

RESCUING INTERPRETATION WITH MARK DANIELEWSKI: THE GENRE OF SCHOLARSHIP IN *HOUSE OF LEAVES*

STEVEN BELLETTO, LAFAYETTE COLLEGE

To believe the buzz about Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) is to believe that it reinvigorated the novel, a genre threatened by the proliferation of digital media. The buzz first became audible when Danielewski circulated initial versions on the internet; starting in 2000, when Pantheon printed the "2nd Edition," literati applauded, meticulous fans posted queries and tentative theories to the message boards on www.houseofleaves.com, and reviewers compared Danielewski to the likes of Thomas Pynchon and David Foster Wallace.¹ With multiple fonts and different colored inks, unconventional printing that forces readers to physically turn the book to varying degrees, hundreds of footnotes, complex appendices including obituaries, collages, photographs of paintings, dioramas and graphic novels, and an index, *House of Leaves* is a 709-page ride through lexical playfields that would leave many readers exhilarated if ultimately perplexed. Given such complexity, a remark Danielewski made in a 2003 interview invites consideration: "I have yet to hear an interpretation of *House*

¹ In the introduction to their 2003 interview with Danielewski, for example, Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory write that *House of Leaves* is a "stunning, mind-and-genre expanding work that is not only arguably the most impressive debut since Thomas Pynchon's *V.* nearly forty years ago but that itself renders any such commentary about the irrelevance and obsolescence of the novel instantly irrelevant and obsolete . . . [it] simply knocks your socks off with its vast scope, erudition, formal inventiveness, and sheer story-telling skills, while also opening up whole new areas of the novel as an art form" (99).

of *Leaves* that I had not anticipated. I have yet to be surprised, but I'm hoping" (106). Part of the reason Danielewski could make so confident a claim about so complicated a novel is that the text is about interpretation—its unusual formal features, for instance, function to stretch the representational power of the printed word so that the central subject becomes acts of interpretation themselves. The novel toys with various kinds of interpretation, from intuitive, emotional responses to measured, rational analyses, none of which have final authority, a situation that encourages readers to adjust what they consider to be legitimate meaning.

I. Scholarship in the Novel

House of Leaves demonstrates an interest in interpretation on its title page, which frames the novel as a scholarly enterprise: "Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* / by Zampanò / with introduction and notes by / Johnny Truant." Such a title page immediately gives the book an academic cast and suggests the important role scholarship will have; in this interest, *House of Leaves* is perhaps only the most elaborate example of a sub-genre of novel that flouts generic conventions by appropriating the trappings of academic scholarship. To find novels that use footnotes, for example, one could look to work as early as Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759) or Walter Scott's historical novels of the early nineteenth century, but it was in the twentieth century that the use of academic conventions came into more widespread use by those writing innovative fiction. There are countless examples of twentieth century fiction coming complete with footnotes [one thinks, for instance, of Jorge Luis Borges's "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," which is a key intertext for Danielewski, R.M. Koster's *The Dissertation* (1975), or David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996)].² But the book that might come immediately to mind is Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), a novel which takes the form of footnoted commentary on a lengthy poem, and in so doing challenges the claims to truth that academic commentary often makes. In *Pale Fire*, questions about the annotator's interpretations overtake what readers first presume is the real meaning of the poem so that readers are left wondering what kinds of interpretation constitute legitimate meaning.³

² See McHale, 193.

³ The other major formal feature *House of Leaves* shares with *Pale Fire* is an index. As in *Pale Fire*, *House of Leaves*'s index includes both actual references to people and places and joking references; in the case of Danielewski's novel, such joking references include parts of speech like "so" and "for," which, when traced through the novel, may help readers understand its intricate designs.

A more recent example of a novel that appropriates formal characteristics of scholarship is Junot Díaz's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), which tells the story of Oscar's family and—through footnotes—the history of the Dominican Republic and of Dominicans in the United States. Although in the footnotes Díaz is generally providing accurate historical information, their tone and style is aggressively subjective and idiosyncratic [Rafael Trujillo, for example, is described as “our Sauron, our Arawn, our Dark-seid, our Once and Future Dictator, a personaje so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up” (2)]. Footnotes like these rouse a certain skepticism—as do the increasingly outlandish interpretations in *Pale Fire*—because the academy has established discursive rules for what can count as valid, rules that these notes bend or ignore (I return to this idea at length in part IV).

Writing in this tradition, Danielewski creates a novel in which meaning is always tied to various kinds of interpretation, and in which scholarly interpretation gets special consideration because of its self-awareness. The dozens of scholarly voices in *House of Leaves* supplement the three principal writers who shape the narrative: Zampanò, a mysterious and intellectually wide-ranging man in his eighties, Johnny Truant, a twenty-something tattoo artist's assistant who edits Zampanò's dense manuscript, and Johnny's mother, Pelafina Lièvre, who writes her son fevered letters from a mental institution. (A fourth, anonymous presence known simply as “The Editors” has apparently arranged all this material into the edition that readers hold in their hands.) Like any good Modernist novel, then, *House of Leaves* suggests that what we sometimes imagine is objective reality is in fact mediated and perspectival (an idea vividly demonstrated, for example, in *The Sound and the Fury*, in which the separate tales of the Compson brothers, together with a narrative focalized through Dilsey, gives us a coherent picture of what is “really” going on). But *House of Leaves* starts to look more like a good postmodernist novel, by contrast, when it refuses such a coherent picture, and leaves readers disconcerted when they learn that the reality being described—a kind of haunted house—is fundamentally indescribable. As such, the real world of *House of Leaves* exists *only* in mediation and remedia-

Although one could spend quite a bit of time piecing together how the sometimes-odd entries in the index help make meaning in and for the novel, for the purpose of this essay, it is sufficient to say that in *House of Leaves*, the index is no more a reliable repository of knowledge than any of the numerous experts invoked in the main body of the text.

tion.⁴ The appropriation of scholarly discourse, both formally and conceptually, allows Danielewski to write a novel about interpretation, his house of leaves is a house of interpretation that does not exist in spite of these competing claims to meaning but because of them.

Johnny Truant's introduction (presented, as his footnotes are, in Courier font), offers the first terms with which readers might understand the novel. Johnny has spent the last few years in a fog of LA sex and drugs, and he tells the story of discovering Zampanò's manuscript, called *The Navidson Record*, in Zampanò's musty, sealed-from-the-inside apartment after his death. Johnny finds the manuscript on various sorts of paper strewn around the apartment, and it is he who arranges these words and types them for our consumption:

Endless snarls of words, sometimes twisting into meaning, sometimes into nothing at all, frequently breaking apart, always branching off into other pieces I'd come across later—on old napkins, the tattered edges of an envelope, once even on the back of a postage stamp; everything and anything but empty; each fragment completely covered with the creep of years and years of ink pronouncements; layered, crossed out, amended; handwritten, typed; legible, illegible; impenetrable, lucid; torn, stained, scotch taped, some bits crisp and clean, others faded, burnt or folded and refolded so many times the creases have obliterated whole passages of god knows what—sense? truth? deceit? (xvii).

We learn in the introduction that if Johnny has taken these sometimes-illegible fragments and branching lines of inky thought and edited them into the edition that we, the readers of *House of Leaves*, have before us, then we know that whatever Zampanò's own preoccupations and interpretations, the physical words in our possession have already been interpreted by Johnny.⁵ As this passage suggests, *House of Leaves* also has an abiding interest in absence and the way that absence becomes presence through interpretive acts—Zampanò's words are

⁴ See Hayles.

⁵ Johnny has in fact gone a step further than Borges's Pierre Menard, who only copies Cervantes's words verbatim, for he admits to changing Zampanò's words when it suits him, something which further complicates what one might take to be the novel's ground floor. The most first and obvious example is his discussion of changing Zampanò's mention of a broken "heater" in the Navidson house to a broken "water heater," because, as Johnny explains, he had "no fucking hot water" in his apartment (12).

indeed “everything and anything but empty,” but they are so partly because Johnny has invested so much of himself into their interpretation; his editing and engagement animates the “snarls of words” in tandem with his own bizarre history, which is revealed in his supplementary footnotes.

If Johnny’s notes are quasi-academic, emotional attempts to make sense of words by turns illegible, impenetrable, and obliterated, Zampanò’s manuscript is a comparatively even-tempered, pedantic treatment of its subject, a documentary film also called *The Navidson Record*.⁶ Given that we have learned in Johnny’s introduction that Zampanò has been blind since well before *The Navidson Record* appeared, readers are especially alert to the interpretive problem being staged—how could a blind man describe in such detail what he has never seen? This question is compounded by another piece of information offered before we reach Zampanò’s manuscript:

as I fast discovered, Zampanò’s entire project is about a film which doesn’t even exist. You can look, I have, but no matter how long you search you will never find The Navidson Record in theaters or video stores. Furthermore, most of what’s said by famous people has been made up. I tried contacting all of them. Those that took the time to respond told me they had never heard of Will Navidson let alone Zampanò. (xix-xx)⁷

In its mixing of fictional and real worlds, this passage confirms Brian McHale’s description of the postmodern “dominant”—an interest in ontological over epistemological questions. Whereas hallmarks of modernism are concerned with the epistemological (think *The Sound and the Fury*; McHale’s example is *Absalom, Absalom!*), postmodern fiction is for McHale characterized by “strategies for foregrounding ontological issues”:

What is a world?; What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? (McHale 10)

⁶ To avoid confusion, Jessica Pressman represents the film as “The Navidson Record” and the narrative about the film as *The Navidson Record*—but because it is significant that the narrative cannot be extricated from the film and vice versa, I will use italics to refer to both.

⁷ As Mark Hansen points out, there is a section, ostensibly supplied by The Editors, called “contrary evidence,” which suggests that *The Navidson Record* could exist in the world of the novel because there are other aesthetic forms that engage the film such as a graphic novel, a painting, and even Polaroid pictures. Note also that in the course of an interview with Danielewski, McCaffery refers to “Zampanò’s novel,” and Danielewski does not correct him (130).

As I will explain, the question of when boundaries between worlds are violated permeates *House of Leaves*, both in the literal sense (the house's supernatural dimension) and in the textual sense, which merge in the figure of Zampanò. For example, the question of how he could be physically capable of describing and interpreting a film becomes less urgent if that film does not exist in the real world of the novel. If *The Navidson Record* does not exist, then we wonder if our reality is the same as Johnny's reality, a question compounded by those moments when Johnny comes across the very edition of *House of Leaves* that he himself has edited, one that shares almost the same title page as the volume we are reading. As readers familiar with the tendencies of postmodern fiction might expect, such questions are never fully resolved, but it is important that they are staged in ways uncommon even in recent experimental fiction. The novel in fact extends the logic evident in a range of postmodern fiction to thematize its own status in our real world, a status cemented not by the book itself, but by the various built-in—and extrinsic—interpretations of the novel.

II. House of Leaves / House of Ontology

The most fertile metaphor on which these questions of reality and interpretation turn is the house that stands at the center of *The Navidson Record*. As Zampanò explains, Will Navidson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist, has set out to make a quiet documentary about moving into a house in rural Virginia with his “longtime companion,” Karen Green, and their two children, Chad and Daisy (10). Navidson, equipped with Hi 8 video cameras set up in various rooms of the house, “hunts for moments, pearls of particular” so that he might capture the dynamics of a sometimes-strained family trying to create a new home (10).

But the documentary takes an unexpected turn when Navidson discovers that the house has one unsettling feature: it is larger on the inside than on the outside. As Navidson becomes increasingly interested in this fact *because it is inexplicable*, it comes to dominate not only *The Navidson Record*, but also Zampanò's commentary on the film. As Zampanò works to unpack the film, both the house and the manuscript are shown, as Johnny says, “sometimes twisting into meaning, sometimes into nothing at all.” The discovery of the house's dimensions represents a crack in the foundation of reality that even postmodern novelists generally assume: e.g. gravity exists, an object's inner dimensions cannot exceed its outer dimensions. The novel is not an example of magic realism or of other genres in which impossible things

happen—the pervasiveness of academic scholarship suggests that this is a world bound by the same rules as our own—and yet the house pointedly defies explanation. Initially, this seems merely a way for Danielewski to have fun with conventional ways of knowing, relying as they do on concrete, empirical systems of measurement, which the house will be shown to frustrate at every turn. But as the documentary (and Zampanò's commentary) become about the house rather than about the people living in the house, its profound depths become more insistent, if not necessarily clearer. Zampanò describes Navidson's first attempts to understand the house:

The interior of the house exceeds the exterior not by 1/4" but by 5/16". No matter how many legal pads, napkins, or newspaper margins they fill with notes or equations, they [Will and his brother Tom] cannot account for that fraction. One incontrovertible fact stands in their way: the exterior measurement *must* equal the internal measurement. Physics depends on a universe infinitely centered on an equal sign. . . . The problem must lie with their measuring techniques or with some unseen mitigating factor: air temperature, mis-calibrated instruments, warped floors, something, anything. (32)

The house is endlessly interpretable because it is beyond the bounds of what and how we know the physical world. Its nature does not square with the other known, physical facts of the universe, and this difference is itself a source of the metaphysical angst that would be generated by any supernatural encounter. As Mark Hansen has put it, "*House of Leaves* is a realist novel about an object that, for precise technical reasons, cannot belong to the 'reality' we inhabit as embodied beings" (607). If we agree with Navidson that the physical world "*must*" behave in certain ways, then the house's existence is suggestive because it allows Danielewski to stage interpretive problems that cannot be resolved by determining that an instrument has been mis-calibrated or a floor warped, for such a determination would only confirm the authority of the very circumscribed reality that the existence of the house challenges.

When the Navidson brothers fail to see how the logic of the house jibes with known reality, Will brings in an emblem of incontrovertible facts: Billy Reston, an engineering professor at UVA who comes armed with a "Stanley Beacon level and a laser distance meter" (38). As is expected by this point in the novel, even Reston's expert measurements refuse to corroborate what he knows of the physical laws of the universe, and as Navidson explores the house further, he finds that it has a full-blown supernatural dimension: a door that opens onto a

labyrinthine hallway complete with ever-shifting chambers, dark stairs that lead down miles into the earth, and possibly even a minotaur-like monster.

The house's "fantastic dimensions" (418) demonstrate an important difference between *House of Leaves* and a novel already mentioned, Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. In the latter novel, Charles Kinbote—like Johnny, mentally unstable but erudite in his own way, disposed to discussing his sexual adventures in footnotes—writes novel-length annotations to a poem called "Pale Fire," written by Nabokov's invented poet John Shade. *Pale Fire* differs from *House of Leaves*, however, because readers are provided the text of Shade's poem so that they may judge for themselves just how detached from the original Kinbote's interpretations and observations are. In *House of Leaves*, by contrast, there is no original. The novel at first encourages the sense that a fantastic object existing in the real world would so disconcert us that all systems of order would collapse, but it ends up emphasizing that these systems depend for their coherence on some referent: the house either means everything or it means nothing, but readers have no way of knowing because the standards by which we might judge the reasonableness of a given interpretation are absent. In *Pale Fire*, we have read Shade's poem and thus have a range of acceptable interpretations which mark Kinbote's interpretations as unacceptable relative to the poem itself; in *House of Leaves*, we have only interpretation upon interpretation, and thus have no way of knowing if some are more compelling than others.

Thus when Mark Hansen writes of *House of Leaves* that "the novel's true protagonist is the figure of interpretation" (602), he is drawing attention to the way that it resists definitive interpretation by courting the possibility that all interpretation is potentially reasonable. This idea is a corollary to what N. Katherine Hayles has argued about the novel; in a post- postmodern world in which it would seem naive to claim a coherent subject, Danielewski "has found a way to subvert and have his subject at the same time" (779). For Hayles, Danielewski's subject (the house/book) can only be known to readers as a "palimpsest, emerging not behind but through the inscriptions that bring the book into being . . . [*House of Leaves*] recuperates the vitality of the novel as a genre by recovering, through the process of remediation, subjectivities coherent enough to become the foci of the sustained narration that remains the hallmark of the print novel" (779-781). Hayles rightly notes Danielewski's canny stance toward his subject, and I would add that this canniness is profoundly informed by work in contemporary literary theory and scholarship, and so "the novel as a genre" Hayles

speaks about becomes recuperated in part by incorporating and extending some key insights such work has offered.

III. Scholarly Interpretation in/on *House of Leaves*

Danielewski's project is in fact more subtle than invoking the quiddities of the scholarly enterprise mainly to mock them because the terms of this enterprise become the ideal staging ground for thinking about how the rules of interpretation dictate its potential to create meaning. Zampanò's discussion of *The Navidson Record* is situated in and informed by countless academic treatments from a range of disciplines; as far as he is concerned, *The Navidson Record* comes to us complete with a scholarly archive rivaling anything written by Melville or Shakespeare:

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. (6-7)

Just as *The Navidson Record* is coming to us already interpreted by Zampanò, the house cannot be extricated from the growing body of scholarship—largely interpretations and counter-interpretations—that exist. This situation leaves real-life professors of English or cultural studies in a bit of a bind because much of the lit crit work has already been done for us. Fans of poststructuralism, for example, might conceive of the house as having a center that is not a center, so perhaps a judicious use of Derrida would be helpful when writing an essay on *House of Leaves* for a journal like *Genre*. But Zampanò has already provided a footnote, “strictly as an aside,” that quotes liberally and in French from “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences” (111-112).⁸ For those readers who may not have previously encountered Derridean thought, *House of Leaves* provides a gloss on itself, so one might bring in the concept of, say, the play of structure into a discussion of the novel without ever having to leave the novel. For those who have already waded through Derrida's labyrinthine prose, it would seem a given that the nature of the house would call to mind those con-

⁸ Although this hasn't stopped real-life critics from invoking Derrida when writing about *House of Leaves*—Will Slocombe's essay, for example, is titled “The House That Jacques Built.” See also Little.

cepts which have made Derrida consequential to literary and cultural critics. In this way, then, *House of Leaves* offers numerous pre-emptive readings; that is, it folds in various interpretive acts that would make sense to those coming to the novel from differing theoretical perspectives.

Those fresh from their graduate program's intro to theory seminar, for example, might think of the house's odd features as uncanny, so perhaps Heidegger's thoughts on the *unheimlich*—which shocks our sense of being so that, as he writes, “everyday familiarity collapses”—could illuminate the dark corners of the infinite hallway. But again Danielewski has beaten us to the punch, and this concept too is present in a German passage from *Sein und Zeit*, quoted by Zampanò and offered in translation thanks to Johnny's efforts (24-25). In having Zampanò anticipate such theory moves, the novel does not simply mock them. Although Johnny finds it mere coincidence that his “state of mind” should be aligned with “a few arcane sentences on existence penned by a former Nazi tweaking on who knows what” (25), Heidegger's theory of the uncanny could indeed help account both for just such an apparent “coincidence” and for an impossible object like the house.⁹

Because Zampanò introduces such theories to help interpret a likely-non-existent film about an inexplicable house, it is tempting to agree with Will Slocombe's statement about *House of Leaves*: “Paradoxically, because [the novel] has nothing to say, it may say a lot about nothingness itself” (106). But it is not of course that the novel has “nothing to say”—such a stance would mean a Zen-like abstention from writing novels at all, or at least something on the order of the T'ang Dynasty poet Han Shan writing his poetry on remote cliff faces for no one to read—but rather that Danielewski notices that even nothingness depends on interpretation.

Unlike Han Shan, Danielewski is writing for an audience—not only those who go to the novel for its first-person accounts of supernatural horror, but also those (probably those connected somehow to the academy, whether students or teachers) who might be at least passingly familiar with trends in recent literary theory, with its own complex debates about how and when an interpretation can be said to generate meaning. In navigating a novel that includes lengthy passages not only from Derrida and Heidegger, but also that quotes Roland Barthes and invents quotations from the likes of Harold Bloom, Andrew Ross, and

⁹ Later in the novel, when Navidson's companion, Karen Green, interviews Harold Bloom, he invokes the Freudian concept of *unheimlich* to offer an interpretation of the house (358-9).

Camille Paglia, one can hardly ignore the importance of contemporary literary and cultural studies. *House of Leaves* thus poaches—to poach Brian McHale’s phrase—the genre of scholarship to remind us of the centrality interpretation has had to the academy. But Danielewski places these interpretations in a world in which the rules of acceptable or reasonable or illuminating interpretation are not clear, so to assume that, for example, a Derridean reading could seem a given when trying to understand *House of Leaves* is highly problematic.

On the first page of his manuscript, Zampanò cautions us that the Navidson house, “like Melville’s behemoth, remains resistant to summation”—but the novel as a whole suggests that unlike *Moby-Dick*, which has the white whale to be pursued, the “there” in *House of Leaves* is the sum of the commentaries in the novel (3). For Zampanò at least, this is not a problem because, like a cartoon academic, interpreting the whale is more interesting than the whale itself: “Though many continue to devote substantial time and energy to the antimonies of fact or fiction, representation or artifice, document or prank, as of late the more interesting material dwells exclusively on the interpretation of events within the film” (3). While the adverb “exclusively” may be overstating the case, the point is that we all interpret the world all the time, and *House of Leaves*—from the house itself to the film about the house to the commentary about the film to the commentary about the commentary—enacts and underscores the notion that we are always interpreting “events.”

This is what I think Danielewski meant when he directed readers’ attention to the acts of interpretation within the novel; while reading *House of Leaves*, he said,

Pretty soon you begin to notice that at every level in the novel some act of interpretation is going on. The question is, why? Well, there are many reasons, but the most important one is that everything we encounter involves an act of interpretation on our part. . . . We believe that our memories keep us in direct touch with what has happened. But memory never puts us in touch with anything directly; it’s always interpretive, reductive, a complicated compression of information. In *House of Leaves* you’re always encountering texts where some kind of intrusion’s taking place. The reason? No one—repeat no one—is ever presented with the sacred truth, in books or in life. And so we must be brave and accept how often we make decisions without knowing everything. (McCaffery 121)

The interpretations in the novel, then, are not pointing to some behemoth that will be endlessly pursued, but are rather themselves the source the book’s vitality, if not reality. Zampanò’s remark that the “more interesting material” are the commentaries prefigures a quotation that appears at the end of the novel, in Appendix II (F) “Various Quotes”: “A professor’s view: ‘It’s the commentaries

on Shakespeare that matter, not Shakespeare.’ –Anton Chekhov, *Notebooks*” (646). We ought to take this as something more than a gentle poking fun of academics who can’t see Shakespeare for *Shakespeare Quarterly*; instead, it alludes to the ways the novel interrogates what counts as acceptable in academic interpretation.

IV. Zampanò and Acceptable Interpretation

Zampanò’s recounting of *The Navidson Record* evinces a fraught relationship with that implacable edifice called the Ivory Tower: “To date,” writes Johnny, “I have counted over two hundred rejection letters from various literary journals, publishing houses, even a few words of discouragement from prominent professors in east coast universities” (20). Given Zampanò’s erudition and evident mastery of the vast archive on *The Navidson Record* specifically and Western letters generally [we learn from an acquaintance of Zampanò’s that he “possessed a pretty uncanny ability to recite verbatim almost anything he’d read, and let me tell you, he’d read alot. Incredible character” (248)], it may seem surprising that his work should be so roundly dismissed—until, of course, we remember that it is most likely that *The Navidson Record* does not exist. Assuming this is the case, then it would make sense that a narrative claiming to be a critical work and not a fictional one would not meet standards of scholarship, even broadly conceived. When it comes to Zampanò’s relationship to the academy, at issue is how we measure what is acceptable.

In Stanley Fish’s *Is There A Text in this Class?*, one chapter asks “What Makes Interpretation Acceptable?”; Fish’s answer is essentially: agreement. Following Wayne Booth’s question, “Are we *right* to rule out at least some readings?”, Fish explains what he sees as the workings of scholarly interpretation:

If, as I have argued, the text is always a function of interpretation, then the text cannot be the location of the core of agreement by means of which we reject interpretations. We seem to be at an impasse: on the one hand there would seem to be no basis for labeling an interpretation unacceptable, but on the other we do it all the time.

This, however, is an impasse only if one assumes that the activity of interpretation is itself unconstrained; but in fact the shape of that activity is determined by the literary institution which at any one time will authorize only a finite number of interpretative strategies. Thus, while there is no core of agreement *in* the text, there is a core of agreement (although one subject to change) concerning the ways of *producing* the text. Nowhere is this set of acceptable ways written down, but it is a part of everyone’s knowledge of what it means to be operating within the literary institution as it is now constituted. A student of mine recently demonstrated this

knowledge when . . . she confided that she could go into any classroom . . . and win approval for running one of a number of well-defined interpretive routines: she could view the assigned text as an instance of the tension between nature and culture; she could look in the text for evidence of large mythological oppositions; she could argue that the true subject of the text was its own composition . . . She could not, however, at least at Johns Hopkins University today, argue that the text was a prophetic message inspired by the ghost of her Aunt Tilly (342-343)

Fish's point is that while an institution like Hopkins may lay claim to fostering interpretive strategies that are essentially correct or perhaps even objectively true, what counts as acceptable in such a setting is defined by an unwritten set of rules that is not inherently more or less legitimate than others, but is rather dependent on a "core of agreement." One demonstrates her membership in such a community by participating in the core of agreement and subjecting a text only to certain kinds of interpretations, which will in turn be deemed acceptable by other members of the community. Although Fish's book was published in 1980, it would be likewise acceptable today to interpret *The Navidson Record* or *House of Leaves* as enacting the tension between nature and culture, or as really being about its own composition, but it would be unacceptable to interpret it as a prophetic message from a dead relative.

The problem with these standards of acceptability, of course, is that in *House of Leaves*, it may well be acceptable to interpret the house as supernatural as Zampanò does, or *The Navidson Record* as personally prophetic as Truant does. The rules of acceptability that Fish describes are present in *House of Leaves*, but they do not ultimately determine what is or is not acceptable. One might argue, for example, that Zampanò's work is interpretation in its purest form, scholarship without a referent that does not always point to something else, and is therefore most meaningful as interpretative performance. Zampanò's rejection by publishers and professors, then, stems not from his work's lack of quality, but from a differing conceptions of what constitutes acceptable quality.

This idea is illustrated by a response that Johnny uncovers from a woman who represents the interpretive standards of the academy. We learn from Johnny that Zampanò has had a string of hired women read to him from various interpretations and engagements with *The Navidson Record*. One of Johnny's footnotes contains remarks by Maus Fife-Harris, a "UC Irvine PhD candidate in Comp Lit who apparently always objected to the large chunks of narrative Zampanò kept asking her to write down." Fife-Harris's grad student sensibility doesn't allow her to see beyond Zampanò's plot summary:

"I told him all those passages were inappropriate for a critical work, and if he were in my class I'd mark him down for it. But he'd just chuckle and continue. It bothered me a little but the guy wasn't my student and he was blind and old, so why should I care? Still, I did care, so I'd always protest when he asked me to write down a new bit of narrative. 'Why won't you listen to me?' I demanded one time. 'You're writing like a freshman.' And he replied—I remember this very distinctly: 'We always look for doctors but sometimes we're lucky to find a frosh.'" (55)¹⁰

Because Fife-Harris is committed to writing "critical work," for her, too much is summarized, too much given over to Zampanò's narrative. But in this insistence on the certain or correct way to do things, Fife-Harris misses the fact that all of Zampanò's narrative is interpretation, and thus there is no such thing as mere summary in this or any other sort of writing or visual "record." This is something that Johnny comes to realize as he becomes emotionally involved—to the point of obsession and possible psychosis—with Zampanò's writing, that however dispassionate it appears, it is built on his own subjectivity. "You don't need me," Johnny once remarks, "to point out the intensely personal nature of this passage" (48).¹¹ And yet he continues to do so, a repetitive act that again calls into question the norms of interpretive acceptability.

Perusing the arcane nature of the scholarly archive Zampanò includes (or invents) we notice a chorus of voices interested in *The Navidson Record* precisely because of its (failed) attempt to represent nothingness—which means, of course, that the house and film are able to sustain the idiosyncratic readings of critics as diverse as they are vocal. There are dozens of examples of this throughout *House of Leaves*. There are, for instance, the caricatured, winking responses to the house attributed to real-life academics: Harold Bloom reads aloud from his own *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), concluding that "emptiness here is the purported familiar and your house is endlessly familiar, endlessly repetitive" (359). In the same section, Camille Paglia urges us to "Notice only men go into it [the hallway]. Why? Simple: women don't have to. They know there's nothing there

¹⁰ See also 9, fn. 13, in which The Editors direct us to Zampanò's "lengthy narrative descriptions" and Zampanò's later claim that "People always demand experts, though sometimes they are fortunate enough to find a beginner" (329).

¹¹ See also Danielewski's claim in the McCaffery interview that "the footnote format in itself is a lot less interesting to me than the issue of the content of those notes—of who's responsible for creating them and what they tell you about that person—because the footnotes become another lens through which the reader must look at everything" (114).

and can live with that knowledge, but men must find out for sure” (357). In these and other instances, one gets the sense that the house is again the perfect subject for scholarship because it creates scholarship that has no real referent, thereby shifting significance to the interpretations themselves and those who perform them. But what also begins to happen is that readers have no way of judging whether Bloom’s or Paglia’s interpretation is more or less valid—the absence of the house marks an absence of the “core of agreement” Fish describes. *House of Leaves* has countless cores, none of which are privileged; as a result, readers cannot evaluate the interpretations within the novel.

This is why, as Zampanò writes, “some critics believe the house’s mutations reflect the psychology of anyone who enters it”:

Dr. Haugeland asserts that the extraordinary absence of sensory information forces the individual to manufacture his or her own data . . . Ruby Dahl, in her stupendous study of space, calls the house on Ash Tree Lane “a solipsistic heightener,” arguing that “the house, the halls, and the rooms all become the self—collapsing, expanding, tilting, closing, but always in perfect relation to the mental state of the individual” (165)

Insofar as it invites speculation and interpretation, *House of Leaves* is itself a “solipsistic heightener” precisely because it is built on “extraordinary absence”; whatever else the scholarship in *House of Leaves* accomplishes, it does not offer definitive explanations of *The Navidson Record* or the house on Ash Tree Lane. As a metaphor for “extraordinary absence,” the house does indeed stand in “perfect relation” to its varied interpreters—be they film-makers or spelunkers or readers—because it exists to allow these interpretations to be staged without confirming or dismissing their acceptability.

V. Untangling Interpretation and Meaning

When Zampanò provides a partial transcript of Karen Green’s series of interviews about the house, “What Some Have Thought,” we get, in addition to the musings of Bloom and Paglia, Byron Baleworth’s take on the house: “You’ve created a semiotic dilemma. Just as a nasty virus resists the body’s immune system so your symbol—the house—resists interpretation.” Karen responds by asking: “Does that mean it’s meaningless?” (356). Instead of answering, Baleworth invites Karen to dinner. The teasing marriage between meaning and interpretation here informs much of the novel—if something cannot be interpreted in an acceptable way, then perhaps it has no meaning. Because the book prevents even the most seemingly acceptable and persuasive argument from being definitive

or comprehensive, what becomes significant is not the revelation of meaning—determining what the white whale “really means”—but the act of interpretation itself. This displacement of what Jeffrey Nealon calls the “*what* of hermeneutics to the *how*” has in fact been a characteristic of some general trends in literary criticism over the past three or four decades. Nealon writes:

This decisive mutation from the *what* of hermeneutics to the *how*—in shorthand, from revealing meaning to performing readings—doesn’t simply abandon the structural position of “meaning” in the hermeneutic enterprise. Far from fading into the background, the interpretive act here swallows up everything Interrupted, reading-as-interpretation nevertheless continues—and it lives on even more strongly in its new-found assurance that the text will never be totalized. Meaning remains the impossible lure, the absent center, the lack or excess that continues to drive the critical enterprise. (par. 6)

Nealon’s description of this theoretical mutation could likewise account for the critical interest *House of Leaves* has generated. If *House of Leaves* reclaims or reinvigorates the novel as some have argued, it does so by displacing the hermeneutic *what*—as the house swallows up those who enter it and attempt to comprehend it, the novel is swallowed up by interpretive acts. “Textual undecidability,” writes Nealon, “has been very good to [recent] literary criticism”; if the response to *House of Leaves* is any indication, such undecidability can also be very good to the novel.

In this sense, then, one reason why *House of Leaves* has seemed important to a variety of readers is that it confirms what contemporary literary and cultural theory has decided about interpretation and its relationship to meaning. Whatever form such interpretation takes, there is a pervasive assumption that, as Jonathan Culler has put it, “the goal of literary studies is the interpretation of literary works and that the test of any theoretical discourse is whether it makes possible new and convincing interpretations of individual works” (*Literary* 166). Culler himself has long had a problem with this assumption [as he wrote in 1976, “if there is one thing we do not need it is more interpretations of literary works” (“Beyond” 246)], and yet recently he has found himself arguing against the notion that there can be such a thing as “overinterpretation.” Discussing debates about interpretation and overinterpretation staged by Umberto Eco and Richard Rorty, for example, Culler finds that Rorty “does not imagine that there are limits to interpretation but supposes, rather, that if I want to have a chance of convincing others, a chance of making my interpretation plausible, I will have to do various things, such as account for as much of the text as possible rather than just focus on one or two lines, and so on. There is no boundary surround-

ing proper interpretation and separating it from overinterpretation or aberrant interpretation; rather, there are discursive practices that can establish relevance and persuade others” (*Literary* 180). In this conception, an interpretation of a literary work lives or dies by these discursive practices, so that what can seem in one writer’s hands outlandish overinterpretation can seem in another’s like cogent interpretation. But, as I have suggested, what happens in *House of Leaves* is that Danielewski banishes the force of discursive practice—by multiplying these practices, there are no rules by which to determine if someone is performing overinterpretation.

There are numerous moments in *House of Leaves* when discursive practices multiply. For example, the three comically-involutéd and competing theories about why Navidson returned to the house after his brother died there [The Kellog-Antwerk Claim, The Bister-Frieden-Josephson Criteria, The Haven-Slocum Theory (385-407)] embody the incommensurability of these three theories for Zampanò; for readers of *House of Leaves*, they must all be equally plausible or equally absurd. Likewise, when Zampanò dismisses another interpretation as “an amusing if ultimately pointless essay” (90, fn 101), we have no way of assessing his assessment. In reading through Zampanò’s judgments, in fact, we get a confirmation of Culler’s sense that there can be no overinterpretation. Consider this discussion:

Florencia Calzatti . . . has shown in her compelling book *The Fraying of the American Family* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1995)—no longer in print—how these invasions begin to strip the Navidsons of any existing cohesion. It is an interesting examination of the complex variables implicit in any intrusion. Unfortunately understanding Calzatti’s work is not at all easy, as she makes her case using a peculiar idiom no reader will find readily comprehensible (e.g. She never refers to Holloway [a renowned mountaineer Navidson hires to explore the hallway] as anything but “the stranger”; Jed and Wax [Holloway’s assistants] appear only as “the instruments”; and the house is encoded as “the patient”) (83-84)

While Calzatti’s analysis is for Zampanò “interesting,” its ability to explain what the house means in what Culler calls a “plausible” way is seriously hamstrung by the “peculiar idiom” she invents. Calzatti’s analysis might be suggestive, but it hardly seems to generate meaning about *The Navidson Record* because it isn’t even clear from the information Zampanò provides that she is discussing the Navidson house. But given its place in *House of Leaves* as a whole, this question is of course irrelevant since the film does not exist and so this interpretation, like all the other interpretations, is both plausible interpretation and egregious over-interpretation.

Despite the proliferation of interpretations already in the novel, then, it is ready-made for literary and cultural scholarship that has retained the hermeneutic enterprise after having largely abandoned the belief that there could ever be a comprehensive theory of literature. When Danielewski claims that no interpretation has yet surprised him, it is because the novel is designed to sustain a range of interpretations so wide that it would be surprising could such an interpretation be dismissed as overinterpretation. By including a range of scholarly approaches in particular, the novel legitimates various acts of interpretation that have seemed acceptable to the academy, and yet authorizes none of them. Such a situation ought to sustain many more real-life academic commentaries as it becomes clearer that the novel's absent center becomes replete with meaning once it has been engaged.

WORKS CITED

- Culler, Jonathan. "Beyond Interpretation: The Prospects of Contemporary Criticism." *Comparative Literature* 28.3 (summer 1976), 244-56. Print.
- . *The Literary in Theory*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2007. Print.
- Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*. New York: Pantheon, 2000. Print.
- Díaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007. Print.
- Fish, Stanley. *Is There A Text in This Class?* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980. Print.
- Hansen, Mark. "The Digital Topography of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*." *Contemporary Literature* 45.4 (winter 2004), 597-636. Print.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. "Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*." *American Literature* 74.4 (2002), 779-806. Print.
- Little, William G. "Nothing to Write Home About: Impossible Reception in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*," in *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*, eds. Neil Brooks and Josh Toth. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007. 169-199. Print.
- McCaffery, Larry and Sinda Gregory. "Haunted House: An Interview with Mark Z. Danielewski." *Critique* 44.2 (winter 2003), 99-136. Print.
- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York: Methuen, 1987. Print.
- Nealon, Jeffrey T. "The Swerve Around P: Literary Theory after Interpretation." *Postmodern Culture* 17.3 (2007), 31 paragraphs. Web. 3 Feb. 2010.
- Pressman, Jessica. "*House of Leaves*: Reading the Networked Novel." *Studies in American Fiction* 34.1 (spring 2006), 107-128. Print.
- Slocombe, Will. "'This Is Not for You': Nihilism and the House That Jacques

Built.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 51.1 (spring 2005): 88-109. Print.