

Julia Krasenberg

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Supervisor: Susanne Knittel

Assembling the Pisces

A look at the way the house in *House of Leaves* creates uncanny experiences
in both its characters and readers.

Introduction

The home has always been a place where people can be safe and free, and there are many expressions that show this. For example, to 'feel at home' means to feel comfortable and at ease, if something is 'safe as houses' it means that it is either a safe place or something you can count on, and to be 'home and dry' is to be successful in reaching a safe place or situation without problems. In all of these expressions the home is a positive, safe, comfortable place where one can relax and be themselves without fear or worry. A home is not just a place to sleep in and store one's belongings; it is much more than that.

In literature the house or home has served many different roles¹ and one of them is that of the haunted house, mostly known from Gothic literature. In this genre, the house is not the

¹ Some examples are the house in relation to gender in women's novels, the house as symbol for power in Irish big house novels or the house as a beacon during travel, which are all associated with feelings very different from the uncanny. Shelley Mallet, 'Understanding home: a critical review of the literature,' *The Sociological Review, Volume 52, Issue 1* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004) 62-89.

kind of home it is supposed to be, or at least not anymore. These haunted houses have become unsafe, uncomfortable, unreliable and *uncanny*. As I will explain later, this is a type of fear unlike any other. A haunted house is very suitable for the gloomy, eerie and scary feeling Gothic literature tries to induce, because a house is supposed to be homely. It is exactly this disturbance of safety that makes a haunted house uncanny.

Edgar Allan Poe, one of the most important Gothic authors, uses houses in many of his stories and treats them almost as characters at times. There are several Poe stories that include houses and/or rooms, but there is one, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, that can prove particularly useful when trying to understand Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, the book which will be the main focus point of this thesis. Poe's influence is perceptible in this text even though he is not mentioned in the book apart from his picture on two stamps on the cover, and in a collage. As a postmodern novel *House of Leaves* reappropriates a number of Gothic elements as well, especially when looking at the house itself and the role it plays in the story. In a way it can be seen as a reinterpretation of a classic Gothic haunted house story.

House of Leaves is an exceptional novel and can be very useful when examining the uncanny attributes of 'haunted' houses. Not only is it about a house that evokes uncanny feelings and experiences in its characters, this book evokes them in its readers as well. This is achieved by its internal set-up and by external factors such as its typography and the use of footnotes and appendices, which I will all discuss in this thesis. These elements make *House of Leaves* into a book that is one of a kind and gives the reader a very special reading experience. This book is therefore specifically suitable for this topic of the uncanniness of architecture.

In the first chapter of this thesis I will elaborate on the term 'uncanny' and attempt to illustrate what it is about houses that can make them homely and safe, as well as strange and unsafe. To do so I will call on various theories and philosophies, such as Sigmund Freud's essay on the uncanny, which discuss the uncanny and the role architecture plays in it. Here I will also examine the ways in which *House of Leaves* has been influenced by the Gothic genre, while focusing on the aforementioned story by E.A. Poe.

House of Leaves has several levels of narration. First, there is *The Navidson Record*, a film about Will Navidson and his family who are moving into their new home. In this house a mysterious door suddenly appears, leading to countless pitch-black hallways and rooms which Navidson sets out to explore. Second, there is the text by Zampanò, an old blind man who transcribes and investigates this film. Third, there are the footnotes by Johnny Truant, who has found a trunk containing Zampanò's text after his death and tries to organize them. In these footnotes he writes about this process and about his own life. Fourth, there are the anonymous editors of the book who sometimes add footnotes as well, mostly containing small, practical remarks. Alongside these narrative layers, there are the appendices which contain notes and pictures, *The Pelican Poems* seemingly written by Johnny, and many letters written by Pelafina, Johnny's mother, revealing more about Johnny's background.

Navidson, his family, Zampanò, Johnny and Pelafina have all been in contact with Navidson's house on Ash Tree Lane, either directly or indirectly, and have all been affected by it in some way. The ways in which the effects of these encounters occur are different for each character and have to do with their personal issues and history. In the second chapter of this

thesis I will look at how the characters have been affected by the house and what makes this experience so personal for them. The uncanny seems to work differently for each one, which implies that there is something about their own psyche that is affecting their experience. This is why I would like to explore the possible connection between the human psyche and architecture, and find out how this relates to the uncanny.

We, as readers, also come into contact with the house by reading about it. Though we are not characters in the story and are aware that this novel is purely fictional, we may notice some effects of this contact as well. This is caused by the story as well as by the book's appearance. The way the story is presented to us causes us to read it in a very different way than we are used to, and the fact that the word 'house' is printed in blue every time is the first and most obvious clue that there is more to this book than just the story. The typography of the novel represents its content by making the reader feel uneasy and confused, and by giving him the feeling he is lost in a maze without any reference points, just like how Navidson feels in the dark hallways. While we are reading, we are 'living' in this book and therefore the book is, in a way, like a house to us. In the third chapter of this thesis I want to see how this 'house' acts upon the reader and how the typography achieves this uncanny effect.

By looking at all of these different aspects of *House of Leaves* I hope to create a view of the role architecture can play in literature to create an uncanny feeling in characters and readers alike. There have been many papers and discussions about *House of Leaves*, for example in the contexts of typography, story-telling, and also the uncanny. However, though this book has been discussed in relation to the uncanny before, there has not been much focus

on how the uncanny is personalized for the characters and on the way this uncanny experience is conveyed to the reader, which is what I wish to do here.

Uncanny Architecture

Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, in his essay called *The 'Uncanny'*, describes the uncanny as “that class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar”² and something that “is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression”³. It is something that is supposed to be familiar and home-like but has, for some reason, become strange. This has an unsettling effect and may even cause fear in the person experiencing it. Uncanny is translated from the German word *unheimlich*, which literally means ‘un-homely’. The word *heimlich*, therefore, means ‘homely’, but it can also mean ‘secret’ or ‘hidden’. When *das Heimliche*, the secretly hidden, turns into *das Unheimliche*, it becomes un-secret. Freud explains this as meaning that it is “something repressed which recurs”⁴. In other words, repressed thoughts and feelings that were hidden away in the unconscious now come to light. So, he claims, the uncanny does not just come from an external change but from a change in our own psyche.

Freud builds upon the ideas of fellow psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch, who first discussed the uncanny. According to Freud, “Jentsch attributed the feeling of uncanniness to a fundamental insecurity brought about by a ‘lack of orientation,’ a sense of something new, foreign, and hostile invading an old, familiar, customary world”⁵. Jentsch connects feelings of the uncanny only to one’s environment, but the stepping stone to Freud’s psychological interpretation is

² Sigmund Freud, ‘From The “Uncanny”’, *The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010) 825.

³ Freud 833.

⁴ Freud 833.

⁵ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994) 23.

already laid when he speaks of the “intellectual uncertainty” that can cause uncanniness as well. As Freud says: “the uncanny would always, as it were, be something one does not know one’s way about in. The better oriented in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it”⁶. In other words, when someone is disoriented and feels uncomfortable in a space, he will be more likely to perceive things as uncanny. This gives rise to a vicious circle; being disoriented increases uncanniness, this uncanniness can cause feelings of disorientation, and so on.

Historian and architecture critic Anthony Vidler explains, in his book *The Architectural Uncanny*, how and why the concept of the uncanny shifted from being connected to our surroundings to being connected to psychology. Since the end of the 19th century, he says, the uncanny became associated with life in the big city and was seen as a part of what Vidler calls “metropolitan illness”: “[t]he uncanny here became identified with all the phobias associated with spatial fear, including ‘la peur des espaces’ or agoraphobia, soon to be coupled with its obverse, claustrophobia”⁷. This development made the uncanny psychological. Vidler describes it as something that takes place in the psyche, though still caused by an external force: “a distancing from reality forced by reality. Its space was still an interior, but now the interior of the mind”⁸.

House of Leaves itself brings up the subject of the uncanny, only not through Freud but through philosopher Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. In this quote Heidegger explains that ‘Being-at-home’, feeling *heimlich*, “brings tranquilized self-assurance into the average

⁶ Vidler 23.

⁷ Vidler 6.

⁸ Vidler 6.

everydayness of Dasein [existence]”⁹. If one does not have this feeling, he ceases to be absorbed in the world and feels anxiety instead. This is what he calls the feeling of uncanniness. Zampanò remarks that “Heidegger still fails to point out that *unheimlich* when used as an adverb means ‘dreadfully,’ ‘awfully,’ ‘heaps of,’ and ‘an awful lot of.’ Largeness has always been a condition of the weird and unsafe; it is overwhelming, too much or too big”¹⁰. Both of these aspects are present in the Navidson Record and the house on Ash Tree Lane. This house is uncanny, too big and disorienting, and the effect this has on the characters is that of feeling detached and uncomfortable.

It is no wonder that it is a house that causes most of the uncanniness in *House of Leaves*. Houses have always played a central role in Gothic literature, which is the ‘home’ of the uncanny. The relationship between the two is of course already visible in the word itself – *unheimlich*, un-homely – and this is taken quite literally in these stories. Vidler explains why, when he says: “[t]he house provided an especially favored site for uncanny disturbances: its apparent domesticity, its residue of family history and nostalgia, its role as the last and most intimate shelter of private comfort sharpened by contrast the terror of invasion by alien spirits”¹¹. When these qualities are disturbed it results in a terribly frightening and uncomfortable experience, because there is nowhere else to go when even the safest of places is not safe anymore.

As said, uncanny houses are an important factor in the Gothic genre and Edgar Allan Poe has written several stories that involve them. “[T]he uncanny found its first home in the short

⁹ Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000) 25.

¹⁰ Danielewski 26.

¹¹ Vidler 17.

stories of E. T. A. Hoffman and Edgar Allan Poe. Its favorite motif was precisely the contrast between a secure and homely interior and the fearful invasion of an alien presence”¹², Vidler states. One of Poe’s short stories in particular, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, is worth a closer look in order to explore the concept of the uncanny better and also because it has some significant commonalities with *House of Leaves*. In this story, the Usher house is home to the last members of the Usher family; Roderick and his sister who has fallen ill. In this case, however, the house is not made uncanny by an alien presence. The only ‘invasion’ is that of the narrator, but he is not the one who makes the house uncanny either. He is, however, the one who experiences the house as uncanny.

The fact that it is the narrator who brings the uncanny into the story by bringing out the uncanny in the house is remarkable because this also happens in *House of Leaves*. If it were not for the narrator’s way of interpreting and telling the story, it would not have the same uncanniness it does now. In *House of Leaves* something similar happens on different levels of the narration. Navidson makes a film to deal with his uncanny feelings, which he edits so that it conveys the people’s experiences with and inside the house. By doing this, he makes the film itself just as uncanny as the house. Johnny experiences the house’s uncanniness through narration. The more he reads and writes about it, the more it affects him, and the same seems to have happened to Zampanò. This means that, in both *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *House of Leaves*, the method of narration is what brings forth the uncanny and really brings it to life. We might not think of the houses as uncanny if it were not for the way they are being described, or even the fact that they are being described at all. Heidegger claims that “it is the

¹² Vidler 3.

essence of language to first elevate beings into the open as beings. Where there is no language [...] there is also no openness of beings and thus also no openness of non-beings, un-beings, or emptiness. By first naming objects, language brings beings to word and to appearance"¹³. Thus, language defines things and by doing that it brings them into Being, because naming and describing things makes that they *are something*. The uncanny is brought out by the narration in these stories, because it is created by language and without language it would not exist. As shown by the examples in the introduction, in language the house or home is usually a positive and safe place. If it is language that can make it safe, it is also language that can make it uncanny.

The narrator in Poe's story notices the uncanny nature of the house as soon as he sees the mansion from a distance: "I know not how it was – but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit"¹⁴. He describes the walls as 'bleak' and the windows as 'vacant' and 'eye-like', but also confesses that "any sentiments of doom were more easily attributed to the fantasies of [himself] than to any striking detail in the house itself"¹⁵, and that it is probably nothing more than the arrangement of the scenery that make it seem eerie. Once he is inside the house, he points out the "somber tapestries on the wall, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies"¹⁶ and how "the eye [...] struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted

¹³ Martin Heidegger, 'On the Origin of the Work of Art: First Version', *The Heidegger Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009) 145.

¹⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Tell-Tale Heart', *Selected Works* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1990) 199.

¹⁵ Vidler 17.

¹⁶ Poe 201.

and fretted ceiling”¹⁷. The draperies and furniture are dark and old and the narrator perceives the spaces as gloomy and lacking vitality. He says he does not know what makes him feel this way, but what he is feeling is precisely what the uncanny is about: “[w]hile the objects around me [...] were but matters [sic] to which, or to such as which, I had been accustomed from my infancy – while I hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this – I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up”¹⁸. In other words, the *heimlich* items inside the house have become *unheimlich* for no apparent reason. Vidler says that “the house was itself an uncanny power, [...] the more disquieting for the absolute normality of the setting, its veritable *absence* of overt terror”¹⁹, describing precisely that the uncanny effect is so much stronger because the house should actually not be frightening at all.

The way the narrator describes the house of Usher is similar to the way the house and its dark hallways are described in *House of Leaves*. Though the latter does not contain any objects that should be familiar but are not, it does have the same darkness. They are both very large and mostly empty and uninhabited, with black floors and walls. It is so dark inside that the corners are not visible, which makes these spaces seem like they are endless and just dissolve into nothingness. This makes them disorienting and mysterious, leading to a feeling of uncanniness in their inhabitants.

Something that also plays an important part in giving the Usher house its uncanny power is the relationship between the house and its inhabitants. The narrator explains how the Usher family tree has always had just one branch and that this family has always lived in this

¹⁷ Poe 201.

¹⁸ Poe 201.

¹⁹ Vidler 18.

house. For this reason the name 'House of Usher' came to mean "both the family and the family mansion"²⁰. The metaphorical meaning of the word 'house' as a family line is made literal in this story by making the two meanings practically interchangeable. This is another element that can also be found in *House of Leaves*. The word 'house' in this title can be taken both metaphorically and literally as well. It is, of course, a story about an actual house, in which case 'house' is meant literally. The book itself, however, can also be seen as a house, but then in a metaphorical meaning of the word. I will elaborate on the book's layout in a later chapter, but to put it briefly the book is set up in a way that makes the reader feel like he is inside a maze and this brings forth the same experience of the uncanny as the characters have in the story. The book is designed to be like the house on Ash Tree Lane, so by calling the book a 'house of leaves' the word 'house' is meant metaphorically and 'leaves' is meant literally, namely as pages. The same wordplay is used by Danielewski as by Poe, both of them adding an extra dimension to the stories by use of the title, which makes the connection between these two stories stronger.

But the house and the family of Usher have not only merged into one and the same just by name. Roderick tells the narrator about his theory that stones and plants are sentient and that the Usher mansion in specific, because it has been unchanged for so long, has a "silent, yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family"²¹. This family, the narrator says, has always been known for its "peculiar sensibility of temperament"²² and was honored because of it, but at the same time Roderick speaks of their

²⁰ Poe 200.

²¹ Poe 206.

²² Poe 200.

darker side. He himself suffers from a nervous condition described as “a morbid acuteness of the senses”²³, which is a hereditary family trait, and expects that because of this he will eventually need to “abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR”²⁴. The house has influence on the people who live in it, so this illness might be the effect of this, but it is also possible that it is the other way around. Maybe the house has absorbed some of these maladies and the sentiments that have come from it, and if so, the house’s sickening sentience and the family’s illnesses are now reinforcing each other.

It seems as though the house is both shaped by the emotions of the people within it and also reinforces some of their emotions. The same can be said for the house on Ash Tree Lane. The dark hallways could be appearing because of Navidson himself and could be designed according to his psyche. The same vicious circle observed in *The Fall of the House of Usher* may be in play here; Navidson and his house may be affecting each other in a similar way. The house reacts to Navidson’s restlessness by creating an escape for him and in turn this feeds his tendency to run away instead of settle down, which is something I will discuss in more detail later on.

Notable here is also Madeline Usher’s illness, described as “[a] settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character”²⁵. It seems like she is mentally being absorbed by the house, because it is draining her of all energy, personality and life. After she has been buried for a week, within the house instead of in the graveyard further away, she comes back to kill Roderick. Whether

²³ Poe 202.

²⁴ Poe 203.

²⁵ Poe 203.

she never truly died or has come back to life is not so relevant, because in either case it seems as though the house has given her back some of the life it has taken from her and stored over time. Considering how Freud has described uncanniness as “the fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners”²⁶, it is even possible to think that the house has inhabited Madeline’s body by killing her and is using it to go after Roderick next. When both she and her twin brother are dead the house collapses and “the deep and dark tarn [...] closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the ‘HOUSE OF USHER’”²⁷. The relationship between the house and the family is so strong that one cannot survive without the other, because they have been feeding on each other for so long they have indeed been unified. When the House of Usher falls it is in both its meanings, because not only Roderick and Madeline, the last of their family, have died, but the mansion has died as well.

The Fall of the House of Usher is a good example of what the uncanny is and what an uncanny house can be. Firstly, it shows how very familiar objects and environments can suddenly become strange and frightening, for reasons inexplicable and unknown. Secondly, it shows how a house and the people living in it can develop such a close connection that they start to influence each other, even if only in the minds of the people themselves. These are both aspects that will return later as we discuss *House of Leaves* further. This also shows how this book uses traditional Gothic elements in a new way to help create the feeling of uncanniness that plays such an important part in it.

²⁶ Vidler 7.

²⁷ Poe 212.

Personalized Experiences

The house in *House of Leaves* seems to act as a magnifying glass, making memories and repressed feelings visible and bringing out certain personality traits that would otherwise have remained dormant. It is exactly this aspect that Freud described when discussing the uncanny: these traits are close to 'home', familiar, they have always been a part of the people in question, but the house makes them seem strange and unfamiliar by casting more light on them. To understand how the house illuminates the dark corners of Navidson's psyche, it might be useful to look at where his main troubles come from.

According to Heidegger, as he describes in his work *Building, dwelling, thinking, dwelling* is inherent to mankind. People have always been searching for places where they can settle down and build their lives, but this place needs to be made. In the widest sense, this means building a house, and in the smallest sense, it means making an existing house your home. Since building is necessary in order to dwell, Heidegger says "to build is in itself already to dwell"²⁸. Evidence for this claim is visible in language; the High German word 'Buan' was the forefather of the contemporary words 'building' and 'dwelling', and even the German word *bin*, the first person conjugation of 'to be'. "The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we as humans *are* on the earth, is *Buan*, dwelling"²⁹, he says. He also gives the example of the word 'inhabit', which includes the word 'habit'. Dwelling is so natural to us that it is something we do not even need to think about anymore.

²⁸ Martin Heidegger, 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking', *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971) 146.

²⁹ Heidegger, 'Building' 147.

For Navidson dwelling does not come naturally. He has always been travelling for his work as a photographer and now that he has made the decision to settle down with his family on Ash Tree Lane, he finds that this is not so easy for him. The move to this new house was not entirely his own decision. He did not choose this because he felt that he needed it or was ready for it, but because he would lose his family if he did not. He was forced to make a choice between his career and his family, because “Karen has made it clear that Navidson must either give up his professional habits or lose his family”³⁰. Karen is the one who does all the ‘building’, as she decorates the house and is busy making it their home. Navidson gets distracted quickly when he notices the measurements on the inside of the house do not line up with its measurements on the outside. Instead of dismissing this one quarter inch small problem and continuing to build, he jumps at the opportunity to run away from building this home. Moreover, when the door and the hallway appear, he hardly hesitates to abandon his family again and move back from dwelling to his previous nomadic lifestyle. Even after the whole ordeal, he still chooses to go back to the house instead of going after the family he misses greatly. In a letter to Karen, he writes: “I should burn the place down, forget about it. But going after something like this is who I am. You know that”³¹.

There are buildings that people live their lives in, but do not dwell in. The difference between the two is a matter of personal feelings. According to Heidegger we dwell to have shelter and be safe and preserved, because this gives us a feeling of safety and therefore freedom. Navidson, for his part, needs to learn how to dwell, but he does not understand the

³⁰ Danielewski 10.

³¹ Danielewski 389.

importance of this “plight”³² and how essential it is for human experience. Navidson cannot feel safe and free in this house, not only because of the house itself, but also because he does not feel freedom by confinement, he only feels confined.

Even in the moments when Navidson is at home with Karen and the kids, he is not really present. Mentally, he is either in the dark hallways of the house or with Delial, the dying girl he photographed instead of helped³³. He is haunted by his past, and cannot bring himself to let it go and shift his focus to a domestic life in the present. This is also clear to Karen, who says that “[p]art of this move south was supposed to be about putting the past and all that behind us”³⁴, when she hears him mentioning Delial in his sleep. He finds the transition to be too drastic and the walls of the house, the home, and the family life too confining. This type of life is just too small for him. Then, when the house changes, it provides exactly what he needs: more space. He goes in to explore not only the hallways, but himself as well. Danish scholar Ib Johansen gives a quote by psychologist Carl Jung in his work, *Spooky Houses in Western Fiction: From Poe’s House of Usher to Danielewski’s House of Leaves*, to describe how houses can represent the human psyche:

‘we have [...] to describe and to explain a building the upper story of which was erected in the nineteenth century; the ground-floor dates from the sixteenth century, and a careful examination of the masonry discloses the fact that it was reconstructed from a dwelling-tower of the eleventh century. In the cellar we discover Roman foundation walls, and under the cellar

³² Heidegger, ‘Building’ 161.

³³ Danielewski 368

³⁴ Danielewski 17.

a filled-in cave, in the floor of which stone tools are found, and remains of glacial fauna in the layers below. That would be a sort of picture of our mental structure³⁵.

This 'architectural model of the self', as Johansen calls it, shows that the deeper into the house we go, the deeper we also go into ourselves. Navidson goes so deep into his own house, in both its meanings, that he gets lost in it. By exploring the depths of the dark hallways he explores his own deepest feelings and needs. As he wanders further and further, the space expands and expands because he can never find what he is looking for, namely the peace of mind he needs to let go of his past and settle down in just one place. The more he travels through the hallways and the further he goes down the stairs, the deeper he goes into the house and himself, but to no avail. Navidson has never really dwelled anywhere and now he cannot adapt to it. He lives in the house on Ash Tree Lane, but does not dwell there.

A more concrete reason for Navidson to explore the dark hallways is that he wants to understand them and find an explanation. This is, after all, supposed to have become the home of his family and himself. According to scholar and writer Peter Turchi's book *Maps of the Imagination: the Writer as Cartographer*, this is a common impulse: "[w]e want to know the location of what we deem life-sustaining [...] and life-threatening"³⁶. Navidson tries to draw a map, but fails because the layout of the hallways keeps changing and the whole area keeps expanding without end. Turchi writes that "[n]othing can remain immense if it can be

³⁵ Ib Johansen, 'Spooky Houses in Western Fiction: from Poe's House of Usher to Danielewski's House of Leaves', *Ambiguity and the Search for Meaning: English and American Studies at the Beginning of the 21st Century* (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2010) 411.

³⁶ Peter Turchi, *Maps of the Imagination: the Writer as Cartographer* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2009) 11.

measured”³⁷, which might be why Navidson makes this attempt. It is a way to overlook the environment and gain a feeling of control. It therefore makes sense that it is very frustrating and frightening if a place cannot be measured and mapped in any way. As literary critic N. Katherine Hayles puts it in her book *Writing Machines*, the house on Ash Tree Lane is “resistant [...] to coherent mapping”³⁸. Scholar Will Slocombe has yet another view of Navidson’s motive, because he says that ‘Being’, in this case Navidson and the reader, has an instinctual need to eliminate ‘non-Being’, in this case the dark hallways of the house. “This is transferable into our reading of the House,” he says, “in which we desire to read ‘something’ into the House because we cannot tolerate the absence that it signifies. Our desire to enter the House is the same as Navidson’s, because it is a process of interpretation by which we seek to bring this House into Being”³⁹. The house resists this attempt, however, because it does not want to be changed. Slocombe even argues that “Zampanò’s death may actually be the result of the House itself,”⁴⁰ because he was trying to bring it into existence by explaining and interpreting it and the house did not allow him to do this. This idea that the house is made of Nothing, or non-Being, can also be an explanation for the walls being made of a material that is older than the solar system⁴¹; “it ‘exists’ before anything else is constructed”⁴². Zampanò has made a long list of buildings that the house does not resemble in footnote 146. Here he names buildings going from modern to the oldest he can think of, but ends by saying that “of course it cannot end there”⁴³. This list

³⁷ Turchi 163.

³⁸ N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002) 116.

³⁹ Will Slocombe, “‘This is not for you’: Nihilism and the house that Jacques built”, *Modern Fiction Studies, Volume 51, Number 1* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2005) 96-97.

⁴⁰ Slocombe 105.

⁴¹ Danielewski 378.

⁴² Slocombe 94.

⁴³ Danielewski 134.

can be seen as a more extensive example of Jung's theory of the architecture of the psyche. The dark hallways go beyond this model and are placed beneath all other layers of foundation, because this building is older than existence itself. What we find when we explore these hallways is therefore the deepest level of our psyche, the foundation that of our 'self' is based upon.

Navidson is not the only character in *House of Leaves* who explores and maps; Johnny Truant and Zampanò do it too. Zampanò tried to 'map out' the Navidson Record and Johnny tries to piece together all of Zampanò's papers and make a coherent whole of them. If it were not for Johnny telling us about this process we would only have seen the end product of Zampanò's text, which might have resulted in a different interpretation on our part. Just like mentioned earlier, it is through language and narration that the uncanny is established. It is only because of Johnny explaining the creation of the text we are reading that we can understand the complexity of it. This contributes to the feelings of confusion and disorientation enhancing the uncanniness the reader feels.

Hayles noticed how Johnny's experiences also coincide with his personal history. She describes the moment when Johnny is seemingly attacked in the storage room of the tattoo shop where he works⁴⁴ and says that "the scratch that remains the only verifiable evidence of the encounter recalls the half-moon cuts his mother left on his neck when she tried to strangle him at age seven"⁴⁵. She also sees another reference to his mother in this scene:

⁴⁴ Danielewski 630.

⁴⁵ Hayles 120-121.

[t]he purple ink that brings back portions of his splattered face recalls the purple nail polish his mother wore the day her fingernails dug into his neck, marking him in a complex act of inscription that here merges with the purple and black ink to form an over-determined double writing that operates simultaneously to negate and assert, obliterate and create, erase and mark⁴⁶.

Slocombe states that “the power of the absence of the house [...] transforms even those with whom it comes into secondary contact”⁴⁷. Even though Johnny has never been in direct contact with the house on Ash Tree Lane, simply reading and working with the Navidson Record brings out certain experiences for him. With increasing frequency he is prone to anxiety and panic attacks, later he becomes paranoid, thinking there is a monster hunting him, and afraid to leave his fully barricaded room. The idea and image of the monster may have been planted in Johnny’s head by the markings he saw in Zampanò’s house, but the details, like the scratch on his neck and the color purple on his face, come from his own mind. It is as though the house on Ash Tree Lane provokes these experiences, manifesting in a way that is specific to Johnny’s psyche. Just as the house makes Navidson consider Delial, his family and his way of living, it makes Johnny consider the traumas of his youth.

We do not know much about Zampanò, though it is clear from his notes that the further he goes into the narrative, the more distracted and incoherent he becomes. He dedicates many pages to the relationship between Navidson and his twin brother Tom, comparing them to the biblical Jacob and Esau, but later destroys it because it was “too personal”⁴⁸. This is so striking

⁴⁶ Hayles 121-122.

⁴⁷ Slocombe 104.

⁴⁸ Danielewski 248.

that Johnny thinks there might be more to it: “[m]aybe it really was too personal. Maybe he had a brother. A son. Maybe he had two sons”⁴⁹. Maybe his son is Johnny Truant. In Zampanò’s note written on the 21st of September, 1970, he writes: “[p]erhaps in the margins of darkness, I could create a son who is not missing; beyond even my own imagination and invention”⁵⁰ and exactly 9 months later Johnny is born⁵¹. Considering it is widely agreed upon that coincidences do not exist in this book, it is very likely that the son he is referring to is Johnny. There are a lot of plausible theories going around amongst readers about which character has written and made up which part, some of them claiming that the entire novel is produced by either Johnny, Zampanò or Pelafina⁵², but this falls outside of the scope of this thesis. Regarding this note, however, it is worth mentioning that it is also possible that by ‘creating a son in the margins of darkness’ Zampanò meant creating a son in the literal margins of his text about the darkness of the hallways, i.e. creating the character of Johnny in the footnotes of his text.

For now I will consider the different narratives to be separate and written by different ‘authors’. Another argument for Zampanò being Johnny’s father is that Pelafina, Johnny’s mother, seems to know him. She addresses Zampanò in one of her letters to Johnny, in a code that she uses more often. The initial letters of each word spell out ‘my dear zampano who did you lose’⁵³. This indicates that Pelafina does not just know *of* Zampanò, but that they have a personal, maybe even close, relationship. In this message she could be responding to Zampanò’s note, indicating that she knew about his plan to create a son and may have been

⁴⁹ Danielewski 249.

⁵⁰ Danielewski 543.

⁵¹ Danielewski 503.

⁵² Several discussion threads on the official online forum for *House of Leaves*, <<http://www.houseofleaves.com/forum/forumdisplay.php?3-House-Of-Leaves>> .

⁵³ Danielewski 615.

involved. She asks him who he has lost, to which the answer is probably the missing son he mentions in his note, and Johnny's guess about Zampanò having had two sons may indeed have been correct.

By finishing the book written by the man who could be his father and including the letters his mother wrote to him, one could argue that Johnny is building a home for himself within *House of Leaves*. This home is as much a place to live in as it is a house in the metaphorical meaning of a family line. He has never had a nice, stable family and this could be his way to finally feel like he belongs and no longer feel *unheimlich*. The theme of a son trying to reunite with his father may actually have its roots in Danielewski's own life. Hayles writes that he explained in an interview how he had written a story based on his relationship with his father who was a filmmaker. When he showed his father this story he disapproved, making Danielewski tear it apart and give up on being a writer. But then his sister rescued the pieces, put them back together and gave it back to him. This story became the basis of *House of Leaves*. "[T]he book's remediation of film is, along with much else, the mark of a generational struggle, the son claiming the right to his own voice by encapsulating the father's medium within his"⁵⁴, Hayles writes, referring to the main part of the book being a transcription of a film. Aside from the father-son theme this anecdote also shows where the idea of Johnny piecing together Zampanò's scraps of paper may have originated.

The fact that the house's effects on the characters are very specific to each of their personalities and lives shows that the uncanny is indeed something that is created in a person's own mind. There is an external catalyst, namely the contact with the house, that causes the

⁵⁴ Hayles 128.

feeling of uncanniness to be formed, but the development happens within the psyche. This makes that the uncanny is shaped to have maximum impact on one person specifically. The uncanny invades this person's mind and changes familiar things to strange and frightening things. By looking at the uncanny in this manner it is no longer a general feeling, but a collective noun for multiple personalized feelings of uncanniness.

Labyrinthine Typography

One thing that immediately stands out when reading *House of Leaves* is the use of different storylines. The book we read has been passed on from character to character: to begin with there is the Navidson Record, which has been filmed and edited by Navidson, then there is Zampanò's transcription and interpretation of this film, then Johnny Truant's editing and interpretation of this transcription, and finally the compilation and editing of the anonymous editors. All of this, of course, has been written by Danielewski and then read by the readers, who give it their own interpretations as well. The difficulty with the story going through all of these different layers is that things can be changed along the way. When that happens, the origins of these changes are untraceable. It is impossible to transcribe and interpret things without the material being changed in some way, because of the subjectivity of the author. Johnny gives us a good example of this very early on in the book when he admits to having changed Zampanò's work. From that point on we know he is an unreliable narrator and we have been warned to be cautious. Johnny also tells us that he doubts Zampanò's work, because the Navidson Record cannot be found anywhere and Zampanò has used a lot of sources that either do not exist at all or have been falsified. The story goes through many different hands before it ends up in ours. This process makes the text feel pieced together and incoherent, making the reader wonder what comes from where, what is 'real', and what exactly they are actually reading. This results in a feeling of being lost and confused, uncertain of their environment, like Navidson.

The films of Will Navidson and Karen, Zampanò's transcription and Johnny's editing and footnotes all make use of several different media. Hayles sums these up quite completely when she says that "[t]he inscription technologies include film, video, photography, tattoos, typewriters, telegraphy, handwriting, and digital computers"⁵⁵. All of these media types are gathered within this one book, which she describes as follows: "*House of Leaves* in a frenzy of remediation attempts to eat all the other media, but this binging leaves traces on the text's body, resulting in a transformed physical and narrative corpus"⁵⁶. The use of all of these media is visible in the way that these parts do not line up together seamlessly. For example, it is visible in the book that one scrap of Zampanò's paper and another are not exactly the same. Some are damaged, some are lost, some are just little snippets that do not fit in anywhere and so on, and it happens often that these pieces are still distinguishable from each other even though Johnny has tried to put them together to form a whole. The lines between these pieces distort the view, just like the incoherence of the narrative makes it seem distorted. This can result in a feeling of being disoriented, confused and lost in the text, which increases the uncanniness about the experience of reading it.

House of Leaves is set up just like a maze. Our reading experience is similar to the ones the characters have in their stories. We have to roam the pages, going back and forth, twist and turn the book, and even use a mirror in order to be able to even read the words. In our own way, we are following dark hallways and in order to not get lost in the text we have to make some sort of map. We are given several different paths we can follow, and bits and pieces that

⁵⁵ Hayles 111.

⁵⁶ Hayles 112.

we have to put together in order to create a narrative for ourselves. We can choose the order in which to read the different parts of the book, for example. Beside the main narrative there is Johnny's narrative in the footnotes and the different appendices, like the Whalestoe Letters, which you can choose to look at or read either before or after the main narrative or in between. Since there is also an index, which according to Hayles is "an encrypted pseudo-narrative of its own"⁵⁷, you can even choose to take that as a starting point and go from there. It is also up to us to finish Johnny's work in making sense of Zampanò's writings. Johnny does what he can in deciphering the damaged pieces of the manuscript and putting them in the right order, but when he does not know what to do with something he just includes it as is. In doing so, he all but hands over the pen to us and says: 'you figure it out'.

Because of the way the book is built up, the reader has the opportunity to become very involved and this is a type of involvement that goes beyond the normal absorption a reader usually experiences. Slocombe writes that "by reading and 'inhabiting' the text we are thus complicit with the construction of the house's 'meaning.'"⁵⁸. The reader does not just become a part of the story through sympathizing with the characters, but he also plays a role in creating that story, because the way he reads and interprets it shapes and changes it. The house, both as a house and as a text, does not just influence us; it is also influenced by us. Hayles says that "[a]s readers enmeshed in the book, we find ourselves positioned, like Will Navidson, *inside* the book we read"⁵⁹. Here she refers to the scene in which Navidson is very deep inside the house and he is reading, and burning, a book called *House of Leaves*. She states that this scene

⁵⁷ Hayles 111.

⁵⁸ Slocombe 94-95.

⁵⁹ Hayles 130.

“presents us with a vivid warning that this book threatens always to break out of the cover that binds it”⁶⁰, because it blurs the line between the real world and the fictional world. Not unlike Navidson, who reads a book in which he is a character, we become immersed in the book’s world. But, as Slocombe also states, “[a]s readers, we are unable to dwell within the space proffered by *House of Leaves*, just as Navidson finds it impossible to live within the House”⁶¹.

What blurs the line between reality and fiction most of all is the book’s typography. Usually the thing that differentiates the two is the fact that readers can step away from the content and realize it is nothing but words printed on paper and that the rest is in their minds. With *House of Leaves* this becomes a little less simple. Surely it is a book, ink on paper, but it is not *just* a book. The connection between the book, the printed pages, and the story, its content, is so strong that it is even possible to state that the story has modified the book and the book has changed the way we read the story. There are several instances where it is clearly visible how the typography and the story align. For instance, the way the words “s t r e t c h i n g” and “e x p a n d i n g”⁶² are written represents exactly what they mean. There is a page with one line on the side saying “silence predominates”⁶³, with the bottom of the next page saying “[n]ot even the growl dares disturb his place”⁶⁴ in a very small font. This leaves the rest of the pages empty, representing the silence and emptiness, and the small letters showing how the growl does not dare to appear.

⁶⁰ Hayles 129.

⁶¹ Slocombe 91-92.

⁶² Danielewski 289.

⁶³ Danielewski 469.

⁶⁴ Danielewski 470.

There are also instances, mostly in chapter XX, where the book needs to be turned around and around because the words change position. “As the reader tries to follow the thread of the sentence, what actually occurs is that the sentence switches angles, bifurcates, and finally disappears, just as the ‘concrete’ walls of the House do”⁶⁵. The typography keeps changing and every time the page is turned the reader needs to re-establish his position pertaining to the text. This feeling of being in an uncertain environment, not knowing what to expect and not being able to count on any security whatsoever, is the same we would feel had we been inside the house itself.

Another good example is the box that appears on page 119 and is repeated on each of the following 25 pages, in exactly the same spot. On each second page, the back side, the words inside the box are mirrored, so that it seems as though the paper within this square is see-through. “The box calls into question an assumption so commonplace we are not normally aware of it – that book pages are opaque, a property that defines one page as separate from another”⁶⁶. Though it makes the reader pop out of the fictional world to look at the object in his hands, it does not show the normality of the book but its strangeness. It is not comforting to suddenly see something so well-known in a different light, it is uncanny. The outline of the box is the same color blue as the word ‘house’ is in the book and it includes a summary of all the items that are not present within the dark hallways of the house. The box represents the house and all the missing items are put in there “as if attempting to make up through verbal proliferation the absolute emptiness of the House as a physical space”⁶⁷. It also serves as a

⁶⁵ Slocombe 102.

⁶⁶ Hayles 123.

⁶⁷ Hayles 123.

reference to Derrida's concept of *différance*, which, in short, means that words on their own can never really encompass the things they try to describe. Instead, the words can only be explained by using other words, which in turn can only be defined by yet other words, and so on, forming an endless chain of signifiers. A word can also gain its meaning by putting it opposite other words in binary oppositions; for example, the word 'white' can be defined by saying it is not 'black' or 'red' or 'blue', etc. Listing everything that is not a part of the house seems like an attempt to describe the house through this negation. Because there is no way to describe the house by saying what it *is*, Zampanò attempts to get a grip on the house by trying to describe it by what it *is not*.

The last square has a white and empty front and a black back. Hayles explains this as "an image that suggests either nothingness or inscriptions so densely over-written they have obliterated themselves"⁶⁸ and as "the fullness of an ink-black square [...] linked with nothingness"⁶⁹, but she might be overlooking a much simpler explanation. Something clear and transparent, like a window, with something dark behind it makes a mirror. By looking into this box we still cannot see anything of what *is* present within the house and we cannot put anything inside it even in words, because everything projected onto it is being rejected by the house and thrown back at us. According to Slocombe this box is like "a two-way mirror image that allows the reader to both see through the space and yet see only themselves or what they impose upon the text"⁷⁰. Another way of looking at it is that the box seems like a tube that goes through the pages and the 'mirror' at the end of it makes it seem like it goes on forever,

⁶⁸ Hayles 123-124.

⁶⁹ Hayles 124.

⁷⁰ Slocombe 100.

perfectly resembling the dark hallways it describes. Slocombe also mentions how mirrors function in creating the uncanny, because they are “deferring the justificatory identity of the self by the self, by reflecting an image that both *is* and yet *is not* the individual,”⁷¹ so it is both familiar and unfamiliar, both *heimlich* and *unheimlich*.

Johansen discusses several other stories in his work, one of which is about an uncanny table. About this, he says: “[t]he uncanny – or magical – object [...] becomes the thematic centre of the plot; and the rest of the furniture becomes literally inessential, insofar as [this object] takes up all the narrative space, as it were”⁷². The same can be said for the house in *House of Leaves*; the house is so present and so full of darkness that it literally leaves no room for anything else. This can be seen in the descriptions of the house that take up entire pages, in the long list of things not present in the house, and in the fact that all the Feng Shui items Karen puts in the house have absolutely no effect and even disappear⁷³. As Slocombe says, “it is not that the house is empty *per se*; it is that the House is full – so full in fact, as to promote claustrophobia – of Nothing”⁷⁴. The book is completely filled by the house and the house is filled by ‘nothing’. Each attempt to cram anything else into either the book or the house, literally or in words, is in vain.

The layout of *House of Leaves* is important for different reasons. It represents its content, making this book into more than just a way to tell a story. By aligning the layout with the story, it also *shows* this story. This not only makes the reader understand the story better, it

⁷¹ Slocombe 98.

⁷² Johansen 414.

⁷³ Danielewski 315-316.

⁷⁴ Slocombe 103.

makes him experience and *feel* the story as well. The book is the external influence that leads to the uncanny developing in the reader's psyche, making the feelings of uncanniness personal for him, just like the house on Ash Tree Lane does for the characters.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have discussed the role of the house in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* in relation to the uncanny, using several steps along the way. In the first chapter I discussed the uncanny and its function in the Gothic genre, in the second chapter I focused on the way the house brings out a specific uncanny experience for each character that comes into contact with it, and in the third chapter I argued that the book itself is like a house to the reader and that this uncanny experience is thereby passed on to the reader as well.

The common denominator in all of these chapters is the feeling of uncanniness, which is, amongst other ways, evoked by using elements of classic Gothic literature such as E.A. Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*. The house in *House of Leaves* was supposed to be a real home for Navidson and his family, but because of the sudden appearance of the dark hallways it could not become a home at all. Though this would normally be seen as a negative development, it turns out to be exactly what Navidson needed: a way to postpone his domestic(ated) future and continue his nomadic lifestyle. The house reacts to his deepest fear, namely having to give up his career and stay fixed in one place.

For Johnny the effect of the house is different, because he has a different personal history. When he starts to work with Zampanò's text about the house, his phobias get stronger. He becomes alternately claustrophobic and agoraphobic, and increasingly paranoid. This stems from his relationship with his abusive foster parents and his mother, Pelafina, who tried to murder him when he was young and has spent most of his life in a mental institution because she was also paranoid and delusional. Though we do not know much about Zampanò's life, we

do know that his body was found in a house mauled by claws, that working on the Navidson Record brought out very personal and painful memories for him, and that this work eventually destroyed him.

All of these characters experience the uncanny in their own way and this shows that the uncanny is produced internally, giving it a different shape for each personality. This notion changes the way the uncanny in *House of Leaves* can be seen, because it becomes clear that 'the uncanny' is not just one thing. Although the external cause for the uncanny may be the same, in this case the house, it presents itself differently depending on the person experiencing it. It has already been said that the uncanny is connected to the psyche in general, but in *House of Leaves* this connection is more specific to the psyche of each character.

The layout of *House of Leaves* prevents the reader from simply reading this book like any other; we are put to work. We must turn it upside down and leaf through it in order to follow all the storylines and footnotes and to consult the appendices. This makes for an active and involved reading experience which keeps us from sitting back on the couch and becoming fully immersed in the story. Reading a book is of course a familiar thing to readers, but this type of reading is unfamiliar: it does not allow us to become mentally comfortable and it keeps us on our toes. We are prevented from feeling at home in the book by its content as well as its typography and this makes *House of Leaves* like an uncanny house to us. This 'house' plays the same part for us readers as the house on Ash Tree Lane does for the characters. It seems familiar at first, but instead it gives us an unfamiliar experience by making the *heimlich* become

unheimlich. This book plants the uncanny in our psyche and lets it grow, so that we experience our own version of uncanniness as well.

The fact that *House of Leaves* uses the uncanny in an unconventional way and that the book is to the reader what the house is to the characters has not yet been discussed much. It can, however, give new insights into this work and how the uncanny can be achieved within and through literature. *House of Leaves* is an intricate book that continues to give us hallways to explore and that keeps roaming the hallways of our minds as well.

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