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**Metaleptic Transgression and
Traumatic Experience:
The "empty rooms, long hallways,
and dead ends" of *House of Leaves***

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Abstract

Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* is a stunningly complex work, blending elements of the traditional haunted house tale, postmodernism, and film analysis with innovative approaches to textuality and to the format of the novel. This thesis explores *House of Leaves* with regard to many of these elements, presenting a reading which unifies its various modes of discourse by relating them back to the labyrinth at its centre. Using Genette's concepts of diegetic level and metalepsis, it is argued that the narrative structure of *House of Leaves* echoes the qualities of the labyrinth (infinite space, shifting dimensions, emptiness), in that the heterarchical natures of both labyrinth and text confront the reader with instances of logical paradox. This violation of physical spaces and narratological conventions, moreover, is reflected in the complexity of the novel with regard to narrative unreliability, textual manipulation, and the dismantling of the concepts of authorship and the sacred text. Finally, it is argued that the labyrinth and its effects on the narrative represent traumatic experience, that the absence at its centre and the violations of physical laws, narrative coherence, and semantic meaning are related to the ontological uncertainty which suffering or grief engenders.

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Introduction

Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* is equal parts haunted house story, satire of academia, and postmodern exemplar, a complex masterpiece which is perhaps more worthy of Mary McCarthy's summation of *Pale Fire* than Vladimir Nabokov's work itself: "[A] Jack-in-the-box, a Faberge gem, a clockwork toy, a chess problem, an infernal machine, a trap to catch reviewers, a cat-and-mouse game, a do-it-yourself novel" ("A Bolt From The Blue"). Following on from contemporaries such as David Foster Wallace, as well as forebears including Borges and, of course, Nabokov, Danielewski toys with the established conventions of plot, narrative, textuality, and authorship, presenting the reader with a literary work which combines the conventions of the traditional novel with elements of critifiction, para- and metatextuality, and concrete poetry. As Belletto states:

With multiple fonts and different colored inks, unconventional printing that forces readers to physically turn the book to varying degrees, hundreds of footnotes, complex appendices including obituaries, collages, photographs of paintings, dioramas and graphic novels, and an index, *House of Leaves* is a 709-page ride through lexical playfields that would leave many readers exhilarated if ultimately perplexed. (99)

At the heart of the novel is a textual mediation of *The Navidson Record*, a film made by the titular family which documents their experiences in their new house on Ash Tree Lane in suburban Virginia. What begins as an effort to document the moving-in process, however, becomes a chronicle of bizarre spatial anomalies; the interior of the house is found to be greater than the exterior, and a hallway appears in the living room which leads to an endless maze of dark, empty corridors. As the film continues, the Navidsons explore this labyrinth, encountering impossible architecture - a staircase deeper than the circumference of the earth, corridors which double back on themselves without ever intersecting - bewildering spatial shifts, and, possibly, the 'monster' at its centre. In so doing, each character is affected physically and mentally, confronted with the dangers posed by an impossible space and their own psychology. To some, this labyrinth becomes an obsession, a territory to be conquered,

to others a source of utmost terror; all of these experiences, however, are linked by the consuming effect, both literal and metaphorical, of its blank, lightless expanse.

The Navidson Record is the subject of, and mediated by, a pseudo-academic text by a mysterious, elderly eccentric named Zampanò. Titled 'The Navidson Record'¹, this critical work is hundreds of pages long and is as much filmic analysis as it is strange, vaguely personal, asides, extended digressions of tangential relevance, and a case study in the appropriation of academic style over interpretive or meaningful substance. In his discussion, Zampanò incorporates philosophy (from Derrida and Foucault to Heidegger and Nietzsche), mythology (the minotaur, Narcissus and the nymph Echo), etymology, architectural studies, psychology, linguistics, quantum theory, and many more fields in order to deconstruct the film and its subjects, often with little or no relevance to the film or its exegesis.

When Zampanò dies in mysterious circumstances, his work is inherited by Johnny Truant, a tattoo shop assistant and Los Angeles degenerate with a history of drug abuse, a penchant for casual sex, and an unusually artistic temperament. The manuscript of 'The Navidson Record' is fragmentary in the extreme:

As I discovered, there 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 (xvii)

In spite of the jumbled state of the text, Johnny gradually becomes absorbed by its contents, eventually assembling it into a coherent work - and this is what the reader of *House of Leaves* holds in their hands. 'The Navidson Record', however, begins to negatively affect Johnny; he becomes paranoid and starts to hallucinate, as elements of the film and Zampanò's analysis appear within his reality, affecting his everyday life. This mental collapse, paralleling the events of *The Navidson Record*, is explicated through his notes accompanying Zampanò's work. At times these are editorial, explaining or commenting upon some peculiarity of the text, but they become increasingly schizophrenic as they continue, being appended haphazardly to the body of the text and occasionally extruding into the space ordinarily

¹ The typographical distinction between *The Navidson Record* and 'The Navidson Record' will be followed throughout this thesis, with the former referring to the film, and the latter to the critical exegesis based upon the former.

reserved for it, whole pages of the novel being consumed by Johnny's experiences. As *House of Leaves* unfolds, it becomes ever more complicated; Johnny's footnotes impinge upon Zampanò's text, which becomes increasingly complex, frequent digressions obscuring *The Navidson Record* itself.

To approach *House of Leaves* as a critic is to attempt to work with a text which actively satirises the act of literary interpretation. We find this in Zampanò's pompous style, in Johnny's eclectic and often dismissive reactions to it, in the fact that the index in the back of the novel lists not only 'fuck', 'fucker', and 'fucking' but also 'and', along with a long list of words denoted as 'DNE' - presumably 'Does Not Exist'. More crucially, though, *House of Leaves* actively and openly manipulates the concepts of reality, truth, and authority. In Johnny's introduction to 'The Navidson Record', we find that Zampanò was not only "blind as a bat" but that *The Navidson Record* would appear to not exist at all: "You can look, I have, but no matter how long you search you will never find The Navidson Record in theaters or video stores" (xix-xxi). Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, then - indeed, the house at the centre of it all - is built on a shifting foundation of evasions and contradictions, and these literal and metaphorical paradoxes, like the house, expand as the novel continues, violating and obscuring narratological cohesion.

It is perhaps this, the fundamentally unappealing nature of the text with regard to the possibility of arriving at specific or conclusive interpretations, that has led to the emergence of a small (though continually expanding) corpus of criticism related to *House of Leaves* which focuses on the context and mechanics of the text, rather than the novel itself. Many scholarly discussions of *House of Leaves* focus on its relation to the internet and new media, as is exemplified by Pressman's postulation of digital technology as "the 'spectre' in the background [...] it is the thing you know is there but can't see that is the most frightening" (111). Similarly, Chanen analyses the novel in relation to digital network structure, while Hansen and Davidson focus on new media and other digital aspects. Another strand of *House of Leaves* criticism relates to its "spatial form" (Brick 2), focusing on Danielewski's innovative usage of formatting, typesetting, intertextuality, and colour (Barton; Gibbons; Kilgore), and yet another focuses on the postmodern (Graulund; Noah) or post-postmodern (Hemmingson, Toth) context of the novel, often in relation to contemporaries such as Wallace (Herring). The influence of Borges (Hamilton; D'Ambrosio) and Jackson's *The*

Haunting of Hill House (Kröger) have been explored², as have the ideologies of Freud (Bemong), Lacan (Lord), and nihilism (Slocombe) - leaving a slim selection of texts which focus on themes such as trauma (Dawson), the labyrinth (Cox), narrative beginnings (Shastri), or the problems of interpretation (Belletto; Hagood).

The perceived failing of many of these approaches is that they, by and large, fall into two broad categories: Some examine one or more of the unusual features of *House of Leaves* (textual layout, hypertextual structure, ramifications for the status of the postmodern genre), treating the novel as something of an oddity and exclusively discussing the ways in which it differs from mainstream literature; others focus on one particular narrative or thematic aspect, often utilising only one section of the text or narrator as a means of discussing one component of the whole. Dawson's discussion of trauma, for example, relates all instances back to Johnny, one of three primary narrators in the novel, while discussions of the postmodern aspects of the text with regard to Danielewski's influences, while fruitful in terms of discussing where the text is coming *from*, have little bearing on our understanding of a novel which offers so much in the way of symbolism and narrative innovation. Critics, then, appear to have been perhaps too quick to reduce *House of Leaves* to its component parts in order to analyse these, often forcing an entirely foreign context onto the novel which does little to offer a reading of the novel that acknowledges its qualities as a carefully constructed literary artwork - as is the case for the discussions related to the internet and digital media, for Danielewski wrote the novel wholly with pencil and paper (McCaffery and Gregory, 117) and the text itself features very few references to the World Wide Web³. Moreover, these approaches evince an unwillingness to engage with *House of Leaves* as a complex, multifaceted text, "a book deeply concerned with exploring what a novel is (or might be)"

² Additionally, almost every scholarly discussion of *House of Leaves* introduces it in relation to Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, including this one; there are, of course, many parallels between the two - critifiction, narrative unreliability, inventive use of paratexts, and so on - and so the *Pale Fire* analogy functions well with regard to establishing the complexities of *House of Leaves*. Discussions of the *influence* of the novel on the development of *House of Leaves* are, however, rather hampered by Danielewski's claim to not have read *Pale Fire* (McCaffery and Gregory 114).

³ Hansen, for example, writes that "the house is nothing if not a figure for the digital" (609), and a multitude of critics have been quick to state that the fact that the word 'house' (and its variants; 'haus' and 'maison', for example) is always printed in blue in the novel is related to the usage of hyperlinks on the internet (Brick 6; Hansen 598; Chanen 174; Davidson 76; Lord 466; Pressman 108). While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to contest such a claim in detail, it would seem to be something of an over-simplification, demonstrating a tendency on the part of many critics to overlook the colour's larger significance in favour of a specific reading of the text. As Dawson argues: "Considering the paucity of references to the internet within *House of Leaves* [...] looking beyond these technological analogies may prove fruitful" (25).

(McCaffery and Gregory 100), and which is greater than its textual layout or standing in relation to current trends in literature or literary theory.

This thesis, then, will attempt to approach the novel as a unified whole; to engage with its complexities, and to discuss and analyse these as a means of putting forth a reading of *House of Leaves* which does not shun its contradictions and impossibilities. The interpretive difficulties posed by the novel are many and varied, ranging from acrostically encoded messages to the aforementioned index and the significance of the 'DNE' words, to the poems, manuscript drafts, collages, and various other fragments of the appendices which relate to the novel; where possible, these will be explored as part of a larger argumentation, but it is stressed here that this thesis will not, nor could it hope to, provide conclusive answers to the novel as a whole or to all of its mysteries.

Genette's concepts of narrative level and metalepsis are used to initially delineate the various layers of the ostensible structure of *House of Leaves*, and to then describe how these seemingly distinct narrative levels are transgressed, violating narratological coherence and presenting instances of logical paradox. The Navidson house, as the central symbol of the novel, is explored with regard to its impossible and shifting dimensions, and is related back to this idea of the violation of physical laws; the ramifications of the creation of such a symbol, along with the effects of dwelling upon it, as Johnny, Zampanò, and others do, are then explored at length. The question of the authorship of the various texts which constitute *House of Leaves* is discussed, and it is argued that the narratorial contradictions and paradoxical occurrences, in tandem with the metaleptic transgressions found throughout, suggest a narrative structure which is heterarchical and which rejects the concept of one narrative voice or 'sacred text'. It is then posited that the experience of trauma - of loss, grief, abandonment, and betrayal, which permeate every facet of *House of Leaves* - is a means of interpreting the novel and its contradictions and evasions. The violations of space and narrative borders perpetrated by the central symbol of the house, itself the construction of one or more disturbed minds, are related to the process of coming to terms with traumatic experience, and are also reflected in the narratological and epistemological uncertainty that both the characters and the reader of *House of Leaves* experience.

Level and Metalepsis

In terms of the layout of its pages, the structure of *House of Leaves* is, at its most simplistic, similar to that of an onion, consisting of concentric layers which envelop those below and are enveloped by those above; reflecting this, Gibbons diagrammatically depicts the novel as a series of boxes, each containing 'lower' layers and contained within 'higher' layers (290). The spatial metaphor of 'lower' and 'higher', moreover, may be applied to the fictionality of these layers, with the upper- (or outer-) most layers of the onion/novel being those closest to our reality, and the centre as that which is most distanced from it. These layers ostensibly represent the world of each narrator and the limits of their knowledge, with each 'higher' layer mediating the 'lower' ones as part of a series of what initially appear to be one-way relationships.

Due to the complexity of the text, it is worth delineating the boundaries and constituents of these layers, as close reading is often required in order to understand who is responsible for what, and to which layer of the narrative any given text or discourse belongs: Graulund, for example, erroneously asserts that all of the appendices are provided by the Editors (383), while Hamilton conflates all of the appendices together and relegates them to their own layer (5). Similarly, Hagood claims that the title of Zampanò's text is *House of Leaves* rather than 'The Navidson Record' (2; Hagood 87), and Belletto suggests that "[i]f *The Navidson Record* does not exist, then we wonder if our reality is the same as Johnny's reality" (104) - a hypothesis which, as will be shown, is invalidated by the existence of narrative layers between Johnny's and that of the reader. More crucially, we find a dissonance in the number of layers which are said to constitute *House of Leaves*; Graulund, for example, splits the novel into five "narrative voices" (381), Hamilton describes "a four-level split" (4) and, Gibbons's pictorial representation depicts four "narrative worlds" (289).

What is required in order to begin to understand *House of Leaves*, prior to moving past the 'onion' structure - the ostensible layout of the text which is, when one reads more closely, repeatedly undermined - and towards an analysis of the deconstruction which Danielewki performs, is a theoretically grounded and terminologically sound approach. We find this in Genette's concept of "level"⁴, wherein each corresponds to a layer of the 'onion'.

⁴ It is noted that Genette uses "level" and "diegesis" interchangeably; here, this conflation will be followed in line with Genette's terminology, wherein "diegetic level", for example, is utilised so as to avoid tautological words such as "diegetic diegesis" (Genette 228).

The boundaries of these levels are defined by the act(s) of narration which mediate them, in that each "depends absolutely on that action of telling, since the narrative discourse is *produced* by the action of telling in the same way that any statement is the product of an act of enunciating" (Genette 26). In short, the level on which a narrating act is performed and the level on which this narrative exists (that of the characters and actions narrated) must, from a logical perspective, be distinct so as to maintain narratological cohesion. The action of narrating, of fabricating another diegesis, thus creates distinct ontological boundaries, and so each level is mediated by that directly above it.

The levels of *House of Leaves*, concentrically arranged, are as follows: At the centre we find the works of Zampanò, which include an epigraph and the title page of 'The Navidson Record', 21 chapters in near-sequential⁵ order, Exhibits One-Six ("instructions for a series of plates he planned to include at the end of 'The Navidson Record'"; 529) and Appendix I (chapter titles for and photographs of drafts of 'The Navidson Record', the contents and release history of *The Navidson Record*, poems, and various other textual fragments). Moving 'outwards' from this core we find Johnny Truant's material; an epigraph and Johnny's introduction to 'The Navidson Record' prior to Zampanò's material, and Appendix II after Appendix I. Appendix II includes various sketches, photographs, and collages, 'The Pelican Poems', Johnny's father's obituary, an extensive collection of letters sent to Johnny by his institutionalised mother, Pelafina⁶, between 1982 and 1989 (as well as various documentation relating to her institutionalisation, including a notification of her suicide), and a selection of quotations from numerous (real) literary texts. Moving again 'outwards' we find the work of the Editors, who appear to have edited the text for publication and supplied corrections and bibliographical information where these were missing; a contents page and foreword preceding Johnny's material and Appendix III ("Contrary Evidence"; 657), an index relating to Zampanò's and Johnny's material, and a credits page, placed after Appendix II. Finally, at the outermost fringes of the novel are the primary title

⁵ The exception being Chapter XXI, authored solely by Johnny. The significance of this is discussed below.

⁶ Pelafina's correspondence with Johnny is enlarged upon in the companion piece *The Whalestoe Letters*, which features all of the letters found in *House of Leaves*, in addition to eleven new ones and a foreword written by a member of staff at the institution in which Pelafina was held, who serves as the curator and editor of these missives. For the purposes of this discussion, the contents of *The Whalestoe Letters* are considered to constitute an extension of the universe of *House of Leaves*, and so are utilised in argumentation concerning Pelafina in the same manner as the corpus of letters found in *House of Leaves*.

page of *House of Leaves* at the front, and, at the rear, an enigmatic reference to Yggdrasil, the central symbol of Norse mythology.

It should be noted that these levels are not wholly separate in that, within the chapters that make up 'The Navidson Record', both Johnny and the Editors contribute in the form of footnotes; in addition, the Editors at times supply commentary on Johnny's material. The Editors' are always strictly academic in terms of content, offering clarification or correcting bibliographical mistakes, while Johnny's notes generally comment upon Zampanò's text in relation to his own experiences. It should also be noted that the material of each of the three active contributors to the text of 'The Navidson Record' - the Editors, Johnny, and Zampanò - is presented in a different font, as part of an effort "to limit confusion" (4, note 5) by the Editors; these are Bookman, Courier, and Times, respectively.⁷

That these components of the novel are separate and yet ordered in a concentric, hierarchical fashion reflects the existence of each as an individual sphere or layer of the narrative, and all reflect an awareness only of those 'below' - at least on the surface. Thus, Johnny's material bookends Zampanò's and comments upon it, and the Editors' bookends Johnny's and comments upon both Johnny's and Zampanò's. As stated above, each 'higher' layer mediates the 'lower' ones, with the contents page provided by the Editors assimilating the works of Zampanò and Johnny into *House of Leaves* and the title page listing both as contributors, while Johnny provides an introduction to 'The Navidson Record'; conversely, Zampanò's text does not acknowledge the existence of Johnny or the Editors, and nor does Johnny with regard to the latter.

In *Narrative Discourse*, Genette suggests a typology for a text featuring multiple levels: The first level, that of the 'top' narrator, is "extradiegetic"; the level of the narration of this 'top' narrator is "intradiegetic". If there is a narrator within the intradiegesis, their narration is on the "metadiegetic" level, and any further levels are "metameta-" or "metametametadiegeses", ad nauseam (228). To take a simple example, the stories told by the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* are, as Wales notes, metadiegetic - they are "narrative[s] of the second degree [...] embedded within the framework" (264) of the text as a whole. These tales are

⁷ Regarding the significance of the fonts in relation to these characters, Pressman offers some insight: "Zampanò's academic commentary appears in Times Roman, the font associated with newspapers and the linotype; Truant's footnotes are in Courier, imitate a typewriter's inscription, and thematically identify him as the middle-man, the 'courier' of the manuscript; the terse notations from the Ed. are aptly presented in Bookman" (109-110).

narrated within the intradiegesis (the pilgrimage to Canterbury), which is in itself narrated by the extradiegesis (Chaucer-as-narrator). Within this framework, narratives within the pilgrim's tales (the metadiegesis), as when the waiter in 'The Pardoner's Tale' relates the circumstances of the death of the man being transported past the inn and to his grave, are metametadiegetic.

Applying Genette's framework to *House of Leaves*, the uppermost level of the narrative, the very outer limit of its fictivity, is that of the Editors, and so this is the extradiegesis. That which is directly mediated by the extradiegesis is the (intra)diegesis of Johnny; the world of Los Angeles in which he resides, the tattoo shop in which he works, as well as the terrors he experiences as a result of 'The Navidson Record'. Also inhabiting this narrative level are 'The Whalestoe Letters' of Appendix II and the life of Pelafina, as well as the existence of Zampanò as a character and his *act* of writing 'The Navidson Record'. The metadiegesis of *House of Leaves* is, in essence, 'The Navidson Record', the text which is mediated by Zampanò's act of narration; the critical exegesis of the film *The Navidson Record* and accompanying material. Zampanò's critical work is a response to a (fabricated) corpus of scholarly work relating to the film and a broader (though still invented) cultural awareness (i.e. Zampanò's placing of *The Navidson Record* within popular culture, as with the invented responses of e.g. David Letterman or Rosie O'Donnell; 90 note 101; 467 note 417f⁸), and so this level - that of the invented critics and viewers of *The Navidson Record* - is the metametadiegesis. The events which 'The Navidson Record' mediates, and that which Zampanò's invented critics and viewers respond to, is the metametametadiegesis; the Navidson family's experiences with their bizarre house, which is to say *The Navidson Record*.

⁸ Although the majority of the footnotes in *House of Leaves* are marked with the usual convention of superscripted numbers, there are several instances in which symbols (in particular planetary symbols in Chapter V, and Ground-to-Air Emergency Code signals throughout the novel; cf. 582) are used in their place. Many of these reflect the events of *The Navidson Record*, as when the symbol for 'Require medical supplies' is used as a footnote marker in a passage dealing with Jed being shot. Others comment on the layout of the text itself, as with the labyrinthine string of footnotes (starting with note 135, [114]) in Chapter IX, each of which refers to another in a non-sequential order, creating multiple pathways which force the reader to move back and forth throughout the chapter. The multiple routes of this maze, however, all, eventually, conclude with an abrupt dead end, in the form of the Ground-to-Air Emergency Code symbol for 'Unable to proceed', linking back to both the exploration of the labyrinth by Holloway, Wax, and Jed, and to the complex layout of the pages of this section. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to further address the significance of this, however, and so footnotes which are designated with a symbol are here referred to with the number of the previous footnote and a letter; in this case, there are five footnotes designated by symbols between footnote 417 and the one here referred to as 417f.

However, in addition to the cumbersome nature of Genette's terminological approach to diegetics (meta- as a prefix, stretching on into eternity), the framework is, broadly, inapplicable in relation to *House of Leaves*, for many of the diegeses mediate multiple other narrative levels; for example, the intradiegesis (broadly, that of Johnny), features both Johnny's experiences with 'The Navidson Record' and Pelafina's letters to the young Johnny in 'The Whalestoe Letters'. These two levels may both be classified as 'metadiegetic' in the typology of Genette on the basis of their being narrated within what may be considered to be the intradiegesis, and yet the two are ontologically distinct - in essence, two different stories, mediated by two different acts of narration. From any given narrative level, then, multiple others stem, and from these stem yet more, and so Genette's taxonomical approach is not sufficient in terms of suggesting how multiple diegeses of the same 'type' are mediated, and how each example of a meta- or metametadiegesis is distinct from others. Thus, in the interest of clarity, the discussion that follows will utilise Genette's framework in a holistic manner, based on the relationship that any given level has to any other, considering the narrative structure of *House of Leaves* to be akin to a rhizomatic network⁹ or the roots of a tree: All traceable back to one source, but branching in multiple directions, with each level that could be considered of one 'type' comparable to others of their kind only insofar as they are arrived at through multiple acts of mediation. When Navidson narrates the circumstances surrounding the death of Delial, the Sudanese girl whose photograph won him the Pulitzer Prize (393), this is an offshoot of the diegesis of *The Navidson Record*, and so is once-mediated; in relation to 'The Navidson Record', it is twice-mediated, and with regard to Johnny's diegesis it is thrice-mediated.

It is also important to draw a distinction with regard to Zampanò's text on the basis of the two modes of discourse employed; namely, the narration of *The Navidson Record*, and the analysis of these events. In relation to Zampanò's diegesis, that which recounts the actions of the characters of the film is clearly part of the metametadiegesis of *House of Leaves*, based on the simple fact that it constitutes an act of narration. Conversely, any analysis of the film is not an act of narration but of interpretation, and so is diegetic and belongs to 'The Navidson

⁹ From botany, "[a]n elongated, usually horizontal, subterranean stem which sends out roots and leafy shoots at intervals along its length" ("rhizome"), commonly used in relation to understanding of data and causality with regard to multiplicity. This is discussed in passing by both Davidson (T. Davidson 79) and Cox (5) in relation to *House of Leaves*; the former evokes rhizomatic structure in relation to the proposed hypertextuality of the novel, the latter with regard to Eco's concept of the labyrinth and the labyrinth within the Navidson house. Neither, however, discuss the concept in direct relation to the *narrative* structure of the novel.

Record' (i.e. the metadiegesis of *House of Leaves*). Thus, the Navidsons' discovery of the "crawl space" (29) between the upstairs bedrooms is narrated within 'The Navidson Record', and so metadiegetic in relation to Zampanò's diegesis; Zampanò's statement that "[w]hat took place amounts to a strange spatial violation" (24) is interpretive, and so diegetic.

Genette's focus on the "act of narration", in the sense of this action as a verb which distinguishes between the world of the telling and the world of the told, thus offers a means of delineating the boundaries of diegetic levels, allowing one to create a schema of the ontologies that comprise *House of Leaves*. With the image of the roots of a tree in mind, *House of Leaves* becomes a network of divergent narratives, branching out in multiple directions, with the bifurcating of these roots representing the multiple, distinct acts of narration of each narrator. As applied to the novel as it is *ostensibly* presented, then, the adapted usage of Genette's framework presents a bewilderingly complex but, crucially, logical system of rhizomes; reading more closely, however, suggests the existence of numerous transgressions of the boundaries of these supposedly autonomous and hermetically sealed ontologies.

As is discussed above, the act of narration is key in establishing the borders between narrative levels, creating a distinction between the world of the narrator and that of the narratee. However, it is also through the act of narration that the boundaries between these levels may be violated: "The transition from one narrative level to another can in principle be achieved only by the narrating, the act that consists precisely of introducing into one situation, by means of a discourse, the knowledge of another situation" (Genette 234). This bridge between these two "situations" is narrative metalepsis¹⁰, variously referred to as "a paradoxical contamination between the world of the telling and the world of the told" (Pier 190), "the move of existents or actants from any hierarchically ordered level into one above or below" (Fludernik 383), and a "strange loop" occurring within a "tangled hierarchy" (Hofstadter). Metalepsis is thus a device which disrupts the hermetic borders of narrative levels and so the logic of narratology itself, placing a character, object, or event in a diegesis in which it should not exist. Genette's example, "when Virgil 'has Dido die'" in Book IV of the *Aeneid* (234), is

¹⁰ As distinct from metalepsis as a purely literary/poetic device, involving generally metaphorical instances for the purpose of artistic impact; see Kukkonen, 1-2. In this thesis, in the interest of simplicity, 'metalepsis', unless otherwise stated, will refer specifically to narrative instances.

Additionally: What follows is a brief overview of metalepsis as relates to the discussion of *House of Leaves*; for a more thorough analysis, see Pier, in particular section 3.2.

an authorial metalepsis, in that the author foregrounds the fictivity of the text by locating the cause of the action in their own power of authorship. A more extreme example is found in Cortázar's short story 'Continuidad de los parques', in that a man reads a novel, the final pages of which describe how a character within this novel approaches what would appear to be the room in which the reader sits; similarly, in Woody Allen's short story 'The Kugelmass Episode', the main character is magically transported into the world of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and begins a romantic relationship with Emma.

Although first proposed by Genette, many narratologists have expanded upon the original concept of metalepsis, constructing a framework of multiple typologies; Nelles's "marked and unmarked" (93), Fludernik's five "Types" (384-389), and Pier's substitution of "minimal" for "rhetorical" (192). Foremost amongst these with regard to the discussion that will follow is the distinction between "rhetorical" and "ontological" metalepses, as posited by Ryan:

Rhetorical metalepsis opens a small window that allows a quick glance across levels, but the window closes after a few sentences, and the operation ends up reasserting the existence of boundaries. This temporary breach of illusion does not threaten the basic structure of the narrative universe. [...] [O]ntological metalepsis opens a passage between levels that results in their interpenetration, or mutual contamination. These levels, needless to say, must be separated by the type of boundary that I call ontological: a switch between two radically distinct worlds, such as 'the real' versus 'the imaginary.' (*Avatars*, 207)

Rhetorical and ontological metalepses are thus distinguished on the basis of the degree of violation, on whether the instance is employed for rhetorical purpose in the purest sense - "to achieve eloquence of expression or ensure the greatest possible effect on the reader or listener" ("rhetorical") - or as a means of bringing into question the nature of our reality, of ontologies in the sense of "the nature or essence of being" ("ontology"). To return to Ryan, the crucial difference is between whether the metaleptic instance takes the form of a "window" or a "passage" - something through which one merely peers, or which facilitates *movement*.

More recent and interdisciplinary work in the field has focused on the issue of 'unnaturalness', and Bell and Alber argue that "only ontological metalepses involve

disorienting transgressions of boundaries that are physically or logically impossible, and hence properly unnatural" (167), relegating lesser instances (authorial, rhetorical) to the status of stylistic quirks. Although the focus of Bell and Alber's work is on transfictionality and hypertext fiction, and their framework is constructed so as to support this¹¹, 'unnaturalness' as a concept has great relevance to *House of Leaves*. Central to this is the idea that ontological metalepses constitute the transgression of physical, scientific, and logical laws, broadening the scope of discussions of ontologies beyond narrative analysis and towards examining ontological boundaries in literary texts in relation to their bearing on *our* reality. Pier asserts that ontological metalepses relate to "the problems of logical paradox encountered by modern science" (193), Bell and Alber that "they violate the principle of non-contradiction whereby two contradictory states of affairs cannot be true at the same time" (167), while Ryan claims that any text which features an instance of ontological metalepsis "cannot, by analogy, occur in a fictional world that claims to respect the logical and physical laws of the real world" (*Avatars*, 210). Turning back to *House of Leaves* this idea of paradox is critical for, as will be shown, these violations of logic find counterparts in those perpetrated by the central symbol of the novel, the house on Ash Tree Lane.

Instances of rhetorical metalepsis exist in *House of Leaves*, and are often used for purely literary effect; when Johnny writes that "[w]ith a little luck, you'll dismiss this labor, react as Zampanò had hoped, call it needlessly complicated, pointlessly obtuse, prolix - your word - ridiculously conceived" (xxii), he not only breaks the fourth wall in addressing the reader, but 'quotes' them, in effect drawing the reader into his own summation of 'The Navidson Record'. A similar effect is created by Zampanò's "one simple word - perhaps your word - flung down empty hallways long past midnight" (48), in that the reader is again drawn into the diegesis - indeed, into the "empty hallways" of the text.

These rhetorical flourishes hint at disruptions to the hermetic boundaries of the structure suggested above, but it is through instances of ontological metalepsis that Danielewski brings into question our understanding of the novel as it is ostensibly presented, and thus the authenticity of every discourse within the novel. We find, for example, in the 'Credits' section, ostensibly the work of the Editors and in the Bookman font, gratitude being

¹¹ Primarily through the introduction of the term "horizontal metalepsis" to refer to "the transmigration of a character or narrator into a different fictional text" (Bell and Alber 167). Woody Allen's 'The Kugelmass Episode' would be one example of this.

expressed to "the Talmor Zedactur Depository for providing a VHS copy of 'Exploration #4'"(708) - a short edit of *The Navidson Record* which presents footage from the fourth exploration of the labyrinth within the house on Ash Tree Lane¹² (5). That the Editors suggest that this film exists contradicts Johnny's repeated assertions that *The Navidson Record* and the titular family are entirely the products of Zampanò's imagination, and that the contents of Zampanò's text have somehow 'leaked' into, if not our reality, then the one directly below it. This possibility is hinted at throughout *House of Leaves*, and works on many levels; from metametadiegeses to metadiegeses, from metadiegeses to diegeses, and so on.

Within 'The Navidson Record', Zampanò writes extensively on the effects of *The Navidson Record* on both audiences and critics, citing scholars who have assessed the film's greater impact. Summarising "The Haven-Slocum Theory" (396), one of several competing academic theses which seek to explain Will Navidson's final return to the house on Ash Tree Lane as part of 'Exploration #5', he writes:

Perhaps strangest of all, the consequences of Navidson's journey are still being felt today. [...] the concluding paragraphs claim that people not even directly associated with the events on Ash Tree Lane have been affected. The Theory, however, is careful to distinguish between those who have merely seen *The Navidson Record* and those who have read and written, in some cases extensively, about the film.

Zampanò claims that this latter group, "those who have not only meditated on the house's perfectly dark and empty corridors but articulated how its pathways have murmured within them", experienced "anything from sleep disturbances to sexual dysfunction to poor rapport with others" as a result of watching the early footage of *The Navidson Record*, prior to the

¹² It may be valuable to here briefly summarise the release history of *The Navidson Record* as related by Zampanò; the Navidsons move into their house in 1990 (8), slowly discover its abnormalities, and document four explorations of the labyrinth within. Following the disastrous Exploration #4, in which the house reacts violently to its occupants and Navidson's twin brother Tom is killed, the family flee the house and Navidson begins compiling the footage. Two "VHS shorts" appear in late 1990 ('The Five and a Half Minute Hallway') and 1991 ('Exploration #4'), which spark interest on both cultural and scholarly levels (6), and this is the material which early obsessives of the Navidson saga viewed. In April of 1991 (after the release of the two "VHS shorts"), Will Navidson returns to the house and gathers further footage (384), and the full *The Navidson Record*, featuring footage from all five explorations and the intervening periods, is released by Miramax in 1993 (539).

release of the final film, and that Navidson's eventual return to the house led to improvements for these people.

However, The Haven-Slocum Theory also points out that this course is not without risk. An even greater number of people dwelling on *The Navidson Record* have shown an increase in obsessiveness, insomnia, and incoherence: 'Most of those who chose to abandon their interest soon recovered. A few, however, required counseling and in some instances medication and hospitalization. Three cases resulted in suicide.' (407)

Here, Zampanò describes the effects of *The Navidson Record* on critics or viewers, the impinging of a metadiegesis on its diegesis as a result of metaleptic transgression. This is complicated by the fact that both the film and the critics are, as we know, entirely invented, and yet hints at the possibility of these effects being felt outside of Zampanò's diegesis and that of 'The Navidson Record'.

This is, moreover, exactly what happens within Johnny's diegesis, with his frequent and increasingly schizophrenic notes to Zampanò's text testifying to his psychological breakdown. Although this is discussed more fully below, it is important to note that the links between *The Navidson Record* and 'higher' diegeses are not wholly psychological; consider, for example, the gouges he finds carved into the floor of Zampanò's apartment, next to his corpse; "four of them, six or seven inches long and half an inch deep, splintering the wood, left by some terrible awe-full thing, signature in script of steel or claws [...] I saw the impossible marks near the trunk, touched them, even caught some splinters in my fingertips" (78). These supernatural marks are reflected in the damage done to the rations of the explorers of the labyrinth in *The Navidson Record*: "Holloway discovers the remains of one of their foot long neon markers barely clinging to the wall. It has been badly mauled, half of the fabric torn away by some unimaginable claw" (122). Here, then, is a concrete instance of ontological metalepsis, the intrusion of the 'monster' that haunts the house into Johnny's reality through the "passage" opened by a narratological device.

Towards the end of the novel, Johnny listens to a band playing in a bar and hears the lyric "I live at the end of a Five and a Half Minute Hallway" (512), a clear reference to the VHS short of *The Navidson Record* (see note 12 of this thesis). Speaking to the band after their performance, he finds that their material is "inspired by a book [they had] found on the Internet quite some time ago" (513), metaleptically reflecting the fact that *House of Leaves*

was originally published on the internet (Pressman 119; Belletto 99). Johnny is able to peruse a printed edition of this text, the title page of which is reproduced (513) and, aside from the fact that the band's copy is marked "First Edition"¹³, what Johnny examines is exactly the same as the title page of *House of Leaves* which the reader holds in their hands. Furthermore, the band even discusses "the encoded appearance of Thamyras on page 387" (514), arrived at by acrostically decoding "The house answers many yearnings remembered in sorrow" (387, emphases added). This method of encoding messages is suggested by Pelafina in one of her letters to Johnny (619), however - an entirely personal communiqué sent over twelve years prior to the events narrated, and one not included in this "First Edition" of the novel - and so the band's understanding of this secret method of communication between mother and son suggests a metaleptic transgression of the boundaries of two ontologically distinct diegeses.

The chapter in which this exchange appears is titled "Nightmares" on the "Possible Chapter Titles" page in Zampanò's appendix (540); a fitting one, considering the fact that these pages deal with the final stages of Johnny's descent into madness and schizophrenic, unreliable narration. What is troubling here, however, is the fact that this heading is offered by Zampanò himself; the chapters as they appear in the body of the text are simply given Roman numerals, and so those in Appendix I are, presumably, Zampanò's working titles. Johnny's "nightmares", however, are the direct result of his reading of 'The Navidson Record', and his inheriting of the text stems from Zampanò's death; thus, the reader is faced with an impossibility - a "strange loop" in the diction of Hofstadter - for how could Zampanò have so aptly titled a chapter which is a response to his work, after his death?

The metalepses of *House of Leaves* are not limited to passageways between the diegeses of the novel, however; at times, we find that they extend outwards towards *our* reality, threatening the borders of our own world. This links to Fludernik's tentatively posited idea of "a more macrostructural technique affecting entire texts", forging a metaleptic link "between the real author or real reader and the text, jumping the extradiegetic textual level" (392). We find this, for example, in the simple fact that the band's copy of *House of Leaves* bears that title - one which does not feature within the text, but is the work of Danielewski. Within 'The

¹³ Indeed, with regard to *our* reality, the only text which could be regarded as the "First Edition" of *House of Leaves* is that which surfaced on the internet, and the first print edition of the novel is denoted as "2nd Edition" on the title page.

Navidson Record' is 'A Partial Transcript Of What Some Have Thought', the transcript of a short film made by Karen Green, partner of Will Navidson, featuring interviews on the subject of the house on Ash Tree Lane and the film in which it features. Here, we find both fabricated interviewees (Leslie Stern, a caricature of modern psychologists; Byron Baleworth, the archetypal indolent playwright) and real figures, including Douglas Hofstadter, Camille Paglia, and Hunter S. Thompson. All of their responses are, of course, entirely fictitious, and yet each is concurrent with the real figure: Hofstadter focuses on the labyrinth's mathematical and philosophical qualities, even describing the house as "[a] horizontal eight" (364), a phrasing which links back to his "strange loop"; Paglia offers a feminist reading focusing on "[t]he feminine void" (364); Thompson raves in a stereotypical fashion about its being "very very fucked up" (363). These interviews, invented though they are, all serve to anchor *House of Leaves* to our own culture, to threaten the fabric of our reality, suggesting that the terrors of the Navidson house and the 'monster' that stalks its corridors are more 'real' than the reader might think. As has already been discussed, Zampanò claims that *The Navidson Record* can psychologically damage those who view it - and Hofstadter, Paglia, Thompson, and many others - people who exist in *our* reality - have seen it.

This is further reflected in Johnny's repeated assertions that the power of the film (and, indeed, Zampanò's text) is metaleptic, and that it is able to strike at not only the characters of the novel but the reader themselves: "I felt certain its resolute blackness was capable of anything, maybe even of slashing out, tearing up the floor, murdering Zampanò, murdering us, maybe even murdering you" (xvii). The effects of 'The Navidson Record' on Johnny combine with the terrors he relates, and he predicts that the reader will be drawn into the text, will succumb to paranoia just as he has: "At least some of the horror I took away at four in the morning you now have before you, waiting for you a little like it waited for me that night" (xvii).

Finally, an ontological metalepsis which fully constitutes Hofstadter's "strange loop": Towards the end of Navidson's journey into the depths of the house during Exploration #5, at the point at which he is utterly lost within limitless space, "he turns his attention to the last possible activity, the only book in his possession: *House Of Leaves*" (465). This moment is described by Hansen as "an inversion of the postmodern topos of the *mise en abyme*" (606, note 7), by Slocombe as "ourobotropic" (101), and by Lord as Navidson's "entering the lacuna" and thus "collaps[ing] the hierarchical levels of his (and perhaps our) reality onto each other" (472). Zampanò states that Navidson's book has 736 pages (467); taking the 23

pages which constitute the epitext of the novel and Johnny's introduction, the 528 of 'The Navidson Record', the 4 between these sections, and the 181 of the three appendices, the index, and the credits and Yggdrasil pages, we find that the book from which Navidson reads and the reader's copy of *House of Leaves* are one and the same. Zampanò even suggests that "maybe the words in [Navidson's] book have been arranged in such a way as to make them practically impossible to read" (467), reflecting the frequently labyrinthine formatting of *House of Leaves* itself. Thus, the book which Navidson reads within the house is the book that the reader holds in their hands, which simultaneously mediates and is mediated by Navidson's act of reading; the metaleptic "passage" within the text has opened upon itself, creating a "strange loop" which is self-reflexive and of infinite depth.

This passage then, as Lord suggests, represents the meeting and impossible conflation of every diegesis of *House of Leaves* - in addition to those outside of the text, for Navidson possesses the same edition of the novel as the reader - and the destruction of any semblance of spatialised concepts of 'higher' or 'lower' with regard to these diegeses. Suddenly, we are inarguably presented with a narratological heterarchy¹⁴, "a multi-level structure in which there is no single 'highest level'" (McHale 120). *House of Leaves*, then, is not a text composed of a series of hierarchical levels, with each narrator and ontology mediated solely by another act of narration, but rather a network of competing voices, consisting of "strange loops" which revert back upon themselves, upon each other, and upon our own reality.

¹⁴ A concept originally developed to describe non-hierarchically organised cognitive structures within the field of neuroscience (McCullough).

The House as Subject and Object: "Behold the perfect pantheon of absence"

The ontological status of the house at the centre of *House of Leaves* is complex, and as an object it is fictive even within the other diegeses of the novel; in order to explore the themes of the novel further, however, it is worth discussing the house as it exists within *The Navidson Record*, as a symbol, and as a paradoxical object which defies scientific logic.

The house on Ash Tree Lane is, at its most simplistic, a domicile in Virginia into which the Navidson family moves as part of Will's effort to focus on his family, mend his foundering relationship with his partner, and "create a record of how Karen and I bought a small house in the country and moved into it with our children. [...] No gunfire, famine, or flies. Just lots of toothpaste, gardening, and people stuff" (8). The physical manifestation of the initial change which disrupts this domesticity is the "crawl space" that appears between the upstairs bedrooms, and its sudden emergence leads to Navidson's attempts to measure the dimensions of his house. He discovers that its interior measurements exceed those of the exterior by one quarter of an inch (29), later corrected to five sixteenths of an inch (32). Navidson's friend Billy Reston uses a laser distance meter to fully quantify these bizarre proportions, with the result that "the discrepancy has been eliminated"; moments later, however, "at least a foot" (39-40) of space appears between a shelf and a wall. Following Navidson's continued efforts to come to terms with what was at first described as "a strange spatial violation" (24) but which becomes, in the words of Reston, "a goddamn spatial rape" (56), the hallway leading to the unending labyrinth abruptly appears in the living room. This process of measurement, and the 'response' of the house to the act, hint at the house's irreconcilability with regard to physics and logic; as Belletto states, it is "beyond the bounds of what and how we know the physical world. Its nature does not square with the other known, physical facts of the universe" (105). Within both the house proper and the labyrinth accessed through the hallway, the ability to measure, quantify, and orient disappears. Spatial dimensions fluctuate, and compasses and altimeters cease to function; Zampanò states that "North [...] has no authority here" (90) but neither, it would seem, does any kind of physical law or system of logic.

The sense of impossibility that the house embodies is expressed through the tension between the purpose of a domestic residence and the absence that it perpetuates; the house itself is a home for a family, the site of a hoped-for reconciliation between Navidson and Karen, while

the labyrinth is characterised by utter blankness. One is a dwelling, a place in which one lives, the other a space which is utterly hostile as a result of its negation of domesticity; as Slocombe states, "[t]he House symbolizes absence and to live inside absence is impossible" (92). From the beginning, we find Chad Navidson asserting that the silence of the Virginia countryside evokes fear due to the void that it suggests - "It's like something's waiting" (9) - and this is further concretised by the ways in which the unnatural spaces of the house are described. Navidson's statement at the outset, "There's nothing there. Beware" (4) presents a paradox for, as Hayles argues, "[o]nly if we read 'nothing' as a substantive does this passage make sense, a negation converted into the looming threat of something, although it is impossible to say what unless it be negation itself" (788). The absence within the house is a source of fear and, ultimately, destruction, and Navidson's warning is a tautology which embodies the impossible threat of danger through utter negation. The house is "nothing", the labyrinth is defined by its emptiness, and yet still we must "beware".

The labyrinth is repeatedly described in terms of absence; not only is the temperature roughly 0°C (121), but its spaces are characterised by a lack of any kind of furniture, fixture, or marking. The crawl space that appears upstairs "lacks outlets, sockets, switches, shelves, a rod on which to hang things, or even some decorative molding" (28), and the labyrinth itself is described by Navidson during his first exploration as being similarly barren and lacking in domestic attributes:

Here's a door. No lock. Hmmm . . . a room, not very big. Empty. No windows. No switches. No outlets. Heading back to the corridor. Leaving the room. It seems colder now. Maybe I'm just getting colder. Here's another door. Unlocked. Another room. Again no windows. Continuing on. (64)

The labyrinth, then, is an endless 'blank slate', a void populated by nothing and of a temperature which is neither oppressively warm nor particularly cold, but simply zero; its blankness defines it, and is utterly opposed to the warm domesticity that is at the heart of the familial home.

Perhaps the clearest manifestation of this sense of absence is the footnote in a blue box which appears within the body of the text in the stunningly complex labyrinth chapter. Here, "[a]t the point when the explorers are lost inside the house, the text becomes a labyrinth of 'rooms'" (Brick 6), as Zampanò's narration of the events of *The Navidson Record* is

crowded by footnotes above, below, to the sides of, and within the body of the text. Due to the blue lines surrounding the text and its content and formatting, it has been variously described as "an evocation of the blue screen of a movie backdrop onto which anything can be projected" (Hayles 792), a series of "windows or mirrors" (Slocombe 100), or a representation of the labyrinth's "lack of historical and cultural specificity" (T. Davidson 78). The note, which spans 22 pages of text, appears as normal on the recto pages and reversed on the verso pages, with the verso pages showing the recto pages' text "as if we were seeing them from the inside of a barbershop window decorated with text meant to be read from the outside" (Hayles 792). The note stems from Zampanò's claim that "not one object, let alone fixture or other manner of finish [sic] work has ever been discovered there" (119), and lists ventilation and water systems, electrical components, material types, construction methods, and architectural styles; in essence, objects and concepts which cannot be found within the house's labyrinth (119-141, note 144). Here, the labyrinth is defined by negation, by a list comprising the objects and concepts which do not exist within it. Moreover, the footnote is placed directly next to the point in Zampanò's narration when Holloway, frustrated by the unending monotony of the labyrinth,

succeeds in scratching, stabbing, and ultimately kicking a hole in a wall, only to discover another windowless room with a doorway leading to another hallway spawning yet another endless series of empty rooms and passageways, all with walls potentially hiding and thus hinting at a possible exterior, though invariably winding up as just another border to another interior. (119)

Holloway's action within *The Davidson Record*, then, is mirrored by the placement of the footnote, with the hole in the wall becoming a 'hole' in the text which reveals only absence, and does as little to mitigate the reader's sense of perplexity and claustrophobia as Holloway's violence. What hides behind both the walls of the labyrinth and the pages of *House of Leaves* is yet more negation, an infinite void: Holloway's attempt to escape the labyrinth and the textual representation of this on the page of *House of Leaves* assert both the endlessness of the labyrinth and the overwhelming absence that characterises it.

The walls of the labyrinth are "perfectly smooth and almost pure black" (28), and no light, noise (except 'the growl'), or air movement, save that of the occupants, disturbs the interior (121). As the epigraph for Chapter XX states:

The walls are endlessly bare. Nothing hangs on them, nothing defines them. Even to the keenest eye or most sentient fingertip, they remain unreadable. You will never find a mark there. No trace survives. The walls obliterate everything. They are permanently absolved of all record. Oblique, forever obscure and unwritten. Behold the perfect pantheon of absence. (423, note 417a)

Ironically, this passage is presented on the page of *House of Leaves* in braille, but mediated via ink rather than any kind of tactile surface. Thus, the absence at the heart of the house, the annihilation of semantic meaning, extends outwards into the physical form of the novel, enveloping the reader and metaleptically conflating the labyrinth and the text itself. Braille, a communication system which is reliant on touch - on the "sentient fingertip" - is here presented two-dimensionally and so is simultaneously there, present on the page, and yet absent; like the walls of the labyrinth, this passage is "unreadable", "forever obscure". As a result, *House of Leaves* itself takes on the characteristics of the "perfect pantheon of absence" that it describes.

In spite of the absence that defines it, the inhabitants of the house all seek to explore the labyrinth, to find something within its walls. This may be partly attributed to the 'growl' that is first heard during Navidson's first journey into the labyrinth, and which continues to haunt subsequent explorations. Its initial occurrence is marked in Zampanò's narration by the now-familiar tension between absence and presence: "Suddenly immutable silence rushes in to replace what had momentarily shattered it. Navidson freezes, unsure whether or not he really just heard something growl" (67). Here, sound is described by way of negation, its occurrence marked by the fact that it momentarily displaces the crushing emptiness of the labyrinth; it is a noise, and thus differentiated from the lightless, silent corridors in which it is heard, but it is *of* this environment, for it is characterised by the absence which it briefly intrudes upon. To Navidson, however, the growl is experienced as a concrete phenomenon, a distinct sound, and this dualism is hinted at later in the narrative, as when Navidson states that "[t]he roar would frequently rise up the central shaft like some awful wail. At times it sounded like voices. Hundreds of them. Thousands. Calling after me. And then other times it sounded like the wind only there is no wind there" (322).

This noise is linked by both the house's occupants and Zampanò to the "terrifying shifts which can in a matter of moments reconstitute a simple path into an extremely complicated one" (69) that regularly occur within the labyrinth, causing characters to become lost or isolated. Zampanò states that Navidson comes to the conclusion that the growl is "probably just a sound generated when the house alters its internal layout" (95), but the linking of two supernatural phenomena with "just" betokens an attempt to come to grips with these occurrences through empirical observation and cause-and-effect, both of which are inapplicable to the impossible phenomena of the house. Navidson's attempted empiricism thus betokens a desperation, an approach to that which is beyond the bounds of rationalism but which seeks to encapsulate it within neat, logical boundaries - and, just as with the measuring of the house, this proves to be futile. Navidson's desperation to comprehend, to quantify and measure, moreover, is mirrored by a similar desire on the part of Zampanò's invented scholars, Johnny, and even us, the readers and critics of *House of Leaves*, for these impossible phenomena within the house are reflected by the textual complexities and narratological impossibilities of the novel.

The shifts in the labyrinth are repeatedly related to the Khumbu Icefall on Mount Everest, "where blue seracs and chasms change unexpectedly throughout the day and night", but the labyrinth's shifts are differentiated from those of the natural world in that "not even a single hairline fracture appears in those walls. Absolutely nothing visible to the eye provides a reason or even evidence of these terrifying shifts" (68-69). Exploration of the natural world as a theme repeatedly surfaces in *The Navidson Record*, but its purpose is not to simply give the forays into the labyrinth a sense of organisation and purpose; rather, it is to contrast the traditional, goal-oriented function of exploration - to discover something, to arrive somewhere, to reach an end-point - with the absence of any such possibility within the labyrinth. This theme is hinted at in various ways throughout the novel; for example, evoking the mountaineers of the same names, the cat and dog of the Navidsons are named Mallory and Hillary, respectively. The moment when "Mallory comes screaming into the living room with Hillary nipping at his tail" (75) reflects the claim that George Mallory summited Everest prior to Edmund Hillary's well-known ascent, but died while descending the mountain, leading to speculation within the mountaineering community (Messner 5-6). Moreover, the eventual fate of the cat Mallory mirrors that of the mountaineer for, when Danielewski was writing *House of Leaves*, George Mallory's body had not been discovered on the slopes of

Everest and his fate was a mystery¹⁵; similarly, at some point during *The Navidson Record*, the cat "vanishes completely, and no mention is made about what happened to him" (74).

Moreover, the investigation of the house is continuously described in the language of exploration; the living room is the "'base camp' or 'command post'" (98), and each foray into the labyrinth is designated 'Exploration #X' by Navidson and approached as an expedition, requiring extensive preparation and supplies (94). The team which is tasked with surveying the house is comprised of expert outdoorsmen; Holloway Roberts, "a professional hunter and explorer", and Wax Hook and Jed Leeder, two climbers and trekkers. For these characters, then, 'exploration' as a concept involves a concrete objective; the ascent of a mountain, the attaining of a goal, the discovery of something. With regard to the labyrinth, however, the aim of the explorations is less clear; Wax Hook understands that the intention is to "explore a house" (82), and Holloway states that their goals are as follows: "We're taking pictures. We're collecting samples. We're trying to reach the bottom of the stairs. Who knows, if we do that then maybe we'll even discover something" (94). Perhaps the most accurate summation, however, would be that the characters of *The Navidson Record* seek some semblance of domesticity, an end to interminable, blank corridors and impossibly huge spaces, and a return to what is comprehensible. Crucially, the explorations of the labyrinth are without set parameters; there is no summit to reach and from which to turn back, no point at which the exploration is 'complete', for the labyrinth is, as the team soon discovers, endless. In the words of Zampanò's invented critic Gavin Young: "Who could have predicted that those two words 'discover something' would prove the seeds to such unfortunate destruction? The problem, of course, was that the certain 'something' Holloway so adamantly sought to locate never existed per se in that place to begin with" (95).

For both Holloway and Navidson, what the labyrinth offers is mysterious and ineffable, but of great value, and "both men agree their story will guarantee them national attention as well as research grants and speaking opportunities" (91). The two differ, however, in that Navidson's desire is not for fame and recognition alone, but for the simple opportunity to explore (he is hampered in this by Karen's concern for his safety), as Zampanò articulates when Navidson departs to rescue the exploration team: "It is almost as if entrance let alone a purpose - any purpose - in the face of those endless and lightless regions is enough reason to rejoice" (153). Holloway, however, is consumed by the need to "discover

¹⁵ Mallory's body was discovered on the north face of Everest at roughly 8100 metres in 1999 (Messner 171).

something", to achieve a goal. When confronted with Jed and Wax's insistence that they return due to diminishing supplies, his response is unequivocal - "I will not abort this mission" (124) - and yet their ostensible purpose in Exploration #4, to reach the bottom of the spiral staircase, has been achieved. Conversely, when he comes to believe that the growl is a sound made by a concrete creature, his purpose is reaffirmed and, armed with a hunting rifle, he has a goal to pursue; "finally something about that place has begun to make sense", he has "something concrete to pursue" (124). The hunt for this elusive creature, and Jed and Wax's refusal to participate in what is "just the same as suicide" (125) in light of their diminishing supplies, leads to Holloway disappearing into the labyrinth alone, consumed by the need to find and kill this creature, and he later mistakenly shoots Wax: "I thought it was that, that thing. Fuck. It was that thing. I'm sure of it. That awful fucking..." (126). Thus, Holloway's failure, that which causes his mental collapse, is his inability to cope with the crushing negation that the labyrinth represents, the absence of any hint of the domestic within its walls; to, as an objective-driven explorer, function in an environment in which there is no concrete objective to pursue, only exploration without end. As Zampanò wryly comments: "As if there could have been a final objective in that place" (124). Holloway's self-imposed mission eventually becomes to find the absence of absence, the negation of negation, an end to the endless, in an environment in which purpose is as lacking as light, sound, and heat.

This "deepening, atrabilious obsession with the un-present" (122) reaches a climax when Holloway fatally shoots Jed, who is tending to the already-wounded Wax, and again disappears into the labyrinth. His last moments are filmed on his personal camera; irrevocably lost amidst endless hallways and infinite rooms, Holloway repeats his identity as a mantra, a means of distinguishing himself from the absence that envelops him:

Holloway Roberts. Born in Menomonie, Wisconsin. Bachelor's from U. Mass. There's something here. It's following me. No, it's stalking me. I've been stalked by it for days but for some reason it's not attacking. It's waiting, waiting for something. I don't know what. Holloway Roberts. Menomonie, Wisconsin. I'm not alone here. I'm not alone.
(5)

Ultimately, however, the monster that torments Holloway proves to be insubstantial, and he takes his own life; following his suicide, the camera records the embodied absence of the labyrinth, darkness given physical form, consuming his lifeless body:

Fingers of blackness slash across the lighted wall and consume Holloway [...] It seems erroneous to assert, like Pitch, that this creat[ur]e had actual teeth and claws of b[on]e (which myth for some reason [] requires). [If i]t d[id] have claws, they were made of shadow and if it did have te[e]th, they were made of darkness. Yet even as such the [] still stalked Holl[o]way at every corner until at last it did strike, devouring him, even roaring, the last thing heard, the sound [o]f Holloway ripped out of existence. (338)¹⁶

Holloway's fate, then, is the direct result of his inability to reconcile the objective of his "mission" to the eviscerating absence of the labyrinth, and his death and subsequent consumption at the hands of the physical manifestation of negation is a paradoxical embodiment of the danger presented by extreme absence, an exemplar of Navidson's warning that "There's nothing there. Beware."

Although Holloway's death is the result of his own twisted psychology, of his inability to come to terms with absence, the house still poses a concrete threat to its inhabitants that goes beyond danger as a result of extreme negation. Crucially, while these actions affect the material world (the occupants of the house or their physical possessions), their purpose would appear to be to maintain the emptiness of the labyrinth. We see this with the way that it purges itself of the traces of humanity left by the explorers, as when Holloway's body is consumed by darkness, the supply caches left behind by the exploration team are "devoured" (126), and the neon markers left to guide the explorers for their return journey are attacked by the "claw" (122). Tom discovers that even human excrement is expunged by the labyrinth; as Navidson muses, "[i]t looks like it's impossible to leave a lasting trace here" (162).

The relationship between the house and its occupants is not entirely one-way, however, and at times the spaces of the labyrinth are shaped as a direct response to the

¹⁶ Aside from the first instance of ellipses in the quotation, the lacunae in this passage are represented in the text of *House of Leaves* (the letters in italics within the lacunae are estimations, provided so as to facilitate ease of reading). As Johnny explains; "[s]ome kind of ash landed on the following pages, in some places burning away small holes, in other places eradicating large chunks of text. Rather than try to reconstruct what was destroyed I decided to just bracket the gaps - []." (323, note 276). Yet again, then, we find that the damage done to the manuscript of 'The Navidson Record' mirrors the events recounted within it, the annihilation of the text on the page mirroring Holloway's being torn from reality.

vocalised or internally held perceptions of individuals. Occasionally, this is manifested through horror clichés, as happens during Navidson's first foray into the labyrinth: "'That's it. Nothing else. No big deal. Over this Karen and I have been fighting.' Except as Navidson swings around, he suddenly discovers a new doorway to the right. It was not there before" (64). The labyrinth responds in a similar manner when Tom attempts to overcome his fears and begin descending the spiral staircase, presented in the form of a transcript in 'The Navidson Record':

No way. Not gonna happen, Navy. I've been alone in this shithole for almost three days and now you want me to go down there alone? No way.

[Tom descends a few steps, then quickly retreats]

No can do.

[Tom tries again, makes it down to the first flight]

There that's not so bad. Fuck you, Mr. Monster! Yeah, FUCK YOU!!!

[Then as Tom starts down the second flight, the stairs suddenly stretch and drop ten feet. Tom looks up and sees the circular shape of the stairwell bend into an ellipse before snapping back to a circle again.]

[Tom's breathing gets noticeably more rapid.]

You *are* here, aren't you Mr. Monster?

[A pause. And then out of nowhere comes that growl. More like a roar. Almost deafening. As if it originated right next to Tom.] (272-3)

Experiences of the labyrinth, however, are not simply confined to the realm of B-movie horror, with the house presented as a taunting monster; rather, its spaces are influenced by experience, mental attitude, and individual psychology, as if the 'blank slate' that the labyrinth represents is one which is coloured by its inhabitants' mental states. When Navidson sets out to reach the bottom of the spiral staircase so as to rescue the exploration party, for example, armed with the knowledge that the staircase *has* a bottom, what was to Holloway, Wax, and Jed "an incredible thirteen miles down" becomes one hundred feet (159). Zampanò's discussion of this phenomenon utilises multiple invented scholars:

[S]ome critics believe the house's mutations reflect the psychology of anyone who enters it. Dr. Haugeland asserts that the extraordinary absence of sensory information

forces the individual to manufacture his or her own data. Ruby Dahl, in her stupendous study of space, calls the house on Ash Tree Lane 'a solipsistic heightener', arguing that 'the house, the halls, and the rooms all become the self - collapsing, expanding, tilting, closing, but always in perfect relation to the mental state of the individual.' (165)

The labyrinth thus contains an absence so strong that those within it are forced to manufacture their own experiential data; Holloway, Wax, and Jed take so long to reach the bottom of the staircase because they do not *know* that it has an end, whereas Navidson does and so finds it comparatively straightforward. Similarly, Tom's fear of the unknown and of his isolation leads to the labyrinth 'preying' on this fear, and the spatial shifts that he experiences when he attempts to descend the staircase are reflections of and responses to this on the part of the labyrinth. Similarly, the "monster" that Holloway hunts, and which in the end consumes him, can be read as a manifestation of his troubled psyche (further evidenced by Zampanò's discussion of Holloway's medical records; 327-331), resulting in an inability to come to terms with the impossible negation of the labyrinth which, in the end, psychologically eviscerates him. As a "solipsistic heightener", the labyrinth reflects the psychology of individuals within it, and the absence that characters are confronted with offers a blank slate onto which an individual projects their experiences, based on the knowledge that they possess and the fears that hinder them.

Stranger still are the circumstances surrounding Navidson's discovery of the tape with which Holloway documented his last moments:

I remember finding the Holloway Tape off one of the landings. I had caught sight of a few bits of neon marker still attached to the wall and wandered over to take a look. A minute later I saw his pack and the camera. It was all just sitting there. The rifle was nearby too, but there was no sign of him. That was pretty odd to come across something, let alone anything, in that place. But what made finding that stuff particularly strange was how much I'd been thinking of Holloway at the time. (323)

In this instance, then, the labyrinth again responds directly to thought processes, rather than to an externally voiced feeling; moreover, it does so by contradicting the norms of the labyrinth, for Holloway's equipment is untouched by both the "claw" that ravaged the

markers and the generally detrimental effect of this environment on foreign objects. In addition, these items would seem to have been moved; Zampanò describes Holloway's last moments unfolding within one of the many rooms of the labyrinth, at the bottom of the staircase, and yet Navidson discovers these personal effects midway up the staircase, at a point in time when he is reflecting upon Holloway. Here, the house serves a quasi-authorial function, for it 'presents' to Navidson a key 'text' for his film, for Zampanò's monograph, and, indeed, for Danielewski's novel. Narratologically, this is not unlike Virgil "ha[ving] Dido die" (Genette 234), an authorial metalepsis which serves to disrupt the mimetic illusion, but the fact that its effects resonate on multiple diegetic levels and that the labyrinth, in effect, acts as contributor within the text in which it is described ('giving' Navidson "The Hol[lowa]y Tape" [333], which becomes part of *The Navidson Record*), affords it an ontological status that usurps the power of the author. The labyrinth is thus no longer a place to be explored nor an object to be understood, but an actor within the narrative, metaleptically shaping multiple audiences' experiences, including ours.

Beyond the terrors within it, be they real or imaginary, the house offers a threat which goes beyond its metaphysical implications and towards the violation of logic. This aspect of the labyrinth's dimensions reflects the destructive negation discussed above, and the fact that this unnatural, impossibly huge space is utterly barren.

Chapter XVI, titled "Science" (540), describes Navidson's attempts to come to terms with the reality of his house following the family's flight from it, using chemical analysis of samples taken from the walls of the labyrinth at various points. Here, we discover that some of the samples "appear to have ages predating the formation of the earth" (374) and "could indicate matter older than even our solar system" (378). Using empirical, scientific methods, Navidson is able to show that the impossibilities and contradictions inherent in his house of infinite proportions are even more extensive than previously thought, and attempts to move towards conclusions; unfortunately, however, the chapter is hopelessly incomplete. Multiple editorial comments state that pages are missing, and the body of much of the text (although not, tantalisingly, the accompanying footnotes) was destroyed in an accident involving a leaking bottle of ink, placed on top of the pages of the manuscript of 'The Navidson Record' by Johnny (376, note 350). What remains of the chapter are the paratextual elements and fragments of words in the body; a glossary listing various chemical and geological terminology as well as, more bizarrely, concepts relating to grammar and linguistics.

Fragments such as "abeced [...] spoken language versus the lang"¹⁷ would appear to hint at an unusually anthropologically-oriented approach to the scientific study of the house. The full import of the findings of Navidson's research is lost, however, to the destruction of the manuscript, and any hint of an explanation is excised along with the "incontrovertible facts" (370) that Zampanò undertakes to present at the outset of the chapter.

What remains are the attempts of both Navidson and Zampanò to understand the house, to quantify and qualify based on a system of logic and scientific knowledge. "[I]ncontrovertible facts" (370), "new evidence" (371), "an exact chronological map" (376), "a very consistent scheme" (378); all of these utterances are in the diction of science, of rationality. Within the chapter, then, we are *told* that Navidson comes upon a means of understanding the house in terms of how it can possibly exist, but this evidence is withheld from the reader, is expunged just like the traces left behind by the explorers of the labyrinth. Johnny's accident destroys large portions of the text, and more pages are unaccountably lost by the Editors: "*Inexplicably*, the remainder of this footnote along with seventeen more pages of text *vanished* from the manuscript supplied by Mr. Truant" (376, note 349, emphasis added). The end of the footnote referred to by the Editors reads as follows; "Therefore Navidson's conclusion seems the only conclusion. Based on the evidence, sample A thru sample XXXX appear to make up an exact chronological map, which though simple, nevertheless still shows that..." (376), followed by several lines of ellipses.

Ultimately, the house and its labyrinth refuse comprehension but, in so doing, invite interpretation, teasing the possibility of understanding through the footnotes, which "survived only because [Johnny] hadn't incorporated them yet" (376 note 350). As readers, we know the subject of the chapter and the importance of its content in terms of providing answers to the impossibilities of the house, but it would appear that this knowledge simply cannot be allowed to exist within the text of *House of Leaves*. Just as the house cannot be quantified and violates scientific logic within the diegesis of *The Navidson Record*, so too does it in Zampanò's, in Johnny's, in the Editors', and even, it is suggested, in ours. Where evidence exists that may shed light on the contradictions and impossibilities of the house, this is metaleptically excised - ink spills on pages, whole sections 'disappearing' - as if the "unimaginable claw" that rends the exploration team's markers or the "fingers of blackness"

¹⁷ "abeced" in all probability being a fragment of 'abecedarium' or 'abecedary', relating to the concept of the alphabet as a linguistic tool.

that tear Holloway out of reality do the same to the evidence which was collected by Navidson, commented upon by Zampanò, held (if not wholly safeguarded) by Johnny, and lost while in the care of the Editors.

As Danielewski has stated, part of the genesis of *House of Leaves* was the simple idea of "a house that was a quarter of an inch bigger on the inside than on the outside" (quoted in McCaffery and Gregory 105); in essence, an impossibility. The image at the centre of the novel is thus paradox in its simplest form; the contained not fitting within the container, the universe no longer working on the principle of an equals sign. From this simple imbalance in the laws of nature stem all of the impossibilities that the novel presents; ranging from the question of authorship to the impossible effects of 'The Navidson Record' on its reader, Johnny Truant, these contradictions relate back to that quarter of an inch, to the irreconcilability of physics and logic to the labyrinth.

The house is thus an object and symbol which absolutely resists empirical understanding across all diegetic levels, and so becomes "[t]he most fertile metaphor on which [...] questions of reality and interpretation turn" (Belletto 104) and "the novel's central metaphor for written testimony" (Hagood 88). Like the Navidson family, those who are confronted with the labyrinth - the invented viewers and critics of *The Navidson Record*, Johnny in his attempts to grasp 'The Navidson Record', and the reader themselves - are faced with a symbol which negates understanding by the sheer power of the absence that it represents. As a result, these audiences/readers must "manufacture [their] own data" within the "isolation tank" that is the labyrinth/*The Navidson Record*/'The Navidson Record'/*House of Leaves*. Thus, in the words of Borges, "the book and the labyrinth were one and the same" (283); the novel takes on the characteristics of its subject, and in so doing presents a textual experience which mimics that of the explorers of *The Navidson Record*, forcing its readers and critics to struggle to comprehend a literary symbol which is characterised by paradoxical negation.

Narrative Space as Theme and Metaleptic Threat

'Space' as a theoretical concept in literary studies is a broad one, encompassing its implications with regard to narratology, thematic exploration, linguistic mediation, and so on¹⁸. As Cox notes, space in *House of Leaves* is "decentred, magnified and prolific" (8) and, following on from the previous chapter, it will be argued here that the spatial violations within the house are reflected throughout the novel. The impossible spaces of *The Navidson Record* appear metaleptically in Johnny's diegesis, and are mirrored in narratological terms by the manipulation of narrative space and with regard to textuality by the physical layout of the novel. The threat posed by the spaces of the labyrinth is thus thematised and remediated in the form of distortions to other notions of space, both literal and metaphorical.

'Narrative space' is considered to be "the environment in which story-internal characters move about and live" (Buchholz and Jahn 552), "the WHERE of the narrative, that is, the demarcated space of the represented storyworld, including objects (such as houses, tables, chairs) or other entities (such as fog) that are part of the setting and do not belong to one of the characters" (Alber 45). Narrative spaces are thus those inhabited by characters - in this case, among many: The house on Ash Tree Lane and the labyrinth contained within; Virginia, the geographical location in which the house is situated; Los Angeles, home of Johnny and Zampanò. There exists a tension, however, between the various narrative spaces of *House of Leaves* (and of literature in general), in that some are wholly fictional, whilst others are grounded in reality; the house and its labyrinth, for example, are clearly invented, but Virginia, the US state in which the house is located, exists in our reality. The distinction here, then, is between what Ryan terms "spatial frames" and "setting"; "the immediate surroundings" of narrative events versus "the general socio-historico-geographical environment in which the action takes place". These two concepts are constituents of the "narrative universe" of the text, with the house figuring as one of the "counterfactual worlds constructed by characters as beliefs, wishes, fears, speculations, hypothetical thinking, dreams, and fantasies" ("Space", 421-422). The house exists within the novel, and so is part of the narrative universe, but is invented by Zampanò and thus a fictitious space which is superimposed onto the real setting of Virginia.

¹⁸ For a general overview, see Ryan, "Space".

Zampanò, of course, maintains that the house exists. Will Navidson's tax statement "proves the impossibility of digital manipulation" with regard to the assertion that the house that is depicted in *The Navidson Record* is the product of special effects, for "[t]hey just never had enough money" (148), and other "verifiable elements", such as the claimed existence of "Holloway Roberts, Will Navidson, et al." (6), supposedly add credence. In spite of this assertion, however, even Zampanò admits that "[t]he exact location of the house has been subject to a great deal of speculation" (414, note 401), and that multiple "quests" to find the house all "for one reason or another, failed" (5), hinting at the simple fact that the status of the house as an existent space (along with the 'proof' for this) is restricted to the diegesis of *The Navidson Record*. Even the street address that Zampanò offers, "on the corner of Succoth and Ash Tree Lane" (18), is insubstantial: Symbolically, this places the Navidson house at the junction between Judaism ("succoth", linking to the Feast of Tabernacles, "a Jewish festival, commemorating the dwelling of the Israelites in tents during their sojourn in the wilderness"; "tabernacle") and Norse mythology (Yggdrasil, the world tree, was an ash; Lindow 319), thus infusing it with some of the mythological resonances that recur throughout *House of Leaves*, but offers nothing in the way of concrete, physical reality.

The spatial frames of the labyrinth, moreover, constitute a narrative space which is fundamentally incomprehensible. If we consider the labyrinth in relation to Linde and Labov's theoretical postulation of "mental models" for conceptualising and understanding a described space, we find that, even with regard to the narration which mediates them, the spaces of the labyrinth are impossible. Linde and Labov propose two means of narrating the experience of a space; "the map" and "the tour". The former is, in essence, a description of a floor plan, as if "looking down at [the space] from a height", while the latter involves "verbs of motion, as the speaker conducts the hearer on an imaginary tour" (929). Regarding *House of Leaves*, then, 'the map' is the omniscient third-person view of Zampanò, the author of the labyrinth and thus its author(ity); 'the tour' is the exploration of this space by the characters of *The Navidson Record* as it occurs, the experience of space narrated in real-time. Linde and Labov's framework is said to encapsulate descriptions of space through a "set of discourse rules which govern these speech events" (924), and yet neither is sufficient. As Zampanò asserts, "the house rejects any attempt at cartography" in that

this is an impossibility, not only due to the wall-shifts but also the film's constant destruction of continuity, frequent jump cuts prohibiting any sort of accurate

mapmaking. Consequently, in lieu of a schematic, the film offers instead a schismatic rendering of empty rooms, long hallways, and dead ends, perpetually promising but forever eluding the finality of an immutable layout. (109)

As a subject which is mediated through verbal narration, it is impossible to grasp; as an architectural object which defies logic (consider "the absurd way the first hallway leads away from the living room only to return, through a series of lefts, back to where the living room should be but clearly is not"; 120) it is similarly paradoxical.

The house at the centre of the novel is thus comprised of spaces which are, by their very nature, impossible and thus fictitious, and so Zampanò's fabricating of *The Navidson Record* constitutes a superimposition of two narrative spaces; a setting based in reality, and a series of spatial frames which defy coherent narration and, indeed, logic. As a result, our understanding of space as a physical construct is disturbed, for the creation of a series of logically impossible spatial frames, and their insertion into a real setting, involves an intrusion into our reality and a violation of *real* spaces.

The spatial distortions of *House of Leaves* are not restricted to general ontological violations, however; rather, narrative space (specifically spatial frames; the physical environment of the house and its labyrinth) is thematised as a source of constant threat. This is manifested in two ways, linked by the fact that both constitute violations of physical laws; firstly, in terms of the spatial enormity that the house represents, stretching on to infinity, and secondly, with regard to the unpredictable and impossible violations of the dimensions of space, represented largely by the shifting interior of the labyrinth. These gargantuan, shifting spaces are at times seen by the characters of *The Navidson Record* as an enemy to be combated, as when Navidson attempts to "slaughter" the disparity in the measurements of his house - "[a]nother night passes and that quarter of an inch still *survives*" (30, emphasis added) - or as agents which inflict trauma. Wax, following his escape from the house, subsequently "keeps clear of caves not to mention his own closet" (318), Karen experiences frequent panic attacks, and Navidson's trauma is reflected in "obsessive behavior; weight loss; night terrors; vivid dreaming accompanied by increased mutism" (396).

All of this relates to the essential strangeness of the spaces that these characters encounter within the house, the sheer impossibility of what they are confronted with. The changes in the Navidsons' home are first experienced in the form of a shift which is "not

exactly sinister or even threatening", and is characterised by Zampanò in terms of Heidegger's *unheimlich* (28); that which is "uncanny", "nothing and nowhere", "not-being-at home" (Heidegger 233, quoted in *House of Leaves* 25). *Unheimlich*, moreover, as Zampanò notes, "means 'dreadfully', 'awfully', 'heaps of'", uniting the notion of the uncanny to the house's abundance of space with the idea that "[l]argeness has always been a condition of the weird and unsafe; it is overwhelming, too much or too big" (28). Freud's notion of the *unheimlich* reflects these concerns, for it is "in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it" (241), "something which is secretly familiar" (245). As relates specifically to literary occurrences rather than psychological ones, Freud claims that there is far greater imaginative scope for the writer in terms of actively constructing the effect of the *unheimlich* but, as he notes:

The situation is altered as soon as the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality. In this case he accepts as well all the conditions operating to produce uncanny feelings in real life; and everything that would have an uncanny effect in reality has it in his story. (250)

Here, we find a reflection of Ryan's assertion regarding metalepsis, that such an occurrence "cannot [...] occur in a fictional world that claims to respect the logical and physical laws of the real world" (*Avatars*, 210), for the *unheimlich* qualities of the house (and, indeed, Danielewski's direct textual evocation of the term) clash with the supposed 'reality' of *The Navidson Record*. Zampanò, in inventing a film which he claims to be a representation of the real world, and in centring this film on an object which is *heimlich* and yet utterly *unheimlich* - a house which is impossible to live in - conflates the uncanny nature of literary fabrication with our reality, imposing onto it the impossible nature of the labyrinth.

There exists a tension in *The Navidson Record* between large spaces and small ones - in essence, between claustrophobia and agoraphobia. The 'Great Hall' of the labyrinth, the span of which "approaches one mile" (150), is one of the first spaces encountered by the explorers. It is here that Navidson becomes lost during his initial foray into the house, disoriented within an enormous interior, "the beam of his flashlight scratching at nothing but the invariant darkness" (67). However, Navidson is able to use the acoustic properties of the room to his advantage, echolocating in order to find the nearest wall and, from thence, the

exit. This space, then, is dangerous precisely because of its extraordinarily large dimensions; the walls are so far apart that it is possible to become lost between them, isolated and with no point of reference. Conversely, though, this enormity allows the propagation of echoes and the possibility of salvation for Navidson; thus, the properties of the Great Hall which are related to agoraphobia and the threat of unbound space are also the ones which facilitate navigation.

The presence of an echo, however, is not always a comfort, as when the entrance to the labyrinth first materialises in the living room. Here, its sudden appearance is heralded by the voices of Chad and Daisy, who have ventured into the hallway, which are echoing in spite of the fact that "[n]o room in the house exceeds a length of twenty-five feet, let alone fifty feet, let alone fifty-six and a half feet"¹⁹ (57). Moreover, when the Navidsons fit a door on the entrance to the hallway, the relief they initially feel at having 'contained' the labyrinth turns to fear:

Unfortunately, as [Tom] twists the last key, the accompanying sound contains a familiar ring. He grips the red kye [sic] and tries it again. As the dead bolt glances the strike plate, the resulting click creates an unexpected and very unwelcome echo.

Slowly, Tom unlocks the door and peers inside.

Somehow, and for whatever reason, the thing has grown again. (61)

In both instances, the spatial dimensions of the house cause the propagation of echoes, a familiar phenomenon which is utterly *unheimlich* in the context of the familial home; a domestic space in which large expanses (the province of echoes) are out of place, and thus unnatural.

This tension between largeness as that which is *unheimlich* and thus intrusive, and expansiveness as a set of physical dimensions which allow for echolocation and thus the orientation of the self, betokens a more general one which surfaces throughout *House of Leaves*, best elucidated by Tuan's concept of 'space and place'. Here, 'place' is space made safe, colonised or sanitised - and above all *inhabited* - while 'space' is that outside of the bounds of place and civilisation (1). Navidson's original intention for *The Navidson Record*

¹⁹ 56.5 feet (17.2 metres) being the minimum distance required to produce an audible echo, as Zampanò notes on page 47.

was for it to document this process of colonisation - "I just thought it would be nice to see how people move into a place and start to inhabit it" (9) - and yet it is the violations of place (the family home) by space (the labyrinth) which become the subject of the film. This dichotomy, however, is not as simple as it first appears for, as Tuan notes, "[f]rom the security and stability of place we are aware of openness, freedom, and threat of space" (Tuan 6). Space may thus also constitute a welcome departure from place, as we find in the contrast between the Great Hall of the labyrinth and the corridors at the bottom of the spiral staircase; the latter are claustrophobic, cramped, and truly labyrinthine, a maze without end, whereas the enormity of the space above, while inducing agoraphobia, is comparatively easier to escape from due to its acoustic properties. Moreover, the border between the house on Ash Tree Lane and the labyrinth contained within is not inviolable, and the spatial distortions that occur within the house suggest that, if the house *is* place, it is not wholly secure from the encroaching threat of unbridled space.

The culmination of this threat occurs after Navidson emerges from the labyrinth following his laborious four-day journey up the expanded spiral staircase, through an unprecedentedly elaborate maze of corridors, and back to the living room. While the family packs, Tom builds a "rebarbative barricade" (339) using furniture and, whether it is this act of fortification, Navidson's extended sojourn in the labyrinth, or the family's plan to leave, the house reacts violently. The scene is set in the style of Hollywood horror, with the backdrop of a thunderstorm presaging the fact that "from behind the door [to the labyrinth] comes a knock. Followed by another one" (340). This mysterious and unprecedented knocking, never explained, is preceded by a "faint grinding", "something unheralded and unfamiliar [...] evolving into a new and already misconstrued sort of menace" (340), again evoking the *unheimlich* through the contrast between the commonplace, domestic activity of knocking on a door and the "unheralded and unfamiliar". The house then acts with incredible violence, directed at its inhabitants and the domesticity in which they exist; "the bedroom begins to collapse. We watch the ceiling turn from white to ash-black and drop. Then the walls close in with enough force to splinter the dresser, snap the frame of the bed, and hurl lamps from their nightstands, bulbs popping, light executed". The floor of the living room "drops away", "[w]ay below the baseboard, like the foundation had given way, except there was no fucking foundation. You expected to see cement but all there was was blackness". This void is characterised by Navidson as utter absence, so profound that the mounted cameras recording

the scene are unable to fully depict it: "You can't see the hollowness in it, the cold" (341-344).

The whole place keeps shuddering and shaking, walls cracking only to melt back together again, floors fragmenting and buckling, the ceiling suddenly rent by invisible claws, causing moldings to splinter, water pipes to rupture, electrical wires to spit and short out. Worse, the black ash of below, spreads like printer's ink over everything, transforming each corner, closet, and corridor into the awful dark. (345)

Thematically, these violent distortions of space are related to the labyrinth, but this is concretised by the fact that, when Karen escapes the converging walls of the bedroom, she finds herself within the crawl space, "a space rapidly enlarging, the size swallowing up all light" (341). Here, following all of the explorations of the labyrinth, the overwhelming space contained within it - the *unheimlich* - pushes back, extruding into the house and warping the physical dimensions of the family home, annihilating the domestic (walls, moldings, water pipes, etc.) through violations of the laws of physics and the manipulation of space. The void that Navidson escapes from in the living room is the previously passive absence of the labyrinth turned active, a negation that crosses the threshold erected by the family and attempts to destroy it. Here, then, the labyrinth, for reasons never adequately explored within 'The Navidson Record', responds in a catastrophic manner to the invasions of the inhabitants of the house, transgressing the border that previously separated the house and the labyrinth. The *heimlich* is thus annihilated by the *unheimlich*, and the Navidson family have no choice but to flee their home.

The threat of limitless space and the violation of place is not confined to *The Navidson Record*, however; rather, it is able to cross diegetic thresholds as well as liminal borders, as happens with Johnny's experiences with the manuscript of 'The Navidson Record':

At first only curiosity drove me from one phrase to the next. Often a few days would pass before I'd pick up another mauled scrap [...] I never read for more than an hour. [...] And then one evening I looked over at my clock and discovered seven hours had passed [...] That wasn't the last time I lost sense of time either. In fact it began to

happen more often, dozens of hours just blinking by, lost in the twist of so many dangerous sentences. (xviii)

Curiosity gradually becomes obsession and, eventually, something more, as Johnny begins to believe that "there's some kind of connection between my state of mind and *The Navidson Record*" (25), resulting in an inability to sleep, nightmares, visions of his own death, and suicidal urges. This psychosis is eventually manifested by physical symptoms, and Johnny describes "ramming my head into another wool hat, sneezing again" (403) - an indication of a failing immune system as a result of "the shattering effect this whole thing has had on me" (348).

Parallels begin to develop between the events narrated in Zampanò's manuscript and Johnny's accompanying footnotes, signifying his mental collapse occurring alongside the escalating dangers faced by the Navidsons: "There's just too much of it anyway, always running parallel, is that the right word?, to the old man and his book, briefly appearing, maybe even *intruding*, then disappearing again" (106, emphasis added). This sense of "intrusion", as with the Navidsons, is very much at the heart of Johnny's terror, for the themes, concerns, and even the 'monster' haunting *The Navidson Record* begin to appear within his reality. As Graulund asserts, "The Navidson Record is everywhere around him, threatening at any time to rip open a hole in reality in order to engulf him" (387).

We find metaleptic transgressions from the diegesis of the film to that of Johnny, such as the "tabby, head completely gone, a smear of red" (499) that he sees at the side of the road and the "big gray coated husky" (514; cf. 74) that approaches him in a park; these descriptions, along with the brutal fate of the cat, reflect the descriptions provided by Zampanò of Hillary and Mallory, the two Navidson pets. Johnny goes so far as to imitate Holloway in purchasing a Weatherby 300 rifle (380, cf. 80) in an attempt to combat the 'monster' which stalks him, even echoing Holloway's paranoia; "something is again approaching, creeping slowly towards my room, no figment of my imagination either but as tangible as you & I [...] Not afraid to shoot. Safety off" (381, note 354). He also recreates the pictures that Chad and Daisy draw as a response to the traumas of the house: Chad's drawings consist of "a black square filling ninety percent of the page. Furthermore, several layers of black crayon and pencil had been applied so that not even a speck of the paper beneath could show through" (313); Johnny's apartment is described as having "weird drawings all over his

walls [...] all in black" (149), depicting "[e]mpty rooms, hundreds of black, empty fucking rooms" (324).

The root of this downward spiral is a fear, in essence, of the house of *The Navidson Record*; of infinite space, of spatial fluctuation, of the *unheimlich*. Unknown and open spaces become a source of terror and, as a corollary, Johnny becomes increasingly hermit-like, unwilling to venture from the sanctuary he has created, consumed by agoraphobia: "Even reaching for the latch made me feel sick to my stomach. I also experienced this awful tightening across my chest, my temples instantly registering a rise in pulse rate" (107). The modifications to his apartment are designed to keep out the terror that haunts him and, moreover, to ensure that what is within is not tainted by the shifting nature of the labyrinth, by the violence of the house's *unheimlich* transformation:

I nailed my windows shut, threw out the closet and bathroom doors, storm proofed everything, and locks, oh yes, I bought plenty of locks, chains too and a dozen measuring tapes, nailing all those straight to the floor and the walls. [...] this was about space. I wanted a closed, inviolate and most of all immutable space.

At least the measuring tapes should have helped.

They didn't.

Nothing did. (xviii-xix)

The installation of the measuring tapes, moreover, is described in a footnote that stems from a description in Zampanò's text of the moment in which the spiral staircase dramatically expands, stranding Navidson at its bottom. Thus, we find that Johnny's attempt to "tell for sure if there are any shifts" (296, note 249a) is a direct and extreme response to the events of a film which he knows does not exist, to a metaleptic terror which he is fully aware has been fabricated by Zampanò.

Space in abundance is not the only threat to Johnny, however, as the cramped corridors of the lower labyrinth, mediated by the claustrophobic textual layout of the labyrinth chapter, take its toll: "Ever since leaving the labyrinth, having had to endure all those convolutions, those incomplete suggestions, the maddening departures and inconclusive nature of the whole fucking chapter, I've craved space, light and some kind of clarity" (179). Here, as in the labyrinth, there exists a tension between claustrophobia and agoraphobia, between the restrictive contortions of the labyrinth(ine text) and the open spaces that

simultaneously represent ultimate absence and the possibility of salvation. This tension is again reflected in Johnny's desire to "come to a clearing where I can ease myself into peace", tempered by the realisation that "perhaps in finding my clearing I'll only make myself an easier prey for the real terror that tracks me, waiting beyond the perimeter, past the tall grass, the brush, that stand of trees, cloaked in shadow and rot" (180). As in *The Navidson Record*, then, place, while comforting, may be restrictive and claustrophobic; conversely, space, while liberating, exposes one to danger. Both themes are thus fully evoked by Johnny, and neither offers any protection from the terror that haunts him; claustrophobia and agoraphobia are, paradoxically, experienced in equal measure, and are equally debilitating. Eventually, Johnny's psyche becomes so infected by Zampanò's invention that his fears are characterised specifically in relation to the house; the violent urges that he experiences "stretch inside me like an endless hallway" (494) and his dreams are metaleptically tinged by the house, in particular the 'growl' as experienced by Navidson: "No color. Just blackness and then in the distance, getting closer and closer, beginning to pierce some strange ever-present roar, sounds, voices, sometimes just a few, sometimes a multitude, one by one, all of them starting to scream" (503).

The instances described above could very easily be argued to be simply the effect of Zampanò's imagination upon an impressionable, drug-addled mind, Johnny's descent into madness being the result of paranoid tendencies and irreparably altered brain chemistry rather than any kind of supernatural power. Within his footnotes, however, we find instances of impossibilities, of *something* reaching across diegetic thresholds, from *The Navidson Record* to Johnny's world, and disturbing its fabric. When Johnny suffers what may be regarded as a panic attack in the storeroom of the tattoo shop in which he works - "darkness pushes in on me"; "the door closes"; "Everything falls apart" (70-71) - the root of this seizure is, most likely, his growing obsession with 'The Navidson Record' and nothing more. However, the presence of the 'monster' that "hisses at me and slashes out at the back of my neck" is later attested by "the long, bloody scratch" (72) found there. The door that Johnny perceived as closing was open during the whole episode and he did not, in fact, soil himself ("I've shit myself. Pissed myself too"; "But now I see that I haven't"; 71-72), and yet the 'thing' that haunts Johnny leaves a real wound upon him. Johnny's metaleptic experience of the house, a chaotic maelstrom of spatial violations and ethereal terror - "All's warping, or splintering. That makes no sense. There's a terrible banging" (72) - is one which leaves a concrete, tangible scar upon his body.

Just as the thematisation and threat of space carries over from the diegesis of *The Navidson Record* into that of Johnny, so too does it move further, into those ontologies closer to our reality. We find this in the intrusions of the monster of the labyrinth into the diegesis of the Editors, as is discussed above, and in Johnny's repeated assertions that the book will psychologically eviscerate the reader, as it has him. Indeed, the "claw" that figures as a motif within the house and in Johnny's consciousness, that which "slashes" at him in the storeroom, would appear to be, in essence, Zampanò's words themselves, the manuscript of 'The Navidson Record'. Johnny describes the trunk in which the fragments of the monograph are contained as being "capable of anything, maybe even of slashing out, tearing up the floor, murdering Zampanò, murdering us, maybe even murdering you" (xvii); thus, that which consumes Holloway, destroys the explorers' rations, marks the floor next to Zampanò's corpse, and wounds Johnny, is the embodiment of the threat presented by the text, a monster capable of "tearing up the floor" and "murdering *you*". This threat, then, is extradiegetically metaleptic - the reader is next. The 'monster', however, is not dangerous in and of itself - consider the fates of Holloway, Zampanò, and Johnny, and how they are related to obsession rather than any kind of supernatural attack - for it is the *spaces* of the house, the shifting nature of its dimensions, that are dangerous.

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. [...] You'll stand aside as a great complexity intrudes, tearing apart, piece by piece, all of your carefully conceived denials [...] And then the nightmares will begin. (xxii-xxiii)

Thus, the terror at the heart of the labyrinth, the insubstantiality of physical space, is not just a trope explored for dramatic literary effect; it is a threat to not only the characters of the novel, but to the reader themselves.

The danger of the labyrinth is the result of a paradoxical combination of extreme absence and the violation of physical laws, and this, in a textually mediated form, is what the reader is confronted with. When Navidson enters the labyrinth for the last time, the textual

layout is bizarrely altered to reflect the properties of the labyrinth; words form ceiling arches (431), ladder rungs (440-441), and reflect the fact that gravity, and our spatially-oriented concepts of 'up' and 'down', no longer applies (shown by the fact that the text is rotated to various degrees, even appearing upside-down; 470-471). The reader's experience of the text mirrors, to the greatest extent possible for a print novel, the bizarre properties of the house, as they are confronted with the disorienting nature of endless space and infinite recombination. Even 'The Navidson Record', the foundation on which this impossible symbol rests, is riddled with a distorted perspective on space, as evidenced by the fact that the door to the labyrinth variously appears on the north (4; 415), west (57), and east (285) walls of the Navidsons' living room. Just as in the labyrinth, direction in the text is meaningless, individual orientation is impossible, and space is constantly shifting.

Ryan summarises *House of Leaves* as follows;

a certain house is bigger on the inside than on the outside, and the inside is the gateway to a seemingly infinite alternative space where horrific events occur; even so, readers can still draw on their normal experience of space in some regions of the narrative world, despite its topological heterogeneity. ("Space", 430-431)

Such an assertion, however, is undermined by the fact that the "gateway" that Ryan describes is not secure; in *House of Leaves*, no threshold is inviolable, and the threat of the *unheimlich* permeates all. The door to the labyrinth in the house on Ash Tree Lane cannot contain the spatial distortions within, and so they cross through into the house proper; from thence into Zampanò's text, into Johnny's life, into the Editors' world, and, Johnny implies, into ours. Moreover, the reader is *not* able to "draw on their normal experience of space", for the spaces of the labyrinth are utterly *unheimlich*, impossible to comprehend or accurately describe. Space is thus thematised throughout the novel, and is violently deconstructed across all diegetic levels, destroying characters and structures within the text and reflecting this in the textual layout and, as a result, our reading experience.

Ryan's theoretical framework, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, is one composed of interconnecting pieces - story space is part of narrative world is part of narrative universe, all of which constitutes the narrative space of the text - and it is the interconnections between these facets that allow the logical contradictions of the labyrinth to infect all of the diegeses of the novel. Fear of space and spatial violation is present in the story space/diegesis

of *The Navidson Record* as a concrete threat, and the unification of all of the constituent diegeses of *House of Leaves* within the overarching narrative universe/space means that nothing and no-one - not Zampanò, Johnny, the Editors, nor even the reader - is safe from this influence.

"What I've made up, what has made me": Authorship and Contradiction

For the critics who delve into the complex structure of *House of Leaves*, who immerse themselves in the novel and its mysteries, it becomes clear that the text is a tapestry of competing, and often contradictory, voices. As Cox notes, there exist "unlikely connections [that] disturb the apparent passage of the manuscript and effect further questions concerning the narrative's construction" (10). Danielewski himself, when confronted with the issue - "In short: who really is the originator of this book?" - refused to answer, stating that to do so would be "to deprive readers of the private joys of making such a discovery on their own" (quoted in McCaffery and Gregory 115). In this spirit, this chapter will holistically explore the question of authorship, working on the assumption that, as Toth states, "there are innumerable clues (or lures) throughout, all of which provide the possibility of new (temporary) conclusions while simultaneously preventing the reader from resting finally on previous assumptions" (186). Like the house at the centre of the novel, then, the question of authorship in *House of Leaves* invites interpretation, but ultimately resists conclusions.

The novel is ostensibly understood as outlined in the first chapter of this thesis; Zampanò is the author of 'The Navidson Record', Johnny is the editor of the 'first' published edition of this text (that which the band in Flagstaff possess), and the Editors are responsible for the 'second' edition of the text, which is to say the first *real* version. Each of these figures has contributed a set of textual apparatus (title page, introduction, index, etc.), and these texts and paratexts are organised in the manner of an onion, a series of nested dolls which reflect an awareness of lower layers (mediated via footnotes) but which do not overstep diegetic boundaries.

In addition to the metaleptic transgressions discussed above, however, various errors and contradictions creep into 'The Navidson Record' and disturb this structure. The clearest examples of this are the dual revelations that Zampanò was blind and that *The Navidson Record* is his invention:

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

photojournalist who must somehow capture the most difficult subject of all: the sight of darkness itself. Odd, to say the least. (xxi)

House of Leaves thus consists partially of a blind man's dissection of a visually mediated text which does not, in fact, exist; Zampanò cannot see but, in addition, there is *nothing to see*. This paradoxical foundation for the novel is not, however, a revelation, a twist at the end; rather, these logical contradictions are divulged in Johnny's introduction to 'The Navidson Record', and are thus central to the novel's structure and its deconstruction of literary reality.

This destabilising of narrative reliability is also found on a smaller scale, throughout *House of Leaves*. In addition to the spatially inconsistent door in the living room of the house on Ash Tree Lane, we find passages such as "[Tom] might have spent all night drinking had not exhaustion caught up with *me*" (320, emphasis added), a bizarre slip which, while it may arguably be attributed to an error on the part of Zampanò, also hints at the possibility of a personal element to his narration. In addition, Zampanò's calculation of the depth of the spiral staircase, given as between 27,273 and 54,545 miles - the former "exceeding even the earth's circumference at the equator by 2,371 miles" (305) - is wildly inaccurate. Zampanò bases his calculations on an estimate of the length of time it takes for the coin Reston drops from the top, as a signal to Navidson, to reach the bottom, working with rough guesses of both the time taken and air density, but the real figure, while still staggering, is certainly far lower than 100 miles²⁰.

Such 'mistakes' could, of course, be dismissed as just that - as simple slips on the part of Danielewski - were it not for his emphatic assertion that "[t]here are no errors in the book" (quoted in McCaffery and Gregory 114). These faults, then, are in fact devices consciously utilised by Danielewski, and so must be considered in relation to their effects on our understanding of the novel; as a result, this chapter will consider these errors to be a means of foregrounding the question of authorship and, moreover, the *acts* of authorship within the novel.

Various points in Zampanò's narration and analysis of *The Navidson Record* point towards its fictivity, to the possibility that the writing of 'The Navidson Record' simultaneously

²⁰ Taking the terminal velocity of a coin to be 22.352m/s and the time to be 3000 seconds (50 minutes, as postulated by Navidson; 305), we arrive at roughly 67km/42 miles.

constituted the process of creation for the film upon which it is supposedly based. Early in the text, Zampanò dissects a scene from the film in which what is inside one of Karen's jewellery boxes is, to the detriment of his analysis, "invisible to the camera" (10); later, he states that the box contains love letters from a suitor, saved by Karen (349). Here, it is as if Zampanò 'fleshes out' the Navidsons as he writes, inserting the letters into Karen's jewellery box when it is necessary for the discussion of her infidelities. A similar hint of the construction of narrative emerges in Chapter III, which deals with the question "Why Navidson?" (19) with regard to the exploration of the house. Here, Zampanò proceeds to discuss Navidson's credentials as a photojournalist, his troubled childhood, and his original intentions in creating *The Navidson Record*:

Why Navidson?

Considering the practically preadamite history of the house, it was inevitable someone *like* Navidson would eventually enter those rooms.

Why not someone else?

Considering his own history, talent, and emotional background, only Navidson could have gone as deep as he did and still have successfully brought that vision back. (23)

Cause is here expressed as effect, logic is back-to-front; Navidson does not explore the house by utilising his "history, talent, and emotional background", but *because* of it. Zampanò, then, creates a character adapted to explore the labyrinth, and then sends him into it through an authorial metalepsis - just as Virgil has Dido die, in the diction of Genette, so too does Zampanò have Navidson explore.

As part of his construction of a narrative, moreover, we find Zampanò making statements about his subjects that are more appropriate to the invested author than to the distanced critic. For example, Zampanò states that, when Navidson viewed the tape of Wax kissing Karen, he "hardly responded. He viewed the scene twice, once at regular speed, the second time on fast forward, and then moved on to the rest of the footage without saying a word" (397). Similarly, with regard to the filmic representation of Navidson's experiences at the centre of the house, where gravity no longer applies, Zampanò states that "the film does not provide an even remotely coherent synthesis of Navidson's fall" (468). These instances represent Zampanò's comprehension extending beyond that of his own diegesis, and into that of the Navidsons, for all of these observations fall outside the purview of the film critic. To

take the example of Navidson's viewing of the tape; there is no evidence to suggest that Navidson filmed himself at this moment, nor any logical reason why he would have. Thus, if Navidson's reaction to the tape is not featured in *The Navidson Record*, Zampanò should not have any knowledge of it, based on his supposed role as distanced critic. In short, Zampanò possesses knowledge which only an author could have, even going so far as to state, with regard to the labyrinth - that endless space which he *should* only know of as a result of a television or movie theatre - that "[o]nly knowledge illuminates that bottomless place, disclosing the deep ultimately absent in all the tapes and stills" (87). It is as if, unlike the inhabitants of the house, Zampanò alone has penetrated the depths of the labyrinth, has understood its meaning - and, of course, as its author, he has.

In his critical analysis of *The Navidson Record*, Zampanò utilises a large quantity of scholarly material, all of which is as fictional as the film upon which it comments. Many of these references are arguably inserted by Danielewski for comedic or satirical effect, as with "Invasive Cures" in the journal *Homeopathic Alternatives* (84, note 91), Walter Joseph Adeltine's "Crap" (34, note 39), and Justin Krape's "Pale Micturitions" (378, note 352), to name a few, and still more would appear to have a complexity that goes beyond satire of the academic penchant for profound titling: We find, for example, Eta Ruccalla's *Not True, Man: Mi Ata Beni?*, published by the "Hineini Press", and Nam Eurrton's "All Accurate" discussed in a footnote (247, note 224); the name of the former author, when read backwards, is the title of the latter's article, and vice versa, while "Mi Ata Beni?" ("Who are you, my son?") has a response in "Hineini" ("Here I am"), referencing an exchange between the biblical Isaac and Jacob (Cohen *et al.* 39), which is the subject of the body of the text of 'The Navidson Record' from which the footnote stems. The purpose and nature of these references thus range from scatological jokes to complex constructions which, when decrypted, comment upon already-complex analyses; moreover, they draw attention to the bizarre critical apparatus upon which 'The Navidson Record' is built.

Some texts, such as those which present competing theories as to why Will Navidson returns to the house at the end of *The Navidson Record*, are in fact so insubstantial that they do not even exist in the diegesis of fabricated criticism (that which is located between the world of *The Navidson Record* and that of Zampanò). For example, Lance Slocum and Mia Haven's analyses of the three dreams which Navidson relates in a video journal are all, for one reason or another, unavailable to Zampanò; the first is "difficult to find and *purportedly* exceeds 180 pages", and the second is "also impossible to locate and *reportedly* well over two

hundred pages long" (398-399, emphases added). The third, moreover, is prefaced by Zampanò's comments regarding it being "particularly difficult to recount", and we then find that two pages are missing from the manuscript of 'The Navidson Record', the (presumably explanatory) footnote appended to this notice a series of blank lines (402-403; 403, note 389). Here, then, between the increasingly transparent nature of Zampanò's 'analysis' and the bizarrely incomplete status of the manuscript, there is a growing erosion of the sense of reality on which 'The Navidson Record' as a critical text is ostensibly founded.

More troubling, however, are the incontestable impossibilities regarding some of these references if we are to believe, as Johnny states, that Zampanò died on January 6, 1997 (xix), and was wholly responsible for the text of 'The Navidson Record'. For example, the theory proposed by Lance Slocum and Mia Haven regarding Navidson's return to the house was presented to "The Assemblage of Cultural Diagnosticians Sponsored By The American Psychiatric Association" in Washington, D.C. on the day of Zampanò's death (396); possibly Zampanò, prior to dying in Los Angeles, was made aware of this, but it would seem unlikely. More damning is the reference to Matthew Coolidge's *Nuclear Proving Grounds of the World* (381, note 355), a *real* text which was published in 1998, roughly two years after Zampanò's death. These impossibilities, moreover, are found within *The Navidson Record*, as when Zampanò, in describing the books on the Navidsons' bookshelf, makes reference to Chris Allen's *1001 Sex Secrets Every Man Should Know* and its companion, *1001 Sex Secrets Every Woman Should Know* (62, note 73a), both of which were published in reality in 1995, contradicting Zampanò's assertion that *The Navidson Record* was released in April of 1993 (6). All of these instances when taken together serve to show logical impossibilities within 'The Navidson Record': The books on the bookshelf of the Navidsons conclusively demonstrate the fictive nature of *The Navidson Record* (if the impossible, shape-shifting house was not already sufficient proof), and those referenced in Zampanò's text suggest a logical paradox; either Zampanò did not die on the date alleged by Johnny, or 'The Navidson Record' has been altered by some external force.

This possibility is further enlarged upon by the strangely apt epigraph of Chapter XI which, prior to providing the transcript of Tom's recordings from inside the labyrinth, discusses the relationship of Navidson and his twin brother with reference to that of the biblical Jacob and Esau. This section, however, was supposedly destroyed by Zampanò due to its being "too personal" - "[h]e had torn [the pages] to shreds" (248, note 226). With this in mind, consider the epigraph, quoted from Baudelaire and translated in a footnote:

The poet, sick, and with his chest half bare
 Tramples a manuscript in his dark stall,
 Gazing with terror at the yawning stair
 Down which his spirit finally must fall.

(Baudelaire, "[On Tasso in Prison' by Eugene Delacroix]" 1-4, quoted in *House of Leaves* 246, note 221)

Again, we find a back-to-front logic, with Zampanò seemingly providing an epigraph which is related not to the content of the chapter, but to an event which postdates this action of selecting the epigraph. The situation of Zampanò, who authors a section of text which is so personal as to require its destruction, is reflected in Baudelaire's poet, a figure confronted with some unimaginable pain which is tinged with "Doubt and terror, multiform and blurred" ("On Tasso in Prison", 8), and both respond with the destruction of their work, 'trampling' their manuscripts. Here, again, is a logical impossibility if we are to believe in the inviolability of Zampanò's authorship, for the epigraph is simultaneously a part of the chapter and yet a metaleptic commentary on it, intruding down from the diegesis in which Zampanò's text figures as an object of narration, mediated by Johnny.

Just as in 'The Navidson Record', in Johnny's material we find various inconsistencies which destabilise our understanding of his role as the caretaker and intermediary of the manuscript. His discussion of the discrepancies in Zampanò's use of secondary material, for example, is undercut by the Editors who, in response to his assertion that *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft, Volume XXVIII* does not exist (xx), provide a photograph of the volume and corresponding bibliographical information in Appendix III (658).

More disruptive to the reader's faith in Johnny, however, are his evasions of the truth. His statement that "Latin's way out of my league" (34) is undermined by both Pelafina's cryptic "God knows how he's sinned,/'Cause in Latin he's practically fluent" (631) and, moreover, by Johnny's stream-of-consciousness narration of his panic attack in the storeroom, brought on by visions of the house's distorted geometry and the 'monster' at its heart.

Known.

Some.

Call.

Is.

Air.

Am?

Incoherent - yes.

Without meaning - I'm afraid not. (71)

This unintelligible string of words is clarified at the end of the passage by the phrase "I am not what I used to be" (72), giving Johnny's exhortations a new meaning in that they may be reconfigured as a phonetic pronunciation of the Latin 'Non sum qualis eram' ("I am not what I used to be") - a phrase which appears in one of Pelafina's letters (602). Johnny's thought processes, at first seemingly erratic, are thus clarified into a startlingly erudite phrasing plucked from Horace's *Odes* (4.1.3-4; Slavitt 155), forcing the reader to re-evaluate Johnny and his professed ignorance, as well as the influence of his mother on his thought processes and responses to the metaleptic intrusions of the labyrinth.

Johnny's narration of his descent into madness is not without its subversions of narrative reliability, replete as it is with passages which later appear to have been violent fantasies or delusions. Johnny's assertion that he has kidnapped and intends to rape and murder Kyrie, with whom he had a brief affair, and that he has murdered her boyfriend, the bizarrely titled Gdansk Man (497), is later countered by a contradictory version of events: "I throw the bottle away [...] Kyrie takes his keys, slips behind the wheel and retreats into the bellowing of the day" (516). At times, Johnny proceeds to lie to his reader with little regard for even a semblance of reliability, as when he discusses his 'recovery': "Staying with an old friend. [...] I am very much improved. My friends have been taking care of me full time" (507); "I'm healthy and strong. I can run two miles in under twelve minutes. I can sleep nine hours straight" (508). Then:

Are you fucking kidding me? Did you really think any of that was true? September 2 thru September 28? I just made that all up. Right out of thin air. [...] Though here's the sadder side of all this, I wasn't trying to trick you. I was trying to trick myself, to believe, even for two lousy hours, that I was lucky enough to have two such friends (509)

Similarly, the passage in which Johnny describes meeting the band in Flagstaff who possess a copy of the first edition of *House of Leaves*, which ends with an unusually peaceful series of sentiments - "somehow I know it's going to be okay. It's going to be alright." (515) - is immediately undermined by the following entry:

These pages are a mess. [...] Stuck together with blood. No idea what to make of those last few entries either. What's the difference, especially in difference, what's read what's left in what's left out what's invented what's remembered what's forgotten what's written what's found what's lost what's done?

What's not done?

What's the difference? (515)

Johnny's narrative, then, repeatedly contains clear fabrications which are part of an attempt to escape from the crushing reality of his situation, from the pressure and fear exerted by the house upon his psyche. These lies are not those of a narrator but of someone who seeks to delude their own self, to fabricate a reality outside of, and better than, one's own. What's more, as part of this effort, truth becomes essentially meaningless.

What Johnny describes as "shifting and re-shifting details" (92, note 104) also bleeds into the manuscript for which he is responsible; indeed, his first extended footnote appended to the text of 'The Navidson Record' contains an admission which, though brief, irreversibly alters our understanding of the nature of Zampanò's text. In a footnote stemming from a passage in which the Navidsons' "water heater [is] on the fritz" (12), Johnny describes facing the same issue in his apartment, and then explains the unlikely parallel:

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

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

Now there's an admission, eh?

Hey, not fair, you cry.

Hey, hey, fuck you, I say. (16, note 18)

With just a few lines, Johnny demolishes the sanctity of authorship, blithely admitting to making changes of a non-editorial nature to 'The Navidson Record', seemingly in order to

relate the events of the film to his own life. Although this is the sole instance in which Johnny admits to tampering with Zampanò's manuscript, the ramifications of this admission are enormous: "Once this first brick has been removed from the 'sacred text' Johnny is supposed to be faithfully reassembling, the entire edifice immediately collapses and can never be made whole again" (McCaffery and Gregory 131). Suddenly, Johnny's life and Zampanò's discourse "running parallel", Zampanò's authorship itself - indeed, everything about 'The Navidson Record' - is undermined and subject to question. Moreover, as with the fact that the reader of *House of Leaves* is aware from its initial pages of Zampanò's blindness and the fictional nature of *The Navidson Record*, this admission is found in the first of hundreds of footnotes authored by Johnny; again, contradiction, textual manipulation, and unreliability are central and explicitly stated components of the fabric of the novel.

Who, then, is the author of 'The Navidson Record'? Who is the originator of *House of Leaves*? As has been previously discussed, even the diegesis of the Editors is subject to metaleptic violation, and Danielewski's name is effaced from the title page of the novel and placed on the preceding one²¹; thus, *House of Leaves* is "by Zampanò", "with introduction and notes by Johnny Truant" (iii).

Before discussing the broader ramifications of the question of authorship for our understanding of the novel, however, one more figure needs to be discussed. Danielewski states that he considers *House of Leaves* to be "basically a three-character play" (quoted in McCaffery and Gregory 107), the third of these characters being Pelafina, whose significance becomes apparent when the reader arrives at Appendix II-E. Indeed, close reading of both her letters and 'The Navidson Record' reveals that, just as with Zampanò and Johnny, Pelafina's discourse has a destabilising effect on the ostensible 'reality' of *House of Leaves*.

There exist several links between Zampanò and Pelafina, in spite of the fact that there is no explicit suggestion or evidence in the novel for them ever having met. These range from unlikely parallels - both mis-spelling 'pieces' as "pisces" (41; 599) or quoting the same lines from *The Battle of Maldon*, written in roughly AD 991 (601; 653) - to the fact that they share

²¹ As an interesting, unverified aside, I note that the page on which Danielewski's name appears in both the hardcover and paperback editions of my copies of *House of Leaves* appears to have been bound less securely than the other pages, and has had to be restored to its rightful place using tape. Assuming that this is a conscious effort on the part of Danielewski - a not unlikely possibility, considering the fact that his attention to detail with regard to the physical form of the novel extended to his typesetting it himself (McCaffery and Gregory 118) - we find a further erosion of the concept of authorship, which again extends outwards into our reality.

a similar prose style. Both write in an overblown, pseudo-academic manner, with a predilection for wide-ranging literary, artistic, and mythological references and quotations, use the Oxford comma, and show an interest in the etymology of words, as when Zampanò spends several paragraphs unpacking the roots of "riddle" (33) or Pelafina provides etymological notes in the margins of one of her letters (*The Whalestoe Letters* 56). Both, moreover, take the same bizarre approach to textual formatting, and the rotating, superimposition, and mirroring of words and sentences found in 'The Navidson Record' is also found in several of Pelafina's letters (see, for example, 624-627; *The Whalestoe Letters* 35).

The ways in which Pelafina describes her experience of The Three Attic Whalestoe Institute also resemble descriptions of the labyrinth of *The Navidson Record*, in spite of the fact that, logically, she cannot possibly know of it: "I live at the end of some interminable corridor" (624); "How many chambers? How great the space of its hollows? How seldom the windows?" (*The Whalestoe Letters* 55); "Not enough room for it all and yet there is room. It makes rooms. Rooms upon rooms upon hundreds of rooms full of indistinguishable remains" (*The Whalestoe Letters* 19). There are unlikely parallels between Pelafina's writings and Karen in *The Navidson Record*, as with the "pink ribbons" (599) which Pelafina puts in her hair finding counterparts in the ones that mysteriously appear in Karen's following Navidson's final escape from the house (523), or Pelafina's description of "[p]racticing my smile in a mirror the way I did when I was a child" (615) echoing Karen's practice of doing so as an insecure teenager (58). Pelafina's letters, then, written between 1982 and 1989, would appear to have been influenced by a film which not only postdates her death but which never, in fact, existed; alternatively, Zampanò's invented film incorporates elements of a private correspondence between mother and son, but there exists nothing in the novel to suggest how or why this may have occurred.

There are further instances of ontological metalepsis in Pelafina's letters, as when she writes "[t]hough what of the cats?" (*The Whalestoe Letters* 56). Here, we find a reference to the fact that, in the months preceding Zampanò's death, the cats in the area around his apartment "had begun to disappear. By the time he died they were all gone" (xx). Moreover, using the acrostic method with which Pelafina encodes messages to Johnny, we find in one of

her letters the phrase "my dEar Zampanò who did you lose?" (615²²). These instances show a knowledge which crosses diegetic and ontological boundaries for, not only is there no direct link in the text between Zampanò and Pelafina, but the point at which the cats started dying (the months preceding Zampanò's death on January 6, 1997) postdates Pelafina's death (May 4, 1989; 643) by roughly seven years, and the date of the letter (February 23, 1988) by eight.

What links Pelafina and Zampanò is, of course, Johnny - and, between the three, we find a strange meeting point within the text of 'The Navidson Record'. In the bottom right-hand corner of page 97 there is a small check mark, there for no discernible reason upon first glance; it would appear to have no relevance to Zampanò's discussion, and is not elaborated upon at any point in 'The Navidson Record'. Pelafina's letter of September 19, 1985, however, instructs Johnny to "place in your next letter a check mark in the lower right hand corner"; in the next letter, Pelafina confirms that Johnny did so ("We have found a way!"; 609-610). The appearance of the check mark in Zampanò's text thus ties the three together in an impossible way: 'The Navidson Record' is a critical exegesis of a film which was released in 1993, postdating Pelafina's letter by eight years, and so this check mark, a symbol kept secret between mother and son, suggests that 'The Navidson Record' is, somehow, a letter from Johnny to his mother, received by her before Zampanò could possibly have begun work. This impossible confluence unifies the three characters of Danielewski's "play" and, in so doing, utterly destabilises the foundations upon which the authorial structure of the novel rests. Like the 'water heater' instance, the check mark calls into question all we know of the novel, rendering interpretation of any one element near-impossible and dismantling the idea of the 'sacred text'.

As was stated previously, the narrative structure of *House of Leaves* when examined in detail is in essence a heterarchy, a system in which no one voice may be considered to be authoritative. Like the house, like the blue box footnote, the 'holes' made in the text by the inconsistencies discussed above suggest answers and finality, and yet each subsequent discovery or piece of evidence is yet another dead end - it creates "yet another series of empty rooms and passageways, all with walls potentially hiding and thus hinting at a possible exterior, though invariably winding up as just another border to another interior" (119).

²² Taken from the following passage: "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?" Here, then, in a letter to Johnny which is otherwise lucid and structured, we find that the word order is altered specifically for the purposes of this hidden communique.

Indeed, Johnny himself expresses an awareness of this, giving voice to "the most terrible suspicion of all, that all of this has just been made up and what's worse, not made up by me or even for that matter Zampanò. Though by whom I have no idea" (326). His losing sense of what is real, of who the author is - of "[w]hat I've made up, what has made me" (497) - is thus a reflection of the state of the heterarchical structure of *House of Leaves*, of the reader's difficulty in terms of sense-making, and the critic's with regard to coming to any kind of conclusion regarding the nature of authorship in the novel. Again, then, "the book and the labyrinth" are "one and the same".

As Davidson notes, "[i]t is this lack of ontological certainty - which manifests itself as the reader begins to question the narrator's and their own understanding of the text - that makes the novel uncanny" (T. Davidson 79). Thus, the *unheimlich* is here related not to concrete or literal manifestations, but to Danielewski's narrative technique: The familiar construct of textual authorship is made unfamiliar, as concepts such as narrative reliability and logical non-contradiction are violated by a clamour of authorial and narratorial voices, all of which can be argued to have responsibility for the text. In the works of Zampanò, Johnny, and Pelafina we find instances of diegetic transgressions, textual manipulation, and ontological uncertainty, all of which *could* suggest that they, alone, are the author of the text. These "innumerable clues (or lures)" are so frequent, so wide-ranging, that many contradict one another, however, and the question of the authorship of *House of Leaves* thus becomes an unsolvable puzzle, each subsequent discovery posing more questions than it answers. Like the explorers of the labyrinth, then, like Johnny in his experiences with the labyrinthine text of 'The Navidson Record', and like Zampanò in his construction of this monolithic monograph, the reader and critic of *House of Leaves*, should they attempt to make sense of it, becomes lost in a maze of contradictory evidence and narrative speculation, proceeding through the textually mediated "empty rooms, long hallways, and dead ends" (109) of the labyrinth.

"The house answers many yearnings remembered in sorrow": The Minotaur and Trauma

The previous chapter argued that the issue of authorship in *House of Leaves* is, in essence, an unsolvable puzzle, consciously crafted so as to textually mediate the experience of the labyrinth; the preceding chapters considered the significance of the house and its violations of space, arguing for the fundamentally paradoxical nature of the novel and its themes and symbols. The house is inarguably at the centre of the novel, but we are left with the question of what the house *is*, beyond a paradoxical symbol; of whether there is a unifying principle which further ties together the contradictions and violations of the novel and its house. Here, it will be argued that the various elements of *House of Leaves* - the diegeses, authors, paratexts, characters, and settings - are linked in that all are suffused with experiences or remediations of trauma and grief. McCaffery and Gregory write that *House of Leaves* is "part meditation on the nature of fear (and the ways that fear is projected outward into hatred, anger, and sadomasochistic impulses)" (99-100), while Dawson argues that "Danielewski's twisted contemporary surrealism explores a severely traumatized individual's fallen psyche" (14). At issue here is far more than simple fear or the damage done to a single individual, however, for *House of Leaves* is permeated on every narrative level with excruciating pain, grief, loss, absence, and regret; the novel is in essence, an extensive meditation on traumatic experience.

Within *The Navidson Record*, 'Delial' functions as a source of extreme guilt for Navidson, the albatross around his neck which, Zampanò suggests, is at the root of his desire to return to the house for Exploration #5 (394). This guilt stems from Navidson's decision to photograph, rather than immediately attempt to save, a starving Sudanese child, which resulted in his being awarded the Pulitzer Prize. His grief is expressed most clearly in his letter to Karen in which he writes, regarding the vulture in the background of the photograph, that "the real vulture was the guy with the camera preying on her" (392). All of these elements - the starving child, the vulture, the Pulitzer Prize, the sense of guilt - clearly link to Kevin Carter's *real*, also Pulitzer Prize-winning, photograph of a starving Sudanese child; tragically, the remorse Carter felt as a result of his choice led to his suicide in 1994 (Macleod). Here, then, we find a metaleptic reimagining of a real-world artefact, serving as a focal point for a fictional character's locus of pain.

More broadly, emotional scarification in some form or other surfaces for every character of *The Navidson Record*; with Tom's death during the house's violent transformation and its effects upon the entire family, with Holloway's suicidal urges as a result of an early heartbreak (328-329), with Karen's sexual abuse as a child (347). Billy Reston, in spite of his resilience, deals with the aftermath of the accident that left him paraplegic (38), Chad and Daisy are traumatised by the destruction of the family home and, moreover, the breakdown of their parents' relationship, Jed Leeder is murdered, and Wax Hook is scarred psychologically by his time in the labyrinth, showing symptoms of "stupor" and "enduring impotence" (396). *The Navidson Record* is, of course, a text which has been invented, and is a narrative pervaded by trauma and loss, and so the act of inventing such a film - of dwelling extensively upon it, as Zampanò and Johnny (and the reader, moreover) do - could perhaps be seen as a way of revisiting and attempting to come to terms with traumatic experience.

In Zampanò's discourse we occasionally find unusually personal, un-academic asides; for example, relating back to his own blindness, in the chapter on echoes, in the midst of a passage discussing the physical properties of light and sound, is the following:

The blind must rely on the feeble light of fingertips and the painful shape of a cracked shin. Echolocation comes down to the crude assessment of simple sound modulations, whether in the dull reply of a tapping cane or the low, eerie flutter in one simple word - perhaps your word - flung down empty hallways long past midnight. (47-48)

Past his physical disability, there are suggestions of a deeper pain, as with the destruction of the biblical twins chapter discussed above ("What difference does it make? They're dead anyway, right?"; 248, note 226), and the acrostically encoded "she said memories mean all but they are all dead", hidden within a long footnote (65, note 75²³). The passage in which "[h]e might have spent all night drinking had not exhaustion caught up with me" (320) appears relates to Tom's belief that his twin brother has died within the labyrinth; here,

²³ Arrived at by taking the first letter of the surnames of 39 of the 776 names listed in footnote 75 (64-67). Other messages are also to be found within this note; "she said..." is arrived at by acrostically decoding Paul Strand through to Bruce Davidson.

perhaps Zampanò's 'slip' is due to the fact that Tom's perceived loss reflects one of Zampanò's own, a possibility which correlates with the painful memory evoked by Jacob and Esau. Pelafina's question, then - "who did you lose?" (615) - impossible though it may be from a narratological perspective, would appear to be apt for, while neither Zampanò nor Johnny are forthcoming about whom this might be, a sense of loss pervades *The Navidson Record* and its critical exegesis.

The reader is able to glean very little regarding the life, or indeed person, of Zampanò. One of those who assisted with the creation of 'The Navidson Record' by reading and transcribing describes him as "imperceptible and alone, though not I think so lonely" (35), and this vagueness of character is reflected in the concrete details of his life available to Johnny:

From what I can gather now, he was an American. Though as I would later find out, those who worked with him detected an accent even if they could never say for certain where it came from. He called himself Zampanò. It was the name he put down on his apartment lease and on several other fragments I found. I never came across any sort of ID, whether a passport, license or other official document insinuating that yes, he indeed was An-Actual-&-Accounted-For person.

Johnny even suggests that the name was "maybe borrowed" (xii), and critics have drawn parallels between Zampanò and the character of the same name in Fellini's *La Strada* (see e.g. Hansen 601; McCaffery and Gregory 125-126), a callous circus strongman who emotionally dominates, and later abandons, a young woman, only to hear of and lament her death as a result of his mistreatment several years later. McCaffery and Gregory go so far as to draw parallels between Fellini's Zampanò and characters in *House of Leaves* (Zampanò, Navidson, and even Danielewski himself), stating that there is "considerable evidence" to suggest that the two Zampanòs are the same; that Fellini's Zampanò, following the final scene on the beach, "later went blind (just as he claimed he might in *La Strada*) and then eventually made his way to Los Angeles where he lived out his days as an eccentric old man" (McCaffery and Gregory 126). This interpretation, most likely something of a stretch - consider the difference in temperament of the two characters, the one's scholarly eloquence contrasted with the other's brutishness - nonetheless hints at a possible influence for Danielewski, a link between the two Zampanòs based on pain and loss. Here, then, we find, rather than a horizontal

metalepsis, in the terminology of Bell and Alber (see note 11 of this thesis), a metatextual correlation which thematises the source of Zampanò's grief.

The other, more concrete, possible source of loss for Zampanò is his hinted-at military background. This is suggested partially by his usage of vaguely military language - "command post" (98), "[a] sudden enfilade of 'fuck you's'" (125) - as well as "the battered shotgun bearing the initials RLB under his bed" (31), a World War Two collectable (554). Most conducive to any understanding of Zampanò's loss, however, are the references to the Vietnam War which it is possible to find within his work. Holloway's decision to return to the heart of the labyrinth during Exploration #4 is characterised by Zampanò as "[u]ne solution politique honorable" (127; "an honourable political solution"), a reference to the sought-for end to the conflict in Vietnam on the part of the French (P. Davidson 165). Similarly, "[l]es jeux sont fait. Nous sommes fucked" (38; "the plays are made. We are fucked") is attributed to a Fred de Stabenrath in April 1954, the point in time at which the Battle of Dien Bien Phu was raging. "Fred de Stabenrath purportedly exclaimed this right before he was ki" begins the explanatory footnote appended to this passage, with the rest "buried beneath a particularly dark spill of ink" according to Johnny (38, note 44; note 45). Moreover, the "seven names he would occasionally mention [...] when he was disconsolate and for whatever reason dragged back into some dark tangled time" - "Béatrice, Gabrielle, Anne-Marie, Dominique, Eliane, Isabelle and Claudine" (xxii) - are the names of seven French fortifications established during the Battle of Dien Bien Phu (Ricaud 30). Lord notes that one name is missing from this list ('Huguette') and hypothesises that this could be "the name of a lost love" (474), but there is, in fact, another name absent - 'Françoise' (Ricaud 30) - bringing the number 'missing' from this list up to two. 'Huguette' and 'Françoise' are not names that otherwise appear in *House of Leaves*, and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt to offer an interpretation of this disparity; suffice to say that here, perhaps, amongst the elisions and excisions of Zampanò, we find a possible source of his pain, and for the suffering which the characters of his invented film undergo.

In relation to the analysis of *The Navidson Record*, there is one other aspect that suggests some loss or trauma on the part of Zampanò. Discussed in relation to the concept of the labyrinth, following Zampanò's extensive analysis of the trope - ranging from historical examples (109) to Penelope Reed Doob's *The Idea of the Labyrinth* - the idea of the minotaur, that which roams the labyrinth, is introduced by Zampanò and subsequently excised, only to

be reinstated by Johnny's editorship and presented in the text in a struck-through font and coloured in red. As with the biblical brothers chapter, the minotaur would appear to have been 'too personal' a subject for Zampanò and, in spite of its illustrative qualities as relates to the house and the 'monster' at its centre, was removed; Johnny, "with a little bit of turpentine and a good old magnifying glass managed to resurrect" (111) this theme.

To Zampanò, the Cretan minotaur of Greek myth was not a supernatural being: "King Minos did not build the labyrinth to imprison a monster but to conceal a deformed child - his child"²⁴. The minotaur is thus linked to shame, to familial betrayal, and is "a trope for repression". Tragically, in Zampanò's retelling, the son of Minos is sequestered away from the populace, the king having had "enough conscience to keep from murdering his own flesh and blood", until Theseus - "a drunken, virtually retarded, frat boy" - hears of a monster within the labyrinth and sets out to destroy it. The king, however, gradually realises the qualities of his son, "eventually discovering an elegiac spirit", but Theseus "hacks the minotaur into little pieces".

King Minos, with tears streaming down his face, publicly commends Theseus' courage. The crowd believes the tears are a sign of gratitude while we [...] understand they are tears of loss. The king's heart breaks, and while he will go on to be an extremely just ruler, it is a justice forever informed by the deepest kind of agony. (110, note 123)

For Zampanò, then, the minotaur is not a mythological creature; rather, it is a symbol representing grief, unfathomable loss, abandonment, and, above all, regret. That the minotaur was incorporated, prior to its excision, into the text of 'The Navidson Record' conflates it with these tropes with regard to *The Navidson Record*, imbuing the passages which it appears alongside with the resonances of Zampanò's tragic reimagining of myth.

Chapter XIII of 'The Navidson Record' is given the title 'The Minotaur', and we see here the traumas of Minos reflected in the Navidsons; Chad and Daisy's psychological breakdown, Holloway's psychosis and suicide, and, finally, the violent change in the house and the resultant death of Tom. Here, in spite of the fact that, aside from its title, the chapter

²⁴ As is stated, all of the passages concerning the minotaur are presented in a struck-through font and coloured in red; for ease of reading, however, quotations are presented here without these textual alterations.

does not discuss the minotaur specifically, we find that the title is apt, for it is not a corporeal being but an embodiment of trauma. Moreover, "[a]t the heart of the labyrinth waits the Mi[no]taur" (335, note 295), and it is this that Holloway encounters in its depths - "not half man/half bull [*but*] something other, forever inhabiting [...] unreadable" (338, note 303; see also note 16 of this thesis). The minotaur, as the transfigured representation of human trauma and emotional abandonment, is that which exists at the centre of the labyrinth of the house, for it is equated with the absence that characterises it. Also presented with the same unusual formatting (struck-through and coloured red) are the following lines on the labyrinth which, on the basis of their excision, relate to the Zampanò's minotaur:

No answer lies there. It cannot care, especially for what it no longer knows. 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. And if you do lose yourself at least take solace in the absolute certainty that you will perish. (115, note 140)

The minotaur thus stands for the properties of the labyrinth - for its infinite, cold expanse, for its emptiness, for its traumatic effects on humanity and the human psyche. It is not a fixed symbol, however, for it not only transcends the corporeal form of the half man/half bull being of legend but corporeality itself, becoming a textual artefact (red ink, struck through) that symbolises a grief so intense that its explication requires annihilation.

The minotaur is also linked to "Redwood", Danielewski's early literary project which he abandoned due to his father's disapproval. Echoing the fate of Zampanò's Jacob and Esau passage, Danielewski describes how he "tore up the manuscript [...] into hundreds of pieces, flung them into a dumpster in the alley", and so what was intended to be "a piece in which I tried to articulate what my father's mortality meant to me" (Danielewski, quoted in McCaffery and Gregory 103) became associated with parental betrayal and rejection. This theme, at the heart of the retelling of the minotaur, moreover, is transformed by Zampanò into something other, something monstrous: "Redwood. I saw him once a long time ago when I was young. I ran away and luckily, or no luck at all, he did not follow me. But now I cannot run and anyway this time I am certain he would follow" (547). Danielewski's deeply personal and painful trauma is thus metaleptically appropriated by Zampanò, and comes to stand for the absence at the centre of the labyrinth: "Myth is Tom's [M]r. Monster. Myth is

Hol[lowa]y's beast. Myth is the Minotaur. Myth is Redwood" (335-337; see also note 16 of this thesis). Yet again, the terror of the labyrinth (and, moreover, Zampanò's understanding) metaleptically intrudes into our reality, becoming a facet of its author's own traumatic experience.

The heart of the labyrinth of *The Navidson Record* is thus a composite symbol which is truly metaleptic, for it is partially constituted of the pain of its (real) author. It is the Cretan minotaur, a mythological monster; it is Zampanò's minotaur, the failings of a father and the remediation of some unimaginable pain; it is Danielewski's own sense of paternal betrayal; it is absence and threat and space embodied, and yet paradoxically disembodied. Above all, the minotaur as a textual element in *House of Leaves* is one which is present, and *made present*, as a result of Zampanò's attempted excision: It is a manifestation of pain, as well as its source, and exists in a liminal space with regard to the text, for it is struck through - simultaneously there and not there. Perhaps here we find the culmination of Zampanò's desire to "in the margins of darkness [...] create a son who is not missing; who lives beyond even my own imagination and invention" (543), this 'missing son' linking back to Zampanò telling one of his assistants that "he didn't have any children *any more*" (35, note 41, emphasis added). Both Toth (186) and Hayles (799) suggest that the "son" which he seeks to create is Johnny, on the basis that his notes exist within the "margins" of Zampanò's text, and such an argument is certainly not without its merits. However, to posit such a theory is to suggest the primacy of one diegesis/narrator (in this case Zampanò) over all others, thus arguing for one clearly defined author and going against the heterarchical structure of the novel argued for in this thesis, and so is rejected on those grounds. Instead, this son is perhaps most likely the minotaur itself, a figure which, like Johnny, is present largely within the margins of 'The Navidson Record' and, moreover, exists on the outermost limits of the text, in the "darkness" which is suggested by the ethereal traces of an excised theme. Irrespective of this, however, the minotaur functions chiefly as the embodiment of the absent centre of the labyrinth, a symbol of negation and annihilation, Zampanò's nexus of pain.

The theme of the minotaur remains in 'The Navidson Record' as a result of Johnny's efforts; regarding the motive behind this, one could argue for a simply editorial desire - to salvage any and all fragments of Zampanò's text and present them to the reader. There is a deeper, more personal aspect to this, however, for the minotaur becomes for Johnny a point of identification, and he sees within the symbol and all that it entails a reflection of his own

sense of abandonment and trauma (as is noted by McCaffery and Gregory; 128). He begins to identify with Zampanò's minotaur, his paranoia tainted by it, as when he describes the aftermath of a panic attack: "The locks may have held, the chain too, but my room still stinks of gore, a flood of entrails from wall to wall, the hacked remains of hooves and hands, matted hair and bone, used to paint the ceiling, drench the wall" (151). Here, then, the "hooves" of the mythical minotaur are combined with the violent fate of the son of Minos in Zampanò's retelling, with the literal evisceration of the mythical beast becoming the psychological horror Johnny faces.

He even goes so far as to find his own name *within* 'the minotaur': "[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, note 298). As Hayles asserts (798; see also Cox 8, Dawson 22), the letters of 'Truant' are found within the words 'the minotaur', although her solution to the anagram - recombining 'the minotaur' as "O Im he Truant" (Hayles 798) - ignores the fact that subtracting the letters of 'homie' from the phrase leaves a perfect anagram for 'Truant'. Here, we find Johnny scrambling for meaning, clutching at a forced coincidence, indicating the level of his identification with "a trope for repression", a symbol of paternal guilt, horrific violence, and abandonment. The minotaur thus becomes a reflection of his own self in Zampanò's text, a literary figure and thematic emblem which mirrors his own experiences of trauma.

Following on from the missing pages relating to Lance Haven and Mia Slocum's analysis of the third of Navidson's dreams, we find that Johnny relates one of his own. Bizarrely (perhaps metaleptically), this dream fits perfectly with the synopsis given by Zampanò for Navidson's, for it too is "difficult to recount and requires that careful attention be paid to the various temporal and even tonal shifts" (402). Here, Johnny is entombed in the bowels of a ship, having been isolated for some time, "wandering its narrow passages of black steel and rust" which "in spite of their ability to lose me still retain in every turn an almost indiscreet sense of familiarity." Johnny is deformed, the skin of his arms "melted" as if they have "been dipped in boiling oil"; he is Zampanò's minotaur.

Stiff hair sprouts up all over the fingers and around the long, yellow fingernails. [...] On my forehead there's an enormous bulge harder than stone. [...] I'm here because I am deformed, because when I speak my words come out in cracks and groans, and

what's more I've been put here by an old man, a dead man, by one who called me son though he was not my father.

He is assaulted by a figure which is at first a "drunken frat boy" (Zampanò's Theseus), who then becomes Kyrie, then various other women with whom Johnny has had romantic relationships, and this composite figure proceeds to brutally murder Johnny, "put[ting] an end to the far more terrible ache inside me, born decades ago, long before I finally beheld in a dream the face and meaning of my horror" (403-406, note 390). Zampanò's minotaur, the symbol of pain and trauma, is combined with Johnny's own, with the sense of abandonment brought on by an institutionalised mother and a deceased father; the burns on his arms reflect the cooking oil accidentally spilled on the infant Johnny by Pelafina, "transforming them forever into Oceanus whirls" (505).

This was, however, only the first instance of Pelafina harming Johnny, for we discover that the reason for her incarceration was an attempt to murder her child:

As she explained it, her thoughts at that time had entirely deteriorated. The burden of life seemed too much for her to bear and therefore, in her mind, an impossible and even horrible burden to impose upon a child, especially her own. Based on these wild ratiocinations, she gathered me up in her arms and tried to choke me. It was probably a very brief attempt. Maybe even comic. My father intervened almost immediately, and my mother was then taken away for my own safety. (380, note 354)

This memory later becomes confused for Johnny - "She hadn't tried to strangle me [...] I do know her fingers never closed around my throat. They only tried to wipe away the tears from my face" (517) - but even this is undercut by Pelafina's own admission of guilt, expressed in a letter: "You probably understood what I was doing for you. You were probably grateful" (629). The psychological effect of this event is also clear in what are, perhaps, Johnny's fabrications; the "long bloody scratch on the back of my neck" (72) following the storeroom panic attack mirroring the ones that Pelafina left there ("half-moon cuts on the back of your neck"; 630), or the fear of the 'monster' which stalks him. This is often described as having "[e]xtremely long fingers" (71; cf. 297), which mirror the ones that "closed around my throat" and, even in *The Navidson Record*, there are the "[f]ingers of blackness" (338) which consume the corpse of Holloway. Zampanò's minotaur, abandoned and left to die by his

father, thus becomes Johnny, the victim of would-be infanticide; the trauma that Johnny experienced as a child becomes the supernatural horrors of the labyrinth.

More particularly, the duration of this incident would appear to have great significance, for Johnny recalls "those five and a half minutes [which] just went and left me to my future" (517). Here, then, is a clear reference to "The Five and a Half Minute Hallway", the initial short film produced by Navidson of the labyrinth's impossible interior (see note 12 of this thesis). Moreover, Zampanò's description of the house on Ash Tree Lane following the events of *The Navidson Record*, and Johnny's of the asylum in which his mother was held when he visits many years after its closure, are strikingly similar:

The house was taken off the market, an eight foot fence was built around the property line with "No Trespassing Signs" posted everywhere. Apparently graffiti now marks the signs and vandals have broken all the windows. Following the release of the film, someone tried to burn down the house but it never caught fire. (550)

I found a way through the surrounding chain link fence. Eight feet high. Crowned with concertina wire. No Trespassing signs every ten yards. [...] On one of the walls, someone had scrawled: 'Welcome to the Ice House'. (504)

The other possible source of Johnny's mental suffering is Raymond, one of his foster fathers during his troubled adolescence. Following a series of schoolyard fights, Raymond loses patience and claims that he is taking Johnny to the hospital to deal with the injuries he has sustained. However:

Raymond took me somewhere else first, where I lost half my tooth, and alot [sic] more too I guess, on the outskirts, in an ice covered place, surrounded by barbed wire and willows, where monuments of rust, seldom touched, lie frozen alongside fence posts and no one ever comes near enough to hear the hawks cry. (93)

The suggestion here is of sexual violence, of the loss of far more than a tooth. Within Johnny's footnotes, this trauma reappears within passages of unreliable narration, as when Johnny describes his fantasy of raping Kyrie, in "[t]his place where no eye will find her, no ear will hear her, among pillars of rust, where hawks haunt the sky" (497). Johnny's traumatic

memory, of "monuments of rust" in the place where "no one ever comes near enough to hear the hawks cry", thus resurfaces in his frenzied desire to perform the same abuse on another, and we may thus read Johnny's fantasy as consisting more of a need to revisit and attempt to deal with a memory of trauma than a concrete intention to commit an abhorrent crime.

Moreover, within this recollection of sexual abuse we find various echoes of *The Navidson Record* - of the abandoned Navidson house/asylum ("barbed wire") and of the interior of the labyrinth ("an ice covered place", "seldom touched"). The impact of this moment also reverberates throughout Johnny's footnotes, appearing, for example, as the splinters he receives when he touches the claw marks in Zampanò's apartment floor:

I [...] even caught some splinters in my fingertips, some of their unexpected sadness and mourning, which though dug out later with a safety pin, I swear still fester beneath my skin, reminding me in a peculiar way of him, just like other splinters I still carry, though these much much deeper [...] reminding me of much colder days, Where I Left Death [...] ruled by a man with a beard rougher than horse hide and hands harder than horn, who called me beast because I was his boy though he wasn't my father (78, note 82)

Here, the claw of the monster of the labyrinth is linked to Johnny's traumatic experience, the "man with a beard rougher than horse hide and hands harder than horn" being Raymond, his abuser.

Taken together, all of these disparate elements suggest the possibility of both *The Navidson Record* and Zampanò's critical text functioning in some way as a means of re-experiencing trauma. Johnny equates himself with Zampanò's minotaur; the minotaur is the monster at the centre of the labyrinth; the monster at the centre of the labyrinth is simultaneously extreme absence and the experience of pain and abandonment, the claw marks it leaves in Zampanò's floor causing the memories of Johnny's abuse to resurface. Moreover, the house is equated with the institution in which Pelafina resides, and Navidson's 'Five and a Half Minute Hallway' is the one which Pelafina disappears down following her attempt to strangle Johnny. One interpretation of *House of Leaves*, then, would be Dawson's:

The composite figures of his scarred history return until Johnny identifies with the various perpetrators that form the roots of his twisted genealogical tree - the scars

engraved by Pelafina, Raymond, and the beast, a dark corridor within himself, blur together as traumatic and uncanny composites. (23)

Thus, to Dawson, *The Navidson Record*, its critical exegesis, and Johnny's experiences with this manuscript, are all Johnny's invention, mediations of the traumatic experiences of his childhood and adolescence, with the characters of each diegesis being "composite figures surfacing as imperfect repetitions of trauma" (15)²⁵.

Lord, however, argues for an opposing reading, claiming that Pelafina is the originator of all of the texts of *House of Leaves*:

If we read her psychosis in conjunction with the appearance of the check mark and her reference to Zampanò, we can speculate that her hallucinations extend beyond the appendix that contains her letters and into the rest of *House of Leaves*. Read in these terms, Johnny's story becomes a way for Pelafina to imagine her son's journey towards forgiveness of his mother. (474)

There is thus just as much evidence for a reading of the novel which posits *House of Leaves* to be the product of Pelafina's troubled psyche as there is for the same assertion with regard to Johnny. We find a motive for this in the sense of genuine regret regarding the attempted strangulation, attested by the many letters begging forgiveness. These missives, like much of Pelafina's discourse, are clouded by a sense of psychosis and fixation; one letter, for example, consists almost entirely of two phrases; "it was an accident" and "forgive me" (627). Pelafina, then, has both the desire and the requisite mental instability necessary to conjure up such an edifice as *House of Leaves*.

As is discussed above, the Whalestoe Institute is frequently described in Pelafina's letters in near-identical terms to the Navidsons' labyrinth, and there are other pieces of evidence that suggest Pelafina's authorship, and that the impetus for this act of writing is founded in her own traumatic experience. In addition to the similarity of Pelafina's writing style to Zampanò's, there is the fact that the Whalestoe Institute was located in Charlottesville, Virginia (*The Whalestoe Letters* xvi), the same state as the setting for *The*

²⁵ Similar interpretations are offered by Hamilton (8), Graulund (389, note 31), and Cox (6-7)

Navidson Record. Moreover, there are various passages in Pelafina's letters which hint at a possibly metaleptic edge to her words; we find this in phrases such as "I read you now as I write you" (*The Whalestoe Letters* 35), and in longer passages which, like Zampanò's description of the book which Navidson reads in the depths of the labyrinth, would appear to describe *House of Leaves* itself:

I'll concoct the right tale, perfect the telling, something worthwhile and grand to be delivered later, much later, more than likely in the years to come, into your gentle hands. Maybe I'll even make you stand on your tippy toes to get it. Of course you won't have to if you don't want to. Eventually you won't need to stand on your tippy toes. You'll have grown to grasp it. Which is when you'll need me most anyway. Strange. Peculiar. (*The Whalestoe Letters* 15)

We find here a counterpart to Zampanò's desire to create "a son in the margins of darkness"; a passage which could, were one so inclined, be read as Pelafina's desire to attempt to confront traumatic experience - her attempt to murder her child and subsequent institutionalisation - by way of extreme remediation, 'The Navidson Record' here functioning as an allegorical representation of the emotional void between mother and son.

To return, however, to the conclusions arrived at in the previous chapter; to Lord's "innumerable clues (or lures)", and to the simple fact that no one voice in *House of Leaves* may be considered to be authorial or even reliable: Any attempt to claim the primacy of one narrator or another, to attribute the novel to one particular troubled psyche, to consider it as a 'sacred text', is one which is fundamentally flawed, for contradictions abound. We may read the novel as Johnny's exploration of his own traumas, but we are then at a loss to explain how these themes came to exist in Pelafina's letters, which surely predate Johnny's act of writing; we may argue that *House of Leaves* is Pelafina's attempt to envision her son's forgiveness and explore the traumatic experience of institutionalisation, but we then, surely, must question how Zampanò fits into this scheme. We may even, in fact, argue for Zampanò as the author, the elderly eccentric having invented not only *The Navidson Record*, but a fictional commentator for his exegesis, the son he wished to create "in the margins of darkness". All of these interpretations are simultaneously valid and invalid; the evidence 'for' exists, and one may always fall back on the fact that the novel is riddled with contradictions so as to explain away the arguments 'against'.

What is perhaps more accurate, however, is to simply state that *House of Leaves* is a novel filled with pain. Within every narrator's discourse, on every diegetic level, there are instances of physical trauma, ranging from schoolyard fights to dismemberment and murder, sexual abuse, emotional and psychological despair, inconceivable loss, the destruction of the family; all of these experiences are found in the novel, are inflicted upon one or more characters. At its simplest, *House of Leaves* mediates pain; the ways in which trauma is inflicted, how this is experienced, and the mechanisms by which people come to revisit it. In the absence of any one solid argument regarding authorship with regards to the constituents of the novel, then, we must turn to the *true* author of *House of Leaves*, Mark Z. Danielewski. His act of authorship, the text which he has created - for, irrespective of the ontological status of Zampanò, Johnny, and Pelafina, the novel is, of course, Danielewski's - may thus be read in broad terms as a novel which evokes traumatic experience as a literary theme, and explores the various forms of pain and suffering which humanity not only experiences, but inflicts upon one another. The house at the centre of the novel is, in spite of its complexity, at its core a symbol of the emotional void left by bereavement, caused by another, or resulting from an absence; it is emotional and physical pain given literary form.

Conclusion: "The book and the labyrinth were one and the same"

The two central assertions of this thesis are that *House of Leaves* is a novel which constitutes an extensive meditation on the nature and experience of trauma, and that, in the words of Borges, "the book and the labyrinth were one and the same". The house *is* traumatic experience, and the novel *is* the labyrinth at its centre.

As a literary symbol, the house on Ash Tree Lane represents paradox and absence, actively violating logic and scientific laws and thus utterly inhibiting comprehension. As a result, it not only invites but *requires* interpretation, for this is the only means, for either the characters of the novel or the reader or critic, of moving towards an understanding of the house; semantic meaning exists within the labyrinth only insofar as it relates to the individual. Moreover, this absence, paradoxically manifested as a physical, present object, warps not only literary representations of space - the house - but also narratological ones.

These metaleptic transgressions of diegetic levels lead to the conclusion that the novel which mediates the labyrinth is similarly heterarchical; both are composed of a seemingly endless sprawl of variously distorted spaces, all of which are arranged in a way that confounds any attempt to map out or accurately describe their structures. On the page as in the labyrinth, foundational human concepts such as orientation ('up' and 'down', 'north' and 'south'), sequential hierarchies (one diegesis being mediated by another; the layout of a space as ordered and constant), and the belief in the stability of the fabric of our reality (be that ontological or textual) are violated, and that which is *unheimlich* - familiar but distorted - comes to dominate all.

In attempting to come to a conclusive understanding of the novel, then - to, for example, construct an argument regarding the authorship of 'The Navidson Record' or its related texts - is to become, like Holloway in Zampanò's film, lost in an interminable labyrinth. The reader or critic who seeks definitive answers will inevitably find themselves desperately searching for an end to the plethora of contradictory statements and narrative impossibilities - for the absence of absence - but discovering only yet more "empty rooms, long hallways, and dead ends, perpetually promising but forever eluding the finality of an immutable layout" (109).

Traumatic experience suffuses the text; it is central to the plot of *The Navidson Record*, and to characters' experiences outside of this. Grief, abandonment, betrayal, and regret colour the perceptions and discourse of the narrators of *House of Leaves*, every

experience or symbol which these characters encounter coming to be related to the psychological and spiritual absence which is the result of suffering. The spatial distortions experienced by the Navidson family are described in traumatic terms - as a "violation" and a "rape" - and this violent destruction of a family is reflected in the brutal deconstruction of textual unity, narrative reliability, and semantic meaning. The house is the text but, moreover, the house and the text mediate and represent pain; textually, narratologically, authorially, *House of Leaves* constitutes an extended meditation on traumatic experience. The words on its pages are distorted, the traditional conventions of narrative are inverted, and any sense of overarching coherence - of the 'sacred' text - is obscured by evasions and lies. All of these facets come to represent the individual's experience of pain; of the destruction of one's concept of reality, of the vanishing of any semblance of meaning, of the all-encompassing, crushing power of absence.

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