

Labyrinthine Literature: Reality versus Perception in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

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Though its origins date back to the 19th century, the time of philosophers such as Kant and Nietzsche, the school of thought known as nihilism is arguably more pervasive in today's culture, with counterculture movements built on the idea that the meaning that society attempts to prescribe to human existence is essentially nonexistent. This philosophy provides part of the basis for the postmodernist movement, particularly where deconstructionist themes are concerned.

Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, while not postmodern in the strictest sense, plays with the concept of nihilism through exploration of the increasingly warped mind of its primary narrator, Johnny Truant, as well as the additional characters who may or may not exist in the context of the novel's mythos. Even more notably, the novel aims to interact with readers as well, interfering with their reality as well as the book's.

House is generally classified as a horror novel though it lacks the standard monster or revelations of some dark Lovecraftian secret. Instead, it opts to scare readers with the notion that their perception of reality is fluid and prone to error, instilling within them a sense of agoraphobic loneliness and dread of the unknown. In this way, *House of Leaves* doesn't so much preach nihilism; rather, it presents it harshly and honestly. By doing so, it both defies conventional literary criticism and invites the reader to interpret it as they see fit, as one's perception is worth far more than his or her reality.

The novel's distinct style originates from its many layers, each containing a separate character or group of characters who tell separate stories, each including the titular house as a defining element. However, the house's influence cannot be clearly defined for each character. Zampanò, an elderly man, is found deceased among an assortment of papers that are taken and read by one Johnny Truant, a worker at a tattoo parlor who decides to organize and publish his work. It is Zampanò who first defines the house through his review of the *Navidson Record*, a documentary about a family looking to settle down that instead discovers there is more to their idyllic country home than it would initially appear, for it grows extraneous rooms as well as a colossal labyrinth that stretches for miles.

Early on in the novel, it becomes apparent that Zampanò's writing, though evidently meticulously researched, is flawed. For Johnny, the most glaring of these flaws is the fact that the *Navidson Record* is not an actual film. During his work with the book, Truant claims that the famous individuals featured in Zampanò's review of the documentary "had never heard of Will Navidson, let alone Zampanò."¹ Furthermore, the descriptions that Zampanò uses in reference to various shots of the movie are called into question when it is revealed, "[h]e was blind as a bat."² This systematic deconstruction of Zampanò's credibility lampoons the horror genre, giving away what could have been a major twist for readers. Yet, the point of the old man's possible insanity drives home a motif that becomes recurrent throughout the rest of the novel, namely the obstruction of truth in writing, something that even Johnny resorts to in his analysis

¹ Mark Z. Danielewski, introduction to *House of Leaves*, by Mark Z. Danielewski (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000), xx.

² *Ibid.*, xxi.

of Zampanò's work. Danielewski conveys through Zampanò and Johnny the fickle nature of writing, and how, even in a work of fiction, a reader can still be lied to about a story.³

For instance, Zampanò writes in a footnote about "exquisite variation" in regard to two passages that, despite being written at different times and under different circumstances, are exactly alike. Johnny comments on this, skeptical of Zampanò's logic when the variation was only contextual. His jaded criticism draws parallels to conclusions that an average reader might draw, with Zampanò's views representing literary critics and the stances that they take on fiction. The footnote satirizes the ambiguity that comes with written language and the meaning that critics and analysts attempt to derive from it, a struggle that can potentially be undermined or even undone by divergent interpretations.

Furthermore, some of the terminology that Zampanò uses is switched intermittently, changing the way the narration is framed. The use of military lexicon to describe interactions with the house, starting with the use of the word "outpost"⁴ and extending to the debate between "operation" and "exploration"⁵ as well as "base camp" versus "command post."⁶ Through this method of framing, Zampanò implies a conflict with the house, priming the reader to expect a monster to lie within the hallways, reinforced by the presence of the weaponry that one of the explorers insists on bringing with him.

³ Larry McCaffery & Sinda Gregory, "Haunted House—An Interview with Mark Z. Danielewski," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 44:2 (2003): 120-121, accessed December 7, 2013, doi: 10.1080/00111610309599940

⁴ Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000), 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

Zampanò's work, though fictitious even in the already questionable realm of fiction, plays out in a way similar to that of a standard horror movie, an aesthetic which, in direct contrast to what the reader knows about Zampanò, forces him or her to think of the *Navidson Record* as factual within the context of the novel. Through extensive citations and footnotes (which, again, Truant rules to be invented), Will Navidson's story is told. A renowned photojournalist, Navidson, his often-distant wife Karen, and their two children, Chad and Daisy, purchase a home in Virginia. Wishing to record the family settling into their new environment, Navidson installs cameras all over the house. However, the previously halcyon house quickly becomes uncanny when a small closet appears between two rooms. Even this early in the story, the family's contrasting views of the house become apparent. The two children lack the concern of their parents, treating this anomaly with a childish blitheness, eliciting the following:

When confronting the spatial disparity of the house, Karen set her mind on familiar things while Navidson went in search of a solution. The children, however, just accepted it. They raced through the closet. They played in it. They inhabited it. They denied the paradox by swallowing it whole. Paradox, after all, is two irreconcilable truths. But children do not know the laws of the world well enough to fear the ramifications of the irreconcilable. There are certainly no primal associations with spatial anomalies.⁷

As such, the house seems to only influence its inhabitants to the extent that they can perceive its changes. To the children, whether or not the structure of the house makes sense is irrelevant, as they are unaware of the ramifications that come with this unwelcome new annex. Thus, it becomes part of their accepted reality, unlike their parents, who wrestle with the concept as it relates to everything that they have learned and perceived over time. Later on, as a massive

⁷ Ibid., 39.

labyrinth materializes inside the house, leading to several explorations of its eldritch depths, Danielewski further explores the relationship between the house and those inside it. One of Zampanò's sources states, "architecture comes into being only when experienced,"⁸ referring to how the house shifts and changes for different explorers. It can be postulated that the house would not retain its impossible hallways without its inhabitants; when the Navidsons move in, there is no indication that it is anything other than a typical suburban home. This gradual escalation of the interior proportions of the house suggests that in measuring, studying, and even acknowledging what should, for all intents and purposes, be an impossibility, the Navidsons are, in fact, encouraging its growth and allowing the impossible to become real to them.

Even beyond the house itself, the ephemeral nature of human perception can be seen in the differences between Will Navidson and his brother, Tom. Tom, having shown up to assist with the exploration, is depicted as laid-back and passive, and in his description, the reader is informed that he "won no awards, achieved no fame, held no job for a year or two, remained in no relationship for longer than a few months, could not settle down in a city for longer than a few years, and ultimately had no place or direction to call his own."⁹ Though he is presented as a stark foil to the ambitious Will, Tom is better liked due to his easygoing attitude. As a result, their relationship is complex and often ambiguous; is Will successful for his devotion to his work, or is Tom for the warmth that draws Will's family to him? Zampanò questions this

⁸ Ibid., 170.

⁹ Ibid., 246.

juxtaposition, and the reader is certainly invited to draw his or her own conclusions as well.¹⁰

As readers, we accept what is stated as fact in a novel, clinging to what is said outright to form our own ideas.

This reliance on what is perceived can be examined more closely with Karen's attitude toward the house. At the start of the novel, she is demonstrated to be very spiritual, placing items around the house to improve her feng shui. Gradually, as her relationship with Navidson worsens on account of his obsession with the house, culminating in him venturing down the icy, dangerous hallway, the house begins to take its toll on her as well, with her assorted feng shui items disappearing. Perhaps they were mere objects, but with their unexpected absence, Karen begins to lose faith because she had perceived them as a positive force, one that she could depend on. Without the items, and indeed, without Navidson, her personal reality begins to lose cohesion.

And a general lack of cohesion does not simply apply to Karen; indeed, it is the hallmark of anyone in the novel who has come in contact with the house. The way the house affects those that perceive it is greatly varied; a list of symptoms ranges from "sudden migraines" to "obsessive behavior; weight loss; night terrors; vivid dreaming accompanied by increased mutism."¹¹ Similar to the beings of Lovecraftian works, the house is portrayed as an abomination, defying reality to the point that the mere sight of it can cause insanity. What distinguishes the house from Cthulhu, Dagon, or any other of Lovecraft's horrors is the way it is fueled by perception; as previously stated, it depends on the presence of people to shape it,

¹⁰ McCaffery and Gregory, "Haunted House—An Interview with Mark Z. Danielewski," 119-120.

¹¹ Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 396.

reacting in ways that play to the fears of those that set foot in it. Ruch's review of the novel hits this point close to home, stating, "[t]here is a lurker at the threshold, and whether it's your own personal emptiness, a shared void common to all, or Lovecraft's Yog Sothoth himself, is perhaps just a matter of perspective."¹² The fear instilled by the house, and by extension, the novel itself, is fueled by human emotion or perhaps paranoia, that most tenacious of fears, embodying the instability that comes from shattered perception.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is referenced within Danielewski's work almost as much as Lovecraft. Both works involve the descent of the protagonist into a horrific setting that warps their sanities, but *Heart*, a pre-modern piece of literature, approaches the subject of insanity through concrete experience. *House*, on the other hand, is more than content to let the reader decide whether or not characters' traumas are based on genuine events or their own imaginations, and furthermore, challenges whether or not this makes any difference in the long run. Critic Conor Michael Dawson extensively compared the two works, noting, "[a]s in *Heart of Darkness*, the various characters scattered across the divergent diegetic levels voyage through emanations of their disturbed pasts."¹³ What makes *House of Leaves* more metafictional than Conrad's work is the presence of the house in the lives of the readers, embodied by the notion that perception, whether warped by misfortune or sickness, inevitably decides one's reality.

But what is the house, really? Its influence affects more characters in the novel than the Navidsons, despite the family being fictitious to the rest of the characters. And indeed, none of

¹² Allen B. Ruch, "Book Review: *House of Leaves*", review of *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski, *The Modern Word*, October 24, 2000, Book Review, http://www.themodernword.com/review_house_of_leaves.html.

¹³ Conor Michael Dawson, "'The Horror! The Horror!': Traumatic Repetition in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*," *PG English* (25), September 2012.

the others actually see the house as experienced by Will and his family, but many are affected by it in ways similar to those described in the *Navidson Record*. Darkness is used as a common symbol to represent the house; Daisy Navidson composes a picture of “several layers of black and cobalt blue crayon, with not even the slightest speck of white showing through,”¹⁴ concerning her teacher greatly. For humans, darkness has always been a primal fear, associated with the unknown, obscuring sight and potentially hiding any number of dangers. In this way, it can be theorized that the house is everything that cannot be seen or understood. And because all individuals strive to exert a level of control on society as well as their own lives, the unfamiliar and unknowable, existing in blatant disobedience to what is perceived as proper, is terrifying not just to the characters in the novel, but the reader as well.

However, whether the house actually contains any sort of monster is deliberately kept unclear. Claw marks, the scent of rotting meat, and a deafening roar all become hallmarks of the supposed beast, for exploration teams as well as Johnny and Zampanò, though it is hinted that the creature might be a Minotaur. While Danielewski appears to be navigating the plot towards the eventual reveal of the mythic beast as a primary antagonist, keeping with the postmodernist themes of deconstruction, this never happens. Additionally, Danielewski takes this subversion a step further by striking through every mention of the Minotaur in the story. As it is presented, the Minotaur is simply one version of what the darkness of the house could hide, turning delusion into fear. To confirm its existence in any way would cheapen the message of the book, though insinuating that it might exist plays with the notion of control, the idea that humanity attempts to explain the unknown when it cannot.

¹⁴ Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 314.

Other critics have similarly commented on the novel's eschewing of a traditional narrative in favor of giving the reader his or her own choices. Mark B.N Hansen comments on the parallels between the unknowable house and the mountains of false literature apparently conceived by Zampanò.

The effort to document or otherwise make sense of this physically impossible object generates a series of mediations which quite literally stand in for the void of referentiality at the novel's core. Lacking the force of indexicality, these mediations can only acquire the force of conviction by eliciting embodied reactions in their fictional and actual readers. They garner their rhetorical effect by triggering what I shall call 'reality *affects*'.¹⁵

Hansen's analysis is largely synchronous with my own in that it agrees that the many nonexistent texts and impossible architectures are only given meaning by the perceptions of readers, both in and out of the story. However, his later statements about the house needing to be viewed as "a figure for the otherness of the digital"¹⁶ both deviate from my points and prove my overarching thesis. Hansen draws from his own sense of reality, and I from mine, and neither can be proven correct or incorrect based on the novel's evidence. The use of the first person is necessary to describe this divergence, as my status as a literary critic must be brought into question the same as any other work concerning Danielewski's novel, or literature in general, must be.

From these tenants comes the nihilistic view of the house; namely that it is nothing which, based on human perception, makes it everything that we can imagine. The title of the novel must also be considered when mulling over the nature of the house; why is it titled *House*

¹⁵ Mark B. N. Hansen, "The Digital Topography of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*," *Contemporary Literature* 45.4 (Winter 2004), 599. DOI: 10.2307/3593543

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 607.

of *Leaves* when nothing relating to leaves is ever mentioned? In this case, “leaves” can refer to pieces of paper, suggesting that the house is, in fact, the book itself, its pages carrying the idea of its dark depths, further explaining how it manages to affect Zampanò so deeply.

Even Johnny Truant, the feckless steward to Zampanò’s epic, cannot help but feel the call of the house. The more Johnny reads, the deeper into madness he sinks, his downward spiral fueled by his discontent with his previously hedonistic life. Additionally, memories of abuse at the hands of his mother and foster father haunt him, leading to traumatic delusions similar to those experienced by Navidson and his family. The color purple becomes a recurring motif, associated with the color of his mother’s fingernails when she attempted to strangle him. One of his earlier hallucinations is triggered by both the color and the darkness of the storeroom in which he works. Though there is no house like Navidson’s to draw him to the brink of madness, he falls just the same, his past hurting him in ways he can no longer ignore through debauchery. His narration decays with his mental state, and he starts to reflect Zampanò’s writing through his deliberate meddling with audience expectations. Before this, he reflects on a false story he told to impress a group of women, saying that, “[j]ust looking at this story makes me feel all queasy all of a sudden. I mean how fake it is. Just sorta doesn’t sit right with me. It’s like there’s something else, something beyond it all, a greater story still looming in the twilight, which for some reason I’m unable to see.”¹⁷ Again, a reference to darkness alludes to the theme of an unattainable truth pursued by mankind.

After talking over his conflicted thoughts about telling the false story, he divulges that he added details into Zampanò’s work to tie it in with his narration, a hypocritical move that

¹⁷Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 15.

nevertheless foreshadows his eventual habit of lying continually to the reader. Despite this, his deception is not truly directed at the reader, but rather at himself, trying to convince himself, the reader, or anybody that his downward spiral is not as pronounced as it actually is. Shortly after reaching rock bottom, he writes of two married doctors with whom he is staying, old friends who are more than willing to help him recuperate. These passages are entirely fabricated, leading to Johnny admitting, "I wasn't trying to trick you. I was trying to trick myself, to believe, even for two lousy hours, that I really was lucky enough to have two such friends, and doctors too, who could help me, give me a hand, feed me tofu, make me exercise, administer a miracle drug, cure my nightmares."¹⁸ Johnny's duplicity is based on escapism, another testament to perception overruling reality. Previously, the novel's nihilism originated from the truth that can be found in lies told by others; here, it comes from lies told to oneself. It also shows how badly Johnny is hurting, to need a ray of hope so badly that self-deception becomes the most desirable option.

Even with Johnny's madness, revelations gleaned from reading Zampanò's work give him an excruciatingly clear view of the lives of others, and the subjective way individuals can be perceived. He tells the reader of "Lude's List,"¹⁹ a lengthy compilation of his friend's sexual exploits for a month. But Johnny, becoming disenchanted with his personal series of one-night stands, is shaken after one of the women reveals that she had been previously taken advantage of, leading to him revising the list to include the dark pasts of each girl. Not only does this cynical take on Lude's prowess provide a more human side to the girls, it also demonstrates

¹⁸ Ibid., 509.

¹⁹ Ibid., 262-263.

how people can cease being perceived as human beings under even the most intimate circumstances. As he says, “[p]eople frequently comment on the emptiness in one night stands, but emptiness here has always been just another word for darkness.”²⁰ Again, as in previous narrations, he uses darkness as an allegory for the unknown; in this case, he refers to the casual obscurity of humanity in these blithe sexual revelries.

The suppression of one’s inherent humanity also becomes apparent whenever Pelefina, Johnny’s abusive, asylum-confined mother, appears. Her story is told through a series of letters to Johnny that express her grief over what she has done to him, constantly giving reassurance that she loves him. Though confined to an appendix in the back of the novel, Pelefina’s endeavor to reconcile with her son mirrors Johnny’s descent into madness, as her narration becomes increasingly unreliable. Notably she talks of abuse at the hands of the Director, but readers discover that she was delusional, and that the Director was in fact kind to her. However, even these apparent figments of imagination are called into question when later, the Director leaves and is replaced with a new one, and Pelefina does not notice. To her, his replacement is irrelevant; to her, he is exactly the same as the old Director. Her eventual suicide is a major blow to Johnny, though even the reality of her death is blurred to him, as “[t]elling everyone she was [dead] though made [his] life less complicated.”²¹

On a metafictional level, *House of Leaves* seeks to render meaningless the entire concept of literary analysis by both blurring the fourth wall and satirizing the in-novel criticism that

²⁰ Ibid., 265.

²¹ Ibid., 129.

Navidson's film receives.²² In a number of instances, Johnny addresses the reader directly, implying that, by reading his work, and by extension, Zampanò's, the reader has become exposed to the house, namely, in this case, the belief that there can be no states of truth and falsity due to consistently differing views. Notably, the approach attempts to induce paranoia in readers, such as in the following passage:

To get a better idea try this: focus on these words, and whatever you do don't let your eyes wander past the perimeter of this page. Now imagine just beyond your peripheral vision, maybe behind you, maybe to the side of you, maybe even in front of you, but right where you can't see it, something is quietly closing in on you, so quiet in fact that you can only hear it as silence. Find those pockets without sound. That's where it is. Right in this moment. But don't look.²³

With this passage, the terror it is meant to invoke comes not from any traditional sense of a horror movie monster, but from the fear of nothingness, because in the end, being reduced to nothing is all that needs to be feared as a human. This is why the breakdowns of both Johnny and Zampanò are so tragic; they are both men who have been reduced to nothing, reeling from the revelation that reality is irrelevant. The portrayal of characters in such a way exemplifies the nihilism that the novel so subtly preaches to the reader.

If Johnny's narration satirizes the reader's role in the novel, Karen's interviews operate similarly as she discusses the house with various famous individuals. Freudian theory is mocked prominently here, Freud having been mentioned and quoted several times earlier in the novel. Critic Paglia Camille interprets the house with a feminist take on Freudian Theory,

²² Steven Poole, "Gothic Scholar," review of *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski, *The Guardian*, July 15, 2000, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/jul/15/fiction.reviews>.

²³ Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 26-27.

stating “[t]he whole thing’s about womb envy or vagina envy, whatever you prefer.”²⁴ In a similar fashion, others compare the house to a “hall of mirrors without mirrors,” a “riddle,” and a “great circuit in which individuals play the part of electrons.”²⁵ An obvious critique of literary criticism, Danielewski conveys through this section of the novel that meaning is completely subjective; one man’s scholarly interpretation of a subject is no more or less valid than the beliefs of one who is unlearned in said subject. In this, it further obscures any conclusions that the reader might draw about the house, emphasizing Danielewski’s message that literature is incapable of having one clear-cut meaning. It also lampoons those that search for hidden subtext in the novel itself, as any significance is meant to be determined on a purely individual level. Karen never indicates which theory she prefers; all of them and none of them are simultaneously true.

Mark Z. Danielewski’s debut novel attempts to break new ground with its subversive approach to structuralism and its veiled advocacy of nihilism. The novel is a self-criticism of sorts, incorporating postmodernist genre deconstruction while at the same time parodying the compulsion of readers and critics to search for hidden meaning in a body of text. Through a large cast of characters, Danielewski communicates a underlying feeling of dread, originating from the idea that no concept, object, or person can be defined in concrete terms, as this illusion of control merely masks the subjective reality that every human experiences.

²⁴ Ibid., 358.

²⁵ Ibid., 364.