

“A maze meant... What did it mean?”
The Labyrinth Motif and the Reader’s Response
in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*

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This is not for you.

“Prometheus, thief of light, giver of light, bound by the gods, must have been a book.”

Introduction

There are many ways to summarize *House of Leaves*, as many as they are interpretations of it. This one is but one more, whose sole ambition is to introduce the major aspects of the novel that will be discussed in this paper. *House of Leaves* tells the story of the Navidson family who, upon moving into their new house in Virginia, gradually discovers that something does not add up, namely the inside and outside measurements of their house. This discovery is the starting point of a series of architectural and familial metamorphoses, and most notably, the appearance of a dark and ever-shifting maze in the wall of their living room. This strange addition results in a number of speculative and practical explorations, conducted by Will Navidson under the scrutiny of his worried partner, Karen Green. The story of the Navidson is in fact, as the reader soon realizes, a film that comes from the mind of a blind old man named Zampanò, and that only exists within the pages of what he calls *The Navidson Record*. The manuscript eventually comes into possession of a young man named Johnny Truant, whose interest in it will grow into an obsession, as he compulsively covers the pages to tell his own tale. Between these two masculine voices, a third one arises from the pages of tragic & tender letters addressed to a long-lost son, that of Pelafina Heather Lièvre, Johnny's institutionalized mother. Although *House of Leaves* does not have "main characters" *per se*, I shall refer to these three voices as such for the sake of clarity, and because Danielewski himself likes to describe the book as "a three character play [that consists of] a blind old man, a young man, and a very special, extraordinarily gifted woman" (Grand). This labyrinthine story made of intricate and intertwined narratives came out in 2000, ten years after Mark Z. Danielewski began the writing process.

At the time of its release, the novel was quickly associated with such experimental novels as Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* or Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. In *The Washington Post*, Steven Moore went as far as calling it "the first major experimental novel of the new millennium" (Moore). Danielewski nonetheless claims that the novel is "really just enjoying the fruits of a long line of earlier literary experimentation" (Danielewski, "Haunted House" 106), and that its "so-called 'originality' [...] must be limited to [his] decision to use the wonderful techniques developed by Mallarme, Sterne, B.S. Johnson, Cummings, Hollander, etc" (106). For example, Pelafina's September 19, 1988 letter borrows from Mallarmé's pre-concretist "Un coup de dés" and the "see-through square" from page 119 to 144 is reminiscent of the cut

pages of B.S. Johnson's 1964 *Alberto Angelo*. Michaël Greaney also compares the novel's layout to "the innovative typography of [Derrida's] *Glas*"¹ (Greaney 153). Guillaume Apollinaire and his *Calligrammes*² can also be mentioned in relation to the "signiconic" typography³ that Danielewski developed in his latest collection entitled *The Familiar*. He defines the term as follows:

[Signiconic] is a word that combines "sign" and "icon." What signiconic writing does is embrace the possibility of engaging the mind not only on a visual level but on a linguistic level as well, and at the same time, without ever letting either side claim dominance. We can be completely immersed in text. And we can be completely intoxicated by the visual [...]. But by engaging both at the same time, you destabilize both sides, and open the mind up to many other perceptions—even a third perception, if you will (Danielewski, "Writing").

Danielewski's insistence on the necessity to combine textual and iconic reading strategies and his aspiration to a mode of perception which transcends such dichotomies is a foundational element of his concretist poetics. This technique is nonetheless more relevant to discuss in relation to *The Familiar* rather than *House of Leaves* and will, therefore, not be discussed further in this paper.

In the same line of thoughts, N. Katherine Hayles argues that "none of the dynamics displayed in *House of Leaves* is entirely original, yet the bits and pieces add up to something very specific if not unique" (Hayles, *Writing Machines* 112). I believe that Hayles' statement perfectly pinpoints why the novel stood out and still does in the literary landscape. His unorthodox combination of different experimental techniques is indeed so unique that it does not fail to be the focus of many critiques and scholarly works. "Cette exubérance formelle", Valérie Dupuy explains "a conduit la plupart des journalistes et critiques à souligner ces aspects formels expérimentaux du roman, mais en les présentant comme une forme de virtuosité, fascinante pour certains, assez vaine pour d'autres"⁴ (Dupuy 39). Dupuy's statement hints at the polarized reception of the novel, which surely does not leave readers indifferent. By way of example, consider Emily Barton's review in *The Village Voice*: "The typographical experiments often seem random [...]. [...] [I]n the end this deft onomatopoeia becomes tiresome in the general atmosphere of senseless typomania [...]. *House of Leaves* is at once worth trying to fathom and inexplicably overhyped, overstylized, and difficult"

¹ See appendix 1 for more examples and illustrations.

² "Poem[s] in which words are positioned so as to create a visual image of the subject on the page."

³ See appendix 2.

⁴ "This formal exuberance has led most journalists and critics to emphasize these experimental formal aspects of the novel, by presenting them as a form of virtuosity, fascinating for some, quite useless for others."

(Barton). Conversely, Moore believes that “[a]ny hope or fear that the experimental novel was an aberration of the 20th century is dashed by the appearance of Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*”:

The physical layout heightens the experience: After Navidson’s crew lose their way, the text mimics the labyrinth by expanding and contracting, going off in odd directions, printed upside down or backward, with narrative and multi-layered footnotes crowding each other for space. As texts collide, the reader experiences the same disorientation the explorers do (Moore).

Here, Moore singles out an important aspect of the novel as well as a major focus of this paper, namely the reader(s)⁵’s experience through the book and its similarities with that of the characters.

Since the history of the labyrinth goes back to Antiquity, chapter II⁶ is devoted to the study of its history by means of Penelope Reed Doob’s *The Idea of the Labyrinth: from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages* and Paolo Santarcangeli’s *Le livre des labyrinthes: Histoire d’un mythe et d’un symbole* in order to identify the different kinds of labyrinth and the various symbolical meanings assigned to it. Doob also discusses books as labyrinths, which will be an important component in my analysis. I will also address the labyrinth as an important postmodern motif by means of Michaël Hoffman’s book *From Modernism to Postmodernism: Concepts and Strategies in Postmodern American Fiction*. The possibility for books to be labyrinths implies that they require a certain type of audience. Reader’s response will, therefore, be a major aspect of this paper. The concept of *implied reader* according to Wolfgang Iser, and Wolf Schmid’s further distinction between the *presumed addressee* and the *ideal recipient* will be discussed in order to see how such concepts can be applied to *House of Leaves* and how the *ideal recipient* could actually come into existence.

Chapter III deals with the Navidsons’ labyrinth and the extent to which, despite appearances, it can be considered a house. This assessment will bring about the notion of *uncanny* and how it can be applied to the novel itself. Moreover, the labyrinth’s function as

⁵ Throughout this essay, the word “reader” is mostly used in the plural in order to avoid using the third person singular (masculine and feminine) each time. Sometimes, however, both (like in this case) or only the singular are used, either because it is more relevant in the given passage, or to be more coherent with the quotations. It is important to keep in mind that both the singular and the plural uses of the word “reader” are relevant in the context of *House of Leaves* and that the choice of plural by default was simply made to ensure a better readability.

⁶ Except for chapter I, which is to be found at the end of the introduction, all of the chapters are dealt with in chronological order.

substitute will be addressed. It is nonetheless important to point out that there are no “correct” interpretation of it, and that it is but one among many. As Dupuy argues : “L’image du labyrinthe [...] ne s’accompagne pas d’un sens unique et clair, mais d’une multiplicité de lectures possibles dont aucune n’est privilégiée”⁷ (41). She explains that

...le foisonnement thématique qui tisse autour de la maison un réseau serré et rapidement inextricable pour le lecteur [...] n’a aucunement pour fonction de venir interpréter le récit et lui donner un sens. Au contraire, il tend à jouer un rôle dilatoire, et brouille le motif architectural par son omniprésence même⁸ (Dupuy 41).

Danielewski does not favor one interpretation over the others, and by doing so, leaves the readers without bearing as to which path (both in terms of what they read and how they interpret) of his labyrinthine book they should safely follow. This also means that the path they choose is personal and that the labyrinth reflects their choices rather than the author’s design. This statement can be illustrated by Dupuy’s own argumentation, where she claims that a passage from Derrida “peut se lire comme une clef que Danielewski dissimule au cœur du roman, et qui semble confirmer le lien entre les questions architecturales et le mode de ‘fonctionnement’ du livre”⁹ (45). Danielewski does not suggest that this passage in particular is a “key”. Rather, Dupuy considers it as such because she reads the novel through the lens of architectural spaces in literature (she wrote her paper for a symposium called “Architecture, Littérature et Espaces”). That said, I do not mean to condemn this attitude, since I – we all, in fact – tend to be influenced by our personal underlying intentions. Besides, it is one of the novel’s goals to make the readers project themselves onto it and interpret the labyrinth as they personally want to.

In chapter IV, the typographical aspects of the novel will be discussed in order to look at the various ways in which the novel conveys the motif of the labyrinth and how it affects the reading experience. The way in which the typographical choices go hand in hand with the content of the novel and, therefore, broaden the scope of interpretations will also be addressed. This chapter is divided into 5 sections.

⁷ “The image of the labyrinth [...] is not accompanied by a single and clear meaning, but by a multiplicity of possible readings, none of which is privileged.”

⁸ “The thematic proliferation that weaves a tight and quickly inextricable network for the reader around the house [...] does not serve to interpret the story and make sense of it. On the contrary, it tends to play a delaying role, and interferes with the architectural motif by its very omnipresence.”

⁹ “can be read as a key that Danielewski hides at the heart of the novel, and which seems to confirm the link between architectural matters and the way the novel operates.”

The section “Non-linearity and hyperlinks” will revolve around the notion of non-linearity in *House of Leaves* based on Espen J. Aarseth’s book *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. In his study, Aarseth highlights the importance of the user (or, in this case, reader) in relation to the *cybertext*: “The concept of cybertext [...] centers attention on the consumer, or user, of the text, as a more integrated figure than even reader-response theorists would claim. The performance of their reader takes place all in his head, while the user of cybertext also performs in an extranoematic sense” (1). He calls that phenomenon *ergodic*, which comes “from the Greek words *ergon* and *hodos*, meaning ‘work’ and ‘path’” (1). This discussion will allow me to discuss the role of the reader(s) in *House of Leaves* from a speculative and extranoematic perspective. Aarseth’s typology of non-linearity¹⁰ provides a model by means of which *House of Leaves* can be studied with a view to identifying how non-linearity is generated and how it helps create the labyrinthine structure of the novel. The notions of hypertext and hyperlink will be discussed in relation to their literary equivalent, namely the footnotes. Finally, the issue of the word “house” written in blue will be addressed in relation to computer technologies, although it is far from being the only valid explanation to the mysterious “blue house”.

The section “Polyphony in *House of Leaves*: typefaces and handwriting” addresses the issue of the various narrative voices and the polyphony that results from it. In that respect, the discussion will revolve around the specific typefaces assigned to each character and how it makes them seem more well-rounded and three-dimensional, while also misleading the readers into believing that each section is clear-cut and impervious to the others’ interferences. This ambivalent situation calls into question the notion of identity. I will focus on the typefaces belonging to Zampanò (Times New Roman), Johnny Truant (Courier), Pelafina (Kennerley) and the Editors (Bookman). Other sections such as Tom’s story, “A Partial Transcript of What Some Have Thought” by Karen Green, and “The Pelican Poems” also have their own typefaces. They will nonetheless not be addressed as they give shape to specific parts of the novel rather than embody the voice of a character. Since the typefaces define and shape the narrators, I will address the readers’ interaction with the text in the form of their own handwriting and subsequent reader-as-character status. Furthermore, the readers’ imagination will come to the forefront with regard to how it can make *The Navidson Record* (as well as the rest of the novel) come into existence. This double approach (extranoematic and speculative) confirms *House of Leaves*’ status of ergodic novel as defined by Aarseth.

¹⁰ He laid the foundations of this typology in the article “Nonlinearity and Literary Theories” for the anthology *Hyper/Text/Theory*, and revised it in his 1997 book.

The section “~~The Minotaur at the heart of the labyrinth~~” deals with the passages in red and placed under erasure, which will be discussed in light of erasure art and more specifically Mary Ann Caws’ and Michel Delville’s book *Undoing Art*. In the novel, most of these passages focus on the myth of the labyrinth and on the personal nature of the journey inside it. The figure of the Minotaur is also central and will be discussed with regard to the duality it embodies and how it can be applied to the characters, especially to Johnny Truant.

To conclude this chapter on typography, the labyrinthine nature of Chapter IX, entitled “The Labyrinth”, will benefit from a more detailed study. This chapter will allow me to highlight the ways in which Danielewski’s concretist poetics affects the reader’s journey through the novel.

As an important part of the novel, as well as one of the embodiments of the labyrinth motif, intertextuality will come at play in chapter V. I will discuss the various subtypes of Genette’s *transtextuality* – his preferred term for intertextuality¹¹ – with a view to identifying how *House of Leaves* plays with and subverts them, and see how intertextuality emphasizes the “beginless” and endless nature of the book-labyrinth. Intertextuality will also be tackled with a more precise example, namely the Whalestoe Letters written by Pelafina. The labyrinth of intertextuality she created is as ambivalent as any other, in that it seems to be her only haven, a place where she feels in control and manages to express herself, while it represents a challenging labyrinth of intertextuality for the readers. I will also address references to real life in *House of Leaves* and discuss how it adds even more depth to the reading experience. The large amount of material provided in the novel and its various narrators create a rhizome of seemingly endless connections. This assessment brings about the notion of monophony, in other words the idea as to which the many voices in *House of Leaves* may actually come together as one to form, as Danielewski suggests, “a single melody” (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 124).

Finally, chapter VI will address motifs that arise towards the end of the novel and that make it even more complex, namely the *mise-en-abyme*, the *strange loop* (as explained by Douglas Hofstadter), and the *causal loop*. I will discuss what they imply for the novel’s labyrinthine structure, and more specifically whether such a work – in light of the new motifs – ever allows for an exit.

¹¹ The term transtextuality enables Genette to foreground the notion of “transcendence” between texts, as well as to make a difference between his approach and that of Riffaterre. His “rapport étudiés”, Genette explains, are “toujours de l’ordre des microstructures sémantico-stylistiques, à l’échelle de la phrase, du fragment ou du texte bref, généralement poétique.” Genette, on his part, seeks to study “l’œuvre considérée dans sa structure d’ensemble” (Genette, *Palimpseste* 9).

Before the journey begins, it is important to discuss preliminary issues such as reality and fiction, and how relevant this distinction is in *House of Leaves*. In that respect, chapter I focuses on storytelling, whose unreliability will be discussed in relation to Jean Baudrillard's postmodern concept of hyperreality, and how it plays a role in the destabilization of notions such as fixed identity, epistemic certainty and univocity of meaning.

I. Fiction & reality

"There are no errors in the book" – Mark Z. Danielewski

This chapter addresses a number of complexities and complications regarding the notions of fiction and reality in *House of Leaves*, as the core of the book consists in an in-depth discussion of a film that does not exist, written by a blind old man. The starting point of the novel, therefore, establishes upfront a climate of uncertainty and confusion. The effects this climate has on the readers will also be at the centre of the discussion.

i. "We all create stories to protect ourselves": Storytelling and reliability

The three main genres used in the novel, namely the documentary (Navidson), "autobiographical writings" (Johnny), and "academic treatise" (Zampanò) (Aghoro 65) are, as Nathalie Aghoro states, "factual genres" (65). She argues that "a major similarity between [them] is their claim to convey facts and to promote understanding of real-life events" (65) and that, since they are "systems of order" (67), they allow the three men to face the "disorientation [...] [they] suffer from" (67). The issue with this argument is that these genres, despite *appearing* reliable, cannot be taken at face value. Danielewski's approach can be compared to that of Fielding, who "calls to mind a whole repertoire of familiar literary 'genres' [with his "comic epic poem in prose"], so that these allusions will arouse particular expectations from which his novel then proceeds to diverge" (Iser, *The Implied Reader* 32). In *House of Leaves*, Zampanò's use of academic writing gives his work a semblance of authority by quoting from multiple sources. Among them, some are real works by real people (ex:

L'écriture de la différance by Derrida), but some are fictional works by fictional authors (ex: *Ultrapure Water, the Super-Kamiokande Detector and Cherenkov Light* by Gordon Keams, L. Kajita and M.K. Totsuka). The novel goes even further in the confusion when alleged “fictitious” (xx) works turn out to exist, for instance “The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft, Volume XXVIII” (xx). This example is special in that the Editors give the readers evidence that it is real in “**Appendix III – Contrary evidence**”¹² (657). As a result, the readers become aware that other works that are claimed fictitious may actually be real, and the other way around. Of course, Zampanò’s biggest deception is *The Navidson Record* itself, as a film that does not exist, yet does, as a manuscript.

Johnny, on his part, is known for making-up stories, which among other things, enable him to corrupt the origin of his scars: “Take the scars for instance. There are a number of variations on that one. The most popular is my two year stint in a Japanese Martial Arts Cult [...]. We all create stories to protect ourselves” (20). Johnny, therefore, rewrites his biography in a way that protects him from the truth, namely his violent step-father, his institutionalized mother, and his numerous fights at school. Not only does he make up stories about him and, therefore, prevents the readers from uncovering the truth, he also admits tempering with Zampanò’s manuscript (see chapter IV section i). As for Navidson, he edits his shot in an aesthetic way, which allows him to select and leave out what he wishes (this aspect of storytelling will not be discussed further in this paper, as it would deserve an entire discussion on photography and filmmaking and how they can be deceptive). In addition to these three unreliable male narrators, it is important to mention Pelafina and her letters, whose content, as I will discuss later (see chapter V section ii), is both confusing and confused, making her an unreliable narrator as well.

Hayles nonetheless argues for the term “remediated narrator” (Hayles, *Writing Machines* 117) rather than that of “unreliable narrator”, for the former would better emphasize the “proliferation of inscription technologies that evacuate consciousness as the source of production and recover in its place a mediated subjectivity that cannot be conceived as an independent entity” (117). This statement is part of Hayles’ more general argument about (re)mediation in *House of Leaves*, which I will not discuss further. Within the scope of this paper, her argument draws attention to the fact that the three main characters’ graphomania suggests that they crave the mediation of any surface that can be written on – *verba volant,*

¹² See appendix 3.

scripta manent – suggesting that there is a *value* to what is written, which can be mistaken for truth. Furthermore, writing suggests perspective on the part of the author who thought about what they were going to write beforehand, and who could even modify it afterwards. However, the writings of these “remediated narrators” prove to be as unreliable as the stream of consciousness of “unreliable narrators”. Consider one of Johnny’s hallucinations:

People started screaming. [...] [The truck] was leaking all over the place. Gas. It had caught fire. I was going to burn. Except it wasn’t gas. It was milk. Only there was no milk. There was no gas. No leak either. There weren’t even any people. [...] And there sure as hell wasn’t any truck¹³ (108).

The fact that Johnny wrote the whole experience down after experiencing it shows that he willingly kept every single element, every detail and contradiction for the readers to experience his confusion.

Like the characters in Beckett’s trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*, “the novel[] show[s] how it becomes increasingly impossible for their narrators to conceive themselves – i.e., to find their own identity; and yet at the same time it is precisely this impossibility that leads them actually to discover something of their own reality (Iser, *The Implied Reader* 174). This comment can be applied to the three main characters of *House of Leaves*, who seem to lose themselves – but also to find themselves – in their labyrinthine writings. Moreover, Iser clarifies that “[t]he stories are ‘play’ insofar as they are not devised for the sake of an ultimate meaning but only for meanings that will ward off the void” (169). Similarly, each character in *House of Leaves* resorts to storytelling to fill their own void and to re-appropriate their reality. Zampanò told one of his readers that he “didn’t have children any more” (Danielewski 35) and writes on September 21, 1970: “Perhaps, in the margins of darkness, I could create a son who is not missing” (543). He also seems to miss someone dear, like a lover, as he writes on December 23, 1996: “I still have nothing because so much of sum’things has always been and always will be you. I miss you” (547). Furthermore, Zampanò likely fought in the battle of Diên Biên Phu during the Vietnam war, as suggested by the fact that he “hadn’t seen a thing since the mid-fifties” (xxi), and that he “would occasionally mention” (xxii) the names “Béatrice, Gabrielle, Anne-Marie, Dominique, Eliane, Isabelle

¹³ This is only the gist of the passage. For a more vivid experience of Johnny’s hallucination and the confusion that results from his numerous contradictions, see appendix 4 or *House of Leaves* pp. 107-108.

and Claudine” (xxii), which actually refer to the French strongholds in Diên Biên Phu¹⁴. The trauma he underwent may explain why he makes Navidson call his house an “outpost” (23). He explains that “[t]his has always seemed a bizarre word to choose to describe a small house in the Virginia countryside” (23), claiming that Navidson’s choice of such a peculiar word was due to his willingness to “use images to create an outpost set against the transience of the world” (23). However, the word choice in fact says more about Zampanò than about Navidson: the “cozy [...] outpost” (23) oxymoron¹⁵ embodies his own inability to come to terms with his past. Similarly, Johnny’s many stories and diary at the end of the novel contain various fictitious stories and hallucinations. Despite the fact that most of what he tells is made up, Johnny, like Beckett’s Malone, realizes that “the stories are about himself after all” (168) (for an example, see chapter V section iv). As the apple never falls far from the tree, Pelafina is also a storyteller, or rather, a *story gatherer*. Her letters are full of references to literary works, which enable her to express her feelings and traumas indirectly. She misses her son terribly, the guilt of harming (and possibly killing) him weighs on her, and she episodically alludes to traumatic events from her past (see chapter V section ii).

Iser discusses the consequences of this “self-observation through writing” (170) in *The Implied Reader*: “*Malone Dies* showed that the attempt at self-observation through writing led inevitably to a process of fictionalization [...]. His writing therefore refers to the process of writing, and so the range of writing itself is extended” (170). This comment draws attention to the fact that each of the three characters’ graphomania and storytelling habit lead them to lose sense of reality. Towards the end of the novel, Johnny states: “I’ve lost sense of what’s real and what’s not. What I’ve made up, *what has made me*” [emphasis added] (Danielewski 497), which, in light of Iser’s comment, suggests that Johnny’s identity is torn between what he made up and the extent to which it became his reality, and what has been made up about him. This assessment hints at a larger issue in terms of identity, storytelling but also the boundary between fiction and reality: Johnny may be a character in another person’s narrative. Two extracts support this conclusion. The first one is Zampanò’s September 21, 1970 diary entry mentioned above, which he wrote exactly nine months before Johnny was born or “created”, on June 21, 1971. The second one comes from

¹⁴ As suggested by Jesse Simms, a member of the official *House of Leaves* book club, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/HouseOfLeavesBookClub/search/?query=French%20stronghold%20sarah%20Oglenz>. Accessed 29 April 2018.

¹⁵Ibid:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/HouseOfLeavesBookClub/search/?query=outpost%20Zampano%20war%20imms%20Glenz>. Accessed May 6, 2018.

the Preface to *The Whalestoe Letters*, where Walden D. Wyrhta¹⁶ says about Pelafina that “somehow she managed to make you feel as if she had invented you” (Danielewski, *The Whalestoe* xv). This issue will be dealt with in detail in chapter V section iii. For the time being, it implies that other characters that those from *The Navidson Record* may be fictitious within the fiction.

Iser concludes that such texts as Beckett’s trilogy feature characters who

...possess a degree of self-consciousness which the reader can scarcely, if at all, keep up with. Such texts act as irritants, for they refuse to give the reader any bearings by means of which he might move far enough away to judge them. The text forces him to find his own way around, provoking questions to which he must supply his own answers (Iser, *The Implied Reader* 175).

Similarly, *House of Leaves* exhibits postmodern¹⁷ features insofar as it is “[a]n open-ended play with formal devices and narrative artifice, in which narrative self-consciously alludes to its own artifice” (Woods qtd. in Meechan xi). By doing so, it deprives the readers of any bearings (like the Navidsons’ labyrinth does to the expedition members), which, according to Iser, can lead to “a wide range of reactions” (175). One of them is to try to make sense of the novel, since “[w]e tend to be ill at ease when there is something which resists understanding” (176). However, since “the raw material” (178) Beckett’s novels and *House of Leaves* “work[] on is an inexhaustible potential (the self), one’s explanatory theory would need to be as comprehensive as the process itself is open-ended” (178). The readers will ultimately not be able to find a final meaning, but as Iser argues, Beckett, like Danielewski, “has achieved [...] to set the self free to pursue a course of endless self-discovery” (178).

ii. Questionable identities and window on the real world

The matter of fiction and reality is important regarding what the characters say, but also regarding who they are. While the readers may usually assume that a character’s identity does not exceed the boundaries of the book, some characters in *House of Leaves* call that assumption into question. Zampanò, most notably, carries the name of a fictional character from the Italian film *La Strada* (1954) by Fellini, which may imply that he is “an imaginary

¹⁶ He was an Information Specialist for 7 years at The Three Attic Whalestoe Institute.

¹⁷ *House of Leaves* is hard to categorize as it exhibits modern, postmodern and even, according to Joseph B. Noah, post postmodern features.

character drawn from another work of art” (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 126). This parallel enables the readers to get to know more about the Zampanò from *House of Leaves* by looking at the background and story of the Zampanò from *La Strada*, as if they were two sides of the same coin¹⁸. Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory state that: “*La Strada* provides us with access to crucial aspects of Zampanò’s background and personality that fill in some of the features of the figure referred to in the book” (126). For instance, the Zampanò from *La Strada* takes the risk of losing his eyesight as a result of breaking iron chains by force, and the Zampanò from *House of Leaves* eventually became blind¹⁹. Other “literal reference[s]” (126) include “Jorge of Burgos” (*The Name of the Rose*)²⁰ – or for that matter, the real Jorge Luis Borges, who became blind at 55 and who is well-known for his literary obsession for labyrinth –, Gabriel García Márquez’ Melquíades (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*)²¹, and, I would add, real-life recluse writer Henry Darger (1892-1973), to whom Zampanò bears a close resemblance. He

...led a secret life as a prolific visual artist and epic novelist. His vast collection of creative work was discovered in 1972 when his two-room apartment in Chicago was cleared out shortly before he died. Over some 350 watercolor, pencil, collage and carbon-traced drawings, most of them stitched into three enormous ‘albums,’ as well as seven typewritten hand-bound books, thousands of bundled sheets of typewritten text, and numerous journals, ledgers and scrapbooks were discovered (Bonesteel).

This description and the circumstances of the discovery are very similar to Zampanò’s own manuscript as discovered by Johnny Truant:

[T]here were reams and reams of it. 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 [...] each fragment completely covered with the creep of years and years of ink pronouncements (Danielewski xvii).

¹⁸ Danielewski, Mark Z. “Haunted House—an interview with Mark Z. Danielewski.” Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory. *Critique*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2003, p. 126.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Hamilton, Nathalie. “The A-Mazing House: The Labyrinth as Theme and Form in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2008, p. 11.

²¹ Hamilton, Nathalie. “The A-Mazing House: The Labyrinth as Theme and Form in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2008, p. 11.

The character of Zampanò, therefore, crosses the boundary between the novel and other works, as well as that between the novel and reality. It is also the case of Karen Green, who bears the same name as David Foster Wallace's wife.

A similar matter is addressed by Johnny on page 116, when he talks about a poem he found among Zampanò's notes, entitled "Love At First Sight" dedicated to a woman named Natasha. Johnny states: "[I] [...] assumed she was an old love of his, which of course may still be true. Since then, however, I've begun to believe that Zampanò's Natasha also lives in Tolstoy's guerrulous [sic] pages" (116). Coincidentally, Johnny encountered a woman named Natasha during a night out with Lude, who was, he claims, "Tolstoy's prophecy brought to life" (116). As if the resemblance was not enough, Natasha tells Johnny before leaving: "'I guess love fades pretty fast'" (117), which may be a reference to *War and Peace's* Natasha Rostova and her turbulent love life. It is as if the Natasha from *House of Leaves* was reflecting upon her eponymous alter-ego in *War and Peace*. A further dimension that blurs the line between the fiction (*War and Peace*), the commentary on the fiction (*House of Leaves*) and reality, is the fact that Natasha Rostova is allegedly based on Tolstoy's actual sister-in-law, Tanya Behrs²². These three women merge together, each echoing the previous one, as if they were but different versions of the same woman, existing across various dimensions.

In terms of legal identity, Johnny claims that he "never came across any sort of ID [...] insinuating that yes, [Zampanò] indeed was An-Actual-&-Accounted-For person" (xii), which further questions who he really was and whether Zampanò is his actual name. Ironically, a statement from the Editors also questions whether Johnny himself is "An-Actual-&-Accounted-For person" (xii). They claim that they "have never actually met" (4) him because "[a]ll matters regarding the publication were addressed in letters or in rare instances over the phone" (4). Just like Zampanò, Johnny may not even be his real name. Lude calls him "Hoss"²³, the Director of the Whalestoe refers to him as "John", and while Pelafina uses "Johnny" (she is the only one), a note of the Editors at the beginning of the Appendix II-E containing the letters

²² Sebag Montefiore, Simon. "The real (even racier) Phwoar and Peace: Think the TV series is raunchy? The real-life aristocrats Tolstoy's characters were based on were even more debauched - and heroic." *Mail Online*, 22 January 2017, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-3411689/The-real-life-aristocrats-inspired-characters-Tolstoy-s-epic-War-Peace.html>. Accessed 14 December 2017.

²³ A possible reference to Dan Blocker's character in the series *Bonanaza*, Hoss Cartwright. Blocker also happened to be a veteran of the Korean war, like Zampanò.

suggests that it may not be his real name: “Mr. Truant wished to make known that though some names here were not deleted many were changed” (586) (his name will be the topic of further discussion in chapter IV section iii). Interestingly, Christophe Claro, the French translator, adds his own footnote underneath that of the Editors, which further maintains the atmosphere of uncertainty regarding identities:

N’ayant pas pu joindre directement l’auteur [...] je me suis permis, parfois (c’est-à-dire toutes les fois où la chose *ne présentait aucun danger*), de fournir au lecteur français une traduction intelligible de certains titres d’ouvrages, de chapitres ou d’articles [...]. Dans le même souci de clarté, mes notes, signalées par un astérisque, apparaissent en caractère Gill. – Le Traducteur²⁴ (Danielewski, *La maison des feuilles* 4).

This quotation may not be subject to questioning, since, after all, Claro’s presence is specific to the French edition of the novel, and was in no way planned by Danielewski. The content of the footnote, however, shows that Claro, as Anaïs Guillet states, “s’il est bien réel joue le jeu de la fiction”²⁵ (Guillet 29). He indeed mimics the quotes by Johnny and the Editors by choosing a distinct font for his footnotes and by claiming that he was not able to come in contact with Danielewski directly, which creates a similar effect as the Editors claiming they never met Truant. The result is that it further calls into question the notions of authorship and identity in the novel. Zampanò’s blindness questions his authorship of *The Navidson Record*, the Editors’ comment question Johnny’s authorship of his section and even his very existence, and Claro further defers the authorship by claiming that he was never in contact with Danielewski directly, suggesting the author may be *somewhere* else. Of course, Danielewski does exist and did write the novel, but the fact that Claro plays along and in turn becomes an unreliable participant in the novel makes it even more complex. Besides, some aspects of his claim suggest that – if he was not in contact with Danielewski directly – he at least received precise indications from him. Otherwise, he could not have known when a translation “*ne présentait aucun danger*” (Danielewski, *La maison des feuilles* 4). An illustration of that

²⁴ “As I was unable to come directly in contact with the author [...] I sometimes allowed myself (that is to say whenever I did not deem it *dangerous*), to provide the French reader with an intelligible translation of certain book titles, chapters titles or article titles [...]. For the sake of clarity, my notes, marked with an asterisk, appear in Gill. - The translator.”

²⁵ “If he is real, plays along.” Christopher Claro is indeed a real translator, who defines himself as a ‘literary treasure-hunter’. Claro co-directs a collection called “Lot 49” and describes his editorial policy as follows: “publier les écrivains d’aujourd’hui qui bouleversent à leur tour la donne du langage et l’équilibre chimiquement instable de la narration”, which makes him the right candidate to translate *House of Leaves*. Claro, Christophe. “Interview Christophe Claro: ‘Je suis chasseur de trésors littéraires.’” Interview by Christophe Greuet. *Culture Café*, 22 Septembre 2006, <http://www.culture-cafe.fr/site/?p=1602>. Accessed 27 October 2017.

argument can be found in Zampanò's diary. The French translation of the November 11, 1994 entry reads: "Des feux n'est-ce ta ration?" (564) which is a phonetic rendering of "Defend a stray's hun?" (Danielewski 546). If Claro really had little insight in Danielewski's novel, he would have translated each word in French. Instead, he knew that what mattered in that case were not the *words* themselves, but their *phonetic pronunciation*, namely the word "defenestration", and translated them accordingly.

Danielewski himself is keen on identifying and maintaining the ambiguous parallels between art and life. At the end of his interview with Gregory and McCaffery, he says: "[I]t has occurred to me that here we are, three people sitting at this table, and of these is a younger man, and another is an older man, and in between us we have a very beautiful woman, and the three of us have been engaged in a dialogue about this dark house" (Danielewski, "Haunted House" 125).

iii. Simulation and hyperreality

As the tension between real and fabricated words and identities is maintained, the notion of reality does not seem to be relevant to the novel anymore. In "The Novel in Hyperreality", Michaël Greaney argues that: "The either/or logic of 'authenticity' seems conspicuously irrelevant in [a] context" (Greaney 151) where "[t]he question of whose story to trust in this world of unreliable narrators and suspect artefacts seems both urgent and unanswerable" (150). He claims that *House of Leaves* "seems to be dealing with an elaborate hoax" (151), although, he argues, "in Danielewski's novel we are dealing with an endless interplay of simulated realities rather than a one-off prank or self-limiting illusion. In other words, hoaxes belong to reality whereas *House of Leaves* belongs to hyperreality" (151).

The term "hyperreality" is part of larger theoretical frame, which is that of postmodernism. Along with "concepts such as difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum, [...] [it is used] to destabilize other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty and the univocity of meaning" ("Postmodernism."). It was coined by Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacres et Simulation* (1981), and can be defined as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard unpag.). Baudrillard argues: "[i]n this passage to a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor of truth, the age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials" (Baudrillard unpag.). He makes an important distinction between feigning and simulating, which is in line with

Greaney's distinction between a hoax and what *House of Leaves* is: "feigning or dissimulating leaves the reality principle intact: the difference is always clear, it is only masked; whereas simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false', between 'real' and 'imaginary'" (Baudrillard unpag.). I would also argue that the following statement Baudrillard makes about Disneyland could be applied to the novel: "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation" (Baudrillard unpag.). Similarly, Johnny makes it clear from the start that *The Navidson Record* does not exist, although Zampanò's deep and detailed analysis of the film gives the opposite impression. The imaginary nature of *The Navidson Record*, therefore, once acknowledged by the readers, could make them tend to believe that the dimension around it – and according to which and in comparison to which the film belongs to the realm of the imagination – is real.

What is even more confusing is that the novel also reaches out to the real as if it were but one more intradiegetic level. Consider Johnny's following statement:

With a little luck, you'll [...] react as Zampanò had hoped, call it needlessly complicated, pointlessly obtuse, prolix – you word –, ridiculously conceived, and you'll believe all you've said, and then you'll put it aside [...] and [...] you'll sleep well. Then again, there's a good chance you won't [...]. You'll finish and that will be that, until a moment will come [...]. Out of the blue, beyond any cause you can trace, you'll suddenly realize things are not how you perceived them to be at all. For some reason, you will no longer be the person you believed you once were [...]. And then the nightmares will begin (Danielewski xxii-xxiii).

This passage gives the gist of the 2-page-long extract, though it would deserve to be read in its entirety in order to grasp the intensity of Johnny's intention to reach out to the readers in order to make them feel how he felt when he read Zampanò's manuscript²⁶. By even questioning the fact that we are external to the novel (like Claro's footnote does), the novel manages to blur the boundaries between fiction and what we call reality, and in that respect corresponds to Baudrillard's notions of hyperreality and simulation. Furthermore, the possible absence of "outside" or of extradiegetic level suggests that we too are a part of the open-ended labyrinth of *House of Leaves*.

²⁶ For the full passage, see appendix 5 or *House of Leaves* pp. xxii-xxiii.

iv. Conclusion

It soon appears that each narrator in *House of Leaves* is unreliable and, in that respect, the readers can prepare themselves for the great deal of critical thinking and distance that such a novel requires. Furthermore, Hayles' notion of "remediated narrator" brings about a more problematic issue, namely the narrator's intentions towards the readers and the extent to which they are aware of their deception.

Storytelling is not only problematic in terms of reliability, but also in terms of identity, since it enables the characters to express themselves and engage in introspection, but also threatens to make *them* become fictional. This means that already fictitious characters can become fictitious within the realm of the fiction, which suggests that there exist various degrees of "fictionality" within and even without the novel.

This inward movement towards fiction and the fiction within the fiction is mirrored by an outward movement towards reality, as some characters seem to cross the boundary between fiction and the extradiegetic reality. This assessment may lead the readers to wonder whether they are intruding the world of the novel, or whether it is in fact, the other way around. In that respect, Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality highlights the fragile and possibly irrelevant distinction between what is real and what is imaginary.

The goal of this chapter was to prepare the ground for the discussion that follows, in which the notions of fiction and reality will often be brought about, along with the challenges that go with them. Overall, I shall stick to Johnny's claim when writing this paper that: "what's real or isn't real doesn't matter here." (Danielewski xx). What matters are the effects such a choice creates, as the interplay between real and fictitious elements causes the readers to constantly reevaluate their position towards the novel and to take nothing for granted.

While it seems that the readers cannot be sure of anything, one thing seems certain: Danielewski would consider it "criminal to abuse the reader's faith with the promise of a sense of meaning or significance that the author knows does not exist" (Danielewski, "Haunted House" 122). Although one should not enter the house of leaves to find the truth of the matter, one can expect meaning. It is important, however, to keep in mind Ilana Shilo's warning that "the strategy that generates meaning is the same as the strategy that generates confusion" (Shiloh 136). You have been warned.

II. The labyrinth and the book-labyrinth

Life makes detectives of each of us. There's something at the end of the trail that we're all looking for. – David Lynch

i. The idea of the labyrinth: from Classical Antiquity through *House of Leaves*

This short introduction to the notion of labyrinth does not seek to exhaustively explore its origin, history, symbolism, or the many versions of its myth. Rather, the goal is to bring together key ideas about the labyrinth and see how and if they can be applied to the labyrinth in *House of Leaves* as well as to *House of Leaves* as a labyrinth.

In *Le livre des labyrinthes*, Paolo Santarcangeli states that the myth of the labyrinth contains “un thème mental d’une portée et d’une résonance universelles”²⁷ (Santarcangeli 14) of ambivalent nature: “[l]e labyrinthe est double: si ses couloirs sinueux évoquent les tortures de l’Enfer, ils conduisent toutefois vers le lieu où s’accomplira l’illumination”²⁸ (184). The ambivalent nature of the labyrinth is a central notion, since it can be applied to mankind’s journey through life as well as to human beings’ necessary dual nature.

In terms of symbolism, the labyrinth, as Penelope Reed Doob explains in *The Idea of the Labyrinth*, is usually associated with “enforced circuitousness; disorientation; the idea of planned chaos; the *bivium* or critical choice between two paths; inextricability; intricacy; complexity” (Doob 2). Doob distinguishes two types of labyrinths, namely *unicursal* (they contain “a single winding path leading inevitably to the center and then back out again” (3)) and *multicursal* (they “contain many points of choice between two or more paths [...] with dead ends leading nowhere, [...] that [...] are intended to frustrate” (3)). As the subtitle of her book gives it, it mainly focuses on labyrinth “from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages” (cover). The labyrinth motif, however, is still prominently used and became an important motif in postmodern literature.

²⁷ “a mental theme of universal impact and resonance.”

²⁸ “the labyrinth is ambivalent: if its sinuous hallways are reminiscent of the tortures in Hell, they nonetheless lead to the place where the illumination will take place.”

In *From Modernism to Postmodernism: Concepts and Strategies of Postmodern American Fiction*, Gerhard Hoffman considers the labyrinth “[t]he central metaphor for postmodern fiction, the crucial figuration for its content, design, narrative strategies, the paradoxicality of its intention and goal” (Hoffman 414). He further distinguishes two sub-types of *multicursal* labyrinths: those that are “centered and coded” (414), and those that are “decentered and uncoded” (415). While the former type eventually leads to the center through “a process of trial and error” (415), the latter has “no simple way out and no single correct interpretation” (415). Just like a tree, it is built according to “a system of ramifications” (415). That rhizomic labyrinth is considered by Hoffman to be the postmodern type of labyrinth, which has neither beginning nor end, but which possesses “the force of possibilities” (415). The Navidsons’ maze, with its ever-shifting, open-ended nature, falls in that category, though it is important to point out that their maze stands out from the others, which have been thus far static²⁹ and where “[v]isitors may have a guide or a ball of thread; [and where] habitués may learn the labyrinth’s intricacies in time” (Doob 24).

Interestingly, Hoffman considers that the notion of center, or rather the absence thereof, still plays a role in decentered multicursal labyrinths. Part of the reason why may lie in the following comment by Santarcangeli: “l’homme trouve au centre des arcanes – temple ou labyrinthe – *ce qu’il veut y trouver*. Très souvent... il s’y trouve *lui-même* [...]. L’ultime connaissance est celle de soi-même [...]”³⁰ (Santarcangeli 218). This comment is very much in line with Hoffman’s claim that: “the labyrinth ultimately becomes the Self [...] that paradoxically saves itself from being the victim of the labyrinth by making itself its heart” (Hoffman 416). These two statements can be explained by the double meaning of “decentered”, which either means “to cause to lose or [to] shift from an established center or focus”. When there is no self in the labyrinth, it is decentered in the sense *devoid* of centre, and when a self inhabits it and looks for something in it, the center/self “shifts” because it is paradoxically looking for itself. Furthermore, Santarcangeli argues that the self does not only look for itself, but it also *confronts* itself: “L’homme est donc appelé à une confrontation avec lui-même au cœur même du labyrinthe, et à un duel avec lui-même”³¹ (Santarcangeli 219). The fact that the self seeks both self-discovery and confrontation emphasizes the ambivalence of the quest it engages in inside the labyrinth.

²⁹ Hamilton, Nathalie. “The A-Mazing House: The Labyrinth as Theme and Form in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2008, p. 12.

³⁰ “man finds at the center of the arcana – temple or labyrinth – what he wishes to find. Oftentimes... he finds himself [...]. The ultimate knowledge is that of oneself.”

³¹ “Man is urged to confront and battle himself at the heart of the labyrinth.”

The consequence of the self being the heart of the labyrinth is expressed by Jorge Luis Borges as follows: ““This duration, this feeling of eternity makes me the center of the labyrinth, in this way I am liberated, while the labyrinth crumbles”” (Borges qtd. in Hoffman 416). This comment by Borges is very much in line with the ending of *The Navidson Record*. Upon returning to the house for one last solo-exploration, Navidson eventually believes that he will meet a fatal end as he becomes lost inside the maze, only to be rescued by Karen. She shares this peculiar moment with “a college journalist from William & Mary” (Danielewski 524), stating: “We were in pitch blackness [...]. I felt this warm, sweet air on my face, and then I opened my eyes [...]. [...] it turned out to be [...] our front yard” (524). The journalist then asks her a question that will remain unanswered: “You’re saying the house dissolved?” (524). This passage illustrates Santarcangeli’s claim that “la sortie est souvent très facile”³² (Santarcangeli 219), since the real initiation is the way *in*. He states that “Le labyrinthe semblerait [...] lié au parcours initiatique, accompli probablement dans l’obscurité [...] de façon à conduire au sanctuaire à travers des épreuves successives”³³ (Santarcangeli 183) and further argues that “[t]outes ces représentations sont une image du voyage de l’homme vers la mort et la régénération: et par là une représentation de l’infini”³⁴ (188). Furthermore, Guénon points out that “[l]’initiation est... comme une ‘seconde naissance’”³⁵ (Guénon qtd. in Santarcangeli 211). These various aspects of the initiation can be illustrated by Karen rescuing Navidson, as this episode closely resembles birth: “he was there, [...] no clothes on and all curled up [...] I held him. He was alive. He made a sound when I cradled his head in my arms. I couldn’t understand what he was saying” (Danielewski 524). This passage also contains the element of darkness and death, since the “pitch blackness” (524) they were in made Karen believe that they had died, only to realize that they were on the front yard.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, a comprehensive history of the labyrinth would be impossible and irrelevant to make here. What seems more important to point out is Karl Kerényi’s claim as to which “L’étude du problème du labyrinthe a l’étrange caractéristique [...] qu’il n’existe pas de solution qui permettrait de l’éliminer”³⁶ (Kerényi qtd. in Santarcangeli 181), and Santarcangeli adds, “[c]ela vaut éminemment pour les

³² “To exist is often very easy.”

³³ “The labyrinth seems [...] to be linked to a rite of passage that is probably accomplished in the dark [...] with a view to reaching the sanctuary through a series of trials.”

³⁴ “all of these representations convey mankind’s journey towards death and rebirth; by doing so, it represents infinity.”

³⁵ “initiation is like a rebirth.”

³⁶ “The study of the labyrinth is characterized by the impossibility to solve it.”

multiples incarnations du labyrinthe”³⁷ (Santarcangeli 181). Ultimately, as Santarcangeli points out: “le mystère du labyrinthe restera toujours irrésolu, et ne pourra qu’être médité”³⁸ (185). Just like any other labyrinth, both the Navidsons’ maze and the novel are mysteries that will never be solved entirely, but that will firmly await anyone who would want to mull over their meanings, and by doing so, welcome their new “center” and allow him or her to confront themselves within its dark and inextricable hallways.

ii. The book-labyrinth and the reader’s response

a. The book-labyrinth, the *Maximal Encyclopedia* and the Library of Babel

In “The Garden of Forking Paths”, Borges addresses the resemblance between books and labyrinths in the following statement: “Ts’ui Pên must have said once: *I am withdrawing to write a book*. And another time: *I am withdrawing to construct a labyrinth*. Every one imagined two works; to no one did it occur that the book and the maze were one and the same thing” (Borges 36). While Doob discusses architectural labyrinths at length, she also argues that “[i]ntellectual and literary labyrinths can be as inextricable and inexplicable as architectural ones” (Doob 193), since they “may include abundant alternatives – sometimes too many – and there may be dead ends or circular reasoning that gets nowhere” (83). *House of Leaves* represents an interesting case study of the labyrinth motif, since it qualifies as a ‘book-labyrinth’ for many reasons that will be developed throughout this paper.

This chapter deals more specifically with the book as an endless library. This parallel between the book and an architectural space is developed by Dupuy, who points out that “Danielewski agit [...] en architecte, en engageant le lecteur à pénétrer véritablement dans un labyrinthe à la fois intra et extradiégétique [...]: on ne lit pas un roman à propos d’une maison-labyrinthe, on pénètre véritablement dans le labyrinthe, matérialisé par le livre”³⁹ (Dupuy 42). She argues that Danielewski did not limit his work to a “virtuosité formelle” (42) but that he also manages to “impliquer avec force le lecteur”⁴⁰ (42), since “l’architecture est

³⁷ “this applies to the multiple incarnations of the labyrinth.”

³⁸ “the mystery of the labyrinth can never be solved, only meditated.”

³⁹ “Danielewski acts like an architect, urging the reader to truly enter a labyrinth that is both intra- and extradiegetic [...]: we do not read a novel about a house-labyrinth, we actually enter the labyrinth, materialized by the book.”

⁴⁰ “to strongly involve the reader.”

un art dont on ne reste pas spectateur, mais dont on peut pénétrer et habiter les réalisations”⁴¹ (42). While I will not discuss architecture in relation to *House of Leaves*, this quote will allow me to discuss Espen J. Aarseth’s theory of *ergodic* literature, where he believes in a similar active and extranoematic role for the readers (see chapter IV section i).

An important aspect of *House of Leaves* as book-labyrinth is the fact that, unlike most labyrinths Penelope Reed Doob discusses, an overall view seems impossible⁴². She argues that “[w]hat you see depends on where you stand” (Doob 1), which means that there are usually two possible perspectives on labyrinths: that of the “maze-treaders, whose vision ahead and behind is severely constricted and fragmented” (1), and that of the “maze-viewers[,] who see the pattern whole” (1). In that respect, Danielewski remains the only maze-viewer, the Daedalus figure of *House of Leaves*. Interestingly, Penelope Reed Doob highlights the fact that “Lucretius [when describing Daedalus] speaks of ‘verborum daedala lingua’, ‘the tongue, cunning crafter of words’” (Doob 33), which also applies to Danielewski, who skillfully crafted a labyrinth of words that offers many possible interpretations and readings. However, unlike Daedalus who “could scarcely retread the ambiguous corridors of his own construction” (36), Danielewski claims to have a great deal of control over his work. He acknowledges in the Haunted House interview: “I don’t mind admitting that I was extremely self-conscious about everything that went into *House of Leaves*” (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 106). The complexity of his novel leads the readers, as Iser writes, to “attend[re] un coup de pouce de l’auteur”⁴³ (Iser, *L’appel du texte* 50). It is, however, vain, since “[c]omme Joyce l’a lui-même dit, l’auteur, tel un *deus absconditus*, s’est retiré derrière son œuvre et se lime les ongles”⁴⁴ (51). While Danielewski did not completely withdraw from his work⁴⁵, he is not giving the readers a “coup de pouce”⁴⁶ either, mostly because, as he said himself: “I’m [...] unwilling to compromise the thrill that comes when a reader privately uncovers a meaning not yet circulated. It is an experience both intimate and profound” (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 122). This last aspect draws attention to the readers’ responsibility in their experience of the labyrinth. In the same line of thoughts, Doob argues

⁴¹ “architecture is an art that does not make us spectators, but whose creations we can enter and inhabit.”

⁴² This can also be said of the maze-like room in the Navidson’s house. Zampanò himself suggests that: “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” (Danielewski 114).

⁴³ “to expect a little help from the author.”

⁴⁴ “as Joyce himself has said, the author, like a *deus absconditus*, has withdrawn behind his work and is trimming his nails.

⁴⁵ He has been quite active in the *House of Leaves* book club, periodically giving the readers food for thought with his questions.

⁴⁶ Of course, it depends on the extent of the “coup de pouce”. He states that he is “willing to give small hints” but never wants to “move [...] into the territory of explicating the book” (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 121).

that “the individual [...] controls his passage through the maze by his ability to choose and perhaps by memory, and however puzzled and despairing he may be, his fate is as much the result of his (ab)use of free will as it is a consequence of the architect’s devious design (Doob 47-8). Her comment highlights the fact that the readers are as responsible for their experience as the author is, since their cooperation is required for the labyrinth to exist. This issue will be addressed in chapter IV section ii.

When confronted to a rhizomic labyrinth like it is the case here, Hoffman argues that “the reader is faced with the encyclopedic kind of labyrinth that – even if it does not allow for an unraveling of the lines and one single interpretation – at least contains clues and symbols as to the range of its significance” (417). Umberto Eco also compares encyclopedias and labyrinths in *From the Tree to the Labyrinth: Historical Studies on the Sign and Interpretation*: “For the reader, the encyclopedia appeared as a ‘map’ of different territories whose edges were jagged and often imprecise, so that one had the impression of moving through it as if it were a labyrinth” (Eco 26). In that respect, *House of Leaves* bears resemblance to what Eco calls the *Maximal Encyclopedia*, which “records [...] everything that has been claimed in a social context, not only what has been accepted as true, but also what has been accepted as imaginary” (50). This encyclopedia, he states “is not available for consultation in toto because it is the sum total of everything ever said by humankind [...] in the form of all the books ever written and all the images ever made” (50). These statements arguably fit Borges’ short story “The Library of Babel” better than *House of Leaves*, since *House of Leaves* contains everything real and imaginary that has been said, but only about *The Navidson Record*. The similarities between them are nonetheless worth mentioning at this stage, since it brings about interesting elements with regard to *House of Leaves*. First of all, both the novel and the maze, just like the Library of Babel, exist “*ab aeterno*” (Borges, *Labyrinths* 59) and are “*unlimited and cyclical*” (64) (these aspects of *House of Leaves* will be further discussed in chapter III and VI). Furthermore, the narrator in Borges’ short story claims that “[t]he Library is total and [...] its shelves register all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols” (60). Among this endless collection of books, there exists one called the *Vindications*, which “vindicated for all time the acts of every man in the universe and retained prodigious arcana for his future” (61). The search for this book causes “[t]housands of the greedy [to] abandon[] their sweet native hexagons and rush[] up the stairways” (61), which is echoed by Navidson’s explorations of the mysterious dark room and subsequent carelessness towards his family. The consequences of this hopeless quest (since the chances to find the book “can be computed as zero” (61)) are disastrous: “These pilgrims

disputed in the narrow corridors, proffered dark curses, strangled each other on the divine stairways, flung the deceptive books into the air shafts, met their death [...]. Others went mad” (61). Similarly, some characters in *House of Leaves* died (Wax, Tom and Holloway, who also went mad prior to his passing) during one of the explorations. Besides, there is a book in *House of Leaves* that is similar to the *Vindications: House of Leaves* itself. When Navidson conducts the solo Exploration #5 and eventually gets stuck, he “turns his attention to the last possible activity, the only book in his possession: *House Of Leaves*” (Danielewski 465). The novel, just like the *Vindications*, can indeed be considered the record of all his acts and of his future. I will come back to the *mise-en-abyme* the existence of the novel within itself creates in a later section of this paper (see chapter VI).

Another interesting aspect of Borges’ “The Library of Babel” and “Total Library” (another short story discussing similar themes) is that they are both examples of the Infinite Monkey Theorem, which posits that “a half dozen monkeys provided with typewriters would, in a few eternities, produce all the books in the British Museum” (Borges, “The Total Library” 215). There exist several versions of this paradox, but the point is that this endless library would contain everything that could possibly be written. Borges illustrates as follows:

[e]verything: the detailed history of the future, Aeschylus’ *The Egyptians*, the exact number of times that the waters of the Ganges have reflected the flight of a falcon, the secret and true name of Rome, the encyclopedia Navalis would have constructed, my dreams and half-dreams at dawn on August 14, 1934, the proof of Pierre Fermat’s theorem, the unwritten chapters of *Edwin Drood*, those same chapters translated into the language spoken by the Garamantes, the paradoxes Berkeley invented concerning Time but didn’t publish, Urizen’s books of iron, the premature epiphanies of Stephen Dedalus, which would be meaningless before a cycle of a thousand years, the Gnostic Gospel of Basilides, the song the sirens sang, the complete catalog of the Library, the proof of the inaccuracy of that catalog (216).

If we approach *House of Leaves* like an instance of Library of Babel⁴⁷, it can be argued that all the non-existing works and people mentioned in the novel could still exist, as hinted at by the rather unconventional disclaimer at the beginning of the novel. Disclaimers usually contain the following types of information, which can be roughly divided into three parts: (i) establishing that the work is a fiction; (ii) specifying that the names, characters, places, events, organizations, incidents, etc. mentioned in the novel are either the product of the

⁴⁷ The Navidsons’ maze itself could also be regarded as such, since the dark walls could be the physical representation of an infinite numbers of superimposed layers of text. A footnote on the last page of “The Library of Babel” supports that theory: “Letizia Álvarez Toledo has observed that this vast Library is useless: rigorously speaking, a single volume would be sufficient [...] containing an infinite number of infinitely thin leaves” (Borges, *Labyrinth* 64).

author's imagination or used fictitiously; (iii) specifying that if any of the aforementioned elements resemble someone or something real, then it is purely coincidental. As a case in point, consider the disclaimer in Don De Lillo's *White Noise*:

[(i)] This is a work of fiction. [(ii)] Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously, [(iii)] and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental (DeLillo unpag.).

In *House of Leaves*, however, the disclaimer reads:

This novel is a work of fiction. Any references to real people, events, establishments, organizations or locales *are intended only to give the fiction a sense of reality and authenticity*. Other names, characters and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, as are those fictionalized events and incidents which involve real persons and did not occur or *are set in the future*. – Ed [emphasis added] (Danielewski ii).

The disclaimer in *House of Leaves* contains the first and second elements but does not contain the third one, which means that Danielewski⁴⁸ *removed the idea of anything being a coincidence from his novel*. The fact that “[a]ny references to real people events, establishments, organizations or locales *are intended only to give the fiction a sense of reality and authenticity*” [emphasis added] refers to, for instance, the transcripts of the interviews between Karen Green and non-fictional people in “A Partial Transcript Of What Some Have Thought by Karen Green” (pp. 345-365). In that segment of the book, Karen talks to, among others, Stanley Kubrick, Stephen King and Jacques Derrida. The effect of such a choice is ambivalent: on the one hand it gives the novel a sense of reality, which enables the readers to hang on to something familiar, but on the other hand, it makes the book even more unsettling, since these real people are set in a fictional context and given a fictional – although true-to-life – voice. Danielewski also mentions that some elements may be “*set in the future* [my emphasis]”. This means that, for instance, Sebastiano Perouse de Montclos and his book *Palladian Grammar and Metaphysical Appropriations: Navidson's Villa Malcontenta* are not fictitious: they simply do not exist *yet*. Interestingly, this aspect echoes something the narrator says in “The Library of Babel”: “The Vindications exist (I have

⁴⁸ Since what is called “the Editors”, very much in a Borgesian fashion, are in fact written by Danielewski.

seen two which refer to persons of the future, to persons who perhaps are not imaginary)” (Borges, *Labyrinths* 61).

While *House of Leaves* is clearly not an encyclopedia or a Library of Babel it can be considered a microcosm of these two entities, since it manages to create a similar effect of dizziness and confusion. The references towards the outside of the book (either towards other works of fiction or towards real-life events) are seemingly endless and, as mentioned above, the readers never see the pattern as a whole. It would indeed be impossible for one single reader to explore all the branches of *House of Leaves*, and the reading process, therefore, benefits from the cooperation of its readers (which is a key aspect of the role of the reader(s) discussed in this paper) in order to explore as many branches as possible, although, once again, a complete view seems impossible.

Danielewski is well aware of the challenge his novel represents for the readers. Similarly to Joyce, who once playfully claimed: “‘I’ve put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that’s the only way of insuring one’s immortality”” (Joyce qtd. in Elleman qtd. in Iser, *The Implied Reader* 197), Danielewski (less playfully) states:

I hope [the novel] is intimidating! [...] I wanted to write a book that would raise the bar, something that people would feel deserved to be approached with the kind of respectful wariness and willingness that all great art demands. I wanted it to announce, ‘Look, if you’re going to interpret this in a scholastic way, you’d better be ready for the long haul!’ [...] Encouraging a critical engagement with my book – that was at least one challenge I set for myself (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 107).

The ambivalent nature of Danielewski’s approach could very well scare off readers and scholars, who are made to feel redundant by his self-conscious anticipation of the reader figure (Johnny) and of the scholar figure (Zampanò and his fictitious scholars). It could nonetheless also encourage them to mimic these figures and contribute, in their turn, to the expansion of the novel. In that respect, Danielewski’s self-consciousness embodies the use of the labyrinth motif as “a voyage toward the text” (Faris qtd. in Hamilton 5) of “metafictional nature” (5), since it can be read as a metacommentary on the reading and the reception of a text. Danielewski nonetheless points out that he “wanted to display this awareness in a manner that avoids destroying the narrative” (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 106), which he arguably succeeds in⁴⁹. He also uses the labyrinth motif in a second way, which Faris

⁴⁹ Some readers actually found the narrative dull: “The main ‘story’ is deadly dull and the secondary ‘story’ is even duller [...].The endless lists, quotes, spatial experiments, pseudo-intellectual babble and adolescent fantasy

distinguishes from the voyage toward the text as a “voyage toward the self” (Faris qtd. in Hamilton 5), which manifests in each character’s attempt to make sense of the labyrinth or of the book, and to come to terms with their past and traumas, as well as in the readers’ attempt to make sense of the novel and come to terms with what it reflects of themselves.

b. Towards an ideal reader?

A book-labyrinth, just like its architectural counterpart, represents a challenge for the readers, who chooses (or not) to cooperate, and the extent to which they do. The reader’s cooperation is an important aspect in *House of Leaves* since, as Iser argues in relation to Fielding’s work: “[f]or innovation itself to be a subject in a novel, the author needs direct cooperation from the person who is to perceive that innovation – namely the reader” (Iser, *The Implied Reader* 29). Of course, the degree of cooperation can vary from one reader to another. Iser calls “implied reader” (xii) “the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader’s actualization of this potential through the reading process” (xii).

In the case of *House of Leaves*, Danielewski made it clear in an interview that he wrote the novel with an *ideal* implied reader in mind:

One of the rules I made for myself early on was not to underestimate the intelligence of the reader. I would write for the reader who gets it all, who can suspend it all, until the last possible moment before it must necessarily resolve with that final chord. During the ten years that went into making *House of Leaves*, I never flinched from that; and gradually this idealized reader I addressed came to life in my imagination, taking in every single note, noticing every twist of phrase, appreciating all the intrinsic complexities of my narrative, understanding every modulation and harmony, hearing the ways the different parts come together to form a single melody (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 124).

This description of his ideal implied reader echoes Wayne Booth’s argument that: “[t]he author creates [...] an image of himself and another image of his reader; [...] and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement” (Booth qtd. in Iser, *The Implied Reader* 30). Danielewski’s implied reader is so ideal that it draws attention to the fact that “[s]uch a reader belongs exclusively to the sphere of the real author, in whose imagination he or she exists” (Schmid unpag.). This ideal implied reader corresponds to what Wolf Schmid calls the *ideal recipient*, a figure that he sets in

don’t add up to anything other than endless lists, quotes, spatial experiments, pseudo-intellectual babble and adolescent fantasy”(Eric H. Hertzling).

contrast with the *presumed addressee*. He defines the latter as the one “to whom the work is directed, and whose linguistic codes, ideological norms, and aesthetic ideas must be taken into account if the work is to be understood. In this function, the implied reader is the bearer of the codes and norms presumed in the readership” (Schmid unapg.) and the former as the one

...who understands the work in a way that optimally matches its structure and adopts the interpretive position and aesthetic standpoint put forward by the work. [...] The attitude of the ideal recipient, his relation to the norms and values of the fictive entities, are more or less specified by the acts of creation objectified in the work. [...] The position of the ideal recipient is thus more or less pre-determined by the work; [...] the spectrum of readings permitted by the work is wider with experimental or questioning authors (Schmid unpag).

From Danielewski’s statement, it is therefore clear that he is talking about the *ideal recipient* of his novel and not about its *presumed addressee*. While the *ideal recipient* may only exist in the author’s mind, Iser claims that a “transformation of the reader into the image created by the author” (Iser, *The Implied Reader* 30) is possible. In order to do so, “[t]he reader must be made to feel for himself the new meaning of the novel. To do this he must actively participate in bringing out the meaning and this participation is an essential precondition for communication between the author and the reader” (30). The playful nature of *House of Leaves*, as well as the gaps and indeterminacies in the text allow its readers to be particularly active in the process of interpretation and make it possible for them to strive in order to become Danielewski’s *ideal recipient* (these notions will be addressed in chapter IV section ii).

However, the complexity of the novel make it hard for one reader alone to become the *ideal recipient*, such a figure can be brought into existence in another way: the individual responses to the book, brought together, could ultimately become that *ideal recipient*, in other words, the *ideal recipient* of such a labyrinthine work could be its entire readership. Danielewski alludes to the idea of collective work and solidarity in the official *House of Leaves* book club, when he states: “HOL is about getting through some pretty self-obliterating stuff [...] you cannot do it alone. [...] you will need each other”⁵⁰ (Danielewski, “Seriously”). This idea is developed on different occasions in this paper, among other things by means of references to the MZD Forum, as well as to the official *House of Leaves* book club, which are both mines of information, personal experiences, impressive close-reading and theories related to the novel.

⁵⁰ See appendix 6.

The reason why many different interpretations of the novel can coexist is because, as mentioned in the introduction, the distinction between right and wrong is irrelevant. When Danielewski states that he “ha[s] yet to hear an interpretation of *House of Leaves* that [he] had not anticipated. [He] ha[s] yet to be surprised, but [he] [is] hoping” (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 106), it appears bold (as he himself acknowledges⁵¹), but it also suggests that even interpretations of the novel that he had not thought of while writing *would be valid to him*, he even wishes that someone actually finds one. This is in line with Wolf Schmid’s claim that “[t]he co-creative activity of the recipient can take on a degree and pursue a direction that is not provided in the work. Readings that fail to achieve or that even deliberately resist a reception designed in the work may well broaden the work’s meaning” (Schmid unpag.), which is very much in the spirit of this ever-shifting, ever-expanding labyrinth called *House of Leaves*.

The ambivalent situation of both foreseeing most interpretations while leaving space for new ones also seems to hint at the fact that Danielewski attempts to avoid *la mort de l’auteur* according to which “[a]uthors [...] cannot be held responsible for the multiple meanings readers can discover within literary texts” (Allen 3-4). By acknowledging the possible existence of interpretations that go beyond what he had imagined and by suggesting that they would be equally as valid as the ones he had thought of, Danielewski appropriates any element that would expand his novel, preventing it from ever escaping his paternity entirely.

iii. Conclusion

Ambivalence is a central aspect of the labyrinth motif, whose mysterious nature accounts for both its lasting appeal and unattractive nature. As a postmodern motif, it reflects the structure of most postmodern texts and in that respect is embodied by Danielewski’s concretist poetics where he combines the form of the text with its content. *House of Leaves*, just like the Navidsons’ maze, is nonetheless unique as it differs from most labyrinths because of its endless and ever-shifting nature.

In that respect, it is worth coming back to Joyce’s argument that such works warrant their authors a form of immortality, and by doing so, grant their readers a similar form of eternity. *House of Leaves*, as a microcosm of the Library of Babel, offers its readers a seemingly endless textual rhizome that prolongs the novel in the past and the future, as well as in the real

⁵¹ Danielewski, Mark Z. “Haunted House—an interview with Mark Z. Danielewski.” Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory. *Critique*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2003, p 106.

and the imaginary. It also suggests that *anything* can be found in it, and that there is virtually something for each reader. Faced with such a challenge, the process of making sense enables them – at least partially – to appropriate it and come to terms with it.

The importance of the reader(s) is also embodied by the choice of the decentered multicursal maze, as it puts the notion of the self to the forefront and presents it as an integral part of the architectural or literary structure. This argument highlights the collaborative process at play between readers and between the readership and the author and hints at the notion of reader-as-co-author that will be further developed in chapter IV. By breathing meaning into the text, they give a piece of themselves to *House of Leaves*, and so does the novel by allowing the readers to appropriate it. It is nonetheless important to mention that Danielewski has an ambivalent approach to authorship, since he leaves the readers space while making it impossible to be freed from his ascendancy entirely.

The notion of rebirth after the journey through the maze suggests that the readers of the book-labyrinth comes out of the reading experience with an altered vision of who they are and of what literature can be, which emphasizes the novel's power and groundbreaking nature.

III. From house to labyrinth: The hom(az)e on Ash Tree Lane

“The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown” — H.P. Lovecraft

i. The house      and the uncanny

When Navidson and his family moved into their new house of Virginia, what he had in mind was “[s]ettle in, maybe put down roots, interact, hopefully understand each other a little better. [...] create a cozy little outpost” (Danielewski 9). However, the story that unfolds in *The Navidson Record* is far from being an epitome of stability, as two spaces appear out of the blue inside their house: a hallway between the parents' bedroom and the children's bedroom, and, most notably, a room in the north wall of their living room. The latter is often referred to

as “maze” or “labyrinth” given its unhomely nature. The space is ice cold and pitch black, its dark grey walls are windowless, and most importantly, they keep shifting.

The fact that values attributed to a house (homely, safe, and familiar) are intuitively opposed to those attributed to a labyrinth (unhomely, unsafe, and unfamiliar) may lead to believe that the house and its mysterious addition are diametrically opposed. However, Zampanò points out that “the labyrinth *is still a house*” [emphasis added] (121). The similarity between these two different spaces can be traced back to the ancient versions of the myth of the labyrinth, as suggested by Penelope Reed Doob’s literal translation of Ovid. He speaks of a “labyrinthine enclosure”, which Doob translates as “many-folded *house*” [emphasis added] (Doob 34). Of course, these two houses are also different in many ways, which clarifies why the second house has often been called a labyrinth⁵².

Interestingly, the homely and unhomely natures of these two “houses” also highlight a “lexical ambiguity” (Bemong 2), namely that “homely” is *contained* in “unhomely”, or that “unhomely” *arises from* “homely”, from both a lexical and architectural point of view. “Unhomely” or “Unheimlich” is also referred to as “uncanny”, a feeling which “[Ernst] Jentsch [...] attributed [...] to a fundamental insecurity brought about by a ‘lack of orientation’, a sense of something new, foreign, and hostile invading an old, familiar, customary world” (Vidler 1), which the mysterious space perfectly embodies.

Despite the fact that the two spaces are two separate entities in the novel, they can symbolically be interpreted as the two sides of the same coin. In that respect, Aleksandra Bida argues that the house “embodies the uncanny nature of home as familiar but also strange and unknowable” (Bida 43). She states that “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” (44). The Navidsons, like the other characters from the book, hide a much more complex story than it may seem from the onset. This also holds true for the readers, as well as for Danielewski, whose family stories shed light on the origin of the novel. In an interview, he discusses his father’s personality: “one moment warm, generous and funny; petty, vindictive, and hateful the next. He was full of these bizarre sets of contradictions that he never resolved—and that he probably wouldn’t have wanted to resolve even if he could because he seemed to thrive on them” (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 116). In that respect, the maze (and the novel) function as substitute for the actual issues of the characters and the author, and can be used in a similar way by the readers.

⁵² I will continue to call it as such for the sake of clarity.

The appearance of the maze creates a problematic situation that gives Navidson an excuse to come back in touch with his brother after 8 years of silence and to avoid a proper reconciliation. Besides, it may also help him avoid directly confronting his guilt towards Delial, the dying Sudanese girl that he photographed and that won him his Pulitzer Prize. Instead, he seems to seek something within the maze, and eventually almost dies for it, as if it were a way to redeem himself. Facing his issues indirectly nonetheless has a price, as he fails to resolve his tensions with Karen, causing her to go away with the children for a while. Karen, on her part, remains in the house and builds a bookshelf – her “newly found day to day comfort” (34) – as a way to divert herself from the labyrinth she dreads. She refuses to set foot in the dark and enclosed space because she and her sister Linda were kept in a well and abused by their step-father when Karen was 14. Ultimately, Karen is the one who should have entered the maze, as it is not a substitute, but a replica of her trauma. However, she behaves like the other characters and avoids what might make her face what she represses, using the bookshelf as a substitute. This use of books as a way to avoid issues and traumas makes Karen a bridge between the characters who face the maze, and those who face books (Pelafina) or the book (Johnny and the readers). Pelafina has a similar way to deal with her issues, as books represent a shelter, and her labyrinthine and heavily intertextual mode of communication enable her to indirectly express past traumas (more on that in chapter V section ii). As for Johnny, he becomes obsessed with Zampanò’s manuscript, which allows him to face his past but which also gradually makes him lose his mind. Regarding Zampanò, the loss of loved ones and his war experience mentioned in the chapter I led him to write this strange tale about family issues and mysterious spaces appearing out of the blue, likely because he dealt with unresolved issues as well.

In addition to that, the readers can project themselves onto *House of Leaves* and obtain a cathartic effect from it. To come full circle, the novel – and more specifically the short piece of literature that served as starting point, “Redwood” – enables Danielewski to confront the ambivalent relationship he had with his father, and the equally ambivalent reaction Tad Danielewski had towards the manuscript: “[h]is response was unbelievable, full of rage—outraged, I think, by the audacity that I had written something so passionate and so focused on him” (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 104), only to later realize that “[his father had] left instructions for his ashes be scattered among the redwoods” (105).

ii. Exploration #6, the readers in the maze

The readers' projection onto the book brings about a major aspect of the Navidson's labyrinth that has already been introduced previously, namely that it can be experienced by them as well. In *Dwelling in the Text*, Marilyn Chandler argues that "Houses ... reflect not only the psychological structure of the main character or the social structures in which he is entrapped but the structure of the text itself" (Chandler qtd. in Slocombe 90). In the case of *House of Leaves*, Michael Greaney points out that "[t]he Escher-like architecture of the Ash Tree Lane labyrinth, [...] [is] our best visual shorthand for the novel's own maze-like structure" (Greaney 152). One of the best examples to illustrate Greaney's point, is that Navidson's initial issue (his house is bigger on the inside than on the outside) is mirrored by the book cover, which is shorter than the pages⁵³. Another way in which *House of Leaves* mirrors the Navidson's maze is by defeating the readers' expectations as to what a novel is. The indication "A Novel" on the front cover seems to announce something the readers are familiar with (the book as a home), only to realize that *House of Leaves* turns out to be unconventional (the book as a labyrinth). It looks like a maze, a film, a puzzle, an internet page, etc. but still remains, after all, a book, just like Navidson's maze is a house after all.

In Barthesian terms, this assessment makes *House of Leaves* qualify as a *text of bliss*, that is to say a text "that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the readers' historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language" (Allen 90). The state of crisis, unsettlement and discomfort described by Barthes corresponds to the notion of uncanny discussed previously. The readers will, therefore, try to restore the homely atmosphere by trying to make sense – even partially – of the novel. For the readers of Danielewski's novel like for those of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, "'interpretation' is a form of refuge-seeking – an effort to reclaim the ground which has been cut from under their feet" (Iser, *The Implied Reader* 233). However, Slocombe argues that [the house] resists interpretation [...] so too the text-as-House resists interpretation" (Slocombe 102), which is why "we cannot inhabit the text" (91). According to Slocombe, "[t]he House may be a haven, but it is a haven that we can never fully access or accept. All we can do is leave the text, [...] with a partial understanding of its meaning. We can only live in the margins of this text" (Slocombe 106). This assumption relies on the fact that Slocombe believes, in accordance

⁵³ The pages of the novel are actually ½ inch larger than the book cover.

with his nihilistic approach, that “[t]he House symbolizes absence and to live inside absence is impossible” (92). While I agree with his interpretation of the house, I would like to argue that any bit of interpretation a reader projects onto the house (and onto the novel) makes it slightly more homely, like pieces of furniture. Of course, the novel is dense, and the readers’ “pieces of furniture” are often challenged by contradictory elements and possible alternatives, but it may not be what matters. By leaving gaps to be filled, dots to be connected, and riddles to be solved, Danielewski gives the readers the freedom to choose how they want to fill the void.

This freedom is expressed by the numerous ways in which the novel has been interpreted. As Zampanò highlights: “[d]ue to the wall-shifts and extraordinary size, any way out remains singular and applicable only to those on that path at that particular time. *All solutions then are necessarily personal*” (Danielewski 115). This comment draws attention to what Cory A. Reed calls “Cervantine perspectivism”, which “suggests a relativist view of reality that acknowledges subjective observation and suggests the possibility of diverse interpretations of the same phenomena” (Reed qtd. in Richardson unpag.). This definition draws attention to the fact that these “diverse interpretations of the same phenomena” can coexist. Take for instance the now infamous “This is not for you” dedication. It has been read in various different ways depending on the reader, yet the point is not who is right or wrong but how each reader reads it and why. That is precisely the sum of these interpretations and their coexistence that make the novel so rich, dense and fascinating. In a way, it also means that the novel is not for the happy few, and that anyone can, if they wish to, inhabit this place, and do so at the same time. This assessment is in line with Zampanò’s following remark: “Navidson was not the first to live in the house and encounter its peril. [...] Considering the house was supposedly built back in 1720, [...] it would have to be the collective product of every inhabitant’s agonies” (21). This statement can be linked to the collective experience of the entire readership as the *ideal recipient* of the novel and how *House of Leaves* is the product of each reader’s “agonies”, rather than that of a single reader.

Although the collective experience may seem to clash with the personal nature of the journey mentioned above, it may not be so. Danielewski asks in the book club: “How does a public book club conflict with or reinforce the idea of a ‘singular’ path” (Danielewski, “Chapter IX”). One answer is that the singularity of each reader allows them to discover paths/interpretations that had never been treaded/thought of before, and to suggest it to others. In that respect, the journey is necessarily personal since the “paths” or “interpretations” appear to the readers according to their own sensitivity and relationship to the novel. The

experience can – and should – nonetheless be shared, since the coming together of each individual journey is what creates and expands the labyrinthine novel.

Greaney argues that the parallel between the characters' and the readers' experience implies that “the novel is challenging us to succeed where its heroes fail by finding a way to navigate through its impossible spaces” (Greaney 152). The relevance of such notions as that of “heroes” and that of “succeeding” are debatable when it comes to *House of Leaves*, since the type of labyrinth it embodies is more about “going through” than “achieving something”. Navidson, for instance, ended the journey where he started it (in his house), and so do the readers, who eventually realize that the last date in Johnny's diary, which “concludes” his narrative, is October 31, 1998, is also the date of the introduction (see p.515 and p.xxiii). Similarly, *The Navidson Record* is completed by Zampanò on December 25, 1996 and twelve days later, following his death, Johnny finds the manuscript, resulting in *House of Leaves* as we know it (see p.528 and p.i). The fact that the structure of the book and that of the labyrinth lead the characters and the readers back to where they started draws attention to the absence of real conclusion to the book, which offers only an invitation to go down the rabbit hole again, just like Navidson's inexplicable and irresistible urge to explore the labyrinth, a labyrinth that always promises new paths.

iii. Conclusion

As shown in this chapter, the experience of the reader(s) in *House of Leaves* is not limited to identifying with the characters and having empathy for the ordeal they go through. It also enables them to immerse themselves completely in a labyrinth, as they soon realize that they have the same problem as Navidson. This is but the beginning of the mirror effect that takes place between the characters of *The Navidson Record* and the readers. Furthermore, the uncanny nature of the novel, which mirrors that of the house, defeats the readers' expectations about literature.

This chapter demonstrated that reading *House of Leaves* is a very personal process which generates a certain meaning depending on who reads it, just like the maze seems to “react” to who enters it. Zampanò claims that despite the fact that “[some] areas of that place [the maze] [...] never seem to replicate the same pattern twice” (Danielewski 178), “[t]he Infinite Corridor, the Anteroom, the Great Hall, and the Spiral Staircase, exist for all, though their respective size and even layout sometimes changes” (178). Similarly, the novel's cover, page

order, appendixes and exhibits remain the same, while the reader's reading and interpretations make each experience of *House of Leaves* unique. The readers are nonetheless allowed to coexist under the same roof, as the novel leaves enough space for them by making the notions of right/wrong irrelevant, which contributes to expanding the labyrinth.

While this chapter was mostly concerned with the content of the novel, and more specifically the house-labyrinth at the heart of it, the following chapters (IV and V) will be devoted to the other ways in which the book is a labyrinth, this time from a typographical and intertextual perspective.

IV. Typographical labyrinth

"Don't worry, I'm just stuffing shadows"⁵⁴ – Mark Z. Danielewski

One of the main features of *House of Leaves* is undoubtedly its complex typography. As Ilana Shiloh puts it, "the *topos* of the labyrinth is visually conveyed with a staggering variety of means and strategies" (Shiloh 121). She enumerates the following examples to illustrate her point:

Each narrative is typed in a different font, to distinguish the various voices; the word 'house' is always in blue, whereas all the references to the myth of the Cretan labyrinth invariably appear in red and are crossed out. Coiling strands of text meander and bifurcate. The linear sequence of the principal narrative [Zampanò's comment of *The Navidson Record*] is continuously truncated by superscript, referring to footnotes, branching off to other footnotes (121).

I shall use the examples from this quote in order to discuss Danielewski's typographical choices and their effects on the readers' experience of the book, since they "contributes to our understanding of the novel's structure" (Hamilton 4), as well as to that of the story. As the epitaph of this chapter suggests, Danielewski's formal choices support the content of his novel: the narrative is the shadow to which Danielewski gives more depth and substance by "stuffing" it with concrete typographical elements.

⁵⁴ Danielewski, Haunted. "Haunted House—an interview with Mark Z. Danielewski." Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory. *Critique*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2003, p. 119.

i. Non-linearity and hyperlinks

The fact that *House of Leaves* was initially published on the internet, and that its first version is still acknowledged in the novel's publication history question Danielewski's approach of digital technology and the extent to which it should be taken into account when reading and analyzing the novel. Hayles, for instance, believes that *House of Leaves*, "as if learning about omnivorous appetite from the computer" (Hayles 781) is "in a frenzy of remediation" (781), that is to say a "re-presentation of material that has already been represented in another medium" (781). This statement implies a sort of competition between the novel and the computer as an all-encompassing medium that can "incorporate every other medium within itself" (781). Although the novel may appear to compete with computer technologies, Danielewski makes it clear in an interview with Sophie Cottrell that his main goal is to put the many possibilities of books to the forefront:

Books don't have to be so limited. They can intensify informational content and experience. Multiple stories can lie side by side on the page ... Words can also be colored and those colors have meaning. How quickly pages are turned and not turned can be addressed. Hell pages can be tilted, turned upside down, even read backwards ... But here is the joke. *Books have had this capacity all along.* [emphasis added] (Danielewski qtd. in Hansen 597).

Danielewski even claims that, although the book was initially published on the internet, "it is perfectly unsuited for [it]" (Danielewski "Interview"), since he had already thought of and designed the book as a "three-dimensional object" (Danielewski "Interview"). This draws attention to Hayles' remark that "[a]s [Dene Grigar] observes, the adage that something is gained as well as lost in translation applies with special force to importing print documents to the Web" (Grigar in Hayles, "Rethinking Textuality" 263). In the case of *House of Leaves*, Danielewski emphasizes that publishing the book online led to the loss of important aspects: "You can't understand these vertical footnotes, the page, on a screen. You wouldn't understand the depth of the book. You would not actually experience as rapidly the flipping of the pages and things like that" (Danielewski "Interview").

The novel's most notable borrowing from computer technology is that of the hyperlink⁵⁵, embodied by the footnotes referring the readers to units of text located somewhere else, either inside the book or outside. The use of hyperlink in *House of Leaves* also draws attention to its

⁵⁵ Defined as "an electronic link providing direct access from one distinctively marked place in a hypertext or hypermedia document to another in the same or a different document."

non-linear nature. In his essay “Nonlinearity and Literary Theory”⁵⁶, Espen J. Aarseth defines a non-linear text as “an object of verbal communication that is not simply one fixed sequence of letters, words, and sentences but one in which the words or sequence of words may differ from reading to reading because of the shape, conventions, or mechanisms of the text” (Aarseth, “Nonlinearity” 762). This article laid the foundations of his typology of non-linearity that he refined in his 1997 book *Cybertext: Perspective on Ergodic Literature*. It is worth mentioning at this point that, although the notion of “cybertext” would intuitively be associated with digital texts, Aarseth’s discussion encompasses “texts” in the broad sense of the term, ranging “from short poems to complex computer programs and databases” (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 20-21).

Aarseth also emphasizes the role of the reader in his model of cybertextuality. The prefix “cyber” he argues, refers to the vision of the text “seen as a machine” (21), which works according to a triad: “verbal sign”, “medium”, and “(human) operator” (21). This triad includes the operator (in this case, reader), which foregrounds their importance in the functioning of the machine. While some criteria of his typology may further explain to what extent and in what ways *House of Leaves* is a non-linear and interactive novel, some appear less relevant in the current discussion and will, therefore, not be mentioned.

House of Leaves’ dynamic is intratextonic, as “the contents of scriptons⁵⁷ may change while the number of textons⁵⁸ remains fixed” (63). In other words, what is written does not change while what is read may do. This aspect of Aarseth’s typology is embodied in the novel by the messages hidden within the text (often by means of horizontal acrostics, see examples later). Penelope Reed Doob alludes to hidden knowledge in labyrinths (as well as in labyrinthine books), and argues that

...[t]he artist’s aim [...] is not ‘to deprive the reader of the hidden sense, or to appear the more clever; but rather to make truths which would otherwise cheapen by exposure the object of strong intellectual effort and various interpretations, that in the ultimate discovery they shall be more precious’ (Doob 215).

The hidden messages serve as a complementary level of meaning in book-labyrinths, designed to be discovered by careful readers. As Doob argues: “the complex text contains labyrinthine dangers: careless readers or listeners may be lost, lazy, or seduced into interminable error; the

⁵⁶ This article initially came out in the 1994 anthology *Hyper/Text/Theory*, edited by George P. Landow, and was later published in the 2003 textbook *The New Media Reader*.

⁵⁷ Strings of signs “as they appear to readers.”

⁵⁸ Strings of signs “as they exist in the text.”

goal may seem trivial in comparison to the labors involved in reaching it” (220). When reaching it, however, the readers derive pleasure and enjoyment, as suggested by Boccaccio: “[w]hatever is got at the cost of a little labor is both more pleasing and more carefully observed than that which gets to the reader’s mind of itself” (Boccaccio qtd. in Doob 214). The book, therefore, goes as far as rewarding the readers for their involvement by giving them access to new information, that can either be “mere easter eggs”⁵⁹, or more important elements that may “contribute directly to some sort of over-arching narrative” (“Codes for Dummies”). Consider the long (and seemingly pointless) list of photographers on pages 64 to 67. The textons are the names and so are the scriptons if one only reads the names one after the other. However, a closer look at the first letters of these names reveals new scriptons. Some of them seem to be easter eggs such as “a long list [o]f visi[o]naries” (or the name “Danielewski”, which appears when one only looks at the first letter of footnote 32 through 42). More important elements include “for only the wind” (an excerpt from the poem “Ash-Wednesday” by T.S. Eliot), and the strings of words “I wait” and “She said memories are all but they are all dead, who, you”, both hidden in the photographers list.

An in-depth analysis of each of these hidden words, as well as how they relate to *House of Leaves* would be interesting, although I will not discuss them all. As a case in point, consider the appearance of “Thamyris” on page 387 in the sentence ““That house answers many yearnings remembered in sorrow”” (387). Thamyris is the name of a poet from the Greek mythology who believed he could “surpass [the Muses] in song” (“Thamyris”). He either challenged them, or his boasting was reported to the Muses by Apollo (depending on the version of the myth). As a result, Thamyris lost and “they blinded him and took away his gift of song” (“Thamyris”). The motif of blindness is recurring in the book, with Zampanò, who had been “blind as a bat” “since the mid-fifties” (Danielewski xxi), as the most obvious example. The appearance of Thamyris comes in a paragraph in which scientists discuss the fact that Navidson “began believing that darkness could offer something other than itself” (387), they then quote Lazlo Ferma, who argues that: ““Even the brightest magnesium flare can do little against such dark except blind the eyes of the one holding it” (387). The story of Thamyris is very similar to Ferma’s comment, as those who wish to confront the house with even the brightest light (or the brightest interpretations) would be unable to compete with the darkness and end up blinding themselves, which is in line with Thamyris’ pride and subsequent punishment. In a similar fashion, the encoded “my dear

⁵⁹ “an unexpected or undocumented feature in a piece of computer software or on a DVD, included as a joke or a bonus.”

Zampanò, who did you lose?”⁶⁰ (615) in one of Pelafina’s letters establish a link between two (until then) unrelated characters (see chapter V section iv). Her letter from May 8, 1987 is coded entirely using that process, which allows the readers to read a tragic letter (scriptons) hidden in a list of seemingly random textons.

The criterion “determinacy” is trickier when it comes to *House of Leaves*. Aarseth argues that a text is determinate when “the adjacent scriptons of every scripton are always the same” (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 63), and indeterminate when it is not the case. I would argue that *House of Leaves* is indeterminate, but that although “the adjacent scriptons of every scripton” (63) can vary, it remains a binary choice. In that respect, the footnotes in *House of Leaves* function like hyperlinks that can be followed or not, and if they are, it enables the novel to deploy one more labyrinthine feature. Furthermore, the footnotes in *House of Leaves* refer to different types of text units that mirror the different paths that can be taken in a labyrinth: references to existing texts offer new paths outside the book, while references to the exhibits, the appendixes, and other chapters/passages offer new paths inside it. Fictitious texts and missing exhibits face the readers with dead-ends and footnotes that lead to other footnotes extend an already treaded path, or entrap them in a loop (for an example, see this chapter section iv).

The “user functionality” aspect of the novel is interesting to discuss both with regard to non-linearity and to the reader’s response. Aarseth defines this criterion in terms of “additional functions” to the interpretative one (which exists in both linear and nonlinear texts⁶¹). He identifies four⁶² of them: (a) the explorative function, (b) the configurative function, (c) the textonic function and (d) the interpretative function. *House of Leaves* fits in the first three categories mentioned above. In the explorative function (a), “the user must decide which path to take” (64). The footnotes punctually refer the readers to another page, appendix, exhibit, or text that is inside or outside the novel and, by doing so, initiate alternative paths. Although one might believe that because all the words are written down and are, therefore, available to the readers at all time (as suggested by the “random-access” nature of *House of Leaves*), the explorative function may be downplayed. However, following the

⁶⁰ Hidden in the string of words: “many years destroyed. Endless arrangements – re, zealous accommodations, medical prescriptions, & needless other wonders, however obvious – debilitating in deed; you ought understand – letting occur such evil” (Danielewski 615).

⁶¹ Aarseth, Espen J. “Nonlinearity and Literary Theories.” *The New Media Reader*, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort, The MIT Press, 2003, p. 768.

⁶² The 1994 article contains two more, namely the “role-playing function” and the “poetic function”, which I will not discuss here, as they are not relevant in discussing *House of Leaves*.

footnotes when they are suggested or reading them afterwards makes a difference, as the order in which the various sections are read has an impact on the readers' approach and understanding of the novel. For instance, a passage in chapter IX that refers to questions regarding the house and its owner apparently "echo[es] the snippet of gospel Navidson alludes to in his letter to Karen [...] where Jesus says: In my father's house are many rooms: if it *were* not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you..." (121). The letter mentioned in this passage is to be found in chapter XVII and sheds light on the notion of God in relation to the house. It also reveals to the readers elements that happen later, such as Karen going away with the children and Navidson going back for a solo exploration. Another example is Pelafina's letters. They are to be found at the end of the novel (Appendix II-E), but the readers are invited to read them early on in order to gain more insight in Johnny's personality (see chapter V section ii for a discussion on this example). Furthermore, some paths seem to highlight a particular theme. S. G. Miller, administrator of the "House of leaves blog", read chapter IX by taking as many different paths as possible. He argues that the "[g]eneral idea [of path 1] [...] is one of centering. Centering of one's being (spiritual), center of a place or thing (physical) and center of ideas (societal)" (Miller), that path 6 "explores the ideas of how the house's labyrinth is similar to the labyrinth of the psyche" (Miller), and that path 7 "explores the limitations of describing and modeling [sic]/mapping a labyrinth of the size and scope of the house [and] also explores the limitations of the learned etymology of the labyrinth myth based on different interpretations" (Miller). In the configurative function (b), "scriptons are in part chosen or created by the user" (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 64). In *House of Leaves*, the codes allow for new scriptons to appear and though the readers do not choose or create them, they must play an active role in order to *discover* them. The textonic function (c) is a function where "textons or transversal functions can be (permanently) added to the text" (64), which corresponds to the notes the readers can, and are even encouraged, to add. As for transversal functions, the readers can also add notes in order to refer them easily to where another relevant unit of text is to be found. For instance, Johnny says on page 92: "I woke up to find Raymond squatting on my bed [...] murdering all remnants of sterno or park dreams" (Danielewski 92). This statement is clarified by Pelafina's letter from February 14, 1983: "Good lord, Johnny, where does an eleven year old go for three days? He said some policemen found you in a park heating hotdogs over a can of sterno" (590). Since the letter sheds light on Johnny's elliptic

comment, the readers can decide to add the page number of the corresponding passage under the other, in order to jump more quickly between them.

Given the active part the readers play while reading the novel, another notion developed by Aarseth can be linked to *House of Leaves*, namely that of “ergodic literature”. He defines it in his 1997 book as follows: “[Ergodic is a term] that derives from the Greek words *ergon* and *hodos*, meaning ‘work’ and ‘path.’ In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text” (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 1). Aarseth explains that the readers of ergodic literature, in addition to forming a mental picture of the story⁶³, also performs “in an extranoematic sense” (1). This means that the readers needs to devote more effort than barely turning pages or moving their eyes across them⁶⁴, which is achieved thanks to the features of *House of Leaves* discussed above.

This more technical approach of the novel emphasizes the fact that while Danielewski’s novel is linked to the Internet and computer technologies, he does not seem to try to compete with that medium. Rather, he seeks to showcase the possibilities books offer, among other things, in terms of fragmentation and hyperlinks, hidden codes and new meanings, and how they serve the purpose of creating a book-labyrinth. Furthermore, such a fragmentation demands the active participation of the readers and, therefore, makes *House of Leaves* fit the definition of ergodic literature. The fact that the readers can, in turn, add their own hyperlink in order to navigate through the novel more easily contributes to making the rhizome Danielewski imagined come to life and expand virtually *ab infinito*, just like the World Wide Web or the Library of Babel.

ii. Polyphony in *House of Leaves*

a. The narrators: typefaces and characterization

House of Leaves is a polyphonic novel as it consists of different narrative voices: those of Zampanò, Johnny, Pelafina and the Editors. As a result, Robbie M. H. Meechan states that “the reader struggles to locate the true narrator [...] and finds themselves lost amidst a *labyrinth* of different narrators” [emphasis added] (Meechan ix). Graham Allen addresses this issue in the *New Critical Idiom* on intertextuality, stating that

⁶³ Aarseth, Espen J. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. The Johns University Press, 1997, p 1.

⁶⁴ Aarseth, Espen J. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. The Johns University Press, 1997, p 2.

...[i]n the polyphonic novel we find not an objective, authorial voice presenting the relations and dialogues between characters but a world in which all characters, and even the narrator him- or herself, are possessed of their own discursive consciousness. The polyphonic novel presents a world in which no individual discourse can stand objectively above any other discourse (Allen 23).

Allen's comment draws attention to an important aspect of the narrators in *House of Leaves*, namely that there is no hierarchy between them. Of course, as Ilana Shiloh suggests, the narration is "truncated", since each narrative arises from the previous one (like the trunk, branches and leaves of a tree), which does not mean that the "trunk" (Zampanò's manuscript⁶⁵) is more important than Johnny's section, or even than the appendixes. Danielewski himself acknowledges that it is rather "a kind of dialogue" (Danielewski, "Haunted House" 107). He claims that "the novel is not arranged linearly or hierarchically, that is, what appears in the appendix isn't necessarily of lesser significance than what you find in the 'main part' of the book and isn't even supposed to be read afterwards" (123). Ron Richardson, on his part, compares a "story told through a series of narrators, writers and translators" to "Chinese boxes" (Richardson unpag.), which is also a suited metaphor, considering that each narrative/section in *House of Leaves* not only *stems* from the previous one(s), but also *encompasses* it/them. In that respect, his metaphor completes and refines those of the labyrinth and the tree the narrative levels can be compared to. Regarding the different "paths", "branches" or "boxes" into which *House of Leaves* is divided, Nathalie Hamilton suggests that

...[i]nitially, the reader may believe that the narrative levels of the text can be divided into four⁶⁶ main groups: *The Navidson Record* and accompanying cinematic pieces; Zampanò's commentary and critical material; Johnny Truant's narrative; and the mysterious 'editors' and additional material (Hamilton 9).

With regard to the typographical aspects of these four levels, or arguably three⁶⁷, the Editors chose to assign each a different typeface: "In an effort to limit confusion, Mr. Truant's footnotes will appear in Courier font while Zampanò's will appear in Times" (Danielewski 4). Nathalie Hamilton suggests that such a formal choice "make[s] the transition between levels easily recognizable for the reader" (Hamilton 12). It is indeed the

⁶⁵ The fact that it was hidden in a trunk symbolically seems to confirm that status.

⁶⁶ Arguably more, if one takes Christophe Claro into account (for the French version).

⁶⁷ *The Navidson Record* is contained in "Zampanò's commentary and critical material" (9).

case from a visual point of view, but it also reinforces the idea that each character's section is separated from the others' while, as it will be discussed later, it may not be so. Another function of the typefaces is that it reinforces the individuality and three-dimensionality of the characters. In his master's thesis entitled *Towards a Typology of Typographic signification* (2013), Marc Lemon states that:

Many readers have considered that the choice of typefaces [in *House of Leaves*] is intended as more than a simple labeling device, indeed it has been suggested that; 'font choice informs the reader of the roles of various voices.' Instead of connotation these typefaces contribute to character development through metaphorical signification. In many ways the typefaces used function as sender stylistics suggesting facets of each character (Lemon 65).

He argues that "switching a couple of the typefaces, such as choosing Times for Johnny Truant and Courier for Pelafina, would seem to be completely inappropriate and contrary to their characters" (Lemon 67). Lemon has a point when he says that the goal of the typefaces is very likely to give information about the characters. The choice of typefaces in *The Familiar*, his latest collection, confirms that Danielewski attaches importance to them with a view to defining his characters further:

Özgür's narration is marked by the detective genre, [...] in the name of his font (Baskerville, arguably a Conan Doyle reference) [...]. Similarly, since Shnorhk helps to document his country's traumatic past, his font is called Promemoria, Italian for "reminder." [...] Luther['s] [...] self-assurance is reflected in the grandeur of his Imperial font (Lazzara 3).

In his analysis, Lemon proceeds to "pull out some salient features of each face in relation to the others" (Lemon 66), although he admits that his "analysis is clearly subjective" (67). Not everything he concludes from the typefaces is convincing, (for instance that the Editor's typeface suggests "solidarity [and] self-satisfaction" (67)), maybe because the appearance is less important than the use, connotation and name of the typeface. Zampanò writes in Time New Roman, a font commonly associated with academic writing, which he both imitates and parodies. This typeface, therefore, enables him to display authority and seriousness, which misleads the readers into assuming that what he says is reliable, while what they read in his section is actually made up almost entirely. Coincidentally (or not),

“TNR” is the acronym of both Times New Roman and to *The Navidson Record*⁶⁸, as if the name of the font (form) was intrinsically linked to the content written in it. This is one of the many examples of Danielewski combining form and content to strengthen the effect of his narrative. Lemon further states:

[I]t has even been suggested that; ‘Times New Roman is not a font choice so much as an *absence* of a font choice.’ In many ways this indefinable character suits Zampanò perfectly, he is himself a mystery and, as Johnny Truant admits; ‘I never came across any ID, whether a passport, license or other official document insinuating that yes, he indeed was An-Actual-&-Accounted-For person.’ [emphasis added] (66).

It is true that Zampanò’s background remains vague since Danielewski left numerous gaps about his past (for instance how he became blind, or why he decided to write *The Navidson Record*). The fact that Times can even be considered “an absence of font choice” (66) is particularly interesting, since it represents Zampanò’s absence as a living being while acknowledging that he still has a presence through his writing.

Johnny uses *Courier*, which means “messenger”. Although Johnny does not write letters, him addressing the reader(s) makes his section almost epistolary at times. Furthermore, his mother wrote him 65 letters from the Whalestoe Institute. The *Courier* typeface for Johnny can, therefore, also be interpreted as him carrying the emotional weight of his mother’s letters, so much so that they have an influence on his writing and personality (see chapter V section ii for a further discussion on this topic). The Editors, on their part, write in *Bookman*⁶⁹, which is suited, to say the least. Lemon states that “the letters by Johnny Truant’s mother Pelafina are set in Dante” (Lemon 65), although her font is actually *Kennerley*⁷⁰. In Lemon’s defense, there have been doubts around the typeface used by Pelafina, which was assumed to be Dante by many, including Lemon’s source. Interestingly, Dante is not entirely irrelevant in the discussion around *House of Leaves* since the front and back cover, “The Pelican Poems” and the “Yggdrasil” page (p. 709) are written using that typeface, which is believed to be that representing Danielewski. It makes sense that his

⁶⁸ As suggested by Page Broadhead, a member of the official *House of Leaves* book club: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/HouseOfLeavesBookClub/search/?query=TNR%20Paige>. Accessed 10 May 2018.

⁶⁹ Hamilton, Nathalie. “The A-Mazing House: The Labyrinth as Theme and Form in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2008, p. 5.

⁷⁰ Many thanks to Michael J. Simpson, a member of the *House of Leaves* book club, for providing me with this information.

typeface is on the front cover, as an acknowledgment of his authorship of the book⁷¹. Furthermore, Dante is known for his journey through hell and back, which is symbolically represented by the front and back cover being written in Dante, as if it represented the beginning and end of the journey. This statement implies that what the readers can expect between the covers is, in a way, a form of hell or ordeal. The Yggdrasil page serves as a sort of “conclusion” of the book (it comes after the credits) and represents the tree that holds the universe in the Norse mythology. It could be a symbolic representation of Danielewski, since as the author, he is the one “holding” the universe of the novel. As for “The Pelican Poems”, they are a part of the novel he has “a very personal attachment to” (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 123), since he wrote them during a trip through Europe which proved to be a “very difficult and trying” (123) experience for him as he hardly had any money. The use of Dante for this passage echoes his journey through hell and back, as it eventually ended well.

As I have already mentioned above, the relationship between Zampanò’s main body of text and Johnny’s footnotes is sometimes considered a hierarchy, even a competition, which corresponds to the more general hierarchical tension between the main body of text and the footnotes. For instance, Martin Brick suggests that “the compelling textual layout facilitates an unresolved competition of authority between the various narrative voices” (Brick, qtd. in Noah 6). I would like to argue, however, that Danielewski deconstructs this opposition. In order to see what the relationship between these two narratives is, I will discuss a few examples. Regarding the structure of the collaboration between Johnny and Zampanò, Hamilton suggests that

... Truant’s digressions are so long and involved that there is the possibility of losing the original thread of Zampanò’s narrative by the time the reader is returned to it. Similarly, Zampanò’s lengthy digressions [...] divert the reader’s attention from the story being told by *The Navidson Record* (Hamilton 13).

Digressions and their unsettling nature are an important aspect of *House of Leaves*, as it contributes to making it a labyrinthine novel. Doob explains that Geoffrey of Vinsauf identifies two types of digression: “(1) moving from one part of the primary matter to another, and (2) jumping from the story to quite different material” (Doob 212-13). Doob comments on the second type of digressions, which, according to her, are “labyrinthine not only in their circuitousness but also in moving into apparent irrelevancies that prove instructive, just as a

⁷¹ Since the titles of his other books are all set in Dante, this typeface is likely a way for him to convey his authorship in an indirect way.

maze seems to move away from the goal only to approach it more nearly” (213). Johnny’s comments correspond to the second type, as they seem to “mov[e] into apparent irrelevancies” only to discuss similar themes in relation to his own life.

Some parts of Zampanò’s manuscript indeed seem to speak to him, such as the epigraph of chapter III, to which he provides a translation:

When the great Florentine howls, “*Ma io perchè venirvi? o chi ‘I concede?/ Io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono,*”²⁵ [...].

²⁵ Dante again. [...] ‘But I, why should I go there, and who grants it? I am not Aeneas; I am not Paul.’ A question I’m often asking myself these days. Though not the Aeneas/Paul part (Danelewski 19)⁷².

The fact that Johnny shows the same concerns as Dante’s illustrates how the personal tastes and sensitivity of a reader can influence his or her experience of the novel. Another example can be found in chapter V, when Johnny considers a passage written by Zampanò about echoes and “empty hallways long past midnight” (Danielewski 48) as “intensely personal” (48) and proceeds to tell how much six lines of that chapter resonate with him, so much so that it prevented him from “rec’[ing] a quick skip past the whole echo ramble” (48). This last comment is particularly interesting since it also draws attention to the shift of responsibility between the author and the reader. If the abovementioned passage had not interested Johnny like it did, he might simply have discarded it, thus exerting his power upon a manuscript that was initially not his and deciding of what the actual readers would be able (or allowed?) to read.

Sometimes, Zampanò’s comments on *The Navidson Record* speak to Johnny so much that they allow him to reminisce about his past. Jennifer Cooper claims that “the story that Zampanò is telling is full of things that could be directly related to Johnny’s life – particularly his childhood” (Cooper 4). In that case, Zampanò’s comments are a mirror held to Johnny, where, recognizing himself – though in a fragmented way – delves into his own story. The passage about Chad’s unwillingness to speak and troubled behavior, for instance, is followed by a lengthy footnote where Johnny recalls his own troubled childhood in a foster family, which enables the readers to gain more information about his background.

⁷² See appendix 7.

The fact that Johnny admits tempering with Zampanò's manuscript, however, makes the situation more complex: "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?" (Danielewski 16). This suggests that Johnny may very well have (and probably has) tempered with other (more or less significant) portions of the book (see also this chapter, section iii), and points towards the larger issue of the permeable boundaries between the narratives. In relation to the parallel between Chad and Johnny, the readers could formulate the following hypothesis: Chad is inspired by Johnny, Chad *is* Johnny, or Johnny rewrote (or wrote) Chad to fit his own personal experience. This issue of rewriting will be discussed further in the following section.

b. The reader-as-character and co-author

While I have already discussed the *ideal recipient* in a previous chapter, I would like to explore the reader-as-character and therefore as additional "voice" in the novel. This prolongation of the novel by the reader(s) is in fact suggested in the novel itself, when Johnny meets a band that wrote a song about *House of Leaves* and that has read and annotated it, which is one more instance of the novel's self-reflexive and metafictional nature (see chapter VI):

They had discussed the footnotes, the names and even the encoded appearance of Thamyris on page 387, something I'd transcribed without ever detecting. Apparently they wondered alot [sic] about Johnny Truant. [...] Did he at long last find the woman who would love his ironies⁷³? Which shocked the hell out of me. I mean it takes some pretty impressive back-on-page-117 close-reading to catch that one. During their second set, I thumbed through the pages, virtually every one marked, stained and red-lined with inquiring and I thought frequently inspired comments. In a few of the margins, there were even some pretty stunning personal riffs about the lives of the musicians themselves (Danielewski 514).

⁷³ This sentence is a hidden acrostic that can be read on page 117 in the sentence: "a wild ode mentioned at a New West hotel over wine infusions, light, lit, lofted on very entertaining moods, yawning in return, open nights, inviting everyone's song" (Danielewski 117).

One cannot help but read this passage as a projection of Danielewski's *ideal recipient* discussed in chapter II section ii. In relation to the topic of this chapter, it can be read as an invitation for the readers to get involved in the novel the same way as the characters do. This is in line with Aleksandra Bida's argument that, "[t]he novel [...] invites readers to reach out rather than project" (Bida 51). The readers are, therefore, urged to *mimic* Johnny's interaction with the text, adding their own handwriting, and thus their identity of reader-as-character, to it. Furthermore, Johnny addresses the readers as if they were intradiegetic characters:

[Y]es there have been [other women] - who's to say. *Scratch in* your own guesses. No doubt your *postils* will be happier than mine, though if they are, you clearly don't know what the fuck you're talking about. Then again, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe you have got it right. I mean if you've lasted this far, maybe you do know what I'm talking about. Maybe even better than me [emphasis added] (Danielewski 265).

Johnny nonetheless does not stop there: he also questions what the readers might add, claiming that it may be wrong, but that it may equally be right. Johnny had already suggested that the readers may understand the whole thing better than he does in the introduction: "Hopefully you'll be able to make sense of what I can represent though still fail to understand" (xv). The reason why these claims are so unsettling is because of their ambivalent effect. On the one hand, the readers who would have wanted Johnny to lead the way for them and to give them directions are left alone. It is sound to assume that Johnny is the only suited person to serve as guide, since he knows Zampanò's manuscript better than anyone. However, Johnny clearly establishes from the start that he will not be of any help. On the other hand, this also suggests that the relationship between Johnny and the extradiegetic readers is one of equality and that he is not the bearer of meaning and "truth". As he claims: "your guess is as good as mine" (57). This ambivalent way to address the readers results in an ambivalent situation: they are left to their own devices while offered complete freedom to make their own guesses and interpretations. Danielewski formulates the consequences of the reader-as-character mimicking Johnny's behavior towards the text and suggests that

The way that Johnny projects itself into, or onto, Zampanò's book shows how the text of *The Navidson Record* functions as it is being read and assembled by the readers themselves. Johnny even goes as far as to modify it. [...] Not only does the book permit that, it is really saying to the reader, 'Now *you* modify it.' (Danielewski, "Haunted House" 120).

This comment draws attention to the fact that becoming a character in *House of Leaves* also implies becoming *co-author*. This double status is illustrated by Hansen's claim 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). In the same line of thought, Ron Richardson argues that "[o]nce the writer abandons a work, readers must then perform the text, reimagining it. Each act of reading, therefore, is an act of creation. Or recreation" (Richardson.). This process is made possible by the indeterminacies the readers can find in the text, which are defined by *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* as follows: "In reader-response criticism, any element of a text that requires the reader to decide on its meaning". Consider the following passage as an example of what Iser calls gaps and indeterminacies:

One of Zampanò's early readers also found a story she wanted to avoid [...] abruptly returning from her childhood in Santa Cruz [...] her hangover the following day leaving her [...] with only a fleeting memory of something white with ropes of sea smoke and one terrifying flash of blue, which was more [...] than she could usually share even if [...] it still wasn't even the half of it (Danielewski 78).

The very vague recollection shared by Zampanò's reader allows Danielewski to leave gaps in the narrative, which the readers can fill with a great number of interpretations. Such gaps are usually generated by "[l]a luxuriance de la palette des représentations, le montage et les interférences entre les perspectives, la possibilité de voir les mêmes événements au travers des points de vue parfaitement contradictoires"⁷⁴ (Iser, *L'appel* 50). Iser argues that the reader is, therefore, "continuellement tenté d'ordonner les nombreuses facettes du roman"⁷⁵ (50), which is not without consequences: "la lecture, puisant dans les perspectives offertes à foison, fonctionne comme un processus de sélection dont l'imaginaire [*Vorstellungswelt*] de chaque lecteur fournit les critères"⁷⁶ (51). Consequently, the text mirrors the "conception du monde"⁷⁷ (21) of the reader, and "épouse[] [s]es plus intimes dispositions"⁷⁸ (21). What it implies regarding interpretation, is that, in accordance with Barthes' theory, "a reader tak[es] certain

⁷⁴ "the number of representations, the montage and interferences between perspectives, the possibility to see events through contradictory viewpoints."

⁷⁵ "is constantly tempted to order the many facets of the novel."

⁷⁶ "reading, which draws elements from many different perspectives, functions like a process of selection for which the imagination of each reader provides the criteria."

⁷⁷ "to their worldview."

⁷⁸ "corresponds to their most intimate tendencies."

lexias far beyond what one would have previously imagined possible, but leaving others less discussed than another reader would have done” (Allen 88), which echoes Johnny’s personal response to the dark hallways past midnight.

Aside from literary gaps, Danielewski also gives the readers literal ones of various origins, which emphasizes the self-consciousness behind this process. In the section about Holloway, for instance, letters (and occasionally words) are missing because of “[s]ome kind of ash” (323) (represented by blank spaces between brackets) or because the “text was inked out” (328) (represented by “XXX”). Sometimes, these gaps suggest other possible interpretations to the readers. For instance, “The Holloway Tape” reads “The Hol[]y Tape” (333) and “Born in Menomonie Wisconsin” reads “Born in M[]om[]sin”⁷⁹ (334) after the ashes burnt some letters, which echoes the myth of the Minotaur, where Pasiphae mates with a bull and gives birth to the creature. In this case, it reinforces the idea that the beast Holloway fears and hunts is actually himself, which is in keeping with his suicide. While some gaps are easily and unequivocally filled, like for instance “Ove[]view”, others are impossible to fill, or at least based on their surroundings: “Thus despite rational object[]ions, technology’s failure is over[]un by the onslaught of myth.”²⁹⁴ [

]” (335). Some gaps also invite the readers to add their own meaning such as: “²⁹⁵ ~~At the heart of the labyrinth waits the Mi[]taur and like the Minotaur of myth its name is []~~” (335). The name of the Minotaur, or what it represents, is highly personal and varies from one character to the other and from one reader to the other, which means that in this case, the readers are urged to reflect upon how they would personally fill that gap (see this chapter section iii). Another example of such gaps is to be found on page 63 where Zampanò “provided the blanks but never filled them in” (63). This passage tells the story of that “one night in early August” when “_____”⁷⁴ and the equally famous _____ drop[ped] in for dinner” (63). The names of these two people are replaced with blank spaces throughout the whole anecdote, which allows the readers to choose which celebrities might have dropped at the Navidsons’ house unexpectedly. Alternatively, it also allows for a more allegorical interpretation of the anecdote, where the two “celebrities” could be feelings or abstract concepts such as “memory” or “nostalgia”.

⁷⁹ As suggested by Bar Lovv, a member of the official *House of Leaves* book club: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/HouseOfLeavesBookClub/search/?query=mom%20sin>. Accessed 9 May 2018.

Putting the different facets of the novel in order is not only threatened by the various viewpoints and many indeterminacies, but also by the incoherencies the readers encounter in the novel. Iser states: “[q]uand le roman ne permet pas aux différents points de vue de coopérer il force le lecteur à être cohérent avec lui-même [*Konsistenzbildung*]” (Iser, *L’appel* 50). This idea is illustrated by Johnny’s claim on page 31: “if there’s something you find irksome – go ahead and skip it” (Danielewski 31). Arguably discarding something because it is irksome is not the same as discarding something because it does not fit the reader’s subjective and partial interpretation of the novel. However, Johnny’s remark draws their attention to the fact that some passages *can* be skipped, that they can *choose* what they read or not, although they have not waited for his permission to do so. As Barthes argues, “a-t-on jamais lu Proust, Balzac, *Guerre et Paix*, mot à mot?”⁸⁰ (Barthes 224). Barthes calls that practice *tnesis*, that is to say what the reader will not read and which the author cannot predict⁸¹. Barthes calls it a “source ou figure du plaisir”⁸² (224), which we could go as far as calling a *guilty* pleasure, since it is usually a personal and private experience. That is where the interest of Johnny’s remark lies. Readers have practiced *tnesis* for as long as writing exists, but it is not openly discussed, it is not something the author has control upon. The fact that Johnny openly invites the readers to make a selection at their whim, therefore, makes *tnesis* a valid approach of *House of Leaves*. By acknowledging it, Danielewski once again foresees the readers’ behavior towards the text and reflects upon it.

In terms of what filling the gaps says about the reader, Iser argues that, since “[t]he manner in which the reader experiences the text reflect his own disposition”, “the literary text acts as a kind of mirror” (Iser, *The Implied Reader* 281). He nonetheless points out that “the reality which this process helps create is one that will be *different* from his own” (281), on the grounds that the readers would be bored by a text that reflects them exactly⁸³. This idea is similar to Greaney’s claim that

The novel is designed to provoke abnormal degrees of readerly self-consciousness [...]. Zampanò seems to chime in with this eye-of-the-beholder theory of meaning and perception when he speculates that the house may be an ‘absurd interactive Rorschach test’. If Navidson’s house is a place where people come face-to-face with their own repressed fears and desires, and *The Navidson record* is a film that viewers will re-write in the language of their preferred critical methodology, then *House of Leaves*

⁸⁰ “Who has ever read every single word of Proust, Balzac, War and Peaces?”

⁸¹ Barthes, Roland. *Œuvres complètes IV – livres, textes, entretiens 1972-1976*. Seuil, 2002, p. 224.

⁸² “source or representation of pleasure.”

⁸³ Iser, Wolfgang. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974, p. 281. Print.

must also be seen as a warped mirror in which readers misrecognize their own obsessions ” (Greaney 155).

The novel can indeed be considered a “warped mirror”, since Johnny and the readers may project things that were neither written nor foreseen by Danielewski, and might go as far as adding them to the text. In that respect, Danielewski points out that, once the novel triggers a reaction in the readers, they are “on the threshold of a whole series of stories that the book has allowed [them] to access but that are, at the same time, particular to [them]” (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 120), which was one of his goal when he decided to write *House of Leaves*. He states: “I was [...] very aware that I was creating something akin to a vast literal theatre⁸⁴⁸⁵, one that the *reader* could use to project his or her own histories and anxieties” (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 107), an aspect of the book that he believes “has been very successful” (120). He states: “I’ve received a lot of feedback from readers who have responded by telling me about their anxieties and why the book evoked these for them”⁸⁶ (107).

The double status of reader-as-character and reader-as-coauthor allows the readers to be very much involved in the novel to such an extent that, as Doob argues, “the whole thing thereupon becomes *our own work*” [emphasis added] (Aristotle qtd. in Doob 216), since *House of Leaves* is the kind of book that “demands the active engagement of readers who help create the meaning of a text by filling in [...] its gaps and indeterminacies and who thus value what they themselves have done” (Doob 216). The fact that Danielewski welcomes the readers inside the novel and urges them to alter his book amounts to William Tackeray’s claim that “it is the unwritten part of the book that would be the most interesting” (Thackeray qtd. in Iser, *The Implied Reader* 119). Iser calls “virtual dimension” (Iser, *The Implied Reader* 279) that “coming together of text and imagination” (279). This discussion now brings about a topic closely related to how text and imagination come together as a film – albeit one of the unconventional type.

⁸⁴ Noah makes an interesting comment about the link between theatre and *House of Leaves* that is worth mentioning here: “*Muss es sein?*” This phrase is German, and translates to ‘Must it be?’ or ‘Does it have to be?’ The phrase also sounds like a French phrase, ‘*mise-en-scène*’” (Noah 30). Since the phonetic rendering of a phrase in a language in another language is something Danielewski does on several instances, Noah’s claim is far from being unthinkable. Furthermore, it would fit the idea of a play suggested by Danielewski.

⁸⁵ For the characters, the underlying implication of comparing the novel to a play is that everyone in it *plays a role*, which reinforces the idea that the boundaries between characters may not be as clear-cut as the typefaces suggest. This means that transgressions are possible, that is to say that one character could speak with the “voice” (typeface) of another. Such an unsettling assessment leads the readers to wonder *who* is actually speaking and further calls into question the notion of identity and reliability.

⁸⁶ See appendix 8 for an example of a reader’s projection of personal anxieties, in this case by means of erasures.

c. Lights, camera, action: *The Navidson Record*

In an interview, Danielewski claimed: “*House of Leaves* was my remediation of film” (Danielewski, “Allways”). It seems that his passion for and subsequent homage to the cinematic form stems from his father’s own passion for films and job as a film director: “my father’s greatest passion was [...] film. [...] If there was anything my father loved as much as films, it was talking about them” (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 108). He also explains that he was not only “immersed in the cinema from an early age”, but also “in the language necessary to discuss [it]” (108). Tadeusz Zbigniew Danielewski, Tad Danielewski for short, used to comment films at the dinner table, and would do it in “such an articulate, riveting manner that his talks often seemed to completely supersede the films” (108). Danielewski remembers that he would talk about “a film not one of [them] had seen but which [his] father [...] vividly re-created for [them] in [their] head” (108), to the extent that the actual film seemed bleak in comparison. One of the most important aspects of Danielewski’s remediation of films lies here: the power of words and imagination over that of images. Moreover, Tad Danielewski made a now lost film when he was living in Madrid with his family in the late 60’s, early 70’s. The documentary, called *Spain: Open Doors*⁸⁷, was eventually confiscated by the Spanish government, which is reminiscent of *The Navidson Record*. Danielewski states that if “*Spain: Open Door* [...] exists today at all [it] is purely due to [his] father’s expertise in telling [them] such loving and highly detailed stories” (109-10). Similarly, Zampanò describes and comments a film that no one will ever see, except in their own mind. In that respect, Danielewski took over his father’s role as film-teller by self-consciously making the centerpiece of his remediation the object of the remediation.

The process that results from it – the “theater of the mind” (Danielewski, “Mark Danielewski”), as Carpenter calls it – would be threatened by an actual adaptation of the novel for the screen. When Danielewski is asked about such projects, he answers: “I get 300 offers a year. I am just not interested. It’s a book about the imagination. It’s a book suggesting things, illuminating areas with your own mind. [...] If you want to see the movie, read the book!”⁸⁸ (Danielewski, “Interview”).

⁸⁷ Interestingly, the title of the documentary is also related to the lexical field of the house. Danielewski explains that it was meant to express “the way Spain was supposedly opening its doors to artists during the era of the Franco régime” (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 109), which goes back to the topic of a seemingly welcoming and homely place that turns out to be unhomely and even hostile.

⁸⁸ Danielewski released a script of what would be an episode of *House of Leaves*, which cleverly manages to turn the tables. The episode is about a book that does not exist and a documentary that actually does.

The process Danielewski describes, namely ‘illuminating areas with our own mind’, has been theorized by Wolfgang Iser, who explains that “the written part of the text gives us the knowledge, but it is the unwritten part that gives us the opportunity to picture things; indeed without the element of indeterminacy, the gaps in the text, we should not be able to use our imagination” (Iser, *The Implied Reader* 283). Furthermore, Iser emphasizes the crucial difference between films and imagination. He states that the world presented by the novel “does not pass before the reader’s eyes like a film. The sentences are ‘component parts’ insofar as they make statements, claims, or observations, or convey information, and so establish various perspectives in the text. But [...] they are not the sum total of the text itself (Iser, *The Implied Reader* 277). He argues that the connectives mark “those points at which the reader is able to ‘climb aboard’ the text” (277), since the sentences do “not consist solely of statement[s] [...] but aim[] at something beyond what it actually says” (277). The co-creative role of the readers is such an important part of the process described by Iser that it would undoubtedly be undermined by the making of a film.

In addition to that, Danielewski’s remediation of film enables him to question the limitation of that medium, which accounts for “technological gaps” in the novel. For instance, Zampanò is “unable” to see what is inside Karen’s jewelry box, or claims that “for whatever reason the tape cuts off here” (465) during Exploration #5. That type of gaps is artificial, although the readers are so immersed in *The Navidson Record* that they may forget that it all comes from Zampanò’s mind. Hiding something from the readers is, therefore, not caused by technological constraints but is the result of Zampanò’s choice. This argument can be illustrated by the following passage from *The Rescue* (Part Two): “As Tom does not operate a Hi 8 during this sequence, we can only imagine what his reaction was as he struggled to lift the corpse over the railing” (283). Whether the Hi 8 is operated or not does not make any difference, since Zampanò described the scene. The word “struggle” gives a clear indication of Tom’s situation, and the fact that he has to lift Jed’s dead body over the railing suggests to the readers that, in addition to being a difficult task in terms of physical effort, it was also an emotional ordeal. Another example is Zampanò’s discussion of Navidson’s Pulitzer Prize winning photograph of the dying Sudanese girl. He describes the picture in great detail and then shows the readers a diagram of it, which turns out to be an empty square. The Editors explain: “Presumably Zampanò’s blindness prevented him from providing an actual diagram of the Delial photograph. – Ed” (421). In fact, Zampanò’s description already enabled to readers to create the picture in their mind, making the actual

picture useless, or at least redundant. As a result, the readers are freed from the constraints of a unique representation that is not their own.

In that respect, the maze, whose darkness, depth and size are impossible to represent in a film or a photograph, embodies the limitation of that medium. This assessment is made by Navidson himself, who “was really unsatisfied [with the footages]” (418). His dissatisfaction can be explained by the following passage from *The Last Interview*: “Only the interviews inform these events [the house suddenly “attacking” the family, resulting in Tom’s death]. They alone show us how the moments bruise and bleed” (344). The subjectivity of words and the fact that they were chosen by individuals who experienced the events first hand make them more emotionally laden than images. In keeping with this idea, it seems that watching the film does not grant the intradiegetic viewers the most intense experience possible of the Navidsons’ ordeal. Zampanò claims: “Apparently [“those who have *merely* seen” the film [emphasis added]] show[] very little evidence of any sort of emotional or mental change [...]. While [“those who have read and written [...] about the film”] seem[] to have been more radically influenced” (407).

Written words also allow the author to speak to the imagination of the readers directly, without making anything actually *happen*. Let us, for instance, consider the handwritten notes provided in the color plate behind the cover of the full-colored edition (the note is also provided in Appendix C). This note contains another possible fate for the Navidson family:

Perhaps I will alter the whole thing. Kill both children. Murder is a better word. Chad scrambling to escape, almost making it to the front door where Karen waits, until a corner in the foyer suddenly leaps forward and hews the boy in half. At the same time Navidson, by the kitchen, reaches for Daisy, only to arrive a fraction of second too late, his finger finding air, his eyes scratching after Daisy as she falls to her death. Let both parents experience tht [sic]. Let their narcissism find a new object to wither by. Douse them in infanticide. Drown them in blood⁸⁹ (Danielewski 552).

From the moment the readers read the note – and therefore form a mental picture of Chad and Daisy’s bloodied dead bodies and of Karen and Navidson’s unbearable grief – they exist in the same way as the rest of the story: staged, lit, performed and stored in their mind, not quite on the same level as the rest of the story (since it does not actually *happen* in the story), yet hard

⁸⁹ See appendix 9.

to forget and dismiss altogether. This conclusion helps explain why the many contradictions in the novel are so problematic for the readers. Consider, for instance, Johnny's gradually less and less reliable and contradictory accounts: "'Where are the dioramas of famine and disease? The black and broken toes? The gangrene? The night rending pain? Why, it's right here,' says a docent. But I can't see what she's talking about. And besides, there is no docent" (500). At the end of the day, the conclusion is that there is no docent and that Johnny made her up. However, by still telling it to the readers, Johnny makes them "see" and "hear" her. It is, therefore, hard to simply dismiss the thought as non-existent (since the readers already made it exist). Moreover, it immerses them even more in Johnny's character, since it is as if they were experiencing his hallucinations. These contradictions also contribute to making the book labyrinthine since it offers a path that ends up being deceptive but that the readers have nonetheless blindly followed.

Ron Richardson gives an example from *Don Quixote* to illustrate how important the mental images the readers create are. In chapter XVII, aptly entitled "In which are contained the innumerable troubles which the brave Don Quixote and his good squire Sancho Panza endured in the inn, which to his misfortune he took to be a castle", Don Quixote believes that he is staying at a castle while he is actually in an inn, probably due to the fact that he holds "all this fantasy that he had constructed as solid fact" (Cervantes 263). When it is time for him to pay for the stay, he realizes his mistake and reflects: "'I have been under a mistake all this time' [...] 'for in truth I thought it was a castle, and not a bad one'" (277). Richardson then tells his readers: "we may think the knight is deranged for seeing a castle where there was none, but what did *you*, as reader, picture?" and concludes: "'His castle is as real as [the] inn [I imagined]'" (Richardson unpag.). This, once again, emphasizes the idea that each reader's choices are as valid as that of the author or the characters.

d. Conclusion

The omnipresent interplay between Zampanò and Johnny and the interventions of the Editors emphasize that the voices in the novel are not just there to be heard. They can also be interrupted, questioned and interacted with, as Johnny himself suggests. This enables them to add their voice (in the form of their handwriting) to the novel, just like the characters have their own typeface. Although this typographical aspect marks a clear break between each

character's sections, it also accounts for a great deal of confusion regarding their identities and to what extent they temper with each others' texts.

The novel is ambivalent towards the readers, since it gives them an important freedom of action (extranoematic) and interpretation (speculative), while also destabilizing them by means of indeterminacies and contradictory elements they have to deal with, forcing them to be personally involved in order to make a selection. The active participation of the readers may result in interpretations that were not intended by Danielewski, although he is favorable to them.

The gaps he leaves are not only narratological but also physical, (ink stains or burns) where the latter could be considered a concrete representation of the former. In the same line of thought, the remediation of film enables Danielewski to leave technological gaps in *The Davidson Record*, which gives the readers space to interpret what the cameras fail to see. Danielewski also highlights the artificiality of his remediation, by questioning the limitations of images and the superiority of words, which echoes his own experience of listening to the verbal description of a film rather than seeing it. The process of remediating film by making a film the centerpiece of the novel draws attention to the differences between the inner projection of the novel and an actual film. Furthermore, this process explains why contradictions are so problematic and hard to dismiss once they have been staged and performed in the "theater of the mind".

iii.—The Minotaur at the heart of the book-labyrinth

In the introduction, I discussed the labyrinth from a mythical, as well as from a postmodern point of view. *House of Leaves* unites both in chapter IX ("The Labyrinth") and XIII ("~~The Minotaur~~"). In the former, Zampanò recounts the story of Minos, King of Knossos, who wanted the artist and craftsman Daedalus to create a maze in order to imprison the illegitimate child his wife had with a bull. Zampanò nonetheless adds, in a large key-shaped footnote⁹⁰, that "the maze really serves as a trope for repression" (Danielewski 110), on the grounds that what Minos wanted to keep at bay was *his own deformed son*: "~~King Minos did not build the labyrinth to imprison a monster but to conceal a deformed child—his child~~" (110). In that respect, the description of the Minotaur as a man with the head of a bull actually means "~~a man with a deformed face~~" (110). The content of these passages is particularly relevant given

⁹⁰ See appendix 10.

the topic of this paper and its postmodern aspect, since it departs from a mythical creature and points towards the notions of identity (and its dual nature), repression, and domestic issues.

In terms of typographical features, the color red associated with the labyrinth motif, calls to mind the red thread Ariadne gives Theseus to prevent him from getting lost in the labyrinth. The erasure could, therefore, be seen as a representation of the thread. It is nonetheless kept in black, while the text is in red, which suggests that in this case, the *words* themselves, and the story they tell, are the red thread.

The text is not only colored in red but also crossed out. In *Undoing Art*, Michel Delville suggests that “erasure is essentially a kind of rewriting” (Caws and Delville 19), even in its “most radical form” (19). Erasure is not, however, like censor: it does not “purge [the work] of its undesirable qualities [...] deleting stuff that is deemed unwanted or unsafe” (18). Delville compares erasure to the work of a sculptor, which suggests that erasure artists enhance the work rather than weaken it⁹¹.

Caws and Delville’s examples discuss artworks that are altered by those who find them, and who choose to erase parts of them. In the case of *House of Leaves*, however, Zampanò *himself* “ha[d] attempted to systematically eradicate the ‘Minotaur’ theme from throughout The Navidson Record” (Danielewski 336), and Johnny claims that he “personally prevent[ed] said eradication” (336). Johnny recovered the erased text (rather than erase it himself), but he decided to keep the erasures as they were, which highlights that Zampanò wanted that content removed. Another element that supports the arbitrariness of Johnny’s decision to keep the erasures can be found in a footnote by the editors: they comment on a part of Zampanò’s text, stating that “[f]or reasons entirely his own, Mr. Truant de-struck the last six lines in footnote 171” (137). Aside from the fact that this statement draws attention to these six lines as much as the erasures would have (although in a different way and with a different effect), this statement shows that Johnny decided to get rid of erasures in some cases and reinforces the fact that there is a reason behind keeping them in others.

The type of erasure Zampanò uses, namely a line across the words, corresponds to “a format which allows the reader total or partial access to the original work” (Caws and Delville 36), they are “placed ‘under erasure’ (*sous rature*)” (38). Delville states that this type of erasure is “reminiscent of Heidegger’s and Derrida’s typographical gestures signaling the presence of *inadequate yet necessary words*” [emphasis added] (36). It therefore allows “[the]

⁹¹ Caws, Marie-Ann and Michel Delville. *Undoing Art*. Quodlibet, 2017, p 18.

obliterated content [...] to return with a vengeance as its previous vectors of meaning must leak through” (20). In addition to leaking through, the content of the text is also foregrounded by the erasure marks. This goes back to the ambivalent status of erasure, described by Delville as “a poetic practice capitalizing upon the urge to undo and destroy while paying an ambivalent tribute to the object under attack” (29). Nathalie Aghoro expands on the effect such a formal choice has in the context of the novel: “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” (Aghoro 73).

The myth of the labyrinth and the figure of the Minotaur are central to *House of Leaves* and the key shape of the passage suggests that it is “une clé pour la compréhension et l’interprétation du roman”⁹² (Guillet 56). In that regard, the passage in purple from section i can be interpreted as Johnny’s memories being a key to understand who he is. Furthermore, the negative space on page 144 looks like a keyhole. The content of the words around it discusses the notion of truth, which Johnny calls “on one hand transcendent and lasting and on the other violent and extremely flammable” (144). His comment reinforces the idea that approaching the truth can both free the self and damage it. In that respect the ambivalent nature of the erasure enables the characters to see the truth while repressing it at the same time. Confronting the words under erasure would amount to confronting the Minotaur, one’s own deformed and repressed self. Aleksandra Bida argues that “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” (Bida 53). She therefore presents monstrosity as the other side of humanity. In the same line of thought, Santarcangeli points out that the Minotaur was initially *innocent*. He is not responsible for the “luxure de sa mère”⁹³ (15), yet he will be punished for it⁹⁴. The Minotaur is, therefore, a symbol of “l’irruption de la bestialité dans l’homme”⁹⁵ (15). This idea is reminiscent of Johnny’s fate. While he is not responsible for his mother’s “crumbling biology” (Danielewski 587), Johnny seems to have inherited it from her: his mental health deteriorates as the story goes, just like Pelafina’s letters seem more and more confused as the years go by. Furthermore, his step-father Raymond calls him “[b]east” (92), which acknowledges him as a Minotaur figure. Raymond’s disdain towards Johnny is motivated by

⁹² “a key to the understanding and the interpretation of the novel”

⁹³ “his mother’s lust.”

⁹⁴ Santarcangeli, Paolo. *Le livres des labyrinthes: Histoire d’un mythe et d’un symbole*. nrf Gallimard, 1974, p. 15.

⁹⁵ “the eruption of bestiality in mankind.”

the young boy's (he was 12 at the time) rebellious and violent behavior: "what I'm saying 'bout your behavior don't just go for here either. It goes for that school too" (93). Arguably, Johnny's attitude can be explained by his troubled family history and his life in various different foster families which he successively left for undisclosed reasons. Furthermore, Raymond beats him up and arguably does much more, as suggested by Johnny's following statement: "Raymond took me somewhere else first, where I lost half my tooth, and alot [sic] more too I guess" (93). He was the victim of a series of events and as a result, became a violent and unstable person (as an adult, Johnny takes drugs, drinks a lot of alcohol, parties substantially with his friend Lude, and has a dissolute sexual life). Two passages from chapter XIII draw attention to Johnny's duality:

Zampanò has attempted to systematically eradicate the 'Minotaur' theme throughout The Navidson Record. Big deal, except while personally preventing said eradication, I discovered a particularly disturbing coincidence. Well, what did I expect, serves me right, right? I mean that's what you get for wanting to turn **The Minotaur** into a homie... no homie at all (336-7).

Regarding the coincidence Johnny is referring to, Katherine Hayles points out that "The Minotaur' is the anagram of 'O Im he Truant'" (Hayles 798). While I agree with the fact that this is indeed the "disturbing coincidence" (Danielewski 337) Johnny is talking about, Hayles' anagram does not convince me entirely. Without going that far, if "The Minotaur" is turned into "homie" the letters that are left form the name "Truant". It means that by removing what is familiar (homie is short for homeboy, meaning a close friend), the link between "Truant" and "Minotaur" appears. This would also suggest that Truant is the unfamiliar, "unhomely" part of Johnny, his bestial side. This can be further backed up by the very meaning of the word "truant", that is to say "a student who stays away from school without permission" or "one who neglects his or her duty". Either way, the connotation of "truant" is negative. The French translator of the novel highlights the desired connotation by calling him "Errand" rather than "Truant". Christophe Claro comments:

En anglais, 'truant' renvoie à l'idée d'école buissonnière, de vagabond. En français, le mot aurait eu une tout autre dimension, un peu tonton flingueur. D'où le choix de 'errand' (=errant + errand (en anglais: mission). Et en abrégé, ça donne JE, ce qui est

pas mal non plus. Mais vous pouvez lui trouver un autre nom si vous voulez?⁹⁶ (“Les personnages”).

This comment is also of interest regarding the notion of identity in *House of Leaves*, as it highlights three important aspects related to that topic. Firstly, it emphasizes the process of identification with Truant since the initials “JE” mean “I” in French. Secondly, “errand”, as in “errand boy” conveys the idea that Johnny is carrying messages, which is in keeping with his typeface. Thirdly, changing Johnny Truant’s name is allowed, which hints at the fact that names do not really matter. Besides, it is unclear whether “Truant” is his actual last name (his father’s last name was erased from the Obituary), but it is unlikely. Its origin can be traced back to a letter by Pelafina written on April 12, 1988: “The papers all say that ‘JOHNNY IS TRUANT!’” (631). He might, therefore, have started using “Truant” as pseudonym when he received the letter. Johnny was 17 at the time and had a violent and troubled past. By claiming to be a truant, Johnny acknowledges his bestial and darker side, though the Minotaur is not complete without the “homie”, a positive side Johnny also has. Despite the fact that he is a complex and tormented character, the bits and pieces of his past remind the readers that he was initially a victim.

The second passage that hints at Johnny’s duality is written by Zampanò: “¹¹⁷~~For instance youth’s peripatetic travails in *The PXXXXXXX Poems*; a perfect example why errors should be hastily excised.~~¹⁷⁸” (138). As Johnny suggests, this footnote refers to the Pelican Poems⁹⁷ that are to be found in Appendix II-B. These poems were written by Johnny between 1988 and 1990 during a journey in New Haven and across Europe. Zampanò seems to believe that these poems should be discarded, hence the thematic link with the erasure. Alternatively, “errors” could refer to Johnny himself rather than to the poems. In this case, the echo to the myth Zampanò discusses is obvious: Johnny should have been excised just like Minos decided to lock up is deformed child inside an inextricable maze.

The duality embodied by Johnny highlights the fact that mankind is both Theseus and the Minotaur. The parallel is drawn by Penelope Reed Doob in the following comment: “What

⁹⁶ “In English, ‘truant’ refers to the idea of truancy and vagabond. In French, the word would have had a completely different meaning, a bit “tonton flingueur”, hence the choice of ‘errand’ (= errant + errand (in English: mission)). And abbreviated, that gives JE, which is not bad either, but you can find him another name if you want?”

⁹⁷ Although Jesse Simms, a member of the *House of Leaves* book club, points out that the number of “X”’s suggests that the word is 8 letters long. He states that “Pelafina” would be the best guess, although there is nothing called the “Pelafina Poems”. They may be the poems that are to be found in the appendix. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/HouseOfLeavesBookClub/search/?query=This%20is%20probably%20way%20too%20long%20a%20post%2C%20but%20what%20the%20heck%2C%20it%27s%20a%20Saturday>. Accessed 4 May 2018.

Theseus battles in the maze is the Minotaur, the man-beast, [...] the *monster within* can never be slain once and for all. All humanity is double, hybrid; all are potentially minotaurs” [emphasis added] (Doob 250). Santarcangeli also draws attention to the fact that killing the beast is not a desirable outcome: “après la victoire, un sentiment de pitié reflue dans notre cœur sensible, la pitié pour cette mort [...] et peut-être [...] un obscur sentiment de tendresse pour la vie monstrueuse que nous avons détruite en nous”⁹⁸ (Santarcangeli 15). Their comments suggest that mankind is ultimately unable to kill the beast since the beast is an integral part of it.

With regard to the role of the readers in relation to the erasures, a passage from a quote mentioned in chapter IV section ii.b is of interest. When Johnny talks about the band that read *House of Leaves* and thumbs through their copy of the book, he notices that “every [pages] [are] [...] red-lined with [...] comments” (514), which is reminiscent of the red and crossed-out Minotaur passages, although that the members of the band likely *underscored* the passages in red rather than cross them out. The point is that Zampanò’s red thread is “rescued” and “maintained” by Johnny and is prolonged by the intradiegetic readers and, who knows, even be the actual readers themselves.

Furthermore, Zampanò puts the self to the forefront when discussing the effect of the film:

~~in other words, like the house, the film itself captures us and prohibits us at the same time as it frees us, to wander, and so first misleads us, inevitably, drawing us from the us, thus, only in the end to lead us, necessarily, for where else could we have really gone?, back again to the us and hence back to ourselves”~~ (114).

This argument is in line with Hoffman’s point from the introduction that the self *is* the center of the maze. Moreover, Zampanò warns the readers: “~~Treat that place as a thing unto itself, independent of all else, and confront it on those terms. You alone must find the way. No one else can help you. Every way is different.~~” (115). This passage emphasizes how personal the journey through the labyrinth (and the novel) is and that it is independent of all else, which means that while the journey through it is personal, the place stands independently, which goes back to the idea that the house simply exists as a sort of independent “beginless” and endless entity (see chapter VI for a further discussion on that aspect).

Once again, the self is at the heart of the discussion as a dual entity embodied by Theseus and the Minotaur. The use of the Greek myth allows for a symbolical exploration of

⁹⁸ “after the victory, a sense of pity flows back into our sensitive heart, the pity for that death [...] and perhaps an [...] obscure sense of tenderness for the monstrous life we have destroyed in ourselves.”

human nature as being fundamentally dual and explains why evil cannot be slain, but endlessly confronted. The space of the labyrinth, as well as that of the book-labyrinth, enables the readers, in turn, to confront their repressed self, just like Johnny gradually confronts his past traumas. The use of red and erased words is reminiscent of Ariadne's red thread, which appears to be a "key" to understand the truth, a notion both desired and avoided, as shown by the type of erasure chosen. As mentioned in the previous section, Danielewski uses other types of erasure which generate other reading experiences. It would, therefore, be interesting to look at the novel in light of erasurism and what it means.

iv. Chapter IX, "The Labyrinth": A case study

I have argued so far that the novel contains different forms of the labyrinth motif. I shall now focus on a more precise and limited case study, namely chapter IX – aptly entitled "The Labyrinth" – since it illustrates how the form strengthens the content by conveying the labyrinth motif in diverse ways. This aspect of the novel corresponds to what Hayles calls *techartexts*, that is to say texts that "strengthen, foreground, and thematize the connections between themselves as material artifacts and the imaginative realm of verbal/semiotic signifiers they instantiate" (Hayles, *Writing Machines* 25).

The three quotations at the beginning of the chapter set the tone, and function as a sort of "warning" as to what the readers should expect: "*Hic labor ille domus et inextricabilis error – Virgil*" (Danielewski 107), "*laboriosus exitus domus – Ascensius*" (107), "*laboriosa ad entrandum – Nicholas Trevet*" (107), which mean: "'Here is the toil of that house, and the inextricable wandering' [...]. 'The house difficult of exit' [...] 'difficult to enter'" (107)⁹⁹. The chapter is indeed both hard to dive in and to complete, since the readers' attention is constantly drawn away from what they read by different means. The layout of this chapter is particularly likely to lose the readers, as some portions of the text are enclosed in boxes or are shaped like one, some are written upside down or on the side, and some are written in the margins¹⁰⁰.

In that chapter, the form and content of the footnotes also account for a great deal of confusion. Per usual, they contain Johnny's stories (whose length is likely to make the readers lose the thread of *The Navidson Record*) and the Editors' comments, but also translations,

⁹⁹ See appendix 11.

¹⁰⁰ See appendix 12.

long and mostly scientific definitions, long quotations, and seemingly endless lists. The left margin list (pp. 120-135) features architectural styles which the house *does not* look like (“For example, there is nothing about the house that even remotely resembles ...” (120)), the right margin list (pp. 120-135) features architects, the list inside the square (pp. 119-140) makes an inventory of *what is not* to be found in the labyrinth (“Not only are there no ... [...] there are no...” (119)). Additional lists include one of films *The Navidson Record* is “haunted” by, the form of delusions to which *The Navidson Record* *does not* resort, and one is concerned with documentary filmmakers. Although three of these lists, which are filled with absence – what the house is not, what is not there and what *The Navidson Record* *does not* resort to –, may appear frustrating and pointless, those that are filled with presence generate a similar feeling of pointless progression and loss of purpose. Hayles nonetheless makes an interesting difference between the lists of presence and those of absence: “Since nothing is in the House, the list of what is absent [...] is infinite” (Hayles, *Writing Machines* 123), which highlights the idea that whoever chooses to follow the path offered by the list could virtually go on for eternity and therefore never leave chapter IX, left to wander forever in “The Labyrinth”. Furthermore, some lists make the readers go backwards and thumb through pages they have already read¹⁰¹, sending them back to square one.

Aside from making the readers go backwards through pages, some footnotes provide them with numerous pages, passages or footnotes to go to by referring them to other sections of the book, which results in the readers being trapped in lengthy digressions before being able to come back where they left. Footnote 138, for instance, branches off to “chapter Six, footnote 82, Tom’s story as well as footnote 249” (Danielewski 114), that is to say a total of more or less 21 pages scattered across the novel, before returning where they left (and considering the readers do not follow more digressions suggested to them in those pages). Similarly, footnotes 176 and 179 branch off to 6 pages of Zampanò’s diary and to the 33 “Pelican Poems”. Some footnotes also lead to dead-ends, such as footnote 142, which promises a comment on Natasha’s statement: “I guess love fades pretty fast, huh?” (117), but only delivers empty lines. Another example is footnote 175, which promises “The Song of Quesada and Molino” on page 556, but only the title is displayed. The song is missing.

¹⁰¹ For instance, footnote 166 is to be found on page 134 and spans across pages 132, and 130, while footnote 167 starts on page 131 and spans across pages 133 and 135. Moreover, one has to start reading these two lists starting from page 134, since footnote 167 is to be found at the end of the first list, on page 130.

Other footnotes create an endless loop, for instance those marked by an “X” and a “K”, two of the many ground-air emergency symbols that can be found throughout the book (especially in this chapter). These footnotes, in addition to carrying a unit of text, also carry a particular – covert – meaning, which makes the reading even more intricate. “X” means “unable to proceed”¹⁰² and literally mirrors what happens to the readers who follow that footnote, since they are referred back to the “warning” at the beginning of the chapter, which reminds them that it may very well be “inextricable”. It could indeed be the case if the readers do not move past this particular footnote; otherwise they invariably find themselves “unable to proceed”¹⁰³. The “K” means “indicate direction to proceed” and is born by a footnote that initiates the topic of the myth of the labyrinth on page 109. The first footnote that leads to it is footnote 137, which reads: “[‘Doors are let into the walls at frequent intervals to suggest deceptively the way ahead and to force the visitor to go back upon the very same tracks that he has already followed in his wanderings.’ – Ed.]” (114). In this case as well, the path followed by the readers mirror the content of the footnote. While they may believe that following a footnote will make them proceed ahead, this one actually makes them go 5 pages backward. The readers are also referred back to footnote “K” by footnote “D”, which contains a reference to Saul Steinberg’s book *The Labyrinth*. This footnote emphasizes the idea that there is no real direction to proceed as the readers are trapped in a labyrinth, or alternatively that the “direction to proceed” is that of the labyrinth thematic, which is a key to understand the chapter, as well as the rest of the book.

The other symbols¹⁰⁴ are more interesting for their meanings rather than for their link to the footnote they refer the readers to. They include the symbol “JL”, which means “not understood” and which is to be found after the word “*bauplan*” (109). In the corresponding footnote, Johnny writes “So sorry” (109). The symbol enables the readers to make sense of such an elliptic remark: the sign is used to show that Johnny does not understand the word *bauplan* and subsequently apologizes for it. The “□” sign, which means “require map and compass”, is aptly placed after the sentence: “[Holloway] constantly tacks neon arrows to the wall, sprays neon paint on corners, and metes out plenty of fishing line wherever the path becomes especially complicated and twisted” (118-19), which suggests that he does so

¹⁰² A Ground-Air Emergency Code table is to be found on page 582, or see appendix 13.

¹⁰³ Regarding the two “X” on page 114, the paths of footnote the readers follow would be: “X”, 129, 137, 134, “X”; if one dismisses footnote 137: “X”, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, “X”, and if one dismisses footnote 134 and 137: “X”, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, “X”. In conclusion, the readers *have to* ignore the “X” footnotes in order to proceed ahead.

¹⁰⁴ The chapter contains a few more than those mentioned here. The most relevant were chosen in order to illustrate the argument.

because they will need directions inside the maze, or – from a darker perspective – it may foreshadow the failure of Holloway’s strategy by hinting at the fact that *despite all of his materials*, they will still “require map and compass” (582). On page 143, the symbol “**W**” accompanies a debate around photographic objectivity: “Protagonists of the institution of journalism [...] may well fight hard to maintain the hegemony of the standard photographic image – but others will see the emergence of digital imaging as a welcome opportunity [...] to deconstruct the very ideas of photographic objectivity” (143). The symbol means “require engineer”, which suggests that someone qualified would be needed to close the debate and that it may be William J. Mitchell, whose name and book *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth In The Post-Photographic Era* are mentioned in the footnote.

The use of ground-air emergency symbol is far from being innocent and calls to mind a character from the novel not yet mentioned in this paper, namely Johnny’s biological father, Donnie, who was a pilot. Pelafina calls flying “his only real love” (605) to which he devoted almost his entire life before a heart condition prevented him from flying. What better way to represent him, therefore, but with symbols related to flying. This aspect is in line with the use of a particular typeface to manifest the presence of a character, except this time, Danielewski uses symbols.

Danielewski leaves more playful codes such as horizontal acrostics (which I have already mentioned in chapter IV section i). He also uses anagrams, like the name of the fictional scholar Nupart Jhunisdakazecriddle which becomes “a dark child and unjust prize”¹⁰⁵. The presence of “Jhuni” suggests that the anagram concerns Johnny. As mentioned in the previous section, he did develop a dark side as a result of events he was in no way responsible for. Furthermore, the word “riddle” inside the scholar’s last name illustrates Danielewski’s self-reflexive tendency as the riddle draws attention to its status as riddle.

The chapter also contains contradictory information that contributes to making the readers feel confused. Johnny claims: “This gets at a Lissitzky and Escher theme [...]. Pages 30, 356 and 441, however, kind of contradict this. Though not really” (113). When he comments his translation of Derrida: “The best I can do” (112), it is contradicted by him crediting Alan Bass for the translation. Even the references to books are sometimes contradictory, such as that of Zampanò’s “published

¹⁰⁵ As suggested by Michael J. Simpson, a member of the official *House of Leaves* book club: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/HouseOfLeavesBookClub/search/?query=anagram%20nupart>. Accessed 3 May 2018.

thought on the trope of repression in the labyrinth myth”: “~~Sonny Won’t Wait Flyer, Santa Cruz, 1968~~” (110), which becomes “~~Sonny Will Wait Flyer, Santa Cruz, 1969~~” (111).

The fact that the formal organization of the chapter reflects and conveys its theme is not specific to Chapter IX and can also be found, for instance, in chapter VI, whose topic is the animals. In that chapter, the notes are, for the first and only time, *endnotes*. It is stated that “the house played a very small part in both their histories” (74), since the animals are unable to walk in the maze (they directly end up in the garden). It therefore makes sense that the notes are endnotes rather than footnotes: the endnotes are much clearer and much less confusing than the footnotes in *House of Leaves* can be, just like the animals do not face the confusing presence of the maze and the choices that go with it. Furthermore, these endnotes do not branch off to any other chapters or passages. Like the animals that end up in the garden, the readers end up in a similarly enclosed space thanks to the endnotes which literally mark the clear end of the chapter. With this in mind, a study of the form and content of each chapter would be interesting to develop. The fact that the form reinforces the content heightens the experience of the readers, who are not only concerned with what they read, but also the way in which what they read is organized on the pages and how it affects their approach of the chapter. In this case, the labyrinthine nature conveyed by the layout, large units of text, and seemingly endless lists, as well as by the complex and inextricable system of footnotes contribute to immersing the readers in the story of chapter IX, which would arguably have much less impact if it was not for its formal organization. Furthermore, formal elements allow for new meaning to be created, such as the symbols used for the footnotes, which convey a sense of emergency situation, carry complementary meanings and embody a character in a subtle way. Other codes (acrostics and anagrams) allow for the discovery of hidden knowledge, which reinforces the mysterious and labyrinthine aspect of the chapter, as well as the impression that the search for new paths of interpretation could be endless.

v. Conclusion

The goal of this chapter on typography was to discuss the different ways in which Danielewski’s typographical choices have an impact on the readers’ experience of the novel, and how the form can strengthen the content. The use of colors, erasures, symbols, different typefaces, peculiar layouts, etc. enable him to generate covert meanings that are not readily available but that require interpretation and reflection on the readers’ part. These choices

contribute to making the novel complex and labyrinthine, as well as making it more interactive: there is something to be found beyond the words. Danielewski's creation and development of the signiconic in his collection *The Familiar* show a real interest in alternative perspectives on writing and alternative ways to create meaning, which emphasizes once more that he seeks to celebrate the many possibilities books offer.

V. Intertextuality and Pelafina “Livre [sic]”, the human library.

“Still I think of her. Eppure si muove. Or as I like to translate it: yet she moves. And so she does. She moves me still”—The Whalestoe Letters

i. Intertextuality and transtextuality

In the *New Critical Idiom* on intertextuality, Graham Allen claims that the term “intertextuality” is “one of the most commonly used and misused terms in contemporary critical vocabulary” (Allen 2). I shall not, therefore, attempt to offer “a fundamental definition of the term” (2) either, since “[s]uch a project” Allen claims, “would be doomed to failure” (2). Rather, I will look at Gerard Genette's typology of *transtextuality*, which he defines as “all that sets the text in relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (101). Although Riffaterre's starting point is similar, (he defines it as “the corpus of texts the reader may legitimately connect with the one before his eyes, that is, the text brought to mind by what he is reading” (Riffaterre, “Syllepsis” 626)), his approach is harder to apply to *House of Leaves* for two reasons. The first one is that he excludes quotations and allusions from his definition of the intertext. Both are nonetheless important aspects of the novel that cannot simply be discarded upfront. The second reason is that Riffaterre considers the reader's identification of intertextual content “natural”: the reader is “not at liberty to avoid” (Riffaterre, “Intertextuality” 781) this task, he argues, “since it is dictated by gaps in the fabric of the text or by linguistic anomalies” (781). However, as Lee Libby argues:

[R]eading, let alone responding to the syllepses, gaps and ungrammaticalities which Riffaterre deconstructs, required much more than the senses nature gave me. The connections are not obvious and only a person with time, education, inclination and interest in the subject could or would make an attempt to find the conclusions Riffaterre suggests as valid [emphasis added] (Libby unpag.).

It is not difficult to agree with Libby's objection to Riffaterre's claim. It could nonetheless be argued that their viewpoints are not mutually exclusive on the condition that Riffaterre's claim concerns the *ideal recipient*, while that of Libby corresponds to the *presumed addressee*. All in all, intertextuality relies on the readers' willing and active participation, as well as on their capacity to see that such or such element from the book branches off to an intertext.

Be that as it may, intertextuality is – no matter how we define it – an important part of the reading experience of *House of Leaves*. Graham Allen argues that “[r]eading [...] [is] a process of moving between texts. Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from independent text into a network of textual relations. *The text becomes the intertext* [emphasis added] (Allen 1). In relation to *House of Leaves*, the fact that the text merges with the intertext is echoed by Joseph B. Noah, who argues: “Following the allusions to more and more texts led me to believe that this novel was really made up entirely of other texts. [...] I was inclined to say that this text didn't exist at all” (Noah 5). While I see how one can reach such a conclusion, I would rather subscribe to Graham Allen explanation that “[i]n the Postmodern epoch, theorists often claim [...] [that] every artistic object is [...] clearly assembled from bits and pieces of already existent art” (Allen 5). In that respect, *House of Leaves*' content is in many ways, on a hermeneutic and metaphysical level, a commentary on the postmodern creative process, since Johnny assembles *House of Leaves* based on the bits and pieces he found in Zampanò's trunk. There are even two sections in the appendixes called “**Bits**” (541) and “... **and Pieces**” (548), which foregrounds them as an integral part of the existence of the novel. Rather than discussing *House of Leaves* as a text that does not exist without its intertext, I will approach it as a “beginless” and endless work that inscribes itself in an endless rhizome of texts.

Intertextuality is also an important aspect to mention within the scope of this essay insofar as it returns us to the novel's labyrinthine and non-linear quality. In that respect, Laurent Jenny argues:

What is characteristic of intertextuality, is that it introduces a new way of reading which destroys the linearity of the text. *Each intertextual reference is the occasion for an alternative*: either one continues reading, taking it only as a segment like any other,

or else one turns to the source text, carrying out a sort of intellectual anamnesis where the intertextual reference appears like a paradigmatic element that has been displaced, deriving from a forgotten structure [emphasis added] (Jenny qtd. in Allen 113-14).

Jenny's use of "anamnesis"¹⁰⁶ suggests a link between the mind (and more specifically memories) and intertextuality. The former could be considered an "inner" library, while the latter can manifest itself as an actual, concrete library. Both libraries can be linked to the labyrinth motif: intertextual references create a seemingly endless rhizome of texts that can, as Riffaterre states, "[t]heoretically [...] go on developing forever, [...] it will expand as [the reader's] readings expand and as more texts are published that can be linked up to the original point whence these associated memories took their departure" (Riffaterre, "Syllepsis" 626). As for the mind, the Old English word "mase" (Doob 98) was initially used to refer to a state of mind of "confusion and bewilderment" (98). In that respect, the character of Pelafina is the perfect embodiment of that intellectual anamnesis, as she assimilated her concrete library so much it became an integral part of her communication pattern and of her mind ("inner" library). It is important to mention that Jenny's notion of "source text" can be broadened to any piece of information that the text bears a link to, even non-literary ones. I will illustrate this argument in section iii of this chapter, where non-fictional elements add more depth to the reading experience of the novel.

As for now, I will illustrate how each category of Genette's typology of transtextuality is instantiated in *House of Leaves*. Rather than trying to draw an exhaustive list of these instances, each will be illustrated with one example in order to show the extent to which *House of Leaves* is shaped by its use of intertextuality. According to Gerard Genette, transtextuality is made of 5 subcategories: (i) intertextuality ("a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts' and [...] 'the actual presence of one text within another'" (Genette qtd. in Allen 101)), (ii) paratextuality ("the threshold of the text" which "frames and at the same time constitutes the text". It is "the sum of the peritext¹⁰⁷ and the epitext¹⁰⁸" (Allen 103)), (iii) metatextuality ("when a text takes up a relation of 'commentary' to another text" (102)), (iv) hypertextuality ("any relationship uniting a text B ([...] the hypertext) to an earlier text A ([...] the hypotext)" (Genette qtd. in Allen 107-8) that is not a relationship of commentary but rather a relationship where the hypotext is "a major source of

¹⁰⁶ For Plato, it was the "recollection of the Ideas, which the soul had known in a previous existence, especially by means of reasoning."

¹⁰⁷ The peritext consists of "elements such as titles, chapter titles, prefaces and notes" (Allen 103).

¹⁰⁸ The epitext consists of "elements – such as interviews, publicity announcements, reviews by and addresses to critics, private letters and other authorial and editorial discussions – 'outside' of the text in question" (Allen 103)

signification” (Allen 108) for the hypertext), and (v) architextuality (“the reader’s expectations, and thus their reception of a work” (Genette qtd. in Allen 102)).

The epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter are an example of “intertextuality” (i), although the source text sometimes seems to be a topic of debate. Consider the following discussion taking place in the footnotes:

³²²“With his nightcaps and the tatters of his dressing-gown he patches up the gaps in the structure of the universe” – which he quoted in full to his wife, as well as alluded to in chapter Six of the *Interpretation of Dreams* and in a letter to Jung dated February 25th, 1908.³³³
³³³Heine?³³⁴
³³⁴Freud. – Ed.¹⁰⁹
(Danielewski 353).

Zampanò translates a quote from Heinrich Heine, and states that Heine quoted it a few times on different occasions, but Johnny seems skeptical about Zampanò’s statement. The Editors then confirm his doubt: the quote translated by Zampanò is Heine’s, but Freud is the one who alluded to it in his letter to Jung, as well as in the sixth chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The point of this discussion is that, by openly questioning one of Zampanò’s claims, Johnny draws attention to the fact that some citations could be wrongly attributed to authors. It is far from surprising considering that, as I have already argued, the point in *House of Leaves* is not to identify what is true and what is fabricated, but rather to think about how it affects the reading experience and contributes to the novel’s puzzling nature. Ron Richardson explains the effect of quoting: “[a]uthors quote other authors to give their work more authority, as the writers they quote quoted others, and so on and so on in an endless deferment of authority” (Richardson unpag.). He gives an example from *Don Quixote*, where the author’s friend “recommends that he just adds notes whenever certain words appear” (Richardson unpag.), and eventually quotes Horace instead of Aesop. This last comment draws attention to the fact that authority sometimes supersedes authenticity. Zampanò engages in a similar process by quoting a large number of sources to give his work authority, while most of them do not exist. The point is that “[t]he accuracy or even relevance of the quote does not matter [...] so much as its scholarly association” (Richardson unpag.). Just like Cervantes, Zampanò can be said to be “parodying the convention of referring to other works and authors, but [...] also [to be] working within that tradition” (Richardson unpag.).

¹⁰⁹ See appendix 14.

As I mentioned before, the parody of academic writing by Zampanò will not be discussed at length in this paper although it would deserve an essay in its own right. Consider the following passage as a means of illustrating that major aspect of Zampanò's manuscript: "Dr. Iben Van Pollit in his book *The Incident* claims the entire house is a physical incarnation of Navidson's psychological pain: 'I often wonder how things might have turned out if Will Navidson had, how shall we say, done a little bit of house cleaning.'" (Danielewski 21). Zampanò comments Pollit's claim as follows:

Regrettably, Pollit's proclivity to pun and write jokes frequently detracts from his otherwise lucid analysis. *The Incident* [...] is a remarkable example of brilliant scholarship and exemplary synthesis of research and thought. There are also some pretty good illustrations. Unfortunately almost everything he concludes is wrong (21).

This comment is one of the many that can cause the readers to lose their bearings. Pollit's approach of the maze seems at first rather sensible and has actually been explored by many (real) scholars. However, Zampanò's comment destabilizes the reader who is eager to believe in Pollit's theory. Not only does he show skepticism, but he also praises Pollit's thought, research and illustrations (which, considering what follows, is likely to be ironic), only to claim that what Pollit concludes is *almost* wrong. The "almost" adds a last twist, suggesting that not everything he said should be discarded, and of course, Zampanò does not mention what Pollit concluded *right*. If this passage, like many others, proves unsettling for the readers, it is especially frustrating for scholars. By (almost) completely invalidating Pollit's theory, Zampanò (and through him Danielewski) also calls into question the work of the scholars who came up with a similar theory.

Regarding the paratext (ii), Allen argues that some "paratextual elements [such as the publisher, the publishing date and the purpose of the work] also help establish the text's intentions: how it should be read, how it should not be read" (Allen 104). *House of Leaves* is, according to one of its peritextual elements "A Novel", which, as I discussed previously, is misleading given what *House of Leaves* turns out to be. Moreover, *House of Leaves* is called a "terrifying story" by the flap of the novel and is often classified as a "horror story"¹¹⁰, although – if it is – it is a rather unconventional one. As for the different editions, the fact that the "Black & White" version of the novel (which is the first printed edition), is preceded by the "Incomplete" one that was released on the internet, gives the readers the impression that

¹¹⁰ On the website Goodreads, "horror" is the genre in which most users put *House of Leaves* (3510 users). The second genre is "fantasy" with 670 users ("House of Leaves > Top Shelves." *Goodreads*, <https://www.goodreads.com/work/shelves/856555>. Accessed 2 April 2018.).

what they read is not exactly what was first intended by Danielewski, and make them wonder what has been changed between the two versions. The unconventional disclaimer that I already discussed is also an element from the peritext that contributes to an uncanny feeling of defamiliarization the readers experiences when reading *House of Leaves*, since the idea that some elements may be “set in the future” (Danielewski iv) inscribes the novel in a temporality similar to ours, not limited to the book’s time span. With regard to the anamnesis mentioned above, it implies that reading the book does not only entail the rediscovery of past knowledge, but also the discovery of future ones. Genette also considers “dedications, inscriptions, epigraphs and prefaces” (105) as a “major peritextual field [...] which [...] can have a major effect upon the interpretation of a text” (105). The dedication has already been mentioned previously with regard to its uncanny nature and seemingly unwelcoming content. Instead of stating clearly who the target audience is, it simply claims that “this is not for you” (ix). A novel, if printed, published and sold is usually *for* the readers. If not, it asks the question of to whom it is addressed¹¹¹.

Genette also makes a clear distinction between “*autographic*” (“by the author” (Allen 106)) and “*allographic*” (“by someone other than the author, such as an editor or publisher” (106)) paratextual elements. This distinction is called into question by Danielewski with the figure of the Editors. Their name suggests an allographic instance while they turn out to be part of the narrative of *House of Leaves* as characters in their own right. Their comments are, therefore, autographic. In the case of the French translator his status is even more ambiguous as he is an actual person, but plays along with the novel as if he were an autographic instance. This argument is similar to Hayles’ insistence on the effect of the check mark in the margin of page 97: “the page margins into which the check mark intrudes exist in a space contiguous with our world and *House of Leaves* as a book we can hold in our hands” (Hayles, *Writing Machines* 129).

Danielewski’s treatment of the paratext is, therefore, at odds with Genette’s belief that “the single most important aspect of paratextuality is ‘to ensure for the text a destiny consistent with the author’s purpose’” (107). It can, however, be argued that the ambiguous nature of the paratext in *House of Leaves* does exactly what Genette describes, since the author’s purpose, in this case, is to make the readers question notions such as fiction/reality, reliability/unreliability, objectivity/subjectivity. In a sense, Danielewski, just like Zampanò, subverts narrative conventions as much as he works with them. As for the epitext, it is without

¹¹¹ Danielewski nonetheless changes the dedication to “This one is for you” when signing the novel. See appendix 15.

a doubt the best medium to grasp Danielewski's true intentions and personality. The interviews and book club interventions that are included throughout this paper give the readers a great deal of background information about the author and his work.

This paper is but one example of the numerous instances of metatexts (iii) related to *House of Leaves*, though the main form of metatextuality in relation to the novel remains *House of Leaves* itself. Zampanò's section is a lengthy commentary on *The Navidson Record* (although *The Navidson Record* is a film rather than a text). Johnny's commentaries on Zampanò's commentaries are also linked together by a relation of metatextuality, and so are the Editors' commentaries on Johnny's commentaries. Valérie Dupuy argues that "[c]e dispositif est poussé très loin par Danielewski, qui propose par exemple des notes sur des notes"¹¹² (Dupuy 44). Commenting a footnote suggests that anything can be commented, even a commentary. Once again, Danielewski highlights the metatextual nature of his book and draws attention to the process of commenting a work, by creating a work that is itself a commentary to begin with. Interestingly, the notion of metatextuality is called into question by Dupuy's statement that "[l]e processus de prolifération textuelle semble infini, comme si *La Maison des feuilles* était devenue [...] une sorte de piège dans lequel tout critique tombe infailliblement à son tour"¹¹³ (44). This implies that there is nothing outside the realm of *House of Leaves* and that even my own attempt at writing a metacommentary of the novel will be vain. Dupuy explains: "[Les] universitaires tentés d'écrire un article sur le roman passent tous 'de l'autre côté du miroir', et basculent à l'intérieur du roman"¹¹⁴ (44), which she explains by the fact that "[l]e livre porte en lui une logique [...] qui voudrait qu'il soit infini"¹¹⁵ (44). This assessment implies that even the only solution for the readers to be above the house, namely to write about it in an attempt to seize it, is vain, since Danielewski (through the fictitious scholars) has already anticipated this approach and, therefore, included it inside his labyrinthine novel. This goes back to Nele Bemong's statement that "Danielewski seems to make the task of the literary theorist redundant" (Bemong qtd. in Greve 89).

The most obvious hypotext (iv) of *House of Leaves* would be the myth of the labyrinth. Meechan also suggests "Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*" (Meechan xii), since he argues that the whale can be compared to the house. He states: "it seems as if Danielewski has

¹¹² "this strategy is taken quite far by Danielewski, who adds footnotes on footnotes."

¹¹³ "the process of textual proliferation seems infinite, as if *House of Leaves* had become [...] a sort of trap in which all the critics inevitably fall."

¹¹⁴ "Academics tempted to write an article about the novel all go through the looking glass, and end up inside the novel."

¹¹⁵ "according to the novel's logic, it is infinite."

intended his house to be the text's core, open to interpretation, in much the same way as Herman Melville's white whale in *Moby Dick*" (35) and alludes to the "plethora of mentions of whales within the text" (36), and most notably The Whalestoe Institute. Zampanò also alludes to the whale from the Biblical Book of Jonah: "((((((((((((((((Jonah in the belly of the beast))))))))))))))" (Danielewski 545). Interestingly, the coming together of Jonah's and Achab's whale is mentioned by Gregory Maguire in the reviews of *House of Leaves* on page i: "If you can imagine that [...] the whale that swallows Jonah is Moby-Dick, you'll begin to appreciate what this book is about" (Danielewski i). The biblical tale is echoed by Herman's novel, which, in turn is echoed by *House of Leaves*. Together with Maguire's comment, it suggests that the three versions of the whale that the three stories offer are but one and the same, that they are but echoes from one single origin, which is in line with the condensation of identity mentioned in chapter I, as well as the possible monophony of *House of Leaves* that will be discussed in this chapter, section iv.

As for architextuality (v), it "includes generic, modal, thematic and figurative expectations about texts, although, as Genette warns his readers, the five types of transtextuality [...] are not 'separate and absolute categories without any reciprocal contact or overlapping'" (Genette qtd. in Allen 103). Thus we come back to elements that have already been mentioned in relation to previous categories, such as the indication "A Novel", or the fact that *House of Leaves* is often identified as a horror story.

In the following sections, I will focus in more depth on The Whalestoe Letters, as it is a manifestation of Pelafina's intertextual mode of communication.

ii. The Whalestoe Letters

Pelafina's approach of intertextuality mirrors the labyrinth motif, and represents a way for her to escape her condition as a mentally-ill woman at The Three Attic Whalestoe Institute. In that respect, the labyrinthine library she creates is more homely to her than the madhouse in which she lives, as it enables her to "to exceed the boundary of herself" (Danielewski, *The Whalestoe* xiv). Further evidence of the parallel between her mind and a complex and labyrinthine building can be found in the following extracts. In her letter from March 15, 1984, Pelafina refers to her Old English "phase" as "this Old English *Manor*" [emphasis added] (Danielewski 596) and talks about "the *chambers* of [her] soul" [emphasis added] (596). In a letter from November 6, 1984, Pelafina talks about a "light-shattered idea of

[hers]” (Danielewski, *The Whalestoe* 19) that “refuses to part” (19) and that “makes rooms. Rooms upon rooms upon hundreds of rooms full of undistinguishable remains” (19). This suggests that while Pelafina increases the size of her inner labyrinth like a Daedalus figure, it can also be expanded by the Minotaur that haunts her. This assessment is in line with the ambivalent nature of the labyrinth which, in this case, enables Pelafina to avoid what haunts her, but that also allows what haunts her to fill the labyrinth she created.

Considering that the letters are meant for her son, who was 11 when the correspondence begins, it comes across as odd that she fills them with many references to literature and includes languages he likely does not understand (Spanish, Italian, French, Old English). She therefore intends to send Johnny “several books, including a Concise Oxford English Dictionary”¹¹⁶ (Danielewski 591), and realizes that “[t]he volume of poetry may be too advanced for [him]” but that “in time [his] own curiosity will unlock their secrets” (591). She is also fully aware that “[i]t will take more than [his] dictionary” (595) to translate the Old English verses from the December 24, 1983 letter, and urges Johnny to “revisit here once [he has] got some Old English under [his] belt” (595). These statements are also likely addressed to the readers, as her countless references need thorough research, which goes back to Libby’s comment that “[t]he connections are not obvious and only a person with time, education, inclination and interest in the subject” (Libby unpag.) would try to make them. For Pelafina, these countless literary references enable her to create a new reality, one she controls and in which she appears sane (for the most part at least), in order to escape The Whalestoe Institute, as well as the part of her mind that haunts her, as suggested by Walden D. Whyrta’s wife. He writes: “‘She lives in a prison though,’ my wife [...] added. [...] Waheeda didn’t mean The Whalestoe” (Danielewski, *The Whalestoe* xi-xii).

Pelafina’s mind is filled with literary references to the extent that she is even assimilated to a book by the spelling mistake made by the Institute director in his letter addressed to Johnny about his mother’s death: “Again we wish to extend our sympathies over the death of Ms. Livre. [sic]” (Danielewski 643) her actual last name spells “Lièvre”, not “Livre”, which means “book” in French, as if the death of her body meant that all that remains is her labyrinthine and literary mind, her own house of leaves. This claim is reinforced by Walden D. Whyrta’s personification of Pelafina’s writing, as if her mind had a life of its own. He speaks of her letters as follows: “She has been for all these years mine. Now though I see

¹¹⁶ Coincidentally, *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, or *COED* in abbreviated, is the anagram of “code”, which Pelafina also “sends” Johnny.

she is more than mine and should rightly be returned to those who have known her as well as to those who now for the first time have made her acquaintance and desire to know her more” (Danielewski, *The Whalestoe* xiii).

The reason why Pelafina’s literary references have become part of her communication pattern is because it helps her address past traumas indirectly. Let us first consider how Pelafina puts a message across. In her letter from May 9, 1983, she writes: “Your letter arrived last week [...] and I’m still a fountain. Who would have thought such a young boy would succeed where Ponce de León failed?” (Danielewski 591). Instead of simply telling Johnny that she cried upon receiving his letter, she uses the word “fountain”, along with a reference to Spanish conquistador Juan Ponce de León, which refers to the Fountain of Youth he was believed to be looking for but never found. Another example lies in the letter from March 15, 1984, where she talks about “Marine Man Raymond”, Johnny’s foster father. She had already referred to him earlier using a Latin sentence: “qui patriam potestatem usurpavit” (593) (which means: “He who exercised his patriarchal authority”). After she hears about Raymond breaking Johnny’s nose and snapping his teeth, she writes: “As it was raining and thundering, the Director claims I outdid Lear” (596). Pelafina is referring to King Lear’s rant against his daughters as a way to mirror her own anger, which suggests something of a tragic and theatrical rage. She asks Johnny: “Does he [Raymond] not know the fate of Claudius or Ugolino?” (598). Claudius is Hamlet’s stepfather in the eponymous play, which the young man seeks to take revenge on, and who dies at the end of the play. Ugolino is a character in Dante’s *Inferno*, who is condemned for treason and left to starve to death (and who eventually ate his own sons). Both characters symbolize a father figure’s treason and cruelty and Pelafina obviously wishes Raymond to have a fate that is similar to these two corrupt father figures. She adds: “I would like nothing more than to tear out the liver of your purported protector and feed it to him with a hiss. He could semper fi that meal all the way to Hades” (596-7), which is Pelafina’s way to say “go to hell”, though she uses references to the Greek mythology in order to express it. The use of “semper fi” (which is short for “Semper Fidelis” and means “always faithful” in Latin) is apt, to say the least, since it is the motto of the US Marines, of which Raymond is a member. She claims that she “would like nothing more than to tear out [his] liver” (597), which is a reference to Prometheus’s ordeal in the Greek mythology: he was tied to a rock by Zeus and condemned to have his liver eaten everyday by an eagle. She concludes her diatribe against Raymond by cursing him: “So written, so done. This curse is cast. Fuit Ilium” (597) (which means, “Troy is no more”), foreseeing the fall of

the man who hurt her son. Johnny comments on Raymond's death, which happened less than a year after Pelafina "cursed" him, in March:

Coincidence gave an improbable curse new resonance. Cancer had settled on Raymond's bones, riddling his liver and pancreas with holes. He had nowhere to run and it literally ate him alive (325).

Pelafina curses Raymond on the 15th of March, also known as the Ides of March¹¹⁷, the day of Julius Caesar's assassination by his step-son, Brutus, which is similar to Claudius's fate. Coincidentally, Cancer is also Johnny's zodiac sign, which is him symbolically killing Raymond. These are but a few of the numerous references Pelafina makes in her letters, which would be an interesting topic of discussion in itself. She also refers to, among others, Goethe, the Bible, and Sylvia Plath.

What haunts Pelafina is also indirectly alluded to in her letters. In the preface, Whyrta writes about the letters: "Fortunately while rounding the perimeter of that large pyre [...] including obviously stacks of paper [...] *I caught sight of her and retrieved her and kept her*" [emphasis added] (Danielewski, *The Whalestoe* xii), which is the answer to Pelafina's call for help in her letter from December 6, 1986: "Busca me, cuida me, requerda me" (618) ("find me, protect me, remember me"). Pelafina's Spanish plea is also to be found in Poe¹¹⁸'s song "Spanish Doll", along with other useful information that help understand the bigger picture. The title of the song, "Spanish Doll", is to be found in Pelafina's letter from September 30, 1985, saying: "I have found the scissors to snip the black ribbons which [...] blind me like the old Spanish doll I once guarded in the gables of a fantastic attic where we both awaited our execution" (610). She refers to black ribbons once more, in a letter from December 26, 1987: "Yack! Again these dark ribbons wrap me up like a present, a cHrIStmas present, this present, never found, never opened. Tossed like a doll. Spanish" (626). The spoken sentences from Poe's song shed light on the potential meaning of such a strange allusion to an "execution":

Man: and here is father and lovely daughter, shot down in her mistaken flight... Unaware yet how her life will be...affected by this... experience. [...] Girl: Mommy, how come you cry? Man: While what was really happening in the years of her childhood... [...] Man: Perhaps that is where the real story is: in her family house ("Spanish Doll – Poe").

¹¹⁷ As suggested by a member of the MZD Forum.

¹¹⁸ Anne Decatur, Danielewski's younger sister who made an album called *Haunted*, which is considered a companion work to the novel.

These words suggest that the little girl in the song was abused by her father, as hinted by the capitalized “HIS” from the letter in “cHrIStmas present”, and the “present never found, never opened” (626), could, in the same line of thought be what the father promised the little girl to lure her to go to the attic. The abuse might therefore be the “execution”, Pelafina refers to. Moreover, she states, in her November 3, 1988 letter: “[s]ometimes [...] I wonder if my problems originate from elsewhere. In my own childhood, for example” (636). She also says: “To me, my mother only said ‘That won’t do.’” (69), which suggests that she also had a difficult relationship with her. Moreover, her reference to a poem by Emily Dickinson in the same letter gives further evidence that Pelafina is repressing something tragic: “[The Director] quotes Emily Dickinson, saying I cover the abyss with a trance so my memories can manage a way around it – this ‘pain so utter’” (Danielewski 636). It therefore suggests that Pelafina’s madness protects her from undesirable memories and further reinforces the idea that she creates a maze of words to protect herself. The two allusions to black ribbons are contrasted by the pink ribbons she mentions in her June 26, 1984 letter: “Your sentences cast spells. Once again, you’ve turned your mother into a silly schoolgirl. Like Hawthorne’s Faith, I put pink ribbons in my hair” (Danielewski 599). Faith and the pink ribbons refer to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story “Young Goodman Brown”. Faith’s pink ribbons characterize her and materialize her sweet and innocent personality, hence Pelafina’s comparison with a schoolgirl. Faith nonetheless loses her pink ribbons in the woods, which causes Goodman Brown to lose faith/Faith since he suspects that she lost her innocence: “something fluttered lightly down through the air and caught on the branch of a tree. The young man seized it, and beheld a pink ribbon. ‘My Faith is gone!’ cried he” (Hawthorne 12). The corruption of Faith’s innocence can be paralleled with Pelafina’s dark past and loss of innocence at a young age. The fact that Johnny’s letter brings back the pink ribbons, however, suggests that he is the only person that can save her and make her feel better.

As Pelafina seems to have recollection of her past, “dell’oro” (in gold) becomes “deloro” (626). The full sentence reads: “Dell’oro, del oro, deloro” (626). The first two words are respectively Italian and Spanish for “in gold”, which she already used when she spoke about Johnny (“Bambino dell’oro” (592)). From a typographical point of view, these three words look like a transition/transformation: Dell’oro first loses “l’”, then the space between “del” and “oro” disappears, leaving the nonsensical word “deloro”. If the last step was left for the readers to complete, it may mean that the ultimate transformation is the switch between

the “e” and the final “o”, which results in “dolore”, meaning pain. The two ends of the transformation – dell’oro and dolore – indicate the constant back and forth movement Pelafina seems to go through, as hope becomes despair and the other way around.

Pelafina’s letters are filled with sorrow, which she also expresses orally in a conversation with Walden D. Wyrhta. He recalls the encounter in the foreword to *The Whalestoe Letters*, which reveals that she had the same approach of conversation as she had of letter writing, namely learned and nebulous: “she spoke at length about Copernicus and Lear, the legacy of Atreus and someone named Mulligan who apparently was quite plump, which is a reference to something I never quite got” (Danielewski, *The Whalestoe* xiv). Wyrhta then reflects upon what would be his last meeting with Pelafina: “I had no way of expecting that this would be our last chat. Nor can I claim I suspected then the level of grief and sorrow she had already wordlessly communicated to me” (Danielewski, *The Whalestoe* xiv). Pelafina did not explicitly express her grief and sorrow, which is probably what Wyrhta means by “wordlessly”, yet she did communicate them, by means of her references to Lear, Copernicus, and Atreus. At the end of the play, King Lear loses his favorite and faithful daughter, Cordelia and subsequently dies of grief:

And my poor fool is hang’d! No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou’lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never!
Pray you, undo this button: thank you, sir.
Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,
Look there, look there!
[Dies
(Shakespeare 915).

The parallel between Pelafina and Lear might suggest that she too lost a child. The reversal of gender (a father losing a daughter becomes a mother losing a son) suggests that she “lost” Johnny (which may also be read quite literally since many speculate that Johnny is, in fact, dead). The fact that Cordelia went to France is initially due to the fact that Lear rejects her and gives all that he has to his two other cunning daughters. This adds an idea of guilt, suggesting that Pelafina lost Johnny because of something she did. After all, she was locked up at The Whalestoe because she tried to strangle him: “[I] put my hands around your throat. [...] you eyes became glassy and wandered away. Your grip loosened and you wet yourself” (Danielewski, *The Whalestoe* 58-9). The reference to the astronomer Copernicus, who is famous for proving the heliocentric nature of the solar system, is to be paired with Pelafina’s

many references to Johnny as her sun, the center of her world, emphasizing how important he is/was to her. She calls him “her only guiding light” (606), “my sun in winter” (617), “[m]y dear and only spark of hope” (624). Johnny is Pelafina’s light in the darkness of her existence. The figure of the sun, however, is ambivalent as it can also burn. In that respect, Pelafina’s statement: “my love for you burns so brightly” (636), suggests something of a possibly excessive love. It has already been mentioned that her love for Johnny made her attempt to kill him: “But it was love just the same Johnny” (630), Pelafina argues, when she eventually recounts her attempted murder and tells Johnny that she tried to strangle him in the name of love. Wyrhta even mentions that “the recantation [*Eppur si muove*] fixed the sun again at the center of our solar system, certainly a view in keeping with her own personal order of the universe, especially taking into account the importance to her of her son” (xv). Regarding the reference to the “legacy of Atreus”, the house of Atreus in the Greek mythology was known to be doomed for five generations after Tantalus, Atreus’ grandfather fed the gods his own son, Pelops, which might suggest that Pelafina’s household was doomed as well: she lost her husband in a road accident, she lost her son (who is either dead or away from her and possibly because of her), and she is locked up in a mental institution where, according to her letters, she is raped by some unknown people. Furthermore, the fact that she is being raped “not every day, not every week, maybe not even every month” (620) may suggest that it happens regularly but over a longer time span, maybe going back to her childhood, as suggested previously.

The letters are a beautiful, moving, and heartbreaking piece of literature, whose tenderness and sorrow look as authentic and heartfelt as can be. Just as the rest of the novel, however, authenticity soon comes to be called into question. Danielewski suggests that, “[i]n the case of th[e] letter[s] from Johnny’s mother, of course, someone must have intervened [...] by physically altering or representing in some way her original letter[s]” (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 120), which means that they were (to a certain extent) tempered with before they reached the readers. Moreover, a short disclaimer before the letters read: “Mr. Truant wished to make known that though some names here were not deleted many were changed” (Danielewski 586). The names in questions (at least those she mentions in her letters, as well as the ones mentioned in the Director’s two letters to Johnny) are “Johnny”, “Raymond”, “Donnie”, “David J. Draines” (The “New” Director), “Pelafina Heather Lièvre”, and “John” (used once by Pelafina and once by the director to refer to Johnny). The fact that Pelafina refers to a quote by Sylvia Plath by calling her Victoria Lucas

(which was her penname) hints at the use of pseudonym and corrupt identity, and further calls into question that notion within the scope of the novel.

iii. References to non-fiction

While the function of intertextuality in Pelafina's case is mostly a way to express herself indirectly, there is another way in which the use of references may shed light on the novel (or parts thereof), and allow for a better understanding of some passages. The example I will develop here comes from chapter VI "The Animals", and although it does not rely on literary references, it still refers the readers to another frame of reference which allows them to discover the deeper meaning of some passages. Zampanò's chapter VI (without taking Johnny's comments into account) is fairly short – only two pages long –, and mostly describes the behavior of the cat and the dog of the Navidsons in relation to the house and its strange transformations. Zampanò states: "One thing [...] is certain: the house played a very small part in both their histories" (Danielewski 74). The dog, called Hillary, is a "grey coated Siberian husky" (74) and the cat, Mallory, is a tabby. Despite the fact that both animals are male, they bear female names. The discrepancy between the animals' gender and their names¹¹⁹ hints at a deeper level of meaning and can be made sense of when Hillary and Mallory are linked to their human counterparts¹²⁰, namely George Mallory (1886-1924) and Sir Edmund Hillary (1919-2008), two explorers of Mount Everest. Mallory disappeared while trying to reach the summit just like Mallory the cat "vanishes completely [...]. His disappearance remains a mystery" (74). Hillary, on his part, was the first man to reach the summit in 1953.

This background information sheds light on some extracts: "An instant later Mallory comes screaming into the leaving room with Hillary nipping at his tail. It is not the first time they have involved themselves in such a routine" (75). According to this passage, Mallory is often seen to be following – "tailing" – Hillary, which is figuratively what Edmund Hillary did when he followed the example of George Mallory and climbed Mount Everest. In the passage: "Hillary and Mallory are in the backyard. Mallory up a tree, Hillary howling grandly over his achievement" (75), the fact that Mallory is up the tree may again refer to E. Mallory

¹¹⁹ Of course, in real life, one can perfectly well name an animal regardless of its gender. In this case, however, since Danielewski chose the name, it is not irrelevant to assume there must be a reason behind the choice.

¹²⁰ As suggested by Linda on Goodreads: <https://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/2208283-house-of-leaves-by-mzd-chapters-v-viii>. Accessed 10 March 2018.

never leaving the summit, and Hillary's achievement would therefore be a reference to his human counterpart being the first man to reach the summit of Mount Everest and make it back alive.

This example illustrates that (at least) one of the meanings of some passages can be unlocked by keys residing outside the realm of the novel, and in this particular case, non-literary ones. This is but one example and the chances are high that there are numerous others to be found in the novel, which would further expand its possible interpretations. Within the realm of the novel, the fate of Mallory may be explained by an element from Johnny's section: "On the side of route 636, I see a tabby, head completely gone, a smear of red" (499). This link between Johnny's world and that of *The Navidson Record* hints at another topic, namely that of the interconnectedness between the different narratives of the book.

iv. Interconnectedness and echoes

Despite the fact that Pelafina is locked up at The Three Attic Whalestoe Institute and dies there in 1989, her voice echoes throughout the novel via her son, Johnny, but also via other characters, such as Zampanò and the people from *The Navidson Record*. Echo is an important motif in *House of Leaves*, to which an entire chapter of the novel is devoted. The result is that it creates a rhizome between the different sections of the novel, which is one more embodiment of the multicursal maze. Not only do these echoes create an ever-expanding labyrinth of interconnected elements, but they also embody the misleading nature of the maze, since echoes give the readers/maze treaders the impression that they read/walk down the same passage/path while it may not be so.

Paradoxically, it also questions *House of Leaves* as a polyphonic novel and highlights a possible monophony, since one single sound/voice can generate multiple echoes. This is in keeping with Danielewski's statement that the "different parts come together to form a single melody" (Danielewski, "Haunted House" 124). At this stage, it is important to mention that the polyphony theory and the monophony theory are not mutually exclusive, since the novel allows for various different possible interpretations.

In relation to the monophony, Hayles suggests that "[t]he intimation that Pelafina can speak about Zampanò implies she may be the writer who creates both the old man's narrative and her son's commentary. Combined with the check mark, this coded message suggests that

apparently distinct ontological levels can melt into one another” (Hayles, *Writing Machines* 129). Hayles makes an interesting point which she does not, in my opinion, develop enough. There are indeed elements that imply such a thing as a single voice, including Danielewski’s own words. He claims: “who really is the originator of th[e] book” is “a very important question” (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 115). He nonetheless refuses to answer it on the grounds that he does not want to “deprive readers of the private joys of making such a discovery on their own” (115). His comment suggests that there is indeed one character at the root of the many narrative levels, and what is more, that it is possible to figure out who. In that respect, what Hayles mentions does not convincingly back up her claim. This chapter will, therefore, further illustrate Hayles’ claim that Pelafina is the voice of all voices by means of interconnected elements from the novel and will more broadly address the rhizomic nature of the connections between the characters.

Pelafina’s space initially seems limited to her letters that are to be found in Appendix II-E, and despite the fact that they are not part of the “main” body of text, the readers are invited to read them at an early stage:

Though Mr. Truant’s asides may often seem impenetrable, they are not without rhyme or reason. The reader who wishes to interpret Mr. Truant on his or her own may disregard this note. Those, however, who feel they would profit from a better understanding of his past may wish to proceed ahead and read his father’s obituary in Appendix II-D as well as those letters written by his institutionalized mother in Appendix II-E. – Ed (Danielewski 72).

In total, Pelafina sent Johnny 65 letters (including those from *The Whalestoe Letters*), although she expresses doubt as to whether he received them: “I cannot understand how you have not received any of my letters [...]. The New Director destroyed all the letters I wrote you” (613-14), and even goes as far as dismissing their very existence: “I hardly wrote a thing. Five reams of paper and postage were nothing more than figment of my imagination” (635). Johnny’s section nonetheless echoes his mother’s letters substantially, which suggests that they existed, and that he did receive and read them, or that, alternatively, Pelafina indeed wrote her son’s commentary.

It is important at this stage to point out that Johnny’s section shows a clear evolution in his awareness that the letters have an impact on him. He states towards the end: “I grew up on certain words [...] words orbiting around my mother mainly, sometimes whispered, more often written in letters” (379).

In order to see how much Pelafina's letters are echoed in Johnny's section, I will discuss specific examples¹²¹. Let us for instance consider pages 69 to 72, the passage under which the Editors suggest reading the letters. The first part of the passage, rather than proving Johnny read them, enables the readers to cross-check the story of Pelafina's attempted murder on her son. In the passage in question, he goes to the storeroom of the tattoo shop he works at to get purple and black ink. Once there, the light burns out and leaves him in the dark where he starts having hallucinations. He talks about the "[h]ands of the dead" (70) and "extremely long fingers" (70) which is a reference to his mother's hands and her "long, ridiculous purple nails" (630) which tried to strangle him when he was a child. At the end of the incident, ink spills on Johnny: "My face has been splattered with purple, as have my arms [...] defining me, marking me, and at least for the moment, preserving me" (72). The purple ink symbolically marks Johnny's body parts that bear the brunt of his mother's attacks. His face (and neck) symbolize Pelafina's attempt at suffocating him to death and Johnny's burnt arms "from the inside of both elbows all the way up to the end of both wrists" (129) as a result of him trying to catch a burning pan before it hit the floor. Johnny remembers the episode as follows: "something made my mother jerk around, a slight mistake really but with what consequences, her arms accidentally knocking a pan full of sizzling Mazola" (505). Despite the fact that Johnny claims it was an accident, a dream he has allows him to skim over another version of the story¹²²: "[My hands] look melted. [...] [They] have in fact been dipped in boiling oil. I know this and I even know the story. I'm just unable to resurrect it there in my dream." (403-4). This recollection calls into question the accidental nature of Johnny's burns.

These events explain why purple, a color so closely associated with his mother, triggers a visceral reaction in Johnny, for instance when he sees "purple mountain majesty" on postcards, he says: "they are purple, I hyperventilate" (501). These two episodes highlight Johnny's ambivalent relationship towards purple (and, therefore, towards his mother): the color purple preserves him, saves him from "oblivion" (72) (since the rest of his body is covered in black ink), yet the purple nails (a metonymy for his

¹²¹ Since an attempt at being exhaustive is bound to be vain as well as irrelevant, I shall only develop a few of the instances present in the book which I deem the most important in terms of interconnectedness.

¹²² As suggested by Jessica Thunstrom Nelson, a member of the *House of Leaves* official book club: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/HouseOfLeavesBookClub/search/?query=403%20390>.

mother) also threatened to end his life. During his hallucinatory episode in the tattoo shop, Johnny also hears/remembers “[a] scream, a howl, a roar” (71), which echoes the memory of his father, who “roared in intervention” (630) and prevented Pelafina from killing him. As a result of his hallucination, Johnny states: “I’ve shit myself. Pissed myself too” (71), which echoes what Pelafina says in her letter: “you wet yourself. You did more that wet yourself” (630).

The second part of the passage contains references to Pelafina’s letters. It begins with Johnny stating: “Everything falls apart. Stories heard but not recalled. Letters too” (71). He then combines words which, at first glance, are incoherent: “Known. Some. Call. Is. Air. Am?” (71), and states: “Incoherent – yes. Without meaning – I’m afraid not” (71). The series of words is actually the English phonetic equivalent of Pelafina’s Latin quote: “Non sum qualis eram” (602), which means “I am not what I used to be” (72). When discussing fear, Johnny states: “None of this can truly approach the reality of that fear, there in the midst of all that bedlam” (71). As a common noun, “bedlam” means “a state of wild uproar and confusion”, it can also be used to refer to a “madhouse”. Both meanings derive from the Bedlam (or Bethlem Royal Hospital), a famous psychiatric hospital in London, which Pelafina alludes to in her letter from November 3, 1988: “Saint Elizabeth was right to warn us from the rooms of Bedlam” (636). At the end of his story, Johnny uses the idiom “spirit of the staircase”(72), which comes from the French “esprit de l’escalier”¹²³, an idiom Pelafina uses in her letter from September 18, 1986. The few pages in which these different elements are found would appear almost meaningless and impenetrable if it were not for the letters, which highlights how important they are in order to understand Johnny.

An important aspect of Johnny’s personality is his fits of violence and constant fighting as a child, which Pelafina also addresses in her letters. When he says: “Another Maldon or no Maldon at all” (71), it refers to the passage Pelafina quotes from the poem “The Battle of Maldon”: “Hige sceal þē heardra, heorte þē cēnre, mōd sceal þē mære, þē ūre mægen lytlað” (601), which is translated in Appendix F (“Various quotes”) as follows: “By as much as your might may diminish, we will harden our minds, fill our hearts, and increase our courage” (653). The fact that this very quotation is echoed both in Johnny’s section and in the additional material by Zampanò provided by Johnny to the

¹²³ This expression is used to express “the predicament of thinking of the perfect reply too late” (Diderot).

Editors, suggests that Pelafina's voice resonates beyond her son's section, which I will develop below. Pelafina uses the poem to reinforce what she tells Johnny: "Do not rely on your fists. [...] Rely instead on the abilities of your mind" (600). The rest of the sentence: "on snowy days, or not snowy at all" (71) is a reference to the fight Johnny talks about on page 93, where he fights in a snowy schoolyard ("there were rivulets [of blood] on his parka and on alot [sic] of the snow" (93)). In her letter from September 29, 1983, Pelafina tells Johnny: "if ever you decide to design some crest for yourself, you would find it impossible to accurately do so without incorporating at least some of the accoutrements of Mars along with the consequent symbology of carnage and bloodshed" (594). Johnny reminisces about this statement during a fight:

I stood there tingling all over [...] ancient bloodline colluding under what I imagined now must of [sic] been the very aegis of Mars [...] a call to arms, though all of it still held back by what? words I guess, or rather a voice, though whose I have no clue (87).

What holds Johnny back is likely Pelafina's warning about the consequences of violence. The second time he remembers that letter, Johnny is again in a fight and says: "Some wicked family tree [...] conspired to instruct my response, fitting this rage with devastating action [...] in allegiance with Mars" (496). This time, his mother's voice does not prevent him from acting and he accepts the bloodied consequences of his actions. Even more, the "wicked family tree" (496) may in fact refer to his foster father Raymond, who was a very violent man. This suggests that Johnny was overcome by the violence in him, so much so that he let it out, ignoring his mother's words and indulging in what he loathed so much about that man, becoming the beast Raymond told him he was. He then claims: "I was going to rip open his skin with my bare hands, claw past his ribs and tear out his liver and then I was going to eat it" (496). This echoes the fate Pelafina wished for Raymond: "I would like nothing more than to tear the liver of your purported protector and feed it to him with a hiss" (596), as if Johnny decided to ignore his mother's words while punishing his enemies in the same way as she would have. Alternatively, these parallels between Pelafina and Johnny mean that she is the one who made him up.

Regarding the relationship between Pelafina and Zampanò, the encrypted sentence in her letter from April 5, 1987 “my dear Zampanò, who did you lose?” (615) implies that Pelafina knew Zampanò though there is nothing that suggests it explicitly in his manuscript. Once again, interconnected elements enable the readers to establish that link. In her letter from November 7, 1982, Pelafina asks Johnny “Do they [his new foster family] serve you hot chocolate and large slices of lemon meringue pie?” (588), which is echoed by Zampanò in *The Navidson Record*: “Tom [...] steals a slice of lemon meringue pie and then whips up some hot chocolate for everyone” (320). This correspondence either means that lemon meringue pies and hot chocolate mean something special for Zampanò and Pelafina, or that the same person wrote the two passages. In conclusion, the correspondences between *The Navidson Record* and Johnny, Zampanò and Pelafina are either due to a shared history (polyphony), or because they are one and the same person (monophony).

Some characters from *The Navidson Record* even seem based on the main characters of the novel. In the case of Pelafina, she writes in her letter from April 5, 1987: “Returning steadily to my former self, [p]racticing my smile in a mirror the way I did when I was a child” (615), which is echoed in Karen’s behavior after being abused by her step-father: “rather than discuss her feelings [Karen] deferred the world with a hard and perfectly practiced smile” (58), which, according to her sister, she “spent every night of her fourteenth year composing [...] in front of a blue plastic handled mirror” (58). Besides, at the time of *The Navidson Record*, it is stated that “Karen refers to her books as her ‘newly found day to day comfort’” (34), which is consistent with Pelafina’s passion for books and the relief she seems to find in using them to express and protect herself. Another example of the link between Pelafina and Karen is to be found in chapter XXII entitled “Faith”. In that chapter, Zampanò says that, after Karen rescued Navidson, “a neighbor saw Karen crying on the front lawn, a pink ribbon in her hair” (523). Karen’s pink ribbon is reminiscent of that of Pelafina and that of Hawthorne’s Faith, a parallel that is reinforced by the title of the chapter. The Spanish Doll Pelafina mentions in her letter is echoed in a passage from *The Navidson Record* where Zampanò states: “Daisy [...] play[s] endlessly with her prized Spanish doll and the doll house Tom finally finished for her” (315). The fact that the both Daisy and Karen are connected to Pelafina suggests – like it has been alluded to previously with regard to the whale and Natasha – that these three female characters are three facets of the same person.

As for Johnny, he is echoed in various male characters from *The Navidson Record*, including Chad, Tom and Will. At the very beginning of the novel, Johnny tells a story he

made up about his illegal travel on a ship: “This barge I’d been on was loaded with dates and pounds of hash and an incredible number of exotic birds” (13), which he later calls “Birds of Paradise” (15). This extravagant story of Johnny’s is echoed in Tom Navidson’s joke when he is waiting for his brother and Reston in the Anteroom of the maze. One of the jokes is about a punker whose “hair’s all green” and who has a lot of “brightly colored tattoos [...] and piercings [...]. [And] [f]eathers hang[ing] from each earlobe” (256). Upon noticing that an old man is staring at him, the young man asks: “‘didn’t you do anything crazy when you were young?’” to which the old man replies: “‘Yeah, when I was in the Navy, I got drunk one night in Singapore and had sex with a Bird of Paradise. I was just wondering if you were my son’” (257). Furthermore, the green hair echoes Ashley’s hair (one of Johnny’s conquests), which were “died neon green” (300). Johnny went to Alaska: “at the age of thirteen” (20), and so did Navidson, in order to “shoot Alaskan fishing boats” (17). On top of being echoed by the Navidson brothers, Johnny also resembles Chad, who “turns out to be the most problematic” (91) because he “spends more and more time outside by himself, and [...] returns home from school with a bruised eye and swollen nose” (91), which echoes Johnny’s behavior as a child. Furthermore, in a letter from December 24, 1988, Pelafina compares herself to a tree that will protect Johnny: “I shall be your roots and I will be your shade though the sun burns my leaves. [...] I will shelter you and I will comfort you” (Danielewski, *The Whalestoe* 72), which is echoed by Chad’s escape and hiding in a tree. Reston describes the situation as follows: “‘Tom told me Chad was happy in his tree’” (Danielewski 320), as if it were comforting him like a mother in times of despair. The proximity between Johnny’s story and the one Zampanò tells through the male characters in *The Navidson Record* even lead Johnny to question his very existence:

[T]his terrible sense of relatedness to Zampanò’s work implies something that just can’t be, namely that this thing has created me; not me unto it, but now it unto me, where I am nothing more than the matter of some other voice [...] all of this has just been made up and what’s worse, not made up by me or even for that matter Zampanò. Though by whom I have no idea (326).

This comment further supports the idea of a unique voice – possibly that of Pelafina – creating Johnny. Furthermore, a fleeting moment of association between the young man and the old man further calls into question their relationship to one another and whether they

really are two different people: “Love At First Sight having been written by a blind man [...] the blind man of all blind men, me” (117). If the young man and the old one are one and the same person, and that Pelafina created Johnny it backs up Hayles’ claim at the beginning of this chapter that both men may be a creation of Pelafina. From a broader perspective, this relates to the notion of identity I mentioned in the introduction and the idea that the self-observation through writing leads to the fictionalization of the self, and in this case, a fictionalization of the self by means of the creation of other selves.

v. Conclusion

The use of intertextuality in *House of Leaves* draws attention to itself by its omnipresence and questions the nature of the book, as either consisting solely of other works, or being inscribed in an endless rhizome of texts. The rhizome that results from such connections seem to go back to the idea of the Library of Babel discussed in chapter II and, therefore, grants *House of Leaves* a form of infinity and allows it – like Pelafina – to exceed its boundaries and become virtually endless.

References to non-fiction also contribute to linking the world of the fiction and that of reality, which further highlights the ambiguous boundaries on which the novel plays. It also allows for new interpretations in light of real elements.

While intertextuality connects texts (and, as we have seen, other media) together, interconnectedness connects elements from within the book together and creates a rhizome between the characters who echo one another to the point that they become one voice. This brings about the notion of identity once more, this time in light of the monophony that seems to result from this interconnectedness. This hypothesis nonetheless does not contradict the one developed in chapter IV section ii, according to which the many voices in *House of Leaves* make it a polyphonic novel. Like the many possible interpretations of the novel, these two can coexist, partly because experiencing the polyphony does not prevent the readers from experiencing the monophony, and the other way around. Once again, this highlights the ambivalent nature of the novel that offers two seemingly irreconcilable perspectives that may simply be the two sides of the same coin, once again deconstructing the univocity of meaning. These two different approaches are both valid and alter the reading experience and bring about different issues in terms of, among other things, identity and reliability.

VI. *Mise-en-abyme*

While the labyrinth has been the red thread of this paper thus far, it is also worthy of interest to mention two other motifs that make the book even more complex. Towards the end of the novel, the labyrinth of intertwined plots and timelines collapses through a *mise-en-abyme* (also known as a process of recursive canon) when, as Michael Greaney explains, “the book makes a paradoxical appearance as a ‘character’ in its own story” (Greaney 154). *Mise-en-abyme* is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Term* as

... [a] term coined by the French writer André Gide, supposedly from the language of heraldry, to refer to an internal reduplication of a literary work or part of a work. Gide’s own novel *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* [...] provides a prominent example: its central character, Édouard, is a novelist working on a novel called *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* which strongly resembles the very novel in which he himself is a character. The ‘Chinese box’ effect of *mise-en-abyme* often suggests an infinite regress, i.e. an endless succession of internal duplications. It has become a favoured device in postmodernist fictions by Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, and others.

In this case, the *mise-en-abyme* takes place when *House of Leaves* is shown to exist within the realm of *The Navidson Record* (Navidson reads the book during Exploration #5), as well as within Johnny’s narration (Johnny meets a band that made a song about the book). The *mise-en-abyme* results in a confusing situation for the readers, who realize once more that the boundaries between each section are not as clear-cut as they might first appear to be. “This scene”, Robbie Meechan argues referring to exploration #5, “shows the text’s most intradiegetic character reading the same text that only the most extradiegetic [character] can read [that is to say, the reader]” (Meechan 47). The *mise-en-abyme*, therefore, also highlights the proximity between readers and characters, and questions the relevance of their two different statuses, which is in line with the argument developed throughout this paper that the reader is considered (or invited to become) a character in the novel. Furthermore, the proximity between Navidson and the reader is reinforced by the fact that Zampanò specifies that his *House of Leaves* contains 736 pages, “which correlates exactly to the published edition the reader is reading from” (Meechan 46). Meechan points out that “[n]otably, this number would also have to include Truant’s introduction to Zampanò’s text, something that a deceased Zampanò would have known nothing of” (47). A consequence of calling into question the diegetic order is that, according to Meechan, it is “impossible to locate where the

‘real’ is” (47), which goes back to the notion of hyperreality developed in chapter I. It also draws attention to the fact that the real is hard to locate within the novel as much as without, since it seems that the *mise-en-abyme*, by making the different Chinese boxes (including ours) collapse, also makes us question what *we* call reality.

The second *mise-en-abyme* happens when Johnny meets the band: “the lyrics were inspired by a book he’d found on the Internet quite some time ago [...]. Here’s what the title page said:

House of Leaves
By Zampanò

With introduction and
Notes by Johnny Truant

Circles Round a Stone Publication

First Edition¹²⁴
(Danielewski 513).

Interestingly, this title page is the same as that from the actual novel (except the publisher and the edition¹²⁵). The readers’ version could be similar to this one, since Danielewski had his name printed on the page that comes just before the title page, which would allow the readers to obliterate his presence as author by simply tearing it¹²⁶. In relation to the discussion on *mise-en-abyme*, it suggests that the extradiegetic readers are only one step away from possessing the exact same book as the intradiegetic readers, which makes the distinction between intradiegetic and extradiegetic fragile and plays on the ambiguity mentioned by Hayles in relation to check mark in the margin of page 97: “the page margins into which the check mark intrudes exist in a space contiguous with our world and *House of Leaves* as a book we can hold in our hands” (Hayles, *Writing Machines* 129).

In terms of narrative logic, the result of the *mise-en-abyme* in both cases is a temporal paradox, since neither the characters from *The Navidson Record* nor the band from Johnny’s

¹²⁴ See appendix 16.

¹²⁵ It is stated in “Exploration Z: The Idiot’s Guide to house of Leaves”: “The true first edition of the novel was the complete set of files downloaded from that site, and published by Circle Round A Stone Publication” (“The Idiot’s Guide”).

¹²⁶ As suggested by a member of the official *House of Leaves* book club.

narrative could have read a book about them reading or having read it. This brings about the notion of the loop, and more precisely those of the *strange loop* and the *causal loop*. A strange loop corresponds to the “infinite regress” mentioned in the definition of the *mise-en-abyme*. Douglas Hofstadter defines it in his 2007 book *I Am a Strange Loop*, as

...an abstract loop in which, in the series of stages that constitute the cycling-around, there is a shift from one level of abstraction (or structure) to another, which feels like an upwards movement in a hierarchy, and yet somehow the successive ‘upward’ shifts turn out to give rise to a closed cycle. That is, despite one’s sense of departing ever further from one’s origin, one winds up, to one’s shock, exactly where one had started out (Hofstadter unpag.).

The “upwards movement in a hierarchy” corresponds to the Chinese box structure of the novel that I previously mentioned with regard to the different narrative levels: *The Davidson Record* is written down and commented by Zampanò, Zampanò’s manuscript is commented by Johnny, whose comments are in turn commented by the Editors, and each of these levels are possibly commented by the extradiegetic readers. The motion from *The Davidson Record* towards the extradiegetic readers seems to make them move away from the film. However, the *mise-en-abyme* makes that Chinese Box structure collapse as the readers realize that the intradiegetic characters (the band) and the intradiegetic intradiegetic characters (the people from *The Davidson Record*) possess the *same novel* as them. In his book, Hofstadter discusses M.C. Escher’s “Drawing Hands”¹²⁷ as a means to illustrate the effect of the strange loop. He states:

[E]ach of the hands is hierarchically ‘above’ the other! How is that possible? Well, the answer is obvious: the whole thing is merely a drawn image, merely a fantasy. But because it looks so real, because it sucks us so effectively into its paradoxical world, it fools us, at least briefly, *into believing in its reality*. And moreover, we delight in being taken in by the hoax, hence the picture’s popularity” [emphasis added] (Hofstadter unpag.).

Three elements from this quote are important with regard to *House of Leaves*. Firstly, like in Escher’s lithography, the readers are led to believe, for the most part of the book, in its Chinese Box structure. However, as the existence of the book across sections suggests (and the interconnectedness discussed in the previous chapter), these various sections are not as clear-cut as they initially appear to be. Secondly, the novel plays with the readers by making

¹²⁷ See appendix 17.

them try to figure out where the sections stand in relation to one another (in the case of a polyphony), or which voice creates the other (in the case of a monophony). Hofstadter gives a simple yet undesirable solution to that problem: “the whole thing is [...] merely a fantasy” (Hofstadter unpag.). This assessment brings about the third important aspect of the definition, namely that Hofstadter is fully aware that the viewer of Escher’s drawing and, in this case, the readers of *House of Leaves*, are willing to be fooled. He argues that since “it looks so real”, it “fools us, at least briefly, into believing in its reality” [emphasis added] (Hofstadter unpag.). The last part of the quote sheds light on the reason why such a fantasy works: “we delight in being taken in by the hoax” (Hofstadter unpag.). I agree with Hofstadter’s conclusion, although I would rather refer to the novel as an “endless interplay of simulated realities” (Greaney 151), rather than as a “hoax”, since, as Greaney argues, hoaxes belong to reality and the novel to hyperreality. All in all, the illusion works because the readers are willing to make it work. This is in line with the argument developed throughout the paper that the readers play an important part in the making of the book, and in this case, in maintaining the illusion.

The causal loop on its part, accounts for the existence of the novel itself. In the causal loop paradox, Nicholas Smith argues,

...things come from nowhere. The things in question might be objects—imagine a time traveler who steals a time machine from the local museum in order to make his time trip and then donates the time machine to the same museum at the end of the trip (i.e. in the past). In this case the machine itself is never built by anyone—it simply exists (Smith).

He then argues that one could consider these causal loops “strange, not impossible” (Smith), such as the Big Bang. *House of Leaves* could, therefore, be like the origin of the universe: it could simply “be”, like some sort of “beginless” and endless entity, which would explain why the characters possess a book that talks about them possessing it. Moreover, the house is also an important example of causal loop, since it seems to contain “matter older than even our solar system. Interstellar perhaps” (Danielewski 378). In that respect, it could be compared to the type of labyrinth described in Simplicius’ comment on Aristotle’s *Physics*. Penelope Reed Doob explains that it

...explicitly becomes an endless figure signifying infinity. Normally, labyrinths have ends (a goal, a center, or an exit), but these features are irrelevant for Simplicius. Although a labyrinth is spatial and ‘theoretically able to be traversed,’ its peculiar construction makes it ‘practically impossible to traverse’ and therefore infinite (Doob 82).

This quote can be illustrated by Navidson's Exploration#5 during which he pedals across the maze without ever reaching any sort of center, goal or exit. Doob argues that such "a neutral and logical discussion of the labyrinth's inextricability is extremely rare" (82) as "the idea of the labyrinth's infinity is seldom developed" (82) but that "it may be inherent in identifications of the labyrinth with the infinite and impenetrable mystery of God" (82). This comment is in line with Navidson's letter to Karen, in which he writes:

Do you believe in God? [...] Well, I do now. But my God isn't your Catholic varietal, or your Judaic or Mormon or Baptist or Seventh Day Adventist or whatever/ whoever. No burning bush, no angels, no cross. God's a house. [...] What I mean to say is that our house is God (Danielewski 390).

Clearly, the notion of God mentioned in the novel is not defined by a particular religion. Rather, it embodies infinity, the unknown, the journey through life and power. Danielewski also plays with the idea of destiny and infinite possibilities when Zampanò refers to the Big Bang as a "state of infinite destiny" (373), leaving a spelling mistake Johnny corrects in the following footnote by "density" (373). The word "destiny" suggests a deterministic approach, that is to say an approach according to which "all events, including moral choices, are completely determined by previously existing causes" ("Determinism"). Moreover, "[d]eterminism is usually understood to preclude free will because it entails that humans cannot act otherwise than they do" ("Determinism"). This would mean that the journey through the house/book is not the result of choices, but that each character/reader's journey is predetermined by a God-like figure. Conversely, "infinite" hints at the opposite, suggesting that the journey one goes through is the result of choices, and also suggests that the outcome may vary from one exploration to another and from one reading to another. The oxymoron embodies the ambivalent status of the readers, who have to make many choices in the processes of reading and interpreting the novel, but who also suffer from Danielewski's self-consciousness and of his anticipation of their choices and interpretations.

Aside from offering the readers infinite possibilities (whether it be illusory or not), the labyrinthine structure of *House of Leaves* also embodies infinity in a different way. Nathalie Aghoro explains that

... the hyperlink structure of *House of Leaves* suggested by the word *house* underlined and edited in blue gestures towards the world wide web where inquisitive readers find a website featuring further material (*The Navidson Files*). One also has the possibility

to join reading communities on the *MZD Forum* [...]. The individual effort to solve the riddles of *House of Leaves* thus becomes a social activity (Aghoro 73).

The 2018 official *House of Leaves* book club should be added to the list, as a place where Danielewski regularly posts food for thought and where readers from around the world have the opportunity to exchange and discuss their ideas, freed from any boundaries. And maybe that was the whole point. Unlike Zampanò, Johnny and Pelafina who lived as recluses, the novel ultimately urges its readers to face and come to terms with their own Minotaur, and to go out in the world (wide web) in order to share their experience with others and make sense of the unique and life-changing experience of treading this gigantic and labyrinthine house of leaves.

VII. Conclusion: Leave the House?

“I still get nightmares. In fact, I get them so often I should be used to them by now. I’m not. No one ever really gets used to nightmares.” – Johnny Truant

We cannot say we have not been warned. We have seen the writing devour Zampanò’s life, render Johnny an obsessional wreck, and compel Navidson to reenter the house though he knows he may die in the attempt. This is a technotext so energetic, labyrinthine, and impossible to command that we will not be able to leave it alone because it will not leave us alone. It grabs us, sucks out our center, and gives us back to ourselves [...] transforming us in the process (Hayles 129).

This quotation from Hayles’ *Writing Machine* aptly summarizes the aftermath of the journey through *House of Leaves* as a labyrinthine entity and its lasting effects on the readers, which were the two main aspects discussed in this paper. With *House of Leaves*, Danielewski manages to create a book-labyrinth, a limited artifact that nonetheless seems endless. Just like the characters, the readers’ journey could virtually never end, which is reinforced by the labyrinth and the loop motifs present throughout the novel. In the same fashion as Joyce, Danielewski grants his reader a form of immortality in the possibility of endless (self-) discovery.

The use of the labyrinth motif is not new, nor is the experimental nature of *House of Leaves*, and Danielewski is very much aware of the legacy of experimentation his novel benefits from. His approach is nonetheless unique as he adds a metaphysical level to his writing, constantly reflecting upon the processes and strategies his novel makes use of. Such a display of self-awareness is peculiar and unsettling, and results in an ambivalent situation for the readers. On the one hand, it encourages them to engage in a more critical approach of the book and of literature in general, and on the other hand it anticipates and, therefore, makes redundant their analyses and critiques of the novel. As a result, it is not easy for the extradiegetic readers to find their place. Furthermore, the active participation of the reader-as-co-author suggests that their involvement goes beyond the mere act of reading. Such an involvement inevitably leads to the projection of personal meaning onto the novel, allowing the readers to make it their own. In that respect, the figure of the Minotaur embodies the confrontation of the self each reader engages in when reading *House of Leaves*.

Moreover, this self-confrontation is one of the many ways in which the reader's journey is similar to that of the characters. They also experience the same sense of loss of purpose, disorientation, confusion, doubt and fear. Such a symmetry makes the reader's status, becomes unclear and the distinction (even hierarchy) between characters, readers and author collapses, albeit partially, since Danielewski remains a dominant and unparalleled figure, who resorts to several strategies to make the reader feel unsettled and redundant.

Zampanò's parody of academic writing is one of them, as the old man parodies the style he writes in, subverting the values usually associated with academic writing, such as authority and seriousness. The message is clear: the readers should not take anything from the book for granted. This aspect of the novel points toward an important yet rather absent notion, namely that of "externality". Zampanò cannot parody academic writing if he does not, at the same time work *within* that tradition. The readers are similarly threatened by the novel to be sucked in and given the same status as the intradiegetic readers (Johnny and the band) or scholars (Zampanò's fictitious scholars). This goes back to the absence of outside view of the labyrinth developed by both Doob, or even to the absence of outside at all, argued by Dupuy.

Danielewski also achieves the deconstruction of the opposition between inside and outside by making both the characters and the text exceed the boundaries of the novel. In that respect, transtextuality is a central notion for several reasons. The very nature of the novel is transtextual, as *House of Leaves* is a patchwork of texts, quotes, poems, etc. drawn from other works and features a large number of more or less direct references to literature, film, photography, etc. In that respect, the novel instantiates one of Genette's notion of

intertextuality. The four other types of transtextuality are also instantiated in the novel, which emphasizes how central the notion is. As mentioned above, the intertext invades and constitutes the text. As for the others, the hypotext gives shape to its narrative structure, the metatext allows it to be self-reflexive, and the peritext and architext condition and subvert the readers' expectations. It is important to point out that, while metatextuality corresponds to commenting a work and, therefore, seems to grant the readers an external position, that notion is subverted by the novel. By making metatextuality one of the focuses and devices of his novel, Danielewski integrates the metatextual level *within* the text and hints at the impossibility for the readers' metacommentary to be outside the novel. The only aspect of transtextuality that seems to be outside the novel is its authographic epitext, which consists of, among other things, Danielewski's interviews, where he gives information about the book that may help the readers navigate through it. Once again, he is the only one that seems to have a complete overview of the work, by being the only person outside of it.

The fact that characters from *House of Leaves* could be drawn from other works of art makes them intrinsically transtextual and draws attention to a process of condensation akin to that developed by Freud, where one character would be but a facet of a "whole" that consists of all the characters it is based on/echoed by. This process goes beyond the distinction between flat (two-dimensional) and round (three-dimensional) characters by combining several characters, which results in multiversal¹²⁸ round characters. Furthermore characters that are linked to real life people call into question the boundary between reality and fiction and further extend the nature of the universes the characters are made of. It also bridges the gap between real life people and fictitious ones, and goes back to the idea that a real person (for instance, the reader) can, in turn, become a character.

Another aspect of characterization is the use of a distinct typeface in order to add texture to a character's "voice". In the case of *House of Leaves*, the emphasis on the written mode is particularly important since the narrators come into existence through their writing or what others write about them. Consequently, as Hayles argues, they can be called "remediated narrators" instead of "unreliable narrators". The notion of unreliability is, therefore, reinforced by the idea that the narrators *decided* what they were going to write. Unlike unreliable narrators who do not make a selection in their thoughts before they reach the readers, the remediated narrators' thoughts go through a selection process as they must consciously decide what they write down and what they do not include. Furthermore, that type of narrator draws

¹²⁸ As in coming from different universes.

attention to the act of writing and highlights its metaphysical dimension in the novel, as it allows Danielewski to reflect upon the medium he uses while using it.

All of these complexities, therefore, make *House of Leaves* a challenge for the readers who are brought to the forefront, but at a certain cost. After all, ““what is sought with difficulty is discovered with more pleasure”” (Augustine qtd. in Doob 214). Despite the fact that the ideal recipient is but a projection of the author’s mind, it is worth wondering whether Danielewski did not try to make his readers become that ideal projection by building a complex and challenging book. Umberto Eco commented on this process in the “Postille a ‘*Il nome della rosa*’” (*The Name of the Rose*) written in 1983:

It may happen that the author writes thinking of a certain empirical public, as the founders of the modern novel, Richardson or Fielding or Defoe, did [...]. [...] whether you think you are talking to an audience that is there [...] or that you propose to write for a reader to come, writing is to build, through the text, your own model of reader. What does it mean to think of a reader capable of overcoming the penitential hurdle of the first hundred pages? It means exactly writing a hundred pages in order to build a reader suitable for those that will follow.¹²⁹ [emphasis added] (Eco unpag.)

In light of that comment, it appears that Danielewski – like a God-like figure – did not just create a universe; he also wished to create its readers to his own image by making the novel challenging on purpose.

As the novel allows various perspectives to coexist, the personal – almost intimate – experience of the novel does not contradict a collective reading experience. This also hints at the fact that the entire readership may be the best embodiment of that ideal recipient. Such an assessment implies that Danielewski manages to make reading a collective and playful activity. The wide range of possible meanings also accounts for the fact that there is enough space in the novel for the entire readership. Aside from the complex written content and layout, Danielewski’s concretist poetics creates a third level of meaning that arises from the combination of the written words and images. The range of interpretations Danielewski thought of nonetheless still leaves space for interpretations he did not foresee. This illustrates the status of reader-as-coauthor mentioned previously, and emphasizes the active part the readers play in the making of the novel. Such a process reinforces the relationship between

¹²⁹ Original version: “Può accadere che l'autore scriva pensando a un certo pubblico empirico, come facevano i fondatori del romanzo moderno, Richardson o Fielding o Defoe [...]. [...] sia che si creda di parlare a un pubblico che è lì [...] sia che ci si proponga di scrivere per un lettore a venire, *scrivere è costruire*, attraverso il testo, *il proprio modello di lettore*. Cosa vuol dire pensare a un lettore capace di superare lo scoglio penitenziale delle prime cento pagine? Significa esattamente scrivere cento pagine allo scopo di costruire un lettore adatto per quelle che seguiranno.”

the readers and the novel, as they can appropriate it as partly being ‘their’ work and therefore develop a more intense and intimate bond with it.

Just like computers have been developed to encompass more and more media, Danielewski attempts to develop books and put their possibilities to the forefront. This process questions the limitations of “traditional” books and opens to a wide range of possibilities regarding literature and the forms it can take. *House of Leaves* and Danielewski’s later novels lay the foundation of a type of literature that could redefine the notion altogether.

Danielewski not only emphasizes the wonderful possibilities of books, he also draws attention to his belief in the superiority of words over images by remediating film. Whether one agrees or not, his approach has the merit to create a debate around words and images, and how the theatre of the mind could never be equated by an actual film, although, conversely, the film medium also offers aspects a novel could not. Danielewski develops his concretist poetics further in his latest collection *The Familiar*, with what he calls the “signiconic”. This new approach emphasizes the interplay between form and content and contributes to enhancing the reading experience by further immersing the readers in what they perceive.

The overall result is that Danielewski created a work that involves its readers on various levels and, as Hayles stated, that we “will not be able to leave [...] alone because it will not leave us alone” (Hayles, *Writing Machines* 129). So when the moment comes to leave it – but do we ever leave it? –, it still lingers somewhere in our mind, urging us to reevaluate our approach of literature as a whole and to never take anything for granted.

The journey continues.

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Special thanks to the members of the *House of Leaves* book club for their insightful and enthralling discussions on the novel. Their inputs have been credited in the footnotes as precisely as possible.

e.e. cummings "You are tired (I think)" (left), *House of Leaves* (right)

You are tired,
 (I think)
 Of the always puzzle of living and doing;
 And so am I.

Come with me, then,
 And we'll leave it far and far away--
 (Only you and I, understand!)

You have played,
 (I think)
 And broke the toys you were fondest of,
 And are a little tired now;
 Tired of things that break, and--
 Just tired.
 So am I.

But I come with a dream in my eyes tonight,
 And I knock with a rose at the hopeless gate of your heart--
 Open to me!
 For I will show you the places Nobody knows,
 And, if you like,
 The perfect places of Sleep.

e.e. cummings

"direction no longer matters."

Navidson stops and lights four magnesium flares which he throws as far as
 he can to the
 right and left.

Then he hikes down a hundred yards and lights four more flares.

After the third time, he turns around
 and
 relying on a timed exposure
 photographs
 the twelve
 flares.

The first image captures twelve holes of light.
 In the second image, however, the flares seem much further away.
 By the third image, they appear only as streaks,
 indicating that either

Navidson:
 it
 the
 flares
 are

or
 y
 i
 n
 f

However,
 Navidson's comments on the microcassette
 indicate his camera
 on the
 was freely
 tripod.

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e.e. cummings "l(a" (left), *House of leaves* (right)

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e.e. cummings

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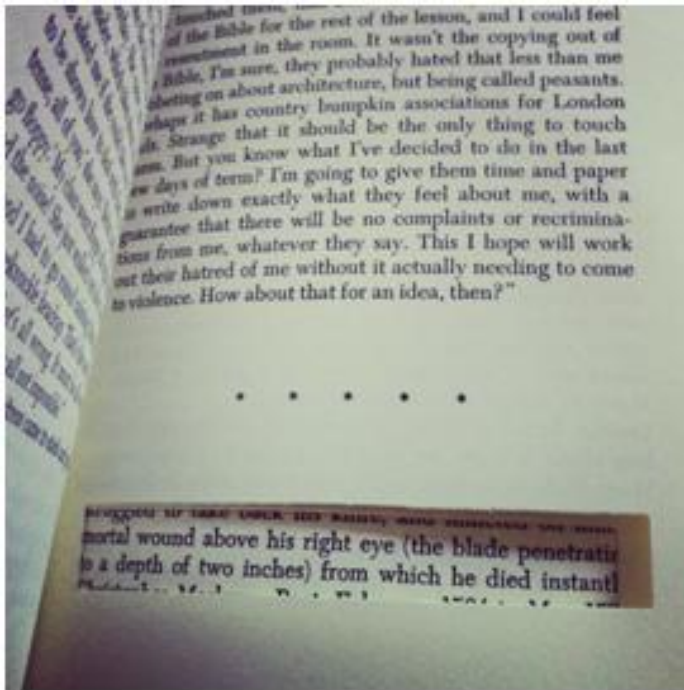
Y E G
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What miracle is this? This giant tree,
 It stands ten thousand feet high
 but doesn't reach the ground. Still it stands.
 Its roots must hold the sky

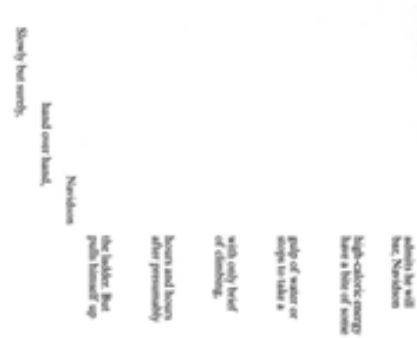
○

799

B.S. Johnson (left), *House of Leaves* (right)

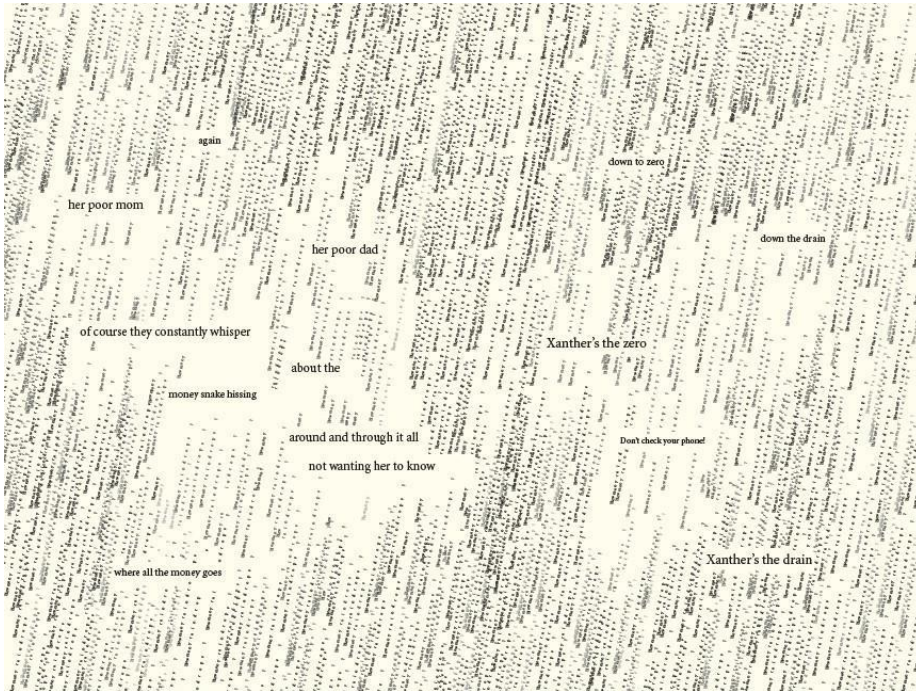


Apollinaire "fontaine" (right), *House of Leaves* "ladder" (left)



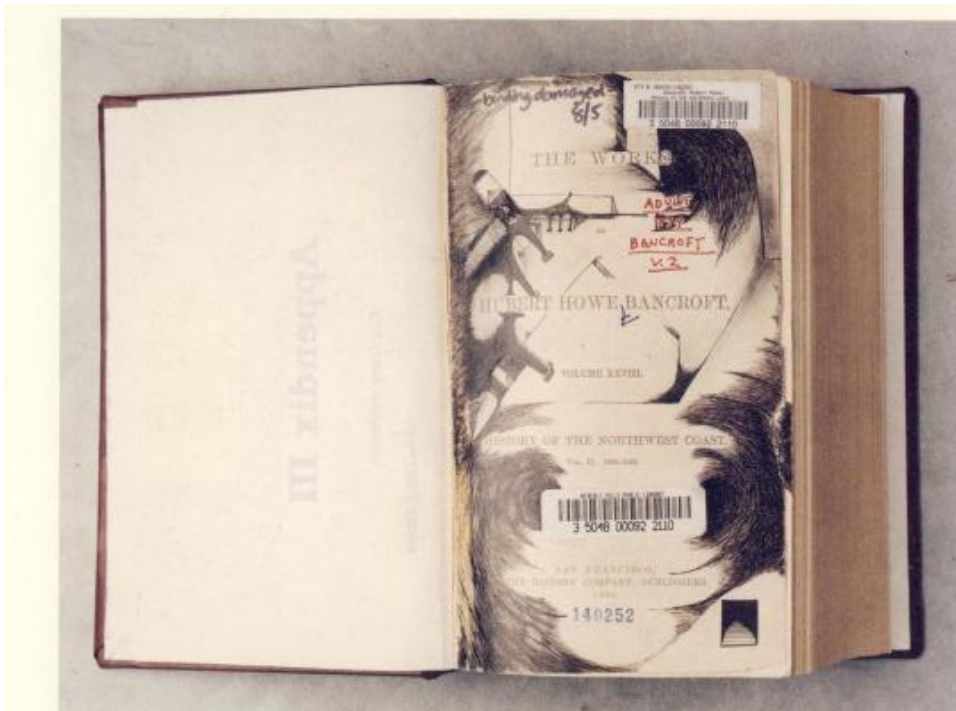
2.

The Familiar 1: One Rainy Day in May



3.

The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft, Volume XXVIII



The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft, Volume XXVIII.
San Francisco: The History Company, Publishers. 1886.

4.

Johnny's hallucinated truck accident

Of course I was fine.

Except as I started walking down the sidewalk, I watched a truck veer from its lane, flatten a stop sign, desperately try to slow, momentarily redirect itself, and then in spite of all the brakes on that monster, all the accompanying smoke and ear puncturing shrieks, it still barreled straight into me. Suddenly I understood what it meant to be weightless, flying through the air, no longer ruled by that happy dyad of gravity &

mass until I was, landing on the roof of a parked car, which turned out to be my car, a good fifteen feet away, hearing the thud but not actually feeling it. I even momentarily blacked out, but came to just in time to watch the truck, still hurtling towards me until it was actually slamming into me, causing me to think, and you're not going to believe this—"I can't believe this asshole just totaled my fucking car! Of all the cars on this street and he had to fucking trash mine!" even as all that steel was grinding into me, instantly pulverizing my legs, my pelvis, the metal from the grill wedging forward like kitchen knives, severing me from the waist down.

People started screaming.

Though not about me.

Something to do with the truck.

It was leaking all over the place.

Gas.

It had caught fire. I was going to burn.

Except it wasn't gas.

It was milk.

Only there was no milk. There was no gas. No leak either. There weren't even any people. Certainly none who were screaming. And there sure as hell wasn't any truck. I was alone. My street was empty. A tree fell on me. So heavy, it took a crane to lift it. Not even a crane could lift it. There are no trees on my block.

This has got to stop.

I have to go.

I did go.

5. Johnny reaches out to the readers

With a little luck, you'll dismiss this labor, react as Zampanò had hoped, call it needlessly complicated, pointlessly obtuse, prolix—your word—, ridiculously conceived, and you'll believe all you've said, and then you'll put it aside—though even here, just that one word, "aside", makes me shudder, for what is ever really just put aside?—and you'll carry on, eat, drink, be merry and most of all you'll sleep well.

Then again there's a good chance you won't.

This much I'm certain of: it doesn't happen immediately. You'll finish and that will be that, until a moment will come, maybe in a month, maybe a year, maybe even several years. You'll be sick or feeling troubled or deeply in love or quietly uncertain or even content for the first time in your life. It won't matter. Out of the blue, beyond any

cause you can trace, you'll suddenly realize things are not how you perceived them to be at all. For some reason, you will no longer be the person you believed you once were. You'll detect slow and subtle shifts going on all around you, more importantly shifts in

you. Worse, you'll realize it's always been shifting, like a shimmer of sorts, a vast shimmer, only dark like a room. But you won't understand why or how. You'll have forgotten what granted you this awareness in the first place.

Old shelters—television, magazines, movies—won't protect you anymore. You might try scribbling in a journal, on a napkin, maybe even in the margins of this book. That's when you'll discover you no longer trust the very walls you always took for granted. Even the hallways you've walked a hundred times will feel longer, much longer, and the shadows, any shadow at all, will suddenly seem deeper, much, much, deeper.

You might try then, as I did, to find a sky so full of stars it will blind you again. Only no sky can blind you now. Even with all that iridescent

magic up there, your eye will no longer linger on the light, it will no longer trace constellations. You'll care only about the darkness and you'll watch it for hours, for days, maybe even for years, trying in vain to believe you're some kind of indispensable, universe-appointed sentinel, as if just by looking you could actually keep it all at bay. It will get so bad you'll be afraid to look away, you'll be afraid to sleep.

Then no matter where you are, in a crowded restaurant or on some desolate street or even in the comforts of your own home, you'll watch yourself dismantle every assurance you ever lived by. You'll stand aside as a great complexity intrudes, tearing apart, piece by piece, all of your carefully conceived denials, whether deliberate or unconscious. And then for better or worse you'll turn, unable to resist,

though try to resist you still will, fighting with everything you've got not to face the thing you most dread, what is now, what will be, what has always come before, the creature you truly are, the creature we all are, buried in the nameless black of a name.

And then the nightmares will begin.

6.



Mark Z. Danielewski

Beheerder · 23 februari om 2:24

Pagina leuk vinden



Seriously, do we really need to spell this out?

Spoiler: HOL is about getting through some pretty self-obliterating stuff.

Spoiler: you cannot do it alone.

Spoiler: you will need each other.

Engage in racist, misogynistic, ad hominem attacks and you will be banned.

Why? For lots of reasons everyone should already know by now but here are a few obvious ones:

1) the reason to have a book club is to apply those magnificent critical energies to the book and NOT against each other;

2) by improving all our analytical skills, we inevitably come to recognize just how badly all constructs of hate fail and just how beautifully constructs of love succeed;

also 3) if you are engaging in racist, misogynistic, ad hominem attacks, you're likely a Russian bot. And even if you think you aren't a Russian bot, if you're guilty of the aforementioned in whatever shape — microaggression to rant — you were probably coded into creation last year outside of Samara.

Sorry. No ifs, ands, or bots allowed.

Or in other words:

Be kind. Be considerate. Be good.

Be a Hymn for Good.

And start now.

7.

Why Navidson? Why not someone else?

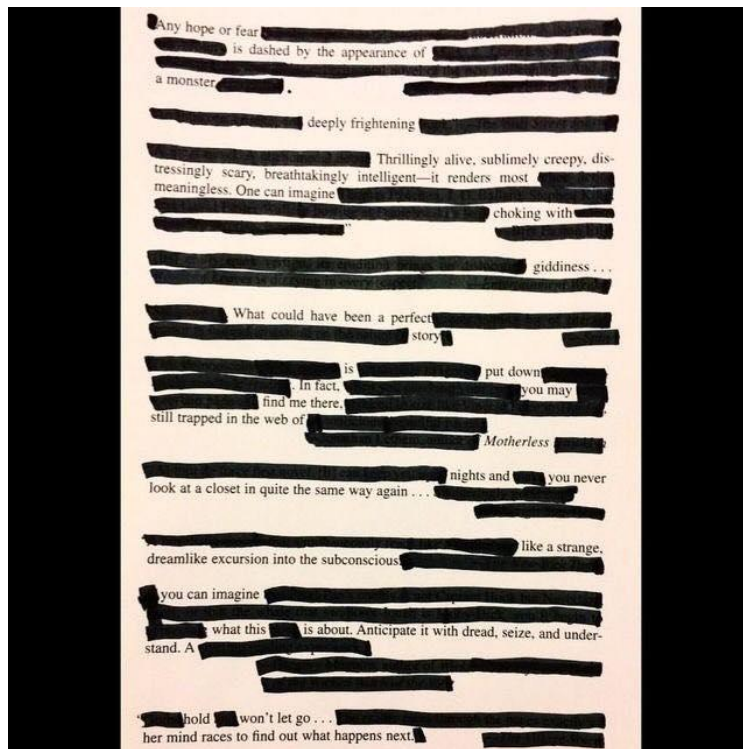
When the great Florentine howls, "*Ma io perchè venirvi? o chi 'l concede?! Io non Enēa, io non Paulo sono,*"²⁵ Homer's rival calls him a

²⁴"But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?' " — Ed.

²⁵Dante again. Again translated by Sinclair. Canto II; lines 31-32: "But I, why should I go there, and who grants it? I am not Aeneas; I am not Paul."

A question I'm often asking myself these days. Though not the Aeneas/Paul part.

8. (Courtesy of Nova M. Hodkinson)



Johnny.

For an instant then, I understood she was my ghost, a seventeen year old with gold braided hair, as wild as a will-o'-the-wisp, encountered many years ago, maybe even in another life, now encountered again, and perhaps here too to find me and restore me to some former self lost on some day no boy can ever really remember—something I write now not really even understanding though liking the sound of it just the same.

"He's so dreamy. I just love the way he smiles when he talks, even if he doesn't say that much."

Which was when I realized, a moment later, that this Ghost was none other than the domed ceiling, rising above the dining hall, somehow carrying with particular vividness, from the far wall to my well, in one magnificent arc, the confession of a girl I would never see or hear again, a confession I could not even respond to—except here, if this counts.

Sadly enough, my understanding of the rare acoustic dynamics in that hall came a fraction of a second too late, coinciding with the end of dinner, the voice vanishing as suddenly as it appeared, lost in a cumulative leaving, so that even as I continued to scan the distant edge of the dining room or the line forming to deposit trays, I could never find the girl whose expressions or even gestures might match such sentiments.

Of course, ghostly voices don't just have to rely exclusively on domed ceilings. They don't even have to be just voices.

I finally hooked up with Ashley. I went over to her place yesterday morning. Early. She lives in Venice. Her eyebrows look like flakes of sunlight. Her smile, I'm sure, burnt Rome to the ground. And for the life of me I didn't know who she was or where we'd met. For a moment I wondered if she was that voice. But before she said even a word, she held my hand and led me through her house to a patio overgrown with banana trees and rubber plants. Black, decomposing leaves covered the ground but a large hammock hung above it all.

We sat down together and I wanted to talk. I wanted to ask her who she was, where we'd met, been before, but she just smiled and held my hand as we sat down on the hammock and started to swing above all those dead leaves. She kissed

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Albert Kahn, William Van
George Howe
William Lescage
Ludwig Hoffmann,
Alfred Messel,
Theodor Fischer,
Schumacher,
Bonatz, Fritz
Peter Behrens, Paul
Bruno Schmitz,
Berg, Hans Poelzig,
Bruno Taut, Max
Eric Mendelsohn,
Dominikus Böhm,
Otto Bartning
Kier, Fritz Höger,
der Mey, Michel de
Gropius, Johann von
Hannes Meyer, Walter
Nagy, Theo van Doesburg
Loos, László Moholy-
Nagy, JIP Oud, Adolf
Rietveld, Willem Marinus
Fahrenkamp, Gerrit
Thyssens, Leend
Albert Speer, Heinrich
Walter Gropius, Kurt
Chapuis-Fredric Koenig,
Sergent, Arthur Davis,
Auguste Perret, René
François Hennebique,
Saugoy, Tony Garnier,
Pierre Charroux, Henri
Robert Mallet-Stevens,
Korhonen, André Lurcat,
Roger-Henri Expert, Paul
Osberg, Martin Nyrop,
Wahneum, Ragnar
Klim, Lars Ivar
Feder Vilhelm Jensen-
Lundsgaard, Kaare Klint,
Gerrit Rasmussen,
Sigfried Giedion, Herman
Freyer, Lars Sonck,
Edward Thomson, Carl
Kay Fisker, G. B. Hagen,
Bazzano, Paul Baumgarten,
Antonio Sant'Elia, Cesare
Piacentini, Pio Piacentini,
Frezzotti, Marcello
Giuseppe Fugazza, O.
Muzio, Angiolo Mazzoni
Larum Langens, Giovanni

Gilbert, Berram
Raymond Hood, Cass
Washington Roebling,
John Mead Howells,
Ralph Thomas Walker,
Andrew C. Mackenzie,
Stephen F. Vachon,
Alen, Paul Gnehm,
Albert Kahn, William Van
George Howe
William Lescage
Ludwig Hoffmann,
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Muzio, Angiolo Mazzoni
Larum Langens, Giovanni



14.

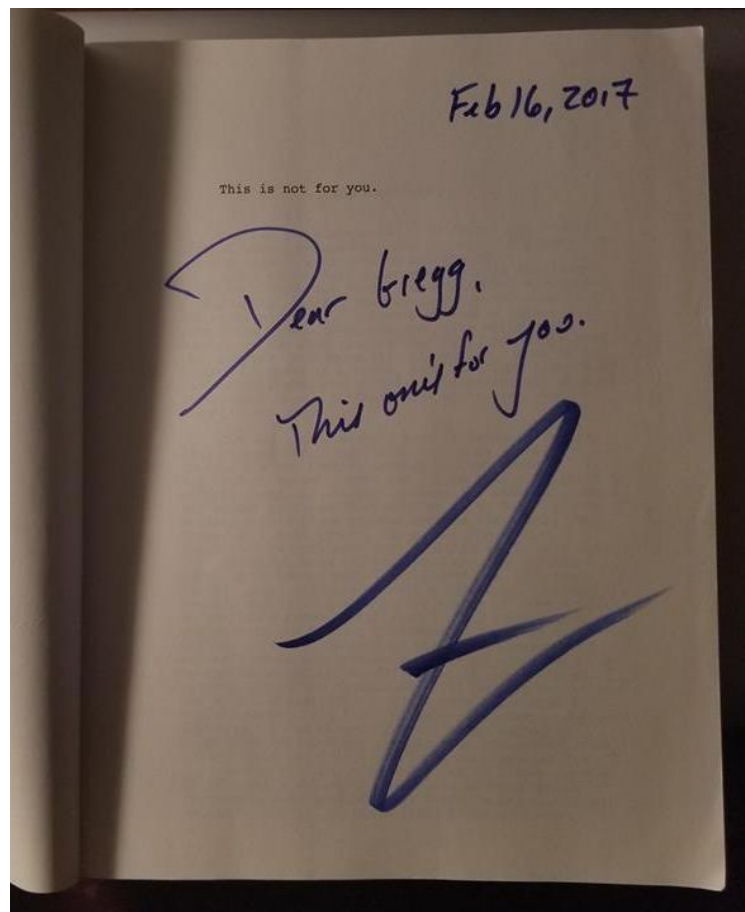
³²²“With his nightcaps and the tatters of his dressing-gown he patches up the gaps in the structure of the universe”—which he quoted in full to his wife, as well as alluded to in chapter Six of *The Interpretation of Dreams* and in a letter to Jung dated February 25, 1908.³²³

³²³Heine?³²⁴

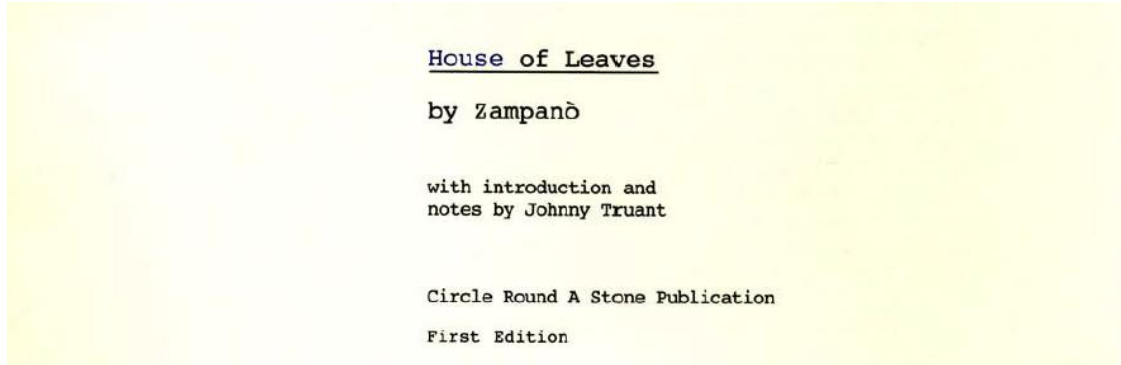
³²⁴Freud. — Ed.

✿ More than likely, an eight minute version of Karen’s abridgment became the second short now known as “Exploration #4.” However, it remains a mystery who cut out five minutes (which must have included Holloway’s suicide) before distributing it. Kevin Stanley in *What Are You Gonna Do Now, Little Man?* and *Other Tales of Grass Roots Distribution* (Cambridge: Vallombrosa Inc., 1994) points out how easy it would have been for one of the professors or authors who received a copy to make a dupe. As to why

15. (Courtesy of Gregg Kearns)



16.



17.

