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## Voices from the Darkness: A House of Leaves Experience

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Honors Research  
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## Voices from the Darkness: A *House of Leaves* Experience

*House of Leaves* is both a love letter to the written word and a demonstration of its inadequacies, a cautionary tale, a horror story, a romance, a bildungsroman, an eloquent mockery of literary criticism, and much else besides. It incorporates postmodern poly-vocal framing techniques, which are sort of a literary version of Russian nesting dolls, if the dolls all talked to each other and one was a pathological liar and one was claustrophobic and one denied the existence of any other dolls (but even if there were other dolls, this one would tell you, they're all crazy anyway). Granted, it's not a perfect analogy, but it's about as close as anyone's going to get, because *House of Leaves* is a novel that defies easy description, categorization or genre stereotypes.

In order to provide clarity<sup>1</sup>, a brief synopsis of the plot(s) is in order. *House of Leaves* revolves around the nonexistent film documentary, *The Navidson Record*, an account of a family who discovers that their house's inner dimensions are impossibly larger than its outward dimensions. The man of the house, Pulitzer-Prize-winning photographer Will Navidson, decides to explore the dark hallways that have appeared beyond a door in the living room with a team of expert spelunkers; the narrative continues on from there to document their findings and the tragedies that befall them. The man writing this nonexistent account of a fictional documentary<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As much as is possible for a text of this nature

<sup>2</sup> And commenting on it with faux-critical analysis in thorough footnotes

is a blind genius named Zampano<sup>3</sup>, who is dead throughout the novel and only represented by secondary or tertiary accounts, or through his graphomaniac scribbling. Represented as both a complementary and competing narrative is the tale, in footnotes, of the twenty-something tattoo artist and former poet, Johnny Truant, who discovers the story and pieces it together. He edits it and comments upon Zampano's footnotes in his spare time until the project consumes both him and his sanity. Finally, the manuscript falls into the hands of The Editors, a mysterious bunch who pop up now and again to decipher Johnny's digressions in yet another typeface and compile together various appendices and an index,<sup>4</sup> including letters from Johnny's institutionalized mother, fragments of Zampano's other writings, Pelican Poems, and evidence supporting or denying the existence of the House.

The uniting feature of all three narratives<sup>5</sup> is an obsession with the House on Ash Tree Lane<sup>6</sup>, manifested in various ways as the characters in question<sup>7</sup> become hypnotized by its dark depths. You see, there is nothing<sup>8</sup> there. And in that absence is an especially potent, almost violent kind of presence. And the things that Danielewski's characters do to fill that essential void at the center of the text and the House, their shouting, overlapping one another in their eagerness to be heard, is the subject of my particular interest in this text. Or, at least, a particular interest. As Johnny Truant says, "so many voices. Not that I'm unfamiliar with voices. A rattle of opinion, need and compulsion but masking what?" (Danielewski 365), a question that is answered later in the text in sinister fashion, like so: masking, as it turns out, horror. Emptiness. A void so

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<sup>3</sup> Which immediately poses the problem- if he cannot see, how could he have written such a reading of this film in his head which relies so heavily on visual cues?

<sup>4</sup> All of which interact with and comment upon all three narratives

<sup>5</sup> other than, as you may have noticed from this paper, the word 'house' always being written in blue font, possibly as a kind of hyperlink, a promise of escape from the labyrinthine corridors that remains, as it must, unfulfilled

<sup>6</sup> That is, the Navidson house and the House within it

<sup>7</sup> And the reader him/herself

<sup>8</sup> Or perhaps I should say, Nothing

staggering it becomes a nihilistic presence, unBeing devouring everything with which it comes into contact, attempting to wipe itself out of and disprove its own existence.

Naturally, if one wishes to discuss absence, nothingness, the utter lack of meaning that somehow makes meaning, one must discuss nihilism, and to discuss nihilism, one must discuss Nietzsche.<sup>9</sup> Arguably the founder of the nihilist philosophy, Nietzsche's nihilism is active in the sense that by rejecting a rejection, he cancels out the negativity inherent in a Judeo-Christian society and man is left free. The "metaphysical religious tradition" forces man to renounce and repress "his instincts, his impulses, his emotions" (Daigle 198), and it therefore renounces part of what it means to be human, the experience of the senses. Nietzsche's nihilism mandates the killing of God as a first step, but to take on His murder is a heavy responsibility; without him, the entire metaphysical religious system collapses and man must build new foundations of significance from which to construct meaning. "In the metaphysical-religious tradition, God is the guarantor of the whole system and if one rejects God, the system is left without a foundation" (Daigle 198). Man has been abandoned in the absence of or death of God, and there is no one to answer the most pressing question: what is the meaning of life? Therefore, Nietzsche's atheist-nihilism "may result in man not finding meaning anywhere"<sup>10</sup> (Daigle 199) with the most obvious answer out of commission. "One interpretation has collapsed; but because it was considered *the* interpretation it now seems as if there was no meaning at all in existence, as if everything were in vain" (Daigle 200). It is at this juncture of impossible reality with the comfort of expectations that we meet the Navidsons, struggling to first disprove and then come to terms

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<sup>9</sup> See attached notecard.

<sup>10</sup> "This is not for you," Johnny Truant says in the dedication to the text, and I reiterate- no, it's not. For me, either. Then what/who am I doing this for? If I knew the answer to that one, do you think I'd be talking to myself in footnotes? Call it whim.

with the fact that their house is a structural impossibility. It literally defies the laws of the universe. Because this interpretation, "houses will be larger outside than inside", was the only one to which they had been exposed, now nothing makes sense and Karen must struggle with her pointless Feng Shui in order to cope.

Sartre, as the heir to Nietzsche's theories, also proposes atheistic nihilism as the answer to the "alienating nature of the metaphysical-religious tradition" (Daigle 199), but unlike his predecessor, finds the system already in ruins and can "adopt a more passive attitude" (199). In his idea of the world, a person must realize that she creates both the world and her own reality and accept responsibility for it: "consciousness creates the world and itself; gives meaning to Being and accomplishes its duty, its mission of replacing the dead God as meaning-provider. In creating the world through action, consciousness gives meaning to being and saves it from absurdity and being nonsensical" (Daigle 202).

In short, Nietzsche first suggested killing God, but realized that there would be a period of transition in which humans would flounder for a new way of making meaning, once deprived of the presence of a deity to make it for them. Sartre expanded on this theory and placed the responsibility of turning the chaos and absurdity of the world into something with purpose squarely on the individual's shoulders. Unfortunately for the Navidsons, their home provides no easy answers, nor any concrete answers at all, only more questions.

Heidegger, Foucault and Dreyfus then take up the mantle of nihilism and transform it into something having to do with technology, postmodernism and the internet. For Heidegger, "technology's essence is nothing technological" (Heidegger, 1977, p. 4). It goes back, in fact, to Ancient Greek culture. While modern physical science began in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and machinic technology (as an application of 'pure science') began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of "techne"

“relates not only to the activities and skills of the artisan, but also to the arts of the mind and fine arts. Techne is a word linked to episteme. It is a form of knowing in the widest sense” (Peters 4). However, technology in its current form “is a mode of revealing,” (Heidegger, 1977, p.13) termed ‘enframing’, which forces mankind to view the world through only one limiting, ‘ordering’ lens. It “endangers 'man' in his relationship to himself and to everything that exists. Its destiny is to banish humankind into a kind of revealing which is an ordering and where this ordering holds sway, it drives out every other possibility of revealing” (p. 27). Danielewski is wary of this encroaching paradigm to the extent that he wrote out the entire novel on paper with a pen, and that he insists that he will never sell movie rights to the book. He wishes it to remain in one static (but not truly, as he proves) medium.

Meanwhile, Foucault focuses on discussing how technology has always been a part of human culture and critical to self-formation and exploration. There are four major types of technology:

“technologies of production; technologies of signs systems; technologies of power; and technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect ...operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.” (Foucault, 1988, p. 18)

Next, Dreyfus takes a post-Nietzschean stance on the internet, the body and where technology is at crossroads<sup>11</sup> with the two.

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<sup>11</sup> And cross purposes

"As long as we continue to affirm our bodies, the Net can be useful to us in spite of its tendency to offer the worst of a series of asymmetric trade-offs: economy over efficiency in education, the virtual over the real in our relation to things and people, and anonymity over commitment in our lives. But, in using it, we have to remember that our culture has already fallen twice for the Platonic/Christian temptation to try to get rid of our vulnerable bodies, and has ended in nihilism. This time around we must resist this temptation and affirm our bodies, not in spite of their finitude and vulnerability, but because, without our bodies, as Nietzsche saw, we would be literally nothing" (Dreyfus, 2001, pp. 106-7).

The body, in short, is quite literally everything. Without it, we lose "the source of our sense of our grip on reality" (Dreyfus, 2001 p. 107). Therefore, his the technological enframing of being stands at the door. It contains both the danger and the saving power. If we allow it to transcend the limits of the body, we will also allow it to remove, forget, or separate us from our moods, our cultural location and belongingness, our finitude and vulnerability, our animality that helps comprise our linguistic and cultural identities, and also the meaning we give our lives. By leaving the body behind we will succumb to the same nihilistic impulses in our culture that began with Platonism and was repeated by Christianity" (Peters 7).

The uncanny, that feeling of bodilessness, of being in dangerous limbo, plays a large role in the suspense/horror-movie aspect of the novel, and so, not to discuss two major theorists on the uncanny and the way their contradictory ideas come to parallel fruition in the main and auxiliary stories would be neglectful. Jentsch says, regarding the uncanny, that it is an effect caused by something new or unknown, whereas Freud argues that it is just the opposite, the repressed

skeletons in our metaphorical closet that “everything that should have remained secret and concealed, and nonetheless [have] come to light” suddenly and without warning. In *House of Leaves*, the “intellectual uncertainty” of not being able to explain the bizarre phenomena taking place in the house, while never completely abandoned (the “explorations” the men head are, after all, an effort to “know” the house), it is a familiar horror that ultimately usurps the Jentschian uncanny. Often, this intellectual uncertainty is recreated by an author who hides the laws by which his/her story operates from the reader, whereas in Danielewski’s text, the house merely defies reality as we know it in order to become real to the reader/character. The combined effect is one of which Poe opines, “this place feels so unfamiliar and yet I know it well/ I think I used to belong here but the only way I can tell/ is that I miss you still and I cannot find you here” (Poe, *Spanish Doll*)<sup>12</sup>. It is a house in which one can never be fully at home, defined by its absences. “*Riddling*<sup>13</sup> is an offshoot of *reading* calling to mind the participatory nature of that act- to interpret- which is all the adult<sup>14</sup> world has left when faced with the unsolvable” (Danielewski 33).

Interpretation, then, is critical to making meaning out of life, and art. Thus, the more media one can incorporate into one’s meaning-making, the better. That is, at least, the Flux artist’s stance. As a main and significant movement in what would become/was becoming/had become performance art, Fluxus is/was/will be notable for its remarkable inclusion of multimedia or “intermedia”, which by this point in history pop culture has readily embraced, but the formal art world has yet to fully accept. Its relationship with objects has shaped punk music

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<sup>12</sup> The song goes on to mention a Spanish Doll, presumably the one given to Daisy in the text; yet another way in which a source outside the novel parallels it, or, dare I say, echoes it?

<sup>13</sup> Why is a raven like a writing desk?

<sup>14</sup> What do children have as recourse that adults do not? Acceptance?



culture, with the smashing of guitars on stage<sup>15</sup> and the destroying of valuable works of art or rare books as a performance. While Fluxus, by its very nature and name, has no set explanation or definition, it was and remains a group of experimental artists who got together from around the world in the 60s and 70s and mucked about with the idea of multimedia performance, and that anything can be art, an experience can be art. As a brief synopsis of the history of Fluxus, have a non-answer:

“Most Fluxus artists all over the world were doing Fluxus-like work before there was something called Fluxus. So if you were in Denmark, you learned this through Eric Andersen and his experience of *Bewogen Beweging*, or "Moving Movement," which was an historic kinetic art show from the 1960s. If you were in Germany, you found it among the students of Karlheinz Stockhausen and the Darmstadt circle—who were talking about serialism and experimental musical structure in a way that a student of Cage never would. If you're talking to one of the Japanese Fluxus artists, there's a good chance they met at the University of Tokyo, and had some relationship to Group Ongaku, which was another experimental musical group. Most of these scenes had some connection to music: some of the artists were training to be involved in music professionally, although most of them were actually discovering music as an "other"—a structure or practice distinct from forms more traditional to the art world, such as painting” (from an interview with the daughter of Dick Higgins, predominant Fluxus artist and theorist).

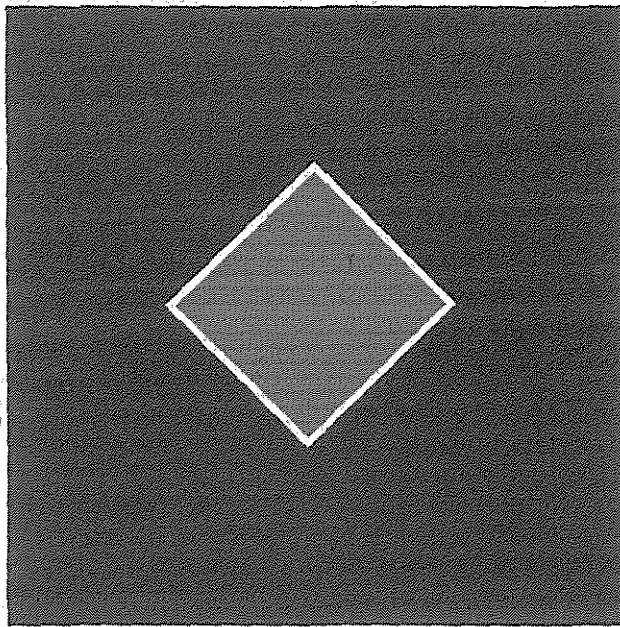
And we cannot escape from Heidegger, who has noted that in handling objects, those objects reveal themselves to us. Additionally, and relevant for my project, one's experience with an object is not always necessarily a happy one. The Ay-O boxes were a Fluxus installment in

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<sup>15</sup> Now a trope in itself

which the audience stuck their fingers into a box with a hole in it, and the box was full of pins, or rusty razor blades, or something equally distressing. Ontological truth, unfashionable as it now may be, was explored in detailed in the Fluxus movement, in addition to the sense that “there's some level just above that reality... where you touch something and it touches you back, or you break something and it's broken in terms of your own body, and your own self.” And for me, at least, the most interesting piece of this process is that of the relationship of the performer to the performance, the body in peril, as it were, as spoken of in this excerpt below, about a Dick Higgins piece entitled “Danger Music no. 17”:

“The score for that piece reads: “Scream! Scream! Scream! Scream! Scream! Scream!” And the way it's conventionally performed is: you scream as loud as you can until you pretty much lose your voice. I actually did it last week in Amsterdam--twice in one night--and my throat hurt for 10 days. But I remember coming down the stairs when I was about 4, and there was a group of people in our living room. I came around the corner just as my father started the piece, and it was *existential*. It parent being of actors and experience this at a child's this is a your parent in this strange and the not-real. I was in a tunnel of it, and all I boring into me. about 11 or 12, I Canada, and at working with these very large 20 feet high. The big book, which book of in 1968-- pop-up you could walk from page to page. Well, she had this freestanding "page" she



<sup>16</sup> Although I run the risk of pedantries here, this particular formatting constraint is used in the novel itself to disrupt, distort and otherwise play with the notions of book-as-house, text-as-object, and the colors black and blue are used throughout the chapter in question.

was cutting with a blowtorch, and then she would very rapidly separate the two pieces of burning plastic with her hand. And her hand ignited. I remember sitting in the audience thinking, "Oh shit! My mother's *on fire!*" But then she put it out on her clothes, and continued with the performance. I sat there in a panic, while the rest of the audience went on to watch the piece, figuring she probably hadn't seriously hurt herself. Well, she had *third-degree burns*--the plastic had adhered to her skin, and she still has a white line down her arm. So there are those extremely strange moments, which any child of a really invested creative professional gets. Maybe that's the difference between being the child of someone who designs books, and being the child of someone who's in performance--the performer's whole body is in it, and at that point, as a child, you're no longer connected to that body. Most kids probably never experience that level of alienation from the parental body. It's so strange. For the last 20 years of his life, my father made paintings. And while he was very absorbed when he was painting, it was more about a connection to the object he was working on, which is a different gestalt. You can come in and interrupt that relationship. You *can't* interrupt the relationship between a person and a body that's on fire, or a body that's screaming at the top of its lungs. And all the Fluxus kids have that kind of story, to different degrees."

In speaking of horrifying stories, we are drawn back to the ominous, sentient nature of the text itself, the beast residing within its pages: "its resolute blackness was capable of anything, maybe even of slashing out, tearing up the floor, murdering Zampano , murdering us, maybe even murdering you" (D ix). The urgency is such that before it is too late, Johnny is compelled to finish the dead man's project, bind the book together and bury it, take away its power, kill the monster inside it. And so, the first intimation of a beast makes its appearance known, not only in the pages on the floor, but when Johnny Truant notes the claw marks in the floor of Zampano's apartment, as if *something* had dragged him away. But such a possibility is beyond Johnny's imagining at that point, and it doesn't bear thinking about, and so he tucks it away in the back of his mind where the idea festers and grows, until... but I'm getting ahead of myself. The first soft scratching of paranoia at the door officially appear in the Holloway Tape on page five, where Holloway opines in a mantra of desperate self-identification, "Holloway Roberts. Menomonie,

Wisconsin. I'm not<sup>17</sup> alone here. I'm not alone<sup>18</sup>" (Danielewski 5). The faux-critics that have analyzed the Navidson Record are firm in their conviction that "of course there's a beast! And I assure you, our belief or disbelief makes very little difference to that thing!" (D 335). The fact of the matter is that whether or not you believe, whether or not the growl exists, is a figment of a collective imagination, is attached to a creature or is something far more insidious and sinister—"a creature-darkness few can accept as pure [] absence" (D 335)—it makes no difference. Your opinion does not matter here. Documentation alone holds sway, and even that is subject to the laws unto themselves of the hallways.

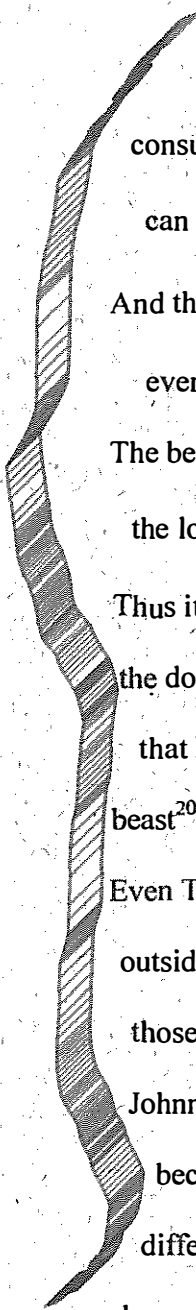
"It is no great coincidence then that eventually someone with a camera and a zest for the dangerous would show up at this Mead Hall and confront the terror at the door" (D 21). And that man, of course, is Navidson, who despite all warnings to the contrary, blithely resolves with Pandora-like stubborn curiosity, an Alice who will not be denied his bleak Wonderland where the wonder is from the lack of substance, to explore that terrible darkness, camera in hand. Now, the faux-scholarly critique embedded in the narrative argues that the House, "permanently foreign" (167), inevitably bores us, because "boredom is really a psychic defense protecting us from ourselves, from complete paralysis, by repressing, among other things, the meaning of that place, which in this case is and always has been horror" (D 167).

This horror reasserts itself at various points in the text, the main vehicle for it being the inside of Johnny Truant's head, and he is so sucked in by the beast of the shadows that when his mind

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<sup>17</sup> But he *is* alone, completely and utterly, in the heart of his own inner darkness from which he will not escape alive. One might speculate that the ruse of a monster to pursue is just his invention to keep himself from going mad, an attempt that both fails and ends tragically.

<sup>18</sup> Or, as Poe so aptly puts it in her song *Hey Pretty*, "I see a stairway so I follow it down/ into the belly of a whale where my secrets echo all around/ I can't forget I am a sole architect, I built the shadows here, I built the growlin' voice I fear". "Whale" in this lyric probably denotes the Whalestone Institute where Pelefinia was held captive.



aps like a twig under the weight of his task, under the weight of the manuscript that has consumed him, he repeats, in an eerie echo of the scholar's assessment, those words: "no place can keep me from this. Can't even keep you. I let it stretch inside me like an endless hallway. And then I open the door. Of course I'm not afraid. Why should I be? What disturbs the sleep of everyone in this hotel<sup>19</sup> — *is and always has been me*" (Danielewski 493-95, emphasis mine). The best argument for the House, for the beast, for any of it (all of it? None of it?) being true, is the low-budget filmmaking of the Navidson Record, the "absolute unaffordability of fiction. Thus it would appear that the ghost haunting the Navidson Record, continually banging against the door, is none other than the recurring threat of its own reality" (Danielewski 149), a reality that is untenable for human sanity, or indeed for life itself. The true horror of the beast-not-beast<sup>20</sup> is not what it *could* be, but what we make of it, and that which it brings out in ourselves. Even Truant has trouble distinguishing, in Zampano's manuscript, whether or not the beast is an outside presence at all, as in his editing of the text, he changes this language: "What comes for those who are never seen again has come from (according to Zampano, or 'for', according to Johnny Truant's edit) [Jed]" (Danielewski 151). This is problematic on many levels, not only because he's tampering with the text, but also because "from" versus "for" makes a huge difference: in one, Jed is the perpetrator of his own end, in the other, a hapless victim of the boogeyman. If the roar is the "growl in [his] belly [he's] scared to let through" (Poe, *Control*), that is infinitely more terrifying than if it came from an outside source, and not just because of its

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<sup>19</sup> Asylum?

<sup>20</sup> There have been many portrayals and personifications of death in literature throughout history, not all of them appearing as a skeletal figure with a scythe. Some versions even eroticize/romanticize the concept, couching fear of the unknown in terms of desire. In *House of Leaves*, however, the questionable beast serves as antithesis to all these attempts to grapple with, access or otherwise understand this force so hostile to human survival. The growl only hushes when

implications about Jed's enormous appetite<sup>21</sup>. The House truly forces its inhabitants to acknowledge the full horror of the self, the heart's "constant hunger for whatever it is it wants/ the way it stops and starts" (Poe, *Terrified Heart*). The growl, then, is both a signifier for the terror of the House and self, and oddly comforting because it is something, however irrational, to be afraid of. There is still sound, which promises<sup>22</sup> shape. The growl is that which humanity cannot voice, the primal fear under the surface that has no words. To compensate for their inability to speak of this thing that matters most, the characters clamor to babble about everything, *anything* else, smothering the page, overwhelming the reader, all sound and fury signifying nothing.

Anything but empty, all these bits of paper, all these voices, and yet, is it possible for a text of this size to ultimately have nothing to say? Or rather, it says so much<sup>23</sup> *about* nothing, it is a treatise on nothing and nothingness and the things humans do to keep it at bay. It also addresses how they react or cope when their defenses fail. Perhaps only Pelafina and/or Johnny (the same entity, two faces, mother and son of language and madness) ever fully embrace/ darkness, close as a lover, as your own skin, as god. This dark, the House's dark, is womb-like purity, purging humans of all their defenses, the House-keeper sweeping humanity under the rug, older than time or God- or like Navidson says, perhaps the House *is* God? If so, it is a deeply unforgiving deity.

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<sup>21</sup> Ms. Waltman seems incapable of making jokes in good taste. Let alone funny ones.  
-The Editors

<sup>22</sup> But never delivers

<sup>23</sup> Much Ado About Nothing?

In this unforgiving darkness, the absolute darkness of the House, there is no room for denial or rationalization: “that faceless black i[] many myths incarnate” (Danielewski 337). The blank space both on the page and in those nameless, labyrinthine hallways is always lurking at the back of the narrative. Johnny Truant’s paranoia about it expresses itself early on in the text as “something I am unable to see. Waiting. I’m afraid. It is hungry. It is immortal. Worse, it knows nothing of whim” (Danielewski 79), and when his panic attacks begin to rise up and strangle him with their monstrous shadow<sup>24</sup>, he knows that “here then was the darker side of whim” (D 150).

Whim itself seems to play a large role in the text, ordering (or not) the pages as “endless snarls of words, sometimes twisting into meaning, sometimes into nothing at all, frequently breaking apart, always branching off into other pieces I’d come across later- on old napkins, the tattered edges of an envelope, once even on the back of a postage stamp, everything and anything but empty...” (D xvii). The text talks to itself, for lack of a better word, all the time. Something Johnny Truant says will later be repeated by the Navidson Record<sup>25</sup>, or a bit of a Poe song will appear in the novel as an epigraph.

On page 518, Johnny apologizes for his abandonment of his project: “Just as you have swept through me. Just as I now sweep through you. I’m sorry, I have nothing left. Except this story.” Then, in the final words of the last paragraph of the narrative, “darkness sweeps in like a hand” (D 528) to have the last say. In this way, “hauntings,” literary and otherwise, and echoes, fill the pages with clamoring voices, all shouting over each other to be heard, babbling in many tongues to fill the void at the center of the text. “In an effort to limit confusion,” the Editors say, somewhat ironically, “we have never actually met Mr. Truant” (D 4). But the mere fact that they

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<sup>24</sup> [ ]t did have claws, they were made of shadow and if it did have te[]th, they were made of darkness” (D 338).

<sup>25</sup> Which Zampano could not have done on purpose, since Johnny’s edits were written after he finished the manuscript, unless Zampano is Johnny is Danielewski

exist to correct his corrections, whether they have interacted with him or not, creates still more confusion. Furthermore, the editors engage in a very active reading of the text, so much so that they begin to meddle with it themselves, as exemplified when Johnny works his personal life into Zampano's narrative: "Is it just coincidence that this cold water predicament of mine also appears in this chapter? Not at all. Zampano only wrote 'heater'. The word 'water' back there- I added that. Now there's an admission, eh? Hey, not fair, you cry. Hey, fuck you, I say" (D 16). Later, Johnny intrudes again to reformat the very universe now (how he has progressed from water heaters!), when Zampano's "infinite destiny" becomes, thanks to Johnny, "infinite density" (373).

But someone has clearly been tampering with the text, and not just Johnny with his water heaters—someone who set Pelafina's letters in expressionistic typeface, someone who coded her words to converse with a man she's never met, of whose existence she cannot possibly be aware, save by authorial intrusion of the most jarring sort. Even the novel's companion album cannot escape these hauntings of meaning layered atop each other, and Poe cannot resist connecting more dots that link impossible connections in her song *Dear Johnny*: "Johnny dear don't be afraid / I will keep your secret safe / bring me to the blind man who / lost you in his house of blue" (Poe). This snippet provides a clue or, if you will, another way into the text, by hinting at the relationship between Pelafina and Zampano<sup>26</sup> that is also alluded to in one of Pelafina's coded messages which asks, when deciphered, "my dear Zampano who did you lose?" (615). The answer, of course, provided elsewhere by Zampano in one of his notes: a son. Johnny takes on that role, as Zampano's inheritor and son, by cataloguing, burying his book, making it *only* a book.

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<sup>26</sup> She knows of his existence, even though, unless she and he or she and Johnny are the same individual, this would present a logical impossibility



But it is never *only* a book, in content or in style. The words on the page almost always mirror, in format or lack thereof, what is happening either for the reader or the characters (reader-as-character?<sup>27</sup>). The text takes on properties of ascent and descent, the layout mirroring a ladder when Navidson climbs, then echoing the skittering off the page altogether and leaving the blank white space to its own devices. When, in the narrative, Navidson's rope breaks, it is echoed by two pages upon which, amidst white silence, appear the letters "(sn)-" (D 294) "-a-" (D 295).

Even the footnotes, the paratext, get in on the action- beginning on pages 114 and 115, they start to loop around each other in labyrinthine form, referencing both each other and footnotes that simply don't exist. They don't just go forward in numerical order, but also backward, after turning upside down and sideways on the page (beginning on 146). They bury themselves inside other footnotes just for spite, and transform the text into a living paradox- when, in Appendix II E, Pelefinia Lievre tells her son Johnny to mark the bottom right hand corner of his next letter with a check mark to indicate that he received her coded message, the check mark actually appears, but back on page 97 within the Navidson Record, sandwiched next to a footnote.

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<sup>27</sup> A subject tackled at some length in both Reader-Response theory and presentation of performance with the Brechtian-Artaudian aesthetic. Whereas the former focuses more on the cathartic response of the audience to the performance and/or text and what they bring to it in terms of experience, memory and prior judgment, the latter engages the audience on a more visceral (less intellectual, although it would be unfair to say that these theories of performance have no academic component, since they are routinely studied in classrooms and universities all over the western hemisphere- although, of course, the methodology of such engagement with their theories is rarely practical, particularly in a lecture-format setting, and as such negates the audience engagement for which the theorists in question had hoped) level, forcing the receptor out of his/her comfort zone and into a space wherein he or she may not feel entirely safe or engaged (because alienation is another technique utilized in such performances, and this text, wherein Danielewski forces the reader to view the text as an object and calls into question the unspoken laws of engagement with a novel as a physical, three-dimensional force exerting itself upon its consumers)

w i t h t h e p e r f o r m a n c e

Johnny's digressions<sup>28</sup> also frustrate the reader and complicate the process of making sense out of the novel- he rambles on about Thumper, his stripper, for paragraphs at a time on page 53, and then tells the reader that he or she can ignore that last paragraph if it doesn't apply, but having already read past it, the digression becomes impossible to ignore or skip. The Editors, helpful as always, note his decline to comment on that particular section. Furthermore, his footnotes, most of which are drug-addled, filled with half-truths and lies, are often used to drown out his own inner madness and/or darkness. As Poe says, "I built the growling voice I fear" – and if the novel is indeed built and constructed like a house, then the only floor not haunted by fear of the dark, the emptiness the house represents, is the attic where The Editors live, secure in their knowledge that Johnny is crazy, they will never have to actually interact with him, and that the entire novel is an academic case study- as evidenced by the appendices- of a disturbed mind.

But from our privileged position as readers (or in this case, participants) in the novel, we are not just observing Johnny's descent into madness, but into the same dark obsession with the House that the Editors and the other characters have. As it says in the Introduction, "Johnny is not just a disturbed mind, but a disturbed mind that is also a disturbed mind." This is not to say that Johnny is not a disturbed mind, but that he is a disturbed mind that is also a disturbed mind. The Editors, who are so helpful, are also so helpful that they never interact with Johnny, and that the entire novel is an academic case study- as evidenced by the appendices- of a disturbed mind.

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<sup>28</sup> *Is it the perfume from a dress that makes me so digress?*

writes a line, unless Johnny is Zampanò is Navidson, in which case the Pelican<sup>29</sup> poems are full of words, full of meaning, but making that assumption is perhaps unwise. Better to say that all narrators are connected, the Russian nesting dolls are fused together and only semantics can definitively say whether they are one or many or *e pluribus unum*, while others tell stories—lies—to help [them] look away. But I guess that's nothing new. We all create stories to protect ourselves" (Danilewski 20).

There is supreme skepticism about the possibility of multiple versions of the text, and in a critical analysis in 2005, one commentator questions the existence of such “editions”:

<sup>29</sup> A Pelican is both a bird and a publishing company subsidiary. The word Pelican has three syllables, broken up like so: “pel-i-can”, emphasis on the first syllable. When viewed from the Latinate root, prefix and suffix in this manner, one can see that the phrase “I can” appears in “pelican”, giving the word connotations of both hope and determination.  
 - Lyonesse, G.A. *The Little Bird that Could*. Pelican Publishing, NY: 2004.

<sup>30</sup> But from our privileged position as readers (or in this case, perhaps not so privileged), we know that Johnny is descending, not into madness, but into the same dark obsession with the House that gripped Zampanò and Navidson. As it now grips us. We, certainly, considering the subject of this honors research project, though I'd like to think my interest is academic instead of obsessive. But that's really the question, isn't it? Where can you draw the line between academia and personal interest, between personal interest and obsession, between obsession and Johnny's spiral into darkness? Poets, writers, artists, they all straddle that line... some of them, like Samuel Coleridge, fall from their perch and seek chemical release from the words building inside them that somehow they cannot put to paper, drowning in dreams (much like Johnny, a tortured poet who never writes a line, unless Johnny is Zampanò is Navidson, in which case the Pelican<sup>29</sup> poems are full of words, full of meaning, but making that assumption is perhaps unwise. Better to say that all narrators are connected, the Russian nesting dolls are fused together and only semantics can definitively say whether they are one or many or *e pluribus unum*), while others tell stories—lies—to help [them] look away. But I guess that's nothing new. We all create stories to protect ourselves" (Danilewski 20).

“There is, if one can trust even the copyright page of a text such as this, an “incomplete” edition (which may be the original, and no longer available, internet edition) in which there is no color in the text and the appendices are missing; a “black & white” edition (the version published in Europe and used throughout this essay); two “2-color” editions, a version in which “house” appears in blue and a version in which “minotaur” and struck passages appear in red; and, finally, a speculative “full-color” edition in which “house” appears in blue and “minotaur” and struck passages are struck line in chapter 21 appearing in purple, and braille and color plates (this exists only in Danielewski’s collection, if at all)” (Slocombe 106-7).

Of course, in perfect black irony<sup>31</sup>, the very full-color edition of which the critic speaks disbelievingly<sup>32</sup> is the edition with which I have worked and used as a basis for this analysis. Thus, the speculation by previous theorists that the full-color edition of the book I now have in my hands did not exist at all, was just another red herring (or should I say minotaur<sup>33</sup>) by the author. So nothing can be confirmed as concrete or real, not the book I hold or, then, me. I too become part of the story. Add another floor to the house Zampano(?)/Danielewski built. Even less certain is that I have a complete work in my hands- in the online release, Johnny never encountered the band members who handed him a copy of the book he edited- is it a paradox? If

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<sup>31</sup> If you wish for a “clean”, undamaged copy of the work in your hands or are allergic to this particular brand of creativity, you may indicate your request by posting a letter to  
Melanie Waltman  
313 A, Harriett Hall, Illinois Wesleyan Campus  
201 East Emerson St,  
Bloomington, IL 61701  
or, alternatively, check the box.

<sup>32</sup> If your [redacted] has already been filled in with black and therefore cannot be checked, complaints can be sent to the manufacturer at [redacted]

<sup>33</sup> Is she trying to be “punny” here?  
-MSCSJ (see above)

the book is treated as a finished and complete whole, then yes, but if it is continually changing its own history, rewriting itself, then there are no paradoxes. There is no coincidence. There is no whim, only hundreds if not thousands of Johnny Truants annotating away, creating unique editions of the text- and the book not only encourages such margin-writing, it demands it at times. In the Whalestone letters you must translate Pelefina's code for yourself or be resigned to a lack of knowledge- so many paths one can follow to read- flipping between appendix and Johnny, reading the central story of the House all the way through, reading front to back (a challenge with all those footnotes), and what do you prioritize? No two experiences will ever be alike, no two people gloss the same way. Your associations are not mine. Even if we have the same edition<sup>34</sup> in our hands, we are not and will never be holding the same book.

What this paradoxical reality proves, other than that Danielewski wishes to break the brains of all who wish to look critically at his work, has yet to be seen, but it is an incontrovertible fact that break us he does, at every turn, even in our mundane but pervasive assumption that the pages of books are opaque. Or that there is a difference between breaking the fourth wall and creating impossibilities within the frames with which he has set himself, as when Navidson, lured back to the deadly House for the last time, trapped in those "curmurring walls [that] still sing the song of our end" (123), turn to the novel in his possession: yes, you guessed it, *House of Leaves*. He reads the novel in which he dwells, even as he burns the pages for light to read by, the narrative consuming itself and him with it. Navidson returns to the siren song of the voice to drown in the wordless<sup>35</sup> music of his stanza, and there is silence. Although not for long.

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<sup>34</sup> The existence of which is continually called into question

<sup>35</sup> Actually not wordless at all- his humming "Help" just goes to show that there *is* a Beatles song for *every* occasion. Take that, Mick Jagger.-Harris, X. "Counterculture CounterClockwise: A Brief History of Music in Subversive Literature." *OK Gone Music Magazine* 89:1 (1999) 11-16.

“I have nothing,” Johnny says, and yet he does; there is always a story, even at the end<sup>36</sup> of all things. Even there, Navidson reads- the artistic and creative impulse is also destructive, self-immolating, except in this case, art rises from the ash<sup>37</sup> that “spreads like printer’s ink over everything, transforming each corner, closet and corridor into that awful dark” (345).

Then there is the matter that, due to not only the multiple editions floating around but also the variety of languages, literary references to Shakespeare, the Bible, Rushdie, Borges’ Menard/Cervante *Don Quixote* stunt, false annotations that are veiled allusions to *The Wasteland*<sup>38</sup>, and the multiple ways in which to “enter” the text, my reading will never be the same as yours. The book is by nature an intensely personal experience which calls up very individual associations and indeed demands the reader scribble in the margins, decode the secret language of madness<sup>39</sup> and come to his or her own conclusions about the<sup>40</sup> reality of Ash Tree Lane, and what it means. In this way, it is very much like theatre: everyone goes to see the same show and comes away having seen a different one than the person sitting next to them. This concept was very much in mind for the author while he was writing, and he notes that he ended up making “something akin to a vast literal theatre, one that the reader could use to project his or her own histories and anxieties” (Danielewski 107), a three-character play that has something for everyone who reads it. Danielewski even confesses to taking his structural influences not from other experimental novels, which he never read, but from “the theater, especially Shakespeare,

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<sup>36</sup> Now she’s channeling Samwise Gamgee and Frodo Baggins? –The Editors

<sup>37</sup> There is also, evidently, a Dan Fogelberg song for every occasion. “Like A Phoenix” is obliquely referenced here.  
–The Pop Culture Editors


<sup>38</sup> A fictional article called “the Third Beside You” on page 42 in a footnote, which alludes to the *Wasteland*’s “who is that third beside you?”

<sup>39</sup> And the secret madness of language

<sup>40</sup> Un-

who remains unrivaled in his ability to handle numerous narrative threads and cross-commenting characters” (Danielewski 114).

The subject of theatre pops up several times in the text, most pointedly in Tom’s “barricade<sup>41</sup> theatre” and his comedic monologues, both which he constructs in order to keep the dark hallways at bay. Tom with his shadow puppetry, his humorous stories- Tom is the artist who creates being out of non-being, who turns the unknown looming darkness into Mr. Monster, and then turns Mr. Monster into a mockery of children’s stories, which he kills with the flashlight. At the end of the day, Tom’s theatre/theatrics are a defense mechanism: he literally barricades the door. Theatre is a step removed from reality, which he uses to keep the world, at bay- just like his alcoholism and his pot-smoking, theatre is used as a drug, as a chemical line of defense, as Lude might say and Johnny might do. However, the House cannot tolerate being sectioned off, and destroys both the barricade and Tom himself: “the devouring of one theatre of the absurd leads to another. And as is true in both cases, no amount of monologue, costume or wit can defer the insistent gravity of that void. As theatre critic Tony K Rich once remarked, “The only option is a quick exit stage left, and I’d also advise a cab to the airport,” (D 343).

**R** <sup>42</sup>  
The “terrible thought” that has torn away Johnny’s sanity, in addition to patience and wit, which he must “set a trap for” (Poe, *Terrible Thought*) lest it shred his mind further, is

<sup>41</sup> Somewhere beyond the barricade is there a world you long to see? When the beating of your heart echoes the beating of the drums, it is the future that we bring when tomorrow comes -*Les Miserables*.

<sup>42</sup> “rzz” is Hebrew, meaning “to tear apart, to shatter” (D 250), and this is what Zampano attempts to do to his text (the Jacob and Esau portions), while the shreds are salvaged and divided on the page with an extension of the Hebrew root “rzz”

that of the anagram embedded in The Minotaur: O Im he Truant. Ultimately, he succumbs to his obsession, resulting in the mortification of his senses and his sense: "though I can see, I walk in total darkness. And though I feel, I care even less than I see. Surprised, really? Has nothing prepared you for this? Here then at long last is my darkness" (493-95). This is the section in which he turns into the vengeful figure of the House, murderous, ravenous, knowing nothing of whim, encountering and embracing the dream in which he is the deformed monstrous son of Minos and his utterly lovely mother tenderly hacks him to bits.

Johnny's darkness is also his madness, and the madness of his mother and her house, as Poe comments in her song *Could've gone mad*: "another day and I might have betrayed every scruple I have to keep a hold of myself... Father, I've been in her house / I've experienced her, her madness / and I rejected the entire experience" (Poe). In the song of the same title as the novel, Poe continues to express doubt that anyone can survive, let alone live in, the darkness of the House: "I wasn't sure if I'm going to survive this horror/ no one should brave the underworld alone" (Poe, *House of Leaves*), a quotation that appears as an epigraph to a later chapter.

engaging the novel with the outside world, and more significantly, family with family (Poe is the stage name for Danielewski's sister, who salvaged the pieces of the short story, 'Redwood', which would become the seed for *House of Leaves*).

The truth, hideous and horrifying, is the "terrible thought" Zampano fears he has written down in his graphomaniac blind scribbling, and so into this ever present darkness, it is appropriate that we have a blind man as our guide. He knows it well but what he knows he cannot share or will not tell- Orpheus was punished for looking back, perhaps Zampano's blindness is his curse for seeing that which humans cannot and survive? He was eventually taken by the creature-darkness and the claw marks left in the wood were evidence that he was in tune



with something the rest of the world could not acknowledge as real. The seers are always blind in mythology, Greek particularly- the things they see must be hidden from the rest of the world through a literal veil-blindfold. Their earthly sight is taken so that they can be blessed or cursed with divine vision, and their consecrated eyes must be protected.

I make, and can make, no pretense to a conclusion. This work defies and yet demands analysis and close-reading, and it defies a singular or even multiple conclusion(s). I can only leave you with the same advice that Navidson gives those who would seek his house and its secrets—there is Nothing there. Beware. Engage, certainly. Obsess, certainly. Puzzle over and meditate on its immortal music, its bleakest of mirrors into human nature. But beware.

Ah

yes

We

Always

must

Freud

To

his

Come

Back

And

slips

are

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any  
In paper

Of

significant

merit,

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Anyone?