

**S
A
F**

STUDIES IN AMERICAN FICTION

Department of English Northeastern University

Editor
Mary Loeffelholz

Book Review Editor and Editorial Assistant
Kurt Moellering

Editorial Board
Northeastern University

Samuel J. Bernstein, Laura Green, David Kellogg, M. X. Lesser, Patrick Mullen,
Guy L. Rotella, Patricia Sullivan, Bonnie TuSmith

Advisory Editors

Phil Barrish (*University of Texas–Austin*), Millicent Bell (*Boston University*),
Lawrence Buell (*Harvard University*), Laura Korobkin (*Boston University*),
George Monteiro (*Brown University*), Timothy Morris (*University of Texas at
Arlington*), Donald Pizer (*Tulane University*), Joel Porte (*Cornell University*),
Shirley Samuels (*Cornell University*), Ben Siegel (*California State University*),
Carol J. Singley (*Rutgers University–Newark*), Linda Wagner-Martin
(*University of North Carolina*), Sandra A. Zagarell (*Oberlin College*)

Studies in American Fiction is a journal of articles and reviews on the prose
fiction of the United States. Manuscripts should follow our established style in
all matters of quotation and documentation. Published twice each year, in
May and December, by the Department of English, Northeastern University,
Studies in American Fiction is indexed in the *MLA Bibliography* and the
American Humanities Index.

Annual subscriptions for 2006 are \$11.00 for individuals, \$14.00 for individuals
outside the United States, and \$17.00 for institutions, \$19.00 for foreign
institutions. Address all correspondence regarding subscriptions and manuscript
submissions to

Mary Loeffelholz, Editor
Studies in American Fiction
Department of English
Northeastern University
360 Huntington Avenue
Boston, Mass. 02115-5000
Phone: 617-373-3687

Copyright © 2006 Northeastern University

ISSN 0091-8083

STUDIES IN AMERICAN FICTION

Department of English Northeastern University

Volume 34

Spring 2006

Number 1

Contents

Articles

- Jane F. Thraikill, *The Scarlet Letter's Romantic Medicine* 3
- Phong Nguyen, *Naming the Trees: Literary Onomastics
in Susan Warner's The Wide, Wide World* 33
- Marianne Noble, *Sympathetic Listening in Frederick
Douglass's "The Heroic Slave" and My Bondage
and My Freedom* 53
- Diana Curtis, *Two Samuels of Hartford: Clemens,
Colt, and the Unification of a Disjointed
Mysterious Ending* 69
- Donald Dingleline, *"It Could Have Been Any Street":
Ann Petry, Stephen Crane, and the Fate
of Naturalism* 87
- Jessica Pressman, *House of Leaves: Reading the
Networked Novel* 107

**HOUSE OF LEAVES:
READING THE NETWORKED NOVEL**

Jessica Pressman
University of California—Los Angeles

Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) is a novel that is not just a book. The seven-hundred-nine page codex embraces and exploits the pleasures of print in typographical play and innovative page design; its substantial print body contains an extensive hypertextual navigation system connecting multiple narratives and reading paths. The reader hopscoches across pages and points of view, layers of footnotes and different fonts, decoding a novel that relishes a print fetish while revealing how literature and its readers encounter and evolve in relation to digital media. The book reaches beyond its bindings to a network of multimedia instantiations that collectively and collaboratively produce its multilayered narrative. The book *House of Leaves* is the central node in a network of multimedia, multi-authored forms that collectively comprise its narrative: the *House of Leaves* website (www.houseofleaves.com), *The Whalstoe Letters* (an accompanying book by Danielewski containing a section from the novel's Appendix), and the musical album *Haunted* by the author's sister, the recording artist Poe.¹ The novel was published to exist in relation to these entities, all of which were published in 2000. *House of Leaves* participates in a feedback loop with these works: the multimedia entities spring from, feed off, and filter back into the novel through references and clues that illuminate its narrative.

Katherine Hayles identifies *House of Leaves* as an example of a "Work as Assemblage, a cluster of related texts that quote, comment upon, amplify, and remediate one another."² Such assemblages, she rightly argues, challenge and expand the concept of the literary work. *House of Leaves* does this by presenting a paradox: it is a print novel for the digital age, a book that privileges print while plugging into the digital network. The novel is acutely aware of its location within the contemporary "discourse network," a system Friedrich Kittler identifies as "the network of technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and produce relevant data."³ *House of Leaves* aestheticizes and enacts this concept: it is a networked novel that connects up with the contemporary "discourse network" of the Internet.⁴ I read *House of Leaves* across its multimedia network to show how the novel uses its assemblaged narrative to teach the reader to engage

with a contemporary print novel that is distributed across the digital network. On her website, Poe articulates the relationship between her album and her brother's novel: "'House of Leaves' is one thing, 'Haunted' is another. Together they are something quite different."⁵ It is this third "thing" that interests me: the connections across and between media forms that forge a networked aesthetic, foster new reading strategies, and foreground the importance of *House of Leaves* as a print novel for a digital age.

Written in the age of the Internet boom and crash and published in 2000, *House of Leaves* reflects and refracts its digital environment in its print pages. Formally, the novel is structured as a hypertext, a system of interconnected narratives woven together through hundreds of footnotes. Every appearance of the word "house" is blue, the color of an active hyperlink on the Internet.⁶ These colored signifiers are textual acts of "remediation," the term Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin use to describe how older media, such as books, "refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media."⁷ Besides imitating the interface and navigation structure of the Web, *House of Leaves* positions itself as a node on the information network before its narrative even begins. Beneath the copyright and publisher's information is the web address for the official *House of Leaves* website: www.houseofleaves.com. Sharing the title of the novel and its publication date, the website is its fraternal twin. On the book's back cover is a red circular icon surrounded by text that prompts the reader to "listen to the house . . . 'HAUNTED' the new CD from Poe on Atlantic Records. www.p-o-e.com." The text identifies "the house" from the novel as distributed across media forms and prompts the reader to pursue these connections between book, website, and album. In this way, *House of Leaves* not only mimics the Internet's infrastructure, it actually links up to it through the URLs on its covers.

These hyperlinks join the book's bound body to a real-time component that updates and actualizes for a digitally literate readership what J. Paul Hunter identifies as a central feature of the novel genre—the "present-centered form of narrative" that prompts the novel to maintain its hold on the new by incorporating emergent narrative and media forms.⁸ Similarly, Bakhtin maintains that it is the novel's constant, conscious relationship to and incorporation of emergent forms that is "the most important thing—the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with the unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present)."⁹ *House of Leaves* engages with the digital, even linking up with the "openended" Internet, in order to maintain

its status as a novel by pushing the genre towards further transformation. Katherine Hayles and Mark B. N. Hansen both identify *House of Leaves* as an innovative realist novel that describes the horror of a very real shift in ontological reference (Hansen) and subject formation (Hayles) due to the influence of digital technologies.¹⁰ The real effects of the digital are evident both in the pages of the novel, its narrative content, and its connection to the multimedia network of which it is the central node. Reading across the neighborhood that houses it shows how *House of Leaves* forges a way for the print novel to remain "novel" in the digital age.

House of Leaves is a layered narrative with multiple narrators, and it uses an elaborate visual vocabulary for its hypertextual heteroglossia. In so doing, it reminds the reader that the book is a material object constructed collaboratively by multiple authors and transcription technologies, and, moreover, that its final product is deeply invested and intertwined with these circuits of production. The novel is comprised of an extensive narration of a film by a blind man, Zampanò, who dictates his critical commentary about the (fictional) documentary film "The Navidson Record" by the Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer Will Navidson.¹¹ The film chronicles Navidson and his family's horrifying travails living in a house whose insides grow larger than its frame; the house's hallway mutates into a cavernous labyrinth that devours sound, light, direction, and human beings. Zampanò's ekphrasis of the film incorporates analysis from real and imagined literary critics and scientists. After Zampanò's enigmatic death, his scholarly manuscript, *The Navidson Record*, is discovered by Johnny Truant. Truant is a psychologically scarred but highly literary misfit who encounters Zampanò's text as a collection of multimedia scraps: "Endless snarls of words . . . on old napkins, the tattered edges of an envelope . . . legible, illegible; impenetrable, lucid; torn, stained, scotch-taped" (xvii).¹² Truant pieces together these discrete fragments and weaves in his own narrative layer through a set of footnotes that describe his hyperactive sex life, traumatic childhood, and devastating experience editing Zampanò's text. Truant's version of *The Navidson Record* is then edited by the corporate (also fictional) entity, "The Editors," whose presence is noted by the monosyllabic "-Ed." Proceeding in an objective tone that contrasts with Truant's highly emotive commentary, the Ed. produce an additional set of footnotes that demarcate emendations to the text or acknowledge missing information. Each of these narrative voices is identified by a different font and is associated with a specific medium: Zampanò's academic commentary appears in Times Roman, the font associated with news-

papers and the linotype; Truant's footnotes are in Courier, imitate a typewriter's inscription, and thematically identify him as the middleman, the "courier" of the manuscript; the terse notations from the Ed. are aptly presented in Bookman. *House of Leaves* internalizes and aestheticizes Pierre Bourdieu's argument that we should approach works of art with an "understanding [of] works of art as a *manifestation* of the field as a whole."¹³ The novel depicts artistic creation (the description of Navidson's artistic choices and cinematic effects), publication (footnotes discussing editorial changes and publication plans), and criticism (*The Navidson Record* is full of quotations from critical commentaries on Navidson's film). *House of Leaves* situates the work in its field of production and promotes a reading practice that focuses awareness on the fact that in our contemporary culture, these systems of production are increasingly digital.

In his introduction, Johnny Truant warns the reader, "Old shelters—television, magazines, movies—won't protect you anymore. You might try scribbling in a journal, on a napkin, maybe even in the margins of this book. That's when you'll discover you no longer trust the very walls you always took for granted" (xxiii). The old shelters of analog media fail to support and "protect" expectations, and *House of Leaves* shows the ramifications for the contemporary novel. Towards this end, *House of Leaves* figures the key moment of recognition, when the Navidsons realize that something is terribly wrong with their house, through the displacement of a print book—a novel. Upon returning from vacation, the Navidson family finds that their house has grown on the inside; a new closet emerged while the family was in Seattle. Will Navidson's measurements conclude that the "width of the house inside would appear to exceed the width of the house as measured from the outside by ¼" (30). Will asks his brother Tom to prop open the closet door: "Tom turns to Karen's shelves and reaches for the largest volume he can find. *A novel*. Just as with Karen, its removal causes an immediate domino effect" (40, emphasis added). The wall has expanded beyond the length of the shelf, and the books fall to the floor. "This is exactly when Karen screams" (40). The chapter ends. It is the extraction of "*A novel*" that causes the rest of the books to fall off the shelf and expose the frightening transformation that has occurred. In this meta-critical moment, *House of Leaves* zooms in on the role of the novel in making and measuring reality. It illuminates the location of "*A novel*" in a larger infrastructural and architectural network, represented by the bookshelves, that is mutating in unexpected and horrifying ways.

It is not just the man-eating house that haunts *House of Leaves*; it

is the mutation of "old shelters," such as books, induced by digital technology. Zampanò identifies the digital as the ghost haunting the film "The Navidson Record": "even though the spectre of digital manipulation has been raised in *The Navidson Record*, to this day no adequate explanation has managed to resolve the curious enigma" (335). The real ghost in the film, and the novel that subsumes it, is the "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. Despite Zampanò's expository statement, the massive print novel barely mentions digital technology. Digital technologies are present but not depicted in the production of the three central narratives. Photographer and filmmaker Will Navidson prefers the traditional tools of manual photography and analog video to their digital counterparts; both Zampanò and Truant write their manuscripts without the aid of computers, orally (as in the case of blind Zampanò's dictations) and by hand (in Johnny's journals). Digital technology is available for use: for example, before the first expedition into the hallway, Navidson collects in his living room "three monitors, two 3/4" decks, a VHS machine, a Quadra Mac, two Zip drive, an Epson colour printer, an old PC . . ." (97). But despite this detailed list, the digital objects are not brought into the hallway or used by Zampanò to describe the scene.¹⁴ Although Navidson uses an "internal computer [that] calibrates the dimension" of the house's growth, Zampanò is careful to clarify that "Navidson captures these seconds in 16mm" (39). Digital technology remains the "spectre" in the background, behind the hallway door. And as in any good horror film, it is the thing you know is there but can't see that is the most frightening.

House of Leaves is shelved in the horror section of bookstores, and this genre not only describes the Navidson family's enigmatic house and Zampanò's haunting manuscript, but also the recognition that our old ways of reading and relating to books are mutating under the influence of digital technologies. Although Hayles writes that *House of Leaves* is "[c]amouflaged as a haunted-house tale," the novel's status as a horror book is central to its project.¹⁵ The novel procures from its reader a sense of identification with the characters not through emotional empathy but by producing a convergence of house and book that puts the novel's reader in the position of a reader within the text. This is evident in the pivotal scene when Will Navidson's brother, Tom, struggles to save Will's daughter Daisy from certain death. The house swallows him into its dark abyss, and in this moment of horror and ontological impossibility, the house is described as a text:

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. (345, emphasis added)

This is not just a moment from Edgar Allan Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher," wherein the house and its symbolic cache crumble before the narrator's eyes; this is, in some ways, its opposite.¹⁶ The "black ash" of the house's internal abyss is compared to "printer's ink" whose "transforming" power rewrites every space with which it comes into contact. The house is like a book: made of ink, it becomes a thing to be read and analyzed, navigated and referenced. This house-book spreads outwards through the layers of mediated narration from Navidson to Zampanò to Truant, and then, to the reader. In the book that Truant edits, the passage describing this horror is also scarred by ash: "Some kind of ash landed on the following pages, in some places burning away small holes, in other places eradicating larger chunks of text" (323). Just as Navidson's house rejects explanation, so too does Zampanò's manuscript become illegible. At times the book's interface even imitates the house's architecture. In a section describing the house and architectural history in general, a square window on the right-hand side of the page is inserted into vertical columns of text. Outlined in blue, the box contains a long footnote listing architectural items not present in Navidson's house: "Not only are there no hot-air registers, return air vents, or radiators . . ." (119). Turning over the page shows the backside of the window, now on the left-hand side of the page; its text appears backwards in the square frame, as if the page itself has become a physical wall around which the reader maneuvers. The novel thus blurs the boundaries between the house on Ash Tree Lane and the house of paper leaves containing the story of this haunted house. In so doing, it presents a parallel between readers of both houses and their frightening experiences reading mutating texts.

This collapse between readers and the narratives they read is even more apparent later on, when, in a tour de force of recursivity, *House of Leaves* forcefully collapses the walls between Navidson's house and Zampanò's book as well as between the readers in the text and the reader of the novel. When Navidson is lost and dying, alone in the bowels of the house's never-ending labyrinth, he is cold and light deprived; so he burns "the only book in his possession: *House of Leaves*"

(465). In this moment of extreme narrative reflexivity, Navidson, the title character of the film and manuscript describing it, becomes a reader within the ever-changing network of the house that is the title character in the book he reads. The book is both entertainment and heat source, and Navidson cannot read fast enough to keep up with the burning pages. In this scene, the book *House of Leaves*, contained within the novel of the same name, is burned to ash and merges with the ashen walls of the house on Ash Tree Lane. The book is literally integrated into its surroundings, and its readers—Navidson, Truant, and the novel's actual reader—struggle to trace these convergences and connections. Johnny Truant is depicted in a similar scene when, desiring to rid himself of the book, he attempts to burn Zampanò's manuscript: "I want to burn these pages. Turn every fucking word to ash" (493). But unlike Navidson, when Truant holds a match to the pages, "one after another, the flames all die . . . no matter how hard I try I cannot close that fraction of space" (493). Whereas Navidson's flame burns the book, generates heat, and disperses the book as ashes into the walls of the house, Truant's match only illuminates "that fraction of space" between the book and its environment; the space is charged with an invisible but poignant power, the energy of active circuits and connections.

The final and most illuminating of such moments occurs near the end of Truant's narrative. He has driven from Los Angeles to Virginia to find Ash Tree Lane and validate the existence of the house. He is, of course, unsuccessful and heads back to L.A. disappointed and depleted. During his return journey, Truant enters a bar in Flagstaff and, with his last dollar, buys a beer. Listening to a group of local musicians, he is suddenly struck by lyrics that penetrate his consciousness. He hears a song entitled "Five and a Half Minute Hallway," which is the title of the short cinematic sequence that is the kernel of Navidson's longer "The Navidson Record." Truant is confronted by two equally unlikely and unsettling options: either these musicians have seen the elusive (and presumed fictional) film "The Navidson Record" or they have read Zampanò's *The Navidson Record*, which Truant is currently editing and has deposited in his trunk for safe-keeping. When Truant approaches the musicians, he is handed a book—not Zampanò's *The Navidson Record* but a book titled *House of Leaves*, whose cover reads:

HOUSE OF LEAVES

By

Zampanò

with introduction and notes by

Johnny Truant (513)

This is the book on which Truant is working, but it is also the title page of Danielewski's novel. While Truant holds in his hands the "First Edition" published by (the fictional) "Circle Round a Stone Publication" (513), the reader follows along in the Second Edition published by Pantheon. In this moment of intense recursivity, implied in the "Circle Round" of the publishers, reality and fiction converge as both readers realize that this book cannot be constrained by its bindings or by the trunk of Truant's car. *House of Leaves* is shown to be part of a much larger network of information processing, one that operates across media platforms in real-time and connects many different readers.

The novel achieves this haunting sense of a narrative crossing over between worlds and walls through its relationship to its multimedia network and in particular to Poe's album *Haunted*. The clues to deciphering some of the novel's mysteries actually exist outside the oversized book and in its sibling soundtrack. In the first sentences of *The Navidson Record*, Zampanò identifies a primary source of confusion and excitement. He explains that the film "The Navidson Record" stimulated such interest because of the "leading obsession—to validate or invalidate the reels and tapes" (3). This desire to determine what is real and authentic about the film is implicitly tied, Zampanò continues, to the influence of digital technologies, which "invariably brings up a collateral and more general concern: whether or not, with the advent of digital technology, image has forsaken its once impeachable hold on the truth" (3). The ubiquity of digital technologies and their potential for manipulating the real or authentic disables attempts to ascertain "truth," assert an authoritative reading, or identify a sole author of the enigmatic film. But the possibility of digital technologies also prompts interest in the film: "'authenticity' still remains the word most likely to stir a debate" (3). As Zampanò describes the situation, the search for authenticity, aura, and authorship are becoming impossible in an age of digital technology; these print-based ideologies of cultural production are being replaced by digital models of collaborative creation, mediated consciousness, and works as assemblages.¹⁷ Learning to read *House of Leaves* across its networked assemblage, particularly in relation to *Haunted*, provides missing pieces to the primary puzzle Zampanò identifies and helps build a theory of authorship for the narratives.

When Truant hears the band play "Five and a Half Minute Hallway," he becomes aware that the narrative he edits extends beyond its pages, so too does the reader learn the same about the book she reads. In this moment, *House of Leaves* is shown to link up with a wider

multimedia network. The song that triggers Truant's epiphany, "Five and a Half Minute Hallway," is also a song on *Haunted*, and this song provides a necessary clue to the question of authorship posited by Zampanò in the first lines of his narrative. A few pages after he hears the band play "Five and a Half Minute Hallway," Truant recalls the traumatic and defining moment of his own childhood that lasted five and a half minutes. This is Truant's last journal entry, and it is dated October 31, 1998, as is his introduction to Zampanò's manuscript. The date further intertwines the novel's narratives, for not only does Truant finish the manuscript on Halloween but *The Navidson Record* also concludes on Halloween with a scene in which the Navidson family goes trick-or-treating in a new neighborhood. But this date also links these narratives to *Haunted*, which was released on Halloween. This key moment in Truant's text is thus a node of intersection in the network of narratives that prompts the reader to move between Truant's story of his five and a half minutes and Poe's song by the same title.

After trying to strangle her son, Pelafina Lièvre is taken away to the mental institution, leaving little Johnny Truant alone in his "own dark hallway" (516). He recalls, "the details of those five and a half minutes just went and left me to my future" (517). The passage locates Truant's hallway as a place of trauma, the space that eats his mother in the duration of five and a half minutes. It was in that hallway that Truant heard "the roar" of his mother "crying out my name" (517). This roar is then transferred to the Navidson's house and labyrinthine hallway which contains a dangerous, devouring monster. The connection between Truant's mother, Pelafina, and the house is hinted at throughout the novel, but in this moment, Truant's "five and a half minutes" as an abandoned child alludes to Poe's song "Five & a Half Minute Hallway" and unearths a pivotal hyperlink. Following the novel's text to the song's lyrics, the reader hears the lament of a loved one just beyond reach: "'Cause there's only so far I can go / When you're living in a hallway that keeps growing."¹⁸ The song continues: "But there's more to this story / Than I have exposed / There are words made of letters/ Unwritten." The lyrics identify letters left unwritten, and the song's steady beat emphasizes the first syllable of each word. Poe sings "letters / Unwritten" as contiguous, placing the stanza break after "Unwritten" despite their transcribed appearance. The auditory effect implies that whoever is writing "letters" is the one who has more to tell. Poe's song thus supports an identification of Pelafina as author of the letters and the narrative about a hallway that keeps growing, which means that she is also the author of both Truant and Zampanò.¹⁹ The song thus provides a key to the door containing a

central enigma in *House of Leaves*. Turning to the letters contained in *The Whalestoe Letters* supports this conclusion and further rewards the reader for learning to navigate across a multimedia network to practice a networked reading strategy.

The Whalestoe Letters contains letters written by Pelafina Lièvre while she was confined in the Three Attic Whalestoe Institute. Most of these letters are contained in Appendix II.E of *House of Leaves*, but *The Whalestoe Letters* contains eleven new letters and a Foreword that frames the collection as a distinct narrative node in the network comprising *House of Leaves*. *The Whalestoe Letters* shows how the arrangement and presentation of information affects its reception and meaning. The Foreword is written by a fictional character not present in the novel, Walden D. Wyrhta, whose attention to the letters was triggered by his wife Waheeda. Waheeda and Walden Wyrhta form the acronym WWW, a detail that further connects the collected letters and the framing mechanism they provide to the World Wide Web. Wyrhta is not a doctor, nurse, or administrative assistant at the mental hospital. Rather, on the first page of the Foreword, Wyrhta explains, "I was and am today an Information Specialist which . . . is just a fancy title for one able to organize, catalogue, index and cross-index" (WL, xi).²⁰ This introduction immediately situates the letters within a culture of digital information and its organization, "knowledge work" as Alan Liu calls it.²¹ As Wyrhta himself suggests, an Information Specialist manages data without understanding its content, in other words without being a good reader. But *House of Leaves* prompts its reader to be a "good reader," as Danielewski calls his "idealized reader," and not only to analyze information but to pursue its meaning across media forms and contexts.²² The reader who ventures outside the book *House of Leaves* to Wyrhta's Foreword recognizes an opportunity to "organize, catalogue, index and cross-index" the content contained in the letters from the novel's Appendix in a new way.

The Whalestoe Letters provides additional clues supporting the identification of Pelafina as the author of the various narratives; these clues are rewards that confirm the reader's strategy of venturing outside the novel for keys to its narrative. The new letters, not contained in the novel, shed light on the congruence between the author of these letters and the author of the narrative layers in the novel. For example, the letter dated March 9, 1983, the first in the *Whalestoe* collection to begin playing with typography—the text slides at angles across the page—mentions "ash" (WL, 6) and thus ties it to a similar typographic experiments mimicking the ashen walls of the house in Zampanò's *The Navidson Record*. Other clues abound. A later letter,

dated January 6, 1987, also visually mirrors the visual and linguistic metaphors in Zampanò's depiction of Navidson exploring the house. Pelafina writes, "Impossible to deny, impossible to" (WL, 44); then, the line breaks. A paragraph break is followed by a single "a"; another break and another single word, "void." The visual void echoes the typographical strategy in *The Navidson Record* wherein single words appear alone on the page describing Navidson's disorientation and isolation in the labyrinth. Again, another separation of page space before a line that ties this textual display to the narrative content shared between the storylines: "(A mother craves her boy. Without her he is ash)" (WL, 44, emphasis added). The experimentation continues, tying this epistolary writer to the author of the manuscript that Truant reads and edits. The line, "Come quickly to my side," breaks off so that "side" is presented on its side, turned to a ninety-degree angle in relation to the rest of the line. The result is a sentence that enacts its content and prompts the reader to enact the action it describes (to turn the book on its side to read the word "side"). The detail is also a sideways glance to the novel that shares this innovative style and a wink to the reader who moves between *The Whalestoe Letters* and *House of Leaves*. This visual marker connects the pages of the distinct but interconnected books and is visible only to the reader who learns to navigate the network of narrative and media forms. It gives added significance to a detail in the final letter in both *House of Leaves* (643) and *The Whalestoe Letters* (77). The letter is from Dr. David J. Draines, Director of The Three Attic Whalestoe Institute, and it informs Truant that his mother has died. In it, Pelafina's name is misspelled as "Livre," French for "book." Although this detail identifying a parallel between Pelafina and the book she authors is present in the novel, its relevance resounds in the context of *The Whalestoe Letters*, the supposedly objective collection framed by Information Specialist Walden D. Wyrhta.

House of Leaves promotes a networked reading strategy not only by rewarding the reader with clues contained in its multimedia assemblage, but also by providing, in its central text, a pedagogical example of a reader learning to navigate the system. Truant is the novel's representative reader, and it is through him that *House of Leaves*'s reader witnesses what is at stake in adopting appropriate reading practices for approaching networked narratives. The reader witnesses Truant's deterioration as he descends into isolation and illness due to his obsession with authenticating the text through hermeneutic study. Paranoid and hallucinating from his obsession with the manuscript, Truant holes himself up in his apartment; he covers the windows,

buys a gun, and slides into a dangerous psychic and physical state. The scars etched on his body mirror those marked on the body of the manuscript and serve as warnings to the novel's reader that shutting out the world and hammering tight the doors not only fails but also proves dangerous. It is only when Truant adopts a new approach and starts to read beyond the pages of Zampanò's manuscript, and out into a wider geographical and informational network, that he acquires an awareness of the larger issues foregrounded in the text. As Truant writes in his Introduction, divesting himself of the education he painfully received from his experience with the manuscript, "the irony is it makes no difference that the documentary at the heart of this book is fiction. . . . The consequences are the same" (xx). Whether or not the film is fake or Pelafina is the fictional author of the narratives, it is the reading process and practice that matters. Truant and the reader have learned to read across and around the information network, and that is the important "consequence" of *House of Leaves*.

The success of the novel's pedagogical project is evident on *House of Leaves*'s extensive and extraordinary Bulletin Board. The Bulletin Board at www.houseofleaves.com is a virtual space where readers form a community based on real-time communication about the novel. As of December 6, 2005, this community counted 7,022 registered members and 70,664 articles, and the numbers steadily increase.²³ Its homepage boasts an astounding fact: the most users online at the same time was on January 25, 2005, five years after the novel's publication.²⁴ The website grows like the house on Ash Tree Lane, adding new rooms and coded corridors as activity continues. As of September 2005, the website contained forums to discuss the book in four languages: English, French, Dutch, and Japanese. There are also boards devoted to discussion of *The Whalstoe Letters* and *Haunted*, further testifying to the interconnectedness of these works. Questions about the novel and explications of its text are posted daily, routing readers (who now write) back to the novel in a continuous feedback loop. The content of the postings ranges from the astute to the puerile: from literary analysis, such as a proposed congruence between "Sylvia Plath/Pelafina" to the decoding of textual details, such as the careful labeling of all images contained in the collage in Appendix II.C, and, as might be expected, to threads that trail off into tangents of unrelated conversations which pertain to the book only by virtue of the involved parties and the location of their discussion.²⁵ The steady and extensive emergence of the *House of Leaves* Bulletin Board attests to the novel's success at promoting a reading practice that extends across media and links up with the Internet as a way of approaching this cyborgic novel.

Moreover, its success suggests that contemporary readers are not only adept at, but also desiring of, such literary experiences.

As is evident from the Bulletin Board, the various entities comprising the *House of Leaves* network are not only connected through their intertextual content but also through their connection to the Internet. Not only do the novel, album, and collected letters contain their own forums for discussion on the *House of Leaves* website, but every screen contains a large icon connecting the online discussion of the book to the Official Poe site. Entering the Poe website, the reader is invited to register and to "Stay in the loop, join the mailing list."²⁶ The pun reminds you that not only are you exploring the figurative "loop" between the novel and its multimedia assemblage, but you are also actually reading across a digital loop, a programmed circuit connecting websites. Like Johnny Truant, the reader becomes part of the network that is *House of Leaves*. As Truant writes at the end of his narrative section, "Just as you have swept through me./ Just as I now sweep through you" (518). Reading across this network, the reader of *House of Leaves*, "you," is not only interpolated into the reading practices of the digital network but also pushed towards heightened awareness of how these technologies inform the literature she reads.

The Internet is a constitutive part of not only the novel's narrative and aesthetic but also its production history. This past permeates the novel, and the digital network that housed the first edition of the novel is shown to be an inherent part of the print novel that emerged from it. Before its publication by Random House, *House of Leaves* was posted online, twice. Three years before its appearance in print, Danielewski "found a crummy URL, all kinds of backslashes and forward slashes and tildes and posted it as a pdf file."²⁷ His reasons were mostly economic: "I didn't have the money to xerox and ship off this huge manuscript, so I got one of these terrible URLs and posted the thing as a pdf file on the Internet."²⁸ Then, after receiving a publishing contract, but before the novel's formal release, the novel was again uploaded to the Internet: online in serialized installments by the publisher.²⁹ This stint on the Internet impacted the novel's publication deal and its printed form, for *House of Leaves* was originally slated for a small print run, "maybe 8,000 paperback. No book tour. Nothing."³⁰ But the novel attracted online interest and generated such enthusiasm that the publisher enlarged the contract. In a turn of life imitating art, the novel narrates a similar production history when Zampanò explains that the short film of Navidson's "Five and a Half Minute Hallway" was disseminated "by curiosity alone . . . VHS copies were passed around by hand" (5) until, "[l]ess than a year later another short sur-

faced" (5). The emergence of additional film fragments sparked curiosity and commentary, generating desire and funding for further production.

The novel's print-to-Web-to-print publication history is also depicted in the editorial footnotes by the fictional Ed. who annotates Truant and Zampanò's manuscript. One such footnote states, "Following the release of the first edition over the Internet, several responses were received by email, including this one" (151). Another includes emails from supposed readers of the online, first edition. Responding to a section about Johnny Truant and his buddy Lude, the following editorial note appears: "Note: This section also elicited several e-mails" including, "Do you know what happened to [Lude]? Did he leave LA? And what about Johnny?" (263). These footnotes identify readers as participants in the ongoing production of the novel. The Eds. not only acknowledge omissions but also promise future editions: "Though we were ultimately unsuccessful, all efforts were made to determine who wrote the above verse. . . . Anyone who can provide legitimate proof of authorship will be credited in future editions.—Ed." (45). The (fictional) Editors' Foreword includes the following disclaimer: "we apologize in advance and will gladly correct in subsequent printings all errors or omissions brought to our attention" (vii). Such moments motion outwards to the reader and forwards to future editions of the novel: "While bits and pieces of these readings still circulate, they have yet to appear anywhere in their entirety. Purportedly Random House intends to publish a complete volume, though the scheduled release is not until the fall of 2001" (385). Such fictional promises to amend the book acknowledge that in a digital age, wherein information can be easily altered and updated, the book is never a discrete and complete object but always a node in an ever-changing network of information, interaction, and potential or "virtual" readings.³¹

House of Leaves illustrates Joseph Tabbi's statement that "[b]ooks have been, or they have been made to seem, instances of a bounded, individuated organization, but they must now link up (again) with a wider, distributed media network."³² The novel "link[s] up" with "a wider, distributed media network" through the collapse of text and paratext. New media critic Peter Lunenfeld sees this convergence of text and paratext to be a condition of the network and a characteristic of the digital age, for "who is to say where packaging begins and ends in a medium in which everything is composed of the same streams of data."³³ This idea is central to *House of Leaves*: Zampanò's *The Davidson Record* is pure paratext, an ekphrasis on a film whose footnotes and

references to other critical commentaries are as important as the narration of the film itself; Johnny Truant's interaction with Zampanò's manuscript provides paratextual commentary in the form of a personal narrative whose confessional tone and voluminous footnotes often overtake the text he is editing; and the Ed.'s comments on publication process remind the reader that the novel is constantly being shaped by its paratext. Visually, even, the novel's pages express an inability to distinguish between text and paratext: footnotes overtake their allotted space at the bottom of the page and fracture the hierarchical, horizontal layout. Paratext permeates, and bindings prove porous. *House of Leaves* threatens to unhinge the scaffolding that structures our interactions with literary texts, genres, and fields of study. The result is a book that registers the influence of digital media as a source of significant and stimulating transformations for the novel in a digital age.

A specific and central instance of the convergence of text and paratext in relation to digital media is the remediation of active HTML links into the novel's text. In interviews, Danielewski claims that the blue color of "house" is not meant to invoke digital technology but rather to represent cinematic effects.³⁴ Indeed, he is downright gleeful when asked about the influence of digital media on his novel: "This is one of those moments when I get to say, 'HA!' (Please quote me on that accurately, with 'Ha' being capitalized, italicized and followed by an exclamation point.) And I say 'HA!' here because I didn't write *House of Leaves* on a word processor. In fact, I wrote out the entire thing in pencil!"³⁵ Taking Danielewski at his word is seductive but dangerous, particularly for an author who claims not to have read Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* or David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, two of the most clear literary influences on *House of Leaves*'s hypertext.³⁶ Danielewski declares that his novel showcases the power of print textuality and seeks to remind readers of "the analogue powers of these wonderful bundles of paper [that] have been forgotten. . . . I'd like to see the book reintroduced for all it really is."³⁷ Despite the author's protests, and he certainly doth protest too much, coloring blue all instances of "house" in a novel published at the turn of the millennium inscribes the Internet's interface into its print pages. Moreover, his articulated desire to "reintroduce" the book implicitly acknowledges a need to reinsert the print novel into a contemporary context and to "reintroduce" it to a specific readership, one that is digitally-literate. Such readers navigate immense amounts of information across hyperlinks and points of view, which is why Larry McCaffery comments that "today's readers—that is to say, people who

have grown used to parallel processing huge amounts of information from magazines, television, databases . . . not to mention word processors—aren't going to have greater difficulties reading this novel than they encounter every day routinely logging onto the Internet."³⁸ The novel's color-coding of "house" in blue is not just remediation; it is a penetration of the text by the digital paratext. The pages of *House of Leaves* are permeated by actual links to other nodes in the network so that the novel both depicts and depends upon the digital context from which it emerges. This is why *House of Leaves* is simultaneously so revolutionary and representative of the state of the contemporary novel.

After its voluminous Appendixes and extensive, if often random, Index, the novel concludes with a final textual hyperlink that ends by opening outwards and connecting its print body to the Internet. Following the publisher's credits and copyright information, the last page of the book contains an "imagetext" (figure 1).³⁹ In Scandinavian mythology, Yggdrasil is the tree whose branches hold together the worlds of the universe. The tree is believed to be ash, like the cavernous walls of the house on Ash Tree Lane. The reference to an ancient myth explaining the division of the world into separate but connected entities—a network—concludes the novel and my reading of it. This final allusion is not only metaphoric but material, for Yggdrasil was the name of an early version of the Linux Operating System.⁴⁰ This subtle reference thus links a cultural myth explaining the universe as network to a computer operating system structuring our Internet culture.⁴¹ The very last image on the page reinforces this reading with its presentation of a large, bold O beneath the stanza describing the Yggdrasil tree as an invisible network. The open O corresponds to the dark dot at the top of the page and represents opposing states—absence/presence, zeros/ones—the bits of patterned information that construct the digital world. This final mark in the novel—an open O—is a visual wormhole connecting *House of Leaves* to the invisible network whose "roots must hold the sky" of our digital age and support new reading strategies for new, networked novels.

●
Y g g
d
r
a
s
i
l

What miracle is this? This giant tree.

It stands ten thousand feet high

But doesn't reach the ground. Still it stands.

Its roots must hold the sky.

O

Notes

I would like to thank Katherine Hayles, Chris Looby, and Mark McGurl for their insightful comments and suggestions on various versions of this essay.

¹ The novel's cover claims that *House of Leaves* is published in four different editions: Full Color ("house" is colored blue; "minotaur" and all struck passages are red), 2-Color ("house" is colored blue), Black & White, and Incomplete. As far as I know, the Full Color and Incomplete versions do not exist. The 2-Color editions appear with either blue (for "house," minotaur and struck passages in black text) or red (for minotaur and struck passages, with "house" in light gray). The blue edition is supposedly the most prevalent in the United States.

² N. Katherine Hayles, "Translating Media: Why We Should Rethink Textuality," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 16, no. 2 (2003), 278.

³ Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer with Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990), 369.

⁴ For a reflection on the "discourse network 2000," see Alan Liu, "Transcendental Data: Toward a Cultural History and Aesthetics of the New Encoded Discourse," *Critical Inquiry* 31 (2004), 49–84.

⁵ <www.realpoe.com> (Accessed Dec. 2005).

⁶ This is true of the "2-Color" edition but not of the "Black & White" edition; in that edition, "house" appears in the gray of grayscale tone.

⁷ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 15.

⁸ J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth Century English Fiction* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 167.

⁹ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981), 7.

¹⁰ Hayles writes, "The remarkable achievement of *House of Leaves* is to devise a form that locates the book within the remediations of the digital era . . . and still deliver the pleasures of traditional realistic fiction." Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge: MIT Press Mediawork Series, 2002), 128. Mark B. N. Hansen reads the novel as narrating a very real void of referentiality due to the failure of orthographic technologies in the digital age: "the novel is about an impossible object, a referent that is absent not simply in the sense of being lost. . . . [*House of Leaves*] is a realist novel about an object that, for precise technical reasons, cannot belong to the 'reality' we inhabit." "The Digital Topography of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*," *Contemporary Literature* 45, no. 4 (2004), 607.

¹¹ For the purpose of clarity, or as much clarity as an article on such a complex

novel will allow, I identify the film "The Navidson Record" with quotations and the manuscript *The Navidson Record* with italics.

¹² Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000). Hereafter cited parenthetically. The image of Truant taping together fragments of Zampanò's text resonates with the author's description of a pivotal moment in the novel's conception. In an interview he explains how he wrote a short story, "Redwood," the kernel narrative of which would become *House of Leaves*, but after receiving criticism from his father, Danielewski tore up and threw away the story. His sister then "presented me with a manila folder in which I discovered 'Redwood'—intact. She had gathered up and taped together all the pieces." Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, "Haunted House: an Interview with Mark Z. Danielewski," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 44, no. 2 (Winter 2003), 104.

¹³ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993), 37.

¹⁴ A brief mention of a character using digital technology is reserved for Will Navidson and Karen Green's son Chad, who plays a role-playing game (*Myst*) on the computer to avoid the horrifying reality of his man-eating home (99).

¹⁵ Hayles, 110.

¹⁶ Not only is Edgar Allan Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) an obvious inspiration for the novel, but Poe also infiltrates the novel as the father of American horror fiction and through the presence of musician Poe, the creator of *Haunted* and sister of Danielewski. For example, the epigraph for chapter XX is from Poe, but the text is from Poe the musician, not Poe the writer: "No one should brave the underworld alone" (423). Indeed, as her standard biography explains, Annie Danielewski took her stage name from a Halloween costume she wore as a child which was based on an Edgar Allan Poe short story. See her fan site at <www.poe.org> or her artist bio VH1.com <www.vh1.com/artists/az/poe/artist.jhtml>.

¹⁷ Hayles reads *House of Leaves* as a "metaphysical inquiry" exposing that "there is no reality independent of mediation" (110) so that "consciousness alone is no longer the relevant frame but rather consciousness fused with technologies of inscription" (117). On the emergent model of collaborative creation, Danielewski describes his writing process in an interview as deeply symbiotic with the development of his sister's album: "She was my only reader . . . she would read bits of *House of Leaves*, and they would inspire her. And she would write a song, and then I'd listen to the song, and it would move me in a certain direction." Eric Wittmershaus, "Profile: Mark Z. Danielewski," *Flak Magazine* [online] May 6, 2000. <<http://flakmag.com/features/mzd.html>>. This kind of collaboration is at odds with print-based ideologies identifying a sole, isolated author but is a constitutive fact of digital production. As Thom Swiss explains, expectations of single-authorship breed such questions about digital art as "Where's our Shakespeare of the Screen? Our Pixel Picasso? How long before we have a Digital DeMille?" But that these questions are based on print ideologies that assume "the 'best' or 'most

important' art is created by an individual, a single pair of hands in the study or studio." "Electronic Literature: Discourses, Communities, Traditions," in *Memory Bytes: History, Technology, and Digital Culture*, ed. Lauren Rabinovitz and Abraham Geil (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2004), 283.

¹⁸ Poe, "5&1/2 Minute Hallway," *Haunted* (Atlantic Records, 2000).

¹⁹ Many links exist between the novel and album, such that there is not space to delineate here. One example is the song "Spanish Doll" (track 14, *Haunted*) which contains the lyrics "rompido mi muñeca" and mentions a doll with a red and gold dress. In Zampanò's text, he describes Daisy's doll in similar ways (526), and one of Pelafina's letters concludes with the "Rompido muñeca" (606); another letter comments on "the old Spanish doll I once guarded in the gables of a fantastic attic where we both awaited our execution" (610). The description of Daisy's doll, contained in Zampanò's narrative, would be unknown by Pelafina, who is locked up in the attic of the Three Attic Whalestoe Institute. Poe's song ties together the narratives and, possibly, the narrators.

²⁰ Citations from *The Whalestoe Letters* appear parenthetically as WL. Mark Z. Danielewski, *The Whalestoe Letters* (New York: Pantheon Press, 2000).

²¹ See Alan Liu's *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004).

²² Danielewski explains that while writing, "gradually this idealized reader I addressed came to life in my imagination, taking every single note, noticing every twist of phrase, appreciating all the intrinsic complexities of my narrative, understanding every modulation and harmony, hearing the way different parts came together to form a single melody" (McCaffery and Gregory, 124).

²³ Testifying to the fact that the novel's online membership continues to grow and engage in active communication is a comparison of these statistics to those from the previous year: as of April 2004, the Bulletin Board contained 30,351 postings and 5,798 registered members.

²⁴ <<http://www.houseofleaves.com/forums/>>.

²⁵ "Jessie" writes about a connection between the confessional poet Sylvia Plath and the institutionalized Pelafina: "I recently re-read Sylvia Plaths [sic] roman-à-clef piece *The Bell Jar*. It gives in brutal detail her first attempt at suicide and the preceding course of treatment at a mental asylum. Sylvia Plaths [sic] vivid use of colors really struck me as their parallels to *House of Leaves* and Johnnys [sic] mother are so captivating. She describes everything in various shades of blue and purple. Sylvias [sic] husband, the poet laureate Ted Hughes, once wrote that when he first met her he was struck by her 'cobalt blue aura'. He went on to publish a book called *HOW THE WHALE BECAME*," Posted on July 7, 2002, Subject: "Sylvia Plath/Pelafina." <<http://houseofleaves.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=2369.z>>. The second posting was posted by fearful_syzygy on October 21, 2004, Subject: "Appendix II-C. Collages." <<http://www.houseofleaves.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=3312>>.

²⁶ <<http://www.realpoe.com/>>.

²⁷ Danielewski, interview with Rick Klaw, "Boredom Is Another Word for Fear," *The Book People* [online], 2000. <http://www.bookpeople.com/infobook.html?isbn=au_dz>.

²⁸ Danielewski, interview with Rick Klaw.

²⁹ From February 15 to March 17, 2000, readers could download free installments of the forthcoming book *House of Leaves* (via iUniverse). This web-based marketing experiment preceded the print publication of the hardback and standard trade editions. See Richard Loeffler's "E-books Precede Paper Editions," Suite101.com [online], February 20, 2000. <<http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/5242/33895>>.

³⁰ Danielewski, interview by Wittmershaus [n.p.].

³¹ Pierre Lévy, working from Deleuze, explains that the word "virtual" implies a "philosophical sense" in which "the virtual is *that which exists potentially rather than actually*." *Cyberculture*, trans. Robert Bononno (1997; Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001), 29 (emphasis in original). Another example of the feedback loop between art and life in Danielewski's work is more recent; on August 17, 2005 the author sent an email to the members of the *House of Leaves* Bulletin Board requesting help with his next book project: information in the shape of personal mini-narratives. In his email, Danielewski writes, "it's about time for something new . . . it makes sense first to turn to you." (The email is available on the Bulletin Board at <http://www.houseofleaves.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=4062>, Subject "That".)

³² Joseph Tabbi, *Cognitive Fictions* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2002), xi.

³³ Peter Lunenfeld, "Unfinished Business," in *The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media*, ed. Peter Lunenfeld (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 14.

³⁴ For the author's biographical narrative describing the influence of film on the novel's creation, see Sophie Cottrell's interview with the author, "Bold Type: Conversation with Mark Danielewski," *Bold Type* [online], April, 2002. <<http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0400/danielewski/interview.html>>.

³⁵ McCaffery and Gregory, 117. In an interview with Rick Klaw, Danielewski explains, "Between 1993 and 1996 I had the whole thing sketched out in a number of journals and on various scraps of paper . . . in 1996 I actually sat down and wrote out by hand almost a treatment of the story, about 60 or 70 pages." In an interview with Eric Wittmershaus, Danielewski describes how he worked for months in an office at Random House setting his own typography, this time, however, with a computer.

³⁶ Despite the author's protestations, *House of Leaves*' structure, and in particular its Index, invokes Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1962). In addi-

tion to the parallels between their use of footnotes, Danielewski's novel invokes his contemporary Foster Wallace, in an allusion to his *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1996). In *Infinite Jest*, Hal's father commits suicide in a highly unlikely but extremely memorable way: by sticking his head in a microwave. In *House of Leaves*, Truant recounts a lie he told Kyrie, a woman he pursues, "about police trying to save a guy in my building who'd stuck his head in a microwave" (88).

³⁷ Quoted in Cottrell.

³⁸ McCaffery and Gregory, 100.

³⁹ "Imagetext" is from W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994); see especially Chapter 3. Figure 1 is from *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski, copyright © 2000 by Mark Z. Danielewski. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

⁴⁰The Yggdrasil Linux distribution system was developed by Andy Richter of Yggdrasil Computing and was last released in 1995.

⁴¹ In a letter dated June 23, 1987 Pelafina describes herself as the Yggdrasil tree and the author of the manuscript (ms): "My hands resemble some ancient tree: the roots that bind up the earth, the rock and the ceaselessly nibbling wordms" (*HL*, 623; *WL*, 49).