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“What Some Have Thought”: Criticism and Reflexivity in *House of Leaves*

Even among the postmodern era of metafictional and multimodal texts, few, if any, novels have had a relationship with academic scholarship as unique and direct as *House of Leaves*. Part horror story and part academic satire, *House of Leaves* does not merely merit, inspire, or warrant literary criticism. *House of Leaves* attempts to presuppose and even contain the whole of critical readings of the within itself; what does this mean for real-world criticism of *House of Leaves*, and how can scholars and critics interpret a novel predicated on satire of such criticism? As *House of Leaves* at least partially fulfills the role of a satire of academic criticism in itself, it places itself in an unusual spot within the annals of scholarly thought; *House of Leaves* is paradoxically both a novel about the futility of critical interpretation and a novel about the need for its existence. Like the impossible house itself, interpretation (but primarily academic criticism) becomes something both impossible to understand, and something that is pursued *because* of that impossibility. Criticism of *House of Leaves*, especially academic criticism, is oftentimes at least partly focused on the reflexivity of the text itself, in a sense adding further layers to the already labyrinthine structure of the text's narrative and self-criticism. Such criticism is not necessarily invalid, but the text's very nature and treatment of criticism means it can only add to the monstrous labyrinth of the text itself, only ever be another branch in the novel's expansive intertextuality. Indeed, Danielewski said of interpretations and criticism

several years after the novel was published that “I have yet to hear an interpretation of *House of Leaves* that I had not anticipated. I have yet to be surprised, but I’m hoping” (qtd. in Belletto 99). Admittedly, this statement predates the bulk of academic criticism written on the novel, so indeed it’s quite possible Danielewski has been somewhat surprised since. Nonetheless, the novel’s vast array of fake publications and fabricated analyses, quotations, and other criticisms have already beaten scholars to the punch. Though some fake publications are listed as only footnotes, other sections of the novel contain whole epistemological or even mathematical and scientific analyses of the events of *The Navidson Record* (and in many cases, *House of Leaves* itself, by proxy).

As the house contains an infinite and constantly changing set of rooms, doors, and staircases (among other terrain), so too does *House of Leaves* contain the genesis of the many interpretations that would develop and evolve following its publication. In many cases Zampanò even critiques the many fabricated examples of academic criticism he writes on, as one would expect from any expansive survey of academic criticism around a particular text. Are scholars forced only to critique elements such as the unusual typography and Truant’s narrative, elements which remain uninterpreted by Zampanò, and only merely occasionally commented upon by “the Editors”? Perhaps not; critiques unimagined by Danielewski have likely surfaced since that quotation and will continue to crop up, yet they may only further expand the labyrinth that is already there. Even wholly valid new and undiscovered interpretations, if they indeed exist, must contend with the fact that they are measured against other interpretations in the very book they analyze.

*House of Leaves* contains a multiplicity of narrators, ontologies, and layers of intertextuality before any literary criticism (real or fabricated) even enters into the picture. The book “House of Leaves,” written by blind eccentric “Zampanò” is found by Johnny Truant, a tattoo parlor employee, following the author’s death. Zampanò’s “House of Leaves” (distinguished from Danielewski’s full book by quotes rather than italics) is a book-length academic survey and exploration of the film and events surrounding the film *The Navidson Record*, which is about, at least to start, a house of which the exterior is  $\frac{1}{4}$  of an inch larger than the interior. Though, as Johnny Truant points out, “you will never find *The Navidson Record* in theaters or video stores;” (Danielewski xx) it does not exist. Further complicating the novel is the much lighter presence of the “Editors” who have apparently compiled Johnny’s own notes and Zampanò’s manuscript of “House of Leaves” into the book we are reading. *House of Leaves* is, succinctly put, a book about a book which does not exist about a film which does not exist about a house which does not and cannot exist.

*The Navidson Record* follows Will and Karen Navidson and their family as they move into the mysterious, eponymous house and discover what horrors await inside. Johnny Truant’s sections of the novel, distinguished by their altered font, consist of both his own commentary on Zampanò’s work and his own personal narrative, while the Editors (distinguished by another font) only rarely chime in to clarify or correct Truant’s writing. The Navidsons, upon moving into their new house, discover a hallway which twists and distorts space itself, adding rooms, doors, and which is able to expand to infinite proportions on a whim. Meanwhile, as Johnny Truant reads Zampanò’s work “House of Leaves,” he descends further and further into madness. These stories progress together in tandem, Zampanò’s scholarly commentaries constantly analyzing

the story of the Navidsons, while Johnny Truant, in addition to telling his own story, analyzes Zampanò's own analysis in his own gruff manner.

If Zampanò were to be believed and the events and film of *The Navidson Record* were to be considered real, then said film and events would according to Zampanò seem to have inspired a collection of literary analysis, criticism, and various other works expansive and numerous enough to rival the works of Shakespeare. At the beginning of his "House of Leaves," he describes this phenomenon:

"Books devoted entirely to *The Navidson Record* now appear with some regularity. Numerous professors have made *The Navidson Record* required viewing for their seminars, while many universities already claim that dozens of students from a variety of departments have completed doctoral dissertations on the film. Comments and references frequently appear in *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *American Heritage*, *Vanity Fair*, *Spin*, as well as on late night television...*The Navidson Record* now stands as part of this country's cultural experience and yet in spite of the fact that hundreds of thousands of people have seen it, the film continues to remain an enigma." (6)

Zampanò goes on to say that the film is "perfectly suited for hanging whole above the gates of such schools as Architectonics, Popomo, Consequentialism, Neo-Plasticism, Phenomenology, Information Theory, Marxism, Biosemiotics, to say nothing of psychology, medicine, New Age Spirituality, art and even Neo-Minimalism" (4). The novel as a whole contains mentions of fictional analysis from dozens more schools of thought and experts (some real, with the statements fabricated by Zampanò) from nearly every field imaginable. Thus, through Zampanò, *House of Leaves* already includes much criticism that would have otherwise been

hoisted upon the Navidson's story. For example, a Derridean analysis is already inserted in which Zampanò quotes from "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (111-113) and in a later section a fabricated quote from Derrida on *The Navidson Record* even appears. In another more extreme case, Chapter V of Zampanò's "House of Leaves" is almost solely dedicated to an extensive history and analysis of echoes, incorporating vast amounts of philosophical, architectural, and mathematical scholarship simply to describe an incredibly minute aspect of the Navidson (and their friends') experiences within the house. The novel is filled to the brim with such analyses of *House of Leaves* from academic frameworks popular, obscure, and entirely non-existent. To document every such instance of pre-emptive criticism in *House of Leaves* would simply serve to create a text as filled to the brim with scholarship as *House of Leaves* itself, but such examples nonetheless show the extent of scholarly criticism and theory that Zampanò attempts to include within "House of Leaves".

In many other cases, Zampanò submits his own entirely original analyses of parts of the story, and in at least one example alters the novel's format and/or typography by doing so. Brian McHale states in *Postmodernist Fiction* that to think of a book in a typographical fashion is "to think about its ontology, its modes of being, in the plural" (180). *House of Leaves* in many ways takes McHale's ideas to the conclusion: it is a novel which uses the placement of words on the page to not only alter and reference the narrative but to alternate between entire ontological worlds. While in many cases the novel's typography is altered as another way of signifying events of the narrative, in other cases formats and typography are altered due to Zampanò's criticism. In one section of the novel "Tom's Story," a transcript of Tom's brother's recordings from within the house (before his death at the hands of the house itself) interrupts

both narrative and criticism. Following Tom's Story is "A Short Analysis of Tom's Story," (274) formatted differently from most of Zampanò's writing and unusually lacking in footnotes or references to other criticism on *The Navidson Record*. There are also numerous chapters in which the narrative and criticism are interrupted by a Bibliography (152) or Glossary (383) or in one case a separate set of endnotes (79) with inconsistent regularity and comprehensiveness. In one case Zampanò interrupts the novel for pages with an enormous list of photographers which Zampanò "picked the names out of some books and magazines he had lying around," (65) to say nothing of the bizarre typographical techniques used during the beginning of Exploration #4 (119-147). The full novel (Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, not Zampanò's) contains an index, though Zampanò's does not nor does it contain a full bibliography or glossary. As noted by Johnny Truant, Zampanò's "House of Leaves" consists of "arcane, obtuse, and way over-the-top wanna-be scholarship;" (249) while it matches a book-length academic text in scope and number of citations, Zampanò is far from a typical scholar in his writings and often far from a competent one as well. As he is dead at the novel's opening, Zampanò's "House of Leaves" is the only glimpse we get at his psyche, and if it, in addition to Truant's remarks to be considered, he may far exceed Johnny Truant in his own madness.

In some cases, events of the film have inspired entire schools of thought in themselves. When asking why Navidson returned to the House towards the novel's end, Zampanò explains that there are three schools of thought: "I. The Kellog-Antwerk Claim, II. The Bister-Frieden-Josephson Criteria, [and] III. The Haven-Slocum Theory" (385) before providing his own analysis of each claim and his thoughts on the answer. The novel has not only preempted criticism of the Navidson's story, but taken it to such extraordinary lengths beyond

the quantity and intensity of scholarship that could come to exist in the real world. Johnny Truant's section remains free of such extensive analysis, and thus leaves his story without the same sort of preemptive criticism. Nonetheless, it should be noted that real world critics don't seem to focus on his story more than the remainder of the novel, often talking about it instead as a whole, though in a few cases the focus is placed on his relationship with his mother and her letters (published both in one of *House of Leaves*'s appendixes and separately with new material as *The Whalestoe Letters*), with one such example being Katherine Cox's "What Has Made Me?: Locating 'Mother in the Textual Labyrinth of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*". Johnny Truant is after a fashion a sort of literary critic of his own, albeit a much less academically inclined and more accessible one than Zampanò. His commentary is given in what Steven Belletto calls "quasi-academic, emotional attempts to make sense of [Zampanò's] words" (103) which slowly becomes "illegible, impenetrable, and obliterated" (103) as the words themselves take a toll on Truant's mind.

*House of Leaves* spends a great deal of time fabricating criticism and thus in some ways presupposing interpretations of itself that may come to exist in academic and mainstream circles of thought. Beyond that, however, *House of Leaves*' penchant for self-criticism and self-interpretation tends to reflect (or more accurately, predict) patterns that would come to be present in real-world scholarship. For example, relatively early on in *The Navidson Record*, Zampanò notes the house's inability to host animals. When the family's husky Hilary and their cat Mallory enter the hallway, they both "disappear into the darkness" (75) with "a loud yowl and bark" before being immediately seen in the backyard afterwards, with "Mallory up a tree, Hilary howling grandly over his achievement" (75). In the film, this incident is brushed aside and

not mentioned much again, and Zampanò notes that what may seem like a quite interesting attribute of the house is not only not expanded on in the film (neither Will nor Karen mentions it later on, nor does any other character) but also almost entirely ignored by the academic criticism of *The Navidson Record* as well, only mentioned in “a third of a sentence” (75) within a “four-thousand-page treatise” (75) on *The Navidson Record*. Truant goes further and points out that Zampanò himself also fails to say anything meaningful, before *himself* being unable to expand on it beyond believing there is a “great deal of significance” in the discovery. Similarly, few real world examples of criticism of *House of Leaves* mention it either; while its importance to the film exceeds the moment’s importance to the greater narratives of the real-world *House of Leaves*, it does seem strange that critics (real and false alike) would not dwell on such a moment given the oft-mentioned idea that the house responds to each character’s perceptions. That the criticism in the real world would ignore the same scene that the fake scholars in *House of Leaves* would overlook seems to indicate a bit of prescience on Danielewski’s part; the book seems to know where real interpretations of *House of Leaves* are headed and not headed.

It can also not be ignored that Zampanò’s “House of Leaves”, academic treatise that it is (at least in part), does not shy away from critiquing many of the fake pieces of academic scholarship mentioned throughout, and therefore perhaps preempting some criticism of what real-world interpretation and scholarship is yet to come. Frequently one may look toward the footnotes or occasionally the regular text itself to find Zampanò chastising a critic; for example, after mentioning a book in which the house is considered “a physical incarnation of Navidson’s psychological pain” (21) (notably a theme the novel returns to many times), Zampanò comments in the footnotes that “Pollit’s proclivity to pun and write jokes frequently detracts



from his otherwise lucid analysis” (21). In another more bizarre example Zampanò goes so far as to say that followers of Cassandra LaRue, renowned author of *The Architecture of Art* (in this case a fabricated author and book) have not “produced anything of consequence, let alone merit,” (420) getting embroiled in a debate entirely unrelated to the Navidson’s story. Even the original citation is merely in vague reference to the word art, leaving little in the way of merit for its inclusion beyond it being another way for Zampanò to in actuality express what is truly his own writing. These examples in some way position Zampanò’s work as the more properly and extensively researched and overall best piece of criticism; it not only creates a massive structure of scholarship of *The Navidson Record* but also positions itself at the top. Of course, given that Zampanò’s is the only work to diegetically exist, it essentially contains all these other works within it, even if they’re only limited in many cases to a title or a quote. Though *House of Leaves* is no ordinary academic paper; Johnny Truant interviews a graduate student who worked with Zampanò named Maus Fife-Harris, who “objected to the large chunks of narrative Zampanò kept asking her to write down,” (55) passages which were obviously “inappropriate for a critical work” (55). Indeed, *House of Leaves* can only function properly if those large chunks of narrative are included. Though academic scholarship makes up a great deal of Zampanò’s work, for every aside about the Uncanny or an overdetailed exploration of architectural acoustics, there are even more sections extensively detailing the narrative of Will and Karen’s (and/or occasionally other characters such Tom, Wax, Holloway, or Billy Reston) lives on a level of detail one would never find in a critical work.

Although Zampanò’s critiques of various scholars represent one common use of footnotes in the novel, footnotes play a more important role in *House of Leaves* as a whole. The

function of footnotes within *House of Leaves* is particularly integral to its melding of literary fiction and faux-academic scholarship. The use of footnotes (or endnotes) in literary fiction was hardly a new conceit at the time *House of Leaves* was published; in *Pale Fire*, Vladimir Nabokov uses footnotes as both commentary and entirely separate narrative, and just a few years before *House of Leaves* was published David Foster Wallace in *Infinite Jest* would use an extremely numerous and lengthy set of footnotes and endnotes to exercise a sort of control over the reader, disrupting the narrative when needed sometimes to offer new information and other times to introduce a new parallel or supplementary narrative separate from the main one. In *House of Leaves*, Danielewski partly follows in the footsteps of Nabokov and Wallace; his footnotes are how he switches to the Johnny Truant narrative, and Johnny Truant himself often uses these occasions to provide either further clarification or simply his own interpretation of Zampanò's "House of Leaves" as we are reading it. Occasionally, further footnotes from the editors also provided added clarification or information. But Danielewski takes the use of footnotes here a step beyond David Foster Wallace. Though footnotes are often used by Zampanò as they would be used in a similar academic survey to his own analysis of *The Navidson Record*, they are more often used to switch between the different narratives of Johnny Truant and the story of the Navidsons as told through what we learn in Zampanò's analysis, which covers events far beyond the scope of the fictional film. In *House of Leaves*, footnotes are the wall separating one layer of reality, one diegesis, from another. They are the membrane through which *House of Leaves'* metafictional elements are able to function, serving as passageways for the reader to travel through.

One of the novel's most unusual sections is its inclusion of a transcript Karen Green's "What Some Have Thought," a supplemental film to *The Navidson Record* in which Karen Green looks to various literary scholars, critics, artists, and many other professionals for their opinion of the events of *The Navidson Record*. Thanks to the inclusion of many famous theorists and writers, such as Jacques Derrida, Douglas Hofstadter, Harold Bloom, Camille Paglia, Byron Balesworth, Stephen King, and Hunter S. Thompson (all were living at the time *House of Leaves* was published), Danielewski is able to create an immense (though fabricated) sphere of renowned criticism around the non-existent film. Few books have attempted such a direct interaction with figures of criticism and/or other writers and artists. Indeed, one might argue Karen's section has an even more direct dialogue with criticism and scholarship than Zampanò's own academic criticism. Though it doesn't take the form of a particular academic paper, Danielewski's stand-ins for such real-world figures allow for a precise interpretation of the story of *The Navidson Record*. While having Jacques Derrida literally appear within the story and offer up his interpretation may not seem like Danielewski's most subtle metafictional gambit, the in-story explanation of Karen looking for meaning reveals a deeper significance to the section, as Karen quests for a satisfactory interpretation of her incomprehensible experiences in the house while unknowingly being a part of a book entirely built on interpretation. The responses often represent a slightly exaggerated and/or simpler caricature of the persona in question: Harold Bloom solipsistically quotes his own book *The Anxiety of Influence* and ties the house to Dante and Milton (359), Hofstadter speaks of mathematics, while Derrida talks about how the film relates to his ideas on the Other. Interestingly, Stephen King, scoffing at the symbols that might be behind the house, is perhaps the only one to take the story at face value: "You didn't

make this up, did you?" (362) and saying of the house merely that it is "pretty damn scary" (364).

With "What Some Have Thought," Danielewski precludes criticism from the lens of these and many other thinkers or their own schools of thought; even the house's presence as a simple horror-genre monster is seen to by King. This is not to say such a piece of criticism cannot exist: "This is Not for You: Nihilism and the House that Jacques Built" by Will Slocombe is in part a Derridean analysis of the novel. Yet such a piece of criticism can only build on the Derridean criticisms and influences already made blatant within the novel. It should also be noted that though Slocombe includes *House of Leaves*'s aforementioned quote from Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play" he bizarrely makes no mention of Derrida's entrance onto the page in "What Some Have Thought". In another example, "Exploration #6: The Uncanny in Danielewski's "House of Leaves,"" a psychoanalytic framework is used which considers the novel a "narrative repetition of Freud's theorization [of the Uncanny]" (Bemong 1). Yet this text remains heavily dependent on the Freudian and other psychoanalytic references and citations already in the text, including the aforementioned passages featuring Harold Bloom and Camille Paglia. Ultimately, Zampanò makes a point of noticing that it is Karen's psychiatrist Leslie Stern who asks her what Zampanò calls "the only important question": "What do you think it means?" (355) scoffing at the idea of any definitive interpretation outside what meaning Karen finds in what has happened to her and her family. There are an abundance of interpretations of the house and Karen's experience, by Zampanò, by the hundreds of writers he cites, and by real-world critiques, but those criticisms are brushed aside in favor of the experience itself, of the personal meaning to Karen.

Karen's psychiatrist's encouragement for her to find what her experiences with the house meant to her intersects with Navidson and his obsession with "Delilah," the starving girl he photographed in a picture that would make his career. The many interpretations, discussions, and have turned the very real starving girl into merely an object for interpretation, or worse, an object made only to foster Navidson's own success. This risk of losing the true human value of the girl portrayed in the photograph is comparable to the entire act of creating a critical interpretation of *House of Leaves* in itself, as we are also left to consider the consequences of our own interpretation. The girl is "just the photo," just made into a thing. As interpreters of *House of Leaves* (or any text, for that matter), we run the risk of turning works of art into merely structure or into bigger parts of a theory. To actually "feel" for the story, to experience its narrative (s), to be the singular reader, is to treat the girl as more than a photo, a thing to be analyzed and deconstructed. But in the postmodern age, with a novel that contains faux-analyses from figures such as Jacques Derrida and Harold Bloom, is such a dissonance even possible? Criticism, intertextuality, approaches within the context of countless theoretical frameworks; all these are inevitable. Yet *House of Leaves* is both a celebration of interpretation, a labyrinth of criticism threatening to collapse in on itself, and a warning against it, a reminder to find a way out of the house, to not treat the novel as merely a photograph to be interpreted and overanalyzed but an emotionally and mentally enriching experience all its own.

Throughout the academic criticism of *House of Leaves*, including Zampanò's writings, the criticism he cites, and works published in the real world, one theme that seems to persevere is the idea that the house in *House of Leaves* (and perhaps the novel itself) represents "nothing". This is not to say that it has no meaning, rather that it literally represents

nothingness, that it represents an absence. Early in the novel Will Navidson is quoted by Zampanò: “And if one day you find yourself passing by that house, don’t stop, don’t slow down, just keep going. There’s nothing there. Beware” (4). This can be taken as either a simple warning or a literal description of the house as nothingness. Later, during one of the novel’s most typographically chaotic moments (in the aforementioned Exploration #4), footnote 144 (119) attempts over dozens of pages to list everything *not* in the house inside a box (outlined blue, like the word house in the novel) in the middle of the page, words repeated on the opposite page in reverse. The box eventually becomes filled in with blackness, before even the lining of the box is erased and only an absent square bereft of text or color remains.

This concept of nothingness comes naturally to *House of Leaves* simply by nature; the novel is built upon layers of non-existence. To Johnny Truant (and perhaps Zampanò) the Navidsons, their house, and the many texts on the subject Zampanò cites do not exist; the people interviewed in “What Some Have Thought” and certain cited authors may exist, but were never truly asked about *The Navidson Record*. To us, Johnny Truant does not truly exist either; he is to us as the Navidsons are to him. At the heart of it all is the house itself, which despite its impossibility exists regardless (within the Navidson’s own diegesis, that is.). Yet despite the nonexistent and ontologically unclear nature of *House of Leaves’* narratives, signs of characters’ fictionality are nonetheless jarring as they break through the reality of the novel’s narratives and the lives of those characters. Throughout *House of Leaves* readers may spot rare continuity errors between narratives; signs of Zampanò’s mistakes, signs which point towards the Navidson’s existence indeed being entirely Zampanò’s creation. For instance, there are a number of occasions where Zampanò writes about certain actions or emotions of one of the

characters, usually Will Navidson, which he could not possibly have known from watching *The Navidson Record* or any of its related films, interviews, and criticisms. For example, while discussing the aforementioned “Haven-Slocum Theory,” Zampanò describes Navidson’s viewing of the tape of Wax kissing Karen: “He viewed the scene twice, once at regular speed, the second time on fast forward, and then moved on to the rest of the footage without saying a word” (397). Yet there’s no indication that Will’s viewings of the tapes are in the actual film of *The Navidson Record*, nor are they tied to any interview or other cited source. On other occasions we may see what may otherwise be interpreted as typos on Danielewski’s part, as in one example where he slips into first person: “He might have spent all night drinking had exhaustion not caught up with me” (320). Danielewski has gone on record as saying there are no “unintentional typos” in *House of Leaves*, so this may be interpreted as Zampanò’s mistake, perhaps referencing his own life rather than the Navidson’s. Finally, in Part C of Appendix 1, “...and Pieces,” we see one of the novel’s most blatant pieces of evidence for the Navidson’s definitive fictionality: photos of pieces of Zampanò’s early work on drafting “House of Leaves” show alternate narratives, including an extremely gruesome ending for the Navidson children without Tom there to save them:

“Perhaps I will alter the whole thing. Kill both children...Chad scrambling to escape, almost making it to the front door where Karen waits, until a corner in the foyer suddenly leaps forward and hews the boy in half. At the same time Navidson, by the kitchen, reaches for Daisy, only to arrive a fraction of a second too late, his fingers finding air, his eyes scratching after Daisy as she falls to her death. Let both parents

experience that. Let their narcissism find a new subject to wither by. Douse them in infanticide. Drown them in blood” (552).

After reading about the Navidson’s story in the novel, this passage is incredibly unsettling not merely because of its graphic nature but because the illusion that the Navidsons are anything but Zampanò’s creation is entirely broken. Though the book on the surface makes no secret of *The Navidson Record* and by proxy the Navidson’s own non-existence on the level of Johnny Truant’s diegesis, these particular collage feels nonetheless revelatory in its demonstration of Zampanò’s control over the Navidson’s lives. The complications of fictionality in *House of Leaves* go further still; eventually Truant begins to doubt his own existence and detect a higher creator who one might assume would be Danielewski:

“More and more often, I’ve been overcome by the strangest feeling that I’ve gotten it all turned around, by which I mean to say—to state the not-so-obvious—without it I would perish...this terrible sense of relatedness to Zampanò’s work implies something that just can’t be, namely that that this thing has created me; not me onto it, but now it unto me, where I am nothing more than the matter of some other voice, intruding through the folds of what even now lies there agape, possessing me with histories I should never recognize as my own; inventing me; defining me; directing me until finally every association I can claim as my own...is relegated to nothing; forcing me to face the most terrible suspicion of all, that all of this has just been made up and what’s worse, not made up by me or even for that matter Zampanò. Though by whom I have no idea” (326)



It is Johnny Truant, not Will Navidson, that actually has a sense of his own fictionality, despite the fact that the world of *The Navidson Record* is from our perspective an even further fictional diegesis from Truant's. Finally, In *The Whalestoe Letters*, as pointed out by Katherine Hayles, a coding algorithm suggested by Johnny's mother which uses the first letter of each word allows one to decode a message from our writings that spells out the sentence "My dear Zampanò who did you lose?" (615) allowing for the possibility that she is the true writer-creator of Zampanò and/or Johnny Truant and their stories. (Hayles 802) The ontological questions of creator and created as it pertains to *House of Leaves* are left complex and unresolved. Ultimately, each of these instances highlight the critical paradox that is *House of Leaves*; it is a piece of criticism of a non-existent source, critique without an original object to critique. All that exists of *The Navidson Record* lies within the critique that is "House of Leaves" itself.

Given that it has only been seventeen years since it was first published, in terms of quantity criticism of *House of Leaves* in the real world is at best an extremely miniscule fraction of the novel's implied or directly cited texts exploring *The Navidson Record* and related events. While criticism of *House of Leaves* will certainly never reach the Shakespearean proportions of criticism on *The Navidson Record*, there are nonetheless more than enough for one to examine and place within the labyrinth of *House of Leaves*' preexisting fabricated criticism. As previously mentioned, some pieces of criticism expand on viewpoints already included or explored at least partially within the novel, such as looking at the novel through a Freudian or Derridaen framework. The aforementioned "What Has Made Me?: Locating Mother in the Textual Labyrinth of Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*" by Katherine Cox is one of the few pieces of criticism to focus mainly on Johnny Truant rather than the Navidsons, and examines his

relationship with his psychotic mother Pelafina as outlined in *The Whalestoe Letters*. With only a few references to the Navidsons throughout Cox's text, one might surmise that Zampanò has already delved well into the familial ties of the Navidsons in his "House of Leaves," and thus has left only Truant ripe for more original interpretation. Yet even Cox's text remains somewhat derivative, delving into the book's involvement of the Minotaur and Zampanò's inclusion of background information on not only the minotaur but also myths surrounding Egyptian and Cretan labyrinths. Cox states that "the drama and mythological grandeur of the mother and son relationship is expressed in Pelafina's writing as she elevates Truant to the status of deity and likens herself to the mother of Christ: 'I remain your only Mary' (611) (Cox 10-11). Evidently, Pelafina's letters raise Truant to a figure of mythical status, like the minotaur himself. This correlates with Hayles' discovery that the "particularly disturbing coincidence" (Danielewski 336) Truant discovers to is likely that "the Minotaur" is an anagram for "O Im he Truant" (Hayles 798). Cox forms original ideas tying together Truant and his relationship with his mother to such myths; yet these conclusions could not be drawn if not for the extensive mythology already contained within the book by Zampanò/Danielewski. The work ties two disparate parts of the novel together (in a way Danielewski likely intended), but the mythology surrounding labyrinths and the Minotaur are already within *House of Leaves*. Ergo, Cox's text can only build upon what criticism and mythology Danielewski has already created, only become a larger part of the labyrinth of criticism within *House of Leaves*.

Katherine Hayles has offered her own interpretations of *House of Leaves* in "Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*," a work which integrates her own ideas of technotexts and hypertexts and other existing frameworks such as Jay Bolter and Richard

Grusin's concept of Remediation to *House of Leaves*. These ideas were only beginning to develop at the time *House of Leaves* was published; *Remediation: Understanding New Media* was published only two years earlier. Had they at the time enjoyed the exposure they have today, it's likely they would have been more significantly incorporated by Zampanò/Danielewski into the novel's critical sphere. Perhaps we would have even seen a Katherine Hayles footnote or quote placed by Zampanò into the text. In her text, Hayles says of *House of Leaves* that "This is a technotext so energetic, labyrinthine, and impossible to command that we will not be able to leave it alone because it will not leave us alone. It grabs us, sucks out our center, and gives us back to ourselves through multiple remediations, transforming us in the process" (802). In part, *House of Leaves'* usage of remediation is quite apparent to anyone familiar with the term; in what Hayles calls a "frenzy of remediation," Zampanò's writings and the fabricated critiques he cites all remediate and interpret the original moment, and the novel as a whole is remediating film in its analysis and description of *The Davidson Record* and related materials. Hayles defines a technotext as a work with "a heightened sense of their [own] materiality," (794) a description which fits *House of Leaves* so well it might as well have been *the* work that coined the term (and indeed it has been one of Hayles' most prominent examples). This creates an interesting paradox given the novel's focus on nothingness; it is both fixated on itself as an object and intent on representing absence of any object at the same time. In addition, a hypertext, a text which has "multiple forking paths" (795) can be said in part to apply to *House of Leaves* primarily through its unusual typography, often forcing the reader to zip around the page to read the complete text (or one can choose to skip around). Hayles' analysis overall stands as one of the more original pieces of real-world

criticism on *House of Leaves*, partly due to its reliance on more contemporary criticism and theoretical frameworks which *House of Leaves* itself has helped demonstrate and expand.

Merely by the nature of its two primary narratives, *House of Leaves* lies firmly in the category of metafiction. However, the novel's foray into the genre goes even deeper; *House of Leaves*, in its comprehensive inclusion of criticism and labyrinth of interpretation and narrative, includes *itself* within its pages on more than one occasion. This ultimate remediation occurs twice, once in each main narrative. Truant in one entry runs into a band with the lyrics "I live at the end of a Five and a Half Minute Hallway" (512) (referencing the initial prototype of *The Davidson Record*) and who later ask Johnny Truant about himself, or at least the himself that is a character in *House of Leaves*. Though disarming to many readers, the journal entry dates show that this incident takes place in August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1999, nearly a year after both the next entry and the previous one, though the following two entries take place further out of order on October 31, 1998, the same date as the foreword, and these entries are also Truant's last. Truant assumedly gets the novel *House of Leaves* published (his own entries included, as in the real world) in his own world "off-screen" during this time. Though even this may not be the truth; his next entry states "No idea what to make of those last few entries either...what's invented what's remembered what's forgotten what's written what's found what's lost what's done?" (515). While disarming to the reader who doesn't notice the change in dates, this act of publishing the novel is not only possible but expected for Truant, who had vowed to "make it only a book" (327). Whether his journal entries were a fabricated vision or actual events from the future, the interpretation remains unchanged; and in *House of Leaves*, the matter of fictionality and truth is always more complicated than it seems.

In a more interesting turn of events, at the climax of the Navidson's narrative, Will, stuck deep within the labyrinth of the house, burns the pages of the only book he has on hand, *House of Leaves*, for the sole purpose of reading it. (465-467) The text is said to be "736 pages long," (467) the same length as the real *House of Leaves* with the introduction included. For the Navidsons' diegesis, this is by all means impossible; even in a world where all of Zampanò's fabricated criticism exists, the novel could not become part of the original story itself in any logical chronological sense. Katherine Hayles calls *House of Leaves* "an artifact fashioned to consume the reader even as the reader consumes it" (802) and indeed the book has collapsed on itself. It has consumed Johnny Truant, Zampanò, and many of us as readers, and as Navidson reads and burns, he consumes the novel as he is simultaneously consumed by it. As a man who only exists within that book (both in Truant's diegesis and ours), he is also consuming himself and his creator Zampanò, in an impossible loop of infinite remediation.

Ultimately, what *House of Leaves* and its labyrinth of criticism and reflexivity point towards is the appropriately postmodernist assertion that no single interpretation can be considered definitive. Even the novel's most basic narrative ideas of who or what is real and of who is created by whom are entirely up for interpretation, to say nothing of beginning to interpret the novel through familiar frameworks of academic scholarship and criticism. However, *House of Leaves* functions not only as a target for criticism or a source of literary criticism of itself but as a satire of academic scholarship as a whole. By its very nature, each bit of criticism of *House of Leaves* carries some extra measure of skepticism from the reader that the author must overcome. *House of Leaves* does not render literary criticism meaningless or redundant, even that which relies heavily on scholarship already present within the text. But

the novel's relationship with literary criticism represents an evolution in the relationship between academia and literature; thanks to the novel's unique pre-empting and inclusion of literary criticism, a dialogue between the two is already initiated before the first piece of scholarship is published. Scholars may discover new interpretations, new paths through the labyrinth of *House of Leaves*, but they remain within that labyrinth nonetheless, bound to the novel's relationship with scholarship, a relationship which at the same time makes the creation of further academic scholarship for *House of Leaves* all the more compelling.

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