

Bart Meijer – 3187535
Rooseveltpaan 290
3527 AL Utrecht
BA Thesis English Language and Culture
Utrecht University
British English
Prof. J. W. Bertens
6 July 2010
8588 words

Into the Labyrinth

I wanted to write a book that would raise the bar, something that people would feel deserved to be approached with the kind of respectful wariness and willingness that all great art demands. I wanted it to announce, “Look, if you're going to interpret this in a scholastic way, you'd better be ready for the long haul!” And I do feel confident that engagement will eventually happen, and I am honestly looking forward to seeing what finally comes out of it. Encouraging a critical engagement with my book--that was at least one challenge I set for myself. (Danielewski, “Haunted House--An Interview with Mark Z. Danielewski” 9)

A decade ago Mark Z. Danielewski's voluminous novel *House of Leaves* was published, a work which had cost the author another decade to compose. Earlier, parts of the novel had been published on the internet by Danielewski himself, calling to mind words as ‘hypertext’ and ‘techno text’, terms by which this type of fiction later on has been identified by critics as well as readers. Since its publication various interpretations of *House of Leaves* have been given, ranging from deconstructive approaches to psycho-analytical readings along the lines of the theories of Jentsch and Freud. As the quote above suggests, Danielewski does not supply any conclusive information as to the interpretation of his work and certainly could be the case that the novel he has produced is extremely difficult to interpret. It is, in fact, quite possible that Danielewski is not all interested in coherent readings of his novel and actively tries to prevent the reader from arriving at such an interpretation. One aspect that thwarts a

coherent interpretation of this novel is its multi-layered narrative: The novel encompasses a complex ‘Chinese-box’ structure in terms of narrative. At the core of the book lies the fictional documentary film *The Navidson Record*, made by Will Navidson. Navidson is the protagonist of this narrative layer in which the reader follows the Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer documenting his family settling in their new house on Ash Tree Lane in the Virginia countryside. What was supposed to be a light-hearted story about Will Navidson, his wife Karen Green and their offspring Tad and Daisy moving into their new residence, turns into a Gothic horror story when they discover the house holds an intricate labyrinth, a discovery which slowly tears the family apart. This disintegration is caused by Navidson’s uncontrollable urge to explore the labyrinth further and further, until he completely loses himself and subsequently everyone around him. The documentary is recorded in a collection of fragments written “on old napkins, the tattered edges of an envelope, once even on the back of a postage stamp; everything and anything but empty” by an old blind poet called Zampanò. These fragments are “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” (Danielewski xvii). All of the material is kept in a trunk which is in turn found by protagonist Johnny Truant, through whom the next narrative layer comes to us. Truant lives in the same building as Zampanò; when the latter died Truant’s friend Lude persuades Johnny to go and explore the old man’s apartment. “Sure enough, just as my friend had described, on the floor, in fact practically dead center, were the four marks, all of them longer than a hand, jagged bits of wood clawed up by something neither one of us cared to imagine” (xvii). Underneath the damaged floorboard Johnny finds Zampanò’s trunk filled with the fragments describing *The Navidson Record*. Initially scared but all the more intrigued, Truant decides to take the trunk

home and puts upon himself the arduous task of deciphering and ordering the pile of scraps. While Johnny Truant might be considered the protagonist of this narrative layer and thereby also the protagonist of the novel, another narrative layer lies on top of this one. This final is being realised by ‘The Editors’, who remain unnamed though they are ever-present throughout the entire work. In order to distinguish these different narrative layers “[t]he narratives for each of these levels are differentiated by their fonts: Times New Roman for Zampanò; Courier for Johnny Truant; and Bookman for the editors” (Hamilton, 5)¹. Danielewski is much indebted to Jorge Luis Borges concerning his use of the labyrinth. As Hamilton states: “The labyrinth is a common and complex symbol in literary works” and “[p]erhaps the author most associated with the idea of the labyrinth in modern writing is Jorge Luis Borges, who was prolific in his use of the labyrinth as a symbol, a theme, and even as a form” (5). In the article “The A-Mazing House” Hamilton draws parallels between *House of Leaves* and a number of Borges’ stories, stating that “Danielewski builds on extant uses of the labyrinth in fiction and creates a labyrinth with his form as well as his themes, using typography to further the construction of the formal labyrinth” (5). Furthermore, Bertens notes that

[i]t is not coincidental that the motif of the labyrinth keeps recurring in postmodern fiction or that a good many postmodern novels - from John Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), and Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning* (1977) to David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996) and Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000) offer fictional labyrinths in which the reader may easily get lost. (57)

With the labyrinth as core element of *House of Leaves* it is not surprising various articles about its possible meaning have been published. Most of these articles put an interpretative

¹ For a more elaborate summary of the narrative layers in *House of Leaves* see Natalie Hamilton’s “The A-Mazing House: The Labyrinth as Theme and Form in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*”.

emphasis on one particular aspect of the maze, which results in a number of theories contradicting each other or reacting upon each other. While one critic states that the labyrinth functions as a psychological trope, another states it holds a mythological meaning and again others declare that it works on a physical level. However, these views are not incommensurable: It can be stated the labyrinth in *House of Leaves* functions on different levels at the same time: psychological, mythological and physical.

First of all, the labyrinth which lies at the core of *The Navidson Record*, and subsequently at the core of *House of Leaves*, conveys a psychological meaning. As McCaffery and Sinda state in their interview with Danielewski, *House of Leaves* is “part psychological study” (1). The subject of this study is identified by Bemong as ‘the uncanny’, who states “[t]he concept of the ‘uncanny’ in *House of Leaves* [...] is extensively introduced, described and theoretically studied in the footnotes, where Danielewski combines the theories of Freud, Lacan and Heidegger” (“Exploration #6”). According to *The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* “uncanny” means “strange and difficult to explain”. However, this definition is inadequate with regard to the psycho-analytical concept of ‘the uncanny’. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* provides a more detailed definition, which clarifies the concept:

A kind of disturbing strangeness evoked in some kinds of horror story and related fiction. In Tzvetan Todorov's theory of the fantastic, the uncanny is an effect produced by stories in which the incredible events can be explained as the products of the narrator's or protagonist's dream, hallucination, or delusion. A clear case of this is Edgar Allan Poe's tale “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843), in which the narrator is clearly suffering from paranoid delusions. In tales of the marvellous, on the other hand, no such psychological explanation is offered, and strange events are taken to be truly supernatural. In psychoanalytic criticism, the term carries further significance from the influence of Sigmund Freud's article *Das Unheimliche* (“The ‘Uncanny’”, 1919),

in which he proposes that the apparently strange is a disguised representation of what is in fact familiar.

In the first section of his article Bemong sets out to define and explain the uncanny through the theories of Heidegger, Jentsch, Freud and Vidler. As the abstract of the article states, “[t]he novel can be regarded as a narrative repetition of Freud’s theorisation as put forward in his essay ‘The Uncanny’, where Jentsch’s postulation of intellectual uncertainty is replaced by Freud’s concept of suppression”. In order to follow this train of thought it is important to distinguish and explain the different psycho-analytical theories about the uncanny. First of all, Bemong shows how Danielewski uses Heidegger’s view of the uncanny to explain the “spatial violation” in the house on Ash Tree Lane: “In anxiety one feels uncanny. Here the peculiar indefiniteness of that which Dasein finds itself alongside in anxiety, comes proximally to the expression: the ‘nothing and nowhere’. But here ‘uncanniness’ also means ‘not-being-at-home’ [das Nicht-zuhause-sein]” (Danielewski 24). However, Danielewski later on writes 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 to the weird and unsafe; it is overwhelming, too much or too big. Thus that which is uncanny or *unheimlich* is neither homely nor protective, nor comforting nor familiar. It is alien, exposed, and unsettling, or in other words, the perfect description of the house on Ash Tree Lane. (28)

Further, with the concept of the uncanny serving as explanation for what is happening in the house, Bemong then goes on to show how Danielewski uses the theory of Vidler, who in a compilation of essays sets out to connect the concept of the uncanny to the field of architecture. In *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992) Vidler unites the different theories of the uncanny by Jentsch and Freud. According to Bemong, Vidler claims that

[t]he uncanny in Jentsch's conception seems to express that somebody who has an uncanny experience is not quite zu Hause [at home] in the matter, that he is not heimisch [homely], that the affair is foreign to him. 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. ... he ascribes the central factor in the production of the feeling of uncanniness to intellectual uncertainty; so that 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. (Vidler 23, qtd. in Bemong)

Furthermore, following Vidler, Bemong shows how Freud adapts Jentsch's view. Freud states the uncanny is not solely something unfamiliar but rather a two-fold concept; it 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" (Vidler 55, qtd. in Bemong). According to Bemong both views are present in *House of Leaves*:

Danielewski narratively repeats Freud's movement: at first, Jentsch's postulation seems to describe most accurately what is going on: the uncanny feeling arises from the not-knowing, the not being able to explain the phenomena taking place in the house. As the story evolves, however, Freud's concept of repression, caused by real traumas or phantasmagoria, will come forth more strongly. The idea of intellectual uncertainty is however never completely abandoned; exploration (knowledge) of the hallways eventually becomes a true obsession for the men, especially for Navidson, until the point where they are willing to risk their lives in order to attain this knowledge. ("Exploration #6")

Thus, the feeling of insecurity about the events occurring in the house eventually converges with the Freudian concept of repressed emotions. This principle is reflected by the labyrinth present in the house, which serves as a mirror for the inhabitants' psychological struggles. For Navidson, the traumatising experiences can be traced back to the early absence of his mother. Further, in the second section of his article, Bemong sets out to explore and explain the meaning of the labyrinth with reference to Vidler's theory of the uncanny. To accomplish this Bemong uses Verhaeghe's work which is essentially based upon Freud's "drive theory", combined with Lacan's theories about "The Real, The Imaginary and The Symbolic". A thorough exploration of Lacan's work would be too extensive to discuss here, therefore in this case the focus will be on Freud's drive theory². According to Bemong, the feeling of uncanniness stems from a traumatising experience which is reflected by the labyrinth. The reason to enter and unravel the maze is to overcome this trauma, in Navidson's case the loss of his mother. This trauma holds connection to the Oedipal complex and in particular to the urge to possess the parent of the other sex. As Bemong denotes Danielewski affirms this theory:

The house as vagina: The adolescent boy's primary identification lies with the mother. The subsequent realization that he is unlike her (he has a penis; she doesn't; he is different) results in an intense feeling of displacement and loss. The boy must seek out a new identity (the father) ... Navidson explores that loss, that which he first identified with: the vagina, the womb, the mother ... Navidson's house is an incarnation of his own mother. In other words: absent. (Danielewski 358)

According to Bemong, "Verhaeghe notes that within each patriarchal monotheism (itself evolved from a matrilineal clan system), it is the female who has to be mastered; the danger supposedly residing inside her has to be curbed before it is even named" (133, qtd. in

² For a detailed account of Lacan's theory please refer to: Lacan, J. *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1963).

Bemong). The male drive to conquer the woman springs from a fear of the “female lasciviousness, a lust reducing the male to a mere object” (Bemong). Verhaege states this leads to the male’s “fear to disappear in the female body”. Nevertheless, this feeling is two-fold: “Beyond the fear lies the desire for that passive position, for the subjection to the other, to that other. For the disappearance in the other” (180, qtd. in Bemong). When considering the concept of the labyrinth as vagina Bemong points to Camille Paglia, an existing critic who is being referred to in Verhaege’s work as well as in *House of Leaves*. Paglia states that “For the male, every act of intercourse is a return to the mother and a capitulation to her. For men, sex is a struggle for identity. In sex, the male is consumed and released again by the toothed power that bore him, the female dragon of nature” (qtd. in Bemong). Verhaege adds that “[s]ex is a battle that the man always loses; still he keeps joining it, driven by an inner force unknown to him and therefore situated outside himself, in the woman, where it has to be fought or fled. At the cost of that woman” (143-144, qtd. in Bemong). This mechanism is at work in *House of Leaves* and explains why Navidson enters the maze repeatedly. At this point Karen steps into the picture, for she is the one on whom Navidson projects his fear and at the same time his greatest desire. The fear manifests itself in the relationship between Navidson and his wife; it is the same anxiety Will feels, and which is reflected in the labyrinth, which forms the problem between him and his wife. When taking in account Bemong’s theory, the labyrinth symbolises the vagina (the female) which Navidson is driven into by his urge to overcome the fear of losing himself in it and subsequently into Karen. Bemong states that in the end

[w]hen Navidson enters the house as a modern Jonah to ward off the storm, and Karen takes the liberating step in the dark out of love for him, the uncanny anomalies disappear like snow in summer. Ultimately, the hallway was a challenge to Karen as well as to Navidson. Should we dare to conclude that without the hallway, which

seemed to mortgage the attempt at reconciliation entirely, this attempt might never have worked? (“Exploration #6”)

In conclusion, Navidson’s primal fear (as well as drive) manifests itself in his fear of commitment to Karen; she is what drives Navidson into the labyrinth, but she is also the one who gets him out eventually. As Hamilton states: “Both Karen and Navidson must navigate their inner mazes to reach one another at the center of the labyrinth. The strained relationship between the two is a result of her insecurity and his obsession with his work. Each has a personal Minotaur to face: Karen must overcome her fear of losing Navidson, and he must face the part of himself that places work above relationships” (6). Will Navidson’s narrative is parallel to Truant’s search for identity. As Cox claims, “Truant is an essential narrative proponent and [...] both he and his mother are integral to the house/labyrinth detailed in the Navidson Record” (5-6). Cox argues that the labyrinth symbolises the development in the Navidson family, as their bond slowly disintegrates along the lines of Will’s journey. According to Cox, “[t]he fragmentation and later reconciliation within the family unit offered by the Navidsons act as an analogy for the tortured and mysterious story of Truant and Pelafina; they too mask a secret that is confronted and finally resolved in the space of the labyrinth” (6). Like Navidson, Truant has lost his mother at a very young age, which suggests a parallel between these two narratives. Cox points out that Truant unwittingly calls the labyrinth in existence as a means to come to terms with his own memories. She also argues that “[t]he eruption of the labyrinth from within the Navidsons’ house is a physical embodiment of the terrible pain experienced by Truant at the loss of his mother from within the domestic environment” (7). This can be linked to Bemong’s theory regarding the ‘Freudian drive’ which according to him urges Navidson on; it can be said that the same drive influences Truant and that he embarks upon a journey similar to the one Navidson undertakes. Both protagonists undergo psychological changes on this journey and both of them are

confronted with their primal fear. However, Navidson's narrative is at the core of *House of Leaves*, while Truant's is placed on top of this layer. Initially, Truant is no more than a device which functions to assemble and order all of the fragments of *The Navidson Record*. Cox states "[t]he stories that define Truant seem elusive, beyond his mental recall, and cause him to begin to lose a sense of memory: 'there are so many stories [...] but I can't remember my own beginnings' (*House of Leaves* 180-81)" (9). Truant's beginnings are rooted in Pelafina's writings, for she is the only person who can give decisive answers concerning his own past and subsequently his own memories: "[S]he stands both as life-giver and potentially as life-destroyer" (Cox 9). Again, the parallel with Navidson's narrative as well as the psycho-analytical reading provided by Bemong becomes clear. Additionally, Cox suggests that "[e]scape from Truant's labyrinthine entrapment is apparently achieved when he accesses his repressed memories of Pelafina" (9). According to Hayles, accessing these memories is accomplished through Johnny's remediation of Zampanò's narrative. Hayles primarily touches upon the technological aspect of remediation through the use of different "inscription surfaces" (781). However, the principle of remediation is also at work on the psychological layer of the novel. While Truant starts out as a 'container' for Zampanò's writings which would seem to trap him in the labyrinth, he eventually constructs a narrative with a certain degree of cohesion. Through remediating Zampanò's narrative Truant gradually accesses his repressed memories, which enables him to (re)construct his own identity. Essentially, his greatest fear lies in the separation from his mother and the subsequent loss of his identity. By retelling the stories that make up *The Navidson Record* he gradually exposes the stories of his own past. In a way, Zampanò's narrative serves as a link between Truant's past, present and future. If the present represents Truant's incomplete identity, he can only proceed to the future through remediating his past. This parallels the remediation of *The Navidson Record*, for its construction aids Truant in finding his identity which can only be constituted by retelling and

reconstructing the past. The (re)constructive force provided through the process of remediation is exemplified by Hayles: “When relationships are not mediated by inscription technologies they decay towards alienation, and when they are mediated, they progress toward intimacy” (783). This also applies to Truant, whose understanding of his past through Zampanò’s narrative leads to a more intimate and truthful relationship with his mother. Moreover, various instances in *House of Leaves* point to a relation between Pelafina and Zampanò. Whereas Zampanò’s narrative functions as a means of recollecting Truant’s past, Pelafina can be regarded as the only authority on this subject. After all, she is Johnny’s mother and therefore the only one who can give conclusive answers concerning his past. As stated before, Truant can only get out of the maze by allowing his suppressed memories of his mother to surface, which he accomplishes through the remediation of Zampanò’s narrative, which then serves as a link between Truant and Pelafina. This connection is exemplified by Cox, who states that in *The Whalestoe Letters*, “Pelafina appears to make reference to Zampano's missing cats” (10). In addition, Hayles points to the code Pelafina uses in the letter on page 605: “[B]y taking the first letter of each word” the message “My dear Zampano who did you lose?” is revealed (802). Consequently, the link between the old blind man and Truant’s mother could then imply that Pelafina’s stories are mirrored in Zampanò’s. In other words, Zampanò’s narrative may reflect Johnny’s youth. Danielewski would seem to support this idea in the interview with McCaffery and Sinda: “Here’s a strange irony: I would say that in some ways Zampanó is my youth”. If Zampanò’s narrative in some way symbolises Truant’s youth it can be said that Johnny’s past, in particular his repressed memories, is retold and recollected through the fragments that make up *The Navidson Record*. Only after all of the stories have been told can Truant establish what his identity is; at first he is overwhelmed by them, then he is constricted in a web formed by those stories and eventually he finds a way out. This act of closure is reflected in the multiple layers of *House of Leaves*. First, there are

the two instances in which the book is being burned. As Hamilton states, “[Traut’s and Navidson’s narrative strands] culminate in the parallel of Navidson burning ‘the only book in his possession: *House of Leaves*’ page by page, as he reads it in an attempt to fend off boredom and keep warm, and Johnny Truant burning Zampanò’s book *House of Leaves*” (9). Cox states “that when the book and labyrinth are complete the yarn will be lost”, which is supported by a quote from Truant: “when I’m certain nothing’s left. The thread has snapped. No sound even to mark the breaking let alone the fall” (*House of Leaves* 327). The act of burning the book only takes place after all the stories have been told and the personal journey has come to an end. For Navidson this closure leads to the dissolving of the labyrinth. For Truant “[t]he disintegration of the book, caused by the remembrance of his past, results in a personal metamorphosis that is hopeful, seemingly complete and utterly apposite for the spiritual notions of the labyrinth’s restorative powers” (Cox 13-14). Cox compares the ‘snapping of the thread’ with the breaking of the umbilical chord, which “denotes the physical separation from the mother” (10), which in turn reminds us of the Freudian drive that is present in both Truant’s and Navidson’s narrative.

Furthermore, the labyrinth at the core of *House of Leaves* holds a mythological meaning. As a matter of fact, there are multiple mythological references in the novel. For example, Chapter 5 is entitled “Echo” and opens with the Greek myth about the nymph of the same name. In addition, Danielewski refers to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in this chapter, which is not the only instance this occurs. And the last page of the book features a poem entitled “Yggdrasil”, which is a symbol from Norse mythology. Danielewski is of course aware of this; Hamilton’s *Mythology* tells us that “Yggdrasil” is “a wondrous Ash Tree [...] that supports the universe” (461). On top of this, Danielewski refers to a number of mythological figures such as Apollo, Caduceus, Hecate, Hermes and so on. However, with regard to the labyrinth one particular myth springs to mind: The myth of the Minotaur. Although there are

references to other labyrinths, such as the English and Egyptian maze, the most prominent one is the Cretan Labyrinth (*House of Leaves* 109). In this myth, King Minos of Crete asks sea-god Poseidon to send him a bull which he can sacrifice. His wish is granted, but Minos chooses to sacrifice another bull, keeping the beautiful white bull which was sent to him. This angers Poseidon, who curses Minos' wife Pasiphaë by letting her fall in love with the bull he sent. Next, Pasiphaë orders the court's designer Daedalus to construct an artificial cow for her in which she can hide in order to mate with the bull. The child born out of this instance is the Minotaur, a creature with the body of a man and the head of a bull. Ashamed of the bastard son, King Minos bids Daedalus to construct a labyrinth in which the Minotaur will be held captive. Also, Minos orders Athens to send seven boys and seven girls every nine years to serve as food for the Minotaur (Morford 567). Athens was indebted to Minos because the king's son Androgeos had been murdered in Attica for winning all of the competitions that feature in the Panathenaic games. In reaction to the murder, Minos attacked Megara, which held close connections with Athens. After Megara was conquered Athens decided to reach an agreement with Minos, which involved the sacrifice of the fourteen youths to Minotaur (558). The story continues with Theseus, son of the king of Athens, Aegeus. Theseus travelled to Athens where he was recognised by his father (Ward 13). In order to prove his strength and courage, Theseus decided to set out to slay the Minotaur at Knossos. He accompanied the sacrificial youths on their journey to Crete, where he and Minos' daughter Ariadne became enamoured (15). Ariadne decided to help Theseus by presenting him with the well-known ball of thread which he could use to retrace his steps in the Labyrinth. Theseus succeeded in killing the Minotaur and escaped from Crete, leaving Ariadne behind³. Afterwards, Daedalus was punished by Minos for advising Ariadne about the thread; the artificer now became imprisoned in the Labyrinth he himself had constructed. He managed to get out, however, and

³ Accounts of what exactly happened to Ariadne differ: "Homer said that she was killed on the island of Dia at the instigation of the god Dionysus; others alleged that she killed herself. An alternative version was that when Theseus left her Dionysus made her his bride on the island of Naxos" (Ward, 16).

fled to Sicily. King Minos followed him to Sicily, where he was murdered by the daughters of the Sicilian King (16). Surely not accidentally, this particular myth is described in *House of Leaves* on pages 109 to 111, where it appears as a struck passage printed in red, a style used all through the book for fragments concerning the Minotaur. Zampanò summarises and interprets the Minotaur myth, stating that he is “convinced Minos’ maze really serves as a trope for repression” (*House of Leaves* 110). In addition, Zampanò claims that this theory inspired Taggart Chiclitz to write a play called *The Minotaur*⁴. Now, with the parallel between the Cretan Labyrinth myth and *House of Leaves* made explicit, we may further elaborate upon it by identifying which character refers to which mythological figure. First of all, there are indications that Johnny resembles the Minotaur. One clue is put forward by Hayles, who states “that within the phrase ‘The Minotaur’ is the anagram ‘O Im he Truant’” (798). Hayles adds that when Johnny makes this discovery he calls it a “particularly disturbing coincidence”, which “[o]n a more general level ... may be the special affinity this son of a crazy woman and doomed father feels for Zampanò’s tale of an abused son imprisoned by his father in a labyrinth, much as Johnny becomes imprisoned in the textual labyrinth he inherits from Zampanò” (798). In addition, Cox argues that “[c]ontact with the manuscripts effectively transforms Truant into the ‘Beast’”, which is exemplified by references to pages 324, 497 and 601 of *House of Leaves* (13). According to Cox, “[t]he threat of the stalking monster is a metaphor for the genetic link to his mother and her stigma of madness which reveals that his ultimate fear is that he is the monster he most fears”. Cox argues that Johnny’s attempt to retrieve the Minotaur myth is analogous to the reconstruction of what Pelafina has experienced in the asylum; both stories, one personal and one mythological, are incomplete and need repairing in order to gain closure. As Cox summarises things: “[Truant’s] inability to escape the network of the text highlights that what is truly fearful is within him, and so [he]

⁴ According to “Exploration Z - The Idiot’s Guide to *House of Leaves*” “M[ark] Z. D[anielewski] has used Taggart Chiclitz as a pseudonym when writing works for stage and screen, and Taggart Chiclitz is one of the first people thanked in the credits section of Poe’s album, *Haunted*”(61).

generates a narrative, resplendent in mythology, to deal with the genetic possibility that his mother's madness will invade him" (13). This theory leads to the conclusion that there is no physical beast present in the labyrinth, but that 'the beast' is a representation of the character's primal fear. This would seem to be supported by the fact that the first index entry for "Minotaur (red)" refers to page 4 but that there is no such instance on that particular page. In other words: The Minotaur does in this case not exist. Hamilton expands upon this, arguing that "this beast is not corporeal. Within the hallway, it appears as darkness, nothingness. Within the text, all reference to the minotaur appears under erasure". According to Hamilton, "It is almost as if there is no need for a physical beast, because each character has his or her own psychological demons with which to contend" (12). Still, Johnny is the only character who experiences an actual transformation into the beast, indicating that in the search for parallels between mythological figures from the Cretan Labyrinth myth and characters in *House of Leaves* he and the Minotaur first of all come to mind. Hayles argues that "[i]n Chiclitz's play (as summarized by Zampanò), King Minos slowly comes to love his deformed son and is devastated when the boy is killed by a brutal Theseus (described by Chiclitz as a 'drunken, virtually retarded, frat boy' [111])". Moreover,

[t]he tale is remediated in Johnny's dream, the first that he has been able to remember, when he experiences himself as a Minotaur wandering an enormous labyrinth, put there "by an old man, a dead man," which would seem to refer to Zampanò but also "by one who called me son though he was not my father," the phrase Johnny uses to refer to his brutal foster father Raymond. (Hayles 798)

This passage implies that Truant is being imprisoned in the labyrinth by Zampanò, which leads to a parallel between Zampanò and King Minos who incarcerated his deformed son. However, Zampanò can also be seen as the creator of the labyrinth. "Zampanò's labyrinth can be more clearly seen as one of his own making", Hamilton states. The notion of Zampanò

resembling Daedalus is reinforced by the fact he never finished his work because he becomes lost, or rather imprisoned, in it. As Hayles states

The connections with the Minotaur story are multiple, including the labyrinth as an instrument of torture, the contrast between those trapped inside the labyrinth and those who look on from the outside, and especially the legend that Daedalus was imprisoned in the artifact he created. Zampanò's closing sentence in footnote 301 makes the connection: "~~Supposedly the tyrant Phalaris killed the inventor Perilaus by placing him inside his own creation~~". (800)

Accordingly, the parallels between Zampanò as artificer of the labyrinth and the mythological artificer Daedalus become apparent. Finally, the Cretan Labyrinth myth features the hero Theseus. He is the one who enters the Labyrinth at Knossos and eventually slays the Minotaur. The most obvious character who enters the maze at the core of *House of Leaves* is Will Navidson. Although Navidson is sceptical about the physical presence of the beast, he sets out to explore the labyrinth in order to unravel its mystery. In order to strengthen this parallel it is necessary to point out the role of Ariadne, the woman providing Theseus with the thread which enables him to escape the Labyrinth. According to Cox, "[t]he role of Ariadne, as the giver of the thread, is reprised by the young Navidson daughter whose cry guides her father out of the maze, by Karen Navidson's retrieval of her husband and also by Pelafina in her desperate guidance offered to Truant" (10). As a matter of fact, the thread also physically features in the book; from "Exploration #1" onwards the team relies on a spool of fishing line to find their way back out of the labyrinth (*House of Leaves* 84). Accordingly, this notion is reinforced in a footnote in Chapter 9 of *House of Leaves*:

aside from the practical aspect of fishing line – a readily available and cheap way to map progress through that complicated maze – there are of course obvious mythological resonances. ~~Minos' daughter, Ariadne, supplied Theseus with a thread~~

~~which he used to escape the labyrinth.~~ Thread has repeatedly served as a metaphor for umbilical chord, for life, and for destiny. The Greek Fates (called Moerae) or the Roman Fates (called Fata or Parcae) spun the thread of life and also cut it off.

Curiously in Orphic cults, thread symbolized semen. (119)

Cox claims that “Truant is not a remodelling of an intrepid Theseus, with an impulse to conquer and destroy; rather he is cast as an Icarus, who finds the mechanisms of his inventions disintegrating around him” (11). Next, Pelafina is compared to Phaedra, daughter of Minos, indicating additional mythological parallels between *House of Leaves* and the Minotaur myth (Cox 12)⁵. Summing up, the resemblances between the characters in *House of Leaves* and those featuring in the Minotaur myth are evident, though in some cases it remains debatable how exactly they relate to each other.

Finally, the labyrinth in *House of Leaves* exhibits the physical properties of a maze, which are reflected in the novel itself. Danielewski employs various stylistic techniques in order to transform *House of Leaves* into a genuine labyrinth. As the author himself states in the interview with Cottrell:

[B]ooks don't have to be so limited. They can intensify informational content and experience. Multiple stories can lie side by side on the page. Search engines--in the case of *House of Leaves* a word index--will allow for easy cross-referencing. Passages may be found, studied, revisited, or even skimmed. And that's just the beginning. Words can also be colored and those colors can have meaning. How quickly pages are turned or not turned can be addressed. Hell pages can be tilted, turned upside down, even read backwards. I'd love to see that. Someone on the subway spinning a book as they're reading it. (4)

⁵ For a detailed account of this theory please refer to pages 11-12 of the article by Cox: “What Has Made Me? Locating Mother in the Textual Labyrinth of Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*.”

In order to arrive at a blueprint for the novel's structure we must distinguish certain basic elements. First of all, the narrative structure of the novel is divided into four layers: *The Davidson Record* features as core element, which in turn is mediated through Zampanò's description of the documentary; Zampanò's texts are being put together by Johnny Truant, whose story is being edited by the elusive Editors. In addition, several Appendices and Exhibits are attached to the novel, as well as an Index, a Foreword and an Introduction. Each of the narrative strands is presented in a different font: Zampanò's notes, as well as *The Davidson Record*, are printed in Times; Johnny's story is set in Courier and the Editor's remarks are printed in Bookman, the font also used for Pelafina's letters in the appendix (*House of Leaves* 4). Brick states that "[b]y this typographical manoeuvre Danielewski not only distinguishes the voices from one another, he also categorises them. He judges them and assigns them personalities" ("Blueprint" 4). According to Brick, this tradition stems from the Medieval period and can also be found in *The King James Bible* (4). Further, Danielewski uses different colours in the novel. The most well-known example is the word "house", which appears in blue throughout the book regardless of the language used. Hagler argues that "the appearance of the word 'house' in blue serves as a print hyperlink to the House itself", keeping readers close to the House at the core of the story ("Mediating Print...": 5). Another colour used in *House of Leaves* is red, which indicates that the passage in question is connected to the Minotaur myth. Most of the instances where this colour appears are struck through due to Zampanò's rejection of these fragments. Nevertheless, Truant tries to recover these scraps and incorporates them into his narrative. Hagler denotes that "Danielewski's use of red to signify this particular link underscores its status as an active link" as employed in hypertexts on the internet (5). In addition, "purple is the color associated with Johnny's memory of his mother Pelafina", a reading that is supported by Pelafina's request to Johnny in their correspondence when "she asks Johnny to bring her a purple suitcase so that she can

escape from her sanitarium”, which she “intends to use [...] as an aid in navigating her own world”. According to Hagler, “in chapter twenty-one’s passage of purple text, Danielewski portrays Johnny’s memory of his mother within the context of a visited hyperlink” (5). The notion of *House of Leaves* resembling a hypertext as found on the World Wide Web is touched upon by various scholars. As a matter of fact, the first edition of the novel was released on the net. However, Danielewski chose to present the different parts which now constitute the novel in PDF file format instead of in HTML – the latter being open to modification – in order to maintain the typographical elements of the work. According to Brick, “[t]he author's comments regarding the significance of the reader’s personal experience of the text suggest that Danielewski would find a hyperlinked House of Leaves too linear in appearance”. Brick adds that a fully hyperlinked edition of the work would enable readers to skip certain passages, thereby missing significant parts of the network behind the novel (“Rubric for a Deconstructed Age in House of Leaves” 5-6). By maintaining a static format Danielewski emphasises the intricate structure of the work, which in turn asks for an active role of the reader. Whereas traditional texts place the reader in a passive role through offering a linear reading experience, a hypertext demands active participation through the need of navigating between different parts. Danielewski tried to maintain this element in the print form of *House of Leaves*; as Sudha states:

Even in its published version *House of Leaves* gives a fair idea of what the net version must have looked like. For one, the multiple-entry structure of the hypertext is replicated in the book, *House of Leaves*, through the use of paratexts like the Foreword, the Introduction, the innumerable footnotes, the Appendices and the Index. Some of these, like the footnotes and the Index are particularly suited to challenge a linear reading experience, akin to a hypertext. (84)

However, in an online hypertext, readers navigate the text by using devices such as hyperlinks and search engines; features which are absent from print. Subsequently, the question how the reader navigates a 'printed hypertext' novel arises. In the case of *House of Leaves*, jumping from one place to another in the story is mainly accomplished through the use of footnotes, which feature throughout the novel and are an instrument in the establishment of a physical labyrinth. In addition, Hayles states that "the linking mechanisms are diverse, consisting not only of footnotes on footnotes (on footnotes) but also positional cues, nonalphabetic marks such as the dots and alchemical symbols, and complex intertextual references as the narrative weaves from Zampanò's text remediated by Johnny to Johnny's text remediated by the editors" (795). Initially, footnotes in *House of Leaves* are used to distinguish and switch between different characters; as Danielewski states in the interview with McCaffery and Sinda: "The footnotes just expanded the number of characters who could participate and interact with this main narrative" (8). When the story progresses, however, another effect is accomplished through the use of the footnotes; navigating the footnotes becomes an act analogous to being lost in a maze. Chapter 9, "The Labyrinth", particularly demands this physical labyrinthine manner of reading. As Hamilton puts it, "[t]he reader who chooses to follow the footnotes as they are presented in the narrative is forced to flip pages back and forth to earlier footnotes and later appendices, often rereading passages (or retreading corridors already traveled)" (14). One example of this procedure can be found on page 114 of *House of Leaves*, where footnote "x" appears several times. Hamilton points out "x" "is placed both at the end of a passage in the narrative and at the end of a footnote, but it does not refer the reader to a footnote at all and in essence creates a dead end". Moreover, the "x" can also be found in Appendix II-C Collage #1, "where it is identified as part of a ground-air emergency code" meaning "[u]nable to proceed" (14). However, Hamilton does not trace this footnote entirely, thereby leaving some of the labyrinthine qualities of this passage untouched.

First, the “x” features after the epigraph on page 107, where it refers to a translation of this epigraph. After the translation, halfway in the footnote, a reference to footnote 135 appears, taking the reader to page 114. At the end of this particular footnote, footnote 129 appears, redirecting the reader to page 111. Here the narrative can be picked up with Derrida’s theory and subsequently Truant’s translation, which appears in footnote 130, which in turn refers to footnote 131 and then to note 132, which continues with note 133. In note 133 Truant refers to “[p]ages 30, 356 and 441”, thereby redirecting the reader again. When we go on to page 114 the “x” appears twice, as noted by Hamilton (14). In addition, the “x” features at the end of the struck passage on page 115, where it creates another dead end. A similar example can be found on page 117, where a reference to footnote 142 appears. The note itself features on the next page; it consists, however, of blank lines, creating the illusion of a path, which then turns out to be yet another dead end. Further, Sudha indicates that “[f]ootnote 168 ... has two inset passages, one recounting the voyage of Magellan in 1519, and the other of Hudson in 1610”. Moreover, “[f]ootnotes 169,171,180 and 170—in this order—are appended to these two accounts which are part of footnote 168, thus producing multiple embedded footnotes” (85). Sudha does not mention that in footnote 169 on page 137 a reference to note 155 appears. Footnote 155 can be found on page 123 and again ends with the “x”, constituting another cul-de-sac. Hayles draws our attention to a similar case:

Just as the House can stretch to incredible dimensions and lure the explorers into long treks that culminate in dead ends, so the narrative entices us into following up on footnote 171, where Zampanò refers us to “*The Song of Quesada and Molino* by [XXXX],” to which is attached footnote 172 telling us the text in brackets is illegible (137), a tease repeated on a larger scale in Section E of the appendix, which contains only the title “The Song of Quesada and Molino” and footnote 433 by “Ed.” telling us this document is missing. (797)

Apart from dead ends, other mechanisms that suggest a labyrinth are deployed in chapter nine. Hagler, for example, points out that

[S]ome of this chapter's footnotes develop in reverse. Footnote 147, positioned upside down in the right margin of the right page, begins on page 135 and ends on page 121, reversing both the orientation and ordering of footnote 146, which occupies the left margin of the left page. These abnormally-placed footnotes create the textual labyrinth by quickly moving the reader forward in footnote 146 only to force her to return to where she started in the subsequent footnote. (4)⁶

To complicate matters even more, some of the footnotes referred to are printed in mirrored script, making it very difficult to find them. In the interview with McCaffery and Sinda, Danielewski provides the location of footnote 183: "Eureka, I found it! The missing text for footnote 183 can be found on page 140. It was just a little hard to locate because it's written backwards" (114). Nevertheless, Chapter 9 is not the only part of the novel where leaps in the narrative are encouraged through the use of footnotes. In chapter ten, for instance, footnote 219 refers to "page 332-333" (*House of Leaves* 244). In Chapter 13 ("The Minotaur"), page 329, footnote 281, the reader is advised to "refer back to Chapter 5; footnote 67. – Ed.", thereby exemplifying references between footnotes on different locations as well. Another atypical use of footnotes can be found in Chapter 15 where Johnny informs the reader that some pages are rendered illegible due to the ink he spilt; the footnotes are still there but they refer to a non-existent text (*House of Leaves* 373-376). Furthermore, Danielewski employs various typographical devices in order to manipulate reading speed as well as to complement certain time-related experiences in the story. Barton states that although the use of typography for this particular purpose might frustrate or even frighten readers: "[T]he typographical trickery begins to make sense as Navidson's plot becomes progressively more spine-tingling and the narrative trickles down to a mere thread, with only a phrase or sentence appearing on

⁶ This particular device seems to foreshadow Danielewski's later work "Only Revolutions".

each page; the reader races through the pages exactly as her mind races to find out what happens next” (1). Especially in Chapter 20 this “typographical terror” is felt by the reader⁷.

Hamilton states the following about this particular chapter:

Not only must the readers navigate the levels of narrative and their corresponding perigraphic apparatuses, but they must also negotiate a textual layout that incorporates upside-down, backwards, horizontal, vertical, and otherwise oddly placed text. As an artifact, the book becomes the labyrinth, and as readers progress through it, they must flip forward and back and turn the book in every possible direction to read the text. The reader becomes Theseus, twisting and turning, never knowing if the minotaur is around the next corner. (14-15)

As if this is not enough, the labyrinthine qualities of *House of Leaves* are also found elsewhere. Hayles focuses on the idea of remediation in the novel – “the re-presentation of material that has already been represented in another medium” – pointing out that different inscription technologies are being used in the work, including “film, video, photography, tattoos, typewriters, telegraphy, handwriting, and digital computers” (780). The use of different “inscription surfaces” and the act of mediating the story through the use of different media creates a web of various “sites”, as Ruppel calls it. Ruppel points out that *House of Leaves* features a “cross-sited narrative” in which “stories [are] told across multiple media platforms” (283). These platforms, or sites, include “audio recordings, live performances and websites” which exist outside *House of Leaves* itself (287). The act of referring to media outside the novel is what Ruppel calls “cross-siting”, a technique used for “binding locationally separate content into whole, coherent expressions” (283). Examples of cross-siting in the novel are for instance the scene where Johnny visits the pub in Flagstaff, Arizona. There, he hears the band Liberty Bell perform the song “Five and a Half Minute Hallway”,

⁷ On page 796 of the article “Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*.”, Katherine N. Hayles provides multiple examples from *House of Leaves* where this technique is employed.

which they claim is inspired by an online version of *House of Leaves* (Ruppel, 287). Moreover, Danielewski's sister, who goes by the stage name "POE", produced an album complementing the novel, "which not only contains ambient audio of the creaking and groaning of the house as it shifts, mutates and grows, but also a song that starts, profoundly, with the same lyrics that the band was singing in the novel" (288). The act of referring to various media outside the book contributes to the construction of yet another physical labyrinth as the reader is encouraged to look beyond the physical boundaries of *House of Leaves*. As Ruppel puts it: "The book does indeed have a life outside of itself – it is now part of a complex weave of relations between media, where even a description of the faintest creak in the house's floorboards can be heard from the speakers of a passing car or, better yet, in the narratively convergent, blended space of the audience's mind" (289). To sum up, the labyrinthine properties of *House of Leaves* are diverse; ranging from an inextricable tangle of footnotes to typographical techniques influencing reading speed as well as the reading experience. In addition, the mediation through different media and the fact there are multiple sites outside the work which readers have to negotiate also contributes to the reader's experience of being trapped inside a labyrinth. As Ruch states: "Again Borges comes to mind, with a line from 'The Garden of Forking Paths': 'No one realized that the book and the labyrinth were one and the same'" ("Review").

In conclusion, the labyrinth identified as a core element in *House of Leaves* functions on different levels. First of all, there is a psychological dimension which can be explained through the psycho-analytical theories of amongst others Freud, Jentsch, Lacan and Vidler. One of the most obvious psychoanalytical themes present in the novel can be identified as 'the uncanny', a theme which recurs throughout the work. This psychoanalytic dimension also reflects the search for identity and peace of mind of a number of the novel's characters. Secondly, the labyrinth has a mythological dimension. The maze at the core of *House of*

Leaves is closely connected to the Minotaur myth and various parallels can be traced between the two stories. Different characters in the novel compare well to the characters in the myth about the Minotaur: Johnny Truant resembles the Minotaur but also shows parallels with Icarus; Zampanò is identified as Daedalus, the creator of the maze; Navidson relates to the maze-treader Theseus; Karen Green is linked to Ariadne, a role which also fits little Daisy and in some respects Truant's mother Pelafina. In addition, the latter is in some theories compared to Phaedra, the daughter of King Minos. Finally, the labyrinth possesses the physical properties of a maze, which are reflected in the novel on different levels. Initially, the use of footnotes and other textual devices causes the reader to navigate through the text as if it were a physical labyrinth. The use of different typographical techniques reinforces this experience, as they are employed to manipulate the reading experience which becomes analogous to the physical act of treading a maze. What is more, the references to media and sites outside the text itself contribute to the idea of *House of Leaves* as a substantial labyrinth. To conclude, despite the fact Danielewski refuses to give any conclusive information about his work, a traditional close reading with the idea of the labyrinth at its core brings us a bit closer to a coherent interpretation of *House of Leaves*.

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