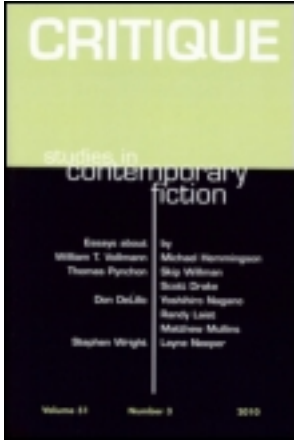


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What's beneath the Floorboards: Three Competing Metavoices in the Footnotes of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

MICHAEL HEMMINGSON

ABSTRACT: The three voices found in the footnotes of *House of Leaves* compete for authority and contradict one another with a mixture of misleading, fabricated, and truthful information, citations, and references. The footnotes engage Raymond Federman's method of critifiction, which combines fiction with critical discourse to arrive at a formally innovative text of post-postmodern contemporary fiction. There are three competing metavoices in the footnotes, each demanding authority, yet each is unreliable because the footnotes frustrate the reader with lies, false literary and cultural references, and the uncertainty to whom these voices belong. Danielewski follows Derrida's method of the bifurcated text in *Glas*, which is presented vertically, whereas *House of Leaves* is horizontal: the footnotes, sometimes going on for pages, draw attention away from the main text. *House of Leaves* is also an example of Avant-Pop: art that infiltrates corporate business and subverts it.

Keywords: Mark Danielewski, footnotes, critifiction, *House of Leaves*, bifurcated text

I

On first glance, the footnotes in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* are concerned with sex, strippers, cinema, long lists of contemporary photographers, erroneous citations of nonexistent publications, and (most importantly) Johnny Truant's readings of a manuscript that move from mere curiosity to manic obsession. There are three separate voices at work in Danielewski's footnotes, all competing for authority: the first-person narration of Truant, chronicling his meager life in Los Angeles as he explicates and deconstructs *The Navidson Record*; the passive, unreliable voice of the "author"—supposedly Zampanò, wearing the mask of Borges—who references other literary works, some real, some imagined; and the commentary of faceless, nameless "editors" who have been charged with the publication and veracity of the book. Each voice propels, and at times frustrates, the overall narrative, operating similarly to hypertext and hyperlinks on the Internet that can stymie the Web surfer's initial subject search. These footnotes engage *critifiction*, a term coined by Raymond Federman, as a narrative technique to further take the reader into a textual tangle, mixing deconstructionist theory, literary discourse, autobiography, history, poetry, and a number of other genres. Danielewski borrows the method of the bifurcated text from Derrida's *Glas*, but where the dueling texts in *Glas* are vertical, *House of Leaves* is horizontal.

II

The existing literature on *House of Leaves* is scant yet growing. N. Katherine Hayles's essay, "Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*," and chapter 8 of her monograph, *Writing Machines*, titled "Inhabiting *House of Leaves*," both address how the novel imitates Internet Web surfing and networking on the printed page. While she finds "none of the dynamics displayed [...] entirely original [...] it extends the claims of the print book by showing what print can be in a digital age" (*Writing Machines* 112). *House of Leaves* emulates "the computer's omnivorous appetite [...] to eat all the other media" (112) such as the documentary, media studies, scholarly footnotes, Derrida, Borges, psychoanalysis, fictional references (critifiction), the index, photography, and poetry the way a page on Wikipedia might incorporate all, or the way one travels from one landing page to another linked page online, going from one subject to another. Hayles coins this as an act of "remediation," which is

the cycling of different MEDIA through one another. These processes are going on all around us, including computer screens being arranged to look like television screens, television screens with multiple windows made to look like computer screens, print books mimicking computers, computers being imaged to look like books. (*Writing Machines* 5)

This is a media ecology where “relationships between different media are as diverse and complex as those between different organisms coexisting within the same ecotome” (5). The position is a bit far-fetched; in all ecologies, there are organisms that devour other life in order to subsist, a food chain that is not present in the theory of remediation.

Nele Bemong’s online essay “Exploration #6: The Uncanny in Mark Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*” interprets the novel as a self-reflexive text that “incorporates the meta-narrative perspective of theory and criticism—within the framework of the prevailing psycho-analytical theories of the uncanny. The novel can be regarded as a narrative repetition of Freud’s theorization as put forward in his essay ‘The Uncanny’ [...] Freud’s concept of suppression.” Bemong, committing an act of emulation by having the word “house” appear in blue text the way the “Blue Edition” of *House of Leaves* does, focuses on *The Navidson Record* and the psychological breakdown of a marriage. As the Navidsons “react in diametrically opposed manners to the manifestation of the uncanny, their relation perceptibly gets worse” so that the strangeness of the house becomes a metaphor of the demise of martial bliss. Bemong is concerned with the psychological make-up of the characters rather than the mechanics of the text, unlike Mark B. N. Hansen, whose “The Digital Typography of Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*” addresses the look and feel of the textual layout as relevant to cyber and computer culture. Taking Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending* as an interpretative lens, Sudha Shastri’s “Return to the Beginning: *House of Leaves*” discusses the multiple layers of stories within the novel and how none of them are adequately resolved by the end of the book to “make sense” of the way traditional narratives contain tidy endings that wrap up all the questions presented at the beginning: there is no answer as to why the Navidson’s house is haunted or if it is indeed supernatural; we never know what truly happened to Zampanò or what Johnny Truant’s final fate is; nor do we find out who the true author(s) of the book is, nor who the actual competing voices in the footnotes are. Natalie Hamilton’s “The A-mazing House: The Labyrinth as Theme and Form in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*” explores Borges’ apparent influence throughout the novel.

III

In *Critifictions*, Federman writes that it is the method of “discourse [...] that is critical as well as fictional” (49), a theory that the footnotes in *House of Leaves* follow. “We are surrounded by discourses: historical, social, political, economic, medical, judicial, and of course literary” (50). Danielewski, as Hayles notes, incorporates these topics: historical (a documentary), social (the Navidson’s marital woes, Johnny Truant’s relationships with women, the Los Angeles singles scene), political (life in the Clinton Administration-era United States), economic

(Zamponò's poverty, Truant's challenges to survive in the city), medical (Truant's mother's mental issues, his own psychosis), and literary (references to other published works). Emory Elliot, in *The Columbia Literary History of the United States*, contends that critifiction is "a kind of narrative that contains its own theory and even its own criticism" (1154), citing Ronald Sukenick's *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories*, along with works by Fiction Collective authors Steve Katz, Walter Abish, George Chambers, and Clarence Major, whose texts are examples of Federman's "surfiction," a predecessor of critifiction that abandons realism in favor of metafiction, self-consciously advertising its own fictional status. Surfiction, for Federman, was an alternative term for 1970s experimentalism: "the new fiction will not attempt to be meaningful, truthful, or realistic" (*Surfiction* 3). Hoesterey's *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, Literature*; Chénétier and Houlding's *Beyond Suspicion: New American Fiction Since the 1960s*; Hollinger and Gordon's *Edging into the Future: Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation*; Wolfreys, Robbins, and Womack's *Key Concepts in Literary Theory*; Jorge Garcia's *Literary Philosophers: Borges, Calvino, Eco*; and Lance Olsen's *Rebel Yell: A Short Guide to Writing Fiction* have all discussed the use and legitimacy of the critifictional voice, so it is grounded, accepted, and now canon in the literature our times. Jane Speedy, in *Narrative Inquiry and Psychology*, calls such writing "messy texts" (xiv).

In *Glas*, Derrida also questions the authenticity of literary forms—history, philosophy, criticism; both Federman and Derrida call for a blending and blurring of the genres. *House of Leaves* follows the spirit of the format of *Glas*: there are competing texts using different font faces and sizes and interruptions with quotes and asides, breaking up the left column on Hegel and the right column on Genet. The difference is *House of Leaves* uses a horizontal layout, whereas *Glas* is presented vertically; both are bifurcated texts in which it is possible to read one column separately and ignore the parallel column and still come away with a complete discourse that holds its own. By appropriating this method of parallel and competing texts, Danielewski creates a polyvocality where the various voices and presentation of the words compete for the reader's attention. Such experimental writing, published by a corporate and commercial entity, is an infiltration and subversion of "mainstream" and popular literature, and the business of selling it—or, to add in another term—an act of "Avant-Pop."

Critifiction aided the birth the Avant-Pop school of writing that surfaced in the 1990s, mainly through Larry McCaffery's two anthologies (*Avant-Pop: Fiction for a Daydream Nation* and *After Yesterday's Crash*) and Federman's influence on McCaffery's philosophy, as well as the critical (and critifictional) essays by McCaffery that a number of writers made use of in their fiction (e.g., Mark Leyner, Mark Amerika, Lance Olsen, Doug Rice).¹ "Avant-Pop combines Pop Art's focus on consumer goods and mass media with avant-garde's spirit of subversion and emphasis on radical formal innovation" (McCaffery, *Crash* xvii–viii). *House of Leaves* follows the Avant-Pop form: examples of

consumerism and mass media (documentary film, horror fiction, graphic novel, photography, architecture, recreational drugs, strippers, tattoos) blend in with “radical formal innovation” via a multitude of footnotes, colored words, fictitious sources, and blank pages—all anticomponents of what is considered commercial fiction suitable for a corporate publishing entity. McCaffery states, “It is only to be expected that American authors who have grown up in this environment are registering and analyzing its effects” by “representing these to us in literary forms” (*Crash* xxiii), which is similar to Hansen’s argument that *House of Leaves* is a paper-based interpretation of online culture. Other works of Avant-Pop also incorporate footnotes and critifiction² as well as the bifurcated text, seen in Samuel R. Delany’s “On the Unspeakable” (in *Daydream Nation*), which is presented in two vertical columns that, critifictionally, addresses theory on the act of the unspeakable in one column, and describes and graphic sex act in the second column as example of the theory.

Taking the metaphor of the book as a house, with each chapter working as foundation, walls, doors, windows, and rooms, the footnotes, then, are found underneath the floorboards, in the crawlspace or basement. In some haunted house tales, the creepy evil things live down below, so it is fitting that the other voices separated from the main text reside here. These three voices create a dialogue that is both scholarly and colloquial, learned and streetwise, truthful and deceiving, while attempting to interpret the meaning behind *The Davidson Record*, both the film and the Zompanò’s analytical monograph. The footnotes employ a scholarly framework that is illusory yet imitates (remediates) a serious façade. Danielewski’s footnotes invite the reader into a labyrinth of critifictional playfulness, inquiring what is true and what is a lie, what is fiction and what is fact. There are references and citations of actual sources derived from authentic books, yet others are fabrications. The reader must take on the role of the aesthetic detective and determine which footnotes are misleading, which are clues, and which speak “the truth,” a deciphering of the plethora of code from the main text to the footnotes to the appendices and even to the index (e.g., there are index entries for single words such as “so” and “something,” separate entries for “fuck,” “fucker,” and “fucking,” and one entry for “endnote” that is on page 76, a page that consists of footnotes 79–82, mostly narrating Truant’s life at the tattoo parlor).

IV

Footnotes “can be charming,” Chuck Zerby states in *The Devil’s Details*, “an encouragement to read on, worth every penny of the extra expense” (3).³ Zerby seeks the life and times of the footnote in English fiction and poetry. “As the eighteenth century approached,” he notes, “the footnote became the young hero of a picaresque novel,” likened to Tom Jones and Barry Lyndon, traveling across

Europe “from one hair-raising adventure to another [. . .] mov[ing] through every stratum of society and across national borders” (59). Zerby anthropomorphizes the footnote, fashions it as someone we can identify with, feel compassion for, a literary fellow in need of a mentor to make his way through the textually cruel Victorian and Edwardian worlds:

For the footnote, those tutors were most importantly the exuberant Frenchman Pierre Bayle; rhetorical Englishman Edward Gibbon; and the meticulous, somewhat dull German Leopold van Ranke. All of them, with very different methods, took the footnotes into their homes, gave him lessons—sternly or gently—and sent him on his way better equipped to make a living [. . .] That the footnote sat still long enough to be usefully instructed by such contradictory masters proves his resilience, his determination to make his mark on the world, however unprepossessing his origins. (59–60)

Zerby admits scholars cannot pinpoint the birth of the footnote; it “drifts somewhere in a universe of manuscripts and books, eluding our discovery the way the original bright star of the skies eludes astronomers” (17). He theorizes the footnote came of age in Elizabethan London, “a crude place. And it is only letting this crowded, crime- and disease-ridden city become real to us that we can properly appreciate what thoughtful and fine character was required to create the early footnotes” (19). (It is equally fitting that the healthy, mature footnote has migrated from the bowels of historical London to the contemporary Los Angeles underground in *House of Leaves*.)

The eighteenth-century footnote was an exercise for the intellectual elite, never meant for the common citizen; in contemporary fiction, the footnote is a textual device that has moved from the mechanics of the beleaguered scholar to the artistic endeavors of the writer with Microsoft Word at one’s disposal and metatextual aspirations in the heart. Larry McCaffery points out, in “Haunted House—An Interview with Mark Z. Danielewski,” that “when people wrote books on typewriters the act of creating a footnote was very laborious, time-consuming work, whereas now, you can almost effortlessly insert [them]” (117). These layers “seem to have encouraged writers to think of what they are doing less in terms of developing linear narratives than in presenting works that are ‘textual assemblages’” (117). The footnote’s current accessibility makes it a more attractive and pleasurable narrative device than it was twenty, fifty, two hundred years ago. Commenting on the footnotes in Nicholson Baker’s *The Mezzanine* in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Ross Chambers explains, “[T]he poverty of narrative interest is an indicator [. . .] that Baker’s text seeks ways to give pleasure and earn authority other than those that are characteristic of narrative” (765). Baker’s footnotes are more than asides, commentary, and citations: they represent the thoughts and memories—the interior psyche—of the protagonist with events that have taken place in the past, whereas the main text is set in the present and concerns the protagonist’s body moving up an escalator.

In Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad Variorum*, the footnotes overshadow the poetry, operating as satirical commentary about Pope's fellow and competing poets of the time, whereas the footnotes in T. S. Elliot's early modernist long poem, *The Waste Land*, work in conjunction with the verse, so that each part relies on the other. The shift in the ontology of secondary text changes with *Pale Fire*, where the notes outweigh the main text, which is also the case *The Mezzanine*: the footnotes contain significantly more information about the protagonist's biography and feelings than what happens in the main text. Yet, for all the extra information footnotes add to fiction and poetry, this device is not universally accepted. Critic John Lanchester, in the *London Review of Books*, accuses the imaginative footnote as a way "to deflect, or escape from, the strength of [the narrator's] own feelings" (6). He believes footnotes are nothing more than part of a "huge repertoire of Post-Modern⁴ tricks" (6). Zerby, on the other hand, defends the "Postmodern sensibility [. . .] in double narrative, second thoughts, multivoice effects, palimpsests, distancing devices, disjunction, irony, and the jokey" as the "tendency of the Postmodern to do the double take" (144).

In this case, the footnotes in *House of Leaves* follow Zerby's playbook faithfully and (like Baker) cause the book to stand out visually and aesthetically from other volumes on the shelves; they create a wholly separate narrative, with story structure, dialogue, the thoughts and feelings of a narrative "I," and the presentation of story arc—in many ways, a novel within the novel. Just as Zerby gives the footnote personality, a "he" that is an underdog hero the reader wants to root⁵ for, the "I" footnotes are the journal of urban slacker Johnny Truant, a reluctant hero who answers the call to adventure to pick up where the previous hero left off and unravel the mystery of *The Navidson Record*.

V

Truant and his friend Lude have come across a manuscript written by Zampànò, who recently passed away in a cluttered apartment. The manuscript is a critical study of an obscure documentary, *The Navidson Record*, which follows a family's experiences moving into a house that defies physics: it is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside. The study is a disorderly work,

reams and reams of it. Endless snarls of words, sometimes twisting into meaning, sometimes into nothing at all, frequently breaking apart, always branching off into other places 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. (Danielewski xviii)

Truant's world begins with the introduction, set in Courier font, the only time Truant is seen in the upper rooms of the house; he then moves below the floorboards. His footnotes, at times, go on for pages, as he falls into a warren of fixation with both the manuscript and the documentary, connecting the dots, turning to Heidegger's *Dasein* to find the answers in his psyche, where "there's some kind of connection between my state of mind and *The Navidson Record* or even a few arcane sentences on the existence penned by a former Nazi tweaking on who knows what" (25). Truant's slow descent into psychosis drives his narrative footnotes, an affliction that may be genetic as his mother is currently hospitalized for schizophrenia. He is a proverbial lost soul in the empty landscape of Los Angeles, working at a tattoo shop in West Hollywood and searching for substance, for *something*, to fill the emptiness of his existence: the answer is Zampanò's former preoccupation, now his. Truant's footnotes are frantic autobiography that chronicles his journey; his gradual depreciation into madness is a direct result of Zampanò's manuscript progressively taking over all his thoughts, "haunt[ing] my every hour" (179). He is prescribed medication to help cope with the anxiety, "a low-grade sedative of some kind" (179), but that does not stop his life from becoming exactly like Zampanò's, his room engulfed in "books, sketches, collages, reams and reams of paper, measuring tape nailed from corner to floor" (323), all in an attempt to unravel the truth behind the monograph-in-progress.

Two other characters coexist with Truant down below: his buddy Lude and a stripper named Thumper, to whom he is attracted because she is "uninhabited, I mean uninhibited, about everything" (Danielewski 105). (This slip of words is intentional: while Truant inhabits Zampanò's psyche, he is unable to make the same connection with Thumper, who tends to be shallow.) These characters aid in pulling attention away from the main text; Truant's social life demands attention because it is filled with sex, drugs, and night clubs, instigated by Lude. The two men are two typical twenty-something single guys, competing for the attention of women when they go out: "[We] quarreled over who would approach her first" (116). The footnotes are so preoccupied with Truant's personal life it is easy to forget the subject matter of the text on the upper pages. These footnotes desire to suppress the parent text, peppering the pages with nightlife and sexual exploits that, at times, are far more lively and interesting than the scholarly voices. Truant's narrative, sans references to Zampanò's text, are a separate novel about the single life of tattoo artists and strippers in Los Angeles, occupying the same territory as Bret Easton Ellis' *Less than Zero*.⁶

Lude is aggressive and impossible to ignore; like the other voices in the footnotes, he attempts to become the dominant character, he competes with Truant not only for the attention of women, but for the attention of the reader. For

instance, Lude presents Truant with a list of women he has had sex with in the past thirty days, making “a great show of sharing with me his official and most prodigious tally for that month” (Danielewski 262). The list includes nineteen women, with their sexual preferences and requests, and what bits of past history (rape, incest, drug use) Lude was able to pry out of them. These pornographic details draw away from the issues of *The Davidson Record*. Thumper’s presence is another diversion; she is a mystery to Truant: “I had never even asked her for her real name [...] which I suddenly resolved to find out [...] who she really was, see if it was possible to mean something to her, see if it was possible she could mean something to me” (366). Lude is super-ego to Truant’s id and Thumper is his ego—the polar opposite “best buddy” who is antagonistic, and the dark heart love interest that is doomed to fail. Truant’s reluctance to compete with Lude’s sexual conquests, yet doing so anyway, conflicts with Truant’s need for companionship and love, as well as his desire to lose himself in scholarship. Thumper’s ultimate rejection of Truant’s wish for romantic participation pushes Truant into isolation. He hides from the complications of his urban life and takes residence inside Zompanò’s obsession. Truant transforms into a hermit; he becomes Zompanò.

VI

The second footnote voice is a critifictional fraud; it takes on the semblance of a scholarly study of a fictional study of a nonexistent documentary⁷ regarding a paranormal subject suitable for a Stephen King novel.⁸ This voice is unreliable, possibly a pathological liar or at least acting like one; the reader cannot trust its legitimacy or intentions. From the very start of the novel, this voice references a nonexistent text, “Resurrection on Ash Tree Lane: Elvis, Christmas Past, and Other Non-Entities” by Daniel Bowler in a book called “*The House* (New York: Little Brown, 1995)” referencing “p. [sic] 167–244⁹ in which he examines the inherent contradiction of any claim alleging resurrection as well as existence of that place” (Danielewski 3). By using real publishing entities, such as Little Brown, for the fake books, Danielewski intentionally sends his readers on wild goose chases, to determine if these books are real or imagined, whereas in other instances, he references publications that are obviously made up, as seen in footnote 11: “Samuel T. Glades ‘Omens & Signs’ in *Notes From Tomorrow* ed. Lisbeth Bailey (Delaware: Taema Essay Publications, 1996)” (11) and footnote 26:

Regrettably, Pollit’s proclivity to pun and write jokes frequently detracts from his otherwise lucid analysis. *The Incident* (Chicago: Adlai Publishing, 1995), p. 108, is a remarkable example of brilliant scholarship and exemplary synthesis of research and thought. There are also some pretty good illustrations. Unfortunately almost everything he concludes is wrong. (21)

The reader may decide that this voice is always lying, until references of real, well-known texts, such as Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* and Chris Allen's *1001 Sex Secrets Every Man Should Know*, are cited alongside the bogus "X.Y.'s *Broken Daisy-Chains* (Seattle: Town Over All Press, 1995)" (62). The reader has to choose to either experience aggravation or enjoy it all and go along with Danielewski's critrifictional game that Federman advocates: the blending of fictional play and factual discourse. Either way, some readers may find the fabricated references so interesting that they *wish* these books and articles existed, such as the psychological studies of Karen Green in relation to her feelings about the spatial anomalies of the house. In one citation from *The Anomic Mag*, the second voice instructs, in footnote 70, to "see Exhibit Six" (59) and to "reproduce Karen's completed Sheehan Clinical Rated Anxiety Scale" (535). Footnote 431, in Exhibit Six, directs: "See Appendix II-C" (535) that consists of two images of collages, where a torn extract from *The Anomic Mag* and Karen's Sheehan Clinical Rated Anxiety Scale is found in the upper right hand corner of image #1 (582).

Returning to page 3, footnote 1, creates a secondary hypertextual annoyance: asking the reader to go to other chapters or appendices before reading further. Footnote 1 appears at the end of *The Navidson Record*'s first paragraph, appropriately discussing authenticity:

While enthusiasts and detractors will continue to empty entire dictionaries attempting to describe or deride it, "authenticity" still remains the word most likely to stir a debate. In fact, the leading obsession—to validate or invalidate the reels and tapes—invariably brings up a collateral and more general concern: whether or not, with the advent of digital technology, image has forsaken its once unimpeachable hold on truth. (3)¹⁰

The first footnote after "truth" (an early code word) states "a topic more carefully considered in Chapter IX" (3) and gives the reader a choice to keep reading or examine Chapter IX first. Chapter IX is the most structurally "experimental" and layered assemblage; it may be a good idea for the reader to tackle it from the start, to acclimate the eye and mind to the book as a whole (by allowing the reader this benefit, *House of Leaves* turns into a bonafide non-linear novel from the get-go). *The Navidson Record*'s text does not start until page 3 of this chapter, as footnotes take up the available white space. Here we are (re)introduced to Derrida's theories of authenticity from *Writing and Difference*:

By orientating and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of the structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself [. . .] This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it. (112)

This poststructural French jargon is fitting for Chapter IX, which delivers a long narrative about Truant going out to L.A. clubs and meeting women with Lude, crossing paths with a new female character, Natasha—“Tolstoy’s prophecy brought to life” (116)—and realizing that his infatuation with Thumper is a doomed fate. There are long sections of text with struck-out lines¹⁴ and columns of text in the margins, boxes of text in the middle of the page printed backwards¹⁵ or in Greek, and other columns of text that are upside-down or sideways. On first glance, the pages appear to be an incoherent “messy text” (see Speedy) that would seem to be the production of a madman; however, if the reader goes back to the chapter while reading other sections, the chapter’s true structural purpose will become apparent: representing Truant’s mind descending into a madness of thoughts, memories, and ideas all jumbled about; they also represent Zampanò’s similar obsessions. Footnote 165 states, “Mr. Truant refused to reveal whether the following bizarre textual layout is Zampanò’s or his own. –Ed” (134).

VII

The editors compose the third competing voice. They make their initial utterance from the beginning: in “an effort to limit confusion, Mr. Truant’s footnotes will appear in Courier font while Zampanò’s will appear in Times” (Danielewski 4). The editors appear in Century Schoolbook font. There is no identity for these editors, nor any indication of how many of them have been assigned to the text, or even why. They claim they “have never actually met Mr. Truant. All matters regarding the publication were addressed in letters or in rare instances over the phone” (4). The editors may not be their own agency, however. It is possible that, taking his cue from Borges, Truant has written the editors’ commentary as a means of distancing himself from both texts and to further frustrate the reader regarding the true origination and authority. Danielewski *could* be the second voice, and he can also be his own editor(s), or the voice can be a fictional disassociating device that results from Truant’s insanity. There are a number of possibilities—what matters is their function as hyperlinks to other sections, themes, and ideas, and to support the critifictinal nature of the book. For instance, the editors offer the reader a means of deciphering the psychology of Truant’s character early on, noting his

asides may often seem impenetrable [. . .] The reader who wishes to interpret Mr. Truant on his or her own may disregard this note. Those, however, who feel they would profit from a better understanding of his past may wish to proceed ahead and read his father’s obituary in Appendix II-D as well as those letters written by his institutionalized mother in Appendix II-E. (72)

Reading the appendix does grant a doorway into Truant's inner workings that may, ostensibly, exist in retrospect: Truant has grown up without a father and was orphaned by his mentally ill mother; her letters to him from the insane asylum, as he is left with a foster family, aid the reader in understanding why Truant has intimacy issues, why he is afraid of falling in love, and that his obsession with Zompanò is an attempt to find a father figure,¹⁶ to connect with an older man's vocation and make it his own. If Truant is the editorial voice in disguise, he is using self-analysis, but he is also using critifiction by creating the fiction of the editors and then offering psychoanalytic discourse on himself, so that *House of Leaves* indeed contains its own theory and criticism. On the other hand, it is possible that the editors have fallen down the same rabbit hole as Zompanò and Truant: they have become just as obsessed and just as unreliable.

Whoever the editors are, they do not always impel the reader forward; from time to time, they drive the reader in reverse and force the reader into a complicated maze of links and confusion. The editors instruct: "refer back to Chapter 5; footnote 67"¹⁷ after the sentence "People always demand experts, though sometimes they are fortunate enough to find a beginner" (Danielewski 329). Footnote 67 appears after the sentence "In the end, Navidson is the one who hauls up the wheelchair" (55) and is a comment from Truant about talking to "a Ph.D. candidate in Comp Lit" (55) who had been employed by Zompanò to type up *The Navidson Record*.

"I told him all those passages are 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 [...] 'Why won't you listen to me?' I demanded one time. 'You're writing like a freshman.' And he replied—I remember this quite distinctly: 'We always look for doctors but sometimes we're lucky to find a *frosh*.'" [...] Not a bad way to respond to this whole fucking book, if you ask me. (55)¹⁸

Footnote 391 instructs: "See footnote 310 and corresponding reference" (406). Three hundred and ten, regarding Karen Green, appears after the sentence "For a dazed instant she lay on the asphalt amid the scattered contents of her bag—*der absoluten Zerrissenheit*" (348).¹⁹ Three hundred and ten is a comment from Truant, about the "Gdnask Man" who seeks out Lude "to exact some kind of serious physical retribution" (348). The arcane reference propels the reader to seek out the meaning of this beyond the text—for instance, doing an Internet search of "Gdnask Man" leads to a YouTube video of a song called "Random House."²⁰ Random House is the publisher of *House of Leaves*. Thus, the text not only imitates the quagmire that Internet links create, it takes readers off the paper page and onto the scroll of the Web page, continuing the text from one media to another. The effect could not be achieved without the footnotes, which Danielewski states are

a lot less interesting to me than the issue of the context of those notes—of who’s responsible for creating them and what they tell you about that person—because footnotes become another lens through which the reader must look at everything. The problem is that it’s a lens that many people don’t want to look through. (McCaffery and Gregory 114)

The footnotes will frustrate readers of fiction not acclimated to footnotes in a novel—certainly not *this many* (450 in all). These footnotes offer other avenues (doorways) to access the text rather than the usual page 1, left-to-right eye movement method. Yet, there are readers who reject anything but standard presentations and penetrations of text, so this can present a problem of accessibility and usability for the general public.

VIII

“The average *Harry Potter* reader is apt to be more than slightly confused,” Eric Whittmershaus claims in a review of *House of Leaves*, although it seems unlikely readers of Harry Potter’s adventures would, other than as an assignment for a college course on postmodern fiction, be drawn to pick the book up. The cult popularity of *House of Leaves* indicates that critifiction²¹ and footnotes²² are not as unwelcome as some—the commercial book marketers—may contend (or any fiction labeled “experimental”); thus, *House of Leaves* is a work of Avant-Pop, for it has successfully infiltrated corporate publishing and subverted the marketer’s beliefs by becoming a profitable property, as well as attracting a wide variety of audiences from general readers, aficionados of innovative fiction, and academics who find its scholarly qualities worth studying. Without the footnotes, and without their critifictional nature and the text’s Avant-Pop sensibilities, *House of Leaves* would simply be labeled another haunted house yarn.

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NOTES

1. The first Avant-Pop book published by a commercial press is considered to be Mark Leyner’s *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*.

2. Doug Rice’s *A Good CuntBoy Is Hard to Find* and *Skin Prayer* both use footnotes and interweave theory with fiction and alleged memoir. Mark Amerika’s *The Kafka Chronicles* is a loose collection of texts making a “novel” that mixes theory with fiction and lists.

3. The “irony” is that the notes herein, following the style of this journal, are endnotes.

4. Chambers’s spelling.

5. Indeed, the footnotes in *House of Leaves* can be viewed as the roots of the textual foundation of *The Navidson Record*, holding up the tree that it is, each leaf that falls to the ground and toward the footnotes—the roots—a clue to the whole of the text.

6. Ellis provides a blurb for *House of Leaves*: “A great novel. A phenomenal debut. Thrillingly alive, sublimely creepy, distressingly scary, heartbreakingly intelligent—it renders most other fiction meaningless. One can imagine Thomas Pynchon, J. G. Ballard, Stephen King, and David Foster Wallace bowing at Danielewski’s feet, choking with astonishment, surprise, laughter, awe.”

7. Another aspect to critification is what Federman calls “pla(y)garism,” the intentional appropriation of another’s text and mixing it up with one’s own.

8. In McCaffery and Gregory’s interview, however, Danielewski states, “It is much easier for some readers to dismiss the whole thing by saying, ‘Oh, Danielewski is just making fun of scholarly work,’ and leave it at that, rather than trying to work out all the math and keep track of all these voices, to say nothing of the footnote numbers (which admittedly can get very complicated once you get into them)” (112).

9. The reader must also question, early on, how a blind man can write a critical study of a film when he cannot see any “film” that exists outside his imagination. Knowing *The Navidson Record* is fiction from the start renders the reader to disregard any reality of the upper text and seek Truant’s reality in the footnotes. Is Truant a real person, a construct of Danielewski, perhaps Danielewski’s alter ego? There are hundreds of men in Los Angeles who fit Truant’s profile. Truant is the face of a disillusioned generation of hopeful artists, poets, and filmmakers who scour the Los Angeles landscape every day.

10. “Stephen King” provides fictional commentary for *The Navidson Record*, when Karen Navidson asks him about symbolism. King responds: “Symbols shimimbols. Sure they’re important but . . . [. . .] what we sometimes forget is that Ahab’s whale was also just a whale” (361).

11. In McCaffery and Gregory’s interview, Danielewski asserts “there are no errors in the book” (114) when McCaffery believes he has found typos and misprints. However, when listing multiple pages in a citation, one would use “pp.” and not “p.” Thus, on page 3, Danielewski is in error about errors, unless he can claim that the unreliable footnote voice made that mistake, and not “he.”¹²

12. McCaffery is “reminded of John Shade’s remark, ‘Life everlasting—based on a misprint!’” (114).¹³

13. Nabokov, *Pale Fire*. The reader will take notice that, emulating *House of Leaves*, I am using footnotes within footnotes, which is often frowned on in the academic community—that is, for the critic to take on the style of the work under scrutiny. In this case, I cannot help myself and ask forgiveness.

14. In the “red edition” of *House of Leaves*, these strikeouts are printed in red ink. In the “blue edition,” they are left in black.

15. Footnote 183 on page 140 can be difficult to locate because it is printed backwards.

16. One could also apply a Lacanian reading to *House of Leaves*—just as Derrida’s poststructural theories include the absence of meaning and authority in texts, there is the absence of the father in Truant’s life. Truant could very well blame his dead father for causing him to become the man he is today.

17. The editors are not consistent, either, citing chapters alternately in roman and alphanumeric numbers.

18. On the same page, Reston, in *The Navidson Record*, is using a measuring tape on the house: “he can provide no reasonable explanation for what he keeps referring to as ‘a goddamn spatial rape’” (55). This would seem to be yet another metacommentary by Danielewski on “this whole fucking book” (55).

19. “*Der absoluten Zerrissenheit*” refers to George Bataille’s reaction to reading Hegel, according to footnote 10 of Milo Sweedler’s “From the Sacred Conspiracy to the Unavowable Community: Bataille, Blanchot and Laure’s Le Scaré”: “Bataille places *absolute Zerrissenheit* at the centre of his own reading of Hegel: ‘L’esprit n’obtient sa vérité qu’en se trouvant soi-même dans le déchirement absolu [*absolute Zerrissenheit*],’ Bataille affirms, making the Hegelian formulation his own (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *La Phénoménologie de l’esprit*, vol. I, trans. by Jean Hyppolite (Paris, Aubier, 1939), p. 29. Cited in Bataille, *Ouvres Complètes*, ed. by Denis Hollier, Thadée Klossowski and Francis Marmande, 12 vols (Paris, Gallimard, 1970–88), xii, 335).”

20. See <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mf0ZltuJqtc&feature=related>>.

21. For other works of critfiction, see Steve Katz' *Moving Parts*, Avital Ronell's *The Telephone Book and Crack Wars*, Frank Lentricchia's *Lucheesi and the Whale*, and William T. Vollmann's *The Rifles*.

22. Paul Auster's *Oracle Night* contains thirteen long, narrative footnotes that present separate stories outside the main text. This is a fine example of the bifurcated text, two narratives running alongside one another.

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