

**The Importance and Efficacy of Narrative Structure and Device in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves***

Supernatural literature is a genre rife with complex narrative tropes and structures. As far back as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, we see three conflicting first-person narratives layered within each other. The novel opens and closes with letters of Captain Robert Walton to his sister, recounting his experiences with Victor Frankenstein. Through this frame, the reader is presented with Frankenstein's first-person account of his troubles and this account, in turn and at the very core of the recounting, contains the first-person narrative of his hideous progeny, the Creature whose tragedy is the driving force behind the story. There has been much speculation on the purpose of this structure and particularly the relevance of the Creature's location at the centre of it. With too much speculation to address with any degree of coherence in an introductory paragraph, it must suffice to say that the structure is highly relevant.

Later in the history of the genre, Henry James appropriates the motif of "the found memoir" of a now-absent narrator<sup>1</sup> in *The Turn of the Screw*, another key supernatural text. Instead of plunging directly into the first-person narrative of the governess, the action is preceded, and consequently framed by an anonymous narrator, who hears the story read aloud as a fireside tale by Douglas, a man who once knew her long ago and was entrusted with her writings shortly before her death. Douglas has also passed away by the time the tale is available for our consumption,

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<sup>1</sup> DUYFHUIZEN, Bernard, *Narratives of Transmission*, London : Associated University Presses, 1992, 19.

but the introduction assures us that “this narrative is an exact transcript”<sup>2</sup> of the original. This prelude to the main action in *The Turn of the Screw* is barely eight pages long, yet it serves to complicate the reception of the tale considerably; apart from the already questionable reliability of the governess – whose memoirs were, naturally, committed to paper sometime after the events in question – and the presence of Douglas as a secondary conduit, the reader also must trust in the integrity of the anonymous introducer. Already, it is clear that ‘editorial frame’ of the introduction “both authenticates and problematizes the questions of authority and authenticity.”<sup>3</sup> Even through a rudimentary analysis, I have begun using words such as ‘integrity,’ ‘reliability,’ and ‘trust’ in relation to narrative voice in *The Turn of the Screw*, undermining the fact that the story is entirely fictional no matter how reliable or unreliable any of the narrating characters may be. When “authority and authenticity”<sup>4</sup> are problematised within the fictional space, the reader is forced to assume that the fiction must be ‘true’ on some level in order to distinguish between ‘true’ and ‘false’ within the text. Thus, this technique has the effect of immersing the reader so deeply in questions of reliability and authenticity within a fictional universe that the over-arching reality of the universe as fictional is quickly forgotten. In this sense, the text becomes authenticated during the act of reading or analysis.

Modern works have huge scope to play on this technique due to the contemporary audiences’ ravenous appetite for the warped version of ‘reality’ that can be gleaned from the media. Max Brooks’ *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* (2007) frames the stories of the ‘interviewees’ in context of an interviewer on a mission to compile a history of the personal experiences of the survivors of the world-wide outbreak of zombies. The efficacy of the documentary

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<sup>2</sup> JAMES, Henry, *The Turn of the Screw and Other Stories*, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> DUYFHUIZEN, 19.

<sup>4</sup> DUYFHUIZEN, 19.

style as a framing device is evidenced by the fact that the Internet is peppered with journals and forum discussions engaged in deep debates over the best way to survive a zombie outbreak, based on the *World War Z* version of such an event. Brooks' companion book, *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2003), has sold several million copies to date. It is also worth mentioning (since the central narrative in *House of Leaves* is based around a 'documentary' film) that, in world of the supernatural on screen, horror 'documentaries' have become a genre unto themselves. The technique of shooting with a hand-held camera to create a gritty and 'true-to-life' atmosphere is exemplified in films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and has been refined in the more recent *[REC]* (2007) and *Cloverfield* (2008). Throughout the history of the supernatural as a genre, the implausible events within the text are contrasted with a structure or style that implies authenticity or reality. The technique can be as simple as a 'Based on a True Story' tag-line, as subtle as the narration taking the form of a letter or as blatant as the almost nauseating jolts and jumps of the camera in *Cloverfield*. As Bernard Duyfhuizen writes:

...such devices as letters, diaries, editorial prefaces and transcriptions [...] are not merely mimetic conventions [...]; they also function as the medium of narration. By their particular textuality, they influence the narrating and, by extension, the narrative produced. Rather than static formal devices, these documentary techniques are active forces producing the unique fictional universe of any given text.<sup>5</sup>

Even in cases, such as *World War Z*, when the physical object of the book is located firmly in the Science Fiction or Horror section of the shop, the 'interviews' within constitute a 'mode of transmission'<sup>6</sup> that the reader is accustomed to processing as a factual or real form of communication; the internal narrative frame is enough to erase

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<sup>5</sup> DUYFHUIZEN, 19.

<sup>6</sup> DUYFHUIZEN, 19.

the fact of the fictional status of the novel and allow the fiction to attain, for as long as the story lasts, some measure of fact.

Thus, it can be established that the documentary frame is an extremely effective narrative device and, when applied to a narrative of supernatural content, it effectively confuses the relationship between fiction and reality by embracing the two opposing sides of “the debate that generally polarizes around the two basic semiotic functions of language”<sup>7</sup> and, by extension, the function of the novel. One camp “valorize[s] those fictions which adopt as a basic narrative world one that is essentially congruent with the real world”<sup>8</sup> while the other claims that “to demand of any aesthetic artifact that it provide the unmediated kind of experience that life gives is to destroy the aesthetic experience.”<sup>9</sup> In one sense, the documentary narrative, through its use of realistic forms such as letters or diaries, is highly mimetic. In novels that aim to portray “the contingent world as it presents itself in prosaic events, commonplace objects and ordinary people,”<sup>10</sup> the devices of everyday communication contribute a heightened sense of realism. However, in supernatural literature, which by definition incorporates events or object that do not exist in the ‘real’ world, the documentary narrative and its content are in violent opposition. The language of the narrative becomes self-conscious and the inherent contradiction within the narrative “draws attention to its own practice as a linguistic system.”<sup>11</sup>

However, as Rosemary Jackson writes of the literary mode of the fantastic, of which supernatural literature is a large component:

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<sup>7</sup> MALMGREM, Carl Darryl, *Fictional Space in the Modernist and Postmodernist Novel*, London: Associated University Presses, 1985, 13.

<sup>8</sup> MALMGREM, 13.

<sup>9</sup> MALMGREM, 14.

<sup>10</sup> MALMGREM, 16.

<sup>11</sup> JACKSON, Rosemary, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, London : Routledge 1988, 37.

The text has not yet become non-referential, as it is in modernist fiction [...] which do[es] not question the crucial relation between language and the ‘real world outside the text which the text constructs, so much as move towards another kind of fictional autonomy.’<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the contradiction alone does not define the realistic supernatural narrative as having a purely “autotelic and autonomous function;”<sup>13</sup> instead, the technique allows the text to occupy the tenuous and confusing space between disciplines, where the relationship between fiction and reality is under constant interrogation. Another effect of this style of narrative with regards to the supernatural is that it creates an incongruent gap between the horizon of expectation and the reception of the content; however, because the horizon of expectation is determined and re-determined during the process of reading and receiving the content, the jarring effect of the incongruency is instantaneous. One might describe this gap as *uncanny* and this description might serve to illuminate why ‘realistic’ narrative structures re-emerge again and again throughout supernatural tales in all their various manifestations; as a literary mode that aims to ‘touch depths of human significance in a way that other literary modes do not,’<sup>14</sup> the capacity for invoking the uncanny has become a key point of reference in the analysis and appraisal of supernatural literature.

The definition of the uncanny has been through a proliferation of mutations since Freud’s landmark essay catapulted the term into the forefront of critical thinking in a wide variety of fields. Its applications and invocations are far too numerous to delve into in any great detail and thus, for the purposes of this essay, I would like to put forward the definitions and interpretations that are most relevant to *House of Leaves*. Firstly, in Freud’s complex linguistic exploration of the German *unheimlich* and the un-negated *heimlich* (which he eventually concludes is ‘a word the meaning

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<sup>12</sup> JACKSON, 36.

<sup>13</sup> MALMGREM, 13.

<sup>14</sup> JOSHI, S.T., *The Modern Weird Tale*, North Carolina: MacFarland & Company Inc., 2001, 2.

of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*<sup>15</sup>), the definition is inextricably bound up with the concept of familiarity and “belonging to the home,”<sup>16</sup> and, conversely, unfamiliarity and not belonging to the home. Jackson states that the uncanny is used most frequently to indicate “a disturbing, vacuous area”<sup>17</sup> as well as offering Hélène Cixous’s determination of the concept as a “relational signifier” that “asserts a gap where one would like to be assured of unity.”<sup>18</sup> Nicholas Royle, in his attempt to enumerate the many sensations and associations the uncanny has come to represent, has found it to “consist in a sense of homeliness uprooted, the revelation of something unhomely at the heart of hearth and home”<sup>19</sup> as well as something “to do with a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality.”<sup>20</sup> Perhaps, for the purposes of this essay, the most important conception of the uncanny can be found in Anthony Vidler’s indispensable work on the architectural uncanny:

As a concept [...] the uncanny has, not unnaturally, found its metaphorical home in architecture: first in the house, haunted or not, that pretends to afford the utmost security while opening itself to the secret intrusions of terror...<sup>21</sup>

Each of these definitions and conceptions introduce a specific aspect of the uncanny that is amplified and exemplified with the labyrinthine text of *House of Leaves*. As Vidler asserts, nowhere is the uncanny more apparent than in the home. The home represents the epitome of comfort and familiarity and thus the intrusion of something alien or strange into the home has enormously unsettling effect; worse still is the

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<sup>15</sup> FREUD, Sigmund, ‘The Uncanny’ as printed in *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (edit. Rivkin & Ryan), Oxford : Blackwell Publishing, 2004, 421.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 418.

<sup>17</sup> JACKSON, 63.

<sup>18</sup> JACKSON, 68.

<sup>19</sup> ROYLE, Nicholas, *The Uncanny*, Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2003, 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>21</sup> VIDLER, Anthony, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992, 11.

transformation of something within the home into something Other (and just as Freud illustrates that the semantic properties of *heimlich* and *unheimlich* are two sides of the same coin, the familiar objects and walls of the home have the latent potential to slide into the realms of unfamiliar). Jackson and Cixous both explain the uncanny in spatial terms, terms which can be readily applied to both the use of narrative techniques in *House of Leaves* and the uncanny mutations and transformations of the fictional House at the centre of the story. Royle's 'strangeness of framing and borders' can also be related to the structural workings of *House of Leaves*; it is a novel almost entirely composed of borders and frames, to the extent that, in Chapter IX, a section of text that "attempts to enumerate over the space of twenty-five pages everything that is *not* in the House"<sup>22</sup> is visually framed and sectioned off from the surrounding typographical chaos.

The experience of the uncanny as a spatial phenomenon is a hugely important aspect of *House of Leaves*, and one that the novel is self-reflexively aware of as it manifests itself both in the structure of the narrative and in the physical nature of the House. Through analysis of the narrative structures and devices in the novel, and particularly those that can be considered documentary techniques, I will attempt to show that, by pushing each of these aspects of narration to their logical conclusion, Danielewski succeeds in confusing the border between reader and protagonist, fiction and reality, as well as exploding several of the numerous incarnations of the uncanny to create a truly disturbing text. As the typography within the novel indicates, the experience of space in novel and the narrative devices are inextricably linked in that both of them are complex to the point of being almost incomprehensible and both of them generate gaps, vacant spaces and pitfalls in the assimilation of the text; it is these

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<sup>22</sup> HAYLES, N. Katherine, *Writing Machines*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002, 123.

absences and uncertainties that are, in turn, linked to the experience of the uncanny. There are many novels that disrupt the unities of time, place and action as a narrative device, but the physical act of reading the text remains, by and large, a linear one; Danielewski's novel, on the other hand, demands that reader literally grapple with the text to gather every available scrap of meaning. Hunting for footnotes, rifling through indexes, back-tracking to previous chapters or skipping forward to appendices and occasionally turning the book upside down are all part of the experience of reading 'seven-hundred-and-nine page codex' of 'multilayered narrative'<sup>23</sup> that is *House of Leaves*.

The title page of the novel reads as follows:

## HOUSE OF LEAVES

by  
Zampanò

with introduction and notes by  
Johnny Truant<sup>24</sup>

The introduction by Truant, "a psychologically scarred but highly literary misfit,"<sup>25</sup> exposes the entire premise of the story; Zampanò, an old blind man living alone in the same building as Truant's friend Lude, dies a quiet and unassuming death in his apartment. With no friends or family to take care of his worldly effects, Lude and Truant take it upon themselves to explore his abandoned home. It is here that Truant discovers Zampanò's life work; "reams and reams of it. Endless snarls of words [...] on old napkins, the tattered edges

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<sup>23</sup> PRESSMAN, Jessica, "House of Leaves: Reading the Networked Novel" in *Studies in American Fiction*, v. 34, no.1, Spring 2004.

<sup>24</sup> DANIELEWSKI, Mark Z., *House of Leaves* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, London : Doubleday, 2001. All individual page references refers to this edition of *House of Leaves*.

<sup>25</sup> PRESSMAN.



of an envelope [...] years and years of ink pronouncements; layered, crossed out, amended; handwritten, typed; legible, illegible; impenetrable, lucid; torn, stained, scotch-taped.”<sup>26</sup> The subject of this chaos of academic musings is a documentary film called *The Navidson Record*, made by the highly-acclaimed photojournalist Will Navidson and capturing the traumatic and life-rendering experience he and his family suffer upon moving to a new House on Ash Tree Lane in Virginia. We are told explicitly in the introduction by Truant that Zampanò’s “entire project is about a film which doesn’t even exist”<sup>27</sup> and that “the documentary at the heart of this book is fiction.”<sup>28</sup> We are also told that some, though crucially not all, of the books cited in the footnotes are also fictitious. The reader has not even finished the ‘editorial’ introduction and they are already faced with a hugely anomalous presentation of what is real and what is not. On the level of basic of linguistics, the idea of a ‘fictional documentary’ is the kind of oxymoronical structure that Jackson identifies as “the basic trope of fantasy [...] a figure of speech which holds together contradictions and sustains them in an impossible unity, without progressing towards synthesis.”<sup>29</sup> As if the idea of an academic text based around a film that doesn’t exist was not sufficiently confusing, the very first line of Zampanò’s narrative raises the issue of authenticity once again. Within the universe of old man’s narrative, the object of the film is assumed to be real but there is still contention over its position as a documentary; apparently, “skeptics call the whole effort a hoax but grudgingly admit *The Navidson*

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<sup>26</sup>xvii. Please see Note 1 with regard to font and style in this essay.

<sup>27</sup>xix.

<sup>28</sup>xx.

<sup>29</sup>JACKSON, 21.

*Record* is a hoax of exceptional quality.”<sup>30</sup> Layered on top of Truant’s version of Zampanò’s work are The Editors, whose “objective tone that contrasts with Truant’s highly emotive commentary.”<sup>31</sup> However, while they occupy the outer-most layer of the fiction, The Editors do not transcend the position of yet another framing device. While they serve to “demarcate emendations to the text or acknowledge missing information,”<sup>32</sup> this process is highly selective (for example, certain incidents of a foreign word or phrase in the text are translated, while others are pointedly ignored), serving more to signpost the reader through the ever expanding maze of footnotes and sub-narratives than to provide a comprehensive catalogue of the missing pieces of the puzzle.

It is under these conditions of conflicting fiction and reality that the reader must proceed to traverse the story that follows. Truant’s position could initially be interpreted as “a “contact character” who moves between the narrative worlds of the editor and the absent narrator,”<sup>33</sup> akin to Douglas in *The Turn of the Screw*. However, Truant’s footnotes are rarely concerned with explaining or speculating on the contents of Zampanò’s work; the occasional fleeting insight quickly degenerates into personal narrative. His contribution to the work, which is presented in Courier font and usually confined to footnotes, is a highly unstable, descriptive, stream-of-consciousness narrative that deals with his own experience of undertaking to edit the work and the paranoia that begins to prey on him as a result of his obsession. His digressions and tangents establish a number of things about his character, and particularly his character’s reliability as storyteller. In the second chapter, footnote 18 reveals his habit of feeding elaborate and entirely fabricated stories to girls in bars. Towards the

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<sup>30</sup> 3.

<sup>31</sup> PRESSMAN.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> DUYFHUIZEN, 19.

end of the novel, his journal entries from September 1998 recount a full recovery to physical and mental health under the care of two friends who also happen to be doctors; this is the first instance of relief or comfort our narrator seems to experience, until he destroys the entire sequence on September 29 with “Are you fucking kidding me? Did you really think any of that was true? September 2 thru September 28? I just made all that up. Right out of thin air.”<sup>34</sup> Later on, when the unnatural darkness and the elusive beast that inhabit at the House on Ash Tree Lane begin to seep off the pages and into Truant’s life, he suffers from detailed sensory hallucinations which crumble into unreality almost as soon as they are over (or rather, as soon as we have finished reading Truant’s account of them). The terrifying hallucination in the storeroom of the tattoo shop is identified by Katherine Hayles as the moment in the text where the “dance between presence and absence is [most] deftly executed.”<sup>35</sup> The description is visceral, exploiting all the senses in the most graphic manner possible, culminating in the realisation: “I’ve shit myself. Pissed myself too. I can’t believe it. Urine soaking into my pants, fecal matter running down the back of my legs.”<sup>36</sup> After degenerating into complete incoherence, “he bolts from the storeroom” and the vivid sensory experience comes “undone in the continuing narration;”<sup>37</sup> there were no eyes full of blood, no scream or howl, and it transpires he has not soiled himself after all. From this point on in story, Truant’s narrative seems at no point more reliable than that of a blind academic writing a book about a film that doesn’t exist. Truant’s narrative embodies “that hesitation experience by a person who knows only the laws of nature,

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<sup>34</sup> 509.

<sup>35</sup> HAYLES, 120.

<sup>36</sup> 71.

<sup>37</sup> HAYLES, 120.

confronting an apparently supernatural event;”<sup>38</sup> Todorov defines this perpetually uncertain stance as one of the core aspects of the genre of the fantastic. Johnny Truant’s position as the editor of Zampanò’s text would tend to privilege him with a distanced perspective on events within the novel; instead the process of reading plunges him into the depths of utter paranoia and anxiety. The reader, absorbing his account of this descent is, in turn, infected with the same anxiety and “never returned to a position of confidence in relation to the tale.”<sup>39</sup>

Zampanò’s writing, on the other hand – despite the apparent insanity that fuelled his project, his chaotic system of scribbling on every available surface and his blindness, which makes his position as a film scholar somewhat problematic – employs an extremely confident and authoritative narrative tone. Long sections of his work include detailed, frame-by-frame description of the film; even though one of the characters who transcribes for Zampanò accuses him of “writing like a freshman,”<sup>40</sup> this device is what allows full access to the core of the story, the horrific experiences of Will Navidson and his family in the House on Ash Tree Lane. These sections are the closest the text comes to “a third-person omniscient narrative, where an ‘objective’ authoritative (authorial) voice, knowing all, tells the meaning of events.”<sup>41</sup> However, the most interesting aspect of Zampanò’s section of the novel – and the aspect which serves most effectively to dissolve the boundary between reader and narrative – is, by far, its characterization as an academic text. If we take theory and criticism as the discipline that documents and analyses fiction, then any scholar attempting an analysis of *House of Leaves* will quickly find that Zampanò has already

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<sup>38</sup> TORDOROV, Tvetzan, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to A Literary Genre*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975, 25.

<sup>39</sup> JACKSON, 29.

<sup>40</sup> 55.

<sup>41</sup> JACKSON, 30.

done a lot of their work for them. For example, on page twenty-eight, the reader encounters Zampanò's own musings on the uncanny:

Heidegger still fails to point out that *unheimlich* when used as an adverb means “dreadfully,” “awfully,” “heaps of,” and “an awful lot of.” Largeness has always been a condition of the weird and unsafe; it is overwhelming, too much or too big. Thus, that which is uncanny or *unheimlich* is neither homey nor protective, nor comforting nor familiar. It is alien, exposed, and unsettling, or in other words, the perfect description of the house on Ash Tree Lane. In their absence, the Navidsons' home had become something else and while not exactly sinister or even threatening, the change still destroyed any sense of well-being.<sup>42</sup>

As previously established, the concept of the uncanny is vital to any study of supernatural fiction, and especially haunted house fiction. Despite the fact that Zampanò is a fictional character, his application of the uncanny to the Navidsons' House is no less valid than that of a real critic. In this way the narrative can transcend its status as fiction; because, even though the study of fiction constitutes another form of fiction, the academic community necessarily privileges it as separate from fiction. This is also the type of language and tone that the academic typically employs the negotiation of fiction; thus, there is something simultaneously unsettling and reassuring about a fictional text that appropriates this language to negotiate itself in a self-reflexive analysis of its own content. It is reassuring in the sense that it instills Zampanò's narrative with a specifically academic version of reality. Even though we are explicitly told at the beginning of the book that many of the critics and texts cited are completely fictitious, the style and the trappings of academia appeal to the critical sense of verity; cradled in comfortably familiar concepts, peppered with giants of critical thinking such as Derrida and Freud and intertextual references to the myths

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<sup>42</sup> 28.

and classics that shape our literary landscape, Zampanò's work feels 'real' to the student of literature or film because it carefully appropriates and reproduces all the conventions and tropes of the critical style that shape our conception of fiction. Networks of footnotes and references, fictitious or not, are effective in exactly the same way as a letter or a diary entry is effective as a mode of transmission; it is a form that we are used to assimilating as authentic. However, while a letter or a diary entry has no specific relationship with fiction (except that they are occasionally employed as a narrative device), an academic or critical article already has an established relationship with fiction; an academic text that analyses fiction must be, by definition, outside of fiction. This is where the unsettling nature of Zampanò's narrative comes into play; because the fictional world of *House of Leaves* is determined through critical analysis, to engage in a critical analysis of the text becomes a direct engagement with the fiction. This assertion can be broadened to include not just the act of analysis but even simply the act of reading; since the experiences of the characters within the book, specifically those of Johnny Truant, are based around reading and the physical manipulation of manuscript, the act of reading causes the reader to become implicit in the same experience. Thus, the experience of reading *House of Leaves* becomes another layer of unstable reality, because the experience is constantly undermined, just as within the book the conflicting narratives undermine one another. For the critic, who is implicit in both the experience of reading *and* analysis, the task of disengaging entirely from the text and adopting an objective stance becomes increasingly complex.

Aside from these two main narratives, there are various textual devices and sub-narratives within the text, all of which function, on some level, to allow "the play

between presence and absence”<sup>43</sup> to become more than just an aspect of the plot that manifests itself symbolically, metaphorically and literally through events in the House and in Johnny Truant’s life; the play between presence and absence (which can be seen as analogous with the play between reality and fiction) becomes the driving force behind the structure of the whole book. There are two sub-narratives in particular that highlight this dynamic in different ways. The first of these is the section of the film entitled Tom’s Story,<sup>44</sup> in which Navidson’s twin brother, Tom, recounts his experience of manning base camp in the Great Hall while Navidson and Reston attempt a search-and-rescue mission in seemingly endless depths of the House; his method of keeping his fear at bay is to tell himself stories and jokes that seem to be entirely discrete units of digression. He also gives a name to the menace that he feels surrounding him; the fear engendered in the darkness and enigmatic growling sound becomes known as ‘Mr. Monster.’ Tom holds conversations with his monster and at one point attempts to give it physical form using shadow puppets. In context of *The Navidson Record*, this section of the film is Will Navidson’s tribute to Tom’s brash optimism in the face of overwhelmingly disturbing circumstances, and it especially poignant since his brother dies in the House while rescuing Will’s daughter, Daisy. However, in context of narrative structure, this seemingly tangential sub-narrative marks the only instance in which any of the characters come close to “temporarily transform[ing] that place into something other than itself.”<sup>45</sup> Within the structure of the novel, it illustrates how resistant the absent space of the House is to presence, even a presence as exuberant and good-natured as Tom’s.

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<sup>43</sup> HAYLES, 122.

<sup>44</sup> 253.

<sup>45</sup> 261.

The second is Holloway's sub-narrative, which illustrates the play between presence and absence in a far more literal way, using a "visual vocabulary"<sup>46</sup> of gaps and brackets. Zampanò's analysis of the section of the film known as "**The Holloway Tape**"<sup>47</sup> has been damaged; according to Truant, "Some kind of ash landed on the following pages, in some places burning away small holes, in other places eradicating large chunks of text."<sup>48</sup> The missing sections, in some places single letters, in others, entire paragraphs, are demarcated by square brackets. Thus, Holloway's section, which deals with being lost in the labyrinth of the House and eventually concludes with the narrator's suicide, is defined by the pieces of the text that are absent; the reader is constantly and unavoidably aware of the gaps. These gaps are asserted at a crucial point of the text, one where the lack of completeness is infinitely frustrating to the reader; thus, the Holloway section functions as a visual manifestation of Cixous's definition of the uncanny as "a gap where one would like to be assured of unity."<sup>49</sup>

With regard to typographical devices, one the most unsettling characteristics of Zampanò's narrative is the manner in which his footnotes and references become gradually more erratic and more convoluted, a process that culminates in the sprawling labyrinthine chaos of Chapter IX.<sup>50</sup> This device constitutes a disruption to the academic reality that the reader has become implicit in. Footnotes, which one assumes should be organised and informative, become a visual maze of never-ending lists of names and places, as well gaps and discrepancies where the reader must engage in a frustrating search for the correlations between different sections of the text. The propensity for lists and exhaustive cataloguing that Zampanò displays begins

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<sup>46</sup> PRESSMAN.

<sup>47</sup> 333.

<sup>48</sup> 323.

<sup>49</sup> See Footnote 18.

<sup>50</sup> The main concern of Chapter IX is, appropriately, Zampanò's musings on the nature of the labyrinth.



on page sixty-five, where he names every photographer that contributed to three cited books of photography. Immediately after this list of hundreds of names, Truant informs us that the list is “entirely random. With the possible exception of Brassai, Speen, Bush and Link, Zampanò was not very familiar with photographers.”<sup>51</sup> In Chapter IX, the margins are almost half a page-width thick and crammed with lists of buildings and people who bear no relation to the House on Ash Tree Lane, as well as the internal frame which enumerates every single typical household object that the House does not contain. Lists also appear in with more subtlety and less exhaustive insistence throughout the narrative of both Truant and Zampanò; in the introduction, for example, Truant provides a catalogue of the exact ways and means by which Zampanò’s manuscript was recorded and the condition he found the various scraps and bodies of writing.<sup>52</sup> Hayles has identified the constant reoccurrence of list as “the text [...] attempting to make up through verbal proliferation the absolute emptiness of the House as a physical space.”<sup>53</sup> In terms of engagement with an academic reality, the lists can also be seen to expose the inherent emptiness of academic structures; layers and layers of references and cross-references that create the illusion of substance, but ultimately within the fictional universe of *House of Leaves*, the references are locked in a self-perpetuating system where the primary referent of the academic reality is itself. Nicholas Royle identifies the compulsion towards classification and lists as an inherently uncanny form of writing or word-making;<sup>54</sup> he views Freud’s ‘The Uncanny’ as an attempt to define and confine the concept in a comprehensive list of things that are uncanny. However, since “every attempt to isolate and analyse a

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<sup>51</sup> 67.

<sup>52</sup> xvii.

<sup>53</sup> HAYLES, 123.

<sup>54</sup> ROYLE, 13.

specific case of the uncanny seems to generate an at least minor epidemic,” the resultant “strange conceptual shopping-list” becomes “subject to the subject;”<sup>55</sup> writing that deals with the uncanny as subject in turn becomes uncanny itself, because the indefinable nature of the uncanny causes it to degenerate into the format of a list. Even Royle’s introduction to his book, *The Uncanny*, falls prey to this symptom. Zampanò also delights in resorting in ‘strange conceptual shopping-lists’ when writing about the House; thus, the House can be seen as a generator of the uncanny, because attempted analysis prompts uncanny patterns of writing.

Repeatedly, one can identify that the layers of conflicting and converging narratives in *House of Leaves* are masking a core of emptiness and nothingness at the centre of the novel. It is an emptiness that warps the narrative of any character who comes into contact with it, even if the character within the text is only aware of the House or *The Navidson Record* as fictional concept. The House on Ash Tree Lane occupies the centre of the novel; it is a yawning abyss of blank emptiness that stretches for impossible distances inside the perfectly normal suburban exterior of the Navidsons’ home. For all its depth, and infinite convolutions of rooms and corridors and staircases, it ultimately symbolises nothing. The physical artifact of the novel *House of Leaves*, as the title suggests, is a reflection of the House at the centre of the story; the novel’s narrative structures go through similar convolutions of words and pages, occupying impossible spaces of information and networks of transmission. The correlation between the space within the House and the space within the narrative seems like a natural occurrence, given Bernard Duyfhuizen has asserted that “spatial vocabulary – like the “boundaries” – has been part of narrative theory since the first

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<sup>55</sup> ROYLE, 13.

discussions of “point of view”.<sup>56</sup> Carl Malmgrem has gone a step further, to conclude that the act of “inscribing a narrative text constitutes a spatial act.”<sup>57</sup> So, to explore the purpose the narrative structures and devices fully, one must first explore how the House, as a symbol of nothingness, functions as the centre of a complex narrative. However, because of the self-reflexive nature of this novel, one finds that the key text in such an exploration has already been handed to us within the novel; Chapter IX contains a highly relevant extract from Jacques Derrida’s “Structure, Sign & Play in the Discourse of the Human Science,” first in French, and then with the translation provided by Truant:

The function of [a] center was not only to orient, balance and organize the structure - one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure - but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure. By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself.<sup>58</sup>

If we take the House as the centre of the structure that is *House of Leaves*, we see this principle holds true; the House does serve to orient and organize the structure of the novel, in the sense that every character we encounter is affected by it, and thus their individual narratives are structured and limited by the presence of the House.

However, if the House represents nothingness, and therefore nothingness is at the centre of the structure of the novel, we have a structure without a centre which, according to Derrida, represents the unthinkable. The unthinkable represents a gap or

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<sup>56</sup> DUYFHUIZEN, 17.

<sup>57</sup> MALMGREM, 25.

<sup>58</sup> 112.

an absence in our ability to process a concept or event, and this gap or absence can be correlated to the uncanny. Therefore, the source of the uncanny in *House of Leaves* resides in the very core of the novel, the gaping absence at the centre of the complex narrative structures which seek to mask the absence with realistic or documentary modes of transmission, but can never transcend the nothingness that is central organizing principle of the structure.

The complex exchange between fiction and reality can also be explored through Derrida's theory of the centre within a structure. He asserts that one of the defining activities of a structure is the activity of play, which is the tendency of the elements towards endless transformation, substitution and permutation. The centre of the structure, however, is "the point at which the substitution of contents, elements or terms is no longer possible."<sup>59</sup> As the governing principle of a structure, the centre cannot be transformed and thus "escapes structurality."<sup>60</sup> The centre cannot be considered a part of the structure since it does not conform to one of the defining activities of a structure, but remains the governing principle of the totality of the structure. So, "the center is, paradoxically, within in the structure and outside it."<sup>61</sup> Thus, the House is *House of Leaves* is both within the structure of the novel and outside it, and its status as a symbol of nothingness serves to heighten the contradiction of "attempts to conceive of structure on the basis of a full presence."<sup>62</sup> We can trace how the House continually occupies the space outside of the confining structure in terms of the layers of narrative that attempt to contain it. Firstly, it spills out of the structure of the film, *The Navidson Record*, and into critical circles, both fictional and non-fictional, where a new structure of analysis manifests to determine

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<sup>59</sup> DERRIDA, Jacques, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" in *Writing and Difference* translated by Alan Bass, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, 279.

<sup>60</sup> DERRIDA, 279.

<sup>61</sup> DERRIDA, 279.

<sup>62</sup> DERRIDA, 279.

the unthinkable nature of the House. It then finds its way into Johnny Truant's narrative, who "descends into isolation and illness due to his obsession with authenticating [a] text"<sup>63</sup> that has its basis in nothing. No one, in Truant's experience has ever heard of *The Navidson Record*, or Zampanò or the House on Ash Tree Lane, and this is symptomatic of the nothingness within the text also occupying the space outside the text in the most literal manner possible; as a result, the whole structure is rendered fictitious in Johnny Truant's narrative – it does not exist, and thus the entire obsessive quest amounts to nothing. *The Navidson Record* and Zampanò's extensive work on it represents a structure that should be real, in that it incorporates all the trappings of reality; but, because the structure is governed by a principle of nothingness, Truant is forced to negotiate a huge incongruity in a structure that is simultaneously insistent on its own reality and centred around a conceptual bastion of nothingness that cannot possibly exist.

Towards the end of *House of Leaves*, during Will Navidson's final exploration of the impossible depths of his home, he becomes stranded when the blank walls and floors of the House vanish to leave him standing in complete darkness, "apparently supported by nothing."<sup>64</sup> As disorientation and nausea consume him and he accepts his overwhelming helplessness, "he turns his attention to the last possible activity, the only book in his possession: *House of Leaves*."<sup>65</sup> The novel the reader holds in his or her hands suddenly appears at the very heart of the dark House at the core of the novel; because *House of Leaves* can appear at the very centre of the novel, as well as being external to the novel (it is the title the reader uses to refer to the entire structure from *outside*), the novel becomes its own centre. This is how the novel achieves the ultimate confusion between fiction and reality; the layers and layers of narrative

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<sup>63</sup> PRESSMAN.

<sup>64</sup> 464.

<sup>65</sup> 465.

between the events within the House and the experience of the reader navigating their way through *House of Leaves* creates a enormous gap in the reader's ability to definitively separate the real from the fictional, and this confusion of perception and vision, this colossal "strangeness of framing and borders"<sup>66</sup> allows the uncanny to permeate every level of narrative from both the inside out and the outside in.

It is interesting to note that by including Derrida's essay within the body of the text, like a clue or a code-breaker for a chain of analysis, Danielewski effectively ensures that anyone attempting to employ it in a critical reading of his novel is also forced to engage with his fictional world in a distinctly uncritical way. Derrida himself appears as a character in the novel in the "transcript" of Karen Green's "What Some Have Thought,"<sup>67</sup> a collection of interviews with leading minds in the fields of psychiatry, architecture, literary criticism and philosophy. Karen presents the *The Navidson Record* to them as a fictional film in the hope that they will ascribe some kind of satisfactory meaning to her family's experience. Other 'characters' that appear in this section include Stephen King, Harold Bloom, Hunter S. Thompson and Stanley Kubrick. This device constitutes a double threat in terms of blurring the lines between fiction and reality, because not only are transcripts of interviews assumed to be a fundamentally 'realistic' form of communication, but the fact that the 'interviewees' are prominent critics and personalities in the real world means the documentary nature of this section is becomes simultaneously more and less realistic; more so because their voices are appropriated with an accuracy that borders on humorous but less so because the reader is also keenly aware that these voices do not belong in a fictional universe. However, by using the theory of a philosopher who has become, even briefly, a character in the novel I am analysing, my essay is undermined by the fact

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<sup>66</sup> See Footnote 20.

<sup>67</sup> 354.

that I am now implicit in the fiction; this essay can now, in fact, be viewed as yet another layer of narrative in the vast structure of a literal house of leaves, pages and words that proliferate around the uncanny absence at the very centre of it all. My work is no different from that of Zampanò or Johnny Truant or any of the other voices that seek to find meaning in the House. In this way, the beauty of the narrative structure of this novel is that it is – like the House at its centre – infinite. Every essay, theory or interpretation becomes another footnote, another reference point, another node emanating from the vast intertextual network of *House of Leaves*.

In conclusion, the importance and efficacy of narrative devices and structures in *House of Leaves* stems directly from the novel's supreme self-reflexiveness and self-conscious use of editorial, documentary, filmic and academic framing; all these devices combine to create an experience of reading that is infinitely uncanny, and thus fulfils its position as a giant in the field of modern supernatural literature. In any piece of literature, the uncanny can manifest itself on two fronts; firstly, in the content, and secondly (though no less crucially) in the structure and style of the work and the way in which it makes the content strange. On the most basic level, first-person narrative makes the text strange in that it exploits that way that it incurs doubling through the "double burden of telling and acting."<sup>68</sup> *House of Leaves* is keenly aware that "how and why a self-referring story gets told is inevitably linked to what has happened to the teller"<sup>69</sup> and exploits this link to its fullest extent by telling its story in the most complex way possible; in a way that induces the reader to actively engage in decoding and interpreting the text. The story of the Navidsons' House is fundamentally unbelievable, but the use of documentary structures throughout effectively conflates the problem of distinction between objective and subjective, reality and fiction,

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<sup>68</sup> AUERBACH, Jonathan, *The Romance of Failure: First-Person Fictions of Poe, Hawthorne and James*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, 8.

<sup>69</sup> AUERBACH, 8.

presence and absence. The spaces within the physical text and the spaces within the story are intertwined to confuse what Jackson identifies as the relationship between language and vision; “is it possible to trust the seeing eye” anymore than it is “possible to trust the recording, speaking ‘I’?”<sup>70</sup> The uncanny, which has time and time again been identified as a metaphorically spatial phenomenon, is implicit in the act of narrating, which in turn, according to Malmgren, constitutes a spatial act. *House of Leaves* is acutely aware of, and thus able to manipulate, its own inherent spatiality in three senses: firstly, in the sense of its existence of a “total object”, a book that “displaces so much physical space”<sup>71</sup> with its pages; secondly, in the sense of “the imagined space projected by the unfolding fictional world [...] that the reader must “concretize” or “actualize” in the process of decoding the text;” and finally the “interpretive space” where the reader “works from the fictional world to “fill” the space of meaning.”<sup>72</sup> It is the awareness of this final “interpretive” space that makes *House of Leaves* so unique; the core narrative of the Navidson family, while engaging, is not overly original, nor is the use of documentary structures to shape the imagined space (though it must be acknowledged that Danielewski exploits them above and beyond any of his predecessors). *House of Leaves*, however, occupies its own interpretive space by beating the reader and the critic to the mark on almost every intertextual or academic front. This device draws the reader so fully into the process of decoding and interpreting individual sections of narrative within the novel that an objective reading of the relationship between fiction and reality is almost impossible. It is this device, above all else, that truly illustrates the efficacy of the narrative structure of *House of Leaves*; the reader knows that there is a gap between fiction and reality and that the House at the centre of the story is a fictional absence,

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<sup>70</sup> JACKSON, 30.

<sup>71</sup> MALGREM, 25.

<sup>72</sup> MALGREM, 26.



but they are unable to perceive or define it; it is this blurring of the unfamiliar and the supernatural with the borders of our reality that makes the novel truly uncanny.

Of course, in keeping with the nature of the novel, we have all ready been warned.

This blurring is what happens to Johnny Truant, the novel's reader figure. This is what could happen to us. As Truant writes in his introduction, before the reader embarks on the journey into the house of leaves:

With a little luck you'll dismiss this labor [...] call it needlessly complicated, pointlessly obtuse [...] Then again there's a good chance you won't. You'll finish and that will be that, until a moment will come maybe in a month, maybe a year, maybe even several years.

[...]

Out of the blue, beyond any cause you can trace, you'll suddenly realise things are not how you perceived the to be at all. [...] 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.

[...]

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

[...]

And then the nightmares will begin.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> xxiii.

**Word Count: 7, 524.**

**Notes:**

1. When quoting from *House of Leaves*, I have used the same font that is used in the section of text quoted; this includes the titles of texts within the texts, such as **The Holloway Tape**. The visual impact and aesthetic structure of each page is such an important part of the book that to ignore the changing font styles would be to quote incompletely.
2. In my analysis of narrative structures, I have taken the decision not to address Appendix II-E, which contains the letters written by the institutionalized Pelafina to her son, Johnny Truant. The appendix constitutes the novel's most significant digression from the core story of the Navidson family, to the extent that Danielewski has published it as a separate novel, entitled the *The Whalestoe Letters*. Pelafina's narrative constitutes a plethora of newly coded information, including hints that she may be the definitive author of the whole text. The content and structure is so dense that *The Whalestoe Letters* almost merits its own essay on the subject, and so rather than include an insufficient paragraph revealing only the tip of the narrative iceberg, I have chosen to exclude my thoughts from the final essay. Jessica Pressman's essay on *House of Leaves* (see bibliography) contains an ample section of astute analysis on this chapter of the text.

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