# THE HOUSE DIFFICULT OF EXIT:
## POSTMODERN DEFAMILIARIZATION
## IN MARK Z. DANIELEWSKI'S *HOUSE OF LEAVES*
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Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* is a twice-removed exploration of his audience's ingrained sensibilities of what is normal; the characters and plot create the first removal that is confounded by the events surrounding their bizarre world, and the audience creates the second as it attempts to approach the subject of what a text is ultimately trying to accomplish. The reliability of the narrative itself, which blurs the lines between fact and fiction, complicates this second removal. Reading this text is a completely inventive experience for the audience; Danielewski presents an interesting story, and he allows the audience to delve into an unprecedented and strange world. Each of the levels of story within the frame has its own characters and plot; even the text within the book has its own way of transforming the adventure with it, twisting and manipulating the text on the page to bring the audience into the surreal world that is recorded. In analyzing this postmodern text, there are many questions that arise about the effectiveness of the author's presentation.

The novel is several texts in one, separated by typefaces and layout to present the different voices and nesting narratives within the text. Johnny Truant's perspective acts as the framing device for all of the texts within *House of Leaves*; through his eyes, the audience experiences the text. Truant's voice drifts in and out of the text, and he narrates the novel only at its beginning. Truant is a tattoo artist who needs a new apartment; he finds that an acquaintance's neighbor has died and left his home vacant. While Truant is helping the landlord clean, Truant finds a scholarly text that was written by the previous tenant, Zampanò. Entitled *The Navidson Record*, the text outlines and examines the existence of a film, also called *The Navidson Record*, made by Will Navidson. *The Navidson Record* describes the experiences that Will, his girlfriend, and his children had in their newly purchased home. Throughout his narrative, Truant presents us with Zampanò's research, Navidson's story, his commentary on both, and his own life experiences.

The many overlapping elements of *House of Leaves* harness the unique qualities of the text by exploring what a book itself is. The audience enters Danielewski's work and is presented with an image: a plate that depicts a pile of seemingly unrelated items spotted with blood and the inscription, "This Is Not For You." From the outset, the audience is immediately rendered the least important aspect of the text.

What results is a text that follows several story arcs at the same time. To keep the audience engaged in the story, and to add a level of audience immersion, the words themselves change direction, placement, order of pages, and even dimension as they are sometimes mirrored through the paper as if they were written on cellophane and glued onto the page. Words are missing, blocks of text morph off the line of the

print block, and the text itself drops away on several pages to become icons, stars, dots, asterisks, and musical bars. The text even continues off the page of the novel itself: POE, a band led by Danielewski's sister, has released "The Haunting," which acts a soundtrack to the text. The typographical changes create a bizarre effect for the audience, a group of people whom Truant doesn't even want to read the book.

The multiple narrators in their respective areas of the text remove the audience from any analytical connection by placing it outside of the scope of its acceptance. The narrator's distancing of the audience becomes a methodology that theoretically frees the audience from the aspects of the text that are perhaps more familiar on a deeper level. The audience is familiar with stable images within the text as well as the text itself; objects like "a book" and "a house" elicit particular emotional responses and static definitions in the audience's mind. For example, the house on Ash Tree Lane, which is the home that Navidson purchases for his wife and child, is not just a "house" but rather represents the idea of "home." Because the home is the place where we eat, sleep, celebrate, mourn, and commit almost all other emotional and physical functions of human life, the concept of "home" is a completely ingrained element related to all familiar aspects of who we are. Taking this into consideration, this image and its separation from the text allows the audience to begin feeling the intense vertigo that occurs as the house begins to expand on the inside to make room for the void that emerges and becomes the centerpiece to the text.

In *The Precession of Simulacra*, Jean Baudrillard explores many aspects of the postmodern text, particularly the weight that is put upon by the image in today's postmodern text. The horror of the house on Ash Tree Lane is that the familiar becomes a demon that literally begins to eat away at the Navidson family and their acquaintances. Similarly, Baudrillard explores the horror of an image and its weight when he explains:

> Thus perhaps at stake has always been the murderous capacity of images, murderers of the real, murderers of their own model, as the Byzantine icons could murder the divine identity. . . . a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could *exchange* for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange—God, of course. . . . [It becomes] a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference. . . . Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum. (1939)

The simulacrum is the true idea of truth. In the above excerpt, Baudrillard examines the power and definition of imagery. Baudrillard's theories have a direct application to *House of Leaves.* What he examines as the power and definition of imagery in the human mind exposes the house for what it really is—a hideous murderer of the image of house—a home that eventually exposes what truth and relationships ultimately lie within it. This truth is a something so awful that it even envelops and digests members of the Navidson brood. This imagery lends itself to the home. The audience is drawn deeper into the text as the house defies the laws of physics by

expanding, physically changing, and creating the doorway that leads into the endless world behind it. The idea of how a house is supposed to physically behave is now lost on the characters and the audience; the idea of structure becomes redefined. This particular home begins as a basic reality, but eventually it perverts reality, masks it, and then bears no relation to it.

The audience is now effectively transitioned from its own reality into the story. The audience is grabbed through the house's doorway, perverting the home and uncovering a new aspect of reality. In the text, there are many explorations into what is ultimately causing the new hell of the familiar. As the characters begin to explore their dreamlike existence, the audience begins to be convinced that they are studying an academic paper on a series of events that, as absurd as they are, have actually happened. Once this happens, the audience becomes swept into what Baudrillard calls a "strategy of the real":

> When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. . . . there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production: this is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us—a strategy of the real, neo-real and hyperreal whose universal double is a strategy of deterrence. (Baudrillard 1939)

When Danielewski approaches the point in the story—about a third of the way though the text—where he is certain that the audience is engaging its lucid experience with his visceral account of the absurd, the words warp and drip off of the page in increasing levels of messiness. The audience thereby replaces its own existence within the text with the experiences of Navidson and other characters that are exploring the new, dark doorway. In this respect, we can easily see the ideas of Baudrillard reflected in the text as Danielewski replaces the main characters with the audience; he is ultimately creating a proxy of truth. As the audience watches the main characters fall deeply into self-analysis, the audience itself begins a self-reflective analysis of its own familiar sanity as it is also unsure of what it is actually looking at with the new unfamiliar book.

In "Exploration #6: The Uncanny in Mark Z. Danielewski's *'House of Leaves,'*" Nele Bemong explores self-psychoanalysis as a reflexive Freudian exercise that deals with death; in exploring this Freudian thesis, the idea of derealization and the dream world is examined more closely. Before the audience is brought into the dark world behind the door to participate in what the narrators are already experiencing, it is bombarded with descriptions of what Navidson and his fellow explorers see. The characters contribute to the new uncanny interpretation of reality that they share with the audience. Bemong suggests that what Danielewski is ultimately trying to accomplish is to prove to the reader that there may not be such a place called "home." In tandem with the idea of a proxy-interpretation of reality that is presented by Baudrillard, this makes a great deal of sense. Of course, the audience approaches the text with an understanding of what home is, and it is then successively pulled into the story through Danielewski's textual design techniques. Subsequently, as Danielewski dehumanizes the protagonists through an analytical framework and execution, the audience does

not entirely comprehend that there is no home because it is so completely entranced and wound into the story. Furthermore, coupled with the proxy-reality, Danielewski eventually depersonalizes the audience through the text and through the eyes of Navidson, Zampanò, Truant, and all of the other characters in the text, thereby almost transforming the text's dedication ("This Is Not For You") into its ultimate thesis.

The house, an omnipresent inky blue word that appears on almost every page, is not the only haunted artifact in the novel. Throughout the text, an overbearing reliance on the digital world unfolds. As the text opens, the first object to be defeated by the house is a set of books that falls when the house expands. In "*House of Leaves*: Reading the Networked Novel," Jessica Pressman explores Danielewski's text and "the novel" itself as being doomed from the beginning by the characters' overreliance on technology. Pressman outlines that the novel is formatted, networked, and cross-referenced because it "is the mutation of [what Danielewski calls] 'old shelters,' such as books induced by digital technology" and the film that Zampanò's study is based on (111). According to Pressman,

> The real ghost in the film, and the novel that subsumes it, is [Danielewski's] "spectre of digital manipulation"—the presence of an invisible network of technologies that infiltrate our existence, our access to information, and our ability to read our world and its narratives. (111)

Pressman's study would technically make the text itself, in the hands of the audience, the pure representation of the old-world matrix of information. But this opens up a paradox. If digital technology creates the ghost of textual experience, and this book is a heavily researched networked novel, what is it doing in print? With it being published at all, the major ghost is the digital representation of text and discourse, the audience uninvited to the text the moment it begins reading. This all contributes to what I consider "the absent audience thesis." The point of the novel being published and existing at all is questionable (and to call it an entertainment would render this thesis a fallacy). My absent audience thesis examines the dilemma that exists in the text: *House of Leaves* opens with a distancing of the audience but subsequently asks the audience to build and then deconstruct the house within the text.

In order to explore this dilemma, one must examine several important internal and external elements of *House of Leaves*. There are a great deal of interesting approaches that readers have taken in examining the existence of and purpose of the text. In a review for the Library Journal, Jim Dwyer refers to the text as a "literary hoax," while other critics such as Brent Sørensen consider the novel a satire and perverse musing on the complexity of academic discourse. Dwyer's brief interpretation of the text is an interesting view of the structure and meaning of the novel in only two words. Danielewski's self-contained style in his novel allows for some of its important elements to be revealed within the text itself, which serves an important analytical purpose as well as the key to unlocking the mystery of the text as a whole, assuming one is viewing the book through the "correct" lens of interpretation.

The door, which I referenced earlier, synthesizes itself into the home on Ash Tree Lane very slowly. The world within the door is a smooth, carbon-coal black architectural monster that moves, changes, and breathes. The descriptions of the

world beyond the door provide the audience a complex view of what the novel is trying to accomplish. As the house shifts shape, it moves toward its ultimate goal:

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

In addition, Danielewski writes the entirety of chapter XX in Braille. Eventually, Danielewski deconstructs the physical structure of the text. He changes page layouts to confound the audience; the audience almost feels the cramped spaces in the house, the distant voids in the house, or the sideways existence of gravity when it interacts with Danielewski's excruciatingly complex design. Danielewski successfully pushes the boundaries of the printed word as imagery of printing overcomes the narrative.

These elements of the text, which the entire audience synthesizes when it is most engaged with the text, are evident in Dwyer's "literary hoax" comment. Danielewski's textual and structural methods (the words on the page, the layout of the pages, the investigative and analytical layout of the chapters, and the uncertain architecture of the novel) contribute to Dwyer's comment. Both the comment and Danielewski's postmodern devices point to one thing—that the novel itself is the house, and the audience is the most important part, taking the role of architect to its creation and its demise.

The experience of all audience members, as best explained in Dwyer's "hoax," is the existential dilemma in the novel—ultimately that the text is not written for anyone. The novel would not exist without an audience, and therefore, neither would the house. As the novel expands and becomes more fluid, liquid, and dynamic, so does the house. As the typeface contracts, baffles, confuses, and deconstructs on the page, so does the house. The strongest and most solid evidence of the book itself being the house and the audience being the ultimate gods in its synthesis and creation comes at the end of the novel; but not in a strategic dénouement, but rather a whisper.

Similarly, Karen, Navidson's girlfriend, describes the final moments of the existence of the house to an interview:

> **Karen**: I held him. He was alive. He made a sound when I cradled his head in my arms. I couldn't understand what he was saying at first but then I realized the flashlight was hurting his eyes. So I turned it off and held him in the darkness.
>
> [Another long pause]
>
> **Q**: How did you get him out of the house?
>
> **Karen**: It just dissolved.
>
> **Q**: Dissolved? What do you mean?
>
> **Karen**: Like a bad dream. We were in pitch blackness and then I saw, no . . . actually my eyes were closed. I felt this warm, sweet air on my face,

and then I opened my eyes and I could see trees and grass. I thought to myself, "We've died. We've died and this is where you go after you die." But it turned out to be just our front yard.

**Q**: Are you saying the house dissolved?

**Karen**: [No response]

**Q**: How's that possible? It's still there, isn't it?

(Danielewski 524-525)

As the audience reaches the end of the book, the house reaches the end of its existence. Eventually, the house, which no longer serves any purpose for either the characters or the audience, dissolves along with the narrative itself. All that is left is a long appendix of secondary sources that the audience uses to reflect on the text. The appendix also acts as a structural support to the text preceding it, and Karen and Will are left on a grassy plot of land where the structure of the house once stood.

Ultimately, the audience is in fact the most important aspect of this text that doesn't want to be bothered by the idea of an audience. The house, the book, the academic research, and every element of the text would not exist if it were not for the audience examining it. Danielewski develops what can be considered a nihilist approach to writing a text. If the audience is not important to the text in the opening pages, it cannot continue to be so as the house itself is built. Without the audience, the house itself would not exist and the audience would remain unimportant. This contradiction forms an interesting paradox in the text that serves as a backbone to successfully interpreting Danielewski's goals in writing the novel.

In "This is Not For You: Nihilism and the House That Jacques Built," Will Slocombe exposes how Danielewski uses nihilism throughout the text; Slocombe also looks at the conjunction between the text's presentation of architecture and its presentation of philosophy. Slocombe explains that Danielewski almost builds the house on Ash Tree Lane on the "rubble of . . . tradition," much like the way that Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger, and others broke free of traditional thought and writing to construct their philosophies (90). Slocombe argues that the house is constructed and then subsequently deconstructed before our eyes without the text itself becoming deconstructive; the deconstructive strategy within the novel is indicative of the text itself seeking to avoid any trace of structure and meaning within the structure of the image of the home in the novel and also without it (88-109).

Derrida's ideas hold an important philosophical place in Danielewski's text. The concept of the house as a mythical structure is easily explored through the application of some of Derrida's ideas from "Structure, Sign, and Play." The structure of *House of Leaves* is completely dynamic; it is not dependent on any kind of "traditional" aspects of the way a novel should be organized, laid out, or printed, suggesting the novel engages in what Derrida would call "différance." The same goes for the main subject of the text, the house on Ash Tree Lane. It changes, defies the laws of physics and common sense, and creates a structural difference. These structural differences take the familiar and distort them. Derrida examines text as emerging to support the idea that normalization "'the familiar' is only a result of the respect for structurality, for

the internal originality . . . [that] compels a neutralization of time and history. . . . the appearance of a new structure, of an original system, always comes about . . .by a rupture with its past, its origin, and its cause" (924).

Danielewski's text and the house on Ash Tree Lane are almost a symbolic or representative interpretation of Derrida's concept.

To return to the idea of audience-dependent deconstruction in the internal book *The Navidson Record*, Zampanò even implies that this audience-dependent deconstruction through construction is intentional by quoting Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play":

> This is why the classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality) the totality has *its center elsewhere*. The center is not the center. (Derrida qtd. in Danielewski 112)

Slocombe suggests that a center outside the house, family, and book teams with the imagery of echoes, mirrors, and other dissociative artifacts to contribute to the nihilistic enigma that is *House of Leaves* (98). It is worth noting the audience's importance in the construction and support of these elements (both associative and dissociative). Slocombe neither discounts nor ignores the audience's major part in the construction of the text and of the house itself. Slocombe explores the idea that the text is "absorbing itself . . . as quickly as it is being read and consumed by the reader, the text is in the process of consuming itself" (101). The audience ultimately reflects the small, self-aware element buried in the text, lost alongside with Navidson. After Navidson "tak[es] a tiny sip of water and bur[ies] himself deeper in his sleeping bag,. . . [he] turns his attention to his last possible activity, the only book in his possession: *House of Leaves*" (Danielewski 465). Here, it becomes possible that Navidson is himself part of an audience to the events around him. This makes the book the apparent fallacy, the entirety of its existence a paradox, and the drive of the narrative just as trustworthy and untrustworthy as the audience itself is.

As the text on the page and the house destroy themselves within the covers of *House of Leaves*, there is no ignoring where the text departs from there. The moment the text is put down on a table or other surface, it becomes a static and stagnant perpetual machine awaiting a new audience to dive within its troubled pages. This new audience will reconstruct and then deconstruct the text once again. While the warping and dissolving of the house itself defamiliarizes the audience to such a static and ingrained image as home, the warping and dissolving of the text defamiliarizes the audience to what its personal expectations of a book should be.

There are many texts that attempt similar forays into anti-mimetism and defamiliarization. When *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* by Laurence Sterne was released in 1759, a wave of popularity surfaced from the text that ultimately served as a major precursor to postmodern writing. Its popularity at the time of its publishing was a reflection of the bawdy and ornery humor and subject matter of the text. But the novel's stream of consciousness, defamiliarization, and deconstruction of what audiences consider to be a novel are perhaps what makes it such an influential

contribution to a new definition of what literature was at the time. Sterne's novel influenced a great deal of writers such as James Joyce, Italo Calvino, Alexander Pushkin, and Flann O'Brien, and continues to influence contemporary writers such as Dave Eggers and Jonathan Safran Foer. *House of Leaves* is only one of a number of other texts where the lines of reality are severely blurred by the audience's experience with a text. But one of this particular text's most interesting aspects is its innovative use of digital culture and the ingrained technological experience that is a companion of it.

Digital life operates as a simultaneously intrinsic and extrinsic contributor to the development of the plot, contributing to the text's existence and the house's existence as well. As Mark B. N. Hansen explores in "The Digital Topography of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House Of Leaves*," the novel itself

> is about an *impossible* object, a referent that is absent not simply in the sense of being lost or unlocatable, or even in the sense-common to all fiction-of lacking any existence whatsoever prior to and outside of the fiction that conjures it up. . . . even the *fictional* existence of this house is, in some sense impossible. (607)

As Hansen suggests, the text needs both the audience and its own digital representations to exist. On the dust jacket for *House of Leaves*, a whimsical or ironic suggestion notes that the novel began its life as a digital text. The importance of the digital world in the text is reinforced through constant reflections on the tools that Navidson and his fellow explorers use. It is important to reiterate that digital technology is a manifestation and defamiliarization of print technology; digital technology allows for information communication to enter an increasingly rapid cycle—what once was viable for thousands of years is now obsolete in a matter of decades.

To bring the audience's experience with the text into harmony with the digital manifestations of the text, the book's website www.houseofleaves.com extends the audience's interactions with the text. The audience-driven website covers, revisits, analyzes, appends, and explores the house on Ash Tree Lane, using the ideas of external, global audience members in flux with one another and with Danielewski's goals for his audience. This may prove to be at the heart of the postmodern examination because the website functions as an undiluted extension of the audience as a whole. It contributes not only to the foundation of the creation of the characters, structures, and prose within *House of Leaves*, but also to the foundation on which the House on Ash Tree Lane stands. The *House of Leaves* message boards become the pastiche that is the new faceless and nameless audience; the users contribute to the new metatext. On the screen beyond the pages of the book, in hypertext, a new world is built beyond the boundaries of the old one built by Danielewski. This world morphs and changes the landscape of the text into something completely new, using thousands of typing digits across time and space to create a metatext.

Fredric Jameson writes in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" that the postmodern work is at constant struggle with the uniqueness of the individual subject (1958). Through over-saturation of media in an overly obsessive society, and in the new completely immersed digital society, audience members can continue to build onto

the frameworks of *House of Leaves*; the audience thus extends the text much further than Danielewski may have originally intended. The book's focus on the individual (Will Navidson, Johnny Truant, Zampanò) becomes relatively important to the existence of its plot, even if the unimportance of characters is reinforced throughout the novel and in the hands of the audience. These same characters have written or have read the text, or are reading and annotating the text, that the audience builds and eventually deconstructs. The audience then disseminates and analyzes the text in a hypertext world with the collective of other audience members. The result is that there is a disjunction between the individual character and the environment constructed by the audience. The plot itself is pushed into a paradoxical matrix or hyperspace of perpetual change that obliterates traditions (and histories, documents) of the kind which all earlier social information have had to preserve (Jameson 1963, 1966).

The novel becomes what Jameson would refer to as "The New Machine," a machine that is not like the industrialist "locomotive or the airplane" that is representative of motion. Rather, it becomes something that can "only be represented *in motion*, [where] something of the mystery of the new postmodernist space is concentrated" (Jameson 1964). Perhaps Danielewski's goal in his creation of this disjointed, heavily cross-referenced, work was to transcend or transgress established postmodern conceits. Hansen argues that Danielewski does this to step away from the "tired postmodern agonies" to create a "shift away from traditional realism and psychological characterization . . . [that] generate[s] belief without objective basis" (601-02).

This unfamiliar novel and its unfamiliar house almost serve as symbols of existentialism itself. The audience serves as a deity who knows that the self-aware texts and films within the covers of *House of Leaves* are simultaneously completely aware of and unaware of the audience. Furthermore, with the extension of the audience's conversation to the internet, a new interpretation and construction of the fluidity of text and literature arises. The audience becomes a part of the text and reflects a new definition of the role of fluid text and literature in reality. These approaches may be a new technological interpretation or actualization of what Roland Barthes was trying to achieve in his "From Work To Text," or Linda Hutcheon's approach to defining postmodern metatextual poetics, or even Walter Benjamin's approaches to defining art's new place in our post-industrialist world in his "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

Our ultrastrange and troubled *House of Leaves* is almost in a league of its own in terms of its place in postmodern literature. The novel itself is an inconsistent text that seemingly doesn't even hold a place in any particular genre on (or off) the bookseller's shelves. What it does accomplish is a foray into the rush of vertiginousness wrought by the defamiliarization of such solidly grounded objects as "home," "family," "book," and "language," as these objects begin to fall apart in multiple directions. An individual reader enters the text, but becomes part of a collective audience. The audience exits the experience of the text as vengeful doctrinarians of a pluralist clan of gods that create and destroy in a perpetual cycle. The audience, ignorant to this new role, are hammering down the walls of traditional literary art as main characters in Danielewski's elegant postmodern puppetry. The audience's kinetic force equals the kinetic energy

in the ever-expanding house on Ash Tree Lane, and they subsequently suck in other audience members with more vigorous force and exponential energy as they grow.

*House of Leaves* is a polyvalent text that ultimately vandalizes all aspects of the audience's conception of traditional physical, textual, and academic boundaries. The audience's subsequent defamiliarization builds the foundation for the house on Ash Tree Lane and the book itself, before it begins to dissolve and fall apart at the binding to reveal the conclusion to the book and a completely new, networked experience online. Ultimately, the book and its internal academic and physical elements exist only in a virtual scope, expanding the audience's role as the central element of the existence of the narrative. Danielewski effectively skews the definition of what a novel should be by redefining the genre and creating something entirely new from the ground up. *House of Leaves* therefore becomes an exercise in postmodern defamiliarization, evokes a new direction in authorship, and reflects the novel's place in both the twenty-first century and a new, networked society.

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