significant variation of Whitman's aesthetic and political dialectics of individual and democracy: instead of pairing the self with the mass of others through love and espousing a theory of universal brotherhood, the novel uses its dualistic form to add *two* individuals to Whitman's problem. In constructing the pair of Hailey and Sam as the irreducibly double basis of its narrative, the novel offers an imagination of the individual that always conceives of it in relation to another individual, not as a single subject that must negotiate its role with regard to a larger group. As the subtitle suggests, democracy is still an issue in relation to this duality, only that it is conceived as a "Democracy of Two" from the outset. It is, in a way, the radical implementation of Whitman's own tenets in *Leaves of Grass*, which he calls in a 1872 preface "in its intentions, the song of a great composite *democratic individual*, male or female" (1028), only that its great democratic individuals are male *and* female—but composite nevertheless. It carries out structurally what Whitman hopes to achieve in *Leaves of Grass*: "The Female equally with the Male I sing" ("One's Self I Sing," *Leaves of Grass*, 1891-92 165). The novel also moves away from a notion of individualism that has rightly come under fire in the twentieth century, most notably in the discourse of poststructuralism and the "death of the subject" which Foucault predicted in *The Order of Things*, by presenting the individual as always already connected to another and indeed an Other; as such, this "Democracy of Two" in *Only Revolutions* is not a choice of the individual to enter a democratic community, but he or she is *already in a community* by default, even if only with regard to a

single other individual. This seems to be contradicted by the beginnings of the novel, where both Sam and Hailey find themselves alone and only meet the other later, and yet the necessary rereading shows that neither have ever really been apart, and that their being alone is always only a step towards meeting again, just like being together is a step towards separation. In the beginning, Hailey finds herself “Terribly allone” (H 4) but also already “Heartrendingly hooked. Out there, my only harm” (H 4); she is already anticipating the meeting with Sam, and so she is not as alone as she thinks. After all, they keep the promise they have made to each other to be there even when they are not, and its first word is not accidentally a homophone of *two*:

*Too when you arrive. When you're allone.
When I go. When I'm allone. But
always beside you wherever we roam. (S/H 178)*

In making this assertion, this passage echoes the ending of “Song of Myself”—quoted always in the 1855 version in this essay—which is also relevant to the first pages of *Only Revolutions* in which Sam and Hailey have yet to meet, while re-readers will know that they must:

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop some where waiting for you (88)

In the cyclical view of the novel, it is clear that Hailey and Sam are always inextricably linked, even if they are physically distant at times in the narrative; similarly, they never become one in the novel, they never merge—as Emmanuel Levinas writes, “[i]n that relation to the other, there is no fusion” (*Alterity* 97). They always remain two distinct persons, so that *Only Revolutions* maintains its individualism on the one hand just as it maintains the connectivity between individuals on the other. At the same time, it combines this balance with a Whitmanian philosophy of continuity in its cyclical structure.

It is important to note that *Only Revolutions* is not only connected to Whitman’s poetry because they share similar politics; rather, this political connection is built on a complex intertextual relationship with regard to diction, style, motifs, strategies of representation, and thematic concerns, as the following analysis hopes to show. In order to outline this connection that forms the basis of the discussion of the politics of the “Democracy of Two,” I will ask the simple question: in what ways can *Only Revolutions* be called Whitmanian? Of course, it is “essentially a free-verse text” that

does not rely “on traditional formal criteria of rhyme and meter” (McHale 144), and like “Song of Myself” and so many other of Whitman’s poems it is written in the present tense, but these are only the first hints at larger connections. One of the first parallels that will strike any reader of Whitman in *Only Revolutions* is its own extensive use of the catalogue as a stylistic element; this means the long list of ever-different cars Sam and Hailey drive in on their road trip, but it is especially noteworthy with regard to the multitude of plants (in Hailey’s half) and animals (in Sam’s) that form an integral part of the narrative. Whitman has established enumeration and lists as a stylistic device in his poetry, using it as a way of expressing universality while at the same time arranging its individual elements in a democratic way that seeks to flatten hierarchies: this aesthetic practice is “universally welcoming, open to all facets of life” (Belknap 74), and it gives “an impression of multitude and variety in its imaginative reach, and of union and cohesion in its interlocking of lines” (Belknap 75). The following example from “Song of Myself,” giving a vision of travel across America, will serve as a brief illustration that resonates with the flora and fauna of *Only Revolutions*:

Where the panther walks to and fro on a limb overhead where the
buck turns furiously at the hunter,
Where the rattlesnake suns his flabby length on a rock where the otter
is feeding on fish,
Where the alligator in his tough pimples sleeps by the bayou,
Where the black bear is searching for roots or honey where the beaver
pats the mud with his paddle-tail;
Over the growing sugar over the cottonplant over the rice in its
low moist field;
Over the sharp-peaked farmhouse with its scalloped scum and slender
shoots from the gutters;
Over the western persimmon over the longleaved corn and the
delicate blueflowered flax;
Over the white and brown buckwheat, a hummer and a buzzer there with
the rest,
Over the dusky green of the rye as it ripples and shades in the breeze; (59-
60)

Only Revolutions stretches out its “Whitmanesque catalogues” (McHale 153) over the 360 respective pages of its two narratives instead of condensing them into a long stanza, and yet the enumerative effect is still achieved. It also includes small-scale lists that add to the effect:

First from my rear, forests of
 Giant Sequoia, Dwarf Juniper,
 Downy Hawthorn and Yew.
 Next, Rugosa Roses and Trailing
 Arbutus. Lastly relieved, Marble,
 Feldspar, Malachite and Opal.
 Coast to coast. Volcanic to Granite. (H 51)

Such passages emulate Whitman's technique of rendering a whole world in a poem, of course never achieving completeness, but still indicating that "there is strict account of all" ("To Think of Time" *Leaves of Grass*, 1855 104). This universality is also evident in the use of the terms *allone* and *always* for *alone* and *always* in *Only Revolutions*: both connote inclusiveness and wholeness. While this already works well for the latter term, which combines temporal with spatial infinity by condensing all ways into one eternity, it is even more effective with the former. Changing *alone* to *allone* saves the individual from the isolation Whitman sees in individualism without comradeship; the term not only affirms that neither Sam nor Hailey are ever truly alone in the text, but also that all is one, that they exist in a universe in which all is connected. This holistic view can again be referred back to Whitman, whose use of the term *all* in *Leaves of Grass* and especially in "Song of Myself" is nothing short of excessive (and a similar thing could be said about *Only Revolutions*).

This presentation of everything is of course closely linked to the United States in Whitman's poetry, and a similar focus also characterizes it in *Only Revolutions*. Whitman famously states in his introduction to the 1855 first edition of *Leaves of Grass* that "[t]he United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (5) and later announces in "Democratic Vistas" that he "shall use the words America and democracy as convertible terms" (954). While he certainly espouses a holistic view of the world, especially in the first editions of *Leaves of Grass*, it is rooted in America, which forms the basis of his universality, as the following gesture of indicating the mortality of all humans exemplifies:

Slowmoving and black lines go ceaselessly over the earth,
 Northerner goes carried and southerner goes carried . . . and they on the
 Atlantic side and they on the Pacific, and they between, and all through
 the Mississippi country . . . and all over the earth.
 ("To Think of Time," *Leaves of Grass*, 1855 104)

Very similarly, *Only Revolutions* also offers a universality that is rooted in the USA. Even though Sam and Hailey may be nothing less than a pair of gods who create and destroy themselves and the world in a perpetual cycle

of life and death, they are also teenagers, “*always sixteen*” (S/H 275), on a road trip through the United States, and they never leave the national boundaries on that narrative level. Sam proposes to Hailey “by national crossroads” (H 239), and they conceive of themselves and each other as north and south—visually represented on the same page—which in the context of their trip seems an indication of American duality rather than of a global one: “He is my North. My Northern Lands” (H 240) / “Southern Fields. I am the South” (S 121). The invariable capitalization of the personal pronoun *us* contributes further to this national focus, as do other references that locate them firmly within the US:

We’re allways here. And overwhelmed by
 no distances, encircling, fastening US to
 The City, Our Mishishishi and US. Just two
 for the World. Allone supplying the force
 of unity. Altering, faltering
 allies we need. (H 176)

The history gutter that accompanies their narratives also amplifies this effect, since the 200 years of history it covers are mostly American history, and even if events that occurred outside the US do get mentioned, they are often those that are highly relevant to the US. Both gutters connect on November 22, 1963, the day of the assassination of US president John F. Kennedy, and while this seems to firmly anchor it in American history, the world-wide significance of this event rather supports the argument that the history narrated in fragments in the history gutter is a global history with a strong American focus, just like the narratives of Sam and Hailey are global with a strong American focus (and indeed like Whitman’s poetry). After all, Sam, “all New World Order, / globalizes with a relentlessness only / he can coo through so / tenderly” (H 225); they are “[s]o beyond Occident & Orient. / And allways flowing” (S 57-58); and the narratives do expand towards the global while maintaining their localization in the US, as these complementary passages and their enumerations show:

Budapest, Santiago,
 Warsaw. Amsterdam, Shanghai, New Delhi.
 Lisbon. Every city. Roam. Air sharper.
 Promises harder. Driving US from the ages. (H 216)

Tokyo,
Dublin. Baghdad, Kiev. Berlin, Cairo.

London. Every city. Paired. Air brisker.
Wishes riskier. Chasing US to our ages. (S 216)

Only Revolutions thus presents a universal view that is global while at the same time focused on a national understanding of locality; another example is the traffic jam Sam presents to Hailey as a wedding gift. Its limits are located at the boundaries of the US, and yet it is also described as global:

From Bangor to Los Angeles by
Barrow to Wailuku.
A globally hubbed hork. (H 299-300)

From Tallahassee to Seattle by
Honolulu to Noatak.
A globally snarled knot. (S 299-300)

This duality of nation and globe is what places *Only Revolutions* once more in the Whitmanian tradition; after all, for all his nationalism, Whitman also asserts that “I have thought that both in patriotism and song (even amid their grandest shows past) we have adhered too long to petty limits, and that the time has come to enfold the world” (“Poetry To-day” 1049). Furthermore, his radical imagination of democracy can never be truly confined to these “petty limits” of the nation, since his efforts are always “to say—to sing—the democratic individual, especially as such an individual lives in receptivity or responsiveness, in a connectedness different from any other. Such connectedness is not the same as nationhood or group identity” (Kateb 21). The most famous example of his planetary scope is probably his “Salut au Monde!,” in which he uses his lists for an imagination of globality:

I see the cities of the earth and make myself at random a part of them,
I am a real Parisian,
I am a habitan of Vienna, St. Petersburg, Berlin, Constantinople,
I am of Adelaide, Sidney, Melbourne,
I am of London, Manchester, Bristol, Edinburgh, Limerick,
I am of Madrid, Cadiz, Barcelona, Oporto, Lyons, Brussels, Berne, Frankfort,
Stuttgart, Turin, Florence,
I belong in Moscow, Cracow, Warsaw, or northward in Christiania or
Stockholm, or in Siberian Irkutsk, or in some street in Iceland,

I descend upon all those cities, and rise from them again.
 (*Leaves of Grass*, 1891-92 293)

Sam and Hailey mostly exist in this space between globe and nation during their road trip, and the text is indeed repeatedly “[s]ticking US again to the World” (H 123) in the sense of emplacing the US globally without seeking to dissolve them in a universality that knows no national distinctions; however, once their road trip ends and they are back on the mountain where their narratives ‘began,’ they indeed disconnect from nation-ness, and the only reference in this respect is made with regard to the threatened destruction of the whole world after the respective other has died: “And every nation will burn” (S/H 348).

At the same time, again following Whitman’s model, these holistic aspects in *Only Revolutions* are always closely connected to the individual or rather *individuals*: Sam and Hailey are exploring a world, but they are also “exploring a World just for two” (H 185). At the beginning of their narratives when they reappear and have yet to find each other again, their individualism is so strong that it overrides all other concepts that could define the world, and Sam’s early statement “This land is my land” (S 2) must be understood less as a reference to Woody Guthrie than as an assertion of power; lacking the first half of the line of Guthrie’s song, which asserts that “this land is your land” also, it does not indicate territorial or communal belonging but rather exclusive ownership. Unsurprisingly, Hailey is only concerned with “me, me, me” (H 57), and Sam denies anything beyond himself in a statement that oscillates between solipsism and individual anarchism:

I will sacrifice nothing.
 For there are no countries.
 Except me. And there is only
 one boundary. Me. (S 3)

Yet at the same time, both Sam and Hailey already carry traces of each other within them, as their respective eye colors indicate—“Gold eyes with flecks of Green” (S 7) and “Green eyes with flecks of Gold” (H 7)—and their individuality is always already informed by the other individual; both selves are always connected to their respective others. The individual in *Only Revolutions* is always already multiple and universal in true Whitmanian fashion, as Hailey’s remarkable spatial stunt indicates (even if the first line implies a lack of empathy that is at odds with the Whitmanian world view):

I'm too multiple to feel.
 A fork ahead.
 I take both. (H 9)

Similarly, Sam asserts: "I take / every path" (S 345). This resonates with what are probably the most famous lines from "Song of Myself":

Do I contradict myself?
 Very well then . . . I contradict myself;
 I am large . . . I contain multitudes. (87)

In tune with this argument, it is fair to consider the contradictory statements in "Song of Myself" as precursors to those of Sam and Hailey that significantly define the style of *Only Revolutions*; Whitman's lines such as "Regardless of others, ever regardful of others" (42) or "I teach straying from me, yet who can stray from me?" (83) find their correlation in "Because I'm allready discovered and never / discovered" (H 340) or "Everyone misses US but we're never / missed" (H 262). In light of this contradictory style, if one were to look for a single concept to summarize how Sam and Hailey represent themselves in their narratives, it would be this: they contain multitudes and contradict themselves, but they still remain individuals. *Only Revolutions* emulates precisely how the individual is constructed in "Song of Myself": the self contains all that it is not, it is the focal point of a universe. Both Hailey and Sam acknowledge this directly by saying "I'm all" (H 27) and "I'm the all" (S 27), or by asking whether they are "*always at once?! —Everything and everyone's?*" (H 175). Yet the novel expands that concept of the all-encompassing individual by turning singularity into duality: Sam and Hailey only fulfill their true potential for multiplicity as a pair. Such duality is repeatedly addressed in "Song of Myself," as the following examples will show, and yet I argue that it is undermined by the single voice of the speaker Whitman must do with in his poem, regardless of the many perspectives he incorporates in the "kosmos" (50) of himself, claiming:

And these one and all tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
 And such as it is to be of these more or less I am. (42)

I also argue that only the fundamental duality of *Only Revolutions* in its visual arrangement of the text allows it to fully implement this Whitmanian double perspective of self and other. In trying to reconcile the individual and the world, the self and the other, by pushing a single voice to its limits in a democracy of one, Whitman is laying the groundwork for

the democracy of two that is possible in *Only Revolutions*. Edward Dowden has commented on this tendency in an early review that emphasized the democratic implications of *Leaves of Grass*: “No single person is the subject of Whitman’s song, or can be; the individual suggests a group, and the group a multitude, each unit of which is as interesting as every other unit, and possesses equal claims to recognition.” While lines in “Song of Myself” such as “Clear and sweet is my soul . . . and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul” (29) indicate a distinction between self and other, others assert that this self is “not contained between my hat and boots” (32). The poem thus

seeks to teach that so far from being indivisible or even coherently multiple, one is, and should be glad to be, at any given moment, a composite—that is ambiguous and ambivalent—and that in a timeless but mortal sense, one is an immense and largely untapped reservoir of potentiality. (Kateb 28)

Its opening already emphasizes that the individual is not necessarily to be seen as entirely separate from its others either, and it is almost immediately confronted with a You that may well be taken as a hint at a “Democracy of Two”:

I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (27)

One could even convincingly argue for an opposition between *I* and *myself* in the very first line (Hagood 26). “Song of Myself” also promises a multiplicity of perspectives and readerly autonomy that is arguably only fulfilled in *Only Revolutions*, even though of course it does make explicit on the copyright page that the narratives by Sam and Hailey have been “chronologically *arranged*” (my emphasis) and thus mediated:

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself. (28)

Instead of the Whitmanian single self that contains everything, we thus get a pair in *Only Revolutions* that is nothing less than potential itself, even if its possibilities are contradictory to the point of being mutually exclusive: “Because whenever toast drops we’re both. / Jam Down. Jam Up” (S 193). *Only Revolutions* can maintain this potential because it is “an exercise in narrative perspectivism” in which “the divergent versions of events cannot always be reconciled” (McHale 141). In the course of the novel, as Sam

and Hailey become lovers, “their initial self-centeredness wanes and their immense egos contract to make room for the other, a process expressed visually on the page as the physical space devoted to the narrative shrinks and the other narrative/narrator comes into view as an important force” (Hayles 173-74). In this process, they only become selfless in the ethical sense, not in the sense of actually losing their self; their textual space shrinks but never vanishes. Despite this radical change, they remain individuals. They even do so while their identity is revealed as utterly uncertain, as is evident when they are facing a wild variety of racial slurs simultaneously:

—*Niggers!* Them retch.
 —*Chinks! Japs! Spicyspans! Wops!*
 Surrounding our Dodge Wayfarer.
 —*Kikes!!* (S 235)

Sam shrugs them off by simply claiming universality for Hailey and him:

Every race,
 except we're the only race, so speedy there's
 never a race. (S 236)

The transformation in the progression of this sentence is significant: they are every race, but they are also the only race, and ultimately there is never a race at all. Playing on the double meaning of *race* in connection with their road trip and their obsession with speed, Sam here both complicates and simplifies the category of identity that is imposed on Hailey and him; in emphasizing mobility, he indicates that they are transcending the category altogether and rejecting this fixed identity while not giving up on their individuality in the process. Yet they only hold on to a single category of identity throughout the text: “All races and shapes, colours and clothing: Sam and Hailey are coterminous with the domain of sensation and the continuum of individuation, and yet they are divided by sex” (Hansen 194). This is not the place for the deconstructive queer reading this gender binary undoubtedly necessitates and indeed invites; for the present purpose, I would argue that this category of identity is (in fact rather weakly) maintained because, along the mainstream lines of heteronormativity, it offers the most clear-cut binary and thus suits the duality of the novel best. Furthermore, it is rather insignificant compared to other characteristics; for example, they are much more defined by their being lovers than by their being male or female. Gender notwithstanding, Hailey and Sam both find that “I resist anything better than my own diversity,” as the speaker of “Song of Myself” (43) declares after having

both illustrated his multiplicity and asserted his individuality at the same time:

Of every hue and trade and rank, of every caste and religion,
Not merely of the New World but of Africa Europe or Asia . . . a
wandering savage,

A farmer, mechanic, or artist . . . a gentleman, sailor, lover or quaker,
A prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician or priest. (43)

Or, as Hailey might put it: “I’m all personnel. Impersonal” (H 89). This multiplicity of the individual is connected to another central motif in *Only Revolutions* that also resonates with Whitman’s imagery: the road. Drawing on the very American genre of the road novel, which saw some of the most famous celebrations of individualism and non-conformism ever since Huck Finn and Jim embarked on their journey on the wet road of the Mississippi, *Only Revolutions* frames its narrative of two teenagers who are “Allmighty sixteen and freeeeee” (H 1) as a circular journey that nevertheless affords them a development from egotism to selflessness. The road is the central location of individualism in the novel; this is where Sam and Hailey assert their individuality as well as their multiplicity and form the pair of individuals that becomes a symbol of potential itself:

Swinging wide for still
untried crossroads
with cairns left for encounters
never kept. (H 21)

Not only do they travel these roads not yet taken, but they also *are* the very possibility they imply: Hailey states that she herself is “every trail’s switch” (H 23), and Sam similarly asserts: “But I am the road following. / Everyway’s a road by me going” (S 61). They are “every happy trail” (S 152) and “ever happening” (H 152). This conception of the road as the site of potential for the individual not only stands in the long tradition of the American road novel, but it also goes back further to Whitman once again, whose “Song of the Open Road” contains a parallel imagination that is echoed in *Only Revolutions*:

I inhale great draughts of space,
The east and the west are mine, and the north and the south are mine.
.....
I will recruit for myself and you as I go,
I will scatter myself among men and women as I go,

I will toss a new gladness and roughness among them,
 Whoever denies me it shall not trouble me,
 Whoever accepts me he or she shall be blessed and shall bless me. (300)
 Allons! to that which is endless as it was beginningless,
 To undergo much, tramps of days, rests of nights,
 To merge all in the travel they tend to, and the days and nights they tend to,
 Again to merge them in the start of superior journeys,
 To see nothing anywhere but what you may reach it and pass it,
 To conceive no time, however distant, but what you may reach it and pass
 it [...] (*Leaves of Grass*, 1891-92 305)

Faithful to these notions of transcendence, passing on, connecting, refreshing, and inventing in a cycle without beginning or end, *Only Revolutions* presents Sam and Hailey's trip as both constitutive of their individuality and challenging to their identity, since they are one with the road as individuals who travel on it, but they are also not self-identical due to their constant movement:

I am the road. And roar.
 Here I go. Here goes.
 Not I.
 Always. (H49)

I am the ruts. And rush.
 There goes I. There goes. Not I.
 Always. (S 49)

The very duality of their pairing asserts that they are always the same and always different, thus pushing the Whitmanian imagination of the multitudinous individual who "tramp[s] a perpetual journey" ("Song of Myself" 82) further into a constellation where it needs to constantly confront another such individual at all times. Sam and Hailey are on the road *together*, and they ask of each other: "*for all we / Wander, Encounter and Open / always curl up with me*" (H 183). Because of this unity in duality, their movement for the reader is indeed that of an I and not-I from two different perspectives, in which what is I for eight pages becomes not-I in the next. *Only Revolutions* thus incorporates multiplicity on a structural level and places the Whitmanian individual in constant dialogue with another instead of merely confronting it with (and containing) the world. It is never an option for Sam or Hailey (and thus the reader) to conceive of individual and world as a binary opposition because there are always two individuals to deal with; everything in this world always happens "[u]nder bipolar skies" (H 225), and subjectivity is always

intersubjectivity. There is always the acronym of the novel's title to contend with: OR, the alternative, the other. (This could also be the implication of the symbol on the novel's cover, two vertical lines in a circle, which can be read as a pause button to imply the arrested representation of their movement, but also as the Roman numeral for two and at the same time two Is, two individuals.) This given intersubjectivity answers directly to Whitman's problem of individual and world as he poses it in *Specimen Days*:

The most profound theme that can occupy the mind of man—the problem on whose solution science, art, the bases and pursuits of nations, and everything else, including intelligent human happiness, (here to-day, 1882, New York, Texas, California, the same as all times, all lands,) subtly and finally resting, depends for competent outset and argument, is doubtless involved in the query: What is the fusing explanation and tie—what the relation between the (radical, democratic) Me, the human identity of understanding, emotions, spirit, &c., on the one side, of and with the (conservative) Not Me, the whole of the material objective universe and laws, with what is behind them in time and space, on the other side? (919)

This Whitmanian notion of self and world, or self and other, is far from static, but even its strong fundament of individualism is set in motion in *Only Revolutions* through the interplay of two selves (and thus two others) with the world. It therefore emphasizes even more the processual character of individualism that becomes evident in the irreducible connectedness between self and other: “We are without / Perimeters, perpetually unwinding, unifying” (H 221-22). This perpetual change is what constitutes Sam and Hailey's freedom: they are “unprincipled” (H 234), “unmastered” (S 234), “impossible to confine” (H 298) and thus “exquisitely free” (H 140). Even with “the rest of the Pitiless / trying to pin US down” (H 118) they resist any attempt to fix them; significantly, this is possible precisely because of their duality. This is shown by the most blatant attempt in the novel to capture Sam and Hailey, carried out by the Creep (who, as I have argued elsewhere, can be understood as representing the reader and his futile attempts to catch up with the protagonists). He fails in binding them with the Nóose because it does not fit around both of them:

—Uh, hey, I shrug. *This can't do.*
The Nóose is never big enough for two.
 THE CORD allready undone
 around our looseness. (H 275)

This indicates strongly that Sam and Hailey's potential, their mobility and diversity, comes about through their pairing and is not so much a quality each of them has on their own. Instead, it is an effect of their *combined* individuality, and their freedom comes about through their free association and mutual recognition of their separate but interrelated existence:

Because we are the littlest part of we
and I'm the littlest part of me.
And always we will leave US
behind US.
Because we're free. (S/H 290)

The first two lines express the extent and nature of their connection. They form a group but are “the littlest” part of it, indicating that their community, their absolutely horizontal democracy of two that is free from any hierarchy, is more than the sum of its parts; at the same time, the self is also “the littlest part of me” and is thus complemented and indeed completed by the Other. This is one way to understand Levinas's comment that “‘we’ is not the plural of ‘I’” (“The Ego” 43); a group is more than the simple multiplication of its components. Sam and Hailey thus form a pair that outgrows its constituent parts and also radically changes them, but at the same time they do not merge, do not permanently become one, and they never give up their individuality at any point. They literally get close to oneness precisely in the middle of the book where the respective chapters mirror each other more perfectly than ever before, and where even the two bookmarks (symbolizing Hailey and Sam through the same colors that also marks their presence in the green and gold Os in the text) almost meet—almost. Given the 360 pages of the book and the eight-page chapter divisions, the bookmarks never come to rest on the same page, and even this central chapter remains doubled so that Sam and Hailey never actually merge. These two are the only chapters in which colored Os appear in both gold and green on the same page, and yet this still implies closeness rather than oneness, which would mean mixing the colors into a new one instead of keeping them separate even as they share a page now. They comment on their closeness repeatedly on the pages surrounding number 180, the most significant turning point among many in the novel:

—*Somehow now, here, we're one,*
while already somewhere nearer we go on apart. (S 182)

They do claim that they are one, and yet the expression remains one of duality, since it still reads “we're one” instead of “I'm one.” Before the

sentence is finished they already acknowledge their separation. If this is oneness, it is extremely short-lived, and I would argue that Sam and Hailey never merge at all in *Only Revolutions* but retain their two individual selves at all times, no matter how close they may get or how selfless they may become. This duality is the foundation of their existence in which “*Liberty and Love are one*” (H 20) and their very freedom depends on maintaining this incredibly strong and close connection between two individuals; in order to be free, they must realize that the one person they cannot be free from is the other, as the following dialogue indicates:

—*Isn't this Liberty, on our own.*
 —*Wherever whatever we please.*
 We're so eased.
 —*Just US allone.*
 —*Free from duty. From Regulation.*
From everyone and anything.
 Me: —*What about me?*
 Diminishings driving this spurn.
 Getting worse.
 Until he takes my hand, curling one fist from two,
 palm on palm, wrist on wrist,
 Peacefully mixed.
 —*Except from you.* (H 130)

Whitman's problem of individualism and democracy finds a new solution through this insight, and it connects his 'personalism' with the tenets of existentialism, but also with a Levinasian ontology and ethics of self and other in which the “first philosophy” is always “a philosophy of dialogue” (Levinas, *Alterity* 97): the freedom of the individual is dependent on that of other individuals, and the “democracy of two” is built on a mutual recognition and acceptance of dependency. As Sam and Hailey are ‘facing’ each other, in Levinas's term for the confrontation of the self with “an absolutely exterior being” (“Philosophy” 54), with what “one absolutely can neither take in nor possess” (“Philosophy” 55), their existence changes fundamentally. Adrian Peperzak's explanation of Levinas's phenomenological theory of the encounter with the other resonates strongly with Sam and Hailey's experience of each other as other:

Another comes to the fore *as other* if and only if his or her “appearance” breaks, pierces, destroys the horizon of my egocentric monism, that is, when the other's invasion of my world destroys the empire in which all

phenomena are, from the outset, a priori, condemned to function as moments of my universe. The other's face [...] or the other's speech [...] interrupts and disturbs the order of my, ego's, world; it makes a hole in it by disarranging my arrangements without ever permitting me to restore the previous order. (19-20)

This does not simply transform an egocentric monism into a dualistic monism but rather transcends any monistic view altogether. Both Hailey and Sam repeatedly emphasize their utter need for each other, and they also acknowledge that they are destructive without the other and fail to fulfill their creative role in the cycle they drive and are part of at the same time:

Because without him I am
only revolutions of ruin. (H 347)

Because without her I am
only revolutions of ruin. (S 347)

Yet even together they wonder about their significance in and for the world they find themselves in and maintain; even if they may form a “democracy of two,” they are still unsure about its relevance for the rest of the world. In a crucial passage, Sam poses the question directly:

Me & Hailey allways around. Ever now.
But with all we go through here
is this Community enough? (S 161)

With the importance of community emphasized through capitalization, Sam refers to much more than the present situation they find themselves in, waiting tables in a restaurant for a highly unpleasant boss. After all, they also go through the world in *Only Revolutions*, and the community Sam talks about can be both that between Hailey and him and that of the whole world. A later dialogue shows that they are not only in contact with other people but also consider themselves on a mission of universal significance:

—*We go to free the World.*
But BAZETTI BILL tries for the last stab:
—*You go to lose the World. You allways do.*
—*No, we go to free you.* (S 215)

Bazetti Bill is of course right, since in the duality of the novel they do indeed lose the world, just as they both keep it. I would argue that they also succeed in freeing it; their community is enough to maintain and even rejuvenate the world in the end. Their “Democracy of Two” is not a retreat from the world into the privacy of a relationship after all; even if they leave the world behind, they also ultimately stay in it, and they do not separate their connections to it. Their community is not a construct that only works for the gods they also probably are, but it is a model that indicates the relation between the individual self and other individuals in a democratic, interdependent way. Even though they have their doubts, they ultimately remain confident in their power to affect the world as combined individuals:

Only Hailey keeps me strangely confident.
 Somehow regaining a certainty that we can,
 Without exertion, absolutely
 change the outcome of all. (S 208-09)

Only Revolutions does not present its readers with a strong subject who changes the world; it does not espouse that old myth of individualism. Instead, it grants this power to the socially embedded individual, even if it exists in the smallest possible community of two: as long as self and other enter a relationship, their individualities enable them to affect the world. Yet Sam and Hailey are models and even saviors, but they are not politicians; their “Democracy of Two” indicates a utopian openness, but it does not effect it in the communities they connect with:

So with him, I'm but US,
 beyond the eager touch of Cultures dying
 to achieve Our Open Anticipation of Life's Rush.
 Except our refusal leaves Them to the mashup
 of their compromises, now tragically
 unified & organized. Just doing time.
 But away we roll. Out of order. (H 282)

As so often in *Only Revolutions*, a line break produces an ambiguity of meaning here: these cultures are not only dying, like everything else in the second half of the book, but they are also dying to “achieve Our Open Anticipation of Life's Rush,” to exist in the openness Sam and Hailey offer as models. Their failure is marked by “compromises, now tragically / unified & organized,” by the fact that they cannot maintain the mobility the protagonists exemplify, maybe because “They are all temporary. Only we recirculate” (H 267). Their “Democracy of Two” indicates that unity

and organization are static concepts to be rejected in favor of flexibility and multiplicity, which come about through their irreducible duality that is never forced to transform into a unity. Sam and Hailey are indeed “Ordering nothing. / And everything” (S 10); they do not give orders, and if they do, they order the whole world; they are also not agents that create order in the world, but at the same time they are what gives order to that very world. In other words, they are either holistic or nothing at all; the order they propose affects everything or nothing, but none of the stages in between that would affect only some. The community they imagine is either complete or a failure; it can appropriately be described by the simple Whitmanian declaration that “I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms” (“Song of Myself” 50).

Finally, there is one more Whitmanian aspect of *Only Revolutions* to be analyzed, and probably the most significant of all: in its radical circularity, the novel espouses a Whitmanian concept of continuity that fundamentally characterizes its outlook on life, love, community, and its “Democracy of Two.” Whitman asserts in the preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* that “all will come round” (22), and the poetic treatment of this idea in “Song of Myself” resonates clearly with the structure and content of *Only Revolutions*:

I have heard what the talkers were talking the talk of the beginning
and the end,
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end. (28)

Only Revolutions resists any finality and teleology just like it does not offer origins; it begins and ends always only temporarily, and neither the death of each of its protagonists nor their reappearance on page one really constitute a beginning or end. Instead, its circularity—much like that of *Finnegans Wake*, though even more pronounced due to a material circularity that is an essential part of the reading process throughout—places life and death within an unbroken cycle in which neither beginning nor end assume the special symbolic positions of origin and finality they are often ascribed to in a linear view. As Joe Bray argues, the world of *Only Revolutions* “cannot simply be ‘ended,’ but is rather continually being begun again and ‘re-ended’” (211). Both Hailey and Sam describe the fundamental law of existence and non-existence in *Only Revolutions* exactly in these terms:

Because allways all around me
the World rebegins. (H 34)

Because all around me
the World rebegins. (S 34)

This perspective is fundamentally Whitmanian. The speaker of “Song of Myself” asserts that “I laugh at what you call dissolution” because he conceives of corpses as “good manure” and of life in general as “the leavings of many deaths,” even assuming that “[n]o doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before” (86). The notion of “compost,” of an earth that “grows such sweet things out of such corruptions” (“This Compost,” *Leaves of Grass*, 1891-92 496), understands death as an integral part of life that is not disruption but continuation, and it translates directly to the section of *Only Revolutions* where the ‘last’ chapters connect with the ‘first’ and “What goes around comes around” (S 241). Having returned to the mountain they both came from, Sam and Hailey each die on top of it in the narrative of their respective other, so that for the reader they are both at the same time dead and alive while they each need to deal with the absence of the other. As if suspecting this simultaneity of life and death, Sam describes ‘dead’ Hailey as “Impossibly still. Just gone. Dead. To where I’m already goinggone” (S 328). These last two words indicate that he himself is already where she is, maybe only in the other half of the narrative, and yet they do not offer any comfort. Hailey too finds herself unable to cope with “how I miss. Me with him. Beyond return. Beyond all starts” (H 356). Their “Democracy of Two” is fundamentally broken, and neither of them can fall back on the individualism that sustained them in the beginning:

Ever now. And now undone, tied
to Liberty no more. To Love no more.
Their divorce united just with death.
Death’s all. Life’s only toll. (S 340-41)

Their individualism is worthless without this liberty and love. Each is about to give in to their destructive impulses in reaction to the death of the other, but they ultimately choose not to destroy the world precisely because it would betray the gift of life bestowed on it by their dead counterpart:

For her
the World turns and to blow it away
would forfeit all the World already Loves of her.
What bending she always resolves.
What evolving she always ends.
How here without, she still somehow,

over with, comforts now what I'd obliterate.
 And she's just chillin on the snow.
 She exists for more. More exists for her.
 And I cannot destroy more.
 For I cannot destroy her. Ever. (S 355)

Significantly, this change of mind occurs after the appearance of a living being in the text, remarkable especially after everything has been dying since page 185 and thus invested with special significance; while the names of animals and plants were initially printed in bold letters and have been fading to grey in the second half of the novel, the plant and animal that reappear now are printed in bold again. Furthermore, suddenly Hailey finds herself with an animal and Sam with a plant, breaking the rule of which would appear exclusively in whose narrative. Hailey's animal is contained on the level of the signifier in the more encompassing plant that Sam encounters, and this is where the full Whitmanian implication becomes evident: she finds that "Only an Ass feasts along desolate streets" (H 350), but he sees that "Only Grass grows down abandoned streets" (S 350). Thus this realization that "yes! not all is death here" (H 319) occurs in reference to the "core symbol [of "Song of Myself"], its leitmotif, seemingly inexhaustible in its ramifications and embodying the mysteries of nurture, decay, death, and renewal" (Aspiz 37), which gave Whitman's collection of poems its title no matter how many changes it would go through in its long publication history: the grass. The reference especially connects *Only Revolutions* to the whole philosophy of compost that is connected with it in "Song of Myself," where Whitman presents a multitude of interpretations of the grass but especially stresses a reading that understands it as proof that there is no death but only life:

A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;
 How could I answer the child? . . . I do not know what it is any more than
 he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff
 woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
 A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropped,
 Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and
 remark, and say Whose?

Or I guess the grass is itself a child . . . the produced babe of the
 vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
 And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
 Growing among black folks as among white,
 Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive
 them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves. (31)

This final interpretation is elaborated on further to emphasize that death is not the end of life but rather enables further growth:

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
 And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere;
 The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
 And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to
 arrest it,
 And ceased the moment life appeared.

All goes onward and outward . . . and nothing collapses,
 And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier. (32)

The reference to *gr/ass* in *Only Revolutions* appears just when one protagonist seeks to destroy the world after the other has died, and it is the one thing to break the general tendency towards death and decay in these parts of the text. This return begins with the simplest of plants and animals in terms of naming; their plain designations are a significant change from the elaborate ones that had so far denoted flora and fauna alike in *Only Revolutions*. This renewal prefigures and even causes Sam and Hailey's change of mind, a reminder that the other may have died but is not necessarily gone for that reason, and that the world indeed holds more life instead of merely death. The novel thus finds its climax in a truly Whitmanian twist, and it draws on this "master metaphor" (Aspiz 37) to emphasize its own continuities. Keeping with the Whitmanian tradition, the decision to keep the world rather than to end it results in a giant blast of rejuvenation of plants and animals that is conveyed by yet another catalogue:

Explosions of
 Roughlegged Hawks, Mallards and Crows. Bighorn
 Sheep charging by Cottontails, Wasps, Milk Snakes
 and Toads. Brook Trout, Badgers, Ants and clowders

of Cats. My wide. Deer bounding by Crickets, Coyotes,
Beavers, while Golden Bears range and Bald Eagles rise. (H 357)

Explosions of
Aster, Yarrow, Buttercups and Clover. Blazing beside
Tarragon, Tansy, Mustards and Daisies. Along with shoots
of Flax, Catnips, Mints and Bull Thistle. Lilacs and Wild
Licorice. And holding my sky, Birches, Tamarack Pine,
Trembling Aspens and Atlas Mountain Cedar. (S 357)

This rebirth of the world not only implies the cycle in which life only feeds on death instead of succumbing to it, but it also emphasizes the scope of the rejuvenation, which Whitman emphasized in constructing grass as a symbol of globality:

This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is,
This is the common air that bathes the globe. (“Song of Myself” 43)

The reference thus also allows *Only Revolutions* to emulate a Whitmanian holism once again, and finally it firmly establishes itself as a global text that has left its national focus behind once Sam and Hailey’s road trip has ended. They can even be said to vanish from the narrative in a way that conforms to Whitmanian ideas of transformation; from early on, they confirm their everlasting presence, for example in the assertions that “*We’re always around*” (S 286) and “*Whenever there’s a hush that’s US*” (S 309); thus their respective deaths produce not absences but traces that rather affirm the continuity of live rather than deny it—just like the speaker in “*Song of Myself*” famously announces his exit by saying

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles. (88)

Only Revolutions thus ‘ends’ with an assertion of continuity and renewal whose promise will be fulfilled in the ‘rebirth’ of the ‘dead’ other protagonist on page 1 that follows page 360:

By you, ever sixteen, this World’s preserved.
By you, this World has everything left to lose.
I’ll destroy no World
so long it keeps turning with flurry & gush,
petals & stems bending and lush,
and always our hushes returning anew. (S 360)

This process sustains the “Democracy of Two” beyond the ‘deaths’ of both individuals; it ultimately proves that their community outlasts its members. Neither are Sam and Hailey able to go back to a singular individualism nor do they want to after the other has died. *Only Revolutions* maintains its duality throughout and never truly separates self and other even in death, which is made possible by the doubling of its narrative on the one hand and by recourse to a Whitmanian model of renewal on the other.

This brings us back to the question asked in the beginning of this essay: in what way can we conceive of *Only Revolutions* as a political novel? In tune with its holistic approach, its political vision is certainly a very general one, and yet this is precisely where its significance lies. It not only draws on Whitman’s notions of individualism and democracy but also adopts the universal scope of his aesthetic and political project. Thus my proposed answer to the question is this: *Only Revolutions* is a radically democratic text, maybe even more so than Whitman’s poems, since it espouses a multiplicity of voices, viewpoints and identities on the levels of content, form, typography, layout, visuality, and materiality. It rejects a “realist” mode of representation in its narrative but employs the symbolic and performative aspects of the poem to emphasize the importance, desirability and indeed inevitability of a multitude of perspectives, and it affirms such multiplicity as the basis for an imagination of self, other, and community. It is not political in the banal sense of telling us how to live with each other but in the sense of taking each reader from his or her single perspective and confronting him or her with two perspectives and making him or her fail at perceiving them simultaneously due to the constraints of the reading process. In a word, it constructs a world that can never be reduced to a single, unified whole, but that at any point needs to be engaged in its full complexity; seeing such representation as only aesthetic and not political would miss the point and illustrate it quite nicely at the same time. The unceasing duality in *Only Revolutions*, never unified, also shifts attention away from the problematic opposition between individual and democracy and rather emphasizes the spatial and temporal coexistence of perspectives, of self and other, that form the basis of democratic community rather than autonomous rational subjects. Instead of presenting these individuals as threatened by isolation or incorporation into the faceless masses, *Only Revolutions* presents them as always already embedded in a basic social network of self and other. This is not a break with the Whitmanian democratic tradition but a shift in focus that is quite faithful to its radical imagination of community, although it relies less on the problematic notion of the autonomous

individual and more on that of the embedded one. The novel employs Whitmanian elements such as catalogues, multiple perspectives, contradictions, a combined national and global view, a universal or holistic outlook on microcosm and macrocosm, a philosophy of renewal and continuity, as well as the major motifs of the road and especially the grass, and it incorporates them within its very own imagination in order to construct its “Democracy of Two” that builds on, adapts, expands, and ultimately maybe even truly fulfills many aspects of the democracy Whitman imagined for the individual in “Song of Myself” and *Leaves of Grass* as a whole. I believe that we may therefore, playfully, read the following lines from “Song of Myself” as Whitman’s prophetic vision of the arrival of Sam and Hailey almost exactly 150 years after the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published, coming to adapt his notion of “ensemble-Individuality” (“Democratic Vistas” 987) for the twenty-first century:

Out of the dimness opposite equals advance Always substance and
increase,
Always a knit of identity always distinction always a breed of
life. (“Song of Myself” 28)

Never satisfied with just a single future, he might even envision their further progress in “Song of the Open Road,” since he knew about the importance of maintaining and working on an imagination of democracy, and why not indeed a “Democracy of Two”:

Forever alive, forever forward,
Stately, solemn, sad, withdrawn, baffled, mad, turbulent, feeble, dissatisfied,
Desperate, proud, fond, sick, accepted by men, rejected by men,
They go! they go! I know that they go, but I know not where they go,
But I know that they go toward the best—toward something great.
(*Leaves of Grass*, 1891-92 306)

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WRITING IN THE ELECTRONIC AGE

HANS-PETER SÖDER

O wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is!
O brave new world!
That has such people in it!
—Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

It is undeniable: We are at the threshold of Marshall McLuhan's *Digital Age*. Everywhere the cultural space of the analog is being challenged by digital thinking. This new sensibility is so fundamental that it makes little sense to keep adding the prefix "post" to describe the current condition. However, despite the fact that the digital era is upon us, it is surprisingly difficult to appraise its impact on literature and writing in general. In assessing the development of contemporary literature in the light of the digital revolution, it is a challenge not to be caught between a rock and a hard place. There are indeed not a few critics who see Marshall McLuhan's electric galaxy not in terms of a global village but more in terms of what George Ritzer has called "the McDonaldization" of society. Umberto Eco, for instance, one of the more outspoken critics of the ongoing "Americanization" of digital culture, once summarized his road trip in the United States as "hyperreal." In his book *Travels in Hyperreality* (1975) he discussed the prefix "hyper" in terms of its transcendent features. For Eco it represented a serious threat to the authenticity of the work of art. Despite Eco's misgivings about the status of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, duplicating and multiplying images and texts has become a central feature of the electronic arts. As G. Pascal Zachary put it: "We are all Americans now, like it or not." Americanization or not, as we see *the reader* of the bygone "manuscript culture" being overtaken by *the user*, we cannot possibly ignore these and other ideological ramifications brought on by the ever-widening epistemological gap between print and electronic media. The blurring of the distinction between *writer*, *user* and *reader* in the Electronic Age has far-reaching consequences.

At this point, it is too early to say if this new digital being is more akin to Goethe's genial homunculus, or if this goodly creature is more analogous to Mary Shelley's monster. If we side with the homunculus point of view, then this novel life form is a benevolent associate, if not a liberator. From this vantage point, the genie-like user is a brave navigator of cyberspace. As a discoverer of new worlds, he or she is part of the poetic process of creation and *imitatio*. Media theorists such as Richard Grusin and Jay David Bolter, to name but two of the early protagonists, see the current "cut and paste" culture of digital media as "repurposing," as "redefinition" and as the "borrowing" of content. They maintain that this practice, that *remediation*, where "the content has been borrowed, but the medium has not been appropriated," has a history going back to the beginnings of Western civilization: "One example with a long pedigree are (sic) paintings illustrating stories from the Bible or other literary sources, where apparently only the story content is borrowed" (45).

Their viewpoint makes sense; however, one could argue that there is a categorical difference between borrowing or repurposing and the interpretation and amplification of themes. Consequently, if we do not accept their notion of *remediation*, then the logic of this kind of "hypermediacy" is open to discussion.¹ In fact, for the critics of Bolter and Grusin's genealogy, remediation is part of a poststructuralist thinking that aims to challenge essentialism, authenticity and identity. For these critics, *the logic* of "cut and paste," of re-facing and repackaging, rather than being a longstanding aesthetic principle, is part of a postcolonial anxiety that promotes the idea of hybridity. In other words, the digital newborn, this man-made Adam, could also be seen as a robber of pure forms and a looter of intellectual goods. In that case, this postcolonial thief, instead of reminding one of Frankenstein's hapless creature, resembles another monster, the menacing Golem of Jewish legend. The Golem, although a creation endowed with special powers, can only follow commands and prompts, but cannot itself "speak," that is, create.

One thing is clear. Electronic literature requires new, advanced, critical models of interpretation that do not resemble the poetics of the past.² What is missing is the normative thinking associated with the *ars poetica*. In digital poetics, the instructive and probing features are of a different class altogether, and they appear to be deemphasized when compared to traditional poetics. More prominent than *docere et probare* is another facet of rhetoric, namely the notion of *delectare*. However, if this is the case, if interactivity, self-exploration and self-communication are primary objectives of the *ars electronica*, then what kind of literary norms can one apply to evaluate the nascent literature? Can we expect a new *Weltliteratur*

from an electronic literature that is dedicated, according to its critics, to *panem et circenses*? In fact, as we see the *epistemé*, the framework of the *ars electronica*, continually being outpaced and supplanted by the mechanics of its *techné*, doubts begin to arise about its supposed Enlightenment lineage. Is information technology (where the stress is on “information”) really, as Bolter and Grusin maintain, the logical continuation of Gutenberg’s movable type, or is *la technologie de l’information* actually part of Max Weber’s master trend of bureaucratic rationality?

In-formation, that is, put-together, stringed data is a central component of the new electronic philology. Of course, the diffusion of information is also part and parcel of conventional writing. However, in the *ars electronica* its technological superstructure plays such an important role that it itself creates its own meaning and language. When Leavitt and Whisler coined the term *information technology* in *The Harvard Business Review* in the late 1950s, they were primarily interested in the utility of computers for business applications. In “Management in the 1980’s” (1958), they argued that by facilitating the free-flow of information, computers would dramatically reduce mid-management, allowing top executives to extend control over vast organizations. In other words, it was the possibility of ultimate executive control over knowledge *per se* that is part of the pedigree of the *ars electronica*. The status and role of information in electronic writing is a complicated and thorny theoretical issue. More rewarding is the consideration of how information technology impacts electronic and conventional writing.

A fundamental aspect of the Electronic Age is its boundless dimension. Its limitlessness poses a direct challenge to circumscribed national systems and bounded frameworks of learning. It is transnational as it cuts across historically-defined cultural and literary boundaries. The antagonistic relationship between the analog and the digital is nowhere as apparent as in the stance of the digital world toward artifacts and archives. In their need to continually feed on data, both the ideology of the information age and the exponential growth of computing power require traditional archives as sources. In fact, the classical resources of the nation state are vital to the continued success of the World Wide Web. As the exponential growth of computing power is blurring the distinction between *information* and *knowledge*, nationally-organized archives lose their purpose as reservoirs of institutional memory. While philologists of the nineteenth and twentieth century searched the earth to rediscover the grammar of past civilizations, so is the current linking of archives akin to H.G. Wells’s vision of a world brain. The electronic philologist-cum-cyberspace

geographer merges various kinds of media in order to create new multimedia literary space. In essence, what makes electronic philology a *nuova scientia* is the discovery that digital *lingua* requires a new kind of conceptual thinking. The World Wide Web is a marketplace that, unlike the *agora* of the Greek city states, is in many ways independent from physical limitations. This new marketplace, like the Platonic world of *ideas*, is a *hyper*-space in the truest sense of the word. The digital re-charting of the new electronic space is made possible not only because of continuous increase of computing power, but also because the traditional, analog textual plane of nineteenth-century philology has been supplanted by the discovery of a new form of communication, the electric language of hypertext.³

Although the term *hypertext* is now familiar to every user of the internet, it is still useful to examine how it has evolved since 1965, when Ted Nelson defined it. Then, the prefix *hyper*- was to merely point out the linear constraints of printed texts. However, later, his perspective changed and in his *Literary Machines* (1992) he wrote: "By now the word 'hypertext' has become generally accepted for branching and responding text [...]" (82). As infinitely re-enterable systems, hypertexts and hypermedia are transcending long-established frameworks seemingly invalidating linear systems of traditional text. It is the non-sequential nature of hypertext that threatens the status and shelf-life of the written work as it increases its own dimensionality (by linking itself to various forms of other media). Hypertext and hypermedia have brought about a new freedom of the text that seems to be in line with the encyclopedia project of the Enlightenment. However, even though the two missions appear to be similar, the word processing made possible by computing machinery and text-handling systems goes far beyond d'Alembert's undertaking. Although the present endeavor to make information accessible to a wider audience is comparable to the intention of the encyclopaedists, there is an important difference. The interconnectedness of encyclopaedic knowledge was bounded by the characters of the alphabet, by the finite entries under each letter, by the financial and technical problems posed by printed matter, and by the disposition of its editors. This is not the case with hypermedia.

As surveys of knowledge, the various national encyclopaedic systems were efforts at identifying and codifying boundaries within a given system of determinacy. The very nature of hypertext, however, is to counter all kinds of determinacy. As the "ideal reader" of literature is becoming the "active user" of hypertext, knowledge production becomes in-determinant, as it is dependent on the point of focus and the choices made by the active

reader-cum-player of hypertext. In regard to digital poetics, then, the question is: How will it interact with Kant's *Lesewelt*, that is to say, the world *des anciens* with its many celebrated republics of letters? What will happen to the notion of the "ideal" reader? And where are we to find stern and disinterested critics, when all users *are* also critics? Will the sanctity of the many diverse literary genres, will the co-existence of national literatures (with their regional identities and numerous dialects) be respected? The inestimable technological possibilities of digital space, along with its overwhelming processing power, could easily surmount the *space* now inhabited by the "small literatures" of print. The power ratio of this emerging condition is so one-sidedly in favour of digital media that this information overload could swallow up memorial sites of former national literary traditions, leading, paradoxically, to a new provincialism. T.S. Eliot had warned about the possibility of such developments as early as 1944. In his essay *What is a Classic?* he wrote:

In our age, when men seem more than ever prone to confuse wisdom with knowledge, and knowledge with information, and to try to solve problems of life in terms of engineering, there is coming into existence a new kind of provincialism which perhaps deserves a new name. It is a provincialism, not of space, but of time; one for which history is merely the chronicle of human devices which have served their turn and been scrapped, one for which the world is the property solely of the living, a property in which the dead hold no shares. The menace of this kind of provincialism is that we can all, all the peoples on the globe, be provincials together; and those who are not content to be provincials, can only become hermits. (30)

The current opposition between analog and digital space need not result in Eliot's world of either provincials or hermits. Nevertheless, it is clear that analog memorial sites and other cultural spaces are being repositioned in digital space. The literary historian Wai Chee Dimock, for example, locates what used to be called *world literature* in a kind of virtual reality. The newly-won literary space is now circumscribed by the term "geopolitical territories." She can now situate established literary genres in a fluid continuum of space (a "geography of human beings") and a new sense of time ("deep time"): "Extending the concept of remediation, then, we might want to coin a somewhat awkward term, a gerund, *regenreing* [*sic*], to highlight the activity here as cumulative reuse, an alluvial process, sedimentary as well as migratory" ("Genres" 1380). This makes it possible not only to read canonical literature in a new way, but also to re-read world literature. As she considers literary genres within "the world" (as opposed to national and subnational frameworks) seen as a 'system,'

Dimock's efforts are directed toward decolonizing the Western literary tradition. However, the costs are high. In the 'regenreing' process, where grounded frameworks are detached and deterritorialized, they become 'uncertain' and the system as a whole becomes indeterminate.

The efforts of Wai Chi Dimock and others to salvage the idealism of Goethe's idea of *Weltliteratur* are commendable and important; however, her remediation process of *regenreing* has a high price. To bring the physical categories of time and space into play in literary theory, be they Einsteinian or *a priori* Kantian transcendental categories, in order to reconfigure literary spaces and genres is audacious.⁴ There are those who warn of their exploitation and abuse even in a general metaphorical way. Already in his *Production of Space* of 1991, the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre cautioned that spatial metaphors need to be carefully defined and contextualized: "Consider questions about space, for example: taken out of the context of practice [...] What they degenerate into are mere general considerations on intellectual space—on "writing" as the intellectual space of a people, as the mental space of a period, and so on" (415). The prominence of spatial metaphors in digital media makes sense, of course. For historians of culture what is worthy of note is that it is so all-embracing. Most sensitive to the current application of spatial metaphors are geographers such as J.K. Gibson-Graham:

Discursive space is "occupied," speaking positions are "located" or "situated," "boundaries" are "transgressed," identity is "deterritorialized" and "nomadic." Theory flows in and around a conceptual "landscape" that must be "mapped," producing "cartographies" of desire and "spaces" of enunciation. If space is currently where it's at, perhaps it is not surprising that professional geographers occasionally feel displaced. It seems we are all geographers now. (72)

As we become aware of complaints such as those of Lefebvre and J.K. Gibson-Graham, it makes sense that the current reconfiguration of cultural and literary space has recently come to be seen as problematic. Describing this reconfiguration as the manifestations of a *technoscience*, the philosopher Gilbert Hottois has been an outspoken critic as he questioned the ethics of this kind of technological modernity.⁵

At this point it is clear, that in relation to the vastness of the new electronic space, it is easy to lose sight of literature *an sich*. One of the most obvious consequences of the "death of distance" is the perception that there is a difference between real and virtual literary space. Bolter and Grusin have described this perception of space in terms of it being a new *logic*: "In all its various forms, the logic of hypermediacy expresses the

tension between regarding a visual space as mediated and as a ‘real’ space that lies beyond mediation” (41). Hyperspace, the new logic of cultural space, is the embrace of “the medium” (and “media”) as the place where the “translation” of information takes place. In *Writing Space* (1991), Bolter argues that hypertext is not an otherworldly gadget, but merely a text in an electronic medium. As he understands all forms of writing to be spatial in terms of their production, he considers hypertext to be only the latest kind of writing space:

All forms of writing are spatial, for we can only see and understand written signs as extended in a space of at least two dimensions. Each technology gives us a different space. [...] How the reader and writer understand writing is conditioned by the physical and visual character of the books they use. (11)

For Bolter, writing (and the history of writing) is a cultural space which, in itself, can be read as text. Following Heidegger and Derrida, he considers writing to be a technology that determines the character and identity of a culture. In regard to literary space, it becomes clear that a major issue is how the discipline of traditional poetics responds to the new digital world. In other words, it is not the communities of national or regional readers who set up the metrics of poetics (as in the poetics of old), but the hard- and software associated with digital media, which really determines literary parameters, that is, its identity and character.

In the final analysis, is difficult to assemble a canon for the emerging electronic literature. In the cat-and-mouse game of technological advances, it is an arduous task to continuously match the narrative structure of the emerging electronic literature with its respective theory. Electronic literature is often dependent on specific interface metaphors which, in turn, are keyed to programmable media, computer games, animations and other aspects of popular visual culture. As the interface metaphors or the hypertext authoring program becomes outmoded, the nascent hypertext genre perishes with it. And just like the hypertext fiction of the 1990s *Storospace* School, so have the email novels of the late 1990s been supplanted by narratives using interactive GPS-based technologies. At the moment, these so called *locative narratives* themselves are being eaten by bigger fish. Without question, texts and lexia will soon leap up at us in 3D. It is at this point where we have come up against the hard place of this matter. It is the realization that the newly-won hyperspace, more than being just a classical medium, is a self-generating system. As such, it not only qualifies, but it also alters, the *collective* perception of the work of art. As Friedrich Kittler put it so bluntly in his opening sentence of

Gramophone, Film, Typewriter (1999), hyperspace shapes the very way we see the world around us. This re-formation emerges in the way it is framed: The work of art either reacts or unfolds against a backdrop of a self-generating spatio-temporal axis. It is this new perception of space writ large coupled with the simultaneous creation of new literary spaces that is the creative element in the works of authors who, like Mark Z. Danielewski, currently write for, but also against, the Electronic Age.

Notes

¹ “Again, we call the representation of one medium in another *remediation*, and we will argue that remediation is a defining characteristic of the new digital media” (Bolter and Grusin 44-45).

² See Matussek.

³ See Heim.

⁴ Wai Chee Dimock’s approach to world literature and literary theory is innovative and unusual as it seems to be informed by discussions in physics. Her notion of ‘deep space’ and ‘planetary time’, for instance, resembles the so-called ‘many-worlds interpretation’ (MWI) in quantum mechanics. See Dimock, *Through other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time*.

⁵ See Hottois, *Philosophies des sciences, philosophies des techniques*.

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HAUNTINGLY SWEET:
HOME AS LABYRINTH AND HOSPITALITY
IN *HOUSE OF LEAVES*

ALEKSANDRA BIDA

Mark Z. Danielewski's physics-defying house on Ash Tree Lane in Virginia conflates the extremes of the "sweet" and haunted home not only for those who inhabit it but also characters and readers who make the text a home. This seamless integration of the physical and conceptual aspects of home is crucial for a comprehensive examination of the idea of home as shelter and identity marker. The house in the text epitomizes a picturesque and comfortable rural home but also contains an entrance to an "inner" house, a space that is impossibly large, windowless, dark, shifting, and at times seemingly doorless. Danielewski's text raises questions about the ways in which this fantastic house embodies the uncanny nature of home as familiar but also strange and unknowable. Published in 2000, the novel also asks what being "at home" can mean in the twenty-first century by investigating the social and psychological constructions of belonging that home signifies even in a highly mobile, globalizing, and digital era.

In *House of Leaves* the home, as a labyrinth, represents a space of integration and meaning-making that requires reflection and continual re-exploration. The narrative layers of the novel, like adjacent rooms physically or past residences conceptually, combine to offer a fuller picture of the construction of home through multiple kinds of experiences with a house and the reflections of divergent perspectives. The layers include a film made by Will Navidson of his family's move to Ash Tree Lane, an academic manuscript on that film by the mysterious Zampanò, the incessant footnotes of Johnny Truant produced while he compiles that manuscript from a labyrinth of notes, additional notes by further "editors," and visual as well as textual content in appendices. Offering a figuratively and formally labyrinthine text, the novel continually suggests that home is also a labyrinth. This labyrinth home consists of physical residences and spaces as well as memories that may be embellished or repressed to take on the sheen of nostalgia or the shadow of fear and loss.

Rejecting the notion of finding some quintessential “sweet” home in favour of a composite and shifting idea that requires constant reflection, *House of Leaves* depicts the experiences of home as continuously labyrinthine in order to reveal the labyrinthine nature of a postmodern home. The structure of the labyrinth and its conspicuous, mythic resident situate the complex and nuanced home at the intersection of the past and present (also literally as the classic story is given a postmodern telling). Danielewski uses the labyrinth and the process of moving through it to highlight the inevitable mobility of home-making through progressing and backsliding or leaving and returning. The novel blurs classic and postmodern monsters as well as heroes to showcase the multiplicity of paths and choices at play in the construction of the idea of home.

Danielewski also uses the labyrinth and myth of the Minotaur to investigate complex, socially mediated questions of “at homeness” and belonging. I will delve further into these questions through the notion of hospitality, specifically Jacques Derrida’s “hostipitality,” or hostile hospitality. Delineations of host and guest, as well as the more loaded categorizations of parasite and hostage, can alternately build and demolish the foundations of home. The Minotaur myth already proposes instability in the roles of host and guest when a guest intrudes and the host is killed, but the relations of host and guest are even further problematized by Danielewski. I use Derrida’s “hostipitality” to further understand the labyrinthine notion of home in a novel that positions home as a means of mediating postmodern flux and seeming “rootlessness” without discounting the effects of modern mobility and feelings of (un)welcome in an era of increasingly commercialized hospitality. The labyrinth in *House of Leaves*, I suggest, entails a search for a different kind of hospitality and the experience of “hostipitality” throughout the process of home-making. This process entails hostile pitfalls, challenges, and surprising welcomes that Danielewski depicts as layered and often contradictory but always transformative for characters, narrators, and readers who explore the labyrinthine nature of home through his textual labyrinth.

At home in a labyrinth: the Minotaur and Theseus

Home is an emergent notion that is continually reframed by a shifting dynamic of social, physical, and psychological circumstances, and it is such an understanding of home along with its inherent paradoxes that lies at the heart of *House of Leaves*. Throughout the text Danielewski uses mobility to characterize the process of understanding home as a labyrinthine and evolving concept. Zampanò echoes this notion when he

claims, “If the work demanded by any labyrinth means penetrating or escaping it, the question of process becomes extremely relevant” (*HoL* 115). Applied to home, this emphasis on process—and the destination or trap that requires “penetrating or escaping”—involves an engagement with learning to navigate and build upon a conceptual space that includes experiences of past homes, present circumstances, future expectations, as well as the dreams and nightmares that can make home haunting and sweetly nostalgic. The labyrinth facilitates the integration of home because, as Kristin Veel suggests in her examination of labyrinths, cities, and cyberspace, “the fixed walls of the traditional labyrinth have become porous” (167). The same term is used by geographers Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling to define home, describing it as a “porous, open, intersection of social relations and emotions” (27). *House of Leaves*, I argue, offers a porous, labyrinthine home in order to emphasize the importance of the home-maker’s process—that initially obscure activity which Zampanò refers to.

Process is vital because the house on Ash Tree Lane continually proposes a networked, interspersed, and fragmented home—an anchor and composite that remains in flux. This allows for “dream house” moments and happy memories for Navidson, his wife and their kids, but it does not repress or single out the marital tensions, parental inadequacies, and other aspects of everyday life in order to project that ideal or decimate it. The emphasis on how other characters experience the house, physically or not, also shows how a sense of home can be created comparatively through personal experiences as well as the experiences of others which are adapted. Johnny identifies his lack of home quite deeply while reading about Navidson’s perceived abundance of homes in New York, Virginia, as well as his family life. Yet Johnny too makes a kind of home in the house on Ash Tree Lane, and his isolating apartment is also a home, even if it’s the means to his isolation and site of his psychological meltdown.

The perhaps obvious yet often overlooked point that *House of Leaves* continually makes is that home is never simply good or bad, safe and comfortable or dangerous and traumatic, but that it is always (potentially) all of these things. Moreover, home is significant because it requires attention in order to become an often much needed space of reflection about belonging and a sense of place in the world—as Navidson’s and Johnny’s meditations show—as well as a place through which identity is fruitfully interrogated and even integrated in a postmodern world of multiplicities and schisms. In *Monolingualism of the Other* Derrida suggests that “an identity is never given, received, or attained; only the interminable and indefinitely phantasmatic process of identification endures”

(28) and this conception of identity as indefinite, a phantasm, and a process is something that Danielewski takes up as his work exposes readers to new parts of an expansive labyrinth.

For instance, one of the many bits of layered, potential phantasms of meaning is a fortune cookie paper in one of the collages of the second appendix which declares, “You have a strong desire for a home and your family comes first” (*HoL* 583). Even though family may not define home, its presence (or absence) certainly plays an important role in the construction of home. In her examination of Johnny’s relationship with his mother, Pelafina, Katharine Cox explains that “Danielewski reveals a current labyrinth whose structural bonds denote the fatiguing impositions of familial ties. Yet these denigrating and traumatic alliances are softened by the walking of the labyrinth, directly through the transformative qualities of the structure” (14). This observation can be expanded beyond familial ties to include other alliances or allegiances and a sense of belonging in geographic as well as cultural communities through the “transformative qualities” of “walking” their labyrinths. It is also the familial absence and lack of geographic or cultural communities that makes the Minotaur figure so interesting in examining contemporary ideas of home.

As scholars of Greek mythology, such as Edith Hamilton, and of the labyrinth, including Penelope Reed Doob and Helmut Jaskolski, recount, in the most basic and widely known version of the tale, the Minotaur is the son of the Cretan king’s wife and an ethereal bull. He is the hybrid but decidedly bestial threat that feasts on a yearly (or multiple-year) sacrifice of youths. Some interpretations, however, interrogate his complicity in the creation of the labyrinth and the deaths associated with the ritual sacrifice. For example, the fact that the youths never re-emerged can be attributed to the complexity of the labyrinth itself. Even in her popular book on mythology Edith Hamilton specifies that “one would go endlessly along its twisting paths without *ever* finding the exit” (212, my emphasis). Furthermore, the fear that the Minotaur inspired as a violent creature can be seen as politically useful for his king or (step)father to instill fear rather than a reflection of the alleged offspring. Finally, Theseus can be read as the man who kills a man-eating fiend or as a man who murders an undesirable being trapped inside an elaborate cage. These are all possibilities that Danielewski meticulously weaves into his text.

Inside the house and inside the book characters experience the central roles of the Greek labyrinth myth: as trapped Minotaur and/or conquering Theseus. The three main “creators”—filmmaker Navidson, author Zampanò, and additional author, Johnny—are alternately trapped in confining spaces

(Navidson at the mercy of the “inner” house and Zampanò as well as Johnny in their isolated apartments) and ready to conceptually explore the homes in the stories that they offer. Additionally, Pelafina, sequestered along with her occasionally lucid confessional letters in the appendix, is literally trapped, writing to Johnny from an insane asylum. This combination of entrapment and liberating reflection reveals another kind of Minotaur and Theseus, alternately trapped, intruding, and (un)welcome in their “own” labyrinth of home. The myth that enriches the labyrinth metaphor becomes, in *House of Leaves*, a story of the monster and hero who both do and do not belong inside the space claimed or conquered by/for them.

The novel includes several discussions of the Minotaur and labyrinth that shed light on how the mobility of the labyrinth informs the process or transformations of home-making. In the appendix the numbered chapters are given titles: Chapter 9 is listed as “The Labyrinth” and Chapter 13 as “The Minotaur” (*HoL* 540). The former opens with three telling epigraphs, and the first is from Virgil: “Here is the toil of that house, and the inextricable wandering” (*HoL* 107). The “inextricable wandering” evokes a conventional search for home but also the mundane wandering of leaving and returning that is elemental in the process of accumulating or forsaking both memories and objects. Such fluctuation is further highlighted by the two quotations that follow: “The house difficult of exit” and “difficult to enter” (*HoL* 107), attributed to Ascensius and Nicholas Trevet, respectively. These allusions to entering and exiting are made more concrete by the word “difficult” which, like “toil” in the Virgil quotation, points to the work involved in continually negotiating the idea of home as something not only imposed or threatened by the outside but difficult to (re)construct on an internal level.

The house, as an exemplary labyrinth, makes categorical opposition more manageable: home and *not* home intertwine or fluctuate as places and people change and move. As a stranger in the “inner” house (inside his own home), Will Navidson exemplifies the uncanny mix that is always present in the idea of home. Characters encounter the “toil” and negotiate the “wandering” of their labyrinthine constructions by moving ahead but also thinking back. For Cox this includes Johnny “wander[ing] through the house of his memory until he arrives at what he once knew” (13), while Nicoline Timmer categorizes Johnny and Navidson facing their repressed issues or fears as a “therapeutic aspect” (288) of encountering their own narratives (Johnny meets musicians who found his text on the internet and Navidson reads *House of Leaves* when he gets lost during his last exploration of the house). These examples of introspection and encounters

with narratives that mirror or deeply resonate with personal experience suggest an emphasis on self-knowledge even though the labyrinth, as N. Katherine Hayles suggests, “becomes a trope for incomplete knowledge” (792). The process of home-making, however, does not demand completion.

In another example of self-knowledge and incomplete knowledge in the labyrinth of *House of Leaves*, Zampanò writes that while alone in the darkness of the inner house Navidson’s twin brother, Tom, was “referring to i[] as ‘Mr. Monster’” (*HoL* 335). Johnny uses brackets for missing parts of the latter portion of Zampanò’s manuscript, and this particular omission of the “t” leaves only the “i” to suggest that Tom *is* this monster, referring not to an “it” but to himself. Similarly to Tom’s Mr. Monster, Holloway Roberts, the professional explorer who loses his grip on reality inside the house, repeatedly refers to a beast. Both names suggest the Minotaur inside the labyrinth as well as a connection to Tom and Holloway themselves, with Tom joking with his alter ego and Holloway becoming a beast as insanity takes over. In an even more personalized effort to make this point, one of Zampanò’s struck-out footnotes reads: “At the heart of the labyrinth waits the Mi[]taur and like the Minotaur of myth its name is []” (*HoL* 335). This time the missing “no” suggests “Mi” (me) and the blank space for the name asks readers to fill in the name. Hayles points out that “The Minotaur” is an anagram for “O Im he Truant” (798) but, more broadly, along with Tom or Mr. Monster and Holloway or the beast, even the reader’s name can fill in this blank and be or become the Minotaur, the “thing” for which the labyrinth was created, the entity that defines and is defined by that creation.

Although the Minotaur is assumed to be passively waiting to be discovered in the labyrinth, in the core moments of the labyrinth story Theseus is also inside, and he may not even be the preeminent “outsider” within the bounds of that structure. The probing questions that re-told versions of the story in *House of Leaves* suggest are who is trapped in this labyrinth, who might feel at home in it, and how each figure’s agency in claiming or navigating the labyrinth affect notions of belonging and “at homeness.” The Minotaur’s labyrinth can be seen in practical terms as accommodation, but also as a prison and cage, or as a temple and the realm of a potentially divine entity, but the basic myth’s plot generally favours the prison as the most forthright view, particularly since the sacrificial youths cannot find their way out (whether the Minotaur can or would want to remains unclear). Nevertheless, the labyrinth also serves a further purpose, which I referred to previously, as a space for learning and self-discovery. An interpretation of the myth that Jaskolski briefly

investigates is of Theseus finding self-knowledge in the labyrinth rather than a tangible foe. Although it is unclear whether he discovers himself to be a courageous hero or beast, Jaskolski suggests that when “Theseus penetrates the mystery of the Minotaur” this becomes “a triumph of self-knowledge” (58).

In this light the mythical narrative of the labyrinth and Minotaur offers a meditation on more than seeking and finding by encompassing internal and external discoveries and transformations relating to identity, belonging, ethical imperatives, rights or restitutions, and other considerations directly related to home. It is along these lines that Cox suggests that Johnny experiences the “transformative qualities” (14) of the labyrinth structure and Timmer points out that “[m]ore interesting [than questioning Johnny’s ‘true story’] is the process of the transformation of the self that is laid out in the novel, however vaguely or cryptically” (282). The vague and cryptic nature of this transformation is part of the uncanny and labyrinthine nature of the concept of home and the self-discovery that it involves. Nevertheless, like the idea of home, not all aspects of self-knowledge can be positive.

Trapped in a labyrinth: intertext and interpretation

Throughout *House of Leaves*, Johnny Truant aligns himself with the Minotaur figure and, specifically, the defective and rejected status of the man/bull. In a nightmare of being trapped in the bowels of a ship, Johnny claims “to wander these cramped routes which in spite of their ability to lose me still retain in every turn an almost indiscrete sense of familiarity” (*HoL* 403). He also notes scars on his arms and a misshapen head, describing his body as covered in deep scars and “stiff hair,” with protruding ribs, as well as teeth that are “long, serrated and unusually strong” (*HoL* 404). Yet in the inevitable tangent while describing the dream he also mentions a meeting in a supermarket during which he is “so pale and weak, clothes hanging on me like curtains on a curtain rod” (*HoL* 404). This contrast only adds to the weakness or helplessness that Johnny feels as the Minotaur figure with an intrinsic flaw:

And even though I have no idea how I got to be so deformed, I do know. And this knowledge comes suddenly. I’m here *because* I am deformed, *because* when I speak my words come out in cracks and groans, and what’s more I’ve been put here by an old man, a dead man, by one who called me son though he was not my father. (*HoL* 404, original emphasis)

The father might be his foster father, who physically abused him, or Zampanò, who passed on his legacy and burden to Johnny. In either case, the power that this “old man” still wields is another source of Johnny’s weakness and general sense of unworthiness.

In the nightmare Johnny meets a “frat boy” who plans to chop him up with an axe and, initially accepting the violence of the classic myth, he describes this event in graphic detail. Eventually, however, Johnny confesses, “I realize that now for some reason, for the first time, I have a choice: I don’t have to die, I can kill him instead” (*HoL* 404). But the myth is not re-written with a new happy ending because the “frat boy” changes into a glowing female figure of understanding, and Johnny allows her to chop him up into pieces while his “heart ruptures” (*HoL* 405). The betrayal of this Ariadne figure, which he seems to trust like the mythological creature trusted his (half)sister, is another intimation of the Minotaur figure as victim.

Johnny not only has dreams of being the Minotaur but absorbs other tropes of the Minotaur’s myth, continually reaffirming an egotistically central placement in the labyrinth of the *House of Leaves* narrative as well as a sense of being unable to leave should he actually want to. He may be an apathetic antihero but is also the impetus behind the story through his efforts in reassembling Zampanò’s manuscript as well as his own plentiful additions to it. Johnny is obsessively focused on the house and feels he was unfairly trapped—like the Minotaur—into this labyrinth, after being shown the chest that held Zampanò’s manuscript. Yet the house that he reads about actually provides a mediation of his conflicting view of being central and marginal since it is essentially decentralized and offers him the remedial agency of choosing to enter. Without specifying an exact centre in which a Minotaur waits to kill or be killed, the house offers Johnny an anchor that he otherwise distinctly lacks.

In the color edition of the book, text concerning the most iconic labyrinth and its enigmatic resident is bright red and in all of the editions it is crossed out. Johnny claims to have “resurrected” these passages which Zampanò “tried to get rid of” (*HoL* 111) in an act that suggests that the Minotaur cannot be so easily erased from the labyrinth. These sections include speculations that rather than the progeny of his queen and a bull, the Minotaur was a deformed child that King Minos did not want to claim. Zampanò describes an obscure play which tells the story of the king’s shame in his own genetic deformity rather than his wife’s bestiality (that she lusted after a bull) or divinely orchestrated infidelity (that the gods came up with the infatuation as a punishment). Similarly, the questions that Zampanò asks about the labyrinth in the house include multiple

possibilities: whether it “[c]onceals a secret? Protects something? Imprisons or hides some kind of monster? Or, for that matter, imprisons or hides an innocent?” (*HoL* 111). The Minotaur in this latter view becomes the ungainly but oddly endearing Ludo from the 1982 film *Labyrinth* who, like a deformed child, is easily cast as a victim of outside forces and shame instead of the violent brute that requires sacrificial youths. Although Zampanò wants to classify the alleged son of Minos as victim rather than villain, Johnny, as well as characters like Tom and Holloway who enter the “inner” house, all further interrogate a grey space rather than rigid delineations.

The novel promotes an interpretive grey space, even concerning intertext. Steven Belletto calls Jorge Luis Borges’s “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*” with its footnotes and layers of authorship a “key intertext” (100) for *House of Leaves*. References to Borges in the novel include a Spanish epigraph (*HoL* 313) in the Minotaur chapter from “The Other Tiger,” the fragment of a picture of Borges in one of the collages in the second appendix (*HoL* 582), as well as similarities between Borges and Zampanò such as blindness and a penchant for obscure footnotes (and, of course, labyrinths). Beyond these instances the famous author’s work is keenly enmeshed in the book, and I would add Borges’s “House of Asterion,” a short story told from the perspective of the Minotaur, as another foundational intertext for *House of Leaves*. In his own story about a “house,” Danielewski, like Borges in “House of Asterion,” presents a similarly oppositional and enigmatic “creature” in a simple and yet potentially infinite space.

Timmer suggests that *House of Leaves* is continually “pointing out that one always constructs texts or stories [even the story of oneself] on the basis of a labyrinthic and ever shifting ‘body’ of *other* texts” (246, original emphasis). She links “Pierre Menard” to the narrative layers of *House of Leaves*, claiming that “[t]he idea is not to identify completely, to project oneself imaginatively unto a narrator or character in an existing story of someone else [...] but to reach out for the text (and the other) from one’s own experience, in one’s own way” (295). This, I think, is the relation that Danielewski establishes with “House of Asterion” as Johnny “reaches out” to experience the Minotaur’s point of view in his own way. The novel also invites readers to reach out rather than project, not only to construct their stories as Timmer points out, but also to make a “home” in parts of this composite house of “leaves” of paper. While Borges’s story may elicit compassion or pity for this Minotaur, *House of Leaves* suggests that there are even more sides to the figure that inhabits the labyrinth.

In “House of Asterion” the Minotaur is referred to by his alternate name of Asterion and the very title of Borges’s story, “House of Asterion,” suggests the labyrinth as the Minotaur’s space, his castle, legacy, dwelling, and realm. This brief first-person account explores the uncanny nature of home and the labyrinth metaphor by questioning whether Asterion is a prisoner in a labyrinth with no locked doors or even locks. Asterion explains that the doors open and “[a]nyone may enter” and “find quiet and solitude” (Borges 138). He speaks with confidence about his house and yet proves to be naïve and unreliable, explicitly stating that he never leaves his house but admitting to having left once and quickly returned “because of the fear the faces of the common people inspired in me” (Borges 138). Those people lead Asterion to conclude: “The fact is that I am unique” (Borges 139), but his sense of uniqueness, like this unique home, primarily serves to mitigate loneliness. This idea is implicitly expressed by Johnny, who even in his most self-deprecating or cynical moments seems to be sure of his uniqueness. In one of her letters Pelafina even reminds him: “Keep true to the rare music in your heart, to the marvelous and unique form that is and shall always be nothing else but you” (*HoL* 613).

Both Johnny and Asterion also have a practical and imaginative knowledge of their “house,” yet feel unconnected to it and seek diversion. Johnny immerses himself in the puzzle of compiling Zampanò’s notes and creating his own persona in his growing footnotes. Asterion explains how “of all the games I prefer the one about the other Asterion. I pretend that he comes to visit me and that I show him my house” (Borges 139). This Minotaur’s identity crisis is an unexpected predicament for a being usually characterized by fearsomeness and brutality because there is something whimsically real about a childlike creature whose imaginary friend is a mirror of himself. Johnny’s teenage-like rebellion and hedonism, like Asterion’s childish nature, suggest innocence and victimhood, particularly in light of their histories of parental neglect, abandonment, and abuse. In the end, Asterion mentions a dying youth’s prophecy of a “redeemer” coming, and the implication is that Theseus can redeem Asterion not from some degree of murder—“They fall one after another without my having to bloody my hands” (Borges 140)—but rather the self-justified isolation that he wants to be saved from in order to be “redeemed” and re-integrated into society.

Similarly isolated, Johnny bluntly confesses in the labyrinth chapter, “I had trouble just walking out of my door” (*HoL* 107). Yet even though Johnny identifies with the Minotaur, he can also be seen as Theseus in search of a Minotaur—a symbolic unknown representing his fears, or a person or thing that can enlighten him. The “inner” house offers Johnny as

Theseus self-knowledge because seeking the house is his remaining purpose in the text as he dejectedly contemplates his sense of self. Johnny's life, or what is scattered about it in his footnote rants and only might be true, lacked the stability of family or home. His father died when he was a child and his mother was institutionalized; his life in foster care also proved to be traumatic, and he began his questing and isolationism early by heading out on his own as a young teenager. Rather than an idealization that he never hopes to aspire to or another prison-type construct in which to isolate himself, the labyrinth as home offers Johnny a means of anchoring while he discovers a burgeoning sense of agency. Both the quest-seeking Theseus impetus and Minotaur-like isolation influence the ways in which he constructs home and re-inscribes for himself a conceptual space imbued with memory—not only hopes of safety but also repressed and not-so-repressed traumas.

Johnny's tragic life mirrors the Minotaur's childhood abandonment but his markers of otherness are mostly psychological. The Minotaur's human and nonhuman amalgamation is a manifestation of a fear of being less than human, unworthy, and without agency. Such a "thing" cannot claim the shelter and sense of belonging at the core of the notion of home, and yet other interpretations of the Minotaur's story, including Danielewski's and Borges's, undermine that assumption. Another re-imagining of the Minotaur story, Steven Sherrill's *The Minotaur Takes a Cigarette Break* portrays a mundanely normal Minotaur, or at least one that is more human with his ordinary job, less than divine strength, and even a poignant gentleness. The character physically has the head and torso of a bull with giant horns that often get in the way, but with a tongue capable of reticent human speech. When he watches a bull killed in an arena bullfight on television, this Minotaur's conclusion is simple: "To be a man means to be capable of this. To be a bull" (Sherrill 168). Johnny seems to come to the same conclusion in the exposition of his nightmare, but his sense of uniqueness stops him from seeing his own monstrosity as something common to humans.

Tom's Mr. Monster, Holloway's beast, and Johnny's self-identification with the Minotaur all echo the sentiment of being something less than human and unworthy, yet their conceptions of humanity and monstrosity are inextricably linked and, as Danielewski's text demonstrates, the labyrinth story as well as structure offer a means of understanding that link through mobility and transformation. In *House of Leaves* the explorers venture in, Theseus-like, to solve the Cretan (now Virginian) problem, but Tom and Holloway encounter themselves as Mr. Monster or beast. The classifications change in surprising ways as new events unfold or new

light is shed on the old. In the end, Navidson's wife, Karen, overcomes a childhood fear of dark, enclosed spaces and goes into the "inner" house to rescue a lost and physically deformed Will, and in doing so becomes the "redeemer" that Borges's Asterion awaited. This conclusion to the explorations of the "inner" house highlights that no matter how hard Johnny or Borges's Asterion try, they cannot welcome themselves home or isolate an unproblematic home.

In the labyrinth chapter Zampanò cites portions of the opening of Penelope Reed Doob's *The Idea of the Labyrinth* in order to set up and break down Doob's distinction between maze-treaders, who have partial knowledge of the structure from inside, and maze-viewers, who have a full view from beyond it. In her book Doob calls this a "double perspective" (1), and so Zampanò's point about the impossibility of this dichotomy (since all views are personal and partial for characters in terms of the Navidson house) becomes redundant. According to Zampanò, because no one can see the entire labyrinth, "comprehension of its intricacies must always be derived from within" (*HoL* 114) and "[a]ll solutions then are necessarily personal" (*HoL* 115). Timmer suggests that in some cases the solution "is obviously *inter-personal*" (263, original emphasis). The view that Johnny's solutions are personal, to apply Zampanò's claim, does not address the need Johnny has to connect with the outside world. To feel at home Johnny must, like Asterion, stop justifying his isolation because no amount of re-thinking of a conceptual home will be sufficient without new comparative experience of physical spaces and the people, places, and events that inform constructions of home. Johnny must become a maze-treader as well as maze-viewer.

Ilana Shiloh extends Doob's double perspective in her claim that "[a]long with Danielweski and his protagonists, we become labyrinth-walkers and labyrinth-makers, creative collaborators in the artistic endeavour" (148). The sense of agency that she stresses through "labyrinth-makers" and the collaborative nature of that creation relates to the notion of hospitality, to which I will turn next. Hospitality stresses the interpersonal aspects of constructing home for an individual through the interplay and duality of welcome *and* hostility. Beyond assumptions of one or the other—such as unconditionally permanent welcome or right to keep others away through birthright or ownership—Derrida's deconstruction of hospitality illuminates one of the most significant forces at play in Danielewski's exploration of home in his amalgamated labyrinth of protagonists and theories.

Hostile hospitality: hosts and guests

House of Leaves is full of partial, extensive, and even fictional theoretical work. Timmer claims that the “parody of critical voices” illustrates that these “critical voices cannot resolve anything, the comments only loop back to an already existing ‘theory’ or discourse” and someone like Johnny is needed because he is “willing to personally invest in what he is trying to understand” (289). The point is well made, and I would extend it beyond Timmer’s focus on “a personal sense of lack” (289) that *House of Leaves* depicts through Johnny’s narrative. Theorists are certainly invested in their work, but Johnny’s comprehensive immersion in “wandering” through epistemological labyrinths and interrogating questions regarding humanity, worthiness, entitlement, and belonging offer an exploration of home that Navidson’s film or Zampanò’s manuscript alone cannot. The quasi-documentary and quasi-scholarship also “loop back” to previously established rules, methods, and approaches. Johnny’s investment, meanwhile, is contingent upon a curiosity (often petulant or perverse) about the discourses that Zampanò regurgitates, investigates, or fabricates. In Johnny’s narrative, theory and experience coexist rather than being bracketed from each other for the sense of convention or order, and so it is through Johnny’s curiosity that theory and philosophical inquiry remain imperative aspects of the labyrinthine text with the added scope of extensively refracted subjective experience.

Although *House of Leaves* “provides a gloss on [Derridean thought]” (Belleto 107), it does not reference Derrida’s examination of the concept of hospitality. Hospitality is implicit in the mythical labyrinth story as well as in ideas of home through the distinctions of host and guest. In *Of Hospitality* Derrida proclaims that “the problem of hospitality [...] is always about answering for a dwelling place, for one’s identity, one’s space, one’s limits, for the *ethos* as abode, habitation, house, hearth, family, home” (149-150). Pointing out that the relation of host and guest contains its own inversion, he suggests scrupulous consideration of the impossible and potentially exploitative expectations of hospitality. By highlighting that the host is not necessarily immobile and the guest not without agency, Derrida’s view of hospitality further suggests a dynamic and complex relation between the host and guest and, in doing so, sheds light on the murky corridors of the labyrinthine home in *House of Leaves*.

The possibility of being able to offer hospitality defines home in a practical sense more precisely than a sense of familiarity or comfort that could be attributed to other places, objects, or occasions. Furthermore, hospitality hinges on the presence of mobility since someone has to come

from beyond or remain in a position of being asked to leave. The agency involved in hospitality, much like the decisions faced in the labyrinth, includes following or breaking social and pragmatic rules, in whatever form they have been culturally, historically, or individually recognized by following certain paths and etiquettes or going back, regressing, and breaking through walls or social norms. To address these possibilities, Derrida coins the term “hostipitality” to highlight the hostile aspects of hospitality. He not only considers the paradoxes or impossibilities embedded in the concept but also a breadth of concerns that include “the historical, ethical, juridical, political, and economic questions of hospitality” (3). These questions are then given a disquieting answer: “We do not know what hospitality is” (6). Derrida does not accuse but seeks to stress that “hospitality is not a concept which lends itself to objective knowledge” (7) and is always more complex and demanding than social niceties and political gestures.

Hospitality and home are problematic, paradoxical constructs that change or shift, and *House of Leaves* showcases such problems, paradoxes, and shifts in order to stress the necessity of re-thinking home and the experiences of welcome as well as hostility. Hosts and guests alike can become hostages or parasites, and one inversion that Derrida emphasizes is that “[t]he one inviting becomes almost the hostage of the one invited, of the guest, the hostage of the one he receives, the one who keeps him at home” (“Hostipitality” 9). The Minotaur can be seen as a hostage trapped inside the labyrinth and as one who is given hostages in the forms of sacrificial youths. It is this enmeshing and potential for double meanings and inversions that I turn to in *House of Leaves*. The novel, after all, opens with Johnny’s dedication of “This is not for you,” offering a terse but broad denial of hospitality or the challenge to (re)claim “this” house.

The house on Ash Tree Lane, through the “inner” house that is a prehistoric or supernatural entity, is not merely a character in this complex novel but also the central “host,” at times hospitable, at times hostile, and sometimes both at once. Yet like most idealized homes, this house initially symbolizes the potential for what Derrida calls absolute hospitality. In *Of Hospitality* he describes absolute hospitality as “open[ing] up my home... to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them [...] without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names” (25, original emphasis). This impossible act is initially represented in the tranquil space that is expected to welcome the Navidsons and nurture their familial bliss. *House of Leaves* offers no example of such expectations with people, and even Will’s brother, Tom, is invited with the express purpose of helping the family deal with the

increasingly suspicious space. In the novel the house asserts itself as a rich symbol for the various external forces that are always a part of the act of “giving place” and home-making.

Unlike absolute hospitality, hospitality is usually understood as implicitly conditional. The existence of absolute hospitality would make the world home to everyone everywhere and invalidate questions of home. In reality, as Derrida explains, “the home (which makes hospitality possible) and the violation or impossibility of home” (*Of Hospitality* 65) are everyday concerns, and this is what Johnny’s and the Navidson narratives reveal. Derrida’s use of “impossibility” is not as final as it may seem, and in “Hostipitality” he elucidates his use of the term: “it is the impossibility which must be overcome where it is possible to become impossible. It is necessary to do the impossible” (14). In this spirit, an impossible film about an impossible house in a labyrinthine novel can offer new avenues for exploring home and hospitality.

Derrida describes this dual nature of hospitality when he claims that “[i]t does not seem to me that I am able to open up or offer hospitality, however generous, even in order to be generous, without reaffirming: this is mine, I am at home, you are welcome in my home” (“Hostipitality” 14). By stemming from a possession or claim, the welcome hinges on the possibility of its denial. In blurring the initial source and seekers of hospitality, Danielewski’s house problematizes home by explicitly focusing on the agency of everyone that enters via door or page, even if they are feeling somehow coerced by curiosity or responsibility. The Navidsons, for instance, are hosts in their home as well as guests in the unknowable and unclaimable parts of this home, where markers and fishing line disappear and so no flag or name plaque can be mounted. They also become hostages and parasites.

As Will Navidson’s obsession with the unexpected shifting space grows, so does the hold the house exerts on him. Even when Karen wants to leave and forbids him from venturing inside again, he cannot seem to help himself. Feeling that some knowledge of the house is owed to him, he sets off on his most ambitious endeavour, and the house almost doesn’t let him go. Navidson, as hostage, seems to be a victim and yet he is never forced to enter or to keep going further inside the unpredictable space. In fact, he is more like Zampanò’s description of Holloway Roberts when the seasoned explorer made his appearance in *The Navidson Record* film “look[ing] less like a guest and more like some conquistador landing on new shores, preparing for war” (*HoL* 80). The connection to war—always a parasitical and inhospitable undertaking in one way or another—highlights the forms of protection and self-determination that hospitality in

its absolute form cannot co-exist with. In an endnote in *Of Hospitality* Derrida adds that in “Latin *hostis* means guest but also enemy” (157), and this is Holloway’s double status as he literally goes to war and even kills another explorer inside the “inner” house.

Karen and Will, alternately Minotaur and Theseus figures trapped and powerless or exploring to conquer, also embody the duality of guest/enemy in a house that seems to welcome and then almost destroys them. This conflict is partially a result of the ways in which Will and Karen approach protection and safety. They are nearsighted or blindsided by the ideals of protection and safety that they invest in the house, even while nurturing the hostile sides of hospitality in their relations with each other, their guests, and their home. In the documentary Navidson “calmly announces” his purpose for the project: “I just thought it would be nice to see how people move into a place and start to inhabit it” (*HoL* 23). He describes his intentions: “Settle in, maybe put down roots, interact, hopefully understand each other a little better. Personally, I just want to create a cozy little outpost for me and my family” (*HoL* 23). In his exposition Zampanò focuses on the term that Navidson uses for his home, pointing out that “‘outpost’ means a base, military or other, which while safe inside, functions principally to provide protection from hostile forces found on the outside” (*HoL* 23). The use of the word is partially explained in the motivation of leaving the city to locate a safe(r) home and externalize the problems that the family had by blaming former circumstances or surroundings.

Derrida speaks to this impulse of externalization and isolation by pointing to a necessary concession to such plans: “in order to constitute the space of a habitable house or home, you also need an opening, a door and windows, you have to give up a passage to the outside world” (*Of Hospitality* 61). An outpost cannot fully protect and is generally not very “cozy” (though Navidson seems to think so), but the Navidsons live in a time in which people are constantly reminded of the local, global, physical, or technological “hostile forces found on the outside” (*HoL* 23) that make the outpost-home seem more attractive. Yet the outside cannot be kept out because there must be an opening. Mobility, intrusion, and surveillance in their mundane forms cannot be avoided because they are a part of the intersections of the outside and inside of the porous, labyrinthine home.

Johnny similarly fixates on an outpost kind of home. He writes that he “wanted a closed, inviolate and most of all immutable space” (*HoL* xix), even though home can be none of these things. It cannot be closed, as Derrida points out; it was never inviolate; and it cannot be immutable

since it is continually changing. Part of Johnny's need for stability can be attributed to the instabilities he experienced throughout his life. Nevertheless, Johnny perpetuates this lack of stability by seeing home as a malevolent labyrinth of obstacles and setbacks rather than a space for investigating and integrating his memories and experiences. He feels like a guest in his own story, a self-invited guest in Zampanò's narrative home and even a parasite. As Hayles describes it,

Johnny Truant's footnotes, parasitically attaching themselves to Zampanò's host commentary, are parasited in turn by footnotes written by the anonymous 'Editors,' upon which are hyperparasitically fastened the materials in the exhibits, appendix, and index. (780)

Derrida's description of a parasite is "a guest who is wrong, illegitimate, clandestine, liable to expulsion or arrest" (*Of Hospitality* 61), and this is precisely how Johnny seems to feel throughout the text even though his text is not the only parasitical one and his "legitimacy" or "wrongness" becomes ever more central to that story.

Johnny never feels at home with his role because he never attempts to feel at home or think about the notion of home as anything other than a literal (rather than Derridean) impossibility. When he does choose to confront this dead-end approach, he goes searching for the Navidson house in order to mimic Will's journey through its labyrinthine depths. At least in searching for that labyrinth he shifts from self-identified, maligned Minotaur to an agential, quest-seeking Theseus, even as his positioning in the text remains precarious and invasive. Johnny has taken Zampanò's manuscript from the dead man's home and appropriated it. He is then surprised that the narrative is not hospitable, confessing: "This much though I'm sure of: I'm alone in hostile territories with no clue why they're hostile or how to get back to safe havens, an Old Haven, a lost haven" (*HoL* 43). Johnny is aware of his encroachment and seems to regret his conquest, yet his own story takes over more relentlessly. He justifies that through the claim that the narrative has taken over his own life in drastic ways. The presupposition of his rationalization is that readers should care or that Zampanò, who did not move to share his manuscript, should be a grateful "host" nevertheless.

The outpost prototype fails Johnny just like it failed the Navidsons. He becomes increasingly paranoid about "hostile territories" and forces. After checking the locks on his door he writes: "Putting on the chain only intensifies the feeling, hairs bristling trying to escape the host because the host is stupid enough to stick around, missing the most obvious fact of all that what I hoped to lock out I've only locked here with me" (*HoL* 326).

What he “hoped to lock out” may be a tangible or psychosomatic threat, or something internal that he perceives to be a broken part of himself, and it begins to rule his life. Johnny’s extreme isolationism is an attempt to discount the possibility of any hospitality and of viewing his dwelling as well as the world as hospitable—as though welcome were not still a part of “hostipitality.” Instead, for Johnny the overwhelmingly hostile aspects of hospitality frame a stagnant version of home as a kind of labyrinth in which we do not belong and from which we cannot escape.

Johnny’s relation with the figure of the Minotaur serves as his coping mechanism to mitigate fears of abandonment, rejection, and loneliness. Dara Downey argues that *House of Leaves* “takes the notion of the Minotaur’s disturbing proximity yet distance from humanity to its logical extreme” (167). What she describes as “the corporealization of the characters’ trajectory through space” (167), I suggest, also represents the experience of hostipitality—not only the power of refusing it or being refused, but the sense of belonging that can be engendered and the painful effects of a rejection or retraction of any “at homeness.” Danielewski depicts this through the symbol of the Minotaur, which functions as monstrosity and rejection in the classical myth, the psychological experience of both for Johnny, trauma and victimhood according to Zampanò, and the innate duality of heroism and inhumanity that postmodern tellings of the stories imply. *House of Leaves* includes these elements to foreground an entity trapped in a home not of its own making yet capable of more than persisting and dying in that labyrinth—something that can be glimpsed in Borges’s “House of Asterion.” The labyrinthine scope of *House of Leaves*, I have argued, allows this Minotaur to inhabit the whole of the text (with added of its presence through growls and claw markings) in order to continually probe feelings of entrapment and isolation but also the integrative possibilities of the labyrinthine postmodern home.

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TEXTUAL TRANSFORMATIONS:
EXPERIENCE, MEDIATION, AND RECEPTION
IN MARK Z. DANIELEWSKI'S
HOUSE OF LEAVES

NATHALIE AGHORO

Between the editors' foreword and Johnny Truant's introduction to *The Navidson Record*, the reader encounters a blunt rejection: "This is not for you" (*HoL* ix). *House of Leaves* welcomes its audience with a paradox: on the one hand, the sentence is an attempt to prevent any intrusion, on the other hand, it directly addresses the reader. At the same time a denial and a proposal, "This is not for you" puts the relationship between text and reader to the test. Not welcoming the reader, who is an integral part of the literary communication system, hints at a larger concern central to *House of Leaves*: the concern with the process of making sense of a text. Textual transformations define the novel, imparting the reader with an active role as s/he needs to act in order to make the text accessible. How the protagonists' experience is mediated turns reception into an experience for the audience.

Right from the beginning the reader has to come to a decision: should s/he consider the address as a warning, dismiss it as nonsense or venture further into the text for answers? In *House of Leaves*, the reader has to choose how to make sense of the text as much as the characters have to decide on their approach towards riddles: the most central—plot-wise—being the house on Ash Tree Lane, which contradicts the laws of physics. In chapter IV, the novel conveniently provides its own secondary literature on that matter. Commenting on Tom and Will Navidson's discovery of the disturbing fact that the house's interior exceeds its external wall exactly "by 1/4'" (*HoL* 30), Zampanò quotes from Edith Skourja's essay "Riddles Without":

Riddles: they either delight or torment. Their delight lies in solutions. Answers provide bright moments of comprehension perfectly suited for

children who still inhabit a world where solutions are readily available. Implicit in the riddle's form is a promise that the rest of the world resolves just as easily. [...]

The adult world, however, produces riddles of a different variety. They do not have answers and are often called enigmas or paradoxes. Still the old hint of the riddle's form corrupts these questions by re-echoing the most fundamental lesson: there must be an answer. From there comes torment. (*HoL* 33)

Suggesting that "there must be an answer," the riddle calls for the endeavor to make sense of it. In the case of *House of Leaves*, the characters examine the impossible topography of the house to the point of obsession by either conducting or revisiting explorations A to 5. "When confronting the spatial disparity in the house, [...] Navidson went in search of a solution" (*HoL* 39): his predisposition to explore the world as a photographer causes him to look for answers *within* the unknown chambers of the house with his camera. Zampanò, the enigmatic blind man who studies *The Navidson Record*, consolidates all accessible evidence in a treatise. And Johnny Truant lives up to his name as his investigation of Zampanò's work for answers causes him to neglect his job, his social relations and ultimately himself.

These three characters, who moreover represent three intradiegetic levels within the novel, can be closely connected to the act of reading. As fictional scholar Edith Skourja explains, "[r]iddling' is an offshoot of 'reading' calling to mind the participatory nature of that act—to interpret—which is all the adult world has left when faced with the unsolvable" (*HoL* 33). Paradox in Danielewski's novel particularly foregrounds the act of interpretation a reader of literature has to accomplish.¹ The characters are simultaneously intradiegetic narrators and inscribed viewers/readers of an impossible event. Their textual transformations illustrate and complicate Wolfgang Iser's statement that the interpreting reader of fiction in general "sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion, too" (Iser 106). I argue that the cognitive reading experience becomes substantially palpable with *House of Leaves*; in other words, reading becomes a material experience. The emphasis on the protagonists' interpretive efforts and the reader's involvement suggest that Danielewski's novel is as concerned with its own printed materiality as with the mediation of an uncanny plot. Therefore, this paper discusses the following two questions: how does the attempt to make sense of impossible events influence the way the protagonists *mediate* their experience? And what role does experience play when it comes to the reader's reception of the novel?

Experience and Mediation

The textual transformations in *House of Leaves* begin with the attempt to make sense of an impossible space. The first mediation of this experience engenders a series of re-mediations in N. Katherine Hayles's sense of the term as being "the re-presentation of material that has already been represented in another medium" (781). From film, book, and internet to photography and comic strips in the appendix, *House of Leaves* features a large variety of remediations. However, the abundance and diversity of media responses are not the only criteria relevant for emphasizing the process of sense-making: the selection of a specific genre in each medium constitutes a crucial procedural choice for the protagonists. In order to understand impossible events, they mediate their experience by recurring to factual genres. Navidson's choice of a visual medium seems straightforward for a photographer, but it is specifically the documentary as a genre that offers the opportunity to convey his explorations of the house. Johnny Truant mediates his personal experience through autobiographical writings, and Zampanò writes according to the conventions of an academic treatise. A major similarity between these genres is their claim to convey facts and to promote understanding of real-life events. Their particularities are the different primary functions these genres adopt in *House of Leaves*.

Navidson's documentary is mainly concerned with actuality, attempting to preserve the events' immediacy and to share the experience with its viewers. In a discussion of the documentary as a genre, Zampanò draws on Stephen Mamber—a 'real-life' media scholar—to deliver an "almost exact description" of *The Navidson Record* (HoL 139). He likens the film to Mamber's concept of *cinema vérité*:

Cinema vérité is a strict discipline only because it is in many ways so simple, so "direct." The filmmaker attempts to eliminate as much as possible the barriers between subject and audience. [...] Cinema vérité is a practical working method based upon a faith of unmanipulated reality, a refusal to tamper with life as it presents itself. (HoL 139)

"Unmanipulated reality" seems to be the only viable option to convey a location that resists understanding. The elimination of barriers between the actual events in front of the camera and the mediated view turns explorations A to 5 into an almost shared experience. Thus, cinema vérité supposedly mediates the actual experience without any interference, leaving the task of interpretation to the audience.

By contrast, Johnny Truant's autobiographical notes impart his interpretation of Zampanò's work, and consequently authenticity becomes

more important than actuality. Truant depicts the context of his retrieval and excavation of a nearly lost text. Autobiography as a genre is aimed at enabling the reader to retrace and to understand an individual life. Conscious of the fact that the unusual circumstances of his encounter with *The Navidson Record* may be considered as fiction, Truant's use of a first-person narration thus emphasizes the truthfulness and accuracy of his remediation.

In addition to the background information, Truant passes his first-hand reading experience of *The Navidson Record* on to the readers of *House of Leaves*: "At first only curiosity drove me from one phrase to the next," then "I lost sense of time [...]. In fact it began to happen more often, dozens of hours just blinking by, lost in the twist of so many dangerous sentences" (*HoL* xviii). His personal account foregrounds the haunting quality of the impossible space at the core of all remediations in the novel. Simultaneously it turns reading into a shared experience for the reader, by reminding us that we are not the first ones attempting to make sense of these textual transformations. Truant even offers reading instructions destined to enable the reader to share his personal experience while interacting with the book:

To get a better idea try this: focus on these words, and whatever you do don't let your eyes wander past the perimeter of this page. Now imagine just beyond your peripheral vision, maybe behind you, maybe to the side of you, maybe even in front of you, but right where you can't see it, something is quietly closing in on you, so quiet in fact you can only hear it as silence. Find those pockets without sound. That's where it is. Right at this moment. But don't look. Keep your eyes here. Now take a deep breath. Go ahead take an even deeper one. Only this time as you start to exhale try to imagine how fast it will happen, how hard it's gonna hit you, how many times it will stab your jugular with its teeth or are they nails?, don't worry, that particular detail doesn't matter, because before you have time to even process that you should be moving, you should be running, you should at the very least be flinging up your arms—you sure as hell should be getting rid of this book—you won't have time to even scream.

Don't look.

I didn't.

Of course I looked. (*HoL* 26-27)

Truant's instructions are more than the representation of his own 'first' reading. They also convey authenticity by drawing the reader's attention to the written words on the page and to the paper margins—i.e. the material outline of the book. Above all, they ultimately point towards the space that lies beyond the narrative world: the space beyond "peripheral vision" the

reader usually excludes from his or her perception while focusing on a novel. By doing so, the narrative itself reaches out to the reader's surroundings, reclaiming its authenticity through a self-emplacement within the actual world.

Beside actuality in Navidson's documentary and authenticity in Truant's account, the draft of an argument in Zampanò's narrative can be considered the third primary function of his choice of genre. He chooses an academic approach to come to terms with the disturbing images of *The Navidson Record*. His work is highly structured, with an introduction to the topic in chapter I, a main part as well as a conclusion in the final chapter. He furthermore enriches his study with footnotes, an appendix and an index. The treatise consists of a systematic argumentation for which Appendix A displays a layout (*HoL* 540). The outlines and possible chapter titles listed there are helpful for a reconstruction of the diversity of academic approaches Zampanò uses. Chapters V for instance is called "Echo," chapter VI "Animals," and chapter XVI "Science." These titles suggest a primary focus on specific preponderant themes in the documentary. Consulting secondary literature plays an important role at this intradiegetic level of narration, particularly in chapter XVII—called "Reasons"—in which Zampanò discusses different schools of thought on *The Navidson Record*. Furthermore, he explores an array of academic fields as diverse as hermeneutics (when reading Tom and Will Navidson's relationship as biblical analogy in chapter XI), psychoanalysis (when interpreting Navidson's dreams in chapter XVII), or historiography (when retracing the history of Ash Tree Lane in chapter XVIII). As to literary studies, the blind man offers a close reading of the visual material in chapter III called "Outpost" after a scene shot on the porch.

In *House of Leaves*, the genres of documentary, autobiography, and academic treatise can be considered as systems of order opposing the disorientation all characters seem to suffer from. Nevertheless, neither of the discussed intradiegetic narrations achieves order. The complexity of the reading process is the first evidence for the narrative architecture's structural frailty. This complexity is due to a phenomenon I would like to call textual excess—not in Tom LeClair's sense of postmodern information overload or density, but in the sense of a break from convention through hyperbole.² The excessive use of literary tools like footnotes and the break from conventional textual layouts both mirror the characters' aimless wanderings through the house and prove that making sense of impossible events is an endeavor never entirely successful. Following Hansen's observation that "the novel insistently stages the futility of any effort to anchor the events it recounts in a stable recorded form" (602), I argue that

the text undermines the factual genre's claim to convey facts and to promote understanding by carrying genre conventions to excess. Zampanò, for instance, exaggerates the usage of lists reminiscent of empirical data sheets. Particularly in chapter IX, he outlines negative catalogs of everything in connection with the barren chambers in the house on Ash Tree Lane: everything they do not contain,³ architectural features they do not possess,⁴ landmarks throughout the world, photographers, hauntings in film and literature, and so on. Due to their general negative mode, these catalogs are potentially endless and do not offer any specific particulars. Consequently, they are unable to account for a better understanding of the Navidson house. As if to mirror their infinite potential, they are so predominant in this chapter that they contaminate the main text, which therefore remains marginal. Similarly, Truant's notes often exceed the usual dimension of added information. In chapter XXI—called “Nightmares” according to Appendix A—Truant's notes on the death of his friend Lude and his subsequent search for the house even become the only text, totally superseding Zampanò's work. Formal variations on textual excess further the impression of multiple outbreaks from coherent argumentation and storytelling. Brackets designating textual gaps caused by a mysterious fire⁵ interrupt the process of reading and rows of Xs echo spilled ink on paper, marking irretrievable passages.⁶

Textual excess leaves the reader disoriented, while at the same time offering the freedom to explore Danielewski's work on his or her own path. On the one hand, an understanding of the text is bound to remain fragmented; on the other hand it becomes personal, what Hansen calls “the reader's singular concretization of *House of Leaves*” (621). Instead of delivering plot or content, the text appears to constantly refer to an action that resides beyond the pages: the act of reading.

Experience and Reception

The play with factual genres and textual excess emphasizes an impossibility of accurate mediation as well as a focus on the relationship between reader and text in *House of Leaves*. During his analysis of *The Navidson Record*, Zampanò comes to the conclusion that

[u]nfortunately the dichotomy between those who participate inside and those who view from the outside breaks down when considering the house, simply because no one ever sees that labyrinth in its entirety. Therefore comprehension of its intricacies must always be derived from within. (*HoL* 114)

With regard to the novel, the reader's experience mirrors the characters' and s/he similarly endeavors to make sense of the events. Like Johnny Truant, the novel's inscribed reader, we have to find solutions in order to deal with the textual excess. Like Navidson, who loses himself within the maze, we experience our own disorientation while the alignment of the text changes.⁷ And like Zampanò, the blind viewer of the alleged original footage, we can only imagine the pictures through a textual remediation. According to Hayles,

[t]he layering [...] 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. (782)

Danielewski even adds another level of complexity by labeling the novel a second edition.⁸ As Hansen observes, "the 'original' we're reading is itself already a copy, [...] a copy with a difference, which is to say, a singular embodied reading of a 'text' that doesn't exist in any other form" (618). The various editions ranging from incomplete to a remastered full-color edition further this difference in reading. The clear-cut lines between author, text and reader break down by means of a proliferation of textual transformations. The reception of the stories told about the labyrinth on Ash Tree Lane therefore becomes the experience of an intricate textual maze.

These different remediations in *House of Leaves* prove that reading is a particularly personal exploration. Meaning not only "derive[s] from within" (*HoL* 114) the maze as Zampanò argues, but also from within our own subjectivity as we develop our personal ways of making sense. To this end, the novel's design implicates difference in language—a play that always remains within a socially constructed referential field—but demands material choices, which vary from reader to reader. Again, the text aligns itself with the house in such a manner that considerations about the Navidsons' home can also be read as metaphors of the reading process:

Where Navidson's house is concerned, subjectivity seems more a matter of degree. The Infinite Corridor, the Anteroom, the Great Hall, and the Spiral Staircase, exist for all, though their respective size and even layout sometimes changes. Other areas of that place, however, never seem to replicate the same pattern twice, or so the film repeatedly demonstrates. (*HoL* 178)

Even though the words on the page remain the same, the reception of the novel is just as personal as the explorations of the house. The different chapters, the structure of intradiegetic narrations, the index and the appendix exist for all, and yet each reader may thumb through them more or less thoroughly, reading some parts and ignoring others. Iser's statement that "the reader 'receives' it [*the literary work*] by composing it" (107) applies to literature in general, but Danielewski's *House of Leaves* explicitly foregrounds the physical, material performance that goes along with the cognitive process. The reader constantly needs to decide on how to proceed in order to unfold the plot and those decisions vary on an individual scale and result in an individual pattern. The reader explores and composes a house of leaves as much as s/he encounters and composes the characters and plot through the novel's textual transformations.

At the same time the text demands ongoing revisions concerning the plot as well as the reading process. Truant's role as first reader of Zampanò's work reflects such a process of revision, because reading and composition converge at the level of his narration. As he acknowledges in his footnotes, he interprets and thus alters Zampanò's text according to his personal situation. The lack of hot water for Truant's morning shower, for instance, seeps into a dialogue between Karen and Will when she informs her husband that "the water heater's on the fritz" (*HoL* 12). Such alteration would remain invisible for the reader of *House of Leaves*—since these words are clearly attributed to Karen— if it weren't for Johnny's commentary:

Now I'm sure you're wondering something. Is it just coincidence that this cold water predicament of mine also appears in this chapter?

Not at all. Zampanò only wrote "heater." The word "water" back there—I added that.

Now there's an admission, eh?

Hey, not fair, you cry.

Hey, hey, fuck you, I say. (*HoL* 16)

His documented textual transformations do not simply position Truant as an unreliable narrator. They characterize him as being the point of convergence between the two poles of a work of literature as defined by Wolfgang Iser. He argues that "the artistic pole is the author's text, and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader" (Iser 106). Artistic and aesthetic composition are unified in one character and therefore emphasize the procedural relationship between text and reader.

Moreover, improbable and sometimes even paradoxical interactions between distinctive diegetic levels preclude any straightforward exploration.

In chapter XX, for instance, Zampanò relates that Will Navidson “turns his attention to the last possible activity, the only book in his possession: *House of Leaves*” (*HoL* 465), but in order to read in the darkness of the barren chambers he needs to burn the book along the way. This plot line is particularly intriguing because it disrupts the process of sense-making. At this point the reader is required to come to terms with a collapse of the novel’s time-line and plot. Interpretations may range from the assumption that more versions of the novel exist within the world of *House of Leaves* to the acceptance of an im/possible book that contains all of its readings. Neither will the text itself deliver a definite answer—in this particular case Navidson’s personal account cannot be recovered because “for whatever reason the tape cuts off here” (*HoL* 465)—nor will the reader be able to interpret the narration without an anchorage in the text. The interpretive range I just mentioned goes with the logic of the fictional world. The question of versions can be ascribed to its play with different editions and the impossible occurrence of an all-encompassing book mirrors the house on Ash Tree Lane. Consequently, the creative act of reading also requires methods of interpretation based on the logic of the text in order to overcome the novel’s resistance to exploration.

House of Leaves proposes several of these methods to approach the reading process, starting with formal possibilities of exploring the different intradiegetic narrations, i.e. either one by one or simultaneously by following the footnotes. The audiobook *Das Haus: House of Leaves* adopts these possibilities by proposing three listening options called “One way,” “Own way,” and “Follow way,” discerning between a consecutive reading of each intradiegetic narration, a reading entirely grounded in personal preference, and a guided exploration.⁹ I would argue that in the novel the editors function as guides by offering interpretive sequences to the reader. Their cross-references connect different parts of the novel, thus producing new meaning.

Danielewski’s novel does not limit its commitment to the reading process to formal options, even though they are most palpable in it. The novel’s content also features acoustic and architectural reading metaphors, i.e. the echo and the maze. In his study “The Digital Topography of Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*,” Mark Hansen argues that “Echo furnishes an example of how—to adopt the language of information theory—information is turned into meaning” (631). He elaborates that

Echo offers herself as a model for the reader, who is, after all, faced with the task of inhabiting an impossible spatial object, an object whose impossibility is a function of the disembodied logic of digital replication. Her example introduces the principle for the conversion that reading must

effect [...]. Like Echo, the reader must breathe life into the orthographic, transforming it from an exact inscription of the past into the catalyst for the new, the unpredictable, the future. (631)

Reading becomes an act of creation, with written words echoing anew in the reader's world, and according to Zampanò, Echo is necessary for the exploration of spaces like Navidson's house as well as for the narration of experience: "where there is no Echo there is no description of space or love. There is only silence" (*HoL* 50). In other words, the reader needs to be involved and to relate to the story in order to unfold his or her personal interpretation of the narrative, adding another layer to the textual maze.

In her essay "The A-Mazing House: The Labyrinth as Theme and Form in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*" Natalie Hamilton discusses how the labyrinth can be understood as metaphor for the reading process: "[r]eaders become trapped in the corridors of this house, diachronically experiencing the maze of the text, which is fragmented and provides limited vision of what is to come" (14). In Danielewski's labyrinth, the spaces of experience, mediation, and reception interact in a multi-layered, cryptic narration that needs and entices the reader to actively explore its depths. Hamilton further argues that

[n]o labyrinth is complete without a minotaur, and in keeping with its labyrinthine theme, *House of Leaves* features one. However, this beast is not corporeal. Within the hallway, it appears as darkness, nothingness. Within the text, all reference to the minotaur appears under erasure. [...] It is almost as if there is no need for a physical beast, because each character has his or her own psychological demons with which to contend. (12)

But why is the minotaur under erasure in *House of Leaves*? The mythical creature first appears in chapter IX when Zampanò connects "~~the labyrinth Daedalus constructed for King Minos~~" to his considerations about the layout of the house (*HoL* 109). All passages concerning the Minotaur appear in red and are struck, thus figuring as a deleted interpretive sequence in the text. They have been retrieved by Johnny Truant as he explains in footnote 123: "[s]truck passages indicate what Zampanò tried to get rid of, but which I, with a little bit of turpentine and a good old magnifying glass managed to resurrect" (*HoL* 111). But why were these thoughts not meant to feature in Zampanò's *The Navidson Record*? His approach towards the myth seems fairly reasonable: "~~At the risk of stating the obvious no woman can mate with a bull and produce a child. Recognizing this simple scientific fact, I am led to a somewhat interesting suspicion: King Minos did not build the labyrinth to imprison a monster~~

~~but to conceal a deformed child—his child~~” (*HoL* 110). This pragmatic re-reading of the myth questions the notion of the Minotaur as monster; its recorded elimination transforms Zampanò’s interpretation into a riddle. We are not only invited to reflect on the Minotaur’s status as monster or child, but also on how non-mediation affects the reading of a text. The struck passages that haunt *House of Leaves* can neither be excluded nor easily integrated in a reader’s interpretation, particularly because the red color points them out as other. Their haunting could only end with certitude, which is impossible to achieve while interacting with a text.

In her personal attempt to make sense of the house, Karen Green cuts *The Navidson Record* down to eight or 13 minutes (another unsolved issue in the novel) and shows them to a number of known personalities. Chapter XV exhibits her “Partial Transcript Of *What Some have Thought*” as a collection of short responses (*HoL* 354), but no one seems to come up with a satisfactory answer to her quest for meaning. Zampanò concludes on the matter by pointing out that it is “[f]unny how out of this impressive array of modern day theorists, scientists, writers, and others, it is Karen’s therapist who asks, or rather forces the most significant question,” in other words, the question that drives the process of sense making: “what does it mean to you” (365-66)? By exposing individual interpretation as the only viable option for an answer, *House of Leaves* directly refers us back to our own readings and remediations. Nevertheless the emphasis on individual interpretation does not remain a solipsistic idea. The novel suggests a community of readers within the text as much as it reaches out into the world of its own reception. Karen’s impetus to share her experience and to gather opinions in *What Some have Thought* results in a compilation of individual thoughts performing a dialogue on the page. Likewise, the intradiegetic editing, commenting and reworking of *The Navidson Record* is a shared effort made by the viewers and readers that are Navidson, Karen, Zampanò and Truant. Moreover, the hyperlink structure of *House of Leaves* suggested by the word *house* underlined and edited in blue gestures toward the world wide web where inquisitive readers find a website featuring further material (*The Navidson Files*). One has also the possibility to join reading communities on the *MZD Forum* (Danielewski). The individual effort to solve the riddles of *House of Leaves* thus becomes a social activity.

With its ever-changing form and its textual maze, the novel never releases us from the “delight or torment” of solving its riddles. It even has a very material impact on its intradiegetic readers: Johnny Truant neglects his physical appearance and Zampanò is obsessed with the idea that his own home could suddenly change its shape. With these physiological and

psychological side effects, *House of Leaves* points to the outside of its book cover. As Hayles notes,

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. (804)

Ultimately, the attempts to make sense of an experience change the material world of the protagonists as much as they multiply the possibilities for the reader to interact with the book. Danielewski's foregrounding of how mediation and reception repeatedly change the shape of the novel and its readings suggests that the answers—if there are any—can only be found within our own textual transformations.

Notes

¹ *House of Leaves* thus places itself in opposition to realist novels that cover up the reading process in order to preserve the illusion of their imaginary worlds.

² Considering what he calls system novels like Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* or William Gaddis's *JR*, Tom LeClair argues that "their excess is first a function of the density of information produced by both selection and organization and, second, a function of their length, proportions, and scale. The systems novelists' artistic mastery lies in their use of what initially seems to be noise or excess" (20).

³ See footnote 144 (*HoL* 119-141).

⁴ See footnote 146 (*HoL* 120-134).

⁵ See footnote 276 (*HoL* 323).

⁶ See footnote 350 (*HoL* 376).

⁷ Nevertheless, the reader benefits from the page numbers' function as a compass navigating through the book.

⁸ According to the blurb, *House of Leaves* has a history as a bundle of paper and an occasional appearance on the internet, but this claim cannot be verified by the reader. The unavailability of any prior document establishes the 'second' edition as the first one that can actually be explored.

⁹ Danielewski, Mark Z. *Das Haus: House of Leaves*. Berlin: DAV, 2010.

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DANIELEWSKI, OR, METACOMMENTARY AS LITERARY PRODUCTION

JULIUS GREVE

“Good story telling alone will guarantee a healthy sliver of popularity in the years to come but its inherent strangeness will permanently bar it from any mainstream interest.”

—Zampanò

“If you want to see this movie, you’ll have to read the book.”

—Danielewski

What happens to a concept if it moves from one codified environment to another, for instance from literary criticism to literary production? How is it deformed, reformed, or informed by the passage of transformation, the metamorphosis of its components, and the consistency of its new code-system? Which role does history assign to the observer who perceives the concept’s passage but cannot relate to it, and who is therefore incapable of dealing with the movement of the concept from variation to variety?

I want to tackle these questions in the following observations, first by considering a particular concept that originates in the corpus of a literary critic and that has experienced the passage of transformation; second by locating that concept in the corpus of an author, i.e. in the realm of literary production or artistic practice; and third by determining the hopes and consequences of that trajectory, as the rearrangement of the notion does not only affect the spheres of literary theory and practice but also the conditions of the two in terms of (inter)mediality and history. The concept is called “metacommentary,” the critic is the Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson, and the writer is Mark Z. Danielewski, whose oeuvre reformulates the “problematic” at stake in the Jameson essay named after the concept. Thus this paper will proceed by defining “metacommentary” within the confines of what Jameson calls “dialectical criticism” before detecting how it has become a mode of artistic practice or literary production at work in Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000). I will discern three principles that comprise Jameson’s concept and how they change in the realm of art as opposed to the domain of its criticism. For instance, while

Jameson orchestrates a comparison of critical practices in his Marxist hermeneutic, Danielewski includes a staged competition of various artistic and medial practices, such as film and photography, in his first novel. To analyze how Jameson's concept shifts from its original domain and becomes affective in terms of service to literary production, Gilles Deleuze's conceptual framework provides two notions, namely those of the "transversal" and of "transcoding," which, as I argue, serve generally as helpful tools for the perplexed critic who encounters Danielewski's fiction.

Any consideration of the conditions of interpretation must start with the formulation of a problematic. The paper called "Metacommentary" that was presented at the 1971 meeting of the Modern Language Association certainly does so, if one allows for the necessary presupposition of the historicity attached to such a formulation. To announce one's point of view on a certain moment in time, to react towards a social, political, or aesthetic paradigm, means to concede to the circumstances that rendered this announcement possible. "Historicity [...] can first and foremost be defined as a perception of the present as history; that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 284).

Although careful throughout his career not to carve out definite rules for a method or doctrine for literary and cultural criticism, the essay Jameson presented back then came very close to doing just that. He took his cue from Susan Sontag's influential book *Against Interpretation* and the general trend in 1970s literary criticism to build up a distrust for the merits of "exegesis, interpretation, commentary [...]"—a tendency towards a "renunciation of *content*" (Jameson, "Metacommentary" 9)—only to reverse that position. As on many other occasions in his cultural analyses, he regarded that distrust as a symptom of a much more interesting phenomenon in the social, political, and, above all, aesthetic development of the time. The model or object of reversal were the numerous claims Sontag made when she contended that "[t]he function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*" (Sontag 14). Very much in the spirit of Roland Barthes's yet to be written *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), she concluded her essay: "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art" (14). Sontag's 'aesthetic eroticism' called for what amounts to a romanticized empathic description of what actually happens in a literary text or on and with the material of a painting. Later Barthes would propose something similar.

This kind of reasoning, however, was the result of an anxiety that was left behind by structuralism and the critical reception of its various forms of application initially championed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the field of anthropology and, even more so, by Jacques Lacan in psychoanalysis.

Meanwhile, in the historical phase that Jameson would come to define as the “period of the 60s” a certain type of novel had emerged that—perhaps inappropriately—was called the “plotless novel” (Jameson, “Metacommentary” 13). What was meant by that rather polemic adjective was the more episodic character of novels such as William S. Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* (1959). Although the episodic tendency in the novel had already begun in (high) modernism, the prose of the second half of the twentieth century was even more explicit about the fragmentary character of the novel, in other words the novel as non-totality. Inspired by Burroughs himself, J.G. Ballard, who is cited occasionally in Jameson’s book *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), had written a novel called *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1969), which can be regarded as excessive in underlining the tendency towards non-linear and fragmentary plotlines. Before the novel starts, the “Author’s Note” has some advice for the potentially perplexed reader: “Rather than start at the beginning of each chapter, as in a conventional novel, simply turn the pages until a paragraph catches your eye. If the ideas or images seem interesting, scan the nearby paragraphs for anything that resonates in an intriguing way” (Ballard vi). Jameson argued that although structuralism was a useful system for thinking about this new type of novel one had to get away from the structuralist method, or rather, to go a step further and add the dimension of history. “For structuralism necessarily falls short of genuine metacommentary in that it thus forbids itself all comment on itself and on its own conceptual instruments, which are taken to be eternal” (Jameson, “Metacommentary” 15). But what is metacommentary? How does it manage to shed light on what is “taken to be eternal,” on what is mistaken for a universal program which can be used in any kind of encounter with works of art without adapting to their singularity?

Three basic principles from Jameson’s text may sum up what the mode of criticism he proposed in 1971 can achieve and how that proposal shaped much of his later thought. In response to Sontag, for whom “to interpret is to impoverish” (Sontag 7) and “the idea of content itself” is “mainly a hindrance, a nuisance” (Sontag 5), one should maintain that the content of a work of art, of a novel, for instance, is in no need of interpretation *not* because to interpret is to disrespect the work, but because it comes before our eyes as a cultural artifact already interpreted by itself. The first principle, then, is the following: “*Content does not need to be treated or*

interpreted because it is itself already essentially and immediately meaningful, meaningful as gestures in situation[s] are meaningful, as sentences in a conversation. Content is already concrete, in that it is essentially social and historical experience” (Jameson, “Metacommentary” 16). This first principle, which may be called the principle of self-explication, states that concrete historical matter displayed in art and literature arrives at the site of the encounter with the critic as meaningful as so many statements that give rise to a whole apparatus of specific codes. In this respect, artworks and novels are completely independent of the critic. They constitute, in other words, a self-sufficient aesthetic system. Their meaning is enclosed within their materiality and therefore does not come from an outside. “Content is already concrete” because the critic has to react to it, as it engenders a “social and historical experience.” The critic, however, who practices what Jameson in the spirit of Ricoeur refers to and rejects as a “positive hermeneutic,” that is, the search for an ultimate and *sacred* truth in the text, is a misguided one whose method is actually also the target of Sontag’s polemic (10). The only way for Jameson to endorse anything related to such a positive hermeneutic would be “how to imagine Utopia” (Jameson, “Cognitive” 355) to see figures of a potentially collective form of living in mass-cultural films like *The Godfather*, for example (Jameson, *Signatures* 31). Yet, a much more fruitful and decisive mode of interpretation would be, first of all, to admit the concreteness of the artwork’s content, with each and every possible interpretation of it ingrained in the text from the start. Put differently, the text to be analyzed *contains* all of the interpretations later attached to it. Nevertheless, what is the critic’s job in such a situation? How to confront the work of art if it has itself anticipated the “critical practice”—to use Catherine Belsey’s phrase—of which it should have been the object and not the subject?¹

These questions lead us to the second principle of metacommentary, closely related to the first, “namely that the absence of any need for interpretation is itself a fact that calls out for interpretation” (Jameson, “Metacommentary” 12). This principle of historicity asserts that the act of commentary relies only marginally on engendering meaning or sense, on rendering meaningful what was formerly disclosed in the work. Instead, the literary theorist or critic has to take account of the *aesthetic dilemma*² that he or she faces by realizing the redundancy of a former and more traditional hermeneutics that would try to debate what is truly conveyed in and by the text. This realization requires a response as to where the practice of criticism is located in “the absence of any need for interpretation” (Jameson, “Metacommentary” 12). In other words, “the important question

is not how one should interpret a text but why one should do so in the first place” (Buchanan, *Jameson* 14), as that text has already done the job. The response will, according to Jameson, always be one that is founded on the “historical situation,” the position from which the critic speaks.³ One of the things that relate the commentary to the work of art is the common ground that is history. Furthermore, any successful response to the aesthetic dilemma will include a thorough demonstration of that common ground, a point that is finally linked to the third and last principle of the method Jameson proposed: “[E]very individual interpretation must include an interpretation of its own existence, must show its own credentials and justify itself: every commentary must be at the same time a metacommentary as well” (Jameson, “Metacommentary” 10).

This last point or principle, though dependent on the other two, is the most fundamental. We may refer to it as the principle of the critical *paragone*.⁴ It appears to be a successor of the aesthetic *paragone*, which signified the comparison of and rivalry between different artistic practices as a popular topic in Renaissance theoretical discourse on art. At one point, painting was held to be the artistic form of expression that represented the body, whereas poetry, and writing in general, was the form that represented the soul (Caldwell 278). The conversion of this notion into a realm that is wholly critical marks a unique development not only in Marxist literary theory but also in critical theory taken as a whole. The third principle of Jameson’s concept posits a staged comparison of critical rather than artistic practices.

If the second element of metacommentary dealt with the understanding of history as a dynamically determining factor, the third point represents the creative treatment of that situation marked by a complete and thereby totalizing historicity. It disrupts the eternalizing and universalizing motor that was still at work in structuralism; it lends Jameson’s proposal the power of an “objectifying” view on history; and it has shown a long and enduring persistence in Jameson’s writings. The critical *paragone* utilizes expressions appropriate for critique and self-critique to work against the eternalizing and universalizing motor that was still at work in structuralism. “Thus we come to an understanding of the text by wrenching it from its seemingly secure moorings in the harbour of a [dehistoricized and hence depoliticized] criticism and relocating it in the socio-cultural context of its inception and its ideological ‘conditions of existence’” (Pawling, “Dialectical” 26). The objectifying character of Jameson’s historicity does not here signify the commonly imagined connotation of a pseudo-scientific demand for ‘truth,’ but simply part of a worldview interested in dynamic formations of modes of production and how they affect the lives of single

human beings and collectivities. In this sense, his conception of historicity is the obverse of Stephen Greenblatt's and New Historicism's in general.⁵

The way Jameson uses the terms *metacommentary* and *dialectical criticism* shows the substitution of the one that gave the 1971 talk its title with the second, more encompassing term. In the revised essay from the book *Marxism and Form* (1971), he states in the concluding chapter that "dialectical thinking is doubly historical: not only are the phenomena with which it works historical in character, but it must unfreeze the very concepts with which they have been understood, and interpret the very immobility of the latter as historical phenomena in their own right" (336). Supposing the "phenomena" are works of art, dialectical criticism adds the aspect of reception theory to the earlier version from the MLA convention. Otherwise, the notion of a historical duplicity strictly conforms to the three principles of metacommentary, enhancing it with a potential rectangularity.⁶ The forms depicted in any dialectical analysis are embedded in a specifically historical context, as are the depiction's theoretical tools—being "forms" themselves. The interpreter "must unfreeze" these forms as part of the analysis, reflect on the impossibility of simultaneously commenting on the artifact in history and its depiction in the interpretation, but also of decontextualizing the artifact and the depiction's terms in commenting on their "very immobility" or *aesthetic dilemma*. "[D]ialectical thinking is doubly historical:" On one level it interprets the cultural artifact *vis-à-vis* its self-explicative nature (first principle of metacommentary), its historical context, and former interpretations of it (its reception), and on a second level it openly reveals the historically specific conditions of the terms, rhetoric, or style used for writing the interpretation.

There is a temporal paradox inherent to Jameson's methodology that has not yet been touched upon. It is expressed in the problem of how to interpret the absence of any need for interpretation (principle of historicity) and simultaneously perform a mediation of different and often conflicting theoretical frameworks at the same time (principle of the critical *paragone*). The second plane of the critique, which is the one of decontextualization, comprises the second and the third principles of metacommentary, the former in an implicit manner and the latter in an explicit one. This plane deploys the concepts or tools of analysis while they are used to analyze the self-explication and historicity of the aesthetic object in the same interpretive time-frame. It might also be characterized by the connection of "interpretation" conceived as a historically informed commentary on the same footing with what should in fact be named "auto-interpretation," the justification of one's own commentary. In this way it

represents the historically determined struggle of modes of exegesis and champions itself as the most extensive.

In one of his books on film, *Signatures of the Visible* (1992), Jameson is also convinced “that there exists for any given cultural artifact the possibility of something like a ‘concrete’ analysis, or in other words an interpretation which rejoins the historical situation both of the text itself and of its interpreter, in such a way that it is finally capable of grounding or of justifying itself” (127). The following diagram illustrates both articulations of dialectical thinking, stressing the historical duplicity and concreteness of the work of art:

Cultural artifact	The artifact’s reception in history
The interpretation	Auto-interpretation

Although it seems outmoded to many literary critics today, I argue that Jameson’s classically Marxist outline of the critic’s problematic encounter with the work of art still has the power to teach us some important lessons. It is doubtlessly the case that the aesthetic coordinates have changed ever since his talk at the MLA convention. Poststructuralism has provided numerous critiques of its predecessor, and the forms of art, music and writing that have been developed and changed from the 1960s onwards have for a long time been identified with the postmodern. Yet with Mark Z. Danielewski’s fiction, we face a problematic that is similar to the one Jameson formulated 40-odd years ago—this situation, however, does not come about without a shift in the coordinates of the problem as well. A particular kind of prose has emerged that is quite troubling in relationship to the adequate mode of interpretation, or even the issue of finding the right critical vocabulary, the proper “idiolect or private language” as Jameson might put it (“Interview” 184). I will argue in what follows that *House of Leaves*, Danielewski’s first major work, is all too easily dismissed as just another postmodernist type of novel that deceives its readers with its cleverness and false clues. Yes, it is clever and it is full of these narrative traps now long familiar to readers of, say, Vladimir Nabokov or Jorge Luis Borges, but these traps are not so much a characteristic of the novel, as they express a motif, a topic that is negotiated in and by the text.⁷ *House of Leaves* marks the starting point of a decisive aesthetic event that suggests a trajectory of Jameson’s concept of the metacommentary from the realm of literary criticism to literary production, or even, in more general terms, artistic practice itself.⁸

In terms of novel writing, the shifting of the aesthetic framework has abandoned the episodic character that Jameson was talking about. In an interview with Geoffrey Goodwin, Danielewski has even stated that “[*House of Leaves*] literally and figuratively was about plot; about story” (“Interview”). It is a story with four narrative layers. The first layer is a fictive documentary film called *The Navidson Record*. It is about the terrifying phenomena that allegedly took place from April 1990 onwards in a haunted house in rural Virginia where the prize-winning photographer Will Navidson had moved with his family. This documentary is the subject of a dissertation written by the blind protagonist Zampanò, who in minute detail comments on each and every move of the family members in the house on Ash Tree Lane in the Virginian woods. He also covers the impossible architecture of the house that makes it bigger on the inside than on the outside, as documented in the film. Navidson realizes this peculiar fact for the first time after the family has taken a four-day trip to Seattle to attend a wedding. When they return the house seems to have changed. As Zampanò comments: “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” (*HoL* 24). The “violation” consists first in the asymmetry between the measurements of the house’s outside and inside, but in the course of the novel the inside continues to ‘grow’ literally, to create labyrinthine pathways that Navidson, his brother Tom, and a team of explorers will try to investigate.

Zampanò’s dissertation, then, constitutes the second narrative layer of Danielewski’s novel, complete with footnotes and bibliographical references to secondary literature, real and fictitious. However, the blind man’s account of *The Navidson Record* is only made legible in the form in which it is presented to us, the readers of *House of Leaves*, by the character of Johnny Truant, an apprentice in a tattoo shop who, together with his friend Lude, has found the scattered dissertation manuscript in Zampanò’s apartment after the old man’s death.⁹ Truant’s reconstruction of and commenting on the treatise in the form of quite frequent and often autobiographical footnotes makes for the third layer of the narrative, only to be linked to a final one, represented by the equally fictive “Editors” and their footnotes, whose sporadic appearances at times provide transcriptions of Zampanò’s writings in Braille (*HoL* 423), or point out cross-references between footnotes written by Truant and the inconsistencies of his commentary (*HoL* 54, 406, 413). Most importantly, even Truant’s actual existence is called into question on the second page of Zampanò’s *Navidson Record*: “We wish to note here that we have never actually met

Mr. Truant. All matters regarding the publication were addressed in letters or in rare instances over the phone. —The Editors” (*HOL* 4).

To sum up, *House of Leaves* is indeed a book full of cleverly invented narrative adventures, false clues and postmodern subversions of what in realism, for example, is taken to be or presented as an objective and documentable reality. N. Katherine Hayles has stated that “[c]amouflaged as a haunted house tale, *House of Leaves* is a metaphysical inquiry [...]. It instantiates the crisis characteristic of postmodernism, in which representation is short-circuited by the realization that there is no reality independent of mediation” (110). This assertion places the novel within the canon of the postmodern. To be sure, “mediation,” or rather mediality as such, is more than important in the narrative, but this motif does not function as a periodizing factor that would be ‘characteristic of postmodernism.’ Conversely, the novel works as a kind of ‘narrative essay’ on the crises of postmodernity, a metacommentary on that historical moment. Its structure of four narrative layers is represented in the following rectangle, which recapitulates the setup of the structure we encountered in the discussion of Jameson’s interpretive method:

<i>The Navidson Record</i>	Zampanò
Johnny Truant	Editors

With *The Navidson Record* as first layer of the narrative that captures the “referential void” (Hansen 600) of the house’s impossible architecture; Zampanò’s “fake” dissertation on the documentary film as the second one; Truant’s assembly of the dissertation’s text(s) as the third layer; and the Editors’ footnotes as the fourth, what is constructed in the novel seems to be discernible and structured according to exact categories. In his “Introduction” to Zampanò’s text, Johnny is talking about what he saw as he entered the dead man’s apartment with his friend Lude: “Sure enough, just as my friend had described, on the floor, in fact practically dead center, were the four marks, all of them longer than a hand, jagged bits of wood clawed up by something neither one of us cared to imagine” (*HOL* xvii). The violence inflicted by the house on Ash Tree Lane, reaching as far as the dark floor in Zampanò’s living room, prefigures the categories listed in the rectangle above. Put differently, “the four marks, all of them longer than a hand,” function as equivalents of the four narrative lines represented by the documentary, Zampanò, Truant, and the Editors. Nevertheless, these mere categories do not yet fulfill the requirements of the narrative essay on postmodern artistic practices. They do not yet make

House of Leaves a metacommentary as understood throughout this paper. Let me therefore reiterate the three principles that gave rise to Jameson's concept: (1) The principle of self-explication states that content is already meaningful and interprets itself; thus there is no need for interpretation in the sense of the traditional form of exegesis in which the 'truth' of the work of art is claimed to be revealed. (2) The principle of historicity takes stock of an aesthetic dilemma: the fact that there is no need for interpretation becomes the object of a revised because challenged mode of interpretation. This precept also deals with the ethos to "[a]lways historicize," the incentive to view "the present as history" (Jameson, *Political* ix; *Postmodernism* 284). (3) The principle of the critical *paragone* is twofold. Every commentary that emerges out of the aesthetic dilemma should include a metacommentary on its interpretive condition and the theoretical terms used. The historical singularity of this condition as well as the justification of the commentary's hegemony over other modes of critical thought are fundamental, as they lend this principle its name, expressing the comparison and rivalry between different theoretical vocabularies.

These three points, as I have tried to show, make up the Jamesonian concept of metacommentary as a critical practice. To arrive at a description of how metacommentary works as an artistic practice, or more specifically, how the three principles differ from the original conception as we locate them in Danielewski's novels, a few precautions have to be made concerning the question of Utopia and politics in general. Metacommentary in Jameson always includes a political gesture, guided by a Marxist worldview. It is at once a procedure that includes historically informed cultural criticism and the analysis of works of art by "[recognizing] that there is nothing that is not social and historical—indeed, that everything is 'in the last analysis' political" (Jameson, *Political* 5). Politics, and especially Marxist politics, are not at all what Danielewski is out to promote or convey with his novel. If in Jameson there was a staged comparison between different interpretive modes—granted that Marxism for him represented the ideal technique, the only way to perform such a comparison—Danielewski's form of the metacommentary works on different criteria and for different ends. Starting from *House of Leaves*, Danielewski's 'politics,' if one could call them that, are immanent to the aesthetic realm and contain no immediate template for a Marxist objective. For Danielewski, instead of Marxism, the novel *as form* represents the ideal technique to undertake a staged competition, not just among different interpretive modes—although that is important as well—but among a whole array of artistic practices.¹⁰ His metacommentary, then, renders the traditional idea of a politically

committed work of art obsolete.¹¹ The political aspect of art thereby generates a distribution of space by and within the narrative essay, delimiting the cultural sphere that other artistic practices like film, photography or painting had inhabited before. Nevertheless, one could still argue with Jameson that the recuperation of artistic space for the purpose of the novel's re-formation is what could be named a Utopian perspective that exists solely with respect to the aesthetic realm and not directly to any form of socialist politics.¹² But the delimitation of spatial practices that from the sixties onwards burned themselves into the consciousness of the average TV-watching middle-class citizen, the folding of their specific techniques into the novel as form becomes a new kind of aesthetics and is therefore political in relation to rival forms of artistic production.

What is happening in *House of Leaves*? How does the concept change its former territory and enter the code-system we normally assign to the aesthetic? The first principle, namely that content interprets itself, is immediately confirmed as we reconsider the novel's narrative structure. The fourfold arrangement of intertwining layers is interconnected partly via scholarly footnotes and sometimes random journal entries, comprising several comments on itself and the composition of its various parts. But this is still just a verification of a hermeneutic claim from the 1970s and nothing more. Aesthetic content takes a different form in metacommentary as literary production than it does in literary criticism. "Content," in Jameson's essay, pointed towards an outside of criticism, and a meaningful inside of the work of art. By contrast, the location of the outside is called into question as the concept of metacommentary enters the aesthetic realm. The function of this former externality is now folded into the work of art, enclosed within its domain. It is thereby occupied by something *immanent* to the work of art itself.

I want to propose that, as metacommentary evolves into an aesthetic practice, the place of the outside is occupied by what Deleuze and Guattari have termed a "transversal." Originally a notion taken from physics and mathematics, they use it to describe abstract formations in the domain of art and literature, nonfigurative lines that track down the trajectories of affects and percepts within works of art, and between these works and living things in the world (Conley, "Afterword" 133). In *What is Philosophy?* (1991), Deleuze and Guattari differentiate between the three discourses of science, philosophy and art. In the present context, the two discourses of philosophy and art concern us here because they are related in a peculiar fashion. Philosophy works according to a "plane of immanence," i.e. a level of thought that has abandoned the idea of a pure outside (Deleuze and Guattari, *Philosophy* 129). Writing in an idiolect that

takes the word ‘plane’ literally, Deleuze and Guattari contend that it stands for a kind of territory on which philosophical concepts are arranged or generated as if they were seeds. Concepts therefore depend on their plane, the territory that surrounds them. “If philosophy begins with the creation of concepts, then the plane of immanence must be regarded as prephilosophical” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Philosophy* 40). On this level, concepts are expressed in order to construct what they call “conceptual personae” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Philosophy* 133) or figures of thought.

The Marxist hermeneutic Jameson endorses is to be understood neither as “an ontology nor a philosophy” let alone “a philosophy of history” but rather as a malleable kind of “theoretical position that is more privileged than others” (Jameson, “Interview” 182-83). Still, his notion of the metacommentary is indeed a *concept* in the philosophical sense Deleuze and Guattari assign to it. It is a concept in that it constructs the critical persona of the interpreter who not only comments on a given cultural artifact—a book, a piece of music, or a painting—but also justifies his or her own historically conditioned “mental procedure” while commenting on the artifact *at the same time* (Jameson, “Metacommentary” 9). Taking up Deleuze and Guattari’s argument, I want to read characters such as Zampanò or Will Navidson in *House of Leaves* as analogous to “personae” like Jameson’s interpreter. That is to say, these characters occupy the same position in their novel that concepts inhabit in the realm of philosophy. The discourse of art orchestrates and maintains the creation of affects and percepts in order to construct “aesthetic figures” or characters like Zampanò according to a “*plane of composition*” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Philosophy* 171-77, 216). In other words, the personae relate to their concepts in the same way that these “aesthetic figures” relate to their specific affects and percepts (Deleuze and Guattari, *Philosophy* 65). It should be noted that this compositional backdrop, the “plane of composition,” holds for all aesthetic forms of expression, whether it be films, paintings, or novels. In relation to *House of Leaves*, this means that characters like Navidson are on the one hand created in the confines of their fictional surroundings, i.e. the house on Ash Tree Lane where Navidson’s family lives, and on the other in (the) *House of Leaves*, the book itself. Yet, a third component is needed, which is precisely the arrangement of the characters within these two houses, their set-up on their “plane of composition.” This arrangement is effectuated by the transversal, the fourfold qualitative pattern of the narrative layers constituted by (1) *The Navidson Record*, (2) Zampanò’s dissertation, (3) Truant’s footnotes and (4) the Editors. A literary transversal of this sort is therefore an individual grouping of four distinct aesthetic figures.¹³ According to this

grouping, which the second diagram in this paper illustrates, the affects generated by the novel's stories are set in motion and move from one layer to the next. To use the language of Deleuze's monograph on Michel Foucault, the notion of the transversal describes a "mobile diagonal line" migrating in a non-hierarchical fashion from one narrative layer to the next (Deleuze, *Foucault* 20).¹⁴

The transversal, then, corresponds to the *narrative structuration*, or better still, the qualitative structuring of the four terms in the rectangle as they have changed from their original site. It designates above all how the four narrative layers relate to the four analytical points in what constituted Jameson's version of dialectical criticism. However, in the act of its very constitution both as isolated object, i.e. as the 'quasi-content' of the narrative essay, and as the relation to the concept at its original site, the transversal is immediately reinserted into the immanence of the work of art, thereby claiming a certain (pre-)philosophical terrain as well. With the passage that makes a transversal out of aesthetic content, as the concept changes territories from criticism to the former object of that criticism, the place and possibility of an outside is completely abandoned. The 'quasi-content' of Danielewski's narrative essay called *House of Leaves* deals solely with facts constituted by the world contained in the book itself. This is why the question of representationality, of literary realism or anti-realism, is off the mark. Belletto's quip that Zampanò's dissertation on Navidson's documentary film figures as "scholarship without a referent" (Belletto 111) may even be taken for the whole of the novel's narrative arrangement and the non-relationship to the problems of exegesis: Jameson's rule of self-explication thus transforms into the qualitative rejection of an outside to the metacommentary taken as an artistic rather than critical practice. It also culminates in the development of a stand-in, in other words, a quasi-content for that former outside to the critic's position. In turn, the narrative construction of *House of Leaves* as a fourfold assemblage gives rise to a novel that demonstrates nothing but a metacommentary as literary production. It is a work that does not have to be interpreted precisely because by the time the existence of an isolated object of interpretation is rejected, the job of commenting on that *necessarily fictive* object, this quasi-content, results in a proper auto-interpretation within the domain of art. Put simply, "Danielewski seems to make the task of the literary theorist redundant" (Bemong).

To come to the second principle of Jameson's concept—that to interpret in the sense of "what does it mean?" has become redundant but that this fact reveals itself as the new object of commentary—it is time to consider how *House of Leaves* addresses this issue while significantly

altering it. Zampanò's dissertation on *The Navidson Record* works its way through almost every mode of critical assessment one can think of. Among those he mentions are phenomenology, information theory, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and biography, and his footnotes refer to texts ranging from Heidegger's *Being and Time* to the transcript of a fictive interview with Douglas R. Hofstadter, the real author of *Gödel, Escher, Bach* (*HoL* 24-25, 355-56, 360).

There is no longer a question of how to interpret but rather why to bother at all when confronted with such a list of sources, methods, and fields. Before trying to think about how to answer the "why?" question, two things seem to be decisive: first, as the concept becomes affective, that is, part of the aesthetic realm, the place of an outside is to be abandoned, meaning that any kind of external referent has become impossible. Second, the commentary on the absence of an interpretive need will, within the limits of narrative art, always pertain to the rules and customs of that art. In other words, the answer the second principle requires must effectuate a genuinely narrative essay, one that gives rise to a plot that is larger than itself—the larger story of *House of Leaves* for instance, the materiality of the book, and so on. In parallel to metacommentary as critical tool or concept, the response that is called for will always be founded on the historical situation, the historical position from which the different narrative voices, the sentences of each narrative layer, speak.

This historicity is one of the things that relate the novel to its transversal, the qualitative shaping of the four narrative lines, the "four marks, all of them longer than a hand" (*HoL* xvii). To distinguish the first principle from the second in metacommentary as literary production, it is indispensable to complement that quality with its quantity, the cultural artifact's concrete being as a historical formation, irrespective of the artifact's form or content. This quantity is therefore called a "transcoding" by Deleuze and Guattari, depicting not how it is or what it is but *that it is*, pure and simple—if one were to resort to Sontag's vocabulary. The notion of transcoding hints at the construction of codes as they change in history, that is, their variable consistency tied to a specific time-frame. The second volume of Deleuze and Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* project defines the notion in the following manner: "Each form is like the code of a milieu, and the passage from one form to another is a veritable transcoding" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 372). If the fourfold pattern of the transversal depicted the qualitative element of the narrative essay, the "how?" in other words, transcoding refers to the registration of the essay in history, the perception of this essay as an historical formation in its own right (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 284).¹⁵ Furthermore, the novel's

“perception of the present as history” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 284) results in accounts of dominant critical paradigms of the late twentieth century, such as Derridean deconstruction. This kind of perception also takes stock of phenomena like the peculiar spatialization of culture in postmodernity. With regard to these phenomena, the rule of historicity incorporates spatial experiments into (the) *House of Leaves*. It deals with the fact of the spatial emphasis in postmodern theory and practice by means of *expression*. With regard to the dominant paradigms after the 1960s, such as the theoretical advances of Jacques Derrida, the function inhabited by ‘transcoding’ prescribes the registration of the dominant critical paradigms as facts. This occurs in terms of *content*. Danielewski’s text uses certain words as connotative ‘statements,’ for example certain philosophical neologisms like “differance” (*HoL* 48) that are steeped deeply in the critical tradition of deconstruction. To be sure, passages of the text with these historical markers convey to the reader a self-awareness as a cultural artifact within history and not only within literary culture. It is a self-awareness that goes beyond the postmodern variants of self-reflexivity Linda Hutcheon defined as the “historiographic metafiction” (146) of some of the literature from the 1970s and 80s. The principle of historicity engenders the commentary on a movement or generic category such as historiographic metafiction, on the influence of Barthes’s theories within postmodernist literature, or on Derridean differance, precisely by making ‘statements’ about them. The statements sometimes take shape as a seemingly random word or phrase like “differance” (*HoL* 48, 515). Another example of an historicizing statement is the underlined title of a book—like Barthes’s study on photography, *Camera Lucida* (1980)—inserted into the text in a pseudo-arbitrary fashion (*HoL* 27). The transcoding at work in *House of Leaves* also effectuates the citation of a whole passage from a Derrida essay including the correct bibliographical reference of the original and the translation (*HoL* 401).¹⁶

And so we come to the last principle—that every commentary has to include a metacommentary on its interpretive condition—and its respective transformation. As in metacommentary, when used as a critical tool, in the aesthetic realm this principle is crucial because it really brings the art of literature into confrontation with other forms of media. Mark Hansen contends that “[f]or [...] Danielewski, perhaps the central burden of contemporary authorship is to reaffirm the novel as a relevant—indeed newly relevant—cultural form” (597). Once again, the author’s politics substantiate with this emphasis on the novel *as form*. If metacommentary as a concept is fully enclosed within the domain of art, and so becomes something else, something intelligible as a transversal and a transcoding at

the same time, the third rule literally prescribes the defense of the commentary's or narrative essay's hegemony over other modes of artistic practice. It figures that Danielewski himself would make statements like "If you want to see this movie, you'll have to read the book" ("Conversation"), refusing to let his highly original novelistic achievement be made into a film.¹⁷ It is equally unsurprising that *House of Leaves* should be filled with enunciations that are explicitly about *The Navidson Record* and its "inherent strangeness" (*HoL* 7), yet are implicit justifications of the novel's re-formation in the history of narrative, all the same. What Hansen appropriately calls "the medial agon" (613) is this confrontation of literary production with film, photography and video, most notably in chapters ten, twelve and twenty of Zampanò's account of Navidson's documentary. The critical *paragone*, which was itself a conversion of the debate among aesthetic theories concerning the supreme mode of artistic practice in the Renaissance period to Jameson's methodology of a staged debate concerning the superior mode of interpretation, has its correlate in Hansen's "medial agon." First and foremost Hansen lists photography and film as rivaling medial practices, both part of the aesthetic realm. Yet his analysis of *House of Leaves* has less to do with this aesthetic realm than with orthography and the shift towards digitalization at the turn of the century, or the recording instruments on which this shift depends. Even so, the notion of the "medial agon" seems useful for describing Danielewski's style as a metacommentary, one that represents an artistic rather than a critical practice.

The third principle is thus transformed, and instead of a critical *paragone*, as in Jameson, one gets a medial or aesthetic *agon*. The novel contains sections that reproduce on the printed page the effect of looking through a camera lens, competing with film in particular for the hegemony of supreme narrative form. This is not so much an imitation of the camera's effect as it is a competition with it and an appropriation of it. In chapter ten, Navidson and his old friend Billy Reston, an engineering professor, are seemingly trapped in the labyrinth that has expanded within the house. The reader 'sees' one of the other explorers whose telling name, Holloway, in retrospect forebodes his running amok in the labyrinth with a rifle he took with him during the expeditions against Navidson's will. As before, the printed pages function as "frames" (*HoL* 193). After a shot out of Holloway's rifle, "Navidson grabs his backpack and pulls out his Nikon and the Metz strobe with its parabolic mirror. Thanks to this powerful flash, the Hi 8 can now capture a shadow in the distance. The stills, however are even more clear, revealing that the shadow is really the blur

of a man” (*HoL* 212-13). This setting, then, prepares the terrain for the appropriation of the medial agon as the resuming “frames” literally expose this shadow,

standing
dead
centre
(*HoL* 214)

with
a
rifle
in
his
hand.
(*HoL* 215)

This “iconic representation [or rather expression and *reframing*] of space” (Sørensen) is even more apparent in “Frame” 233, which will appropriate the visualization of splintering door panels before Navidson and Reston again become enclosed with the darkness of the labyrinth, “saturated in silence” (*HoL* 238). For Hansen, characters like Navidson, who is obsessed with recording, exploring and measuring the house on Ash Tree Lane, have “allegorical functions that serve the ends of the medial agon [...]. Navidson is, quite literally a cipher for orthographic desire [...]” (613), but not only that: Navidson’s character functions as an “aesthetic figure” in the Deleuzian sense, serving the needs of the agon to be fought out within the two houses, the one in the Virginian woods and the one that is Danielewski’s book itself, both rendering any film adaptation of *House of Leaves* impossible.

Finally, the discussion has come full circle with the three initial questions. We have problematized the movement of the concept from literary theory to its practice. We have undertaken a reconstruction of the concept’s various principles. In addition, we have examined the role of history with regard to the aesthetic dilemma of the critic who must face Danielewski’s incredible fictional universe. Deleuze’s book on Leibniz contains a shorthand description of what really happens during the concept’s passage, the redefinition of its three rules and its historical singularity. Although related to an (only seemingly) different subject matter, namely the system of a philosopher and his peculiar notion of folded perception, at one point Deleuze affirms what could equally be said

of *House of Leaves* and the rest of Danielewski's works, which is that "the concept becomes narrative [...]" (Deleuze, *Fold* 127).¹⁸

Notes

¹ Belsey's monograph *Critical Practice* (1980), whose title inverted that of the seminal *Practical Criticism* (1929) by I. A. Richards, is an early work on the developments of literary analysis influenced by French theory at the time.

² For different uses and understandings of this notion in Jameson see *Postmodernism* 25, 166.

³ The emphasis on the "historical situation" in which cultural forms emerge is ultimately Sartrean. On Jameson's Sartreanism, see Homer, "Origins" 7.

⁴ The struggle for the hegemony of supreme artistic practice, otherwise known as the *paragone*, dates back to antiquity, but the sixteenth century appears as its most vital phase. It is a discussion among Renaissance artists and theoreticians about the valence of painting, sculpture and poetry as forms of artistic expression, and the resulting rivalry between these distinct forms (Caldwell 277).

⁵ Compare on these issues: Homer, *Hermeneutics* 56; Buchanan, "Foreword" xv; Greenblatt 5-6.

⁶ See the diagram on page 83.

⁷ See on the connections between Nabokov, Borges and Danielewski: Belletto 100; Hamilton 10; Adams 181; and Sørensen.

⁸ To stress the rivalry between different forms of art, which is explicit on the level of expression in Danielewski's novels, it could be said that his writings seem to belong more to the broader field of aesthetics and its practices than to literature only. Although the terms *literary production* and *artistic practice* may appear to function synonymously in this examination of his works, the two notions are used carefully in all cases of application either to stress the novel's newness in comparison to other works of literature or to examine their relationship with other forms of art and media practices.

⁹ This discovery of the manuscript in a trunk posited in Zampanò's apartment, told at the beginning of Danielewski's novel, has repercussions with the fictional "Preface" to Nathaniel Hawthorne's seminal *The Scarlet Letter* called "The Custom-House. Introductory to 'The Scarlet Letter,'" where the narrator dramatizes the discovery of the cloth that actually engendered the story (Hawthorne 5, 27-29).

¹⁰ Compare on the point of interpretation as theme: Belletto 100 and Chanen 171. This emphasis on the printed book that has been pointed out by various scholars (Hayles 113; Hansen 597) equally holds for *The Fifty Year Sword* (2005) and *Only Revolutions* (2006).

¹¹ Similar formulations have been made recently by Jacques Rancière concerning the identification of art with politics, of the distinctly political nature of art (Rancière 23-24). For him, "[a]rt is not, in the first instance, political because of the messages and sentiments it conveys concerning the state of the world. Neither is it political because of the manner in which it might choose to represent society's

structures, or social groups, their conflicts or identities. It is political because of the very distance it takes with respect to these functions, because of the type of space and time that it institutes, and the manner in which it frames this time and peoples this space" (Rancière 23).

¹² On this last point, see Jameson, "Cognitive" 356.

¹³ Already at this point the present discussion departs from the definition of transversality the critic Martin Procházka gives to it. He seems to conflate Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "rhizome" from the second volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus* 19) with Foucault's notion of discursivity, whereas the present analysis stresses the fourfold nature of transversals (Procházka 5).

¹⁴ Note that Deleuze uses the term for the first time in his book on Proust. There he acknowledges the inspiration he got from Guattari: "In relation to psychoanalytic investigations, Félix Guattari has formed a very rich concept of 'transversality' to account for communications and relations of the unconscious" (Deleuze, *Proust* 188)—it being understood that psychoanalysis is a complex discursive system that has its own idiosyncratic codes and concepts. Crucially, Deleuze and Guattari depart from Lacan with this notion of the transversal, or transversality.

¹⁵ Interestingly, Jameson himself has a notion of "transcoding." For him, it represents "the very prototype of what we may call the postmodern mode of totalization" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 373). In a sense, then, historicity is always entangled in a certain perspective on the totality determined to a large degree by the dynamics of capital.

¹⁶ The essay is "Tympan," a kind of prologue to Derrida's *Margins of Philosophy* (1972). The prologue's layout prefigures parts of *House of Leaves*, where textual columns run in parallel (*HoL* 120-33), and effectively the whole design of *Only Revolutions*.

¹⁷ Interestingly, the *West-Deutsche Rundfunk (WDR)* has recorded a radio play adaptation of *House of Leaves* from 2009 through 2010. The CD was released via the label *Der Audio Verlag* on October 15, 2010. The audio format's circumvention of the visual uniqueness of the house on Ash Tree Lane is a good example of the way in which the medial agon may function, that is, the way in which its dynamics are at work.

¹⁸ See Ridvan Askin's essay in this anthology for more about this monograph by Deleuze and its connections with *House of Leaves* in terms of the labyrinth.

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“FOLDING, UNFOLDING, REFOLDING”:
MARK Z. DANIELEWSKI’S DIFFERENTIAL
NOVEL *HOUSE OF LEAVES*

RIDVAN ASKIN

Und man habe höchstens unbewusst registriert
Dass etwas um sich greift, dass etwas passiert
Und erst jetzt komme man wohl nicht umhin,
Sich einzugestehen, dass hier etwas spinnt
Die Zeichen werden deutlich, es sei soweit
Es komme nun eine Seltsamkeit
—Tocotronic, “Die neue Seltsamkeit”

[W]hen we say that univocal being is related immediately and essentially to individuating factors, we certainly do not mean by the latter individuals constituted in experience, but that which acts in them as a transcendental principle: as a plastic, anarchic and nomadic principle, contemporaneous with the process of individuation, no less capable of dissolving and destroying individuals than of constituting them temporarily; intrinsic modalities of being, passing from one “individual” to another, circulating and communicating underneath matters and forms.
—Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*

A man said to the universe:
“Sir, I exist!”
“However,” replied the universe,
“The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation.”
—Stephen Crane, “A Man Said to the Universe”

This paper follows the trajectory sketched by these epigraphs: its starting point is the intimation of something strange, something weird looming beyond the horizon drawing ever closer, disseminating quickly and stealthily.¹ This intimation and dissemination of the strange, the weird, and even uncanny is of course at the heart of *House of Leaves*. But it is also at the heart of contemporary theory where for the past few years we have been witnessing the steady growth and ever-accelerating dissemination of

a strange new mode of thought coupling speculation with realism, something deemed either incompatible or simply dogmatic by the tradition. One important facilitator of this kind of thought is Gilles Deleuze, and this paper brings together the strangeness permeating *House of Leaves* and the weirdness of a speculative realism in the guise of Deleuze's philosophy of difference.²

Concretely, and this refers to the second epigraph, I read *House of Leaves* as exploring what Deleuze terms the univocity of being, namely that being "is said in a single and same sense of everything of which it is said, but that of which it is said differs: it is said of difference itself" (*Difference* 45). In the epigraph to this essay, Deleuze asserts that univocal being goes hand in hand with the acting of the transcendental in the given as a plastic, anarchic and nomadic principle, a principle that both creates and destroys individuals. Univocity of being has thus to be thought together with this transcendental principle. The name of this principle is, of course, difference. In short, being is differential.

Accordingly, this article traces how *House of Leaves* explores the workings of difference by focusing on a number of, as we will see, irreducibly entangled issues ranging from the act of reading to narrative itself, from questions of matter to questions of the soul leading to—and this is where the weird and strange strike us with full force—nothing less than an entire differential cosmology propagating the ungrounding of the universe. This ungrounding manifests itself most tangibly in the ever shifting labyrinthine void permeating the novel's titular house revealing that there is literally nothing at its foundation. The labyrinth *is* the house's un-ground. The house and labyrinth on Ash Tree Lane thus function as an allegory of cosmological scope akin to the allegory of the baroque house in Deleuze's *The Fold*. As the third epigraph in conjunction with Deleuze's univocity of being thesis suggests, this differential cosmology turns out to be decidedly non-anthropocentric. In a final step, I turn to a closer examination of the narrative strategies the novel employs in order to flesh out how the *presentation* of such a differential cosmology entails the ungrounding of the very *means of presentation*. In short, I will show how the novel undertakes a differentiation of narrative. It is only due to the intoxication with difference *both* on the *story* and the *discourse* levels that *House of Leaves* can be aptly named a differential novel.

I. Differential Cosmology

Before we tackle the question of cosmology let me quickly rehearse Deleuze's philosophy of difference emphasizing those aspects most

relevant to the ends of this paper. Deleuze's point of departure is a critique of the Kantian transcendental as a mere copy of the empirical. In Kant everything is structured according to the image of consciousness. Against this idealist conception of the transcendental Deleuze pits his own realist conception. Against the transcendental as necessarily within the bounds of the human mind, Deleuze proposes a transcendental fundamentally *outside* the human mind. But what is the transcendental actually supposed to do? In its Kantian origins it is supposed to ground the given, to account for the *conditions of possible experience*. Deleuze, in contrast, wants to account for the *conditions of real experience*. Accordingly, in Deleuze the transcendental does not just entail possibilities which might or might not become real, but has to be real *in itself*. In addition, it also has to have generative powers since it is supposed to account for any particular given. In short, with Deleuze the given, the realm of experience, is generated by the transcendental, the realm of Ideas—and both realms are equally real. In other words, with Kant the transcendental is also transcendent—and since Kant's transcendental is modeled according to human consciousness, it is ultimately human consciousness which is transcendent: the human subject takes the place of God and the given is immanent to a transcendent consciousness. With Deleuze, in contrast, there is only pure immanence since the transcendental and the given operate on the same plane. Even if the transcendental generates the given, it cannot exist separately. The transcendental only ever inheres in the particular given. Thus, there is no 'God-function' in Deleuze, or God and consequently the subject have been flattened out. Deleuze's is fundamentally a flat ontology, anarchic, not hierarchic. This is why Deleuze speaks of a "crowned anarchy" (*Difference* 47; 334): an-archic ontology, an ontology without a first principle, without a first ground reigns supreme. If there is no first principle and if one does not want to fall into the undifferentiated abyss of a shapeless *apeiron*, it follows that the transcendental field has to be the realm of difference: difference perpetually different/ciating itself.³ Following Bergson, Deleuze names this transcendental field of difference 'the virtual.' He calls 'the actual' the given that is generated by the virtual and in which the virtual inheres. Both the virtual and the actual are equally real. Deleuze's realism thus encompasses the virtual realm of Ideas and the actual realm of experience. Its animating principle is that of difference in itself different/ciating itself and bringing about actual, given differences. It is important to note that this process of actualization only ever results in *temporary* actualities: every given not only eventually perishes but is also subject to incessant change due to the fact that, and here I repeat part of the Deleuze epigraph, its "intrinsic modalities of being pass [...] from one

'individual' to another, circulating and communicating *underneath* matters and forms" (*Difference* 48, my emphasis). This subterranean circulation and communication generating change in the empirical realm Deleuze calls becoming. Let me already point out the resonances between Deleuze's *subterranean* circulation of becoming and the Navidson house's circular labyrinth with its unfathomable and ever shifting depths.

Foldings

One of the names Deleuze gives to the workings of difference is that of folding. As suggested by this paper's title, I take *House of Leaves* to be a novel of incessant foldings, unfoldings, and refoldings. There are two concrete reasons why the fold promises to be a rewarding conceptual tool for a reading of Danielewski's novel. First, Deleuze uses it when discussing the characteristics of the labyrinth both in his *Nietzsche and Philosophy* and in his book on Leibniz. Second, he explicitly discusses the concept of the labyrinth in conjunction with that of the house when he introduces the allegory of the baroque house in the opening pages of *The Fold*. Here we learn that the baroque house is made of two floors: below, we find the "pleats of matter" and above the "folds in the soul" (3), each level constituting a labyrinth of its own. Deleuze writes,

A labyrinth is said, etymologically, to be multiple because it contains many folds. The multiple is not only what has many parts but also what is folded in many ways. A labyrinth corresponds exactly to each level: the continuous labyrinth in matter and its parts, the labyrinth of freedom in the soul and its predicates. (*Fold* 3)

The labyrinth with its folds is thus the adequate figure for the multiplicity of both matter and soul. Note that the root of the word *multiplicity* is the Latin word *plica* meaning fold, as becomes obvious when we consider the English synonym *mani-fold*. A multiplicity literally contains many folds and is folded in many ways. The baroque house thus names the many folds of matter and soul. Let us add to this what Deleuze has to say about the labyrinth in his book on Nietzsche:

It designates firstly the unconscious, the self; only the Anima is capable of reconciling us with the unconscious, of giving us a guiding *thread* for its exploration. In the second place, the labyrinth designates the eternal return itself: circular, it is not the lost way but the way which leads us back to the same point, to the same instant which is, which was and which will be. But, more profoundly, from the perspective of the constitution of the eternal return, the labyrinth is becoming, the affirmation of becoming.

Being comes from becoming, it is affirmed of becoming itself. [...] The labyrinth is what leads us to being, the only being is that of becoming, the only being is that of the labyrinth itself. (*Nietzsche and Philosophy* 188)

Here we are told that in Nietzsche the labyrinth works on several levels: first, it is an image of the unconscious and its exploration. Second, in its circularity and infinite wanderings it denotes the eternal return. And third, it is the dwelling place of being. But since in its circularity the labyrinth offers nothing but eternal turns and re-turns the only thing that can be said to be is precisely becoming. The labyrinth is thus a synonym of unconscious becoming. And since the labyrinth “contains many folds,” the fold in effect being “the smallest element of the labyrinth,” “folding, unfolding and refolding” (*Fold* 3; 6; 158) effectively name the process of becoming. If we come back to the allegory of the baroque house we can then say that it denotes the becoming of matter and soul. It is my contention that we are confronted with such a baroque house in *House of Leaves*. But it is a strangely twisted baroque house, a house where matter and soul permeate both levels, irreducibly folded into each other, and where the levels do not correspond to a clear distinction between matter and soul. Thus, *House of Leaves* incessantly emphasizes both the materiality of the labyrinth, most tangibly when the explorers take samples of the walls, *and* points out that the labyrinth is but a mere projection or manifestation of their psyche (*HoL* 21; 165). In fact, the house and labyrinth on Ash Tree Lane do not constitute two levels at all—they are located on one and the same level, matter and soul irreducibly folded into one another. This fold between the two levels is vividly manifested in the notorious anomaly with the house’s interior exceeding its exterior by a ¼ inch. It is this in-between, this heterotopia that constitutes the fold. And this is precisely what the Deleuzian virtual-actual relation denotes: the outside (matter) folded within and the inside (soul) unfolding outside itself. The novel makes this more than apparent in a number of ways. It is no coincidence that Jonathan Lethem in his endorsement of the novel warns the reader that she might find him there “reduced in size like Vincent Price in *The Fly*, still trapped in the web of its malicious, beautiful pages” (*HoL*, endorsements page). This not only refers to a reading experience intimating the infinite both due to the novel’s massive volume and its excessive circularity which makes the reader go back, or forth, to passages she has already read or will read time and again, but also due to the very fact that the novel makes the reader part of its telling by making her constantly decide which section to continue reading—Zampanò’s manuscript? The footnote? Or the footnote within the footnote? Johnny’s tale or his mother’s letters? The manuscript or “The Pelican Poems”? We

could then say that the reader forms a fold with the novel, that she is folded into the novel. At the same time and by the same token, the novel unfolds outside itself within every singular reader and her reading experience.⁴ But we can understand Lethem's endorsement in yet another way, namely with reference to the reader's body: by making the reader turn the book upside down, making her use a mirror to decipher mirror writing, and a host of other, similar demands, the novel basically puts the body back into reading. Reading, traditionally conceived of as contemplative, thus becomes a very physical, bodily experience both in terms of the reader's body and the book as body. What is being engaged here, then, already on this surface level are both body and soul, soul and matter: reading as a psycho-somatic experience, matter and soul folded into each other. But this engagement is not just true with respect to the reader but also with respect to the novel itself, which constantly folds its materiality qua book into its narrative soul and vice versa. *House of Leaves* is thus a paradigmatic exemplar of Deleuze and Guattari's saying that "[t]here is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made" (*Plateaus* 4). What I want to emphasize by pointing out all these well-known aspects is that *House of Leaves* is not just a narrative folding story into story into story (metanarrative), or grafting story upon story (palimpsest), but that it primarily constitutes folds between the material and the immaterial, matter and soul, the given and the transcendental, the actual and the virtual, laying them out on a single plane. The virtual inheres in the actual and the actual finds its animating principle outside itself: pure immanence. The labyrinth on Ash Tree Lane, then, denotes precisely the virtual, that "transcendental principle" acting within, "a plastic, anarchic and nomadic principle" (Deleuze, *Difference* 47). It is plastic because even though it never achieves a concrete form, it is not utter formlessness either; it is nomadic because it is constantly shifting, displacing and in movement; and it is anarchic because it is without principle, utterly groundless. On the contrary, the more it is penetrated the emptier it gets until Navidson in Exploration # 5 finally finds himself floating in utter emptiness. Since the virtual does not just inhere in the actual but is also its animating principle, it follows that the cold, dark void of the virtual labyrinth must permeate and determine the actual house standing on Ash Tree Lane. The following excerpt just before Navidson's brother Tom vanishes in darkness makes this unmistakably clear:

The whole place keeps shuddering and shaking, walls cracking only to melt back together again, floors fragmenting and buckling, the ceiling suddenly rent by invisible claws, causing moldings to splinter, water pipes to rupture, electrical wires to spit and short out. Worse, the black ash of

below, spreads like printer's ink over everything, transforming each corner, closet, and corridor into that awful dark. (*HoL* 345)

This passage vividly expresses how the virtual violently erupts into the actual, transforming it. But we are confronted with a seemingly irresolvable paradox here: if the virtual, the labyrinth, is the dwelling place of being, the animating principle acting within the actual, why does it transform everything "into that awful dark" (*HoL* 345)? Darkness is certainly not what we would intuitively associate with being. The question is: how are we supposed to conceptualize being as utter groundlessness? As the dark, cold emptiness and nothingness permeating the depths of the labyrinth on Ash Tree Lane? What kind of dark, cold being is this? In short: how can emptiness, darkness and nothingness be synonyms of being?

Swarming Cosmos

For an answer I suggest turning to Eugene Thacker's essay "After Life," where he proposes the demonic swarm as an adequate means of conceptualizing life. This is what he has to say about life and the swarm:

The swarm is distributed and horizontal, but also driven by an invisible, intangible life force—'life' is at once transcendent and immanent to its particular manifestations. Something drives the swarm, but this something is also nothing—at least nothing that stands above and apart from the singular phenomenon of the swarm itself. (182)

Thacker conjoins this notion of swarming life with an understanding of demonic possession as it is to be found in Dante's *Inferno*:

[D]emonic possession is not just the possession of the living, but a sort of plasticity of the living to include the non-living. Demons possess not only human beings and animals, but the very landscape, the very terrain of the underworld. Demonic possession is geological and climatological, as well as teratological. (186)

Life as demonic swarm then denotes an inherently empty concept of life, since there is literally nothing at its core—this is its swarm aspect; and it goes beyond the living to include the non-living—this is its demonic aspect. In short, life is the monstrosity of swarming emptiness, the "contradiction of an expressive void" ("After Life" 189) as Thacker writes. He finds this "vitalist antinomy" ("After Life" 192) most adequately expressed in the cosmic horror of Lovecraftian weird fiction populated by non-creatures—the nameless thing at the limit of thought

itself. This nameless thing is precisely “formless and yet all shapes; it is so ancient it is alien; it is alive only insofar as all human concepts of ‘life’ are irrelevant” (Thacker, “After Life” 192). *House of Leaves*, however, is not concerned with an ontology of life but with ontology as such: it does not address questions of life but those of being. Thus, what swarms in *House of Leaves* is the dark emptiness of being. When Iain Hamilton Grant discusses Deleuze's Schellingian notion of the unground or groundlessness in his aptly titled paper “The Chemistry of Darkness,” he reminds us of the following passage from *Difference and Repetition*:

Hegel criticized Schelling for having surrounded himself with an indifferent night in which all cows are black. What a presentiment of the differences swarming behind us, however, when in the weariness and despair of our thought without image we murmur “the cows”, “they exaggerate”, etc.; how differentiated and differentiating is this blackness [...]. The ultimate, external illusion of representation is this illusion that results from all its internal illusion—namely, that groundlessness should lack differences, when in fact it swarms with them. (347)

Groundlessness, blackness swarms with differences! Thacker's contradictions of the “expressive void” and “vitalist antinomy” have to be made differential: there is no contradiction in being, only difference. Deleuze is adamant about this early on in *Difference and Repetition*:

Being (what Plato calls the Idea) ‘corresponds’ to the essence of the problem or the question as such. It is as though there were an ‘opening’, a ‘gap,’ an ontological ‘fold’ which relates being and the question to one another. In this relation, being is difference itself. Being is also non-being, *but non-being is not the being of the negative*; rather, it is the being of the problematic, the being of problem and question. Difference is not the negative; on the contrary, non-being is Difference: *heteron*, not *enantion*. For this reason non-being should rather be written (non)-being or, better still, ?-being. [...] Beyond contradiction, difference—beyond *non-being*, (non)-being; beyond the negative, problems and questions. (76-77)

What the labyrinth on Ash Tree Lane manifests is precisely Deleuzian (non)-being or ?-being. Rather than constituting the house's negative it corresponds to its underlying Idea, its subterranean problematic structure,⁵ and Navidson and his crew immerse themselves in this problem in order to explore it. The unground is thus not a mere void but is rather problematic, labyrinthine, in short: differential. The darkness incessantly shifts and moves, folding and refolding, becoming. As the examination of the samples taken shows the labyrinth is made of “molten magma” (*HoL* 383)

and other ancestral matter.⁶ This is indeed a veritable chemistry of darkness and a geology of the unground. The depth of the unground is “the matrix of all extensity” (*Difference* 288), as Deleuze remarks. The unground inhering in the (un)grounded—tectonics in architectonics, the rumblings⁷ of the earth in the homeliness of the house—a “universal ungrounding” (Deleuze, *Difference* 80; 114; 252; 289; 344). But a universal ungrounding also denotes the ungrounding of the universe. When early on in the novel we read that “[p]hysics depends on a universe infinitely centered on an equal sign” and that “the universe adds up” (*HoL* 32), the unfolding narrative unmistakably shows that the universe does not add up at all: it is not centered on an equal sign but absolutely acentered and differential. And sure enough later on one commentator asserts that the house “adds up to nothing” (*HoL* 361). This is a monstrous house, a monstrous universe, the “dark, stochastic glinting of swarming multiplicity” (Grant 39). Thus, when Johnny lets us know that “[o]f course there always will be darkness but I realize now something inhabits it. [...] [S]omething much more akin to a Voice, which though invisible to the eye and frequently unheard by even the ear still continues, day and night, year after year, to sweep through us all” (*HoL* 518), this Voice is nothing other than the voice of being, the swarming of univocal being. It is thus only fitting that *House of Leaves* leaves us with a final evocation of Yggdrasil (*HoL* 709), the Ash Tree of Norse cosmology, the groundless house of being. What lies at the heart of *House of Leaves* is indeed cosmic horror, a monsterfold: absolute difference.

II. Differential Narratology

In the second part of this essay I will flesh out more closely in how far the novel’s ungrounding of the universe necessarily entails an ungrounding of narrative. That this must be the case is immediately and intuitively apprehensible: if the cosmos is ungrounded and amounts to the swarming of difference then narrative as a however minute and ‘unimportant’ part of the cosmos cannot remain untouched. Indeed, *House of Leaves* most vividly manifests the universal ungrounding it presents also on the level of its presentation: it makes narrative differential.

Problematizing Representation

“I have no idea whether it’s on purpose or not. Sometimes I’m certain it is. Other times I’m sure it’s just one big fucking train wreck” (*HoL* 149). What Johnny says with respect to Zampanò’s potential fallacies in his

analysis of *The Navidson Record* must be slightly reformulated when it comes to narrative in Danielewski's novel: *House of Leaves* is a *big fucking train wreck on purpose*. It affirmatively disintegrates and dissolves narrative as we know it. For this end it takes recourse to a host of strategies. These strategies include but are not limited to: the incorporation of an index and heterogeneous, multiple appendices differentiated into diverse media (graphic novel, photography, painting etc.), genres (epistolary writing, poetry, aphorisms etc.) and discourses (philosophy, psychoanalysis, science etc.); diverse narrative strands and voices folded into each other (*The Navidson Record*, Zampanò's manuscript, Johnny's story, the editors' additions, the Whalestoe letters etc.); extensive reoccurring lists of names and things interrupting the narrative flow; a page layout (space) accelerating or decelerating (time) the reading process and putting the body back into the reading experience therefore implicating the reader *explicitly* in the narrative progression while at the same time and by the same token amounting to a spatialization of narrative thus manifesting the very spatiotemporal dynamics of narrative; the irreducible fold between its materiality qua book and its narrative soul thereby implicating its *bookness* in its narrative: the book does not merely function as the negligible material container for its transcendent all-important narrative soul.

It is by such means that *House of Leaves* effectively turns narrative into a "labyrinth without a thread" where "Ariadne has hung herself" (Deleuze, *Difference* 68). By undertaking all these foldings and refoldings *House of Leaves* literally com-*pli*-cates and essentially problematizes narrative. 'Problem' here has to be understood in the Deleuzian sense: as underlying problematic structure. Problematizing narrative thus means approaching the Idea of narrative, unearthing narrative virtuality. Narrative is thus split in two, always torn asunder between Narrative (Idea, problematic structure, virtuality) and *narrative* (expression, individual solution, actuality), the former always inhering in and constituting the latter. What *House of Leaves* suggests is that there is a ¼ inch anomaly peculiar to narrative, a fissure in narratives where Narrative resides, a fold between transcendental and generic Narrative and empirical and specific narratives. In what follows I will explore more closely some of those features of the novel that are complicit in making narrative differential.

Of course, one cannot explore the depths of *House of Leaves* without taking into account one of the novel's most salient features, namely its use of the color blue for the word *house*. Thus, let me begin by addressing this peculiarity. The use of blue print has most often been associated with the blue of hyperlink, and, indeed *House of Leaves* seems to be a "networked

novel” (Pressman, *passim*). In line with this interpretation, Mark Hansen writes: “Making pseudoserious reference to the blue highlighting of hyperlinks on Web pages, the blue ink of the word ‘house’ in the work’s title transforms this keyword into something like a portal to information located elsewhere, both within and beyond the novel’s frame” (598). Joining Hansen’s assertion with Martin Brick’s recourse to the medieval art of rubrication in his reading of the novel where he determines the blue print as a sort of anti-rubric defying authority, an analysis in terms of network becomes more than plausible: acentered and non-hierarchical, the novel weaves a web of interconnections of narrative strands, events and voices. However, there is more to the picture than a mere network. One has to take at face value Hansen’s point that the blue print constitutes a portal to something *beyond* the novel.⁸ Diverging from Hansen’s focus on information I take this beyond to be the transcendental field of Narrative or narrative virtuality. In my reading, the *beyond* differs in kind from the *within*: while the within might indeed be conceptualized as information, the beyond has nothing to do with it. It all boils down to the question of representation. While Hansen emphasizes that *House of Leaves* essentially problematizes what, with recourse to Bernard Stiegler, he calls the orthographic function of media, he exempts the digital from this critique effectively equating it with “the very force of fiction itself” (611). Even though the digital might indeed threaten orthography, I believe that Hansen’s focus on “productive imagination” (fiction) vs. “registration of the real” (orthography) (610) misses the point. It is no coincidence that Johnny’s remark concerning Zampanò’s fallacious analysis quoted earlier refers to the very beginning of the manuscript where Zampanò indeed states that a general problem surfaces with *The Navidson Record*, namely “whether or not, with the advent of digital technology, image has forsaken its once unimpeachable hold on the truth” (*HoL* 3), thus seemingly inviting Hansen’s take on the novel. But just two paragraphs further on Zampanò claims that analyses of Navidson’s film that focus on the “antinomies of fact or fiction, representation or artifice, document or prank” (*HoL* 3) produce the less interesting material. Instead, he suggests turning to the “interpretation of events within the film” (*HoL* 3). In this vein, I think that a reading of *House of Leaves* along the lines of fact vs. fiction, representation vs. artifice, document vs. prank, or, in Hansen’s terms, orthography vs. the digital is misleading. Such a reading focuses on the *epistemology* of representation, on whether representation makes a truth claim or not. This is basically the old Platonic distinction between good and bad mimesis, and all of the above mentioned couplings work according to this distinction.⁹ But that does not make them less

representational as to their *ontological* status. Thus the digital might indeed contest the truth claim of representation by finally executing what, in this line of reasoning, literature and the arts have always been threatening to do, namely overthrowing good mimesis. However, what *House of Leaves* problematizes is precisely the *ontological* status of representation *as such*. What *House of Leaves* comes to express is not the impossibility of representation as good mimesis, as an adequate instrument to capture the real, as Hansen has it, but rather the inadequacy of conceiving of the real in terms of representation in the first place. *House of Leaves* contests that the relation between appearances and the real (Plato), between the empirical and the transcendental (Kant), the actual and the virtual (Deleuze), is one of representation. Instead, it suggests that appearances, the empirical, the actual are precisely *not* to be conceived *in the image of* the real, the transcendental and the virtual. Of course, Deleuze's virtual-actual relation is explicitly formulated along these lines. It is precisely this critique which drives Deleuze to formulate his virtual-actual relation and to pit it against Plato-Kant. Deleuze's virtual-actual relation cuts through the Platonian-Kantian verticality of representation. The virtual-actual relation is not representational but expressive and genetic, with the real amounting to the absolute immanence of this expressive and genetic relation. Or, rather, representation has to be reconceived along these lines instead of being conceived in terms of image and copy. Conceiving representation in terms of expression in fact amounts to the injunction of *not* to conceive of it in terms of image and copy. In this vein, representations do not resemble the represented; representations and the represented differ in kind, not merely in degree. This is why Deleuze's take on the problem-solution relation is so illuminating in this respect: solutions simply do not resemble their problems. They express problems and they grow out of problems, but they do not 'look like' their problems. They differ in kind. This is what I mean when I say that *House of Leaves* is essentially concerned with a problematization of representation (which, of course, as we will see shortly, goes hand in hand with its problematization of narrative). The novel unearths its sub-representative domain, the domain of its underlying problem, the depths of the virtual. The deficiency of representation as copy and image is made explicit numerous times throughout the novel, as when Zampanò points out the labyrinth's "[r]esistance to representation" (*HoL* 90), or when he inserts a footnote in his account of Navidson's rendition of Tom's death pointing out that Navidson "draws attention once again to the questions of inadequacies in representation, no matter the medium, no matter how flawless" (*HoL* 346),¹⁰ or when Navidson attests

that his cameras do not adequately render the events they record: “[T]hat darkness doesn’t seem dark at all. You can’t see the hollowness in it, the cold. Funny how incompetent images can sometimes be” (*HoL* 344). But *House of Leaves* does not merely verbalize a critique of representation; more profoundly, it also enacts this critique. Thus, if we heed Zampandò’s advice and focus on the events within the novel, we can flesh out *how* the novel does so. Coming back to my discussion of the novel’s use of blue print for the word *house* and the word’s function as a portal of sorts, I now want to show how it is complicit in this enactment. It will thus also function as the portal to my discussion of the concrete strategies the novel employs to this end.

In this vein, the word *house* in blue print first of all simply works for the fictional house like a *blueprint* does for a real house: it is a representation. Yet at the same time and by the same token—the color blue—it points to a beyond of representation: something strange is going on, something uncanny—*unheimlich*—stirs underneath the apparent representation. The color blue enstranges.¹¹ There is more to this word than meets the eye. It is both house and unhomely, *unheimisch*—non-house, other than house. It could be said that the word house printed in blue is thus this narrative’s ¼ inch anomaly precisely in *terms of narrative*: it opens up the space of a problem, which, as we are about to discover, will turn out to be a shifting labyrinth of immeasurable dimensions.¹² This short word in blue thus cracks up the representational surface of the narrative. And it is through this ¼ inch crack that Narrative starts to seep in and disseminate, at first slowly and stealthily until it erupts with violence and sweeps along narrative shattering it in a big fucking train wreck, to use Johnny’s expression. Thus, when the Navidson crew starts exploring the depths of the uncanny labyrinth, we as readers simultaneously start exploring the depths of the ever shifting caverns of Narrative: We descend into a dense web of redundant footnotes; we pass through ‘tunnels’ burrowing into the ‘main’ text (framed text inserted in the main body continuing over several pages); we follow footnotes-become-circular-hallways (footnotes running along set-off margin of page for several pages then ‘turning’—one actually has to turn the book upside down—and leading back to the page they started on); we stumble into text-become-empty-halls (blank pages). In all this the novel presents us with an oscillation between the over spilling of narrative and its vanishing, the white and black noise of narrative. Both cases, the too much and the not enough, effectively disintegrate narrative as we know it, making it differential.¹³ One could say that in *House of Leaves* narrative undergoes its very own nuclear fission leaving us with nothing but the dark night of

radiating narrative differentials. It is no coincidence that the last four chapters of Zampanò's manuscript (one of them actually being a chapter written entirely by Johnny and inserted into the manuscript) invariably end with dissolution thus doubling the 'overall' narrative trajectory. Accordingly, chapter XX ends with the very compelling image of Navidson, lost and disoriented in pitch darkness, reading *House of Leaves* by burning page after page in order to have some reading light, thus literally dissolving the very narrative he features in. This instance of metalepsis forcefully drives home how the novel consumes itself, how *House of Leaves* decomposes its very own narrative. Once Navidson is done reading he has nothing left but himself, as he states (*HoL* 471). But this self is also dissolving. Thus, when he counters his own utterance "'Don't be'" (*HoL* 481) with a reaffirming "'I am'" (*HoL* 482), this is immediately belied on the following page: "Navidson is forgetting. Navidson is dying" (*HoL* 483). And turning the page once more we read that "[v]ery soon he will vanish completely in the wings of his own wordless stanza" (*HoL* 484).¹⁴ The next chapter consisting of a series of diary entries by Johnny ends with an entry in which Johnny recounts a story he has heard about the death of a new-born baby concluding that "the EKG flatlines. Asystole. The child is gone" (*HoL* 521). The following chapter ends with a short interview of Karen, Navidson's wife, who silently insists that the house on Ash Tree Lane "dissolved" (*HoL* 524). And finally, absolute zero seems to be attained when the respective endings of Zampanò's manuscript and Navidson's film converge to constitute the ending of the story of *House of Leaves*:

Navidson does not close with the caramel covered face of a Casper the friendly ghost. He ends instead on what he knows is true and always will be true. Letting the parade pass from sight, he focuses on the empty road beyond, a pale curve vanishing into the woods where nothing moves and a street lamp flickers on and off until at last it flickers out and darkness seeps in like a hand. (*HoL* 528)

This passage, of course, like everything else in the novel, does not just simply represent. It is not merely a representation of Zampanò's representation of Navidson's film. More profoundly, this passage expresses the overall narrative trajectory of the novel: narrative as a vanishing curve, the becoming-zero of narrative. In this vein, it tells us this: the parade of stories *House of Leaves* has set in motion passes from sight into the empty darkness beyond. Asystolic narrative. But we have learned our lesson, we do not believe anymore in an "indifferent night where all cows are black" (Deleuze, *Difference* 347). Like Navidson, we

know the truth. We know that blackness swarms with differences. And indeed, the above-mentioned chapter endings propose that utter dissolution does not coincide with absolute nothingness. To each of the dissolutions there is a remainder, however minimal. Thus, in chapter XX, immediately after the premonition that Navidson is about to vanish “in the wings of his own wordless stanza” which is juxtaposed with a page featuring several lines of square brackets arranged thus that they carve out a blank space—emptiness—we read that “this stanza does not remain entirely empty” (*HoL* 486). Accordingly, the blank space constituted by square brackets is reproduced with a difference: a small asterisk appears in the upper right hand corner (*HoL* 487). Similarly, the interview with Karen questions that dissolution is absolute when the interviewer skeptically surmises that the house is “still there” (*HoL* 525). Even in Johnny’s account of child death we are not confronted with nothingness: “the child is gone” (*HoL* 521) essentially means that a body remains. And finally, when we are confronted with utter darkness in what constitutes the ending of the novel’s story, this dissolution in darkness is not the last word. Something still stirs in it: the ending of the story of *House of Leaves* does not coincide with the ending of its discourse. The novel does not end here at all. In fact, we are just about to delve into narrative darkness.

Swarming Narrative

Indeed, what lies beyond the story’s ending is the flickering of the remnants of narrative until it flickers out for good. The whole array of the novel’s narrative strategies, from the sheer overkill of the multiplicity of voices to the typographic dismantlings, from the implication of its materiality to the complication of its narrative strands, find their apex in the multiple appendices and index. It is here that the already highly differentiated narrative of *House of Leaves* is finally torn to “Bits” “...and Pieces” as two of the entries in the appendices are tellingly entitled (*HoL* 541; 548). This section of the book presents us with a mass of heterogeneous, incoherent and fragmented material, with the “[e]ndless snarls of words” (*HoL* xvii) Johnny evokes in his introduction. These snarls of words manifest Deleuzian different/ciation, the repetitious gathering of differential elements in differential relations to be expressed in actuality. This is made explicit by Johnny in his introduction in the passage just mentioned:

Endless snarls of words, sometimes twisting into meaning, sometimes into nothing at all, frequently breaking apart, always branching off into other pieces I’d come across later—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? a legacy of prophecy and lunacy or nothing of the kind?, and in the end achieving, designating, describing, recreating—find your own words; I have no more; or plenty more but why? And all to tell—what? (*HoL* xvii)

This passage vividly conveys not only the genesis of Zampanò's manuscript as assembled by Johnny, and even not just, in metanarrative fashion, the genesis of Danielewski's novel, but most profoundly also the genesis of any narrative *as such*: the assembling and gathering of endless snarls of words, of a heterogeneous multiplicity of divergent series, into form—order out of chaos.¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur has suggested the term *emplotment* to convey this work of ordering. In this vein, we could say that *House of Leaves* is fundamentally a novel of *deplotment*. *House of Leaves*, in its narrative trajectory, does not plot an order but deplots it: chaos out of order instead order out of chaos. *House of Leaves* burrows into plot in order to unearth the depth of its virtual condition. Here, we should remember that plot also means “parcel of land” or “area of ground” as well as a graphic representation of such a ground. And in correlation with the noun, the verb ‘to plot’ designates the division of this ground. Thus, we could say that *House of Leaves* presents us with a geology of narrative, ungrounding the ground of narrative, immersing itself in narrative tectonics underlying the narrative architectonic. It uncovers the shifting tectonic plates of narrative and the “molten magma” (*HoL* 383) they are made of. Rather than envisioning narrative as grounded, as ‘plotted’ by events and existents, it casts narrative as the spreading-out of the unground, as a nomadic distribution of the differentials of narrative productive of events and existents. In its most compelling form, this work is presented to us in the novel's index.

What *House of Leaves* suggests is that the more you dig, the closer you get to the building blocks (of the house, of the cosmos, of narrative). But at the same time, the more you dig, the more these building blocks tend to vanish until one is surrounded by nothing but empty darkness. In terms of narrative, the index thus manifests *House of Leaves*'s ultimate disintegration before it dissipates entirely. The index is as close as the novel gets to its vanishing building blocks: it precisely *indicates* the antecedent differenc/tiation process with its selection of differentials, the

gathering of bits and pieces as the appendix has it, and their actualization in the novel at hand (*House of Leaves*). In analogy with genetics one could speak of narremes (differential elements) forming a narrome (virtual multiplicity) which is then actualized in the actual narrative. It is by incorporating words that *do not* feature in the story—marked as DNE (presumably meaning ‘does not exist’)—that the index intimates this narrome, the Idea of narrative, underlying every actual narrative and comprising the ever shifting totality of differential elements and relations of narrative *as such*. In terms of the genetics analogy, one could then say that DNE is for narrative what DNA is for genetics: the molecules of narrative, or narrative’s differential elements differentiating themselves to be actualized in actual narratives. Note that this analogy is not arbitrary since Deleuze’s philosophy of difference essentially provides a genetic account of the given—it theorizes the underlying structure and genesis of the given.

Still, the genetics analogy might sound somewhat far-fetched or too creatively licentious. Also, it does not explain how something essentially non-existent can form the basis for something that is. Such an explanation seems to fall back on the very nihilism it wanted to counter. In that case, it would have to face Parmenides’s old assertion that *ex nihilo nihil fit*. But we have to remember what Deleuze said about non-being, namely that non-being has to be conceived in terms of the problematic rather than the negative. Accordingly, that which does not exist does not necessarily amount to nothingness. On the contrary, even though it does not exist, it *insists*. It is the very limit of the descent into darkness. This comes to the fore if we consider that DNE is an abbreviation used in *calculus* to designate that a limit does not exist. The function is boundless. In our case, ever approaching zero, narrative does not converge to any defined limit value. Rather, it amounts to a mad dance of infinitely small differentials.¹⁶

Overall, *House of Leaves* can be said to present a *mathesis*, a calculus of narrative with its two ‘inverse’ operations. On the one hand, narrative as a vanishing curve, a differential function approaching zero, flickering on and off, the limit of which is precisely the boundlessness of Narrative’s “dark, stochastic glinting of swarming multiplicity” (Grant 39). This is narrative as a veritable becoming-zero: from the actuality of the subjective “I” of Johnny’s “I still get nightmares” (*HoL* xi) to the virtuality and neutrality of limitless Narrative as intimated by the novel’s index. From the diversity of subjective voices the novel casts to the objective “Voice [...] sweep[ing] through [them] all” (*HoL* 518). From actual, emplotted narrative to its deplotted, virtual unground. From the integrality of narrative to the differentials of Narrative. In short, narrative as a process of

fission. On the other hand, narrative as a summation of differentials, the outcome of a process of integration. Narrative as the emergence of plot from the depths of Narrative's unground. In short, narrative as a process of fusion, or, as *House of Leaves* has it, "nucleosynthesis" (*HoL* 383). What *House of Leaves* detects in its search for its very own conditions are precisely its vanishing building blocks: the ever-shifting dark caverns of swarming Narrative, the growling of the univocity of narrative.

In order to counter the deficiencies of narrative as representation *House of Leaves* parades before our eyes these very deficiencies *and* maps the realm of narrative virtuality. This novel is a matter of cartography (mapping the unknown), of geology (exploration of depth) and of chemistry (of darkness)—not of tracing and representation. In the way of Deleuze and Guattari's (in)famous orchid-wasp example in *A Thousand Plateaus* we have to say that *House of Leaves* does not mimic, does not represent a labyrinth, the snapping of a rope (*HoL* 293-296), or the spatial permutations of the place, but that it plunges into a veritable becoming-labyrinth, becoming-rope, becoming-space.¹⁷ In doing so, it indeed "becomes a new kind of form and artifact" as Hayles asserts (781). But this new kind of artifact does neither denote "the rebirth of the novel" nor "the beginning of the novel's displacement by a hybrid discourse that as yet has no name" (Hayles 781). On the contrary, *House of Leaves* manifests what literary narrative (and not just the novel) can do and always could do: producing volcanic eruptions of the new.¹⁸ Thus it amounts to a paradigmatic example of literary narrative and an exemplary presentation of narrative *in essence*.

III. Cosmos Narrans

An important question has remained unaddressed so far. While I have shown how *House of Leaves* presents both a differential cosmology and a differential narratology, I have not thoroughly addressed the question as to *why* this is the case. Why cosmology and narratology? Is it really enough to say that the ungrounding of the universe necessarily entails the ungrounding of narrative? Is this really satisfying? Is this good enough a reason for going through such pains as *House of Leaves* does in showing how these two movements overlap and implicate each other? Much in the spirit of *House of Leaves* I will take a chance and close this paper with intimating a whole new dimension rather than reformulating and evaluating the results of my exploration of the novel. Or, much in the spirit of Deleuze, this exploration ultimately turns out to invoke *a new problem*.

In a recent essay on the relation between life and non-life, Timothy Morton asserts the following: “When you look at a daffodil, you are seeing the story of how an algorithm was plotted in some kind of phase space. A flower is not an image, but a map” (4). A little further on, he notes: “Lifeforms [sic] are maps, plots, graphs” (4). What interests me here is the way Morton combines an ontology of life, mathematics, science and narratology in order to think life forms as stories. In its insistence on cartography, algorithms and the non-representational, his account is indeed not very far from my account of differential narrative. If we hijack Morton for our purposes and move from the ontology of life to ontology as such, what we get is an account of beings as narratives and, concomitantly, of Being as Narrative. With this, we are facing a whole new problem: is this what the final evocation of Yggdrasil in *House of Leaves* ultimately expresses? That the cosmos ‘plots’ stories? That it essentially *is* its very own telling? Could it be that *House of Leaves* thus intimates a much more subterranean, hidden, demonic alliance than we have hitherto unearthed? Could it be that what dawns at the darkest limit of *House of Leaves* is the implication of ontology and narratology, the folding of the two realms into each other? Could it be that what lingers in this darkness is the irreducible implication of the being of narrative and the narrativity of being: the folds of narr-on-tology?¹⁹ This, indeed, seems to be the strangeness that announces itself in these dark depths: the swarming multiplicity of the univocal growling of being and narrative.

Notes

¹ I would like to thank Philipp Schweighauser and Claire Colebrook for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.

² The term *speculative realism* was coined by Ray Brassier and goes back to a conference held at Goldsmiths College in 2007 featuring contributions by Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux and Brassier himself. Despite pursuing quite different philosophical projects, all speculative realists hold that it is not only possible but necessary to think beyond the human-world correlate which states that everything is ‘for us.’ It thus propagates a radically non-anthropocentric thought. Deleuze’s philosophy of difference is clearly a forerunner in this respect as will become obvious in the course of this paper. Speculative realism has grown well beyond the original nucleus of thinkers, and the publication output related to speculative realism is vast by now and still growing quickly. A transcript of the Goldsmiths event is available in the journal *Collapse*. For a good overview of speculative realist thought see the essay collection *The Speculative Turn*. Paul J. Ennis’s *Continental Realism* provides a short and crisp introduction to the subject matter.

³ Without getting into the intricacies of the argument let me note that the Deleuzian notion of different/ciation names the double movement of difference whereby the given emerges out of the transcendental (*Difference* 261).

⁴ The reader is of course not the only site of the novel's 'external' unfolding: this ranges from its intertextuality to the separate publication of *The Whalestoe Letters* to its implication in various internet forums.

⁵ I should note here that Thacker, even though he does not refer to him in his essay, discusses Deleuze at length in *After Life* (the monograph), with a particular focus on the notions of univocity and immanence. He is too quick, however, in dismissing Deleuze as propagating a generous and overflowing vitalism predicated on full life and full being. He basically reads difference as not going far enough and proposes an ontology predicated on nothingness instead (meontology as primary to ontology). Passages such as the one quoted above, however, make it quite clear that for Deleuze being (and life) are essentially fractured *from the outset*. The fracture is just not modeled according to the rules of contradiction. Rather, it is differential. In fact, from Deleuze's standpoint, it is negativity that does not go far enough. In showing that *House of Leaves* pushes difference rather than negativity my analysis also diverges markedly from Slocombe's nihilist reading of the novel. Even though Slocombe identifies the labyrinth as the house's underlying structure he remains attached to a reading of non-being as being of the negative.

⁶ It is important to note the ancestrality of the material since this opens the scope well *beyond* the human. In fact, in relation to the "interplanetary" or even "interstellar" (*HoL* 378) provenance of the material the human becomes quite insignificant. This unfolding of time and space beyond the scope of the human is a crucial aspect of the novel. It is also stressed in the list of architectural styles which moves back in history from postmodernism to well beyond pre-historic times (*HoL* 120-134) and the ensuing list of architects and patrons, again starting in the twentieth century and going back to "myth, and finally time" (*HoL* 135-121) itself. Of course, the non-human is also a significant aspect of the novel's central motif, the twisted house and labyrinth on Ash Tree Lane. It is precisely the notion of "ancestrality" on which Quentin Meillassoux bases his critique of the correlation of Being and Thought which holds that everything is always for-us (1-27). In *House of Leaves*, nothing is for us. Already the novel's dedication—"This is not for you"—makes this clear. In this respect it is the epitome of horror with horror being understood according to what Thacker in his most recent work, *In the Dust of this Planet*, makes out to be its single most significant aspect, namely that it tries to think "the 'dark intelligible abyss'" of a "world-without-us" thereby alluding to the utterly intangible nothingness of the "world-in-itself" (8). It is noteworthy how Thacker's threefold of for-us, without-us and in-itself resonates with Deleuze's tripartite ontology comprising actuality, intensity and virtuality. Their incompatibility ultimately hinges on their different evaluations of the negative. In contrast to Thacker's emphasis on the negative—he even writes of horror as a kind of "negative philosophy [...] akin to negative theology" (*Dust* 9)—both Deleuze and

House of Leaves emphasize the differential. Horror and the philosophy of difference converge here in what amounts to the horror of dark differentials.

⁷ It is no coincidence that a strange growl haunts the depths of the labyrinth in *House of Leaves*. It is even once explicitly linked to tectonic movement when likened to “calving glaciers, far off in the distance” (*HoL* 123).

⁸ Also, one has to take into account that there are different editions of the novel and that, even though the word *house* is markedly set off in all existing editions, not all of them use color. The hyperlink comparison is contingent on the color editions.

⁹ This includes representation vs. artifice, where representation is narrowed to mean good mimesis only.

¹⁰ This not only emphasizes what I call the novel’s act of problematization (drawing attention to *questions*), but, against Hansen, also emphasizes that *no medium* can be exempt of this critique.

¹¹ This is of course a reference to Shklovsky’s notion of *ostranenie* which is rendered as *enstrangement* rather than *estrangement* in the latest translation—I am following this new rendition here. Let me point out that this effect of enstrangement is also achieved by the black-and-white-only editions of the novel, though arguably to a lesser degree.

¹² This function as portal, as entryway to a beyond, also becomes manifest in the reading experience since the blue print is in fact the first anomaly the reader encounters. While it is not really disturbing on the book’s cover, it becomes gradually more unsettling when moving along to flap, endorsements page, title page, copyright page, editor’s foreword and finally the first few pages of Johnny’s introduction (*HoL* xi;xiii). It thus doubles on the discourse level the ¼ inch anomaly of the story level as it appears in *The Navidson Record* and Zampanò’s account. It functions as entryway, as the portal to the unimaginable narrative labyrinth unfolding beyond it.

¹³ Let me emphasize that the mathematical connotations are not coincidental. As we will see narrative’s dis-integration literally *is* a differentiation: the process of differentiating narrative (integral) towards its vanishing limit (differential).

¹⁴ Contrary to N. Katherine Hayles and Martin Brick, who read the novel as saving the subject (Hayles) and as essentially being about personal experience (Brick), such passages emphasize that *House of Leaves* in fact dissolves the subject. This is fundamentally a novel of *depersonalization* and *impersonal* experience.

¹⁵ It is important to note that Johnny is by no means the mastermind behind this process, no more than Danielewski or the reader are. As has been pointed out, there is no authoritative center to the novel, no centripetal force around which the novel (r)evolves. In addition to all the various strategies already mentioned, the novel makes this clear with its incorporation of *anonymous* editors and by claiming to be the 2nd edition. This is not to suggest that Johnny has not compiled Zampanò’s material, but rather that Johnny, and author and reader by proxy, have to be viewed as just *another set of differential elements* entering into relation with all other elements complicit in constituting the novel’s narrative.

¹⁶ On the mathematical origins of Deleuze's philosophy of difference see Simon Duffy's *The Logic of Expression*, particularly chapters two and three (43-93). Suffice here to say that Deleuze's use of calculus fundamentally builds on the traditional notion of differentials as infinitesimals.

¹⁷ It is no coincidence that Brick asserts that "Danielewski's novel *has rooms*" ("Blueprint(s)," my emphasis).

¹⁸ See also Danielewski's own assertion that books were always able to do what *House of Leaves* does (Cottrell).

¹⁹ Due credit for the coinage of this term goes to my friend and colleague Andreas Hägler.

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“A HOUSE OF ONE’S OWN”: *HOUSE OF LEAVES* AS A MODERNIST TEXT

SEBASTIAN HUBER

(...) *epochs are the same or are different.*
—Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” 65

In Zadie Smith’s attempt to demarcate a fork in the road for the contemporary novel in relation to historical periods long, or only recently, past, Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* would certainly tread the path of the experiments and not the socially more ‘real’ grounds.¹ However, within this oversimplified category of experimental fiction, there are again new bifurcations presenting themselves, extending the main root in a variety of ways. While the formal idiosyncrasies of *House of Leaves* often invite its categorization as postmodernist fiction, one might also read the novel as nodding towards the Gothic tradition.

With such literary classification there always comes a sense of imposition, of constraining the potential of a work of art. True as that might be, showing how a novel deals with different, often rivaling aesthetic concerns also expands the cultural artifact, thus making it bigger on the outside than it is on the inside.

By trying to expand the perimeters of *House of Leaves* this essay will consider whether Mark Z. Danielewski’s novel might be read as a modernist text, and if so, what might be gained by this interpretation. From the very outset, at least two aspects raise doubts about this hypothesis and reveal its ostensibly paradoxical nature. First, *House of Leaves* was published in 2000. This implies that the novel as a historical work of art is to be situated in postmodernity and is thus postmodernist,² or, if we should believe the rumors, the novel is already a case of a post-postmodernist aesthetics.³

Second, the modality ‘modernist’ appears even more problematic if one considers that hardly any periodizing gesture is able to stand its ground. That is, except for one: everything is now *postmodern*. We have witnessed how a range of literary and non-literary texts have turned postmodern: *Ulysses* (or at least one half of it)⁴ because of its ontological

interrogations, *Robinson Crusoe* due to its unreliable narrator, or Shakespeare's metadramatic moments, gender confusions, and intertextuality. At the hand of linguistic indeterminacy, categorizing and thus containing literature in homogeneous periods hardly ever works, with the only acceptable exception to the rule being the umbrella term *postmodern*.

In this paper, I attempt to stifle these arguments and to beat the postmodern approach at its own game. In a reverse move, I seek to turn postmodern dehistoricization on its head and argue that, rather than every text being postmodern, *House of Leaves* embraces pre-postmodernist elements which intimate and legitimize a modernist reading. This is obviously not to say that modernist techniques have not been employed in postmodern fiction. Still, the stance that postmodernism assumed in relation to such notions as space, interiority, myth, epistemology, or ontology, is radically different from what I see at work in the novel. Accordingly, I will de-contextualize the novel from its historical context of production and read it against the assumption that literary periods are a linear and teleological process. While such disruptions are not infrequent in literary history, I would suggest that, first, most of such 'anachronistic works' tend to cast a glance into the future, not backwards.⁵ Secondly, since the dominant mode of rejuvenating past literary genres in recent fiction is marked by the realist return,⁶ this is why I take *House of Leaves* to inhabit, in the urban design of contemporary fiction, a House of its own.⁷

One of the most obvious aspects that suggests a modernist reading of *House of Leaves* is its emphasis on space. The novel's spatial form presents clear parallels with Joseph Frank's argument in "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" that modernist fiction spatializes its narrative while reducing its temporality. By means of juxtaposition, as in Ezra Pound's Imagist poetry,⁸ Virginia Woolf's stream of consciousness in *The Waves*, or James Joyce's parallax view in *Ulysses*, the narrative procession is halted in a freeze frame, while being focalized through diverse observer figures. What is important about this relation to space, and what also contrasts modernism's spatial form with postmodern spatiality, as argued by Frederic Jameson or Michel Foucault,⁹ is that modern narratives still assume an ontological stability beyond the subject's epistemological insecurities. While novels such as John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* accordingly project dispersed views on Manhattan, there still exists an extra-heterodiegetical scaffold that contrasts and holds together the individual fluctuations. Conversely, postmodern narratives fundamentally question the existence of space that surpasses subjective understandings:

here, subjects create spaces, cities, worlds, as for example in Jorge Luis Borges's *Labyrinths*, Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, or Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*.

In order to understand how space figures in *House of Leaves* it is crucial to decide whether space exists beyond the characters' empirical grasp, or whether the house is only discursively produced and mediated by the subjects. In my analysis I will metonymically equate space with the eponymous House, in both senses of *how* it is presented and *what* is presented.

On the level of discourse, the spatialization of the novel becomes manifest with the juxtaposition of various text levels. While the beginning of the novel still pretends to be of a specific genre (that of documentary) with a clear and linear temporality, this is soon effaced. The causal line of

- a) events at Ash Tree Lane;
- b) the recording of these events;
- c) the film;
- d) the public's response;
- e) Zampanò's gathering of these sources;
- f) Johnny Truant's re-collection of Zampanò's work;
- g) the surfacing of *House of Leaves* on the Internet;
- h) the Editors's publication of the novel;

i) finally our reading of the book is eventually disturbed, and the various texts lose their distinct relational temporality. When Truant's excessive paratextual digressions from the 'main' narrative undermine clear-cut notions of textuality (in the sense that there cannot be such a thing as main text and paratext), it becomes difficult to keep track of both time and space. While this narrative strategy obviously echoes the disorientation of the house's inhabitants, one might also read this juxtaposition of various discourses as intimating a synchronicity that urges us to conceive the novel in a simultaneous totality, although we are practically unable to do so.

This is suggested particularly by chapter IX, "The Labyrinth." Its layout is stratified into the diegetical events as mediated in 'The Navidson Record,' the bottom-page footnotes commenting on this narrative, left-margin footnotes depicting architectural styles that the House does not resemble (*HoL* 120), footnote 147 on the right enumerating the influence of architects in reverse for eight pages, and, most idiosyncratically, the blue square (the color of the House) that inhabits everything that is not contained in the House. In modernist narratives, the reader would be obliged to assemble the "heap of broken images" ("The Waste Land" 1292) as presented in the form of seemingly chaotic collage and thus

create a mosaic in which the whole becomes more than its parts. In the case of *Ulysses*, Frank argues that "references must be connected by the reader and viewed as a whole before the book fits together into any meaningful pattern," which, according to Stuart Gilbert, "form[s] a complete picture of practically everything under the sun" (16-17). This presents a narrative strategy that might be ascribed to a similar degree to *House of Leaves*. Katherine Hayles equally attests:

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. (794-95)

This multivocality presents another interesting aspect that could be read as a typically modernist practice. While the presence of different voices is a core characteristic of the politically motivated minority discourses of postmodernism,¹⁰ the use of different fonts in *House of Leaves* indicates, in my view, an attempt to safeguard various independent and secure discursive levels. In this respect, Martin Brick's essay "Blueprint(s): Rubric for a Deconstructed Age in *House of Leaves*," analyzing the rubrics in the novel, observes that in medieval writing "typeface functions as an autograph of its author." The novel equally assigns each textual level a certain font: Johnny Truant's is Courier, Zampanò's Times, The Editors's Bookman, and Pelafina's is Dante (Brick). Although there are instances where the different levels intersect, not only on a content-level, but also typographically, as when the check-mark from Johnny's mother appears in the narrative (*HoL* 97), or the SOS in the diegetic level of the expedition into the House permeates Johnny's world (*HoL* 103), it still seems as if the novel attempts to uphold a concrete correlation between enunciator and enunciated. As a modification of the telling name, Danielewski's 'telling fonts' interpolate a stable connection between what is told and who tells it. In this, *House of Leaves* uses fonts as well as colors "as an organisational tool" (Brick) that tries to establish an order that is, contrary to Wittmershaus's allegations, not "purely haphazard." But more on this at a later point.

More than merely presenting this spatial simultaneity on a formal level, *House of Leaves* also reverberates modernist conceptions of space in its diegesis. The elementary premise that only legitimizes the narrative action of the novel, stating that the "house is bigger on the inside than it is

on the outside,” as the blurb already informs us, emphasizes deep interiority rather than exterior surface.¹¹

This bears stark resemblances to the developments in the field of psychoanalysis in the early twentieth century. One might argue that Freud’s psychoanalysis had the same effect of expanding the notion of the subject by opening up the space of the unconscious that equally consisted of “[...] yet another endless series of empty rooms and passageways, all with walls potentially hiding and thus hinting at a possible exterior, though invariably winding up as just another border to another interior” (*HoL* 119). The question of why the novel incorporates such a markedly modernist theme seems crucial for an understanding of its artistic endeavor. We might thus ask ourselves why *House of Leaves*, rather than spatializing the subjects’ interior through psychological literary techniques, projects the discrepancy between inside and outside onto the architectural structure of the house.

This transfer of reference points from subject to object could, again, be read in the context of postmodernism. In depriving its characters of a larger interiority than exteriority, effacing and questioning the depth of subjects and substituting them by mediated products of discourse, the House indeed assumes the position of an ever-changing rhizome that guides and controls its inhabitants. As was mentioned before, the pivotal point of no return presents itself in deciding whether the House and thus its physically impossible interior is merely a critique of scientific rationality, an extension of a subject-centered ontology, or, which I take to be the case, a manifestation of a metanarrative that surpasses the characters’ epistemological inquiries and ontological fabrications. Hayles’s argument that “there is no reality beyond mediation” (779) is questioned by elucidating how the novel presents a complex structuring pattern that reinstigates pre-postmodernist notions of order.

The relation between subject and House is articulated by the question: “Is it possible to think of that place as ‘unshaped’ by human perceptions?” (*HoL* 173). And indeed, some passages suggest that the House is affected by its residents, mirroring “the psychology of anyone who enters it” (*HoL* 165). In a retrospective glance at Holloway, who led the expedition into the House, Zampanò cites fictitious critic Jeremy Flint’s argument that “[i]n Holloway’s case, the house as well as everything inside it becomes an exten[]n of himself” (*HoL* 330). The novel itself ponders this possibility and quotes, again, a fictional critic, Ruby Dahl, who “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” (*HoL* 165). For the next couple of pages, the novel presents various discussions of psychological theories of space, again mixing ‘real’ and ‘fictitious’ discussions, without coming to a conclusive solution.

In the following, I will outline instances where we might perceive an extradiegetic structure of the House that surpasses subject-oriented interpretations of the House as merely part of the occupant’s (or discursive) constructions. Symptomatic for this is a recollection of Karen’s version of the events, “A Brief History of Who I Love,” where the narrative, mediated through Zampanò, observes that: “[o]n Ash Tree Lane stands a house of darkness, cold, and emptiness. In 16mm stands a house of light, and colour” (*HoL* 368). Juxtaposing these two very different representations of the house, one reported standing on Ash Tree Lane, one mediated on 16m film, represents a fissure between an ‘original’ referent and its mediation that hints at, but does not necessitate, a reciprocal contingency. Referring back to a modernist example, Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* contains a comparable juxtaposition. In the chapter “Rejoicing City That Dwelt Carelessly,” the narrator approaches George Baldwin via an external focalization: “George Baldwin was walking up Madison Avenue with his light overcoat on his arm” (Dos Passos 254). This external view of the character situates him in a specific place in New York and thereby affirms Madison Avenue to be part of an objective space that is then depicted from an internal focalized point of view: “[h]is fagged spirits were reviving in the sparkling autumn twilight of the streets” (Dos Passos 254). Whereas the external focalization apparently describes the setting in rather unbiased terms, using proper names for subject (George Baldwin) and place (Madison Avenue), the internal focalization is clearly characterized by a psychological tint. The character’s mood thus influences the very nature of how the street is perceived. Juxtaposing a ‘neutral’ representation of Madison Avenue and the house on Ash Tree Lane with its subjectively perceived counterpart therefore indicates the existence of a twofold spatiality: one objective—stable and exterior—one subjective—unstable and interior.

Before explicitly going into detail regarding what kind of architecture the house seems to incorporate, a brief divergence is necessary in order to illuminate the core precepts that sustain the House.

The presentation of the House as an overarching entity, which is clearly rather untenable for postmodernist fiction, is underlined by its use of myth. Modernism’s embrace of myths, which in Eliot’s words are used for “manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” (“*Ulysses*, Order and Myth” 480), serve as foundational structures

whose organizing principles help address existential anxieties about order and disorder. A symptomatic instance of postmodernism's relinquishment of such structures can be found in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* in the form of Oedipa's unfinished quest, or in *Gravity's Rainbow's* antagonism between Blicero's obsession with Hänsel und Gretel, Rilke, "all Märchen and Sagen," while his subject Katje "plays at this only...plays at playing" (99). *House of Leaves*, at first sight, also puts such myths under erasure. The Greek tale of the Minotaur is rejected in a Derridean gesture of crossing out the presence of the mythical creature: "~~Myth is the Minotaur~~" (*HoL* 335-336). Yet, like the inexorable impossibility of getting outside discourse, the novel cannot abandon the myth by means of ignoring or erasing it. The Minotaur, although denied as a constituent element of the house, still haunts it and its tenants.

Next to the Greek myth of Minos, the Minotaur and Daedalus's construction of the labyrinth that is typographically expelled from the novel, the House also resists Eastern practices of establishing structures. Attempting to install Feng Shui items in the House, Karen soon finds that they have disappeared: "the absent tiger, the absent marble horses, and even the absent vase" (*HoL* 315). It thus seems that there is a hierarchical relationship between various mythologies in the novel: while Greek and Chinese narratives are banished from the House, there still exists a 'mastermyth' that can be seen as reigning the House, in its diegetical as well as its formal manifestation. On the very last page of the book, even after the appendix, glossary and credits, it says: "Yggdrasil [printed vertically] What miracle is this? This giant tree. It stands ten thousand feet high But doesn't reach the ground. Still it stands. Its roots must hold the sky" (*HoL* 709). Stemming from Norse mythology, as gathered in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, Yggdrasil, literally the "terrible One's [Odin's] horse" (Hollander 36), is an ash tree that constitutes the center of the world. Its three roots reach across the world, with the dragon *Níðhöggr* gnawing at the root that is located above *Niflheimr*. The haunting growl that echoes through the House could accordingly be linked to the fantastical creature, rather than to the Minotaur, as novel and inhabitants seem to suggest. What is more, "[t]here is an eagle sits (sic) in the branches of the ash, and it has knowledge of many things" (Sturluson 18). This motif of knowledge, which interlinks Yggdrasil with the Christian conception of the Edenic tree, becomes even more prominent. Lee M. Hollander explains that in the second part of the *Edda*, "The Sayings of Hár: Hávamál," in line 138

begins the portion usually called 'The Rune Poem.' In order to discover the runes, and through them to become possessed of secret wisdom, Óthin

sacrificed himself by hanging himself on the World-Ash and wounding himself with his spear. (36)

Navidson's final trip into the House can be read in the light of this mythical intertext, since his search for a teleological solution to the mystery of the House leaves him "'floating or falling or I don't know what'" (*HoL* 468). Although I do not want to go as far as suggesting that Odin's self-afflicted wound with a spear finds parallels in Karen's diagnosis of breast cancer, there are also other intimations that link Yggdrasil and its relation to knowledge to the novel.

The emphasis on trees, roots, and ash furthermore adds to the dominant presence of Yggdrasil, not only in the House's location on Ash Tree Lane, but also in passages such as when "'Tom told [Navidson that] Chad was happy in his tree and Tom was hard pressed to start telling him inside was a better place [...]"' (*HoL* 320), the preface to chapter XVIII, "Ashe good for caske hoopes: and if neede require, plow worke, as alfo for many things els" (*HoL* 408), Navidson pondering "[...] just how old the roots of that house really are" (*HoL* 409), or his discovery that "[a]ll that remains is the ashblack slab upon which he is standing" (*HoL* 464). The semantic cluster of trees, roots and ash can be related to core themes of modernist literature, particularly as employed in some of Ezra Pound's poems: from "In A Station of the Metro" and its "wet black bough" (35) through *A Lume Spento's* first title "La Fraisne (The Ash Tree)" or his Imagist poem "The Tree" to "It was you that broke the new wood, / Now is a time for carving. / We have one sap and one root—" (27) from "A Pact." Pound retains this natural and structural imagery which is supposed to counteract the cultural and social ruins of modernity. By means of these recurrent tropes, Pound's poetry aspires to project and preserve deeply enrooted, arborescent patterns that stratify sometimes antagonistic conceptual clusters into synergetic constellations. Concomitantly, these tropes offer, next to their organizational function, a rejuvenating momentum that by charging the past with 'new' meanings¹² is thus heightened with the invocation of ash as an indicative metapoetical imagery.¹³

In a similar vein, *House of Leaves* combines both mythological and natural metaphors that find their gross constituent in Yggdrasil since, "[t]he ash Yggdrasil is of all trees best (...)" (Hollander 62). As a quasi-*Übertree*, Yggdrasil's all-encompassing and indestructible architecture—*The Poetic Edda* accordingly asks "what becomes of that far spreading tree, since nor fire nor iron will fell it?" (146)—serves the novel as an archetypal narrative that is supposed to structure and semantically fulfill it. Order and meaning are not infinitely regressing but can be found in the concrete manifestation of Yggdrasil.

Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical opposition of the arborescent and the rhizomatic intimates that *House of Leaves* rather embraces the hierarchical "roots-book. The tree is already the image of the world, or the root the image of the world-tree" (5). Unlike postmodern rhizomatic novels¹⁴ that undermine the notion of origin, teleological progress and metastructure of their narrative threads, *House of Leaves* adopts the motif of the tree as a hermeneutic explanation. Although the novel at first endorses textual play and narrative collapse, the position of Yggdrasil at the very end of the book displays its substantial function and presents itself as a myth superior to those that are depicted in the diegetical world.

This idea of an unwavering structure, the expansion of an interior space, as well as the synchronicity of discourses give reason to read *House of Leaves* as implementing an architectural structure that sets it apart from postmodernist concerns, and, as I will argue in the following, even extends modernism's stance towards knowledge.

In many instances, the novel's self-interpretation suggests that it has the ontological status of a labyrinth. The visual layout of the cover that depicts perforated maze-walls surrounding the spiraling staircase of the house already conditions our reading and interpretation of the novel as labyrinth. Adding to this, the incorporation of Chapter XI's suggested title and layout, as well as the references to Daedalus, all drive home the equation between novel and maze. Hayles, amongst others, embraces this correspondence, writing that "the story's architecture is envisioned not as a sequential narrative so much as alternative paths within the same immense labyrinth of fictional space-time" (784).

Yet, by having shown how *House of Leaves* pursues a stable ontological structure, I would argue that the novel, as well as the House, should rather be regarded as an archive that affirms rather than negates knowledge. In reading *House of Leaves* as an archive, its modernist nostalgia is extended and sets the novel apart from a constricted notion of modernist narratives. While the accumulation of knowledge in modernist literature questions any kind of truth status, which can symptomatically be seen in *Ulysses*'s Ithaca chapter, *House of Leaves* assimilates these forms of epistemological inquiry into a self-contained structure. Rather than fundamentally questioning the ability of the individual to know the world, the novel projects different strata of information under a specific order. In being aware that structure is impermanent, Danielewski's book nevertheless attempts to build a scaffold that holds together and constructs an epistemological metanarrative: an archive.

Particularly when considering the archive's etymological root, as Derrida relates in *Archive Fever*, this interpretation becomes even more

apparent. Derrida relates how the word 'archive' derives on the one hand from *arkhe*, thus implying both the "*commencement* and the *commandement*" (1, original emphasis). But one also might retrace the word's origin to the Greek *arkheion*: "initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, who commanded" (2). The house becomes the place of residency, organization and rule of the archons, who

are first of all the documents' guardians. They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives. (2)

Moreover, the archons wield the right of *consignation*, that is, the "*gathering together* [of] *signs*," which "aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system of synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration" (Derrida 3, original emphasis).

In *House of Leaves*, there are various levels that could be regarded as incorporating archontic power, which Derrida conceives in toponomological terms (3). The most obvious manifestation of this practice is Zampanò's archiving of *The Navidson Record*, but also Johnny's recollection of this archiving process inhabits an urge to locate, gather, assemble and order. Especially because Johnny adds his personal experiences to the archive of the House, he performs a process of self-archiving that antagonizes his identity problems. On the arguably last level of archiving, The Editors aspire to the endeavor of locating the house in a concrete place while endowing it with a fixed name. In a nomological sense, *House of Leaves* commences and commands by affixing a stable name/signifier to the House. Unlike the tenets of deconstruction, where signifiers are always only differential and do not possess a positive identity, the novel indeed proposes that the word "House" in all of its manifestations (*Haus*, *maison*, *domus*, etc.) shares a common identity that is hinted at by its color. Unlike most readings of this accentuation, which interpret it in the vein of hypertext links, it seems striking that this "unseen network" (Brick) does not affect either the syntagmatic (*mouse*, *rouse*, *hour*, etc.) nor the paradigmatic axis (*home*, *building*, *shelter*, etc.). In this, the novel creates a linguistic network that adheres to certain and unnegotiable rules.

Giving the House a concrete and stable topological place should however not be understood on the level of content (since the House really defies spatial categories), but rather in the scope of its mediation. The Editors' localization thus takes place in the blurb, which announces that:

[y]ears ago, when *House of Leaves* was first being passed around, it was nothing more than a badly bundled heap of paper, part of which would occasionally surface on the Internet. [...] Now, for the first time, this astonishing novel is made available in book form, complete with the original colored words, vertical footnotes, and newly added second and third appendices. (*HoL* 1)¹⁵

Particularly when read in the context of hypertextual archives such as the Internet, my reading of the novel suggests that The Editors here claim the superiority of the book as a medium, since it assembles and orders the “badly bundled heap of paper” into an ostensibly complete source of knowledge, which is also amplified by the novel’s incorporation of a concordance. The materiality of *House of Leaves*, its “bookishness” (Bray and Gibbons 2), indeed its insistence “on its specificity as a print novel” (Hayles 784), seems to suggest that here knowledge, in the form of textual and visual discourses, is best represented, since it has a concrete and physical place.

To this extent, *House of Leaves* complicates both postmodern and modern modes of thought, since it assumes to reconstruct stable structures for the accumulation and presentation of knowledge. While modernist and postmodernist fiction undermines any way of reliably knowing the world (to which postmodern discourse added, rather than shifted focus on, the instability of these worlds), *House of Leaves* on the one hand accepts unstable ontologies (as manifested by the physically volatile house, or its dispersed typography), yet still tries to impose a dominant structure that tries to recover the possibility and extends the dimensions of knowing.

The spatial simultaneity that is presented by the juxtaposition of discourses, the invocation of mythical parallels, all indicate not only modernist practices of narration but can indeed be summarized in equating the novel, the House, as well as the reading process, with an act of archiving. Thus, *House of Leaves* forces us into the same position as Navidson and Johnny. Navidson’s “final act of reading” (*HoL* 467), or Johnny’s epistemological drive—“It’s not me. It cannot be. As soon as I write I’ve already forgotten. I must remember. I must read. I must read. I must read” (*HoL* 498)—are forms of archive fever. “It is,” as Derrida writes

to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there’s too much of it right where something anarchives itself. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement. (91)

This pathological desire to return to the beginning presents a remarkable, though not unproblematic attempt that might offer different ways of understanding and cherishing the book as a medium that has, despite the many allegations, not quite yet turned to ashes.

Notes

¹ See Zadie Smith's book review of Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* and Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* "Two Paths for the Novel."

² See for example N. Katherine Hayles's "Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*," where she argues that the novel is inherently postmodern.

³ Nicoline Timmer, for instance, argues in *Do You Feel it too?* that the novel is part of a post-postmodernist aesthetics due to its "new sense of the self" (18).

⁴ See Brian McHale's *Constructing Postmodernism*, where he diagnoses the dominant shift from epistemological to ontological concerns in Joyce's novel.

⁵ Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* might be one of the most famous examples.

⁶ The most outspoken member of this movement is certainly Jonathan Franzen.

⁷ This is, of course, not to say that *House of Leaves* would have been possible if published in the 1920s.

⁸ "In A Station of the Metro," for example, fuses two extremely antagonistic images and thus creates a synergetic, spatial whole. The setting side by side of human faces with the bleak petals of the bough might be read as generating a simultaneous, spatial unity by fusing these very different images of cultural and natural decay. Pound's affiliation to the imagist movement has to be viewed critically, since he soon would surrogate his notion of the image for the vortex.

⁹ Jameson, for instance, infers that postmodernism is spatial since it is ahistorical (x). Foucault, in his lecture "Of Other Spaces," argues that "[t]he present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space" (22).

¹⁰ This can be seen in the proliferation of identity politics and its connection to the postmodern genre of historiographic metafiction.

¹¹ The opposition between modernist depth and postmodernist surface is depicted in Ihab Hassan's well-known diagram in "Towards a Concept of Postmodernism."

¹² Hence Pound's programmatic slogan to "make it new."

¹³ Yggdrasil also provides honeydew ("The dew that falls from it [the tree] on to the earth, this is what people call honeydew, and from it bees feed" [Sturluson 19]), an imagery that is important in Danielewski's *Only Revolutions*.

¹⁴ One could see rhizomatic 'structures' in Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*, Julian Barnes's *The History of the World in 10,5 Chapters*, or Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

¹⁵ In the actual foreword, The Editors write that "[t]he first edition of *House of Leaves* was privately distributed and did not contain Chapter 21, Appendix I, Appendix III, or the index. Every effort has been made to provide appropriate translations and accurately credit all sources. If we have failed in this endeavor, we

apologize in advance and will gladly correct in subsequent printings all errors or omissions brought to our attention" (*HoL* 10).

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(IM)POSSIBLE SPACES:
TECHNOLOGY AND NARRATIVE
IN *HOUSE OF LEAVES*

BRIANNE BILSKY

Reading Mark Z. Danielewski's critically acclaimed novel *House of Leaves* (2000) from cover to cover is no small accomplishment. Published at the turn of the new millennium and comprising some seven hundred pages, Danielewski's work is a weighty tome in every sense of the word. The book intertwines several narratives and confounds any attempt at a concise plot summary. Ostensibly, the central narrative of *House of Leaves* chronicles the strange experiences of Will Navidson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist who allegedly produces a peculiar film about his peculiar house—peculiar because the size of the interior appears to exceed the size of the exterior. However, readers do not encounter Navidson's story directly. Rather, these events are filtered through several authorial figures. Zampanò, the author closest to Navidson's narrative, claims to have seen *The Navidson Record*, the documentary film Navidson produced, and analyzed it in the form of a scholarly manuscript complete with references to academic sources and extensive footnotes. However, the novel begins at Zampanò's end. The old man is discovered dead in his Los Angeles area apartment, and Johnny Truant, a drug-addicted tattoo artist with a long history of psychological issues, takes possession of the manuscript. Johnny edits Zampanò's work, adding a series of footnotes about his own life in the process, and these three entangled narratives—Navidson's, Zampanò's, and Johnny's—account for most of the pages in *House of Leaves*. In typical postmodern fashion, however, a figure simply known as “—Ed.,” a stand-in for “the Editors,” adds another set of footnotes that comment on Johnny's text. And, of course, all of these authors answer to the Author, Mark Z. Danielewski.

With so many nested narratives to unravel and so many authorial figures to follow, the question of textual production becomes paramount to any reading of *House of Leaves*. Much of the scholarship on Danielewski's debut novel responds to this question in two ways. Critics tend to read the text as a work that reacts to the anxieties of living in a digital age and as a

radical reenvisioning of what a novel can be in such an age. The novel's structure and content certainly support such interpretations. With its multiple networked narratives and shape-shifting spaces, *House of Leaves* would appear to have much in common with debates about the nature of new media and digital culture. In these instances, "digital culture" is broadly used as "a trope for the ethos of contemporary life. In this sense, the essential qualities of Western culture in late modernity are described in terms of the salient features of digital technology: its speed, interchangeability, mutability, and so on" (Rabinovitz and Geil 4).

Although the pool of *House of Leaves* criticism remains relatively shallow compared to the attention other similarly complex works, such as Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) or David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), have garnered, two critics must be mentioned here. The first is N. Katherine Hayles. Hayles brings her proficiency in science and electronic literature to bear on Danielewski's novel and argues that *House of Leaves*

instantiates the crisis characteristic of postmodernism, in which representation is short-circuited by the realization that there is no reality independent of mediation [...] [and] 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. ("Saving the Subject" 779)

She also contends that critics of novels such as *House of Leaves* should take into account the technological processes that turn literary works into material objects, an argument she presents more thoroughly in her book-length work, *Writing Machines*. "The implication for studies of technology and literature," she notes, "is that the materiality of inscription thoroughly interpenetrates the represented world. Even when technology does not appear as a theme, it is woven into the fictional world through the processes that produce the literary work as a material artifact" ("Saving the Subject" 803).

More recently, Mark Hansen sees *House of Leaves* as a breakthrough in the development of the novel. Hansen argues Danielewski's aesthetic experimentation is not simply an advance in style or form but rather a media-technical reconceptualization of how novels operate. Danielewski's formal strategies

form so many symptoms of what can only be understood [...] to be a *media-technical*, and not simply a stylistic or formal, shift in the function of the novel. *House of Leaves* is obsessed with technical mediation and the

new media ecology that has been introduced and expanded since the introduction of technical recording in the nineteenth century. (Hansen 598)

But this obsession is not a celebration of technology's ability to accurately record, or what Hansen more precisely calls the *orthographic function of recording*. On the contrary, *House of Leaves* questions

the very possibility for accurate recording per se, the capacity of technical inscription to capture what Danielewski celebrates, like Thomas Pynchon before him, as the singularity of experience. In an age marked by the massive proliferation of (primarily audiovisual) apparatuses for capturing events of all sorts, from the most trivial to the most monumental, *House of Leaves* asserts the nongeneralizability (or nonrepeatability) of experience —the resistance of the singular to orthography, to technical inscription of any sort. (Hansen 605-06)

This observation leads Hansen to interpret the mysterious shape-shifting house at the heart of *House of Leaves* as a figure for the digital itself, the contemporary force that poses the ultimate challenge to orthographic recording (610-11).¹

Using Hayles and Hansen's work as points of departure, I propose reading *House of Leaves* as the intersection of three concepts: space, technology and narrative. From the immeasurable space of the house to the finite space of the printed page and from *The Navidson Record* to its mediated retellings, space and narrative construction drive the novel's form and content. I see *House of Leaves* as a text that not only is invested in analyzing the ontological effects of digital culture, as Hayles and Hansen argue, but also critiques how information storage technologies affect the way we perceive space and construct narratives. Danielewski's novel is replete with references to such technologies: cameras, camcorders, computers, writing, and the novel form itself, to name a few. It is important to note these technologies are digital (often associated with an increase in clarity) and analog (often seen as susceptible to degradation). They also vary significantly in their data storage density. For instance, compared to a single page of *House of Leaves*, a single microchip can store an almost unimaginable amount of information in an equally unimaginable fraction of space, a technical detail that seems quite at home in a novel ostensibly about an impossible physical space. How does the way information is stored matter? How do different inscription technologies affect the construction and function of narratives in our increasingly technologized society? With its radical approach to space at the level of form and content, *House of Leaves* stages a confrontation

between analog and digital technologies that exposes the mediatedness of all narrative, regardless of the technology used to record it, and ultimately attests to the value of interpretation in a hypermediated world.

I. The House on Ash Tree Lane

Zampanò introduces his analysis of *The Navidson Record* with a short commentary on the ever-elusive concept of authenticity:

While enthusiasts and detractors will continue to empty entire dictionaries attempting to describe it, “authenticity” still remains the word most likely to stir a debate. In fact, this leading obsession—to validate or invalidate the reels and tapes—invariably brings up a collateral and more general concern: whether or not, with the advent of digital technology, image has forsaken its once unimpeachable hold on the truth.

For the most part, skeptics call the whole effort a hoax but grudgingly admit *The Navidson Record* is a hoax of exceptional quality. (*HoL* 3)

The debate over the film’s authenticity largely stems from its improbable content. The film allegedly documents a series of strange events that begin in 1990 shortly after Will Navidson, his partner Karen Green, and their two young children, Chad and Daisy, move to the Virginia countryside. Upon returning to their new home after a trip to the West Coast, Navidson and his family are shocked to discover that the house has undergone what can only be described as a “spatial violation” (*HoL* 24): “a plain, white door with a glass knob” has appeared in the master bedroom. “It does not, however, open into the children’s room but into a space resembling a walk-in closet”; a space “[no] more than five feet wide and at most four feet long” (*HoL* 28). In search of a rational explanation, Navidson and Karen take measurements of the house and compare them against the dimensions indicated on the architectural blueprints. However, the results are anything but rational. Navidson’s measurements indicate a seemingly impossible scenario: the width of the house’s interior appears to exceed the width of its exterior by $\frac{1}{4}$ inch. But what begins as an odd yet tolerable spatial discrepancy quickly transforms into a terrifyingly immeasurable and unaccountable space that literally and figuratively takes over the novel. A second doorway leading to a narrow, dark hallway inexplicably appears in Navidson’s living room, and this space, which thoroughly assumes a life of its own, becomes the source of the terror that haunts the novel’s pages.

House of Leaves endeavors to explore and document this space through both its content and its form. *The Navidson Record* is Will Navidson’s

attempt to process the strange occurrences in his house; Zampanò's manuscript is his attempt to process *The Navidson Record*; and Johnny Truant's introduction and footnotes are his attempt to process Zampanò's interpretation of the film. More importantly, each of these efforts to master information relies on certain inscription technologies. A photojournalist by trade, Navidson arms himself and his exploration team with a plethora of cameras and camcorders. His war against the inexplicable space is an audiovisual one. At the other end of the inscription spectrum, Zampanò and Johnny wage a war of words. Their weapon is not image or sound, but text.

Formally speaking, the novel utilizes several experimental techniques to convey its content. Danielewski assigns each of his narrators a specific font: Zampanò's text appears in Times Roman; Johnny's text in Courier; and the Editors' text in Bookman. Footnotes often traverse several pages and compete with the 'narrative proper' for the reader's attention, while portions of the text that recount the explorations into the shape-shifting space exhibit experimental typographies, with the ratio of words to the blankness of the page often mimicking the size of the space being explored. *House of Leaves* also distinguishes itself from most other novels by using color in a highly systematic way. Every instance of the word *house* appears in blue while struck passages and the word *minotaur* are printed in red.² Danielewski's color scheme has led many to argue for the house's implicit connection to the digital. For any reader familiar with the Internet, it is difficult to encounter the word *house* printed in blue and not interpret its blueness as a hyperlink, a word or icon in a computer document that transports users from one digital place to another. Critics such as Pressman go so far as to label *House of Leaves* a hypertext:³ "Formally, the novel is structured as a hypertext, a system of interconnected narratives woven together through hundreds of footnotes" (108).⁴

However, given Danielewski's background in film theory,⁵ the blue coloring of the word *house* also could be read as a gesture toward the blue screen used in moviemaking, a "backdrop onto which anything can be projected" (Hayles, "Saving the Subject" 792). For a novel ostensibly about a homemade film, this latter interpretation of the blue-inked words would appear to be the more profitable of the two. Supposedly composed of footage from explorations inside the mutating space as well as footage from the more 'normal' rooms in the house, *The Navidson Record* announces itself as a documentary, a testament to the existence of one very strange house in rural Virginia. Navidson begins his documentary efforts by rigging his house with a small army of Hi 8 camcorders fitted with

motion detectors. “With the exception of the three bathrooms,” Zampanò notes, “there are cameras in every corner of the house. Navidson also keeps on hand two 16mm Arriflexes and his usual battery of 35mm cameras” (*HoL* 10). For readers not as well versed as Navidson (or Danielewski) in filmmaking equipment, references to specific types of cameras and camcorders may seem unimportant, but these technologies reveal the interest of *House of Leaves* in analog inscription devices. A Hi 8 is a type of analog camcorder that uses 8mm magnetic tape in reel-to-reel style; the 16mm Arriflex was the standard portable camera for news reporting and cinema production before the so-called digital revolution, a term often used to refer to the unprecedented technological development of the 1990s;⁶ and 35mm is the film size most commonly used for chemically-developed still photographs.

That the main action of *House of Leaves* occurs in the early stages of the digital revolution is a detail often overlooked by those who argue the text primarily responds to the anxieties of living in the digital age. The house begins changing in 1990; “The Five and a Half Minute Hallway,” the first fragment from *The Navidson Record* to be circulated, is released later that year; a second fragment, “Exploration #4,” appears in 1991; and *The Navidson Record*’s closing sequence is dated October 1992. Normally, the time period of a fictional work cannot be equated with the time period in which the author was writing; however, in the case of *House of Leaves*, the two significantly overlap. Navidson ends his film in 1992; Zampanò completes his manuscript in 1996; and Johnny pens his introduction in 1998. In interviews, Danielewski has stated that it took him ten years to produce his novel (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 124), which means he worked through the entire 1990s, the decade that witnessed the most wide-ranging, fast-paced changes to digital culture. Of these changes, the Internet is arguably the most consequential. However, “[w]hile the Internet itself was a real and relevant technology throughout this period [the early 1990s], the network had not yet achieved its popular apotheosis, and the World Wide Web was still in its infancy” (Kirschenbaum 7). In actuality, “[f]or most North Americans the Internet arrived sometime between 1993 and 1995” (Murphy 27).

Since the plot and production of *House of Leaves* both predate and coincide with the mainstream release of the digital revolution’s most significant development,⁷ I contend the novel is not so much in dialogue with the Internet as a phenomenon of digital life as it is with the *technologies* that eventually made this phenomenon possible; that is, microelectronics and the personal computer.⁸ *House of Leaves* often is described as a new kind of horror story, and if one agrees with this

description, which I do, then the question is what makes it so terrifying? What does the creaturely darkness of that ever-changing space behind the hallway door represent? I read this space not as a metaphor for the digital per se, but as emblematic of the unseeable spaces that characterize postmodern inscription technologies. The contemporary quest to store as much information as possible ironically has led to a relentless pursuit of miniaturization. Engineers of microelectronics strive to maximize the storage density of a chip while minimizing its physical size, and they have succeeded to the extent that the human eye can only see these devices with the aid of a microscope. This ‘invisibility factor’ accounts for postmodern technologies’ seemingly mythic or magical powers, and it is these invisible forces, these unknowable technological spaces, that *House of Leaves* finds so terrifying.

II. Covert Operations

In the world of digital technology, smaller is better. On the digital planet, growth is defined “not as becoming larger but as shrinking, to get more storage capacity in a smaller package at a lower cost per megabyte” (Stevens 298). In mathematical terms, the relationship between the size of the storage container and the size of the information being stored is called *storage density*, more specifically defined as “the information stored per unit area of volume,” and in all data storage technologies, storage density “has increased dramatically over the last 40 years” (Monson 224). Microchips, tiny silicon marvels, make digital data storage possible. Also known as integrated circuits, microchips consolidate millions of parts to perform electronic activities in microscopic spaces (Zygmunt xv). The key term in all of these details is *micro*. Microchips, microprocessors, microelectronics all operate beyond the borders of human vision, and thus, to a large degree, beyond human comprehension.

This inherent invisibility has come to define the difference between modern and postmodern technology. To phrase it another way, it is the difference between transparent and concealed processes. As Sholle explains:

In modernist culture, the technology of the machine is “transparent” in the sense that the user is supposed to be able to rationally construct the “workings” of the machine. For example, even the most technically inept person is aware that the automobile requires fuel that propels an engine that drives wheels, thus moving the vehicle forward. In operating early industrial technology, the worker even directs the mechanisms of gears and

pulleys that drive the mechanism. Accordingly, these technologies “transparently” laid out their “rational workings.” (14)

However, in postmodern technology, the machine’s inner workings remain hidden, leaving most users unaware of how digital objects, such as a digital photograph, are produced. Sholle goes on to note:

[D]igital machinery is more and more impenetrable and invisible; it is opaque to everyday understanding. The average “user” denounces the endeavor to grasp the functioning of the computer. The new technologies are everywhere, yet we can’t see them, their internal workings are invisible, all the more becoming socially and culturally taken for granted. [...] In fact, in many cases of microprocessor use, we don’t even know it is there—the alarm clock, the coffee maker, the telephone. It is this invisibility that creates a mythic power for the new technology, its magic power. (15)

Microelectronics operate on an imperceptible level, but they affect large-scale visible change. For instance, the memory card of a digital camera, which easily fits in the palm of a hand, can store thousands of images, which if printed would fill several photo albums. Thus, an inverse relationship exists between the physical size of microelectronics and the size of their place in the social imaginary. Because we only see the remarkable end result and not the process, we ascribe a larger-than-life quality to these physically imperceptible devices.

Until now I have been discussing invisibility in the context of digital technologies, broadly speaking. However, for the purposes of this essay, I would like to consider in more detail what is perhaps the most widely used digital technology: the computer. Like other digital data storage technologies, computers house data on microscopic chips, but this is not the only process they conceal. A computer’s ability to operate literally hinges on invisibility. Most computers rely on a non-removable hard drive to store essential information, such as the computer’s operating system. However, in order for a hard drive to work, it must be sealed off from any external pollutants. “The drive resides within the machine’s external case and is further isolated inside a sealed chamber to keep out dust, hair, and other contaminants” (Kirschenbaum 75). Because nanoscale intervals separate the main components of the drive, even something as small as a speck of dust could cause significant damage. Therefore, computer users can never see how their computers work while they are working. “As a writing instrument, [the hard drive] remains an abstraction—presented as a pie chart to show disk space remaining—or else apprehended through

aural rather than visual cues (the drive is audible as it spins up and down)” (Kirschenbaum 75).

Although the hard drive plays a central role in the way a computer functions as an inscription device, new media critics have devoted little attention to this mysterious box. One very notable exception is Matthew Kirschenbaum, whose recent work *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (2008) applies a textual studies approach to digital media themselves. More specifically, Kirschenbaum argues that understanding how a computer works is essential to understanding the texts it produces. To test his argument, Kirschenbaum solely focuses on electronic texts; however, his research also pertains to a discussion of print-based texts such as *House of Leaves*, which clearly displays an interest in critiquing inscription technologies.

As an inscription technology, computers are volumetric. This concept, as Kirschenbaum discerns, is so widely accepted that it has worked itself into the way we talk about computers:

The commonplace is to speak about writing a file *to* a disk; to say writing “on” a disk sounds vaguely wrong, the speech of someone who has not yet assimilated the relevant vocabulary or concepts. We write *on* paper, but we write *to* a magnetic disk (or tape). Part of what the preposition contributes here is a sense of interiority; because we cannot see anything on its surface, the disk is semantically refigured as a volumetric receptacle, a black box with a closed lid. If we were writing *on* the disk we would be able to see the text visibly, like a label. [...] Writing data “to” the storage element thus entails a literal as well as a logical displacement. (87; original emphasis)

To a certain degree, “all storage media, including printed books, are volumetric—that is, the surface area and structural dimensions of the media impose physical limitations on its capacity to record data” (Kirschenbaum 92). In other words, the physical size and material components of a storage device determine how much information that device can hold. For some devices, such as the microchip, the ratio between physical size and information stored is wildly disproportionate. For other storage units, such as a piece of paper, this relationship is significantly less fantastical.

In addition to the microchip and the hard drive, a computer relies on a third layer of invisibility to perform its normal operations. Today’s computers are multimedia machines, capable of word processing as well as storing and playing both audio and video. However, the original computers literally computed. They were invented to solve inordinately complicated mathematical problems (Ceruzzi 1). In order to be used as a

word processor, the computer “had to give a numerical representation to each letter that each rapid, careless keystroke indicated, converting each instantly to some odd, binary number string of zeros and ones” (Zygmunt 185). In other words, computers run on code.

At its most basic definition, code is executable language that causes things to happen (Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer* 49-50). Although humans write code, the computer itself is code’s primary reader. “Before any screen display accessible to humans can be generated, the machine must first read the code and use its instructions to write messages humans can read. [...] the machine is the final arbiter of whether the code is intelligible” (Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer* 50). Not only is code a ‘foreign’ language to most computer users, but it also is an imperceptible language operating ‘somewhere’ within the device. Similar to the hard drive, how a computer executes code, how it converts a string of numbers into words on a screen, remains unknown to the average user who simply pushes a button on the keyboard and waits for the corresponding letter to magically appear on the screen. As Derrida so eloquently articulates it:

I know how to make it [a computer] work (more or less) but I don’t know *how* it works. [...] I know less than ever “who it is” who goes there. Not knowing, in this case, is a distinctive trait, one that does not apply with pens or with typewriters either. With pens and typewriters, you think you know *how* it works, how “it responds.” Whereas with computers, even if people know how to use them up to a point, they rarely know, intuitively and without thinking [...] *how* the internal demon of the apparatus operates. What rules it obeys. (23; original emphasis)

Thus, digital technologies come to assume mythical powers in the eyes of most users not only because their essential components—microelectronics and hard drives—operate beyond the realm of human vision, but also because users are removed from the information these devices store. “In the electronic medium several layers of sophisticated technology must intervene between the writer or reader and the coded text” (Bolter 43). Before computer users can see any information on the screen, they must first wait for the device itself to read the code, retrieve the information, and render it into human language.

III. Camera Shy

With so many narratives and mediating forces circulating in *House of Leaves*, any interpretation of the novel must begin by defining the object at the center: the house itself. Unlike Hayles who reads the house as a

critique of subject formation in the digital age or Hansen who reads the house as “a figure for the otherness of the digital” (607), I interpret the house as a symbolic manifestation of the mythic qualities that characterize postmodern inscription technologies. As I have demonstrated, these technologies are driven by mechanisms that operate on a scale that defies human vision. Thus, from a human perspective, such mechanisms exist outside the bounds of material space. Distinguished by its tangibility, “[m]aterial space is, for us humans, quite simply the world of tactile and sensual interaction with matter; it is the space of experience” (Harvey 131). Because we can only physically interact with a digital device’s external components, such as a keyboard, and not its innermost mechanisms, such as a hard drive or microchips, we must resituate these devices as part of a symbolic space that is characterized by abstraction and “generates distinctive meanings through readings and interpretations” (Harvey 130).

The mysterious house on Ash Tree Lane straddles these two spaces. Nothing seems to exist in the house’s interior. According to Zampanò, the space is devoid of natural light, humidity, air movement, and sound. Compasses consistently malfunction within its walls, and no object, including dust, was ever found inside (*HoL* 370-71). Nor do the laws of physics apply here. Doors and passageways randomly appear, heights and widths unpredictably expand and contract, while “light never comes close to touching the punctuation point promised by [...] converging perspective lines, sliding on and on, spawning one space after another, a constant stream of corners and walls, all of them *unreadable* and perfectly smooth” (*HoL* 64; emphasis mine). “Unreadable” is an interesting word choice here for several reasons. First, it figures the house as a kind of inscription surface. Second, although this surface is described as being “perfectly smooth,” it does not necessarily follow that the surface is uninscribed. Rather, the surface appears to be smooth to the human eye; however, the juxtaposition of “unreadable” suggests a device other than the human eye may be needed to comprehend this space. In other words, “unreadable” should not be equated with “empty.” Just as the circuitry of a microchip is unreadable to the naked eye, these devices are far from barren. On the contrary, integrated circuits stand as remarkable architectural achievements that, “when examined under a microscope, look like the plan of a large, futuristic metropolis” (Ceruzzi 180). Thus, the question of readability is intimately tied to the question of visual technologies.

The enigmatic space inside the Navidson house systematically avoids capture by several visual technologies used to compensate for the limitations of the human eye. Although the explorers arm themselves with

a variety of still cameras, the space's darkness and variability render these machines powerless. As Holloway Roberts notes after returning from Exploration #3, "It's impossible to photograph what we saw" (*HoL* 86). Descriptions of photographs taken within the space consistently reinforce this sense of the medium's documentary inadequacy. "In one photograph," Zampanò remarks, "we find Reston in the foreground holding a flare, the light barely licking an ashen wall rising above him into inky oblivion, while in the background Tom stands surrounded by flares which just as ineffectually confront the impenetrable wall of nothingness looming around the Spiral Staircase" (*HoL* 155). And although *The Navidson Record's* status as a film would suggest Navidson's camcorders fared better than the 35mm still cameras, even these images fail to capture the space. Most of the frames depicting the explorations document the characters' interactions with each other, not the space itself. Critiquing a series of shabbily produced images, Zampanò notes, "This whole sequence amounts to a pretty ratty collection of cuts alternating between Jed's Hi 8 and an equally poor view from the 16mm camera and Navidson and Reston's Hi 8s. Nevertheless what matters most here is *adequately captured*: the alchemy of *social contact*" (*HoL* 192; emphasis mine).

Although *House of Leaves* contains a number of images in a variety of formats—everything from photographs and film stills to hand-drawn sketches and a page from a comics magazine—the novel consigns all of these objects to its various appendices. Some critics interpret this separation of text and image as a media hierarchy; that is, they read the images as supplements to the text because the images only appear in the appendices, as if they were supporting material. In her work on photo-texts, Silke Horstkotte asserts that "[i]n theory and practice photographic and other visual "illustrations" have traditionally been accorded a strictly subordinate status to the dominant text," and she goes on to claim that Danielewski's practice of relegating images to the appendix "again indicat[es] their supplementary status in relation to the body of the novel" (51). Similarly, Timothy Adams, in his work on the use of photographs in twentieth-century fiction, argues that "[t]he photographs in *House of Leaves* are finally just another example of mock documentation, images that, for all of their layers of reference, do not depict any of the characters in the novel" (181). I would argue the separation of text and image does not indicate a supplementary relationship between the two, where the content of one medium reinforces the content of the other; nor is it a facetious attempt at documentation. Instead, I read the distance between text and image as formally reinforcing the inadequacy of the image as such to capture the nature of the house, and thus the nature of postmodern

inscription technologies. Because these technologies operate outside the boundaries of a material, tactile space, any attempt to visually document them falls short. *House of Leaves* recognizes that the ‘invisibility factor’ which characterizes digital devices means there are always unseen processes at work, and visual technologies such as cameras and camcorders do not bring the user any closer to seeing these processes. Thus, in its absent presence, *The Navidson Record* essentially deconstructs the notion of visual documentary.

If the image is powerless to document in such circumstances, then what is the alternative? *House of Leaves* surprisingly suggests the answer is printed text. The novel candidly acknowledges that representation is an approximation: “Representation does not replace. It only offers distance and in rare cases perspective” (*HoL* 346, fn 308). Rather than pursue an unattainable accurate record of events, the novel argues for the value of interpretation. When faced with “the extraordinary absence of sensory information” inside the house, each individual must “manufacture his or her own data” (*HoL* 165). In other words, individuals must approach the house—and postmodern inscription technologies by extension—as a symbolic space, a space that can only be understood abstractly. And *House of Leaves* contends that printed text, not the camera or the camcorder, is the only technology capable of illuminating this space.

IV. Inky Folds

For all of Zampanò’s detailed analysis of *The Navidson Record*, there is a very real possibility that the film never existed. Johnny Truant takes the most pessimistic view, declaring: “Zampanò’s entire project is about a film which doesn’t even exist. You can look, I have, but no matter how long you search you will never find *The Navidson Record* in theaters or video stores” (*HoL* xix-xx). Obviously Johnny’s claim that Navidson never produced such a film calls into question the veracity of Zampanò’s manuscript. If the film is not real, then the manuscript is a work of fiction, not a work of academic scholarship. However, the issue is more complicated than this, as Johnny reveals:

Zampanò writes constantly about seeing. What we see, how we see and what in turn we can’t see. Over and over again, in one form or another, he returns to the subject of light, space, shape, line, color, focus, tone, contrast, movement, rhythm, perspective and composition. None of which is surprising considering Zampanò’s piece centers on a documentary film called *The Navidson Record* made by a Pulitzer Prize-winner

photojournalist who must somehow capture the most difficult subject of all: the sight of darkness itself.

Odd, to say the least.

At first I figured Zampanò was just a bleak old dude [...] until of course [I] took a more careful look [at his apartment] and realized—hey why are all these candles unused? Why no clocks [...] And what’s with [...] the fact that there’s hardly a goddamn bulb in the whole apartment [...] Well that, of course, was Zampanò’s greatest ironic gesture [...] all this language of light, film and photography, and he hadn’t seen a thing since the mid-fifties.

He was blind as a bat. (*HoL* xxi)

Zampanò’s blindness complicates the narrative in two ways. First, it means Zampanò’s manuscript cannot be regarded as a literal transcription of *The Navidson Record*, regardless of whether or not the film actually exists. This in turn recasts the central issue from authenticity—Are the film and the manuscript accurate reflections of reality? Is this a ‘true’ story?—to the process by which a narrative is recorded. If Zampanò cannot see the film, then his text is an act of pure representation, not remediation. Johnny even comes to question whether or not Zampanò himself is pure textual representation: “He called himself Zampanò. It was the name he put down on his apartment lease and on several other fragments I found. I never came across any sort of ID, whether a passport, license or other official document insinuating that yes, he indeed was An-Actual-&-Accounted-For person” (*HoL* xii).⁹

Perhaps Zampanò is simply a name, a written word, an inscription on a piece of paper. Danielewski’s diction frequently signals an interest in writing as a technology and paper and ink as a means of communication. Zampanò’s apartment is covered with “reams and reams of it [paper]. Endless snarls of words [...] on old napkins, the tattered edges of an envelope, once even on the back of a postage stamp [...] each fragment completely covered with the creep of years and years of ink pronouncements” (*HoL* xvii). After accidentally knocking ink bottles off a shelf at his tattoo parlor, Johnny finds his “face has been splattered with purple, as have [his] arms, granting contrast, and thus defining [him], marking [him], and at least for the moment, preserving [him]” (*HoL* 72). The letter Navidson writes to Karen before he returns to the house for his solo exploration is described as containing “inky folds” (*HoL* 388). And, of course, the novel’s title, *House of Leaves*, self-consciously draws attention to the book as a house of paper.

What makes *House of Leaves* so unique as a literary artifact is not its networked narratives, but rather the way the novel explores how the flat surface of a page conceptually can become more three-dimensional; in

other words, how text can engender a sense of volume. In his landmark work *Writing Space*, Jay David Bolter notes that although “the physical space of a writing technology defines the basic unit, the volume of writing, [...] [e]very written text [also] generates a conceptual space in the minds of writers and readers” (85). How this conceptual space takes shape in the minds of readers or writers to a large extent depends on the inscription technology used to produce the writing:

Each physical writing space fosters a particular understanding both of the act of writing and of the product, the written text. [...] The conceptual space of a printed book is one in which writing is stable, monumental, and controlled exclusively by the author. It is the space defined by perfect printed volumes that exist in thousands of identical copies. The conceptual space of electronic writing, on the other hand, is characterized by fluidity and an interactive relationship between writer and reader. These different conceptual spaces foster different styles and genres of writing and different theories of literature. (Bolter 11)

However, *House of Leaves* employs its typographic experimentation to disrupt the sense of spatial stability usually associated with a printed book. Although every printed copy of the same *House of Leaves* edition is identical, the typography of each page in *House of Leaves* is not. In particular, the pages that recount explorations of the house exhibit intense typographic experimentation. In some instances, words are fractured into syllables that span multiple pages. At other points, the text is written upside down, sideways, right to left or bottom to top, forcing readers to physically turn their books in order to navigate the page. All of these typographic innovations foreground the page as a material writing space, but they also dramatize the ability of print to spatially signify linguistic meaning. If readers encounter the word *expanding* in standard typeset, they must conceptually associate the word with the action it signifies, but if they encounter “e x p a n d i n g” (*HoL* 289), the typography spatially registers the word’s meaning. Symbolic space—the space of interpretation—and physical space—the space of the page—become inseparable. In these moments, the text transforms from a two-dimensional surface to a volumetric space that the reader must move not over—as in reading over the words—but through.

In this sense, *House of Leaves* typographically materializes the shape-shifting house. The house is terrifying because it has an unstable volume. What begins as a ¼-inch spatial discrepancy metamorphizes into a space that eventually covers hundreds of miles at least and takes its explorers days to traverse. The connection between volume and inscription

technologies becomes apparent from the moment the house begins to grow. According to *The Navidson Record*, this inexplicable growth begins when Tom, Navidson's brother, reaches for a book to prop open the mysterious closet door. As Zampanò explains, "Tom turns to Karen's shelves and reaches for the largest *volume* he can find. A *novel*. [...] [I]ts removal causes an immediate domino effect. [...] [A]s the books topple into each other, the last few do not stop at the wall [...] but fall instead to the floor, revealing at least a foot between the end of the shelf and the plaster" (*HoL* 40; emphasis mine). That the growth begins when Tom picks up a book—a *novel*—is telling. Pressman, who reads *House of Leaves* across its multimedia network,¹⁰ interprets this event as a "meta-critical moment" in which "*House of Leaves* zooms in on the role of the novel in making and measuring reality. It illuminates the location of "A *novel*" in a larger infrastructural and architectural network, represented by the bookshelves, that is mutating in unexpected and horrifying ways" (110). However, I would argue Pressman's reading mistakes the source of the terror. It is not the removal of the novel but the expansion of the wall that causes the other books to fall. The house mutates here, not books as such. I read this scene not as one that fears the book's capacity to aesthetically render reality, but as one that places the novel in competition with the mutating space. Tom intends to use a novel as a tool for controlling the unstable space: to prop open the door. The novel that Tom pulls off the shelf is first referred to not as a novel or even as a book, but as a volume. Given the preoccupation of *House of Leaves* with space, it is difficult to read this word as just another label for "book." The wordplay suggests that what unfolds in *House of Leaves* is a clash between two volumetric spaces: one a stand-in for the hidden spaces of digital technologies, and the other an attempt to textually expose them.

Not surprisingly, Danielewski draws from his background in film theory to help him accomplish this task. In interviews, he readily admits that his interest in film theory is the driving force behind the novel's typographic experimentation. "[T]he visual experiments in *House of Leaves* are mostly based on the grammar of film and the enormous foundation of theory established over the last century" (Danielewski, "Haunted House" 119). *The Navidson Record's* absence is, of course, central to this experiment. By structuring his novel around a film that cannot be seen, Danielewski creates a space for exploring printed text's capacity to function as a filmic medium. This property of print becomes apparent in Chapter X, or "The Rescue (Part One)." According to *The Navidson Record*, Exploration #4, the exploration team's attempt to reach the bottom of a colossal spiral staircase, goes horribly wrong.¹¹ They are

lost in the space for seven days, and in that time Holloway Roberts, the expedition leader, experiences what only can be described as a psychotic break. He begins to think a monster that inhabits the deep recesses of the space is stalking the team. Overtaken by paranoia, Holloway shoots Wax and disappears into the darkness. When Chapter X begins, Navidson, his brother Tom, and Billy Reston set off into the space on a mission to rescue the other members of the team, and as usual, the exploration is connected to film equipment: "Using 16mm motion picture (colour and B/W) and 35mm stills, Navidson for the first time begins to capture the size and sense of that place" (*HoL* 154). However, what follows this introduction of Navidson's film equipment and the declaration of his success at finally documenting the space is not a sequence of photographs or film stills as one might expect, but rather a sequence of typographic experimentation. Thus, the alleged documentary success is linked to text, not to image. Typographic innovation becomes the stand-in for visual evidence, and in essence, a surrogate for the film itself.

Technically speaking, films seamlessly link discontinuous, static images. When a film reel is projected, the motion of the strip creates an illusion of continuity between the individual images (Baudry 29). This assumed continuity in conjunction with the content of the images contributes to the film's meaning, but according to Zampanò, *The Navidson Record* refuses to participate in this illusion. Rather than create a sense of continuity, Navidson's editing decisions lead to the "constant destruction of continuity, [with] frequent jump cuts prohibiting any sort of accurate mapmaking [of the house]" (*HoL* 109). Zampanò's reference to jump cuts critiques Navidson's habit of splicing together nonsequential locations, but it also implies temporal discontinuity as well. Jump cuts break a film's continuity by compressing time. To phrase it more simply, the action moves from moment A to moment C without showing moment B, so the time it takes to physically view the scenes is less than the time that actually has elapsed between the scenes.

Although the unseen film allegedly employs jump cuts to compress space and time, the textual representation of the film attempts to expose them. Chapter X spans nearly one hundred pages of *House of Leaves*, and yet it takes far less time to read than most of the more normal-sized chapters. This pacing is the direct result of the chapter's typography. On any given page, most of the text occupies a small fraction of the surface area and is relegated to either the top or bottom, so although readers must physically flip through a sizeable number of pages in this chapter, the number of words they actually read remains relatively low. Eventually, Navidson, Tom and Reston reach the injured Wax and Jed, the final

member of the team. However, the sense of relief this reunion brings is short-lived as a deranged Holloway ambushes the team and fatally wounds Jed. In his manuscript, Zampanò writes of slowing down the film to examine this scene frame-by-frame. This process

reveals how a fraction of a second [after the reunion] one bullet pierced his [Jed's] upper lip, blasted through the maxillary bone, dislodging even fragmenting the central teeth, (Reel 10; Frame 192) and then in the following frame (Reel 10; Frame 193) obliterated the back side of his head, chunks of occipital lobe and parietal bone spewn out in an instantly senseless pattern uselessly preserved in celluloid light (Reel 10; Frames 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, & 205). Ample information perhaps to track the trajectories of individual skull bits and blood droplets, determine destinations, even origins, but not nearly enough information to actually ever reassemble the shatter. Here then— (*HoL* 193)

But Zampanò's words do much more than describe in vivid detail the moment of Jed's death. In the absence of the film, the text literally replaces the frames in question. The above passage appears in normal typeset and begins at the top of page 193, but in order to see what follows the abruptly interrupted "Here then —" readers must turn the page. The rest of the text reads, "the aftermath of meaning. A lifetime finished between the space of two frames. The dark line where the eye persists in seeing something that was never there to begin with"; however, to get from "Here then" to "begin with," the reader's eye must travel across not one or two, but twelve pages (*HoL* 194-205). By breaking lines and words (aftermath appears as two words, *after* and *math*, on adjoining pages) into pieces and unfolding them over twelve pages, Danielewski's typography turns each page into the equivalent of a film frame and establishes print's adaptability as an inscription technology.

It is no coincidence that these page numbers in *House of Leaves* (194-205) correspond to all of the tedious frame numbers Zampanò references in his manuscript; nor is it a coincidence that Reel 10 corresponds to Chapter X. With this scene and others like it, Danielewski utilizes film techniques to explore the spatio-temporal qualities of language and the constructedness of any narrative.¹² These instances of typographic experimentation, which manipulate language and the reader's visual field to expose illusions of continuity, dramatically affect how a reader temporally and spatially interacts with *House of Leaves*. Although it only took a fraction of a second for Holloway's bullet to strike and kill Jed, the typographic representation of this scene extends the event—the textual equivalent of Zampanò slowing down the film to view it frame-by-frame.

Both cases emphasize the imperceptible. Both cases also reveal the way technology affects narrative. The continuity we sense when we view a film is a byproduct of the film's projector, which projects the frames too quickly for the human eye to discern their inherent discontinuity. Similarly, uniform typographies work to elide language's inherent plasticity. *House of Leaves* utilizes the materiality of the page to aesthetically highlight these unseen spaces, but it consistently refuses to fill in the blanks, leaving the reader to decide what exists between the space of two frames.

V. Mediating Machines

When asked if advances in computer technology and word processing influenced the formal structure of *House of Leaves*, Danielewski emphatically denies any connection between digital technologies and his composition process:

"This is one of those moments when I get to say, 'HA!' [...] And I say 'HA!' here because I didn't write *House of Leaves* on a word processor. In fact, I wrote out the entire thing in pencil! And what's most ironic, I'm still convinced that it's a great deal easier to write something out by hand than on a computer. You hear a lot of people talking about how computers make writing so much easier because they offer the writer so many choices, whereas in fact pencil and paper allow you a much greater freedom. You can do anything with a pencil! I even used a pencil to storyboard the labyrinth section in the novel, which was by far the most complicated thing to write from a design standpoint." ("Haunted House" 117-18)

If we take Danielewski at his word,¹³ then his rather neo-Luddite stance on the computer as a writing machine speaks to the tension between inscription technologies in *House of Leaves*; more specifically, to a clash between digital and analog inscription technologies. As I already mentioned, Navidson and his team only use analog recording equipment—the Hi 8s, the Arriflexes, the 35mm cameras—to document the space. Zampanò claims that fragments of *The Navidson Record* were never officially distributed; rather, "VHS copies were passed around by hand, a series of progressively degenerating dubs of a home video" (*HoL* 5). Both Zampanò and Johnny Truant systematically avoid digital technologies when constructing their respective narratives: Johnny writes by hand in a journal, and Zampanò is described as "a graphomaniac [who] scribbled until he died" (*HoL* xxii). And Danielewski himself considers a book to be a kind of analog technology, noting that, "somehow the analogue powers

of these wonderful bundles of paper have been forgotten. [...] I'd like to see the book reintroduced for all it really is" ("A Conversation with Mark Danielewski" np). All of this is not to say that digital recording technology remains entirely absent from the novel. For example, in his living room Navidson assembles "a Quadra Mac, two Zip drives, an Epson colour printer, an old PC" (*HoL* 97); however, as Pressman keenly observes, "the digital objects are not brought into the hallway or used by Zampanò to describe the scene. [...] Digital technology remains the "spectre" in the background, behind the hallway door" (111).

In order to apprehend the importance of this division between digital and analog, it is necessary to understand how each technology records information. Analog technologies inscribe data as a continuous series of variations in a measurable waveform. In contrast, digital technologies record information in discrete or non-continuous values, encoding data as a series of zeros and ones. The primary benefit of digital recording over analog recording is that the former, in principle, perfectly reconstructs the information. "When a digital audio recording is transferred from one storage medium to another in the form of a data file, the data on the second medium are identical to those on the first and there is then no generation loss. [...] In contrast, analog audio recordings always suffer generation loss, with each succeeding copy having lower quality than the generation before" (Watkinson 115). The same can be said of digital images. "In principle, digital video systems have no degradation. At reasonable signal-to-noise ratios, the digits containing the picture information are reconstructed perfectly after each generation" (Sugaya 198). Conversely, analog video recordings can withstand only a handful of duplications before the quality of the image significantly decreases. The image quality of a film recorded on an analog device, such as Navidson's Hi 8, "degrades almost three times after several duplications. The picture becomes very noisy and the resolution is also poor" (Sugaya 198).

With the possibility of exact replication, the concept of *original* holds little value in a digital world. Unlike energy or matter, information is replicated not conserved,¹⁴ and the better the digital technology, the more difficult it is to distinguish between the authentic object and the copy. In other words, digital replication effectively collapses the distance between the original and its successive generations. *House of Leaves* suggests that digital culture's tendency to ignore this distance, to erase as thoroughly as possible all traces of mediation, is problematic. Thus, the novel continually works to expose the seams of its own construction. It privileges analog technologies, including writing and the book itself, precisely because the

imperfect objects they produce attest to the distance between these products and the original source.

Although critics often classify *House of Leaves* as a hypertext because of its networked narratives, this term problematically obscures the novel's interest in the distance between original and derivative. A network is a system of entanglements. The word implies interconnection, not hierarchy. Akin to Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, the network is "anti-genealogy" (Deleuze and Guattari 11). The structure of *House of Leaves* certainly embodies these qualities. Its "navigation system connect[s] multiple narratives and reading paths. The reader hopscoches across pages and points of view, layers of footnotes and different fonts" (Pressman 107). However, each of these narratives—and by extension each of their authors—establishes a distinct spatio-temporal relationship with the object at the novel's center: the house on Ash Tree Lane. *The Navidson Record*, which I will call the first-order narrative, is the narrative closest to the events that occur in the house. Zampanò's manuscript represents a second-order narrative, since he can only vicariously experience the events through *The Navidson Record*. Johnny Truant's footnotes, which register his reactions to Zampanò's response to *The Navidson Record*, are the third-order narrative. And taking into account the adjustments the Editors make to Johnny's work, the book that readers hold in their hands stands as the fourth-order narrative.

As the distance from the original source increases, so too does the space for interpretation, an argument that *House of Leaves* registers typographically. Ironically, this premise materializes in Chapter XX, "The Return." Also known as the infamous Exploration #5, this portion of *The Navidson Record* chronicles Navidson's solo expedition into the house's core. The chapter begins with an epigraph rendered in Braille. In a footnote, the Editors translate the epigraph and also indicate that the name of the epigraph's source is "illegible" (*HoL* 423). However, "illegible" assumes a double meaning here. It applies not just to the author but also to the epigraph itself. Braille is a tactile writing system. In order for the fingers to read it properly, the pattern of dots that represent each letter or number must be raised. But the epigraph in *House of Leaves* is printed flush with the page, which literally renders the quotation illegible. Thus, the epigraph draws attention to its status as a representation. It is a visual illustration of Braille, but not Braille as such.

Akin to the first four explorations, Exploration #5¹⁵ begins with a tedious inventory of equipment. Once again, Navidson packs analog devices including "a 1962 H16 hand crank Bolex 16mm camera" (*HoL* 424), a model often used in film schools. Although he apparently planned

to take a non-analog device this time, “the thermal video camera he had arranged to rent fell through in the last minute” (*HoL* 424). Furthermore, instead of conducting the exploration on foot, as usual, Navidson ventures into the space on a mountain bike equipped with an odometer. This last detail reveals that Exploration #5 attempts to document not only space but also distance. At the end of the first night, the odometer indicates Navidson has traveled 163 miles, and “[f]or the next five days Navidson covers anywhere from 240 to 300 miles at a time, though on the fifth day, in what amounts to an absurd fourteen hour marathon, Navidson logs 428 miles” (*HoL* 425).

Navidson’s journey across these impossible distances marks the beginning of the chapter’s typographic experimentation. In these scenes, Danielewski utilizes the space of the page and typographic innovation to mimic how the house transforms and how Navidson experiences these spatial changes. For instance, to represent the ceiling closing in on Navidson, Danielewski isolates the statement, “Sometimes the ceiling drops in on him,” at the bottom of the page (*HoL* 427). The statement’s content and location work together to represent not only the motion of the ceiling but also the ceiling’s effect on Navidson’s spatial position. Just as the low ceiling would compress Navidson’s body, the page’s overwhelming blankness forces those seven words towards its bottom edge. Similarly, when the ceiling rises again, the typography imitates the action, with the words “rising higher and higher” unfolding diagonally up the page (*HoL* 429).

As Navidson travels further and further into the house, he eventually reaches its center. However, the room he finds himself in suddenly vanishes, and “[a]ll that remains is the ashblack slab upon which he is standing, now apparently supported by nothing: darkness below, above, and of course darkness beyond” (*HoL* 464). By this time, Navidson’s Hi 8 batteries are depleted, leaving him unable to film this space. He also is running out of light: he lost his flashlight long ago and now only has three flares remaining. Stranded in this vast nothingness, Navidson “turns his attention to the last possible activity, the only book in his possession: *House of Leaves*” (*HoL* 465).

Although this moment of self-referentiality situates *House of Leaves* in a long tradition of postmodern novels, Danielewski’s typography complicates the reference’s effect. Typically, referencing the title of the novel within the novel itself is an attempt to undermine the authority of the author and draw attention to the artificiality of the text, but this self-reference is embedded in typographically experimental pages that attempt to reflect the space at the center of the house. Both the form and content of

these pages configure this scene as a moment of looking. When Navidson first enters the space, it appears to be a window: “With each step Navidson takes, we too grow more and more convinced that we are really looking at a window and furthermore an *open* window” (*HoL* 464; original emphasis). The shift to first-person plural ties readers to Navidson in the act of looking. Both he and we are on the verge of finally seeing the heart of the house. “Doorways offer passage but windows offer vision. Here at last is a chance to behold something beyond the interminable pattern of wall, room, and door; a chance to reach a place of perspective and perhaps make some sense of the whole” (*HoL* 464). However, what Navidson sees is far from illuminating; just another “grotesque vision of absence” (*HoL* 464).

The pages’ architecture concretizes this moment of looking. The passages that equate the space to an open window and then reveal its emptiness form a triangle, with its tip anchored in the top left corner and its base expanding toward the page’s center (*HoL* 464). The passages that reveal the failure of Navidson’s recording equipment and his copy of *House of Leaves* form the same shape; however, they unfold from the bottom right corner toward the page’s center (*HoL* 465). And both of these textual triangles are separated by a sizeable stripe of blankness. Thus, when viewed together, these two pages typographically approximate the shape of an open window.

Like Navidson, readers do not physically see anything when they look into this window. The prevailing sense of absence in the text has led some to argue that *House of Leaves* is a nihilistic novel. Slocombe interprets the house as a figure for nihilism and argues that, “[t]hrough the figure of the house, Danielewski offers an unprecedented textual meditation on the nature of nothingness and the way in which this relates to literature, architecture, and philosophy” (88). However, I would argue the sense of absence that pervades the novel is not part of a discourse on nothingness, which implies nonexistence, but rather advocates for the value of interpretation in an age of hypermediation. Although Danielewski’s typography often reflects the space of the house, the two significantly differ in their color. The house consistently appears as a dark space. However, the typography of *House of Leaves* consistently evokes a sense not of darkness but of blankness, of information needing to be filled in. Danielewski’s typographical choices draw attention to the page’s status as an inscription surface, a storage space for information. By remaining predominantly blank at the precise moment that Navidson reaches the center of the house, the page exposes the distance between experience and representation. Although Navidson is at the house’s center, four mediators

separate readers from this space: *The Navidson Record*, Zampanò, Johnny Truant, and the Editors. The fact that Navidson begins reading a novel called *House of Leaves* in this space attests to the separation between a reader's version of events and Navidson's experience of the house. In the end, interpretation remains the only recourse open to readers. They can never know how—or even if—these events unfolded.

In interviews, Danielewski admits that “the novel’s true protagonist is the figure of interpretation, which is to say, the act of reading, or even, perhaps, the reader herself” (Hansen 602). Stated more simply, *House of Leaves* promotes process over product: the act of piecing together textual components, the act of constructing an explanation, the act of grappling with a narrative. The emphasis on process rather than product stands in clear contrast to digital culture’s obsession with immediacy. Digital culture “attempts to achieve immediacy by ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation” (Bolter and Grusin 11). As the quality of digital technology improves, so too does our ability to erase any trace of mediation in the products they produce, which fosters a false sense of immediacy—the illusion that a direct, unmediated relationship exists between copy and original. *House of Leaves* argues this equation is problematic because it fails to take into account the processes that drive digital technology. At every level, users of these technologies are abstracted from the objects they store and produce; yet for the average user, these mediations and how they affect the products we actually see go unnoticed. With its radical typography and seemingly fantastical content, *House of Leaves* exposes the inherent distance that exists between any event and its record, regardless of the technology used to document it. Ironically, it takes writing, the ultimate analog technology, and the book, a centuries-old storage unit, to visually display this gap.

Notes

¹ For less technologically-oriented approaches to *House of Leaves* see Brick, Hamilton, Shastri and Slocombe.

² The copyright page of this edition, known as the full color edition, indicates three other versions of *House of Leaves*: a two-color edition, a black and white edition, and an incomplete edition. Partly in response to the information on this page, “Pantheon also released a “red” version eighteen months after initial publication” (Brick fn 5). However, almost all critics work with the full color edition. Slocombe is the one exception I found. Whereas the word *house* appears in blue in the full color edition, Slocombe notes that in his edition “each occurrence of the word “House,” in whatever language, appears in grayscale” (89).

³ Hayles also refers to *House of Leaves* as a hypertext (“Intermediation” 99). She defines a hypertext as having at minimum three characteristics: “multiple reading paths, chunked text, and some kind of linking mechanism to connect the chunks” (*Writing Machines* 26). Whereas a hypertext emphasizes links, a cybertext “connotes a functional and semiotic approach that emphasizes a computational perspective,” and, as Hayles notes, “[n]either term pays particular attention to interactions between the materiality of inscription technologies and the inscriptions they produce” (*Writing Machines* 28).

⁴ Hansen also sees the blue ink as symbolizing a hyperlink, although he reads the connection as a disingenuous one: “Making pseudoserious reference to the blue highlighting of hyperlinks on Web pages, the blue ink of the word ‘house’ in the work’s title transforms this keyword into something like a portal to information located elsewhere, both within and beyond the novel’s frame” (598). Unlike a ‘proper’ hypertext, the blue *house* does not literally transport the reader to any new information. This also juxtaposes *house* against the novel’s extreme use of footnotes, which prompt the reader to shift his attention to the bottom of the page.

⁵ In addition to formal training in film theory, Danielewski also grew up in a highly film-oriented family. His father, a concentration camp survivor, relocated to the United States after the war and in only a few years, “managed to reinvent himself as a filmmaker who eventually directed avant-garde art works, commercial features, and documentaries” (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 102). Ironically, for all of Danielewski’s interest in film, he refuses to sell film rights to *House of Leaves*, claiming that his “reverence for books—for the power and flexibility of phrases unfolding on the page” is too great (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 117).

⁶ As Christiane Paul importantly notes, many of the digital revolution’s foundational technologies appeared decades before the 1990s; however, “these technologies became seemingly ubiquitous during the last decade of the twentieth century: hardware and software became more refined and affordable, and the advent of the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s added a layer of ‘global connectivity’” (7).

⁷ By the middle of the 1990s, the Internet twice graced the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* (Murphy 27).

⁸ By the early 1990s, personal computing was a familiar phenomenon. The 1980s was the “first full decade of home computing,” and attesting to the computer’s cultural importance, *Time* named it “Man of the Year” in 1982 (Kirschenbaum 7-8). As early as 1990, engineers were in the late stages of moving the computer out of the home and the office with the development of the laptop (Noble 311).

⁹ *House of Leaves* is not the first artistic work to feature a character named Zampanò. In 1954, Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini directed *La Strada* (*The Road*), a film that features a gypsy named Zampanò. Given Danielewski’s interest in film, it is quite possible that he drew inspiration from Fellini’s character when crafting his own Zampanò.

¹⁰ Although most readers know *House of Leaves* as a print novel, it has a somewhat complicated publication history. Before Pantheon, a division of Random House, published it in 2000, the text appeared online twice. In 1997, Danielewski posted it

as a pdf in response to friends who wanted to know what he had been working on: “Friends wanted to know what this book was that I had been writing, and it was expensive to print out and ship across the country to someone who might look at it and say, ‘Oh, 700 pages, I don’t want to look at this.’ So I just found a crummy URL [...] and posted it as a pdf file and said, ‘Look, if you want to read it, you can get it online’” (Danielewski, “Profile”). Then, prior to the official release of *House of Leaves* in 2000, “the novel was again uploaded to the Internet: online in serialized installments by the publisher” (Pressman 119). In addition to these print and online versions, the novel also participates in what Pressman calls a “network of multimedia, multiauthored forms that collectively comprise its narrative” (107). The other nodes in this network include the *House of Leaves* website (www.houseofleaves.com); *The Whalstoe Letters*, a book also by Danielewski that includes a series of letters from the Appendix of *House of Leaves* as well as several previously unpublished letters; and *Haunted*, a soundtrack to the novel, which Danielewski’s sister, the recording artist, Poe, composed (Pressman 107). Hayles more precisely defines such multimedia networks as “Work as Assemblage,” “a cluster of related texts that quote, comment upon, amplify, and otherwise intermediate one another” (*My Mother Was a Computer* 105).

¹¹ Six people ultimately explore the house: Holloway Roberts, Jed Leeder, Wax Hook, Billy Reston, Tom Navidson, and Will Navidson. Initially, Navidson promises Karen that he will not participate in these expeditions.

¹² See, for example, pages 232-33, which typographically echo a bullet splintering a door, and pages 293-96, which typographically depict the snapping of a rope used to rescue the team members.

¹³ Pressman is skeptical of Danielewski’s remarks, arguing that “[t]aking Danielewski at his word [about writing the text in pencil] is seductive but dangerous, particularly for an author who claims not to have read Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* or David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, two of the most clear literary influences on *House of Leaves*’s hypertext” (121). However, Pressman slightly slants Danielewski’s knowledge of Nabokov and Wallace’s work. Although Danielewski claims he has not read *Pale Fire* or *Infinite Jest*, he acknowledges that he is “[well] aware of what Nabokov had managed to do in the book” and “admit[s] to being influenced by Wallace even though I haven’t read any David Foster Wallace, because I believe we are often just as influenced by writers we do not read as we are not influenced by those we do” (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 114).

¹⁴ Summarizing the work of Mark Poster and other media theorists, Hayles remarks that “information does not operate according to the same constraints that govern matter and energy. If I have a disk and make a copy for you, we both have the information” (*My Mother Was a Computer* 63).

¹⁵ Tellingly, Exploration #5 begins on April 1 (*HoL* 424), better known as April Fool’s Day. By linking the exploration to this date, Danielewski seems to suggest that Navidson’s attempt to understand the house—his epistemological quest—is a fool’s errand.

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“YOU WERE THERE”:
THE ALLWAYS ONTOLOGIES
OF *ONLY REVOLUTIONS*

ALISON GIBBONS

I. We are the time (H/S 243)

—Do you have the time?
—We are the time. (H 243)

—You got the time?
—We are the time. (S 243)

Mark Z. Danielewski’s (2006) novel *Only Revolutions* is preoccupied by time. When asked for the time by a ‘GROUNDSSLASS’ or ‘GROUNDSSCHAP’ (depending on whose narrative you’re reading), *Only Revolutions*’ central characters and star-crossed lovers Sam and Hailey respond, “We are the time.” This chapter launches from the conjecture that temporality and chronology are fundamental to both the narrative of *Only Revolutions* and to its reading experience. Indeed, the novel’s temporal structure problematises a linear unfolding of time and narrative events. So too does the reader’s interaction with the book: the novel’s publisher, Random House, suggests a reading practice of “alternating between Hailey & Sam, reading eight pages at a time.” Hailey and Sam’s narratives are printed at a 180 degree angle to each other; they each start on opposing sides of the book, cross in the middle, and conclude where their lover’s narrative begins. As such, the reader must continually revolve the book as they alternate between narratives. In her essay “Mapping Time, Charting Data,” N. Katherine Hayles outlines the temporal logic of *Only Revolutions*:

Sam’s moves from 22 November 1863 (in the middle of the Civil War), whereas Hailey’s starts on 22 November 1963 with John F. Kennedy’s assassination [...]. Each moves through about a century, so that Sam’s ends where Hailey’s began, while Hailey’s ends in our future of 19 January 2063, with the last chronological interval for which events are recorded starting with 25 May 2005. (165)

Despite the precision of these dates, *Only Revolutions* casts temporality not as a clear or fixed linear trajectory, but as a multivalent system. It is exactly such a system that leads Hayles to speak of the novel as a "topographic plane upon which a wide variety of interactions and permutations are staged" (159). It is such a system that I refer to as the "allways ontologies" of *Only Revolutions*, an oscillating arrangement that is as much about each isolated element in the novel's design as it is about the dynamic interchange between those elements.

II. Allways ongoing and going (H 124)

In his 2002 monograph, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*, David Herman outlines what he calls contextual anchoring:

Just as narratives cue interpreters to build temporal and spatial relationships between items and events in the storyworld, and just as they constrain readers, viewers, and listeners to take up perspectives on the items and events at issue, stories trigger recipients to establish a more or less direct or oblique relationship between the stories they are interpreting and the contexts in which they are interpreting them. Or rather, the format of a story can sometimes prompt interpreters to assess the relation between two types of mental models involved in narrative understanding. On the one hand, interpreters build models as part of the process of representing the space-time profile, participant roles, and overall configuration of storyworlds. On the other hand, interpreters rely on analogous, model-based representations of the world(s) in which they are trying to make sense of a given narrative. Contextual anchoring is my name for the process whereby a narrative, in a more or less explicit and reflexive way, asks its interpreters to search for analogies between the representations contained within these two classes of mental models. (331)

What Herman means by this is that there are occasions whereby a narrative may be structured in such a way as to evoke a blurring between the space-time parameters of the world of the narrative and the space-time parameters of the world in which reading and interpretation are taking place. In other words, the storyworld (of the characters) and the real world (of the reader) may not remain as distinct ontological planes.

As part of his discussion, Herman also considers distortion in narrative time and order, paying particular attention to narratives in which the temporal sequence has become 'fuzzy.' For Herman, novels or stories which exhibit an indeterminate narrative structure engage in a 'polychronic' style of narration (*Story Logic* 211-61). Polychrony, he explains;

[...] includes both the more and less “radical” types of inexactness in coding, as well as both the multiple and the partial ordering of events. Polychrony can thus entail self-conscious, self-subverting modes of narration in which alternative or multiple ways of sequencing events are entertained. And it can also entail modes of narration that make it possible to reconstruct a global sequence or overall temporal interval, yet mitigate interpreters’ efforts to establish temporal positions for particular events within that larger span of time. (*Story Logic* 213-14).

I argue that *Only Revolutions* exhibits polychrony through numerous means. Unusually, in doing so, the novel manifests temporal coding in a way that is *both* inexact *and* multiple.

We can turn in the first instance to the layout of each page of *Only Revolutions* which features a quadrant structure: Sam’s narrative, Hailey’s narrative, and a corresponding timeline of historical events for each. As such, the space of each page enables the simultaneous co-existence of multiple time zones. Secondly, we must also take into account the reading process. The respective timelines suggest that Sam travels from 1863-1963 while Hailey journeys from 1963-2063. Yet, in the course of the narrative, Hailey and Sam meet and their misadventures *together* begin. Quite where in time they meet, however, is inexact, indeterminate. As Hayles puts it,

Concatenated with the time of reading are the temporalities of Sam and Hailey, displaced in time relative to one another yet mysteriously interpenetrating through narrative diegesis and occupying the same page-space. Altogether, each page incorporates within its topographic dimension no less than five distinct temporalities (Sam, Hailey, their associated chronologies and the time of reading). (167)

Where Sam and Hailey meet is precisely the space in-between. Hayles astutely suggests: “Since Sam and Hailey’s chronologies do not temporally overlap, the only spacetime in which the protagonists logically can meet is in the user’s reading practices as she flips the book over and over, an action juxtaposing the protagonists in her imagination” (165). In light of Herman’s contextual anchoring, what *Only Revolutions* enacts (or makes the reader enact) is a romance that appears to transcend the space-time parameters set out in the novel’s duplicitous timelines. Sam and Hailey’s misadventures are brought about in reading, and take place in a space and time that you, the reader, make possible. As such, the stories being interpreted (Sam’s narrative, Hailey’s narrative, and American history) and the context of that interpretation appear to fuse. They intertwine to create the allways ontologies of *Only Revolutions*. Moreover, since the reader moves between narrative and historical timelines, *Only*

Revolutions creates what Herman, in reference to a magic realist text, calls “a multilinear complex of vectors of causality moving both backward and forward in time” (*Story Logic* 259). Time in *Only Revolutions* is “Allways ongoing and going,” as Hailey says at one point in the novel (H 124), and in such a way as to become ontologically entwined.

III. You were there

Nowhere are the allways ontologies of *Only Revolutions* manifested so precisely or felt so keenly than in the novel’s dedication, “You were there.” There are many commonalities here with the dedication to Danielewski’s debut novel (2000) *House of Leaves*, where the foreboding words “This is not for you” appear, and which I have discussed at length elsewhere.¹ A particular point of likeness is the way in which both dedications play with the deictic potentials of language.

Linguistic elements that are deictic encode a language user’s position in the world. Consider, for example, the sentence, “*House of Leaves* is my favourite novel.” In the sentence, the possessive determiner ‘my’ is deictic. It serves to orientate the meaning of ‘favourite novel’ in relation to me, the egocentric speaker of the discourse. On the other hand, anyone else could say, “*Only Revolutions* is my favourite novel.” In this alternate sentence, the same lexical item, *my*, is being used but it now points to a different referent—the first person speaker who uttered the words. From these examples, we can see that the meanings of deictic items change relative to their context. Pronouns, demonstratives, and adverbs are representative deictic elements. These linguistic items are typical, in that they point towards their meanings, though deixis can be encoded in all types of language. There are three central deictic categories: perceptual (concerning the perceptive participants of discourse), spatial (locating expressions in a place), and temporal (locating expressions in time).² These shall now be discussed in relation to the dedication to *Only Revolutions*, starting with perceptual deixis.

“You were there” may be brief but its deictic composition enables it to point to a multifarious network of referents. The dedication opens with the perceptual deictic pronoun *you*. As with all pronouns, the meaning of the second-person changes in the context of use. However, since this is a dedication, the reader is provided with very little by way of context. That is, no immediate narrative frames the text, and without such to aid in interpretation, “You were there” is highly ambiguous in nature.

Katie Wales, in her detailed discussion of personal pronouns in English, writes that both the first and second-person pronouns “are

characteristically used in the situational context, and refer normally to human beings in a ‘dialogue’, the speaker (‘I’) and addressee (you’)” (3). Of course, there is no situational context here, and the speaking ‘I’ has been omitted. Nevertheless, the notion of dialogue provided by Wales is significant. In *Only Revolutions*, Sam and Hailey are each homodiegetic narrators; the verbal text of their narrative and the reading practice suggested by the publisher guarantees that a dialogue ensues between their respective stories. As such, one way in which the second-person of “You were there” can be interpreted is as dialogue between the lovers. Indeed, the dedication appears on both sides of the novel and features the respective coloured ‘o’ indicative of each character. It can thus be understood as a reciprocated tribute from Sam to Hailey, Hailey to Sam.

Wales also describes personal pronouns in general as “multi-functional in their roles in different contexts, which is tantamount to a kind of polysemy” (7). In this sense, the personal pronouns are part of what Jakobson called ‘shifters,’ since they shift their meaning with respect to their given frame of coding and decoding. If the dedication is taken as homage from the author, as is traditionally expected, an interpretation of the second-person pronoun *you* moves from the fictional plane to the actual world. Thus the dialogue is initiated by the author of *Only Revolutions* to its readers. Indeed, as Herman phrases it, “the more underspecified the reception position encoded in the text of a narrative, the more likely I as reader will be able to project models of my own current reading environment into that position” (333). The fact that the dedication can be interpreted as both a romantic tribute between characters and an exchange between author and reader enables a metaphoric comparison. While Hailey and Sam are entwined in a love affair, Danielewski and his readers are similarly engaged in a significant liaison: the minds of reader and author meet within the realms of the fictional world. As one reader, Stencil, comments in the MZD online forum: “‘You were there’ also suggests that the story took place somehow in our presence, that we share history in the same way Sam and Hailey share history, parallel to our own lives. Or something like that” (qtd. in Hansen 186). Moreover, in writing *Only Revolutions*, Danielewski is said to have called upon dedicated readers and fans through online discussion boards, asking for responses to famous events and for details of their favourite animals, many of which were used in the book. The book itself therefore does contain within it the personal touches of some of its readers, adding another dimension to the second-person pronoun of “You were there.”

In order to systematically expose the ontological mechanics of *Only Revolutions*’ dedication, it is helpful to consider Herman’s categorisation

of the different types of textual you. He claims that there are at least five functional types: (1) generalised *you*, (2) fictional reference, (3) fictionalised (=horizontal) address, (4) apostrophic (= vertical) address, and (5) doubly deictic *you* ("Textual You" 381; *Story Logic* 345). As I interpret these categories, type two, fictional reference, signifies a protagonist in the storyworld through what Herman, drawing on Uri Margolin, calls "deictic transfer" in which the narrative *you* is "convertible to the first or third person" ("Textual You" 382). While generalised *you* seems rather self-explanatory in referring to the indefinite plural form of the second-person pronoun, Herman cites it as "another species" of deictic transfer ("Textual You" 380), this time shifting from the individualised participant to this impersonal form. The third category, fictionalised address, diverges from fictional reference since although it still functions within the storyworld, it involves address to and/or by fictional characters in much the same way direct address functions in real-world conversation. Apostrophic address, in comparison, transcends the boundaries of the fiction and "directly designates the audience comprising readers of (or listeners to) a fiction" ("Textual You" 387). Herman's final functional type of *you*, which is the most important in the context of the present study, is the doubly deictic *you*. For Herman, this signifies that "on some occasions *you* functions as a cue for superimposing two or more deictic roles, one internal to the discourse situation represented in and/or through the diegesis and the other(s) external to that discourse situation" ("Textual You" 381).

Let us recapitulate our discussion of "You were there" thus far, now pinpointing which types of textual *you* have been called upon. Firstly, "You were there" is a tribute from the characters to each other, thus we have fictionalised address at work twice over: *you* as Sam, and *you* as Hailey. In the second instance, "You were there" signals the reader so is of course a *you* functioning as apostrophic address. In consequence, the second person pronoun in "You were there" is doubly deictic, fusing the fictional and the real. It initiates a complex ontological transcendence, whereby both characters and the reader are invoked as perceptual participants.

IV. Ever once. Ever there. (H 27)

Perceptual deixis, seen in the second-person pronoun, is indeed not the only deictic element of note in the dedication in *Only Revolutions*. "You were there" also functions to encode time and space. *There* is a deictic adverb, denoting the relative position of something, generally in spatial

terms though it can also function to suggest temporality. Here, it appears to advocate a spatio-temporal moment, though of course its exact positioning is, once again, ambiguous. Nevertheless, it is worth considering the reference of *there* in the context of the various subjective entities addressed by the dedication.

For Sam and Hailey, *there* is part of the spatio-temporal horizon of the narrative. Crucially though, the temporal arc differs for each. For Sam addressing Hailey, it is somewhere in the region of 1863-1963; for Hailey addressing Sam, 1963-2063. Interpreted thus, “You were there” feeds into the sense of Sam and Hailey as fated star-crossed lovers (after all, the novel’s blurb compares them to Tristan and Isolde): regardless of how mythical or implausible, each lover shares their journey across time and space with the other. Sam is continuously with Hailey, Hailey continuously with Sam, and yet they are somehow always separated. This separation takes the form of the impossibility of merging their historical timelines. Furthermore, they are also physically divided through the space of the book, the bookmarks serving as a poignant symbol of the way in which their paths cross only briefly before diverging once again.

For the reader, *there* has a broader point of reference. It is the *there* of *Only Revolutions*, the novel’s spatio-temporal totality. To the reader “You were there” once again signals reader involvement in the narrative. On one hand, such involvement is literal in the sense of the input provided through the discussion forums, as mentioned earlier. On the other, the involvement is cognitive. As readers, we project the storyworld of the novel, following or perhaps even accompanying Sam and Hailey on their journey through the great American landscape and U.S. history.

The spatio-temporal encoding of “You were there” is, consequently, both inexact and multiple, returning us to Herman’s concept of polychrony. It encapsulates Hailey’s experiences with Sam, Sam’s experiences with Hailey, and the reader’s encounter with the book. “You were there” seems to project all of these layers in an enduring yet provisional paradox. The allways ontologies of *Only Revolutions*, then, is a perpetual condition in which all spatio-temporal planes congregate and fragment, fuse and digress.

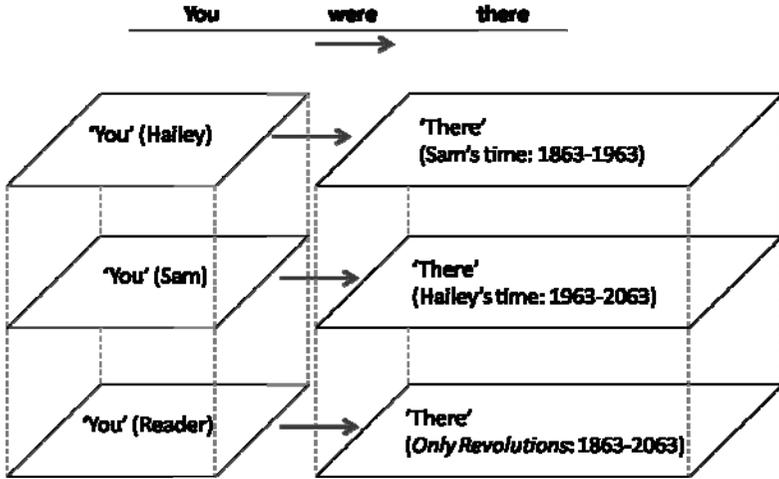


Figure 1: Ontological Planes and Contextual Frames in “You were there.”

V. For once. And allways (H/S 320)

With regards to “You were there,” I have so far discussed its use of the second-person pronoun *you* and deictic adverb *there*. I want to make one final point. Deictic elements are often understood as working in pairs, encoding proximity and distance respectively. *There*, for instance, is seen as the distal counterpart of the more proximal *here*. In itself, this is interesting with regards to the dedication in *Only Revolutions*, since it suggests a dislocation from chronology. The fact that the copula which forms the main verb of the dedication is in past tense serves to enhance this effect. “You were there” indicates a retrospective perspective, perhaps even a sense of nostalgia.

In contrast to such retrospection, Sam and Hailey’s homodiegetic narratives are written in present tense. Hailey’s narrative, for instance, opens with phrases such as “I can walk away from anything,” “I leap free this spring,” and “Rebounding on bare feet” (H 1). Here, we can see the historic present at work (“walk,” “leap”), casting events in such a way as to render them as though they were happening now, occurring in the moment. We can also see the present continuous in “rebounding,” which emphasises the process by making it seem ongoing.

The retrospection of the dedication and what we might call the ‘nowness’ of the narrative cannot be neatly reconciled. Their disparity does, however, accord with the paradoxical nature of the allways ontologies

of *Only Revolutions* in which spatio-temporal parameters are together but separate, synchronised but distinct. When first discussing the notion of polychrony in relation to the narrative of *Only Revolutions*, I intimated at the importance of a space in-between, that is a place brought about by the reading process that is in-between precise narrative time and space and yet where Sam and Hailey can be united.

Because the polychrony of *Only Revolutions* is both inexact and multiple, time as a logical structure is itself brought into question by the novel. Sam and Hailey, I argue, exist not merely in-between but also out-of time. Speaking of their lover, Sam and Hailey each state:

For once. And allways.
 Beyond even time's front. Because now
 We are out of time. We are at once. (H/S 320)

The opening to this quotation is particularly significant: "For once. And allways." Their love is both pinpointed in time by virtue of being "For once," of the moment, yet it is also a love of "allways," something eternal, everlasting.

The complex interwoven ontological fabric of *Only Revolutions* is similarly at once and allways. The sidebar timelines appear to ground the novel in time, orientating the narrative with respect to an array of historical events. Ultimately though, such historical anchoring is illusory. The allways ontologies of *Only Revolutions* in fact work to defy time, at least in any logical or coherent sense. Instead, *Only Revolutions* exists beyond time. Hansen states that "readers come to realise something that [Danielewski's] characters seem already to know: that their capacity to keep moving, to continue to be present, is only made possible by some historical inheritance which remains both uncertain and open to contestation" (193). Indeed, the time of the novel is in the hands (quite literally) of the reader. The allways ontologies of *Only Revolutions* is subjective and deeply personal.

VI. Allways nevertheless (H 121)

Speaking of the subjective and deeply personal, I am, in this section of the chapter, going to diverge in content somewhat, to 'nevertheless' if you will. During the conference in Munich from which this essay originated, I visited the Munich Gallery, Museum Brandhorst, which exhibits works of modern and contemporary art from the collection of Udo and Annette Brandhorst. The collection features more than sixty works by artist Cy Twombly, much of whose work was on display during my visit. One of

Twombly's paintings, an untitled piece from 1993, captured my attention. More than this, it had poetic resonances with *Only Revolutions* and with my investigation of "You were there."

Untitled, 1993, features many characteristics of Twombly's works; in particular, the smeary use of acrylic paint, the presence of written inscription marked on the canvas in scribbled pencil. Both its iconography and text are typical too; more significantly, they suggest a representation of time that is both historical/mythic and exact/personal in a way that may be connected to the allways ontologies of *Only Revolutions*.

At the centre of *Untitled*, 1993, is the image of a boat. According to Leeman, the barge-like vessel emerges as a pictorial element in Twombly's work in the 1960s, and becomes "a predominant motif" (254). Leeman goes on to explain that Twombly extracts the boat image from Greek mythology, in which it serves to transport the newly deceased across the river Styx, dividing as it does the world of the living from the world of the dead. This mythical iconography evokes a historical everlasting time, a concern with life and death that endures. And yet, the funeral boat in Twombly's *Untitled*, 1993 has a specific referent, dedicated "to Lucio," the Neapolitan gallery owner Lucio Amelio who died in 1994 (see Leeman 254, and Jacobus). Thus the elegaic reference of the boat in *Untitled*, 1993, is both eternal (mythic) and exact (the years 1993-4).

Despite the vividness and centrality of the boat image in *Untitled*, 1993, what really captured my imagination as a viewer of the painting and as a recent speaker at the *Revolutionary Leaves* conference was Twombly's choice of poetic text which features within the work. The words read:

Yet there on the other shore
 under the black glance
 suns in your eyes,
 you were there;
 of the other later,
 the other dawn,
 the other birth,
 yet there you were
 in times excessive
 moment by moment
 like

years ago you said:
 fundamentally
 i am a matter of light

(the light is a pulse
continually slower and slower
you think it is about to stop)

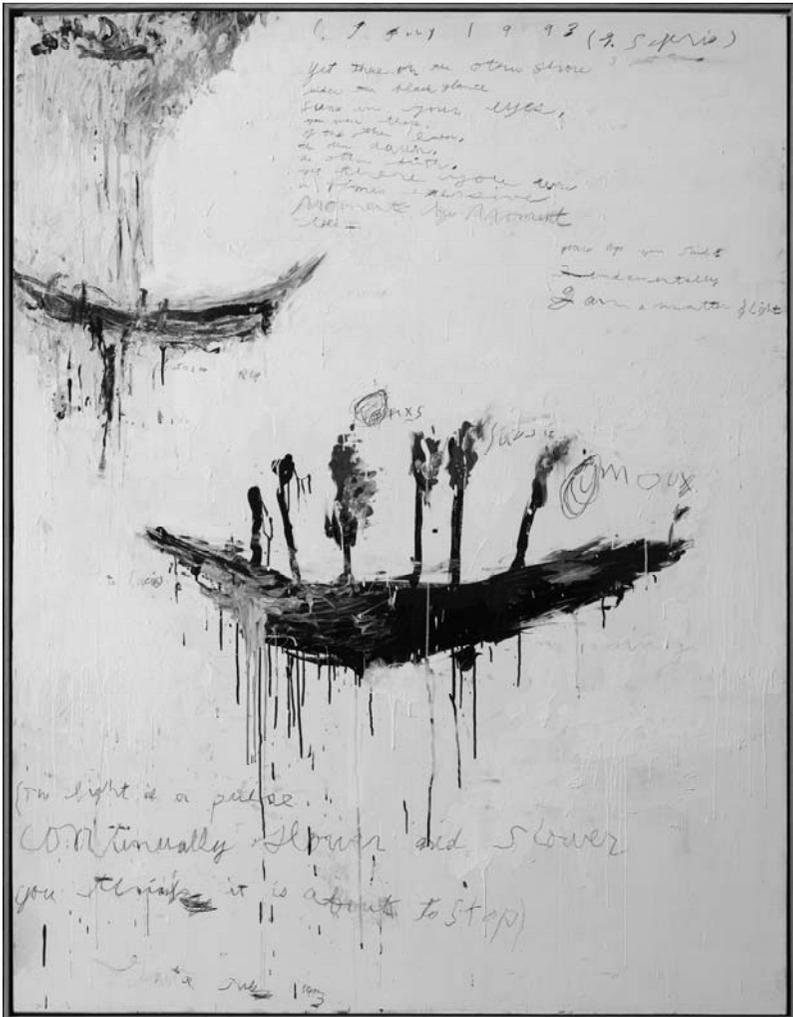


Figure 2: *Untitled*, 1993. Cy Twombly.

There is an unmistakable resonance between Twombly's text to Danielewski's dedication "You were there." I am not, of course, arguing that there is knowing reference of quotation here; it is surely a coincidence, though in the personal context of my visit to Munich, a coincidence that seemed profound to me.

The inscriptions in Twombly's paintings are intertextual fragments, misremembered echoes. As Leeman informs us, "Twombly selects lines of verse for their poetic qualities" (96). The words of *Untitled*, 1993, are approximated extracts from Greek poet George Seferis's *Three Secret Poems*, which can be found in his *Complete Poems* (1995) (qtd. in Varnedoe 50 and Jacobus). Twombly extracts pieces from each of the three poems. What we might call Twombly's opening stanza emulates the closing stanza to the second of the secret poems, "On Stage":

Yet there, on the other shore,
 under the cave's black stare,
 suns in your eyes, birds on your shoulders,
 you were there; you suffered
 the other labour, love,
 the other dawn, the reappearance
 the other birth, the resurrection.
 Yet there, in the vast dilation of time,
 you were remade
 drop by drop, like resin,
 like the stalactite, the stalagmite. (Seferis 205)

Twombly's middle stanza mimics the opening to the fourth stanza in the first of Seferis's Secret Poems, "On A Ray of Winter Light," with little alteration:

Years ago you said:
 'Essentially I'm a matter of light.' (Seferis 200)

And Twombly's final stanza stems from the third of Seferis's poems, "Summer Solstice," Stanza 12:

The light is a pulse
 beating ever more slowly
 as though it is about to stop. (Seferis 212)

The correspondences between Twombly's and Seferis' texts are clear, but in the context of this chapter, we might consider how their stylistic

composition and treatment of time might be connected with the allways ontologies of Danielewski's *Only Revolutions*.

Twombly's first stanza is particularly pertinent in this regard. It opens with "Yet," a conjunction which despite being the textual aperture suggests temporal continuation. The stanza also features second person address, which presupposes a first-person poetic voice. Moreover, the repetition of the adjective *other* assumes an original to contrast with, thus creating the impression of a couplet, an effect heightened by the dialogic perceptual deixis. Oddly, what is being 'othered' is space and temporality—"shore," "later," "dawn," "birth." Thus to relate Twombly's and Seferis's words to *Only Revolutions*, two perceptual entities (the 'you' and implied 'I') appear to both share space and time while simultaneously occupying opposing positions in a way that we might see as parallel to Sam and Hailey's fateful and paradoxical romantic invocations. While Seferis speaks of "the vast dilation of time," Twombly concludes his opening stanza with both an expansive temporality ("in times excessive") and smaller minutiae ("moment by moment"). Indeed throughout, more precise moments such as the new beginnings evoked by "dawn" and "birth" are subjected to a temporal persistence, implied by the preceding temporal deictics "yet" and "later." Thus, like the love of Danielewski's protagonists, we find in *Untitled*, 1993, a star-crossed eternity that is simultaneously felt in exactitudes.

Twombly's use of the phrase "You were there" can also be seen to feature double deixis. On one hand, it sets up a compelling and enigmatic relationship between the implied I and a text-internal referent, the 'you' of the poetic text, as mentioned above. However, as with Danielewski's dedication to *Only Revolutions*, Twombly's adoption of "You were there" also has text-external reference. Firstly, the dedication of *Untitled*, 1993 causes the 'you' to signify Twombly's dying friend, enabling it to be interpreted as a foreshadowing lament from the artist for Lucio Amelio. Furthermore, the apostrophic capacity of the second-person pronoun and the evocative quality of painting means that "You were there" also addresses viewers of Twombly's work. As such, Twombly's painting including the artist's borrowing of Seferis's poetic words, can be seen to hold parallels to Danielewski's dedication. Both create a polychronic field of ontological reference in which time is simultaneously mythic and personal, while the polysemous address of the second-person pronoun evokes a powerful sense of personal involvement and investment from readers or viewers.

As indicated from the outset of this detour, I am not advocating any meaningful correspondence between Twombly's painting *Untitled*, 1993

and Danielewski's *Only Revolutions*. However, such a detour seems, in some ways, fitting, or at least permissible. The opening dedication to *Only Revolutions* is designed to be exact and multiple in terms of time and person; the novel is as much about the individual reader's experience, both literally and imaginatively, as it is about Sam's and Hailey's journeys, as it is about history's contemporary resonances. Cy Twombly's *Untitled*, 1993 and George Seferis's *Three Secret Poems* not only reverberate some of the topos of the allways ontologies of *Only Revolutions*. For me, as the writer of this chapter and a reader of *Only Revolutions*, they offer another facet of ontological meaning, an experiential dimension associating my own felt experiences with the fictional and historical experiences of *Only Revolutions*. Indeed, as I stood there in Museum Brandhorst in May 2011, I was also elsewhere. You were with me, and we were an other time, an other world, an other life.

VII. I'll destroy no World so long it keeps turning (H/S 360)

Throughout this chapter, I have been exploring the ways in which *Only Revolutions* manifests what I have called its allways ontologies. The page layout, narrative structure, dedication, and reading process all work towards this end, generating a multivalent topography of time and space in which spatio-temporal planes appear to both interact and stand in isolation. The polychronic nature of the allways ontologies of *Only Revolutions* is at the heart of this paradox.

In speaking of the "topographic plane" of *Only Revolutions*, Hayles was suggesting that the form of the novel works to spatialise time on its pages and through its reading. This is no doubt the case. Yet there is also an everlasting quality to the spatio-temporality which *Only Revolutions* sets forth. Speaking of the coinage of "allways" with the double 'll', Joe Bray claims that "'allways' suggests both temporal and spatial exhaustiveness, conflating 'always' and 'all ways'" (206). He also highlights the fact that the revolving reading strategy of *Only Revolutions* leaves open the possibility of continuing the narrative by starting again, and rereading, an argument given added support by the fact that the historical timeline of Hailey's narrative begins where Sam's ends.

The double 'll' features throughout the novel in numerous words: "allways," "almighty," "allone," "allso." Such neologisms continually throw up new interpretations and contradictory meanings. Similarly, echoes we might encounter in our own lives, such as stumbling across the phrase "You were there" in a Cy Twombly painting, offer novel yet

poignant experiential connections that may correlate and contrast with *Only Revolutions* in ways that cannot be easily resolved. Danielewski's double 'll' also reminds us of the pause symbol, as Hayles points out. She claims, "The lines may also be taken to refer to the pause symbol on electronic equipment; in this sense, Sam and Hailey exist as 'pauses' (sequentially indicated by the chronological intervals) during which the text gives accounts of their actions, as well as the historical events listed under the date heading" (165). More than this, the pause symbol is suggestive of Sam and Hailey's existence beyond the grasps of time, in the spaces in-between the narrative and its chronological sequencing. (Incidentally, a final link might be made here between Twombly's poetic fragments and Danielewski's *Only Revolutions*. Twombly's final stanza is akin to the pause symbol (ll) : there is a "pulse" which is both "continual" yet about to "stop," and Twombly seals these inscriptions graphologically within parenthesis.)

As with the pause symbol on electronic equipment, it is the user who has control of the unfolding of the narrative time of *Only Revolutions*. Speaking of *Only Revolutions* in conversation with Anthony Miller for the *Los Angeles City Beat*, Danielewski stated: "The book's about letting go. So let go. Flow with it. Whatever you do, get into it. [...] There's only one person I can think of who ultimately ends up pursuing [Sam and Hailey]. Who makes it the whole way?" Well, who makes it the whole way? You. You, the reader. You were always there.

Notes

¹ See Gibbons, "This is not for you" and *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature*.

² For a summary of cognitive deixis, see Stockwell.

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GOING IN CIRCLES:
THE EXPERIENCE OF READING
ONLY REVOLUTIONS

JOE BRAY

I. Introduction

This essay considers the ways of reading inspired by Mark Z Danielewski's *Only Revolutions*. I argue that its patterned, symmetrical structure calls for a process of continual and endless rereading, as the reader revolves the book and considers its narrative from different perspectives. Rereading, according to the model proposed here, is not a means to an end, but rather an instinctive, even compulsive act that reveals subtle interplays of sound and sense and compels the reader to be forever beginning interpretation anew. I suggest that this quality of the experience of reading *Only Revolutions* invites parallels with some approaches to digital texts, in particular the emphasis on their variability, and their ability to generate infinite versions from a finite source. While cautious about definitively classifying *Only Revolutions* as a kind of electronic text, I believe there are comparisons to be made between Danielewski's carefully constructed work and the processes of reading and rereading encouraged by some forms of new media. This applies equally to the list of historical events down the side of the main verse narratives on each page. In the second half of the essay I propose that these brief, elliptical entries can be considered a form of code, containing hidden messages and resonances to be discovered by the reader. History, as well as poetry, is thus presented in *Only Revolutions* as a process of never-ending variation of the same events, cyclical repetition with difference.

This essay therefore represents an attempt to bring together some of the traditional practices of book history with theories of reading that have developed in response to new media culture. While supporting Jerome McGann's assertion that "readers and audiences are hidden in our texts, and the traces of their multiple presence are scripted at the most material levels" (10), I do not believe that enough work is yet being done on how

exactly ways of reading are being influenced by, and adapting to, changes in the physical formats of books in the digital age. I hope to show here how Danielewski's intricately designed text challenges some of the basic long-held assumptions concerning the nature of reading and re-reading.

II. (Re-)reading *Only Revolutions*

Only Revolutions is structured according to many patterns and symmetries. Just to recap on a few: each page is divided into four quadrants. For the left-hand page, the upper left quadrant is the main character's (Sam's or Hailey's), in the lower left and upside down is the complementary narrative of the other character, in the upper right quadrant is a historical side-bar headed by a date, and in the lower right the upside-down chronology accompanying the other character's narrative. The right-hand page is a mirror image, with the chronologies on both pages adjacent to one another across the spine, and the narratives on the outer edges. On each page, there are 90 words per narrative, making 180 narrative words a page and 360 across the page spread. In addition there are 36 lines of narrative per page, counting both the right-side-up and the upside-down one. As one narrative grows, the complementary one shrinks, with each largest at its beginning. There are 360 pages in each narrative, with the page numbers upside down to one another in a circle, with green representing Sam's narrative, and gold Hailey's.

The rigid form of *Only Revolutions* is clearly inseparable from its meaning. In his interview with Kiki Benzon, Danielewski says that he wanted to set Sam and Hailey up "in a way where they were constrained, they were limited, because their entire quest is how to free themselves" (Benzon). He describes the various patterns of the book as "chains that bind them, which they're constantly trying to get out of," and reveals that in the writing of the book "structure and content" evolved "simultaneously." Beyond this thematic connection, though, the question remains as to what effect the highly-constrained form of *Only Revolutions* has on the reader's experience of reading the book, and his or her interpretation of it.

The reader is encouraged by the publisher's note to read eight pages of one character's narrative before rotating the book and reading eight pages of the other's. These short sections retell the same story from the two different perspectives. For example, on their way up The Mississippi, Sam relates how they stop to take a take a brief dip in the river:

Where there's a chance,
 there's a bend. Hailey marvelling
 how I ignore the current.
 I am the current. And currently frisky.
 The currency of every risk.
 But I marvel over Hailey too,
 enjoying her then,
 however meek, fawning when
 I leap towards the adoring
 ripples to take her hand
 and her beneath broiling skies,
 on cool earth. (S 136)

When the book is rotated, Hailey's version of the same event is as follows:

Where there's a bend,
 there's a change. Sam admiring
 how I tear through the current.
 I am the current. And currently bare.
 The currency of every dare.
 But I admire Sam too,
 enjoying him there,
 however timid, rising when
 I stride from the fawning
 ripples to take his hand
 and him over chilly mire,
 beneath burning skies. (H 136)

There are both obvious and more subtle variations here. In the first place Sam's "Where there's a chance, / there's a bend" becomes Hailey's "Where there's a bend, / there's a change," with the swapping of the position of "bend" and the modulation of "chance" to "change" suggesting a more optimistic, carefree attitude on Sam's part. At this point in their narratives, at least, Sam is looking more for "chances," while Hailey is more accepting of "changes." This subtle contrast continues throughout the rest of the two passages, as Sam "ignore[s] the current," perhaps in a foolish act of defiance, while Hailey "tear[s] through it." While Sam describes himself as "the currency of every risk," Hailey is "the currency of every dare," with the rhyme "bare/ dare" suggesting more of a bold challenge than the flightier "frisky/ risk." As Hailey's swimming continues the two "marvel / admire" each other (continuing their choice of word in the second lines), while also viewing the other as "meek / timid." Again a word changes position between the two passages, as "fawning" moves down a line. While Sam describes Hailey as "fawning when / I leap

towards the adoring / ripples to take her hand,” she sees him “rising when / I stride from the fawning / ripples to take his hand.” The “adoring” in Sam’s narrative, though literally absent from Hailey’s, partially echoes her two “admirings” and is perhaps understood in the way she describes him “rising” as she strides towards him. Finally the last two lines present a reversal: while Sam leads Hailey “beneath broiling skies, / on cool earth,” she takes him “over chilly mire, / beneath burning skies.” While “broiling” becomes “burning” and “cool earth” becomes “chilly mire,” the “skies” and “earth / mire” change places, suggesting the disorientating, head-over-heels effect created both by the lovers’ feelings for each other and the reader’s act of rotating the book, which is required to read the two passages in sequence.

No doubt there are other connections and contrasts that could be made between the two passages, and my interpretation of Sam’s and Hailey’s outlooks could be questioned. The important point is that these two passages work together, or rather that they play off each other. The subtle interplays of sound and sense depend on the reader either switching back and forth immediately (rotating the book 180 degrees each time), or at least having the two passages in his or her head (and ear) simultaneously. The full meaning of each passage cannot be understood without a reading of the other; the two, like Sam and Hailey (at this point at least) should not and cannot be separated from each other.

Take another example from later in their narratives, when Sam and Hailey are stuck in St. Louis, forced to work in dead-end jobs in a diner in order to get by and gradually becoming increasingly dispirited. Though their shifts mean they are now rarely together, they take separate bicycle trips to explore the local area. After one such excursion, Sam reports:

That’s how I return.
My turn around manners
always flipping me back
to my want’s duty. (S 188)

In Hailey’s narrative this becomes:

That’s how I turn.
My returning conduct
always heading me back
to my want’s obligation. (H 188)

Again there are some slight, yet potentially significant, differences here: “return” and “turn” are exchanged in the first two lines and Sam’s

“manners” becomes Hailey’s “conduct,” and his “allways flipping me back” her “allways heading me back.” In both cases “allways” suggests both temporal and spatial exhaustiveness, conflating “always” and “all ways.” “Duty” and “obligation” are close in meaning, though “obligation” may suggest a greater sense of binding responsibility on Hailey’s part. Both reveal the constraints that the pair feel under as they endure the drudgery of their jobs in St. Louis. Again the words in the passages themselves suggest the actions the reader must perform as he or she alternates between them, turning the book around, or “flipping” it on its head.

The reader is not however obliged solely to read from Sam’s to Hailey’s narrative as the publisher’s note on the dust jacket recommends. For example, Hailey’s narrative could be read first, in which case Sam’s seems more like a playful, slangy response, with “returning conduct” becoming “turn around manners” and “heading me back,” “flipping me back.” One could also read both the passages quoted above as responses to the text printed upside down on the same page. Thus Hailey’s text could be read as following Sam’s reasoning on why he doesn’t leave his job:

Roamings roam. Impressed by
obligations. Embargoed by trade.
I’m allways moved by
conducts on going away.
So I stay. (S 173)

If the book is then directly flipped over, or turned on its head, the next words are thus Hailey’s “That’s how I turn. / My returning conduct / allways heading me back / to my want’s obligation” (H 188). There are a number of verbal echoes: not only are “obligations” and “conducts” repeated (though both become singular) but they appear, respectively, in the penultimate and second lines, and the fourth from the end and the fourth. “Allways” is also repeated in the third line from the end and the third. Sam’s page 173 and Hailey’s page 188 are thus to some extent mirror images of each other, and both point forwards and back to Sam’s page 188 and Hailey’s page 173, since the word “manners” appears twice in each (lines 8 and 10 of S 173, lines 9 and 11 of H 188), recalling Sam’s “That’s how I return. / My turn around manners / allways flipping me back / to my want’s duty” (S 188). This passage is preceded (if the page is rotated) by Hailey’s:

Pare is pears. Working on
 duties. Organizings surrounded.
 I'm allways moved by the
 manners of going away
 So I stay. (H 173)

This in turn of course responds to (or prompts) the final lines of S 173 quoted above. In other words, the texts on the page containing S 173 and H 188, and those on that which includes H 173 and S 188 all interconnect and are full of repetitions and echoes. Though the two pages do not appear together in the book, there is a four-fold interplay between the passages, so that none can be read in isolation. No block of text on the page stands alone (or “allone”), but instead each both calls out to and answers back to other texts on other pages, sometimes far removed. The book demands to be read “allways,” both in the physical and temporal sense, as its highly constrained form paradoxically dictates that the ways in which it can be read, and, crucially, reread, are without limit.

III. Rereading

Rather than thinking of Sam’s and Hailey’s stories as two parallel narratives that start at opposite ends of the book and converge in the middle then, it might be more productive to think of *Only Revolutions* as composed of one narrative comprised of many interconnecting parts, which the reader is constantly rotating, traversing and rereading. Most theoretical accounts of rereading conceptualise it as a deeper, more profound experience than first-time reading. Matei Calinescu, for example, distinguishes between “the passion for reading,” which is “in principle insatiable in regard to quantity, extension, curiosity, variety, pleasure,” and “rereading, which often springs from a deeper personal commitment, religious or otherwise” (90). He associates “reading” with a “quasi-hypnotic involvement” and “rereading” with “dedication, sustained attention, and sophisticated absorption,” explaining the difference as follows: “involvement is the effect of reading as playing a game of make-believe; absorption is the state in which we reread a text and is conceived as an invitation to play a game with rules” (164). “Absorption” is for Calinescu “a state of high concentration of attention,” and “more imaginatively detached and more intellectual” (164) than “involvement.” François Roustang similarly associates rereading with a greater intellectual understanding of a text, and a deeper insight into the way it is put together. Reporting on his experience of reading Casanova’s *The Story of My Life*, Roustang records how he was first “overcome by the immeasurable

complexity of the text” (123), and how it was only after several rereadings that he became aware of the relationships between “corresponding components as I passed from one episode to another” (122). His first principle of rereading is thus as follows: “one must reread until the text can be broken down into its basic components” (122). Rereading, for Roustang, involves a growing sense of the readerly power and mastery over the author; he claims that it “invent[s] a strategy, adapted to the text and the author, that seeks to disarm the author in order to unmask him” (129).

Yet the notion of a first, innocent reading and a second, more sophisticated one breaks down in the face of a physical object such as *Only Revolutions*, which invites only continual, illimitable rereadings. Roland Barthes is sceptical of the belief that “the first reading is a primary, naïve, phenomenal reading which we will only, afterwards, have to ‘explicate,’ to intellectualize,” adding “as if there were a beginning of reading, as if everything were not already read: there is no *first* reading, even if the text is concerned to give us that illusion by several operations of *suspense*, artifices more spectacular than persuasive” (16). For Barthes, rereading, “an operation contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of society,” is the suggested mode of reading for “those of us who are trying to establish a plural” (15). He claims that “it alone saves the text from repetition (those who fail to reread are obliged to read the same story everywhere), multiplies it in its internal chronology (‘this happens *before* or *after* that’) and recaptures a mythic time (without *before* or *after*)” (16). In his view if we “*immediately* reread the text, it is in order to obtain, as though under the effect of a drug (that of recommencement, of difference), not the *real* text, but a plural text: the same and new” (16).

This description of “*immediate*” rereading, a constant encounter with a “plural” text which is both “the same and new” captures something of the reader’s experience of *Only Revolutions*, which does indeed attempt to create “a mythic time (without *before* or *after*)” (Barthes 16). He or she is under the influence of a “drug [...] of recommencement, of difference” as he or she rotates (or ‘flips’) between Sam and Hailey’s words. This drug is often so strong that his or her first instinct on reaching the apparent ‘end,’ or ‘ends’ of the book (S 360 and H 360) is to begin reading again. This constant rereading is again encouraged by verbal connections; the final words of Sam’s and Hailey’s narratives “I could never walk away from you” are echoed, in fact contradicted, in the opening third and fourth lines of each: “I can walk away / from anything” (S/H 1). The apparent closure of the last lines is thus immediately reopened as the reader recalls that each character begins their narrative with the opposite claim.

IV. *Only Revolutions* as Digital Text

The ways that *Only Revolutions* can, indeed demands, to be read and re-read link it to some recent theories of digital text. The idea that the book's form connects it closely to electronic literature is of course nothing new, though some caution is perhaps required here. Katherine Hayles has shown how Lev Manovich's influential claim that the database, which he associates with the new media culture, and narrative are "natural enemies" (225) is oversimplified. In the case of *Only Revolutions* she argues for a more "fine-grained analysis," identifying "four different kinds of data arrangements" in the novel, "each with its own constraints and aesthetic possibilities" (162-68). Yet nevertheless there are elements of Manovich's approach which can be applied fruitfully to Danielewski's text. In particular, the fourth of his "Principles of New Media," "Variability," may be able to offer insights into the experience of reading *Only Revolutions*. According to Manovich, "a new media object is not something fixed once and for all, but something that can exist in different, potentially infinite versions" (36). New media is thus "characterized by variability" (36). This principle is, he says, a consequence of two others, "the numerical coding of media" and "the modular structure of a media object" (36). The second of these is particularly crucial; Manovich claims that

[s]tored digitally, rather than in a fixed medium, media elements maintain their separate identities and can be assembled into numerous sequences under program control. In addition, because the elements themselves are broken into discrete samples (for instance, an image is represented as an array of pixels), they can be created and customized on the fly. (36)

This view of new media objects as composite constructions, whose discrete elements can be arranged and re-arranged to create a potentially infinite number of versions has proved popular in criticism of digital poetry in particular. Marjorie Perloff, for example, claims that "the most interesting exemplars of digital poetics to date have tended to be what I have called elsewhere differential texts—that is to say, texts that exist in different material forms, with no single version being the definitive one" (146). She gives as examples two well-known digital poems: Brian Kim Stefans's *The Dreamlife of Letters* (2000), in which the letters of the alphabet dance around the screen, continually splitting up and regrouping to produce new words and phrases, and Caroline Bergvall's text-sound work *ambient fish* (1999), in which the line "ambient fish fuckflowers bloom in your mouth will shock your troubles away" is subjected to various permutations and transformations, until a voice eventually says

“fuck fish goose in your bouche suck your oubli away.” There are other examples too; Jim Andrews’s *Stir Fry Texts* are described by their author as

interactive texts that twitch and change as you move the mouse over them. Each stir fry consists of n distinct texts. Each of the n texts is partitioned into t pieces. When you move the mouseover any of the t parts of a text, that part is replaced with the corresponding part of the next of the n texts. (Andrews)

The Electronic Literature Collection website puts it more succinctly: “Jim Andrews’s *Stir Fry Texts* are exercises in combinatorial intertextuality: stretchtexts that refuse to stand still.”

For a similar example, see Philippe Bootz and Marcel Frémot’s *The Set of U* (2004), which is described by its authors as “a typical example of adaptive generation. It is an association of a combinatory generator of sound and a syntactical animation of text that changes its tempo according to the speed of the machine.” *The Set of U*, or to give it its original title, *La série des U*, runs through the following French phrases and clauses in a different way each time, with an English translation provided and the animation set to music:

Le pas / the footprint
 Le passe / passes it
 Elle passe /she is going
 Elle passe le fil / she is passing the thread
 Elle passe le fil de l’eau / she is following the current
 Le fil de l’eau passe / the current goes
 L’eau passe / the water goes
 Passe / go(es)

Though there are obvious differences in the form of presentation (with the lines of the *The Set of U* appearing one after the other, for example, in comparison with the reader’s rotation of the page in *Only Revolutions*), it is not too far from the variation of lines like “Elle passé le fil de l’eau” and “Le fil de l’eau passe” [“she is following the current” and “the current goes”] to the switch between Sam’s “I am the current. And currently frisky” (S 136) and Hailey’s “I am the current. And currently bare” (H 136) in the first two examples above, with in both cases just one word changed.

This ‘combinatorial’ quality of Danielewski’s text, whereby, to adapt Manovich’s formulation, “elements maintain their separate identities and

can be assembled into numerous sequences” (36) is a feature not just of Sam and Hailey’s interconnecting verse narratives. In the final part of this essay I will argue that it can also be related to another part of the complex page of *Only Revolutions*: the sidebar of historical events running in *Myriad Pro* font down the side of the page nearest the middle.

It is sometimes possible to make connections between these cryptic and short, elliptical entries to the events happening in Sam’s and Hailey’s narratives on the same page. For example, on Sam’s page 136, quoted above, his description of the lovers swimming in the Mississippi is accompanied in the right-hand column by the historical sidebar for the date Aug 31 1935. One of the entries is “Tropical storm & Florida, 400 go.” This is a reference to the 1935 Labor Day hurricane, which struck the Florida Keys on September 2 and wreaked havoc for two days, taking over 400 lives. This was one of the biggest natural disasters of the period, and remains the third strongest Atlantic hurricane on record, so it is no surprise to see it included in the list under this date. Danielewski solicited suggestions for significant historical events from his online fanbase, and this may have been one of the items submitted. It is surely no coincidence though that he has chosen to place it opposite Sam’s third line of verse on the page, which describes what he perceives to be Hailey’s reluctance to swim: “Hesitant. River only hip high” (S 136). The reader is invited to draw a contrast between the lovers’ tentative, yet joyful swimming in the “adoring ripples” (S 136) of the Mississippi, and the complete devastation and overflowing, destructive waves caused by the 1935 hurricane. Such links and contrasts between the verse and the sidebar no doubt abound throughout, but would take more than a lifetime to uncover; Katherine Hayles has noted that a “complete exploration of the connections between the narratives and entries would require researching thousands of factoids, a nearly impossible (and certainly tedious task)” (166), while Mark Hansen is even less hopeful, lamenting that “we will [n]ever grasp the principle of selection that guided Danielewski in his assembly of the historical sidebar” (185).

Yet reading across from the verse to the sidebar, and vice versa, does not exhaust the potentialities of reading created by the inclusion of these historical facts and events. I believe that there may also be connections to be made between entries on different pages, at equivalent points in Sam’s and Hailey’s narratives. These further complicate and enrich the reading, indeed re-reading, of Danielewski’s book, suggesting that not just poetry, but also history, is to be read ‘combinatorially,’ that it too can consist of a finite series of elements that can be rearranged in a potentially infinite number of ways. This encourages a view of history that I believe goes

beyond the linear unfolding of events, emphasizing instead resonances and coincidences across the decades.

V. Re-reading History

As an example, take an entry in the sidebar dated August 2 2001, the closest in date to the most significant event in world history so far this millennium, 9/11, which is located on page 277 of Hailey's narrative. The sidebar for this date includes the entries "8:48 AM, North Tower & American Airlines 11," "9:03 AM, South Tower & United Airlines 175" and "9:37 AM, Pentagon's American Airlines 77," as well as various other references to that morning and its consequences, including the italicized "*Let's roll*" (H 277), supposedly the final recorded utterance on United Airlines Flight 93 as the hijacked passengers prepared to charge the cockpit. A little lower down, opposite a point just below the ninth line of Hailey's narrative, appears the somewhat mysterious phrase "Robert Stevens goes" (H 277). This refers to the first victim of the anthrax attacks in the autumn of 2001, which began a week after 9/11. Robert Stevens was a photo editor for the Florida-based tabloid *Sun*, working for the company American Media Inc. He died after inhaling anthrax spores from a letter which arrived at the American Media offices in Boca Raton, Florida.

In total seven letters containing anthrax were sent, all bearing a Trenton, New Jersey postmark; the two most well-known addressees being the Democratic senators Tom Daschle of South Dakota and Patrick Leahy of Vermont. Twenty-two people in all developed anthrax infections, with eleven suffering life-threatening conditions. There were five fatalities. The FBI investigation lasted several years, though eventually suspicion focused on Bruce Edward Ivins, a scientist who worked at the government's biodefense labs in Frederick, Maryland. In June 2008 Ivins was told of the impending prosecution, and on July 27, 2008 he committed suicide. Though at the time the federal prosecutors were convinced that Ivins was the sole culprit, a recent 2011 review by the National Academy of Sciences has cast doubt on this conclusion, claiming that there is no direct link between the anthrax found and the laboratory where Ivins worked. Among the many other theories that have been advanced is a connection to Al Qaeda, and to 9/11 in particular. Several of the hijackers lived and took flight training near Boca Raton, where the letter to Stevens was sent, and at least one is known to have been treated for anthrax-like symptoms in the months before the attack. Obviously if the hijackers were involved they would have needed an accomplice, since all the letters were posted after 9/11.

This reference to Robert Stevens's death is found then on page 277 of Hailey's narrative. Rotating the book to Sam's page 277, one finds the historical sidebar headed July 15, 1957. There is mention of Tunisian independence and Castro's revolution in Cuba. At the point equivalent to just over eight lines down in Sam's narrative, corresponding to the Robert Stevens entry on Hailey's page 277, there is the entry "Brooklyn's Rudolf Ivanovich Abel" (S 277). Like the 2001 anthrax attacks, this refers to a famous FBI investigation, known as the Hollow Nickel Case. Briefly, this dated back to 1953, when a delivery boy in Brooklyn discovered a tiny photograph inside a hollow nickel given to him by one of his customers. The New York FBI discovered that the photograph contained ten columns of typewritten numbers, with twenty-one numbers in most columns. They were convinced that it was a coded espionage message, yet its origins were not solved until the defection of a Russian spy in 1957. This spy, Reino Hayhanen, had been operating in the US, and was unwilling to return to Russia. He told investigators that for the past two years he had been exchanging messages with his superior, who he knew only as 'Mark,' via devices such as hollowed-out bolts, pens, pencils, screws and coins. He was questioned regarding the codes they had used, and by June 3, 1957 the code on the microphotograph was broken, and revealed to be a message intended for Hayhanen shortly after his arrival in the United States. Further information provided by Hayhanen helped to identify his Russian handler as Rudolf Ivanovich Abel, who was eventually arrested in Brooklyn on June 21, 1957.

Aside from the fact that they are two very complicated FBI investigations that took many years to solve, there are further uncanny connections between the Robert Stevens and Rudolf Ivanovich Abel cases, which lead to a suspicion that Danielewski's placing them at identical points on the two page 277s may not have been a coincidence. Or rather, that his placing them where he has invites the reader to notice the coincidences between them. Both represent the most pressing and terrifying threats to the United States (or "US") at the time; from Russia at the height of the Cold War on the one hand, and terrorist attack, possibly sponsored by hostile states, on the other. Both involve the most up-to-date forms of technological threat; the full range of espionage devices on the one hand, and chemical/biological warfare on the other. Both also make use of hidden, coded messages. When they arrested Rudolf Ivanovich Abel, investigators found a laboratory of modern espionage equipment, including a photo studio with film capable of producing the kind of microphotograph found in the original hollow nickel. (It may even be relevant that the first victim of the 2001 anthrax attack, Robert Stevens,

was a photo editor). The code on the photograph in the hollow nickel can certainly be paralleled with the 2001 case, since all the letters containing anthrax are thought to have included a hidden message, though the letter sent to Stevens has never been released. In the two that have, the complex code is based around highlighted letters 'A' and 'T.' Bruce Ivins was known to have had a fascination with codes and all forms of hidden messages, and in late 2001 was observed throwing away a copy of Douglas Hofstadter's book *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (1979), which deals with procedures for encoding and decoding, plus a 1992 issue of *American Scientist Journal*, which contained an article entitled "The Linguistics of DNA," which discusses, among other things, hidden messages.

The fact that these two cases both involve codes and hidden messages is an apt metaphor for the kind of reading and rereading that Danielewski encourages readers to undertake as they consider the historical sidebars on each page. These brief, elliptical entries can be, and most probably usually are, passed over by readers of the novel as they become fully absorbed in Sam's and Hailey's narratives and the connections between them. Perhaps occasionally he or she might cast a sidelong glance to the events in Myriad Pro in the left-hand column, just to check if there are any possible links with the verse. Yet if the entries are unpacked (with the use most likely of internet search engines), fuller resonances can arise, not only with text on the same page, but, as the book is rotated, with entries in the sidebar on the equivalent Sam or Hailey page. I have only given one small example here; I am sure there are more extensive parallels to be found throughout, as well as between sidebar entries on the same page once it is turned over. I have no idea whether Danielewski consciously wanted the reader to draw connections between the Robert Stevens and Rudolf Ivanovich Abel cases, and indeed I believe this does not matter. The important point is that the way that the text is constructed invites him or her to do so, to search after possible coincidences. The effect is again a kind of reading and rereading that is familiar to theorists of digital text; in this case though perhaps what is most relevant is not so much the fourth of Manovich's principles as his first, and most fundamental, "Numerical Representation": "All new media objects, whether created from scratch on computers or converted from analog media sources, are composed of digital code; they are numerical representations" (27).

Numbers are certainly key to *Only Revolutions*, as my earlier summary of its many symmetries indicated, though it may be going too far to suggest that it is a "numerical representation." It is certainly possible to view the historical sidebar though as composed of code; like that in the

microphotograph found in the hollow nickel, or that in the letters supposedly posted by Bruce Ivins, it needs to be read and reread many times before the full range of its possible meanings can even begin to be appreciated.

V. Conclusion

At least two of the principles that have been posited for the form of new media texts can thus be applied to the practices of reading and rereading that *Only Revolutions* invites. There may of course be others; my underlying point is that the text as a whole encourages processes of assembling and reassembling, combining and recombining, as the reader continually encounters variations on the same text, and is compelled to keep rereading. *Only Revolutions* is an example of Barthes's "plural text" for the digital age, as its meticulously constructed form generates never-ending interpretations. The "only" of Danielewski's title is thus accurate in one way, and misleading in another. In one sense there are "only" revolutions as the reader rotates the book and discovers cyclical repetitions and variations without end. Yet in another sense these revolutions of the book create an infinite number possible readings, defying all attempts to encapsulate a text that is so tightly constrained on the page. There is very little that is "only" about Danielewski's singular text.

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THE SURFACE OF SENSE,
THE SURFACE OF SENSATION
AND THE SURFACE OF REFERENCE:
GEOMETRY AND TOPOLOGY IN THE WORKS
OF MARK Z. DANIELEWSKI

HANJO BERRESSEM

Introduction: *Glas* etc.

I first got to know about Mark Z. Danielewski during the 2002 “Society for Literature and Science” Conference in Pasadena, where Katherine Hayles raved about his work over dinner. Soon after, I picked up a copy of *House of Leaves* (2000), and, somewhat predictably, given the academic *zeitgeist*, what I found especially exciting about the novel was its deconstructive allure, the way it brought theory not only to *bear* on literature, but to actually *make up* a large part of it, similar to the way Jacques Derrida, for instance in *Glas*, brought literature not only to bear on philosophy but to make up a large part of it.

Already a cursory look shows the intimate relation between a work such as *Glas* and the work of Danielewski. The elaborate typography of *House of Leaves*, its baroquely intricate writing spaces and the ways in which it orchestrates the materiality of the letter—from its concrete position on the page and the shifting fonts to its ‘spectral’ coloration—do not only *evoke* a Derridean playfulness, but in one of the many pre-emptive references that make deconstructive readings of his work so self-consuming, Danielewski directly *refers* to Derrida’s article “Structure, Sign and Play.” There is a similarly intimate relation between *Glas* and *Only Revolutions* (2006). In fact, Derrida’s folding of the first and the final page onto each other prefigures, quite literally, the ‘topology of torsion’ that defines *Only Revolutions*.¹

At the same time, however, the ‘material’ playfulness of Danielewski’s work reaches well beyond the logic of deconstruction. It taps into literature’s

typographic cabinets of curiosities, which provide a rich and diverse tradition that goes from Egyptian hieroglyphics to the intricate illuminations in medieval manuscripts, to the visual writing of concrete poetry—such as parts of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*—to the variously constrained works of OuLiPo. In fact, *Only Revolutions* is based on a poetics that is extremely constrained both immaterially and materially: it has 360 pages, and each half page consists of 36 lines and 90 words, which adds up to 180 words per page and 360 words for the two pages of the opened book. This structure is a perfect example of how constraints create concepts: not only does the structure quite obviously relate to the 180° revolutions that define the reading process, one might also think of each page of the two 'books' combined as a longitude (one degree of the 360 degrees of the global network of meridians) and of a page of each single book as a latitude (one degree of the 180 degrees of the global network of parallels).

Its typographic and topological extravaganzas also relate Danielewski's work to more contemporary experimental writing such as Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren* (1974), the traumatized writingscapes of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) and the conceptual layout of Leanne Shapton's novel in the form of an auction catalogue, *Important Artifacts and Personal Property From the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion, and Jewelry* (2009). Recently, with the 'conducted' version of *The Fifty Year Sword* for instance, Danielewski's work has begun to exceed the frame of such experimental literature, branching out into the fields of music and the theatre, and, even more recently into the field of the radio play.

My essay enters this development after the deconstructive phase and before the plurimedial one. What interests me about the novels is neither the many ways in which they stage the materiality of the signifier, nor their dissolution into complex media milieus. Rather, I will be concerned with *the materiality of the books themselves*, in particular with the 'reciprocal presupposition' between their materiality as objects and their poetics; their definition as both material objects and complicated essays on geometry and topology, on the 'space of writing'—which I take to be something different than the 'writing space'—and on the 'space of reading.' Early on, Hayles has drawn attention to the fact that the pages of *House of Leaves* are as labyrinthine and impossible as the rooms that are described in these pages, which makes the material novel a direct embodiment of the house described in it. As the title implies it is quite literally 'a house made of leaves.' "Locating itself within these labyrinthine spaces, the text enfolds the objects represented together with

the media used to represent them, thus making itself into a material metaphor for the recursive complexities of contemporary medial ecology” (Hayles 116).

While I fully subscribe to this reading, my interest is not so much in ‘material metaphors’ as in materiality itself, and it pertains less to the materiality of language than to the resonance between immaterial concepts and material objects. In that sense, my approach is that of a ‘reinforced material culture.’ Beyond the complex incarnations of the signifier in *Only Revolutions*, I will be concerned with the various aspects of the work’s embodiment and its relation to the reading process; with Danielewski’s deep investment in the format and mediality of the book and its virtual and actual operations. If I were to frame my argument in terms of intermediality, I would say that I will be concerned with ‘the sculptural’ in the sense of ‘the book as sculpture.’

Virtual Book | Actual Book: Complementarity

In what follows, I will attempt to delineate a number of conceptual parameters that might help address Danielewski’s work. I will take these parameters from the work of Gilles Deleuze, whose philosophy, in particular his distinction between the logic of sense, the logic of sensation and the logic of reference, can provide a useful conceptual frame for a reading of Danielewski’s embodied poetics. In fact, both Danielewski’s and Deleuze’s works are inherently topological. If Danielewski develops a spatial poetics, Deleuze develops a spatial philosophy that develops conceptual figures in terms of lines, surfaces and volumes.

One of the philosophical surfaces that Deleuze develops is the ‘surface of sense,’ which he delineates his book *The Logic of Sense* (1969). The surface of sense, which models a specific ‘space of thought,’ is the conceptual surface that pertains to philosophy. In his complementary book *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (1981), Deleuze develops the ‘surface of sensation,’ which is the surface that pertains to art and to aesthetics. While philosophy lays out planes of virtual, immaterial sense, art lays out planes of actual, material sensation. Although the two surfaces are distinct, they are complementary because virtual sense is always to some degree actualized while actual sensation is always to some degree virtualized. A further surface that is important in Deleuze’s typology of thought is the surface of reference, which pertains to science. As Deleuze and Félix Guattari note in *What is Philosophy?*,

philosophical concepts have events for consistency whereas scientific functions have states of affairs or mixtures for reference: through concepts,

philosophy continually extracts a consistent event from states of affairs—a smile without the cat, as it were—whereas through functions, science continually actualizes the event in a state of affairs, thing, or body that can be referred to (126).

Had Deleuze written a book about science, he probably would have called it *The Logic of Reference*.

All three surfaces address the actual, ‘matter-of-fact’ depth that pertains to bodies and movements *in* and *of* a purely extensive, material, ‘given’ world. “[T]hought in its three great forms—art, science, and philosophy—is always confronting chaos, laying out a plane, throwing a plane over chaos” (197), Deleuze and Guattari note. In fact, the three modes of thought transform a voluminous and chaotic reality—reality as unthought and as unperceived—into surfaces of thought and of sensation. On the virtual surfaces of philosophical concepts, artistic affects and scientific functions the actual depth of the ‘given’ world is ‘given as given.’

Although all modes of thought lay out a plane over chaos, they have different agendas. While science addresses the depth of matters-of-fact in terms of reference, art creates blocs of sensation, and philosophy invents concepts. According to these differentiations, the three modes of thought assemble different planes: the “*plane of immanence of philosophy, plane of composition of art, plane of reference or coordination of science*” (Deleuze and Guattari 216). Deleuze and Guattari describe the three modes of thought further in a nicely alliterative series: “*forms of concept, force of sensation, function of knowledge; concepts and conceptual personae, sensations and aesthetic figures, figures and partial observers*” (216). Philosophy thinks in concepts, literature “thinks through affects and percepts” (Deleuze and Guattari 66), science thinks in functions.

Even though the three modes of thought follow different logics, have different agendas and should be conceptually distinguished, the truly interesting spaces in Deleuze and Guattari’s typology are those hybrid spaces where art ‘does’ science or philosophy, or where science ‘does’ philosophy or art. Such liminal spaces are defined by complex sets of “nondiscursive resonance” (Deleuze and Guattari 23) that define not only elements within the same mode—as Deleuze and Guattari note, “[c]oncepts are centers of vibrations [...] This is why they all resonate rather than cohere or correspond with each other” (30)—but also the relations between the three modes. Their “coadaptations” (Deleuze and Guattari 82) and ‘structural coupling’ cause the three modes of thought to ‘irritate’ each other in the sense of ‘reciprocal stimulation.’ Philosophy irritates art and science, just as art irritates philosophy. In fact, as Deleuze

notes, philosophy is “a practice of concepts, and it must be judged in the light of the other practices with which it interferes (*Cinema 2* 280). For Deleuze, these irritations are vital because only the totality of resonating practices makes up the plane of the production of the new: “It is at the level of interference of many practices that things happen, beings, images, concepts, all the kind of events” (*Cinema 2* 280). Deleuze’s work is pervaded by such transdisciplinary resonances. In his two cinema books, for instance, he develops a detailed cinematic philosophy. How do filmmakers ‘do’ philosophy and how does philosophy ‘do’ cinema? Correspondingly, my question will be: How does literature ‘do’ science and philosophy and how ‘do’ science and philosophy ‘do’ literature? To answer this question, my argument will proceed on two levels. The first concerns Danielewski’s conceptual use of philosophy and science, the second concerns the way the materiality of his works resonates with and embodies these conceptual uses, the way the actual, material book that we hold in our hands resonates with the virtual, immaterial book that we address when we say things like ‘the book argues’ or ‘the novel’s concept of love.’ Symptomatically, at the center of the poetics of *Only Revolutions* lie a haptics and a gestural dynamics that organize the space of reading in a particularly tangible, material manner. In relating the process and performativity of the acts of actual reading and virtual reading, it dramatizes and ‘materially expresses’ quite directly that reading is always embodied reading, in the same way that cognition is always embodied cognition and philosophy is always embodied philosophy; in Deleuze’s words, it dramatizes that the virtual is always actualized and the actual always virtualized. Material objects are always also ‘figures of thought’ and *vice versa*.

On this conceptual background, my interest in materiality is more general than Hayles’s, whose interest is restricted to precisely the materiality and mediality of the signifier. When Hayles talks about “the materiality of the book itself” (111) she is primarily concerned with “its multiple layers of remediation” (114), with the book as a literary medium and thus with what German media studies have called ‘paper practices’ (*Papierpraktiken*). In contrast, I will be concerned with the book as both a literary medium *and* a material medium and thus with the *resonances* between paper practices and what German media studies have called ‘body practices’ (*Körperpraktiken*).

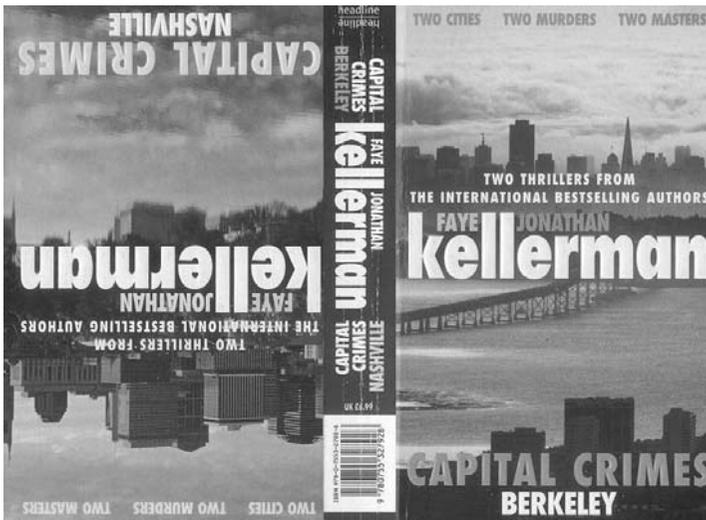
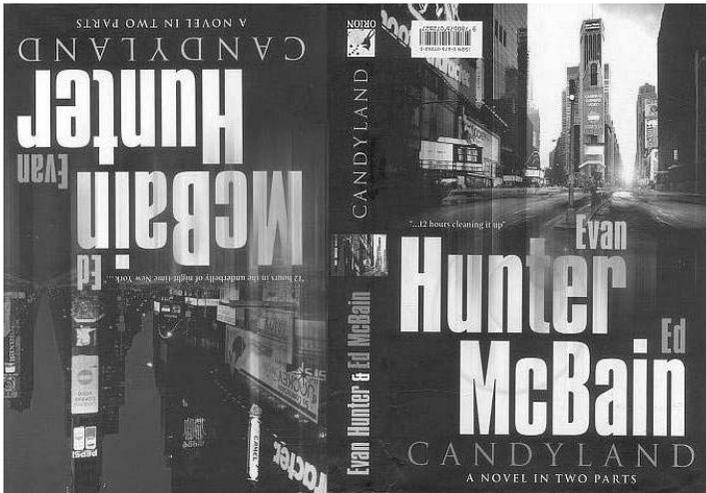
One context in which a paper practice folds directly into a body practice concerns the actual handling of the book. With *Only Revolutions*, a literally *revolutionary* gesture organizes the reading process in a direct ‘structural coupling’ of virtual, immaterial meaning and actual, material

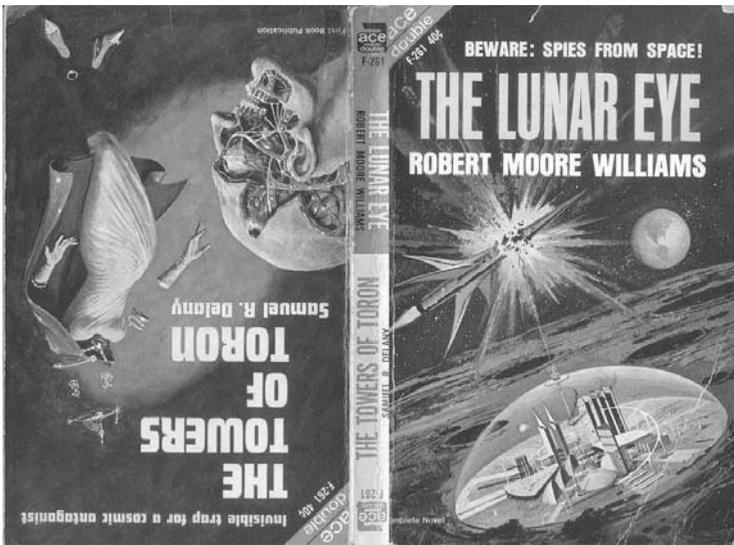
movement. The process of reading, which is habitually organized along the spine of the novel and involves a turning of the pages, now involves a rotational movement of that spine, as if one were to read from the front to the back of the book and *vice versa*, although there is, in the book, no starting point for this revolutionary routine. No beginning and no ending: only revolutions.

In this series of material revolutions, *Only Revolutions* creates complicated correspondences and complementarities between actual and virtual movements, between the movements of muscular operations, of sensations and of thoughts. It addresses the performativity of reading from the level of the reader's posture and gestures to the performativity of the eyes. Of course, this is not to say that reading a 'normal' book does *not* involve such material and immaterial movements, but rather that *Only Revolutions* dramatizes them in a striking and immensely poetical manner, similar to earlier works such as the original manuscript of Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*, which unrolls in front of the reader's eye in the same way a highway unrolls for a driver. Kerouac's novel is not a *House of Leaves* but rather a *Highway of Words*: not *Only Revolutions* but *Only Rolling*.

Like his manipulations of the signifier, Danielewski's specifically 'revolutionary' gesture taps into a longer literary tradition. Explicitly, for instance, the 'revolutionary' format defines a particular mode of the publication of 1950s science fiction and detective novels, while it might be said to 'implicitly' define Deleuze's complementary cinema books, which might well have been published in the same format. Danielewski's important variation of the model lies in two things: his literary revolutions metricize and thus rhythmicize the processes of both cognition and reading, and they relate the process of reading to a complementary, 'revolutionary poetics.'

Figures 1-4: Examples of rotated covers





Metaphysical Prose: Composition

In the way it conceptually and materially relates the spaces of literature, of science and of philosophy, Danielewski's writing might be thought of as 'metaphysical prose.' With the mannerist poetics of metaphysical poetry, it shares a deep interest in the meeting of conceptual lucidity and poetic ludicity and in both conceptual and material convolutions. In *House of Leaves*, in fact, the underlying conceptual conceit is a topological one in the sense that topology is a specific mathematical theory about space and its convolutions. Famously, the plot revolves around the frightening events that surround David Navidson's expedition into 'impossible' spaces whose topological complications are taken up by the both typological and narratological complexities of the novel. Navidson, a renowned photographer, has bought a house whose overall strangeness is announced by the disconcerting fact that the inside is larger than the outside by a quarter of an inch. A similarly disconcerting fact is that a door inside a walk-in closet opens up to a hallway that leads to a subterranean, constantly changing maze of rooms that range from low caverns to giant halls. These rooms are connected by passages and stairways that cannot exist by all geometrical standards—at least by those that pertain to classical space.

The fact that the house is infinitesimally larger on the inside than on the outside refers to an originally mathematical conceit that has found its way into literature before *House of Leaves*. For instance, Thomas Pynchon uses in his novel *Mason & Dixon* (1997) the same topological trope in his description of a coach

wherein the inside is quite noticeably larger than the outside, though the fact cannot be appreciated until one is inside. [...] [A]t the basis of the Design lies a logarithmic idea of the three dimensions of Space, realiz'd in an intricate Connexion of precise Analytickal curves, some bearing loads, others merely decorative, still others serving as Cam-Surfaces guiding the motions of other Parts. (354)²

In *House of Leaves*, this both topological and conceptual paradox opens up to a series of explorations into caverns and passageways whose affective architectures evoke not only the work of M.C. Escher³ and Douglas Hofstadter, but, and probably even more so, the sometimes similarly impossible spaces of Giovanni Battista Piranesi's series of *Carceri d'Immaginazione*.



Figure 5: Giovanni Battista Piranesi, “Carceri VII”

Another important impossible space in *House of Leaves* is related to the theory of the ‘hollow earth,’ which is positioned at the threshold of science, myth and literature. During a discussion of the possible origins of the spatial incongruities of the house—“some fanatics of *The Davidson Record* assert that the presence of extremely old chondrites definitively proves extra-terrestrial forces constructed the house. Others, however, claim the samples only support the idea that the house on Ash Tree Lane is a self-created portal into some other dimension” (*HoL* 378)—Johnny Truant, the fictional editor of the equally fictional journal *The Davidson Record* refers, in a footnote, to an even more fictitious text that mentions the theory of the ‘hollow earth’ as one to which the strange topology of the house might or might not be related:

A Lexicon of Improbable Theories, Blair Keepling, ed. (San Francisco: Niflheim Press, 1996). In chapter 13, Keepling credits *The Navidson Record* with the revival of the Hollow Earth Movement. Tracing this implausible theory from the wobbly ratiocinations of John Cleaves Symmes (1779-1829) through Raymond Bernard's *The Hollow Earth: The Greatest Discovery in History* (1964) to Norma Cox's self-published pro-Nazi piece *Kingdoms Within Earth* (1985), Keepling reveals yet another bizarre subculture thriving in the Western world. (*HoL* 378)

A less 'scientific' way to explain the inexplicable events *in* and the spatial convolutions of Danielewski's house is to consider it as haunted. In contrast to a common haunted house, however, there is no ghost *in* the house. More unsettling, the space of the house is itself ghosted and ghostly. Quite literally, the house is haunted by geometry. More precisely, it is haunted by non-Euclidean, or also 'projective' geometry, similar to the way mathematics and philosophy were each, at some point in the nineteenth century, haunted by projective geometry.

The most crucial difference between classical and projective geometry is that the latter deals with perceptual, embodied space rather than with a purely abstract mathematical space. It is subjective rather than objective, and as such it deals with the visual assembly of space rather than with its structural order. As Ian Stewart notes, "[t]he geometry of perspective was published by [...] Alberti in 1436, in his book *Della pittura*. It's called *projective geometry*, and it describes the way in which the eye sees the world. The basic surface is known as the *projective plane*" (441) that defines the space of "a non-Euclidean geometry having no parallel lines" (Stevenson 4).

Mathematically, the difference between classical and projective geometry congeals into the fact that the fifth Euclidean axiom about parallel lines does not apply in projective space. Against the laws of Euclidean geometry, in projective geometry, two objects *do* converge when they are projected into the distance. More precisely, they converge at the point of perspective that lies, in terms of optics, on the infinitely far-away horizon. In projective geometry, therefore, parallels *do* meet, as everyone knows who has ever looked down a railroad track, at paintings by Giorgio de Chirico—which with their slightly askew points of perspective are similarly haunted by geometry as is *House of Leaves*—or by Salvador Dalí.⁴

In his poem "The Definition of Love," the metaphysical poet Andrew Marvell uses the axiom that parallel lines do not meet for a conceit about the geometrization of love. In fact, this conceit turns the text into a mathematical essay in the form of a poem or *vice versa*. It also relates it to

Danielewski's poetics of love, which develops, like Marvell's, a geometry of love.

In Marvell, the origin of this amorous geometry is the image of two lovers situated at the two oppositional poles of the world's *axis amoris*:

And therefore [fate's] decrees of steel
Us as the distant poles have placed,
(Though Love's whole world on us doth wheel),
Not by themselves to be embraced, (17-20)

As long as the three-dimensional world of love is not compressed into a two-dimensional surface, the lovers will never be able to meet:

Unless the giddy heaven fall,
And earth some new convulsion tear.
And, us to join, the world should all
Be cramp'd into a planisphere. (21-24)

The tragedy is that while any oblique and therefore imperfect love will always meet, a perfectly true, parallel love, will, like true mathematical parallels, never meet:

As lines, so love's oblique, may well
Themselves in every angle greet:
But ours, so truly parallel,
Though infinite, can never meet. (25-28)

In Marvell's Euclidean world, parallels will never converge. In a 'projective world,' however, things look less bleak.

Geometry and Poetry

These geometrical convolutions would lead far away from Danielewski, were it not for the fact that Danielewski's world *is* a radically projective world and that geometry makes up an integral part of his poetics. In fact, Danielewski's work heralds a new orientation of the page as a surface of writing, and as such it heralds, like Deleuzian philosophy, a new orientation of the plane or the space of thought and of the imagination. It develops both a projective thought and a projective poetics that traces the changes in thought that result from the fact that this projective thought develops from within projective rather than Euclidean space. If thought is always and fundamentally thought *in* space—embodied thought, that is—

Danielewski's work is, like that of Deleuze, not only about *thinking* other geometries, but about *thinking in* other geometries.

There is one moment in the history of projective geometry that is central for a reading of *House of Leaves*, which fundamentally deconstructs the spatial categories of inside and outside, and, even more so, for a reading of *Only Revolutions*. The year is 1874. Until this year, projective geometry was, like classical geometry, thought from within a bilateral space, which means a two-sided space, in which two oppositional points were infinitely far away from each other. In geometrical terms, the projective plane was a planisphere, or, more correctly, a hemisphere. In 1874 however, the German mathematician Felix Klein proposed that “the projective plane has only one side” (Stewart 158).

Projective Writing

The figure of the ‘one-sided projective plane’—also called the ‘real projective plane’—is a conceit that marks a both philosophical and artistic moment *within* the mode of scientific thought. This is especially interesting because it deals with infinity and as such seems to contradict Deleuze and Guattari's notion that science is the only mode of thought that ‘gives up’ the infinite:

By retaining the infinite, philosophy gives consistency to the virtual through concepts; by relinquishing the infinite, science gives reference to the virtual, which actualises it through functions. Philosophy proceeds with a plane of immanence or consistency; science with a plane of reference. In the case of science it is like a freeze-frame. (118)

Art creates “a plane of composition that is able to restore the infinite” (Deleuze and Guattari 203).

The relentless integrations of science reduce the infinite to the finite in order to make its objects calculable and functional. In another alliterative series, Deleuze and Guattari note that “the philosopher brings back from chaos [...] *variations* that are still infinite but that have become inseparable on the absolute surface” (202), the scientist “brings back from the chaos *variables* that have become independent by slowing down [...] finite coordinates on a secant [*sécant*] plane of reference” (202), and the artist “brings back from the chaos *varieties* that no longer constitute a reproduction of the sensory in the organ but set up a being of the sensory [...] on an anorganic plane of composition that is able to restore the infinite” (202-03).

The real projective plane, however, does not only *retain* the infinite, it actually provides the space within which infinity is retained. It is somewhat ironic that it is by way of a geometrical conceit involving infinity that mathematics does not only come to irritate both art and philosophy but to create a new ‘space of thought’ for them. The fact that both Deleuze and Danielewski take their space of thought from a scientific conceit is not inconsistent, however, because geometry is a ‘pure science’ rather than an ‘applied science,’ and as such is not so much concerned with functionalization. Like philosophy, it invents concepts.

The real projective plane is the mathematical figure of an infinitely large, unbounded space that is folded back onto itself at what are called points-at-infinity. Klein describes it as a hemisphere with a line at infinity at the edge, at which, in the words of Marcel Duchamp, ‘opposites are reconciled’: “Every infinitely far away point on the plane [...] corresponds to two points on the edge of the half-sphere; thus we have to consider such diametrically opposed points on the edge as identical” (Klein 14, my translation).⁵ Deleuze notes in his book *Difference and Repetition*, drawing directly on the figure of the real projective plane: “For it seems that the extreme can be defined by the infinite, in the small or in the large. The infinite, in this sense, even signifies the identity of the small and the large, the identity of extremes” (52).

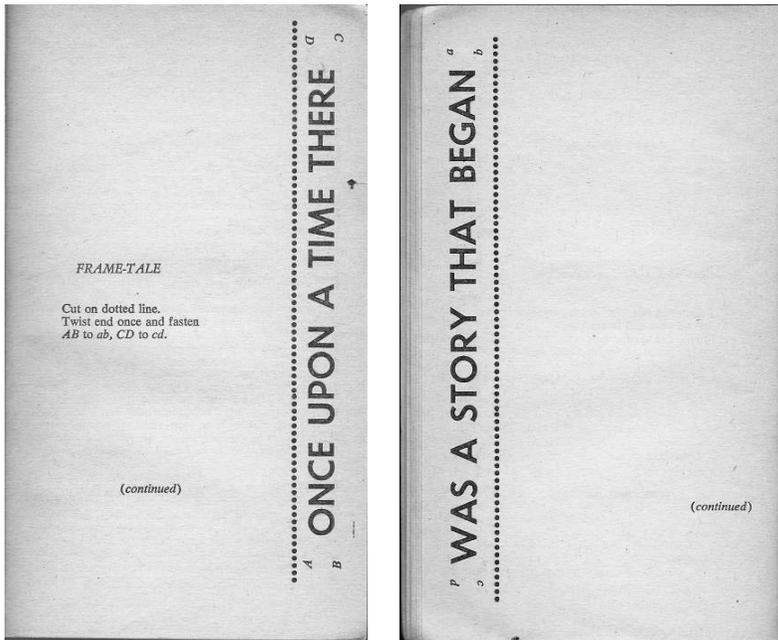
As I noted, the figure of the projective plane is seminal in Deleuze’s construction of a specific space of philosophical thought. Drawing once more on the real projective plane, Deleuze notes in *The Logic of Sense* about the ‘one-sided’ relation between the actual and the virtual that in sentient beings, the classic differentiation between depth and surface is topologically transformed into the differentiation between the ‘two sides’ of a real projective plane:

the old depth no longer exists at all, having been reduced to the opposite side of the surface. By sliding, one passes to the other side, since the other side is nothing but the opposite direction. [...] It suffices to follow it far enough, precisely enough, and superficially enough, in order to reverse sides and to make the right side become the left or vice versa. (12)

The geometry of the real projective plane allows positioning various concepts on its ‘two sides.’ One obvious choice are inside and outside, but one might also think of beginning and ending; the terms the American poet Charles Olson, who called his poetry, quite programmatically, ‘projective writing,’ positions on the literary plane on his essay “Equal that is, to the Real itself” (1958). According to the logic of the real projective plane, the first and the last page of the essay are folded back onto each other in a

curvature of thought. “[I]f the means are equal” (52), the essay ends, to which one should add, of course, its ‘enigmatic’ title, “Equal that is, to the Real itself.”

A similar logic pervades the poetics of Samuel R. Delany’s topological short story “On the Unspeakable” (1993), which is written in two complementary columns, and which loops back from the ending “Indeed it is” (155:2) to the beginning: “the positioning of desire that always draws us to ‘The Unspeakable’ in the first place” (141:1).⁶ John Barth has provided the arguably most concise figure of a projective space of writing in his text “Frame Tale” from his collection *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), which asks of the reader to ‘actually’ take a two-dimensional page and transform it into a three-dimensional Möbius strip.



Figures 6-7: “Frame Tale”

There is, I would maintain, as much poetry in Klein’s mathematical conceptualizations as there is conceptual rigor and mathematics in Danielewski’s literary poetics. Consider, for instance, the conceptual outrageousness and the aesthetic ‘sensuousness’ of the real projective plane. As Klein notes in a beautifully laconic manner, “[w]e should attempt to imagine the projective situation long enough for it to be no

longer too difficult to, for instance, pull some figure through the infinitely far away” (17; my translation).

To wrap one’s head around the concept of the real projective plane, one must juggle two paradoxes simultaneously. The first involves the notion of infinity. Even though the projective plane extends to infinity and is thus unbounded, it is modelled mathematically by a bounded circle or hemisphere. The twist is that this hemisphere is treated conceptually as infinitely large and unbounded. If this both visual and conceptual paradox is already bold, the second paradox is even more so: the identification of the two oppositional points, which implies a curvature of space, to the point where the opposites are identified with each other. And then, as Stewart notes with an almost diabolical irony, “we should think of a disc, whose opposite boundary points are identified mentally, rather than by actually bending the disc around to bring them together” (162). Just when one thinks one has begun to be able to visualize the curved plane, one should neglect the curvature in a move from visuality and sensation to conceptuality and sense.

One difficulty with the real projective plane is that it cannot be represented within three-dimensional space. This refers back to its conceptualization as a three-dimensional volume, as a hemisphere rather than a planisphere. As a hemisphere it contains points that lie in a spatially defined fourth dimension. In three-dimensional space, these points can only be modelled as places where the figure moves through itself, as with the ‘Klein Bottle.’ One way to illustrate the space defined by the projective plane is to use the Möbius strip, which is modelled in two-dimensional space and therefore can be represented in three-dimensional space, which accounts for its popularity and the real projective plane’s relative obscurity. The Möbius strip can be used to illustrate the projective plane because it is homeomorphic to the real projective plane, which means that it can be transformed into a real projective plane through continuous spatial distortions. Topologically, in fact, the only difference between the Möbius strip and the projective plane is that the Möbius strip has edges. To transform it into a real projective plane, one needs to simply extend these edges and bring them together. This operation turns the surface into a volume.

Mathematically, the Möbius strip is a 180° rotation or revolution of a line-segment over the radius over a circle, a rotation that evokes, of course, the structural constraints of *Only Revolutions*. The primal scene of this rotational routine can be found in the collected works of the German mathematician August Ferdinand Möbius. Klein, who was the editor of Möbius’s works, dates this discovery to “the last quarter of the year 1858”

(Möbius 519, my translation).⁷ As Klein notes, the Möbius strip is “the simplest surface [...] that has the same properties as the projective plane” (15, my translation).

The space of the real projective plane has not only haunted literature and the visual arts but also what has been called ‘French theory.’ In fact, when Derrida notes specifically that the torsion in *Glas* does not imply the implementation of a new topology, this should at least partly be read in the context of the philosophical ecology from within which he was writing. In that ecology, the conceit of the real projective plane ‘belonged’ to Jacques Lacan, for whom psychic reality was, famously, laid out on a “projective plan [sic]” (223). The surface that defines his ‘Schema R, in fact, should be understood as a real projective plane. As Lacan notes in his usual cavalier fashion about the topological relation between the Imaginary and the Symbolic: “(the cut ‘ei,’ ‘MI’), are sufficient indication that this cut isolates a Moebius-strip in the field” (223).

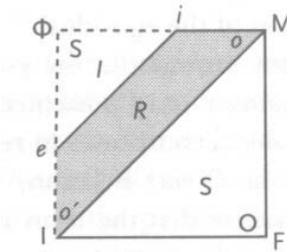


Figure 8: Lacan, “Schema R” (Ecrits, 197)

The terms Lacan positions on the respective ‘sides’ of the projective plane are the Symbolic (the signifier) and the Imaginary (the signified), while the Real is the twist that *brings about* the unilateral topology but is ‘contained’ in it merely as the cut and twist needed to turn a paper ring into a Möbius strip. This, in fact, is the geometrical reason why both psychoanalysis and deconstruction are concerned with the materiality of the sign.

In his book *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (1988), Deleuze proposes a different positioning. According to him, the torsion that defines the real projective plane is that between the actual and the virtual, “the torsion that constitutes the fold of the world and of the soul” (26). This, in analogy, is the geometrical reason why Deleuzian philosophy is concerned with the relation between immaterial concepts and material matters-of-fact. To curve the argument back towards Danielewski, Hayles is informed by the geometry of that defines deconstruction and psychoanalysis, while

my understanding of his work is informed by the geometry that defines Deleuzian philosophy.

This philosophy allows reading Danielewski's novels as material objects that embody the reciprocal presupposition of intension (the virtual) and extension (the actual). While *House of Leaves* does this by way of creating typographically impossible spaces that are congruent with the impossible spaces that define the narration, *Only Revolutions* goes a step further. It creates a complex space of resonance between extensive space, conceptual space and writing space. In other words, if the poetics of *House of Leaves* are defined by typography, those of *Only Revolutions* are defined by topology.

Both strategies, however, address the reciprocal presupposition of intension and extension; between immaterial relations and material terms, which, as Spinoza maintains, need to be categorically separated, like those of mind and matter. Although they never converge completely except 'at infinity,' these two separate series, which together make up the world, should be kept as closely together as possible according to a kind of asymptotics of the actual and the virtual. In fact, Deleuze's philosophy might be described as an asymptotic philosophy. Invariably, in philosophy as in literature, the challenge is to find ways to conceptualize or to dramatize the projective conjunction of the two series; to create figures of thought that express the complementary relationship between material world and immaterial thought.

Only Revolutions

In 1984, the German avant-garde band Die Tödliche Doris (The Deadly Doris) released their fourth album, called "Our Debut." This album was followed, in 1986, by an album called "Six." In 1987, the band published a note that explained the missing, fifth album or LP. "Our Debut" and "Six," they said,

are constructed so that they correspond to one another in music, text and arrangement and comprise a unity if one plays them at the same time from the first piece on, on two record players with their respective A- or B-sides. The parallel pieces are the same length to the minute, from one track to the next, and offer a variety of textual, musical and semantic interactions. By playing both LPs together the invisible fifth LP, an immaterial LP emerges in the mind of the listener. (Die Tödliche Doris, "Our Debut")

Only Revolutions works somewhat similarly. Its two exquisitely symmetrical sides, which can be read as individual books, make up a virtual book that

emerges in the mind of the reader when the two stories are read 'simultaneously.' In fact, the 180° turning of the book recapitulates, in many ways, a lost gesture that future ethnographers and scholars of 'gesture studies' will have to add to their archives: that of turning vinyl LPs on a record player, a turn from side 1 to side 2 that involves, quite literally, a revolution of the record. Or consider a DJ, creating a new soundscape from two simultaneously played albums.

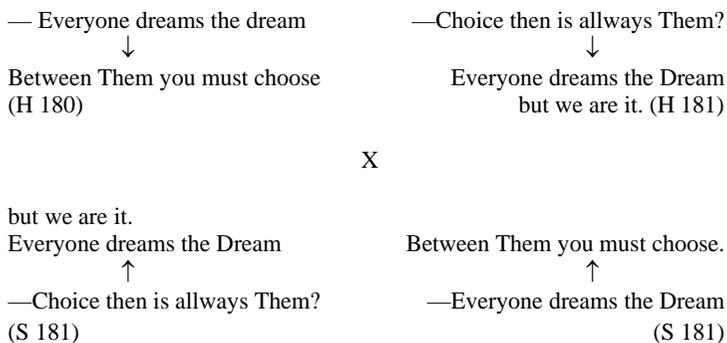
Only Revolutions tells the two complementary stories of Sam and Hailey not only in conceptual but also in visual parallax, which means from two slightly different perspectives. This is evoked already in the two complementary eyes in the cover illustration, which together provide the phenomenon of visual parallax, as well as in the motif of circles—or better projective planes—in the design of the cover and in the two 'authors,' one eye golden-brown, one green. Of course these two narrative perspectives are those of Sam and of Hailey, with each figure having its own space positioned on one of the two sides of a projective plane, which makes the stories both locally bilateral and globally unilateral. The zero, the number 360 and the sign of infinity on the title page in turn evoke all of this.

As on a projective plane, the two novels project the two perspectives onto the same action, the same milieu and the same writing space. Like Marvell's "Definition of Love," *Only Revolutions* is about the definition and the geometry of love. It is a love story told in an eight-page rhythm. On the first page, the two universes are infinitely far away but also connected: "Why don't I have any shoes?" (H 1) asks Hailey, color-coded with golden-brown eyes, while Sam notes in the upside-down column: "I could never walk away from you" (S 360). On the other first page, Sam, color-coded with green eyes, asks "Why don't I have a hat?" (S 1), while in the upside-down column Hailey notes: "I could never walk away from you" (H 360). In these cross-references, Danielewski creates syntactic and semantic complementarities as well as intense resonances between the two complementary 'sides.'

Precisely at the middle of the book, the true parallels meet at a point-at-infinity, at a crossroads, or a point of perspective at which projective geometry and projective writing converge in the poetics of *both* a figure of thought and of a material revolution. This relates once more extensive space (the depth of the material book) to the triad of conceptual space (the surface of sense), writing space (the surface of sensation), and referential space (the surface of science). The novel zooms in from the infinitely far away—the periphery—to the moment of the impossible meeting of opposites: an amorous *concordia discors* or *coincidentia oppositorum*. Once again Pynchon's work provides an instructive passage on the use of

that image in his description of the position of the mythical realm of Shambhala. As somebody notes in *Against the Day*: “I suppose it is a real place on the globe, in the sense that the Point at Infinity is a place ‘on’ the Riemann sphere” (628).

This impossible point-at-infinity, which I have marked by a chiasmic ‘X’ in the diagram below, cannot be represented in three-dimensional space because it lies in the fourth dimension. Quite literally, this point defines the page as a projective plane, and it positions the reader on this plane. At this point-at-infinity and for the shortest of moments, correspondences and intensities travel freely between the two series. Converging at infinity, the two series bleed into the other. The ‘true parallels’ meet. At the same time, the point is a point of bifurcation and of choice: male and female, green and golden-brown, plants and animals. The dream and the dream: “Allways.” Two ‘I’s, which also reads as ‘all ways.’ All ways are open. *Only Revolutions*:



This is how Danielewski dramatizes, in literature, the philosophical concept and definition of love by way of the scientific axioms of geometry and topology. He indeed ‘does’ philosophy and science in literature. He creates a complex, constrained field of resonances and complementarities between the immateriality of the virtual and the materiality of the actual. At this point, if someone can tell me a more beautiful way to dramatize, both conceptually and concretely, in literature, the geometry of love, the parallax of love, the definition of love, the impossible meeting of two people—the moment when drifting towards becomes drifting away, when drifting towards is always already drifting away—then please let me know.

With these remarks, I have brought my essay to the point at which the real work should begin. This work is to produce careful readings that

construct the virtual book that emerges in the impossible space between the two perspectives. Although I cannot provide such readings myself, I find it particularly felicitous that my essay is the last essay of this collection. If one considers the conceptual space of this collection to be a real projective plane, the ending of my essay might be imagined to curve back to the beginning of the collection, and thus to the careful readings which my essay could evoke, but not provide. What I would invite the reader to do, therefore, is to return to these readings, which, in a wonderfully projective manner, ‘complete’ my essay.

Notes

¹ I will refer to geometry when I am concerned with the shift from classical, (Euclidean) to projective (non-Euclidean) space, and to topology [*analysis situs*] when I am concerned with the distinction between Cartesian space (which positions discrete objects within an empty, timeless and uniform space and measures them according to the ‘Cartesian grid’) and topological space (which defines objects by suspending them into a dynamic force-field and along the physical, intensive tensions between each other); this is a difference between space understood as hard, empty and discrete, or as elastic, full and continuous.

² See also Pynchon’s novel *Inherent Vice*, in which he describes a building that “was also turning out to be bigger inside than out” (21).

³ Hayles has noted that “references to Escher’s self-deconstructing spaces pepper the House’s footnotes” (119).

⁴ On top of providing a good example of these lines of perspective, Dalí’s print *Tristan* is evocative of the structure of *Only Revolutions* in the way it treats the complementarity of the lovers by way of the virtual chalice that ‘appears’ in the space defined by the two lovers’ profiles.

⁵ “Two points on the periphery of the half-sphere correspond to each infinitely far-away point on the plane. Thus we must [...] consider two such diametrically opposed points on the periphery as identical” (Klein 14, my translation).

⁶ The first number indicates the page, while the second one refers to the column in Delany’s text. “On the Unspeakable,” which is about the abject as the unspeakable, transposes projective space directly onto the written page. Delany binds unspeakability directly to the text’s topology and the reading space in which “the unspeakable is always in the column you are not reading. At any given moment it is what is on the opposite side of the Moebius text at the spot your own eyes are fixed on. The unspeakable is mobile; it flows; it is *displaced* as much by language and experience as it is by desire” (153:1, emphasis added). Delany notes specifically that there art and commentary, as well as practice and theory, cannot be separated: “the gap between probe and presentation, between interpretation and representation, between analysis and art. *It is as if we must establish two columns*, with everything of one mode relegated to one side and everything of the other

relegated to the other. It's as if we had to figure the impossibility of such a task, such a split, such a gap—figure it in language—rather than write of it, speak of it” (150:2, my emphasis).

⁷ In *Anschauliche Geometrie* Hilbert and Cohn-Vassen define the unilaterality of the moebial surface in terms of whether “there is a way on the surface that leads from one side of the surface to the other, without stepping over the edge of the surface and without piercing the membran at a point over which the way passes. If there is such a way, the surface is called one-sided, if not, two-sided” (268-69, my translation).

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