THE LOCATION OF MEANING IN THE POSTMODERNIST LITERARY TEXT: A READING OF MARK Z. DANIELEWSKI'S *HOUSE OF LEAVES* AND RELATED MATERIAL

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ABSTRACT

In *House of Leaves*, Mark Z. Danielewski has produced a text which epitomises the traits and concerns of postmodernist literature. Through his attention to aspects such as metafiction, intertextuality and parody, Danielewski develops a narrative structure which is best understood as a literary labyrinth. It is a structure intended to reflect the social conditions of the twenty-first century and comment on the experience of people living at this time. Some of the meaning-making strategies within the book's labyrinthine structure are thus discussed in detail in order to demonstrate the relevance and importance of *House of Leaves* as social commentary.

House of Leaves is an exemplary postmodernist text, but it is also one that seeks to guide the reader beyond the intellectual impasse of the postmodernist paradigm toward a renewed ethical and political engagement with the world. One of the most important goals of both Danielewski's novel and this thesis is to attempt to redefine the postmodernist perspective in such a way as to insist on the necessity of what I call a new realism. This is founded upon an awareness of the pervasiveness of the self-perpetuating ideology of capitalism, even in the perspective of postmodernism (which purports to subvert all authoritative ideologies). Playing a crucial role in perpetuating the status quo of capitalism is the growth of entertainment culture, which works to sideline crucial political issues by replacing information with infotainment. The result is an intensification of the processes of commodification. Such an intensification, it is argued, may be countered by a radical scepticism which draws upon the methods and insights of contemporary science.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

House of Leaves by Mark Z. Danielewski invites and rewards exploration on many levels. This thesis reads the novel as a postmodernist literary text, showing how Danielewski positions himself as both writer and theorist, while at the same time radically repositioning postmodernist and postcolonial literary theories in the context of recent scientific thinking. That is, Danielewski uses science to determine the parameters within which literary theory (or any theory) might be regarded as valid.

House of Leaves did not initially attract much attention. But there has been a steady build up of interest in the book, to the point that it is safe to say that it now enjoys a wide following, significantly (as I hope to show) amongst both critics and 'casual' readers alike. The rate of growth of interest in *House of Leaves* snowballed in late 2003, testimony to the novel's unique but intuitively accessible narrative structure, as well as to the relevance of the issues that the narrative foregrounds to life in the early twenty-first century. This thesis will also explore some of these issues.

House of Leaves is both a gripping narrative and a strongly theoretical work. It deals with the intersections of the 'real' world of the readers of the novel, with the metanarratives of the worlds of science and art which essay conceptual explanations of the world. The novel therefore builds a textual scaffolding which Danielewski uses to support a discussion of current epistemological theories, some of which remain stable and some of which collapse. The 'house' (Navidson's labyrinth and all it represents) is a small, visible part of a much larger structure, most of which is (metaphorically) hidden deep underground. These are depths which are often identifiable in myths, for instance the myth of the Minotaur, which will be discussed in Chapter Two. *House of Leaves* is a myth-making text insofar as it reveals the ideology underlying both present and past mythologies.

Chapter One, 'Building the Labyrinth', will demonstrate that Danielewski has an acute grasp of the theoretical concerns of the postmodernist perspective, and that *House of Leaves* can usefully be regarded as epitomising postmodernist literature. Attention will be paid to issues such as genre, intertextuality, metafiction and the use of parody. The figure of the labyrinth, central to the book's narrative and theoretical concerns, is introduced in this chapter, to show how the labyrinth explored by Will Navidson and his team serves as an

analogue for the novel's structure, to the extent that the book itself can be regarded as a literary labyrinth. The labyrinth will furthermore be shown to reflect the epistemology of the postmodern age, as well as the structures of meaning a reader constructs as he or she comes to an understanding of the text. This chapter also discusses how Danielewski's narrative resists the 'postmodern paradox', a paradox arising from the postmodernist resistance of authority while it can be itself regarded *as* an authority.

Chapter Two, 'Negotiating the Labyrinth', is concerned with ways in which readers might approach the text. Attention is thus paid to the meaning-making strategies employed in *House of Leaves*, and how these can be identified and interpreted by readers. An important question addressed in this chapter is: If the postmodernist text truly resists authority, then how can it impart meaning, in which authority is implicit? How do readers deal with a literary labyrinth in the face of this inherent contradiction in postmodernist thought? In the same way that a person can get lost in a physical labyrinth, readers can get lost in the unanswered questions and defamiliarised territory of a book such as this. Allied to this is the question of whether readers need to be versed in postmodernist theory in order to comprehend such a text, a question carried over into Chapter Three.

Chapter Two discusses some of the meaning-making strategies employed in the book under the headings 'Structure', 'Space and Identity' and 'Representation'. The physical composition of the book, in terms of both typographical and narrative arrangements, is itself a meaningful element of the text. The characters of Will Navidson and Johnny Truant are symbolic figures for readers of the book, and their approaches to the labyrinthine structure of the house suggest approaches to the book. A crucial element here is the way in which the maze shifts its structure, and the effects that this movement has upon the explorers and their attempts to understand the maze. As figured in the book's typography and narrative disjunctions, the movement serves to remove structural signposts that readers customarily rely upon.

The section titled 'Space and Identity' looks at the labyrinth as the representation of a space seemingly open for colonisation and appropriation, and examines how this relates to reading the text. It demonstrates the book's concern with ideas of identity, nation and nationalism, and how these ideas inform the actions of, particularly, Johnny Truant. Navidson's exploration of the maze can be read as a form of colonisation. *House of Leaves*

encourages scepticism towards the founding myths of nations, particularly those of America, calling into question the idealised glory of the frontier. It then in turn persuades readers to reconsider their own sense of national identity.

Representation of the characters in the book is used as a means to show the way in which people build representations of themselves and of others, and the inherent biases in these representations. Such biases may set up binary oppositions which become self-perpetuating and diminish the reader's chance of coming to a balanced understanding of the text. The way in which categories may arise is shown in the relationships among Navidson, Karen and Tom.

In each of the three sections of Chapter Two, the effect of the postmodernist perspective is considered. Discussion of the postmodernist perspective lays the foundation for Chapter Three, 'A New Realism?', which attempts to redefine the postmodernist literary position in the light of scientific thinking.

The first issue discussed in Chapter Three is the distinction between naive and critical readers. 'Critical readers' refers here to those trained in literary theory, who are presumed to have a superior ability to read complex texts. But an important concern of the novel is to make literary-theoretical issues accessible to non-theorists: here, Johnny Truant is a figure for the non-critical reader who discovers a critical ability. By making theoretical issues accessible, the book makes it possible to consider the usefulness of a radically sceptical treatment of literature strongly influenced by science and the manner of progress in scientific knowledge. This theoretical advance is described as a new realism, a perception capable of refining the postmodernist view of the connection (or lack of it) between literature and reality.

Chapter Four deals with another implicit contradiction in postmodern literature: the fact that its 'messages' are carried by a medium designed for commercial gain. *House of Leaves* has to be read in the context of the commercial culture of contemporary existence. Consideration is therefore given to whether the desire to make money may entirely replace artistic, political or ethical impulses as reasons for writing (bearing in mind that there have always been some authors who wrote purely to make money). What is the place of literary art in the context of the culture of consumerism prevalent in the twenty-first century? An aspect of consumer culture which epitomises the desire for the speedy meeting of demands and transfer of information is the Internet. Literature has found a place on the net in the form of

hypertext, and the significance of such writing for the field of literary studies is considered in terms of the adaptation of *House of Leaves* from hypertext to print format, to suggest how contemporary literature might serve to highlight the inequalities of capitalist democracy. The final section of Chapter Four, 'Ownership and the Individual', takes a closer look at how the text of *House of Leaves* represents these inequalities.

This thesis is driven by the need to identify some way(s) of moving beyond a postmodernist impasse in which meaning and interpretation are impossible because all forms of authority are subverted. It seeks to point out how individual readers may discover new ways of approaching the reality in which they live with an awareness of the complicity of the observer in the observation. The aim is to show that Danielewski's novel is radically innovative, and that it provides a useful way forward for literary theorists. This study therefore proposes a new form of scepticism which takes into account and integrates with itself the changed and changing circumstances of human existence in modern times.

CHAPTER ONE
BUILDING THE LABYRINTH

This chapter will be concerned with demonstrating that *House of Leaves* has been constructed in an overtly theoretical manner by an author versed in postmodern literary theory, to the extent that the book can be regarded as epitomizing the postmodern literary text. This will require a discussion of the principal tenets of postmodernist thought and their implications for the novel as a genre. The purpose of the discussion will be to show that this novel has a function beyond merely telling a story, and is in fact a form of theorizing in itself, offering a practical application of theoretical principles and a consideration of the implications of those principles. In the case of this text, "the wall between academic literary studies and fiction has been demolished" (Currie 1998: 70).

An obvious starting point would be a definition of the postmodern, but this is inherently problematic because of the wide range of definitions that have been proposed by various theorists. Linda Hutcheon, for instance, holds that "postmodernism ... [in] general terms ... takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement" (Hutcheon 1989: 1). Patricia Waugh sees it as "the latest version of a long-standing attempt to address social and political issues through an aestheticised view of the world, though it may be more *thoroughly* aestheticising than any previous body of thought" (Waugh 1992: 6). Jean-Francois Lyotard, in his book *The Postmodern Condition*, offers what is probably one of the most essential definitions: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard 1984: xxiv). This brief and seemingly innocuous statement has a wide range of implications in terms of novelistic techniques. Metanarratives are what Lyotard calls "the apparatus of legitimation" (*ibid.*). They can be viewed as the overarching constructs which regulate the production of narratives by providing a set of rules for their formulation. Metanarratives govern not only fictional tales but also modes of understanding concepts such as religion, state, and fundamental notions of 'right' and 'wrong'. They are the means by which social institutions legitimize themselves, setting up paradigms against which the production of knowledge is measured for acceptability. Any new narrative which contradicts the values of the existing metanarratives will be rejected. Thus, in the context of religion, for instance, the term 'heresy' can be viewed as encompassing doctrines which go

against the accepted wisdom, the paradigmatic metanarrative of the Church, which relies on rigid acceptance of its values for continued existence.

It follows that implicit in this process of self-legitimation is the concept of authority. Metanarratives form the basis for social institutions' claims to authority, that is, the right to declare what is 'right' and what is 'wrong' or what constitutes acceptable behaviour, even acceptable belief. Philip Wood describes this authority as the organizing principle of "a totality" which "always assumes a vantage point ... outside of the system of difference ... which has, therefore, the ontological status ... [of] an unquestioned centre of power and authority ... it is precisely this assumption which disappears in postmodernism" (Wood 1993: 151). So the postmodern's "incredulity towards metanarratives" can be read as an incredulity towards authority in general, and the authoritarian.

The novel, as a genre, has been subject to its own metanarratives, understood as a set of standards in terms of which readers, and especially critics, understand what constitutes a novel, and whether or not it is 'good'. These include categories such as 'realist', 'modernist' and 'surrealist', each school of thought regarding its own approach as the best way to write, or as the most accurate representation of everyday experience:

> The defining qualities of 'Literature', and consequently the works which are considered such, have varied according to the school of criticism then in the ascendancy. These schools then select such works for the canon as are most accessible to their form of analysis ... certain sorts of writing rather better demonstrate the insights available to any particular methodology.
>
> (Potter 1999: 194-95)

Thus, the postmodern novel can be understood as a form of resistance to such categories, a break from the exclusive compartmentalization of narratives. Lyotard writes: "Postmodern knowledge is not ... a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and refines our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy" (Lyotard 1984: xxv). This implies a creative environment where 'anything goes', in which no one voice may be regarded as inherently superior or 'right'. Original invention (insofar as postmodernism believes it to be at all possible) is not frowned upon, but welcomed. Thus, space is created for a break: from

novelistic tradition, from the metanarratives which control the creation of novels, and from the traditional ideas which novels have expressed under the control of traditional metanarratives. So, to rephrase the introductory paragraph, this chapter will be concerned with how this break is reflected in the writing of novels which call themselves postmodernist, and how *House of Leaves* can be seen to exemplify this phenomenon.

Before this is attempted, though, there is a very important question which must be raised. There seems to be a paradox inherent in postmodernism, which is: how can postmodernism, with its resistance to authority, negotiate its own status as an authority? Is it not itself a metanarrative, a set of rules for the production of texts? An extension of this paradox is, if indeed the postmodernist text rejects authority, then how can it produce meaning(s), in which authority is implicit? This question is central to a critical examination of *House of Leaves* because it provides the primary mechanism for the construction of the novel's labyrinthine narrative: that is, the resistance of that narrative to being set up as an authority. In fact, such resistance could be seen as the defining trait of the postmodernist text, and it is this resistance which then stands in peril of becoming a metanarrative itself (a standard against which the value of a text may be judged): "paradoxically, the particularity of texts or readers only becomes recognisable through a shared descriptive vocabulary which itself constantly threatens to homogenise the heterogeneity it advances" (Currie 1998: 14). The problems resulting from the paradox of authority, in relation to the text's meaning and interpretation by the reader, will be considered in Chapter Two. For now, emphasis will be placed on how the questioning of and resistance to the authority of metanarratives, the driving force behind the break from novelistic tradition adumbrated above, functions to set up the labyrinthine nature of the postmodernist text in general, and *House of Leaves* in particular.

The figure of the labyrinth can be viewed as analogous to the literary structure that results from the application of postmodernist writing techniques, which enact the questioning attitude described above. This is an attitude which such texts seek to impart to their readers, so as to encourage them to look for something beyond the reassurance of the familiar. On the generic level, this is how *House of Leaves* functions as a horror novel: something unfamiliar is happening and the characters must face it. However, techniques are applied which bend the genre to a different purpose, so that a reader also faces something unfamiliar at the level of text, a literary labyrinth. Revealing *House of Leaves*'s postmodernism and considering its

nature as a textual labyrinth are in effect two sides of the same coin, in that the labyrinthine nature of the text is a manifestation of its postmodernism; while the labyrinth of the house (which reflects the textual labyrinth), explored by Navidson, simultaneously reflects postmodernity as the social context in which the novel was written. The adoption of the figure of the labyrinth is appropriate here because of its central position in the text itself, in the form of the labyrinth that Will Navidson discovers - and which he explores in a way that parallels the experience of a reader confronted by the textual labyrinth of *House of Leaves*. This textual labyrinth will, in turn, be shown to reflect the epistemological labyrinth of postmodernity.

The textual labyrinth is built by confounding the expectations of the reader. Instead of a novel presented in the familiar fashion of a linear story to be read line by line from beginning to end, there is a convoluted and non-linear arrangement of narratives presented in such a manner as to force active involvement on the part of the reader in unpicking and making sense of them. The expectations of the reader are based largely on received metanarratives of genre and associated assumptions regarding what characteristics specific genres should exhibit, and it is the "*non-fulfilment* of generic expectations that provides ... the starting point for innovation" (Waugh 1992: 64), consequent on the recognition that "genre ... functions much like a code of behaviour established between the author and his reader" (Dubrow 1982: 2). *House of Leaves* actively resists the label 'horror novel' and the expectations concomitant with it, and it is this resistance which gives rise to its labyrinthine form, just as the postmodern's resistance to the authority of metanarratives gives rise to a similarly labyrinthine network of voices and the paradox of postmodern authority (see Chapter Two). This resistance is enacted in an overtly theoretical manner and revealed in the self-reflexive character of the text. Consideration is given below to some specific techniques typical of postmodern literature identifiable in *House of Leaves*; techniques which, on a more general level, set up the labyrinthine nature of postmodernist literature.

The concept of authority is part and parcel of the notion of literary narratives as stable structures. It is this presumed stability that informs the writing and critical analysis of texts in the realist mode, a presumption which postmodernism resists:

> terms like process, becoming, play, slippage and dissemination, challenge the idea

> that a narrative is a stable structure by borrowing their metaphors from the semantic field of movement. In short, [postmodernists] moved away from the treatment of narratives ... as buildings, as solid objects in the world, towards the view that narratives were narratological inventions construable in an almost infinite number of ways. The shift from coherence to complexity was part of this broad departure from the view of narratives as stable structures.
>
> (Currie 1998: 3)

It is this notion of complexity and play that *House of Leaves*, and postmodern texts in general, use in their intricate construction, an intricacy which brings about problems of interpretation for the reader. The resistance to authority described above plays a role in all of the techniques discussed below, and so will form an extended theme throughout this chapter. The techniques to be discussed combine to bring about a radical defamiliarisation of the novel as a genre.

1. Genre and Author(ity)

House of Leaves is a work of fiction, a novel, as is made clear by the blurb on the cover ("A great novel") and by the usual disclaimer on the verso of the title page, stating that it is a work of fiction and that no similarity is intended to actual events or persons, living or dead. From the first, though, with the dedication "This is not for you", it is made clear to the reader that this is no ordinary novel. Resistance to classification within a specific genre can be related to the postmodern's resistance to authority if it is understood that

> genre invites [an] analogy from daily experience: the way a social institution, such as an established church or legislative body, functions ... much like a firmly rooted institution, a well-established genre transmits certain cultural attitudes, attitudes which it is shaped by, and which it in turn helps to shape.
>
> (Dubrow 1998: 3-4)

So the resistance to genre is analogous to resistance to the authority of the metanarratives described earlier, and thus enacts one of the central principles of postmodernism. In the context of the novel, Danielewski's position in relation to his text is linked to the concept of

genre, because one of the expectations of the reader is that an author, such as Danielewski, will be happy to take credit for his work, and not attempt to make himself as inconspicuous as possible.

Contrary to this expectation, what become strikingly apparent in ***House of Leaves*** are the strategies employed to distance the author from his work. One of the most well-known and discussed examples of this strategy is to be found in John Fowles's ***The French Lieutenant's Woman***, in which the narrator states: "a genuinely created world must be independent of its creator; a planned world ... is a dead world. It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live" (Fowles 1970: 86). Simply put, Fowles's authorial narrator purports not to know what the characters of the book will do next, and it is this that gives them life of their own, an existence outside of the mind of their author. Danielewski achieves a similar effect by setting up a string of sources between himself and the text. The reader is presented with Mark Danielewski's account of the tale of Johnny Truant and his compilation of and comments on Zampano's work on Will Navidson's film of events in the house that he and his partner, Karen, purchased. There is a strong impression that the work is actually that of Johnny Truant, who has found Zampano's work, an academic survey of thought and writing on Navidson's film, and that Truant has made it his business to collate and compile the text into something approaching coherence. This collation is necessitated by the fact that Zampano's work consists of

> ... endless snarls of words, sometimes twisting into meaning, sometimes into nothing at all, frequently breaking apart, always branching off into other pieces I'd come across later - on old napkins, the tattered edges of an envelope, once even on the back of a postage stamp; ... layered, crossed out, amended; handwritten, typed; legible, illegible; impenetrable, lucid; torn, stained, scotch-taped; ... whole passages of god knows what - sense? truth? deceit? ... find your own words; I have no more; and all to tell - what?
>
> (Danielewski 2000: xvii)

The burden of authorship is passed on to Johnny Truant, so that Danielewski stands outside the text in more than just the sense of the separation of reality from fiction. This is noticably similar to the strategy adopted by Umberto Eco in ***The Name of the Rose***, where the narrator,

in order to discover the origin of the story of Adso of Melk and William of Baskerville, must wade through a mire of texts ancient and new, translations and bibliographies, so that the authorship of the text becomes exceedingly vague:

> If something new had not occurred, I would still be wondering where the story of Adso of Melk originated; but then ... I came upon the Castillian version of a little work by Milo Temesvar ... an Italian translation of the original, which, now impossible to find, was in Georgian, and here, to my great surprise, I read copious quotations from Adso's manuscript, though the source was neither Vallet or Mabillon; it was Father Athanasius Kircher (but which work?).
>
> (Eco 1983: 3)

Instead of showing itself as a carefully constructed novel, ***House of Leaves*** takes on the guise of (a parody of) carefully constructed academic research, as Truant struggles to make sense of Zampano's ramblings. The title page emphasizes the distance between work and author by crediting the work to Zampano, "with introduction and notes by Johnny Truant". This serves to mask the fictional status of the text, in a similar strategy to that employed by the makers of the film ***The Blair Witch Project***, which is presented as a documentary gone horribly wrong, and thus as taking place in the real world, the world of the viewer/reader. ***The Blair Witch Project*** was so successful in this regard that the residents of Burkittsville, Maryland, a real town where the events of the film were supposed to have taken place, were subjected to a stream of 'witch-hunters' who actually believed that the film portrayed real events. This is the same effect that Danielewski wishes to achieve, masking his book's fictionality, and thus its status as a novel, in order to draw readers into the events of the book. While the pretence of factuality is the oldest ruse of prose fiction, readers are ordinarily confidently aware of the ruse. In the cases of ***The Blair Witch Project*** and ***House of Leaves*** the very fact that a ruse is in operation is skilfully concealed, through the use of the style of the documentary:

> no matter how moving, riveting or terrifying a film [or novel] may be , it is still only entertainment. Documentaries, however, rely on interviews, inferior equipment, and virtually no effects to document real events. Audiences are not allowed the safety net of disbelief and so must turn to more challenging mechanisms of interpretation which

> ... may lead to denial and aversion.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 139)

It is to this end, to remove the safety net of disbelief and so challenge his readers, that he sets out to defamiliarise the novel as a genre through strategies based in literary theoretical technique.

> If one accepts the ... thesis that human languages adequately reflect the outer world, it will follow immediately that ... we shall have a real opportunity to answer the eternal ontological questions - to understand the way the world around us is built.
>
> (Nalimov 1981: xvi)

In order to provide a "real opportunity to answer the eternal ontological questions", Danielewski adapts the already familiar, and safe, "human language" of the novel to that of the documentary on the assumption that the language of the documentary can more adequately "reflect the outer world" and its insecurity, often effaced in the language of fiction. By bending the formulae of specific genres to a purpose other than that dictated by their traditional characteristics, Danielewski is attempting just this, to examine the way the world is reflected in, and indeed constructed by, literature, and how, by deconstructing the boundaries between genres, a more accurate representation of this world may be achieved (whether or not this new representation is indeed more accurate will be the subject of Chapter Three). To this end he adopts a pseudo-documentary style which overlaps with, and to a large extent effaces, the functioning of the book as a novel. While readers read the story of the life of Johnny Truant they simultaneously read the story of his work on Zampano's manuscript as well as the actual manuscript itself. Truant's story takes the form of footnotes to the Zampano manuscript, his comments on the text often rambling off into long digressions concerning his childhood and experiences in his present life. Consequently, the reader cannot be sure which is the primary narrative, and must regard both as of equal importance. Thus there is a conflation of academic treatise, biography, documentary and novel which undermines the strictures of genre.

This conflation does not end here. Zampano's record is itself based on his study of the film that Will Navidson made of the house, *The Navidson Record*, of which Zampano says:

> From the outset of *The Navidson Record*, we are involved in a labyrinth, meandering from one celluloid cell to the next, trying to peek around the next edit in the hopes of finding a solution, a centre, a sense of whole, only to discover another sequence, leading in a completely different direction, a continually devolving discourse, promising the possibility of discovery while all along dissolving into chaotic ambiguities too blurry to ever completely comprehend.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 114)

The above paragraph is then given a footnote:

> By granting all involved the right to wander ... that which is discursive will inevitably reappropriate the heterogeneity of the disparate and thus with such an unanticipated and unreconciled gesture bring about a reassessment of self. See Daniel Hortz's *Understanding the Self: The Maze of You* (Boston: Garden Press, 1995; p. 261)
>
> (*Ibid.*)

There is a veritable maze of footnotes and references such as this one, some of them to existing texts, some to invented ones. Thus the structure of the text reflects the comments Zampano makes regarding *The Navidson Record* in the extract quoted above, taking the form of a discourse which does indeed dissolve into chaotic ambiguity, leaving the reader struggling to pick out text from commentary, 'truth' from deceit, and all the while faced with a discourse which very often assumes the tone of an academic treatise rather than a work of fiction. In effect, Danielewski has removed the signposts of author and genre. This is again reminiscent of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, where Fowles rejects

> the artistic implications of the novelistic illusion: first, that the novelist is a god who ... creates what and how he pleases ... and secondly, that the reader is reading a verisimilar 'slice of life' to which, paradoxically, he [sic] need not seriously respond, since it is 'only a novel,' only entertainment, only fictive.
>
> (Hutcheon 1989: 59)

By masking the novelistic status of this work, Danielewski implies that its readers do not have this least demanding of options at their disposal - they cannot dismiss it as 'only a novel' as it is, apparently, something else entirely: a semi-autobiographical account of the

collation of an academic study of a film (Navidson's documentary, *The Navidson Record*) about a dark and seemingly supernatural maze. In this manner, Danielewski plays with the boundaries between genres and between author and text to set up the beginnings of a literary labyrinth.

2. Intertextuality

"Intertextuality," say Michael Worton and Judith Still, "is at least as old as recorded human society" (1990: 2). They go on to claim that Plato, in his Socratic dialogues, "has insights which have much in common with ... modern theories of intertextuality," (3) and in fact that "the dialogues enact much of what has later been defined as the essence of intertextuality" (*ibid.*). For example:

> Plato's typical creation does not have an imposed unity; it is a sometimes meandering and inconclusive discussion, which is characterised by digression and which is often playful or even savagely satirical. The starting point is usually random, apparently accidental ... [and] leads on to a play of different languages representing various contemporary belief systems some of which will be unmasked, while others will float, suspended, engaging generations of readers in controversy over their status or meaning. The ambivalence of the dialogues lies ... in the diversity of ideologies evoked.
>
> (Worton and Still 1990: 3)

The importance of intertextuality to *House of Leaves* cannot be overestimated. By distancing himself from the text in the way described above, Danielewski prepares the way for a maze of intertextuality, an explicit enactment of the following theoretical position:

> The theories of intertextuality insist that a text ... cannot exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole, and so does not function as a closed system ... the writer is a reader of texts ... and therefore the work of art is inevitably shot through with references, quotations and influences of every kind.
>
> (Worton and Still 1990: 1)

Overt intertextuality is one of the defining characteristics of *House of Leaves*. Its primary narrative takes the shape of a commentary on a commentary on a commentary (Truant on Zampano on Navidson), each dependent on the other for meaning and relevance, while Truant and Zampano's narratives are both heavily annotated with footnotes and references to other texts. So, instead of a single source of information, the novel itself, there is a plurality: the reader is reminded that no text stands by itself, but rather forms part of a body of literature over which there can be "no imposed unity", because intertextual connections (both overt and covert) are inevitable. It is in order to avoid such an imposition, which amounts to the setting in place of an authoritative metanarrative selected by the author, that Danielewski distances himself from the text, and then makes it clear that his text (or rather, the surrogate author Johnny Truant's text) is dependent on many others for the information which it contains. This is wholly in tune with the postmodern perspective that no single voice or point of view is necessarily more important or authoritative than any other, and that to hide or deny the influence of the works of others on one's own work is to engage in a kind of repressive violence. Such a strategy is identifiable, for instance, in the traditionally patriarchal and racial bias of the western literary canon, which, since colonial times,[1] has tended to deny cultural significance to anybody not male and not white.

The resistance to narrative unity is another typically postmodern trait. One of the best examples of this is Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller*, which consists of a series of beginnings, each chapter a digression from the previous one with the only linking factor being the chapter headings which in the final chapter form a description of the act of reading the book which the reader has just completed:

> If on a winter's night a traveller, outside the town of Malbork, leaning from the steep slope without fear of wind or vertigo, looks down in the gathering shadow in a network of lines that enlace, in a network of lines that intersect, on the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon around an empty grave - What story down there awaits its end? - he asks, anxious to hear the story.

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[1] This is, of course, a postcolonial perspective, but one with which postmodernism finds many points of agreement, in that both postcolonialism and postmodernism are concerned with interrogating privileged discourses.

(Calvino 1981: 258)

"A network of lines that enlace" and "intersect" is an evocative description of intertextuality, and also of ***House of Leaves***, which, through its fragmented narratives and maze of intertextual references, enacts Roland Barthes' description of the writerly text, what he calls the "ideal text":

> In this ideal text, the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend ***as far as the eye can reach***, they are indeterminable (meaning here is never subject to a principle of determination, unless by throwing dice); the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language.

(Barthes 1974: 5)

The echoes of Worton and Still's description of Plato's Socratic dialogues quoted above are clear, for instance in the notion of the random starting point, or of the availability of several entrances to the text. Truant accidentally comes upon Zampano's record, and given its state of disarray, is forced to choose a random starting point for his collation. The two principal narratives are presented in a parallel fashion in which neither takes precedence. The narratives are heavily fragmented and annotated, each intertextual reference a possible frame of reference for the reader, who is thus prevented from forming any conclusions regarding the ideological basis of the text; indeed, the text is thus prevented from demonstrating ***any*** particular ideology, in line with the resistance to authority of the postmodern. The removal of ideology, the denial of a specific philosophical 'entrance' to the text, is reflected in the manner in which Will Navidson gains access to the mysterious maze which extends from his house:

> Upstairs, in the master bedroom, we discover along with Will and Karen, a plain, white door ... Navidson immediately asks whether or not they overlooked the room. This seems ridiculous at first until one considers how the impact of such an

> implausible piece of reality could force anyone to question their own perceptions. Karen, however, manages to dig up some photos which clearly show a bedroom wall without a door.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 28)

Will and Karen do not know where the door came from or how to react to it. They have no previous experience to determine their reaction to it, in fact their reaction is determined precisely by this lack of experience, by the fact that they are confronted by something if not wholly impossible, then highly improbable in terms of everyday experience. Their immediate recourse is to the most obvious sources of explanation: the estate agent who sold them the house, who "gives ... a bewildered shrug when Karen asks if she has any idea who could be responsible for this outrage", and the police, who respond "Better I guess t'have been the victim of a crazy carpenter than some robber" (Danielewski 2000: 29). After this, "all obvious options are exhausted" (*ibid.*). This is the function of intertextuality here, to preclude the obvious, to make impossible a straightforward reading without consideration of the status of the work as part of a network of texts. Danielewski thus disallows passivity on the part of the reader, avoiding what Barthes describes as the "readerly" text, in which

> the reader is ... plunged into a kind of idleness ... instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text ... [a forced dilemma with a] negative, reactive value.
>
> (Barthes 1974: 4)

The labyrinth of the text is thus further complicated. The entrance to Navidson's maze is analogous to the entrance to the intertextual labyrinth which forms the body of contemporary literature (as opposed to readerly classic texts), and *House of Leaves* thus reflects that body. So when readers start to read this book, they do not enter the narrative of just *House of Leaves*, but of all the texts that have influenced it; and, furthermore, which it will in turn influence. That this is the case is apparent in the inclusion of references to books and articles written as commentary on Zampano's record, all of which are fictional, and which preempt any critical work on *House of Leaves*, such as this thesis. There is indeed a playful satire at work here, one in which the critic him/herself is the object of the fun.

The heavily intertextual nature of the plural narratives of *House of Leaves* can, in the context of the work's status as a novel, be read as parodic, in that the book mimics the functioning of a work of academic research. On one level, this links with the disruption of genre, lending the same sense of authenticity as encountered in *The Blair Witch Project*, complementing the documentary characteristics of the work and masking its status as fiction. On another, it serves to enact the writerly nature of the text, in that readers are drawn into the construction of the text through their engagement in a metacritical undertaking, as they become critics of a web of criticism in the form of footnotes and cross-references, and are thereby forced to attempt to unpick the information held in a network of texts, as opposed to the self-contained character of the traditional novel. It becomes clear that:

> mastery is a fiction ... the reading subject ... [is] a network of citations ... where each unit of reading functions ... by activating certain codes in the reader. The fracturing of the reading subject is inevitably associated with the dissolution of the author, or death of the author as Barthes puts it ... The author is revealed to be a necessary fiction, a reading effect.
>
> (Worton and Still 1990: 20)

Danielewski makes overt use of these ideas in his work, masking his position as author, as described in the preceding section, and then introducing a web of intertextuality which can be read as an explicit acknowledgement of the works of cultural theorists on intertextuality, and particularly Bakhtin, who writes in *The Dialogic Imagination*:

> At any given moment of its evolution, language is stratified not only into linguistic dialects in the strict sense of the word ... but also — and for us this is the essential point — into languages that are socio-ideological: languages of social groups, "professional" and "generic" languages, languages of generations and so forth. From this point of view, literary language itself is only one of these heteroglot languages ... this stratification ... is not only a static invariant of linguistic life, but also ensures its dynamics ... the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward.
>
> (Bakhtin 1981: 272)

The stratification of languages is enacted through the parallel narratives of a drug-addicted tattoo-artist's apprentice (Truant) and an aging intellectual (Zampano), while at the same time this division is resisted, as Truant adopts an academic style in his investigation of Zampano's work, so that there is a true 'heteroglot' of languages in the admixture of academic and colloquial discourses:

> By now you've probably noticed that except when safely contained by quotes, Zampano always steers clear of such questionable four-letter language. This ... proves that beneath all that cool pseudo-academic hogwash lurked a very passionate man who knew how important it was to say "fuck" now and then ... relish its syllabic sweetness, its immigrant pride ... starting at the lower lip, often the very front of the lower lip, before racing all the way to the back of the throat ... the concussive force of the K catching up with the hush of the F ... thus loading it with plenty of offense and edge and certainly ambiguity ... A great by-the-bootstrap prayer or curse if you prefer, depending on how you look at it, or use it, suited perfectly for hurling at the skies or at the world, or sometimes, if said just right, for uttering with enough love and fire, the woman beside you melts inside herself, immersed in all that word-heat. Holy-fuck, what was that all about? "Love and fire"? "word-heat"? Who the hell is thinking up this shit?
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 100)

To refer once more to Worton and Still on the Socratic dialogues, this mixture of the academic and the colloquial does indeed "lead on to a play of different languages representing contemporary belief systems", as both Zampano and Truant make extensive use of the discourses of feminism, psychoanalysis, architecture, physics, mathematics, art and philosophy (to name but some) in their attempts to understand the figure at the centre of their studies, the labyrinth in Navidson's house. The latter can now clearly be seen to reflect the epistemological labyrinth raised by the inability of all these discourses to adequately explain the maze's existence, which in turn reflects the epistemological maze of postmodernism in which no single discourse has a necessary authority over any other. Furthermore, the authority of each discourse shifts in and out of focus as it is used or discarded, so that there can be no definitive mapping of the intellectual territory. This is paralleled by the nature of

Navidson's maze, the walls and doorways of which shift and change position, so that mapping it becomes impossible. The complete maze can never be known or written, only experienced in the parts that are immediately available, just as it is impossible to be familiar with every work which is connected, intertextually, with any other. The intertextual labyrinth is made up of many fields of study which interconnect in various and shifting ways, so that the very nature of the beast precludes full knowledge of it. All that remains is to enter into the processes of "disunification and decentralization" with the knowledge that "unity ... in language can only be an illusion" (Worton and Still: 15). It is, of course, possible and indeed desirable to focus on one specific language or field of study when that field is of particular interest to the person concerned. But the labyrinth will always be lurking in the background.

The intense intertextuality of this novel can perhaps best be understood in terms of Michael Holquist's definition of the novel in his introduction to Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*, where he sees it as "the force at work within a given literary system to reveal the limits, the artificial constraints of that system" (xxxi). Danielewski certainly seems to be exploring the boundaries of what constitutes 'the novel' by illustrating its dependence on all manner of critical and academic writing. The knowledges contained within the novel do not arise spontaneously, but are a part of a system of knowledge, and *House of Leaves* can then be regarded as an epistemological indicator for its readers, persuading them to consider where the knowledge in the novel, and their own knowledge, comes from, and in the end questioning the unconditional acceptance of a unitary point of view as defining the state of their being. The axiom "I think, therefore I am" becomes "I think, therefore I am, but why do I think as I do?"

The brief mention of the parody of academic work on page fourteen above is insufficient. Parody plays an important role in postmodernism, and also in *House of Leaves*, and so deserves more consideration.

3. Parody

Patricia Waugh, following Kiremidjian, regards

> the specific method of parody ... as a kind of literary mimicry which retains the form

> or stylistic character of the primary work, but substitutes alien subject matter or content. The parodist proceeds by imitating as closely as possible the formal conventions of the work being parodied.
>
> (Waugh 1992: 68)

Parody thus puts a new or different spin on a familiar concept or method. As such, it a useful technique for postmodern literature, in fact "is usually considered central to postmodernism" (Hutcheon 1989: 93), in that it provides a means to evoke some particular style of writing while at the same time undermining the authority of that style, pointing out its idealism or exclusivity. Waugh goes on to say that: "parody renews ... the relationship between form and what it can express, by upsetting a previous balance which has become so rigidified that the conventions of the form can express only a limited or even irrelevant content" (*ibid*.). Conventional rigidity is exactly the character demonstrated by metanarratives. Parody, therefore, is a tool which can be used to move beyond this rigidity, in order to express ideas that could not be otherwise be expressed. In this manner, forms of expression which may have become outmoded or obsolete can be resurrected to express contemporary concerns. Thus, Umberto Eco parodies the detective novel in his *The Name of the Rose*, A.S. Byatt parodies the biography in *The Biographer's Tale*, and John Fowles the Victorian romance in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, in order to examine how these genres have moved beyond their traditional boundaries. Linda Hutcheon explains this process as follows:

> [This] parodic reprise of the past of art is not nostalgic; it is always critical ... through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive both from continuity and difference ... the notion of the original as rare, single and valuable is called into question ... art ...will inevitably have a new and different significance.
>
> (Hutcheon 1989: 93)

There are two readily identifiable levels of parody in *House of Leaves*: first, the parody of academic research; and secondly, the parody of the quest. The distinction between the two is quite vague, however, as academic research can be understood as a quest of sorts, a quest for knowledge, which is arguably the essential characteristic of every quest, be it knowledge of the location of the Holy Grail, the secret to eternal life, or the origin and purpose of the

mysterious labyrinth in *House of Leaves*. It will be argued that the parody of the quest is a means used in *House of Leaves* to undermine the traditional notion of the 'horror novel' and thereby resist the application of that category to itself, in line with the postmodern resistance to metanarratives, in order to give the art of the novel what Hutcheon calls a "new and different significance."

The quest is a figure with a very long history in literature, and through its various incarnations can serve as a useful indicator of social and intellectual change. Philip Wood, in his article (which is surprisingly short for such a long title) "The Transformation of the Quest from Modernity to Postmodernity and the Third Industrial Revolution", provides a (very) succinct summary of this progress:

> In the classical and mediaeval worlds ... the quest for truth, beauty and the good is ineluctable and finds its terminus in God alone ... [in] the Renaissance [and] Romanticism ... the central quest of the new age — the pursuit of material fortune — is denounced ... the version of the quest which will mark ... literary production ... down to the end of modernity [is] the pursuit of the perfected artwork as the sole prize to be salvaged from the shipwreck of life.
>
> (Wood 1993: 145-146)

He goes on to say that "it would not be difficult ... to read ... an indictment of the hollowness and futility of the quest in postmodernity" (152). It is this futility which the parody of the quest in *House of Leaves* expresses.

There are in effect four quests in the book, identifiable in the main narrative threads: Navidson's quest to understand the origin and significance of the maze extending from his house; Zampano's quest to understand the implications of Navidson's exploration and of the existence of the maze; Truant's quest to make sense of Zampano's work and the effect it has on himself and his life; and the reader's quest to understand the combination of the three. The form of the book can be understood in terms of these four quests, each of which essentially stems from Navidson's labyrinth, and each of which constitutes a search for meaning in the face of the unknown. Navidson's quest can be read as a figure for the other three, in that it reflects the common attempt to come to understanding, to attain the goal of knowledge.

Navidson's goal is stated, albeit figuratively. He is a "Pulitzer prize-winning photojournalist who must somehow capture the most difficult subject of all: the sight of darkness itself" (Danielewski 2000: xxi). This he attempts to do in the making of a documentary film of the maze and his exploration of it, the film known, in the fictional world of the book, as ***The Navidson Record***, which then becomes the basis for Zampano's study. The film constitutes a record of Navidson's quest to understand the house with its impossible extensions; it is in fact the ***means*** through which he hopes to understand the house.

To capture the sight of "darkness itself", as the house is characterized, on film, is seemingly impossible, "sight" and "darkness" being mutually exclusive terms, but this attempt is what characterises Navidson's quest: it is an attempt to apprehend and understand the seemingly impossible. It begins with his attempts to explain why

> the width of the house inside would appear to exceed the width of the house as measured from the outside by 1/4" ... Undeterred, Navidson continues his quest, even though repeated attempts at measuring the house continue to reveal the quarter-inch anomaly.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 30)

Navidson's determination stems from the fact that "the exterior measurement ***must*** equal the internal measurement. Physics depends on a universe infinitely centred on an equal sign" (32). It is this same compulsion to explain the impossible that drives him to explore the maze he discovers leading off from the mysterious new door. Navidson, furthermore, has "always been an adventurer" (60), so it is without hesitation that he equips a large-scale expedition to explore the labyrinth of his house, bringing in a team of experienced explorers to aid in the endeavour. The parody of the quest is particularly obvious in his launching a full-scale expedition from the living room of a house, an image reminiscent of Monty Python. The idea of the quest as a noble undertaking of pioneering exploration is instantly undermined, as is Navidson as the heroic explorer. The parody is compounded as the team proceeds to get hopelessly lost in the maze.

The goal of the expeditions (there are five) is to map the labyrinth, to understand it completely and thereby remove the threat embodied by an encounter with the physically impossible; essentially, to find the route to the centre and out again. What becomes apparent

to the explorers is that the passageways and doors of the maze shift and change, and are different each time they enter, as well as changing while they are inside. The terrain thus becomes unmappable. Their goal is impossible, there is no immutable centre. The quest thus has no attainable objective, the defining quality of a quest, and indeed becomes futile. The very notion of the quest is shown to be predicated on what postmodernism explicitly eschews: definitive answers. The technique is similar to that used by Umberto Eco in ***Baudolino***, in which the protagonist, Baudolino, fabricates a letter from Prester John and then, having come to believe his own deception, embarks on a quest to find him, using directions gleaned from his own invented letter.

Zampano's quest is to study Navidson's explorations, and discover the implications of the existence of the maze. He has no access to the actual maze, and relies on ***The Navidson Record*** for his source material. There is an irony in this case in that Zampano "writes constantly about seeing" yet is "blind as a bat" (Danielewski 2000: xxi), an irony strengthened by the fact that his source material is a film which he has never been able to see. Zampano is thus twice removed from the events of the house. He can, however, read Braille, and has volunteers read aloud to him, which thus provide his entrances to ***The Navidson Record*** and the labyrinth. His quest ultimately consumes him:

> Zampano was in essence ... a graphomaniac. He scribbled until he died and while he came close a few times, he never finished anything, especially ... his masterpiece ... . His mind never ceased branching out into new territories ... whatever it was he could never quite address in himself prevented him from ever settling. Death finally saw to that.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: xxii)

His quest also ends in defeat, his scholarly goal unattained through an inability to limit his work, the end constantly deferred by the continual discovery of new avenues of research (as is made abundantly clear by the heavily annotated and intertextual nature of his work), until his own death. Such deferral of closure is characteristic of postmodern literature.

Johnny Truant's quest is to unravel and decode the meaning of Zampano's heavily fragmented work, as well as to understand the impact Zapano's work has on his own life. Truant has direct access to neither Zampano nor the labyrinth, but only to Zampano's writing

and through it, the labyrinth in Navidson's house. Truant's quest, like Zampano's, is of a fundamentally scholarly nature, an attempt to make sense of a complicated work; yet Truant is no scholar, but a drug-addicted tattoo-artist's apprentice; in this context, an 'ordinary' person. This fundamentally undermines the figure of the academic as possessor of specialised knowledge inaccessible to the average citizen. Truant says:

> there are probably numerous people who would have been better qualified to handle this work, scholars with PhDs from Ivy League schools and minds greater than any Alexandrian Library ... Problem is, these people were still in their universities ... and nowhere near Whitley when an old man without friends or family finally died.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: xx)

He would seem to be making a point about the detachment of the academic world from the real world, and the inability of academia to come to grips with a phenomenon (such as this maze) in the real world. The implication is that "people in universities" have no relationship whatever with ordinary people, no basis from which to consider the implications and reach an understanding of a work such as Zampano's, that falls outside of the categories of academic understanding. For Truant, finding Zampano's work was opportunistic and unexpected, a circumstance which dramatizes the idea of there being no set entrance into the textual world. The figure of the quest is further destabilised here through Truant's lack of knowledge regarding what he has embarked upon without any goal in mind beyond decoding Zampano's work: he does not know what it is he is seeking, and the trajectory of his quest is similar to that of Baudolino in Eco's novel, in that its end result is far removed from what it sought to accomplish, and more personal than grandly heroic.

Truant and Zampano, furthermore, can be construed as representing the readers of the book *House of Leaves*, and of theoretical fiction in general, Zampano as the academic reader, and Truant as the non-academic reader (see Chapter Three). That Zampano dies before his work is published, and that it is published only after collation by Truant, is a suggestion that the understanding of literature is not solely the prerogative of academics, but of anybody who wishes to take it upon themselves. The setting up of 'literature' as something that can only be understood by a select few in university departments is called into question, as Truant, the 'non-academic' (a term which, from the academic point of view, is pejorative), constructs the

text. The underlying implication is that this book is not meant for a specifically academic audience, and is open to all with an interest. This is wholly in line with the postmodern's disdain for the exclusiveness of institutionalised authority.

The reader's quest, then, is to understand *House of Leaves* itself. What links each of the quests described above is their shared source of inspiration, the labyrinth in Navidson's house, a dark and shifting maze. This is ultimately the reader's goal, to understand the significance of the maze in the book, a significance clearly foregrounded through the repetition of the figure. Readers are led thorough a series of interlinking narratives, each of which reflects the maze-like character of the next, from Truant's to Zampano's to Navidson's, and ultimately, into Navidson's labyrinth itself, and the figure of the vast staircase, spiralling endlessly downwards. The figure of the labyrinth becomes an analogy for the shape of the whole text, in its twisting intertextuality, its digressions, allusions to myth and legend, its play with genres, and even its distinctly out-of-the-ordinary typesetting, which often reflects the textual descriptions of the movements of the labyrinth (for example, when the spiral staircase stretches out, the words on the page are separated further and further apart, until finally there is a blank page with a single dot in the middle, signifying the distance to which the staircase has stretched upwards from Navidson). There is a ***mise-en-abyme*** of the labyrinth figure, so that understanding recedes from the reader as explanation is deferred by endless repetition. All that is left is the notion of the maze itself, of the text as maze and the readers as explorers of that maze, which now extends into their own world, as the reader is drawn in and persuaded to play a role in the construction of the text, just as Navidson is drawn into the depths of his house, Zampano is drawn into *The Navidson Record*, and Truant is drawn into Zampano's record. Truant explains:

> it doesn't happen immediately ... You'll finish [the book] and that will be that until a moment will come [when] you'll suddenly realize that things are not how you perceived them to be at all ... You'll detect slow and subtle shifts going on around you ... in you. Worse, you'll realize it's always been shifting, ... a vast shimmer, only dark ... you won't understand why or how ... the hallways you've walked a hundred times will feel longer, much longer, and the shadows, any shadow at all, will suddenly seem deeper, much deeper ... you'll be afraid to look away, you'll be afraid to sleep.

(Danielewski 2000: xxiii)

The "you" here is the reader, and this paragraph is Johnny Truant's description of the effect of the book upon the reader, how it reveals that "things are not how you perceived them to be at all." This is descriptive of a situation in which metanarratives have been destabilised, where there is no authority to declare what is 'right' or 'wrong', no physics to keep the universe comprehensible, no reassuring familiarity. Readers must find their way through the book carefully, in a fashion which foregrounds the act of reading itself, for instance flipping backwards and forwards through the text in search of footnotes and explanations, so that they cannot but be aware of the role their efforts play in forming the narrative. In many instances the text calls for conjecture on the part of the reader, for instance when Navidson has material from the walls of the labyrinth scientifically analysed, and the results are reproduced in the text, but everything except for a few words, enough to give a hint, is crossed out, as is Navidson's response.

Drawing the reader into an active role, and the use of parody, are commonly used in association with another technique characteristic of postmodern writing, the use of metafiction, where the writing comments on the writing.

4. Metafiction

> *Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.
>
> (Waugh 1984: 2)

In short, metafiction is fiction about fiction; or, fictional writing that comments explicitly on the theory of fiction, using and simultaneously commenting upon theoretical techniques. Texts which examine themselves in this manner can be described as self-reflexive, as in the *mise-en-abyme* of the figure of the labyrinth, and the parody of the quest, through which the text examines its own labyrinthine nature. Such self-reflexivity can be "a useful model for

understanding the construction of subjectivity in the world outside novels ... literary fiction (worlds constructed entirely of language) becomes a very useful model for learning about the construction of 'reality' itself" (Waugh 1984: 3). So, by studying the way a fictional world is constructed, it is possible to reach a deeper understanding of the 'real' world which people inhabit, and the manner in which they fictionalize their own lives. One's sense of one's life is a narrative constructed with memories and desires, therefore susceptible to fabrication, at least in part. People construct the reality most favourable for them and their self-image, and ignore, or fail to see whatever does not fit with that image. This is especially clear in Truant's talent for invention (he often fictionalizes his own life in order to impress his audience) a talent also identifiable in his construction of Zampano's work. The implication is that just as novels, as narratives written by authors with specific concerns and dependencies on specific beliefs, are inevitably partial, exclusive or misleading in their evocations of reality, so may one's own narrative of identity be similarly partial, exclusive or misleading. It is this possibility that Danielewski wishes to emphasise.

In *House of Leaves*, the reader sees Johnny Truant attempting to come to grips with Zampano's record. He describes its fragmented nature and explains how difficult it is to read. This directly mirrors the difficulty the reader has with Johnny's work, and *House of Leaves* itself. In this manner, the book raises the issue of its own complexity. An explanation for the foregrounding of complexity is perhaps to be found in the idea that "for metafictional writers the most fundamental assumption is that composing a novel is basically no different from composing or constructing one's 'reality'" (Waugh 1984: 24). *House of Leaves* reflects this postulate through its drawing of a relationship between the act of reading and the act of constructing one's own life, most particularly through the analogous relationship between Truant and the reader: both are engaged in the same task, attempting to make sense of a complex narrative as well as the effect of that narrative on themselves. The complex narrative, with its references to a plethora of fields of inquiry, reflects the complex nature of everyday life, in which people come up against all manner of obstacles and problems in a variety of different areas, these complications then becoming a part of that person's narrative. At the heart of this notion of complexity is the impossibility of there being a final, all-encompassing explanation for everything or anything: there can only be ideas and possibilities. In such a narrative situation, "it is the human imaginative process that is

explicitly called into action in ... the reader" (Hutcheon 1980: 20). Instead of being able to simply passively absorb the text, as is the case with realist fiction, readers are drawn into an active role, in which their own mental processes play a part in constructing the narrative, just as these processes do in everyday life:

> The novel no longer seeks just to provide an order and meaning to be recognised by the reader. It now demands that he [sic] be conscious of the work, the actual construction, that he too is undertaking, for it is the reader who ... concretises the work of art and gives it life.
>
> (Hutcheon 1980: 39)

Without the reader there is no novel, just as without Navidson there is no labyrinth, without Zampano there is no "Navidson Record" and without Truant there is no writing by Zampano. Reading in itself is a creative process, just as much as writing is, a process which brings narratives to life. The reader is thus drawn into the book, and the figure of the labyrinth becomes a figure for the act of reading, for entering the intertextual maze, for attempting to pick out meaning from the vast number of fields of thought available in the everyday world.

At the heart of the matter is the essential inability of language to put across a complete and stable representation of any particular set of circumstances. In postmodernist literature, to construct an ordered and complete novelistic world is shown to be impossible, because to do so would be to exclude vast realms of experience and knowledge relevant to the information contained within the text (though perhaps extraneous to the story at hand). No text can be regarded as 'complete' in the same sense that no single person's understanding of the world or universe can be regarded as absolute. This is demonstrated by the failed attempts of Navidson, Zampano, Truant and the reader him or herself to come to an understanding of the significance of the labyrinth. The literary figure of the labyrinth reflects the text itself and ultimately the external world, and the failure to come to an understanding of it is analogous to the inevitable failure of any text to accurately reflect reality. In metafictional terms, then, the labyrinth is representative of all works of fiction, in that it reflects the essential impossibility of their ever being completely understood. The language of a text inevitably leads the reader to an almost infinite number of other texts, other sources of information, and any one reader will only be aware of a limited number of these texts.

There is the potential for endless discovery of references and relevancies, so that the act of reading any text can never be said to be completed, just as the labyrinth in Navidson's house can never be mapped in its entirety, there always being new hallways and passages to explore. It is this endless web of references that prevents Zampano from ever finishing a work.

Linda Hutcheon sees the function of "self-conscious parodic literature" as being

> to engage the reader in an active dialogue with the generic models of his [sic] time ... By reminding the reader of the book's identity as artifice, the text parodies his expectations, his desire for verisimilitude, and forces him to an awareness of his own role in creating the universe of the fiction.
>
> (Hutcheon 1980: 139)

So, when *House of Leaves* is described as a 'novel' there are certain expectations which immediately arise, as discussed earlier. The fact that the book then refuses to meet those expectations persuades the reader to reconsider what he or she understands is meant by the term 'novel' and thus to consider how this text differs from the model evoked by the term, and to what end. Particularly, by tantalising the reader through the omission of important information and the lack of any closure, the text asks readers to consider their role in the construction of the text as they find themselves attempting to fill in the blanks using their own intellectual effort. For instance, when the results of the analysis of the material from the maze walls are blacked out, readers may draw their own conclusions from the paltry amount of information left undeleted, and in doing so, actively construct the text for themselves, drawing attention to the role of the reader in the making of meaning in any text: "XXXXXXecniquesXXXXX ... XXXcleosynthesis XXXX... XXXvolcanXX ... XXmetamorXXX" (Danielewski 373-374). So, reading between the Xs,

> like the musician deciphering the symbolic code of musical notation, the reader is here involved in a creative, interpretative process from which he will learn how the book is read ... the teaching is done ... by disturbing the comfortable habits of the actual act of reading ... . The unsettled reader is forced to scrutinise his concepts of art as well as his life values.
>
> (Hutcheon 1980: 139)

Disturbing the comfortable habits of the act of reading is an essential element in *House of Leaves*. Just past the middle of the book are two pages of musical notation, which, rather than constituting a break from the narrative, continue it, as they represent a tune Navidson is singing to himself while lost in the maze. The inclusion of these two pages would seem to be making a comment on the relationship between the two forms of notation, musical and linguistic, suggesting that they are essentially of the same nature, requiring analysis and interpretation; and just as a specific text may have different significance for different people, so a piece of music may sound completely different when played by different performers. The result becomes a matter of interpretation as well as comprehension.

The examination of the house as a figure for the text itself continues throughout the narrative, and is especially effective in demonstrating how the idea of 'horror' as a genre is undermined and parodied, revealing that what is typically regarded as a horror narrative takes on an entirely different meaning here. For instance, when Karen discusses selling the house with Alicia Rosenbaum, the estate agent, she discovers that the house has had many owners:

> I did a little research ... All I found was a pretty comprehensive list of owners ... Almost twenty in the last fifty [years]. Noone seems to stay there for more than a few years ... I went ahead and checked if the house was built on an old Indian burial ground.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 409)

The "Old Indian burial ground" is a staple of American horror, used again and again to explain the occurrence of supernatural phenomena, for instance in the *Poltergeist* series of films. The use of the figure here is clearly heavily ironic. This raises the issue of the appropriation and mythologising, by Western writers, of, in this case, native American peoples and their traditions for the purposes of commercial narrative. The implication is that the source of the horror must be external to Western culture, the responsibility of the Other, not of ordered, scientific, rational white people. *House of Leaves* mocks this standpoint as Western science fails to make sense of the labyrinth, and Navidson's explorations collapse into futility, as does recourse to many other typically Western(ised) fields of inquiry, raised through the use of intertextuality, such as psychology and architecture. The horror of this text is not the typical blood-and-guts horror of the popular genre, but of the inability of Western

thought to account for and explain every phenomenon it comes up against, and the tendency to shift responsibility for such phenomena, in the horror films and books that raise them, to an outside source, often a non-Western culture. The horror, then, is similar to that evoked by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, where he shows the dark and malignant aspect of Western civilization. *House of Leaves* conducts an extremely subtle parody of the traditional horror text. Furthermore, the novel invokes postcolonial criticism of American culture. This is especially clear in Navidson's reasons for buying the house in the first place, which become clear as he explains why he began filming *The Navidson Record*:

> I just want to create a record of how Karen and I bought a small house in the country and moved into it with our children ... No gunfire, famine or flies ... Just lots of toothpaste, gardening and people stuff ... Settle in, maybe put down roots ... I just want to create a cosy little outpost for me and my family. A place to drink lemonade on the porch and watch the sun set.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 9)

This is the archetypal American dream, a happy nuclear family in a comfortable suburban house with a white picket fence, which of course ignores the history of the ground upon which the house is built, the history of how the American pioneers, of which the nation is so proud, decimated the native Indian populations and appropriated the land in order to create their dream. The pioneering impulse is emphasized in Navidson's need to explore and claim, through understanding and mapping, the labyrinth. His failure to do so then becomes an indictment of the original pioneers who 'civilized' America, and the search for an "old Indian burial ground" an indictment of the relegation by contemporary, popular American culture of native American culture to the status of an amusement, a source of cheap theatrics. So, by first assuming the label 'horror', then examining what that label means, typically, for the text to which it is applied, *House of Leaves* makes a powerful statement regarding the manner in which standard (American) horror films and texts function, while simultaneously distancing itself from this standard through its refusal to pander to expectations.

The construction of the text thus makes a direct comment on the construction of the typical American image of the American reality as a righteous one, endorsed by God, for the greater good of mankind. The dark labyrinth becomes a figure for the dark and suppressed

background to the founding of the nation. Furthermore, there is a complementary comment on the manner in which readers construct texts as they read, excluding anything that does not fit in with preconceived notions of how texts 'should be', relegating information that contradicts preconceptions to the outside, the space of the irrelevant. *House of Leaves* consists in large part of such information, without explicit appeal to standard literary figures and techniques, which in metafictive terms forces readers to consider what it is that they understand by the terms 'horror' and 'novel' and how their understanding, in its rigidity, performs a kind of violence on literature and its content, just as pioneers and 'civilizers' performed violence on those peoples who stood in their way.

The tendency of people to fictionalize their own lives is especially clear in the case of Johnny Truant, who was the victim of abuse as a child. His mentally unstable mother burned his forearms severely with hot oil, and he invents numerous romanticized stories to account for the scars:

> The most popular is my two-year stint in a Japanese Martial Arts cult ... who on the last day of my initiation into their now-defunct brotherhood made me pick up a scalding metal wok using only my bare forearms ... We all create stories to protect ourselves.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 20)

What is unusual here is that Truant recognises his fictionalizations, which thus in themselves become another form of metafiction that induces readers to consider how they fictionalize their own lives, suppressing events and actions which contrast with what they wish their lives had been like.

The primary function of the strategies discussed above is to destabilize the act of reading itself, questioning assumptions and undermining 'truth' as it is assumed to exist in the metanarratives of text, nation and self. The familiarity engendered by experience is removed, and the blind acceptance of received figures, both textual and historical, is called into question through the metafictive nature of the text. Again, the standard signposts to understanding are removed, leaving the reader to wander in a maze of unfamiliar surroundings in which the customary authority of Western textual manipulation has been erased.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined the manner in which *House of Leaves* destabilises the traditional notions of the novel and the horror genre, demonstrating that the author is well aware of the theoretical issues surrounding narrative fiction. Instead of readers being able to read a linear narrative which confirms their preconceptions and beliefs regarding themselves, their surroundings and textual representations of these, they encounter a twisting maze in which all signposts traditionally relied upon to guide a reading have been removed, or put to very different use. This text questions itself, other novels, and the societal context in which it was written, refusing to give any answers to the questions it raises, only providing hints and suggestions for the reader to unravel. The maze, like the text, is never defined; indeed, such definition is actively avoided, so that the application of, or appeal to, authoritative metanarratives becomes impossible. The reader is left to negotiate a textual labyrinth. How one might go about this is the subject of the next chapter, "Negotiating the Labyrinth".

CHAPTER TWO
NEGOTIATING THE LABYRINTH

> All literary genres are artifacts, but none more blatantly so than fiction. Its very name declares its artificiality, and yet it must somehow be true to hold the interest of its readers, to tell them about experiences at once imaginary and relevant to their own lives. This [is the] paradox of truth in fiction.
>
> (Riffaterre 1990: xii)

This chapter will be concerned with how the reader might find a path through the textual labyrinth described in the previous chapter; it will be concerned, in other words, with identifying the meaning-making strategies of *House of Leaves*. In the context of postmodernism, 'meaning' itself is a value-laden term, given that one of the principles of postmodernism is that meaning is endlessly deferred, because to give credence to a specific meaning is to recognise the ultimate authority of that meaning; and authority, for instance in the shape of metanarratives, is anathema to postmodernism. This raises a paradox, for if postmodernism resists authority, how can it then negotiate *its own* status as an authority, as a discourse with meaning?

One possible resolution of this paradox lies in regarding postmodernism, and postmodernist literary theory, as an ***attitude***, as opposed to a specific set of beliefs or tenets for the production and interpretation of texts. This attitude could be described as sceptical, playful and open (characteristics of postmodernist writing, though of course also recognisable in other literary fields) and would include an awareness that fiction is essentially artificial, even when pretending to be real. In such a perspective, the terms 'truth' and 'meaning' take on a far less rigid quality than is usually assigned to them, and the term 'meaning***ful***' becomes a suitable replacement, as it allows for an inferential relationship between fiction and reality, neither permitting fiction to dictate the nature of reality to the reader, nor permitting any specific interpretation of reality to dictate the nature of fiction. Discourse need not necessarily be dictatorial, and postmodernist discourse is a useful tool for the study of

literature because, not favouring a specific point of view, it allows for unbiased criticism.[2]

To suggest a resolution of the postmodernist paradox of meaning through recourse to a shift in attitude may seem disingenuous. Furthermore, the writing of fiction is an inherently politically engaged act, and politics is an inescapable aspect of life and literature. It may be impossible to write without expressing political belief, but the expression need not be functionally specific, and writers need not be the unwitting or unwilling voices of race, class, gender or genre. It is rather more useful to recognise that there is a vast range of such platforms, each of which may make an equally useful contribution to literary studies. To deny or bemoan the existence of other political platforms simply because they are inconsistent with one's own, is counterproductive and naive. Postmodern textuality accepts that bodies of belief inscribe their own narratives, and meaning is read in different contexts and situations related to the position of the reader. Each method of literary inquiry has the right to approach literary studies as it prefers. Recognising postmodernism as encompassing a range of belief platforms, and not as merely lumping them all together under one rubric, goes a long way towards resolving the postmodern paradox of authority.

Therefore, in spite of the paradox inherent in the postmodernist position regarding meaning, it is after all possible to impart and identify meaning in postmodernist texts; that meaning, however, will not be absolute, and will be open to a number of interpretations from a number of points of view. Meaning is imparted through the use of ideas, as opposed to facts. Postmodernist writing is best regarded as a forum for debate as to what ideas are the most useful. In this manner, a critical standpoint will not impede progress through insistence upon the finality of a specific critical paradigm. Literary theory can then be viewed as an ongoing process, in terms of which declarations such as "The Author is Dead" are counterproductive if regarded with any sense of finality. They are instead interesting ideas which serve to provoke further debate.

So, from the postmodernist perspective, authority is watered down and rejected in favour of an attitude which is far more productive in the context of literary studies, that all

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[2]Of course, it is possible to argue that this in itself is a specific point of view, but to extend the argument in this fashion amounts to *reductio ad absurdum*. No constructive, or indeed deconstructive, critical analysis is possible without some sort of grounding, but as long as that grounding does not become restrictive and exclusive it supports the postmodernist attitude.

(logically compatible) avenues of literary enquiry are useful and may function across the boundaries artificially raised around them by their practitioners. Each researcher has the right to a preferred field of inquiry, but should avoid an isolationist attitude which is of limited use in the context of a world which is becoming increasingly interdisciplinarian. To draw an analogy from physics, postmodernism could be viewed as a unified field theory, in which avenues of inquiry find a linking thread allowing each to function within a wider scope of application. [3]

House of Leaves demonstrates this attitude, and so avoids setting up what could be construed as a postmodern metanarrative. This contention will be examined in terms of a consideration of the meaning-making strategies of the book, under the themes of structure; space and identity; and representation.

1. Structure

House of Leaves uses structure as a meaningful textual element. While it is possible to draw a distinction between structure and narrative, such a distinction is not particularly useful in this case, as the structure of the book as book (the way it is laid out and the way it appears, typographically; its spatial arrangement) and the structure of the narrative (the way the story unfolds) mirror each other so closely in the figure of the labyrinth, that textual structure is an inherent part of the narrative. The spatial arrangement of the text reflects the events of the narrative, and so spatial arrangement itself becomes meaningful.

The most notable characteristic of the structure of *House of Leaves* is its fragmented nature, and the manner in which structural boundaries, which distance the text from its subject, are put in place while the book simultaneously mirrors its subject in its structure. The subject is the labyrinth, and the significance of the labyrinth. It is this, the labyrinth, that Navidson, Zampano, Truant, and ultimately the reader, are trying to understand. For each, though, the experience of the labyrinth is mediated by that of their predecessor, which gives rise to the parallel narratives of the text as each person's story unfolds simultaneously. For

[3]Drawing analogies with physics is always a risky business, as physics has a strict mathematical structure behind it. Here, though, the forming of a more powerful tool through the bringing together of previously disparate branches of inquiry is the outcome in both cases.

Navidson, the experience is mediated by the cameras he is never without, and which he uses to record the film which forms the basis for Zampano's narrative, thereby mediating Zampano's experience of the maze. Truant's narrative of the maze is then mediated by both Zampano's and Navidson's. In this manner the layered narrative interposes three levels of mediation between the reader and the labyrinth, the subject of the book, one of which includes a transposition from film to text. The resolution of this problem of mediated experience lies in recognising that these interpositions are put in place in order for the reader to realise that it is the maze of the text itself, its structural characteristics, that are of importance. The text becomes its own subject in a manner beyond metafictional commentary; the text *is* the maze, or at least an entrance to it, in which the reader stands in peril of becoming ensnared, lost and confounded like Navidson. Navidson's exploration of his "house" thus becomes a metaphor for the reader's exploration of the "house" of "leaves" which is the text. This latter "house" can furthermore be understood as a reference to the mental structures a reader constructs as s/he reads and assimilates the information contained within the "leaves" of the book. It is here, in the imagination of the reader, that Navidson's labyrinth takes shape(s). This is consistent with Eric Rabkin's idea of spatial form, as the labyrinth takes a metaphorical shape in the mind of the reader: "To speak of the 'spatial form' of a plot is to speak metaphorically. A plot ... must occur through time in the mind of the reader. *This ... is crucial for understanding the perception of narrative* precisely because that perception involves the movement of our consciousness" (Rabkin 1981: 79, emphasis added).

> The real object is the thing in the outside world ... the pile of printed pages sewn together in a binding. The aesthetic object ... is that which comes into existence when the [reader] experiences the real object. Thus [the aesthetic object] is a construction (or reconstruction) in the reader's mind ... the material book is a means to make the aesthetic object accessible to the reader.
>
> (Chatman 1978: 27)

The "real object", the book, is not just a metaphorical labyrinth. It is an actual maze through which readers must find their way. Readers looking at the closed cover are in the same position as a person unwittingly regarding the entrance to a hedge maze: both are unaware of the fact that a maze lies beyond. Neither Navidson nor the reader know what they are letting

themselves in for. Navidson encounters a structure that has no fixed layout, and thus can neither be mapped, nor represented through film, which is the means Navidson makes use of to apprehend and make some sort of sense of his world. The reader is in much the same position. The structure of the text explicitly demands the application of critical techniques, but mocks those techniques when it becomes clear that they are useless, in the same sense as Navidson's photography is useless when required to make sense of the labyrinth, to "capture the sight of darkness". The reader/explorer is the "wise fool", foolishly confident s/he has adequate experience, knowledge and wisdom to guide him- or herself safely through, just as does Navidson when he prepares for his final exploration of the house:

> Navidson brought with him a 1962 H16 hand crank Bolex 16mm camera along with 16mm, 25mm, 75mm Kern-Paillard lenses and a Bogen tripod ... a Sony microcassette recorder, Panasonic Hi 8, ample batteries, at least a dozen 120 minute Metal Evaporated (DLC) tapes, as well as a 35mm Nikon, flashes and a ... camera strap ... 3000 feet of 7298 16mm Kodak in one hundred foot loads, 20 rolls of 35mm ... plus ten rolls of assorted black and white film.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 424)

He also brings large quantities of survival gear and food, all of which he carries in a trailer behind the bicycle he uses to explore the maze. The items he prepares, the tools for his journey of discovery, are analogous to the intellectual tools the critical reader brings to a text. There is a trap, though, as the reader, if s/he relies on critical faculties to provide a path through the maze, runs the risk of ending up in the same position as Navidson when he is unable to conquer the maze, that is, to record and definitively map its structure, and instead finds himself lost within its mutable halls:

> Climbing out onto a narrow terrace ... Navidson ... confronts that grotesque vision of absence ... as he turns to go back, he finds the window has vanished along with the room. All that remains is the ashblack slab upon which he is standing, now apparently supported by nothing: darkness below, above, and of course darkness beyond.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 465)

He ends up in this position because the structure of the maze shifts constantly, as does the textual labyrinth for the reader as s/he tries to make sense of it, in that the further s/he reads, the more information s/he gets and so has to adjust his or her conceptions of the text accordingly; and yet the information supplied never leads to a resolution, an exit, an explanation for the maze. The point is that such a literary structure is what results from the application of postmodernist literary theory, and that this is what becomes of a novel which reflects the world as seen from a postmodernist perspective. It becomes a trap if the reader, instead of accepting its shifting, inconstant, seemingly illogical and counterintuitive nature, attempts to identify a specific significance, to map it as Navidson seeks to do, and thus exercise control. This could be read as an attack on the attitude that a text must demonstrate some sort of coherence in order to be meaningful, as expressed in the following:

> The reader must work out a syntax for the text. If conventional connectives no longer exist, the reader, to make sense of the text, must discover for himself what connections are to be made among the seemingly disconnected words and word groups. Once we have succeeded in that task, we can then see what the individual words symbolise and how they relate to one another and to the whole. But the meaning of the text emerges only after the reader has discovered its internal relationships, its syntax.
>
> (Smitten and Daghistany 1981: 19)

On the contrary, it is possible for *in*coherence itself to be meaningful, as in the case of the labyrinth, which defies understanding and the development of a definitive "syntax" in order to reveal the artificial nature of any such syntax.[4]

The analogous relationship between Navidson and the reader takes on a heavily ironic twist when Navidson "turns his attention to the last possible activity, the only book in his possession: ***House of Leaves"*** (Danielewski 2000: 465). But then: "...all I have for light is one book of matches and the duration of each ma- (for whatever reason the tape cuts off here)" (*ibid.*). All of Navidson's preparations, his planning and equipment, come to nothing in the vast empty space in which he finds himself. He is ensnared by the structure he sought

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[4]Including the syntax of this thesis, which itself is, in this sense, artificial, one interpretation of the significance(s) of the labyrinth, and itself a part of the labyrinth.

to explain; the only thing he has left is the very book which supposedly has its source in his exploration, and which here represents the literary maze within which readers may be trapped, in a situation brought about by their own foolish confidence. Navidson, trapped within the maze, has little light to read by, just as readers, trapped within the literary maze, have very little of the light of their confidence left to illuminate their exploration of the text:

> As Navidson reports, he soon begins falling behind. Perhaps his reading slows or the paper burns unevenly or he has bungled the lighting of the next page. Or maybe the words in the book have been arranged in such a way as to make them practically impossible to read ... He tries to read faster, inevitably loses some of the text, frequently burns his fingers. In the end he is left with one page and one match ... Here then is one end: a final act of reading, a final act of consumption ... and then as the fire retreats ... the book is gone leaving nothing but invisible traces already dismantled in the dark.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 467)

That "the words in the book have been arranged in such a way as to make them practically impossible to read," is a metafictional comment on the structure of the book itself, in which the typography is indeed arranged in such a fashion as to make it hard to read. This comments on the idea that "words can be explained only by other words" (Nalimov 1981: 175), as here the ability to explain words using words is minimised because words have less and less ability to explain the ones that follow, to cast light on the path ahead. This arrangement mirrors the difficulty Navidson has in negotiating the maze, and is a thematic device which arouses a sense of loss of direction in the reader. S/he must simply carry on and hope that there will eventually be an exit, some sort of explanation or resolution. But this structure has an absolute lack of definitive signposting, effacing any hints towards resolution as the narrative progresses, until the reader, like Navidson, is left teetering on the brink of an abyss without any hope that the maze may succumb to the tools of the intellect - Navidson's camera, and the reader's knowledge, are useless, as "the fire retreats [and] the book is gone". The fire, the weak light of the matches, represents the critic's knowledge, snuffed as the book refuses to succumb to it, destroyed in the attempt rather than understood. The contradictions within, and excisions from, the text function in the same manner as the shifts Navidson

experiences, unexpectedly reconfiguring the terrain. This prevents the reader from making use of any specific set of tools to explore the text (feminism, structuralism, or any other -ism), as such exploration seems to require some simultaneous knowledge of fields as diverse as domestic DIY and cosmology. Furthermore, the shifting of the maze can be understood in terms of each new reading bringing a new structure to the text as the reader takes a new route, has different ideas, notices different implications, and discovers new meanings. As Nalimov says, "we shall never be able to state that it is impossible to think of another phrase which would reveal ... meaning in some new way" (Nalimov 1981: 179). It is in this fashion that the postmodern can be seen as an authority without authority, in that it seems monumental and imposing, seems to make definitive statements, and yet first among these statements is the asseveration that there is no final word, no absolute authority, as there is always a new way to reveal meaning, and new meanings to be revealed. This is the reason for Navidson's becoming trapped, and the reason that the reader may find him- or herself frustrated and similarly trapped, unable to find a logical resolution to the text: the maze is infinite in extent, constantly branching off into new possibilities.

In the figure of narrative as labyrinth, *House of Leaves* evokes the common metaphor of narrative as architecture. But this metaphor holds true only if narratives are as stable as the works of architects, and in this postmodernist narrative, the building shifts and moves, walls and doors change positions, different on each visit, and for every visitor. Navidson's maze can thus be viewed as representing text that has no form until apprehended by a reader. Navidson's dog and cat, respectively named Hillary and Mallory, do not experience the maze:

> Suddenly, somewhere in the house, there is a loud yowl and bark. An instant later, Mallory comes screaming into the living room with Hillary nipping at his tail. It is not the first time they have involved themselves in such a routine. The only exception is that on this occasion ... both puppy and cat head straight down the hallway and disappear into the darkness. Navidson would probably have gone in after them had he not instantly heard barks outside followed by Karen's shouts accusing him of letting the animals out ... . Strange how the house won't support the presence of animals.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 74)

It seems that the maze, like text, requires a human mind to manifest itself; or rather, it can

only affect the human mind, as animals lack the requisite capacity for abstract thought. In the same fashion, the text only becomes a maze when a human mind starts to consider its implications, how it has multiple narrative threads, how these intertwine and interact, and what such a representation of reality would mean for the reader's relationship with his or her own reality if it was in fact the way things were, if it was impossible to pick a way through daily existence in such a fashion as to make reality seem stable (Chapter 3). The maze which arises in readers' minds is a result of their application of abstract thought to the text, in trying to unpick its meanings, trying to discern the 'point' or purpose. But the purpose, insofar as there is one, is to force readers into the very action that frustrates them, thinking without definitive result; and to point out how, through its reliance on thinking on the part of its readers, the text assumes its maze-like structure. In other words, the purpose is to force readers into labyrinths of their own making while they negotiate the maze of the text.

The book is preoccupied with the concept of the echo, a property affected by structural characteristics: "It is impossible to appreciate the importance of space in *The Navidson Record* without first taking into account the significance of echoes" (Danielewski 2000: 41). Echo-location and Global Positioning Systems, as is well known, are ways of locating position on, above or under the surface of the earth, and it is this metaphor for textual reliability and navagatability that Danielewski undermines. The importance of the echo to the text has its roots in the manner in which each successive level of narration echoes the others, and so the discussion of echo becomes a discussion of the ways in which the structure of the book produces echoes, and of their effects and significance.

The primary result of echo is a shift in meaning as the words of the utterance are abbreviated by incomplete reproduction, and are thus transformed. Some examples of this shift are given by Danielewski (or Truant, or Zampano):

> Hollander begins with a virtual catalogue of literal echoes. For example, the Latin "*decem iam annos aetatem trivi in Cicerone*" [is] echoed by the Greek "*one*!" Or "*Musarum studia*" (Latin) described by the echo as "*dia*" (Greek). Or Narcissus' rejection "*Emoriar, quam sit tibi copia nostri*" to which Echo responds "*sit tibi copia nostri*" ... he even provides a woodcut from Athanasius Kircher's *Neue Hall -und Thonkunst* illustrating an artificial echo machine designed to exchange "*clamore"* for

> four echoes: "*amore*," " *more*," " *ore*," and finally " *re*" ... let this heart-wrenching interchange serve as a final example: *Chi dara fine al gran dolore? L'ore*.[5]
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 42)

From this it can be assumed that perception of the text as a sequence of echoes says something about structure and meaning; that is, that each reading, each interpretation of the structure, which can be understood as a re-echoing of the echo of an utterance, loses something of the original, and this manifestly changes the significance of the original. The echo, in fact, may entirely efface the original, as is the case when Zampano's work, echoing Navidson's explorations, is the only functional access to the house itself for Truant; and when Truant's work is similarly the only access to the house for the reader. The text itself can then be understood as an echo of the labyrinth, incomplete in that it is *not* that labyrinth, but meaningful in that it contains a suggestion of the structure that inspired its shape. A reading of the text thus provides an echo of Truant's echo of the labyrinth, as the reader imagines it, while Truant's work echoes Zampano's echo of the labyrinth.

The roots of Navidson's explorations lie in his disbelief in the ability of the house to behave in contravention of the laws of physics. These laws are again brought into play in the discussion of echo, as a property which can be used to determine spatial characteristics: "The following formula describes the resonance frequencies [*f*] in a room with a length of *L*, width of *W*, and a height of *H*, where the velocity of sound equals *c*: *f*= c/2[(n/L)2 + (m/W)2 + (p/H)2]1/2Hz" (Danielewski 2000: 50). Any space can be understood in terms of this equation, as it describes the reflective properties of specific spatial characteristics: "To hear an echo, regardless of whether eyes are open or closed, is to have already 'seen' a sizable space" (*ibid.*). The house, the halls of the labyrinth, however, have no echo, "And where there is no Echo there is no description of space or love. There is only silence" (*ibid.*). Again, scientific method is of no use in understanding the structure of the labyrinth, or one's position in it, in much the same way that application of the traditional modernist 'laws' of narrative or discourse analysis fails to describe *House of Leaves*. The difference is that the understanding

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[5]Translations provided as given in the text, in their order of appearance: "I've spent ten years on Cicero" "Ass"; "The Muses' studies" "Divine ones"; Narcissus: "May I die before I give you power over me." Echo: "I give you power over me."; "O outcry" returns as "love," "delays," "hours" and "king." ; "Who will put an end to this great sadness?" "The hours passing." (Danielewski 2000; 44)

of the narrative is complicated by the overwhelming number of echoes, raised through intertextuality and the layering or fragmentation of the narrative structure, and reflected in the way that the house itself undergoes structural shifts. An absolute lack of echo is functionally identical to an overwhelming number of echoes, in that both cases prevent the use of echo as a technique for structural description. This highlights the manner in which the thematic concerns of the text are mirrored in its structure, and in the manner in which the reader is persuaded to approach that structure. This approach necessarily involves the application of critical faculties, but such application then forms another layer of mediation:

> Of course, echolocation has never belonged exclusively to technology. *Microchiroptera* (bats), *Cetacean* [sic] (porpoises and toothed whales), *Delphinis delphis* (dolphins) [sic] as well as certain mammals and birds all use sound to create extremely accurate acoustic images. However, unlike their human counterparts, neither bats nor dolphins require an intermediary screen to interpret the echoes. They simply "see" the shape of sound.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 47)

From the human perspective, to "see the shape of sound" is as impossible as it is to "capture the sight of darkness". The tools humans apply to enable some sort of understanding of such abstractions further distance them from those abstractions, further complicating the structure of the object of study, as it is the interpretations generated by the tools that are experienced, not the things themselves. In this manner, the use of literary critical technique becomes severely flawed, if not useless, in trying to delimit the structure of the textual labyrinth that is *House of Leaves*. For instance, this thesis can examine but not pin down the structure of the maze to any specific formulation. What is important is the ***experience*** of the structure and the ideas that it raises, viz.: 1. That structure is both inherent and contingent; 2. That structure only becomes definitive through the application of some form of authority; and 3. That such application is a snare, as it cannot provide a flawless and immutable path through the labyrinth, but leaves its readers confounded when faced with anything unexpected. Structure, then, rather than providing a path ***through*** the text, becomes a meaning-generating part ***of*** the narrative.

2. Space and Identity

> MZD: My father was originally from Poland and a survivor of the war. He was in the Warsaw insurrection and survived a camp. Liberated by the Americans, he first made his way to England ... and [later] wound up ... in New York City directing soap-operas.
>
> SG: This is sounding like one of those classic American immigrant rags-to-riches stories.
>
> (Gregory and McCaffery 2003; 106)

This extract from an interview with Mark Z. Danielewski, describing part of his father's history, sheds an interesting light on meaning-making strategy in *House of Leaves*, namely the manner in which the space of the labyrinth can be read as a representation of a space which is apparently open for appropriation, an appropriation Navidson tries to make with his exploration and attempted mapping. *House of Leaves* raises the issue of space, or land, and who has rights to that space, the right to claim ownership. Awareness of the history of the Danielewski family — how they were displaced and forced out of their homeland by the Nazis, and then made their way to America — is an important piece of background to the text. Despite the distancing strategies employed by the author, as discussed in Chapter 1, the knowledge of family history provides a deeper understanding of the concerns of the text as they reflect the personal life of the author, a member of a nation that has sought a homeland for a very long time.

The idea of the violent appropriation of space was raised previously in the discussion of the attribution of the house's strange properties to its possibly being situated on an old Indian burial ground, and the significance of this in terms of American popular culture. There is an identifiable theme centred on Jewish culture which expands this. Zampano asks the question "Why Navidson? Why not someone else?" (Danielewski 2000: 19). This question is immediately preceded by two lines of Hebrew script, translated in a footnote as: "But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?' " (*ibid.*). What the quotation evokes is the notion of the Jews as an exiled people in search of a space to call their own. Coupled with Navidson's obsession with measuring and mapping the labyrinth, the question of land ownership is raised, with obvious national applications. The

relevance of this to the text is that the house and labyrinth, as a representation of a space that is open for appropriation, can be used to interpret the drives which give rise to the colonising impulse, evidenced by Navidson's desire to map and claim the labyrinth. Navidson's explorations thus become a figure for, for instance, the American appropriation and colonisation of the space that became their country, an appropriation around which was constructed the frontier myth; and of the desire for space epitomised by the historically dispossessed Jewish nation. The book thus raises questions of colonialism, nationalism and ethnicity, pointing out how such issues have been an integral part of human history from Biblical times to the more recent history of the foundation of America and the development of its frontier mythology, and up to the present (particularly relevant in the contentious issue of American support for Israel in its dispute with the Palestinians, a dispute which emphasizes the historical extent of these issues). These questions are also relevant to the South African context, in terms of the redistribution of land appropriated under apartheid. The fact that a concern raised by an American text can be of equal relevance to concerns felt in South Africa emphasises the manner in which this text successfully draws in a multiplicity of perspectives, each of which significantly alters the qualitative functioning of the narrative by allowing it to shift amongst various perspectives instead of being limited to one specifically, which would ordinarily be expected to be American. The American perspective as a cultural metanarrative is thus successfully destabilized, and the global significance of the issue of land-ownership brought into play.

Navidson says his reason for moving to the house on Ashtree Lane is that he wished to "create a cosy little outpost for me and my family" (Danielewski 2000: 23). Zampano gives the following comment:

> A pretty innocuous and laconic rumination and yet it contains one particularly nettlesome word. By definition 'outpost' means a base, military or other, which while safe inside functions principally to provide protection from hostile forces found on the outside ... Navidson wanted to create an outpost set against the transience of the world.
>
> (*ibid.*)

It is then ironic that his 'outpost' comes to contain the threat, and his explorations of it a

window onto the ways of the outside world, which he sought to escape. His outpost becomes the staging point for an exploration which, in a similar manner to that employed by *The Blair Witch Project*, questions the morality and ethics of intrusion into space which is assumed to be empty, and the dangers and implications of such assumptions. In terms of colonialism, nationalism and ethnicity, the book thus raises, for instance, the trope of traditional American frontier history, the nationalist myth of 'how the West was won.' This myth also functions to mask the existence of ethnic groups which existed prior to the historical moment in which America was forged and which provide an unwelcome contradiction to the idea that the land was empty before the colonists' arrival, that no other population group has a legitimate claim to the land (a charge similarly levelled at Israel, accused by Palestinians of ignoring their historical rights to the same land claimed by the state of Israel). If America was *not* an empty space (and it was not), then the myth is flawed, and disingenuous. Worse, it is a nationalist lie, which disguises the fact of mass-murder in the forging of the nation. What is interesting in the case of Navidson's house is the way in which what he had wished to be an outpost, an escape, from the already-conquered world with which he had become disillusioned, instead becomes an outpost in what amounts to a new frontier, an *un*conquered world. In this manner, he is in one sense forced to revisit the history of his nation, and take on the role of the pioneers who set up the very nation he desires to escape. 'Forced' is too strong a word here – he makes a *choice* to explore the labyrinth (in spite of his wife's demands that he not do so). He is in fact compelled to go ahead by his very identity as an 'American male', and the obvious folly of this then becomes an indictment of the type, and of the heavily romanticised myth of the explorer or frontiersman. Such romanticism is clearly evident in the following:

> Thoreau was brought near the original inhabitants of America, changed as they were by prolonged contact and interchange with white settlers. Still, in *The Maine Woods* Native Americans like Joe Aitteon, Governor Neptune and Joe Polis became iconic of that wildness, in fact and spirit, that Thoreau so assiduously sought, and in the essays that compose this work I saw Thoreau celebrating and memorializing their special association with nature.
>
> (Gura 1996: 234)

This attitude is thoroughly romatic, idealistic and self-deceiving: the people are described as spiritual and wild while the effects of the imposition of white, Western culture on them are ignored. They are assigned a voice that effectively silences their own speech on the grounds that it is "wild" (uncouth, uncivilized). This raises questions concerning the foundations of American nationalism as an appropriation, and further begs the question: how does ownership arise? By force? By pointing out the flaws in the romantic myth of the origins of the American nation, the very concept of hereditary land rights is undermined, as these are shown to originate in conquest, forced purchase (for istance in the case of Manhattan Island) or appropriation. The Jewish theme in the book extends the question into the global arena. The Jewish people, who perceive themselves to have been a dispossessed nation (as the original inhabitants of America became), have set up Israel as a Jewish state. But they increasingly have to face the aggression and criticism of Palestinians, who were dispossessed of the same land. This is but one example of contested land rights. And in the end, the question must be asked: what right did the people known as native Americans have to that piece of land? Simply that they were there first? Does ownership spring from mere presence? Nationalism is an ideal that depends on general acceptance of the moral correctness of ownership, by a particular group, of a piece of the earth to which may then be attached some emotional dependence. Historically, the latter has been most effective if the piece of earth has been 'won' from 'uncivilized heathens'. The need on the part of a colonising force for a stable concept of nation, "a concept that comes into being at a particular historical juncture, a concept needed for survival" (Wicomb 1992: 33) and which effaces any contradictions voiced by the colonised, is analogous to the individual human need for mental stability. So, the idea of 'land' — that is, its status as an icon of nationhood and the foundation of patriotism — in a sense depends on not having its foundations probed, much in the same way that the mental stability of a human depends on the perception that the world (indeed, the universe) works in a particular way, that the rules of physics are immutable. Just as the iconicity of nationhood is destabilized by pointing out the violent underbelly of its past, so the stability of perception is shifted by events such as those Navidson experiences in the house. Navidson purchased the house as an "outpost" for his family. The presence of the unexpected labyrinth asks: does Navidson, when he buys the house, simultaneously buy the ***right*** to ownership, and peace? What is being questioned is the fundamental ethic of ownership. The house is portrayed as an

independently existing entity, as a 'depth' below the 'surface' of Navidson's purchase. The 'surface' is the historical surface, that which is decreed to be the truth of the development of the 'house' of America. Nationhood depends on knowledge of this historical surface; as well as on suppression of what lies beneath it. Navidson's house, as an "outpost", the suburban icon of the American dream, depends on an appreciation of the surface alone. When Navidson finds it has a depth he never expected, his dreams crumble, and he meets his doom as his understanding of what constitutes reality is destroyed. So, while the official version of American history is undermined, Navidson's consciousness is simultaneously and similarly destabilised.

So, in terms of nation and nationalism, the question of 'Who is American?' becomes difficult, if not impossible, to answer, as the very notion of 'our ancestral home' (where 'our' is any group with a sense of nation) is shown to be an artificial construction. The horror of *House of Leaves* lies in the manner in which this artificiality is shown to apply equally to the construction of mental stability, the understanding of what is supposedly real and immutable and in terms of which people construct an identity — an identity which incorporates nationality as an important component. Understanding the behaviour of the space in which one lives, historically and scientifically, is fundamental to the construction of a stable identity, which can be understood as an 'ownership of self', and it is this which is shown to be inherently *un*stable, as "built into nationhood [and identity] is also entropy" (Wicomb 1992: 34). This is bitingly clear in Truant's words:

> Outside shots are fired. Lots. In fact one sounds like an artillery cannon going off. Suddenly the city's at war and I'm confused. When I go to my window a spray of light sets me straight, though the revelation is not without irony. Somehow the date escaped me. It's July 4th. This country's birthday. Wow. Which I realise means I forgot my own birthday ... How about that, I can remember the beginnings of a nation that doesn't give a flying fuck about me, would possibly even strangle me if given half the chance, but I can't remember my own beginnings - and I'm probably the only one alive willing to attempt on my behalf that tricky flying fuck maneuver.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 181)

The erosion of Johnny's sense of belonging to a nation called America, and the simultaneous

erosion of his sense of self, his identity, take place as a result of his having entered the space of the figurative 'house' of 'leaves', Zampano's manuscript, characterised by an absence of the laws of physics as understood and depended upon by humans. That this alien space has the ability to efface identity, through deconstruction of confidence in a 'real world' governed by traditional physical laws, is readily apparent in the words of Holloway Roberts, one of the members of Navidson's exploration team, trying frantically to hold on to sanity in the face of the impossible, and thus terrifying, events in the house:

> The immen[]ity of Navidson's house eludes the frame. It exists only in Holloway's face, fear etc[ ] deeper and deeper into his features, the cost of dying paid out with p[]un[]s of flesh and e[]ch s[]allow breath ... Parts 4[ ]6, 10 &1[] centre on Holloway's reiteration of his identity, "Oh god ... Holloway Roberts. Menomonie, Wisconsin. [chambering a round in his rifle]Oh god [ ]."
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 335)

The excisions denoted by square brackets are a part of the text, and are a figure for the degeneration of identity Holloway experiences. That he is aware of this degeneration is surely one of the most terrifying aspects of this moment in the text, as "the creature Holloway hunts has already begun to feed on him" (*ibid.*). The futility of "chambering a round in his rifle" is clear, and illustrates the helplessness of a human being removed from all the security-fostering myths that make everyday existence just that: everyday. As soon as these myths are questioned and subverted, the monster of doubt begins to feed. The irony is that it is these very myths that give rise to the horror, or monster, which exists only in opposition to them, as the unthinkable Other, the outside; and these in turn become myths unto themselves, as in the case of the mythologised "old Indian burial ground", which only becomes frightening in opposition to a 'normal' Christian mythology.

The creation of oppositional myths as an element of the formation of national and individual identity is especially clear in the text's treatment of the ancient myth of King Minos, Theseus and the Minotaur. The passages dealing with this myth appear with a line through them. Truant explains: "Struck passages indicate what Zampano tried to get rid of, but which I, with a little bit of turpentine and a good old magnifying glass managed to resurrect" (Danielewski 2000: 111). The discussion also takes place almost entirely in the

form of footnotes, after this brief mention in the main body of Zampano's work:

> The labyrinth Daedalus constructed for King Minos ... was built to incarcerate the Minotaur, a creature born from an illicit encounter between the queen and a bull. As most schoolchildren learn, the monster devoured more than a dozen Athenian youths every year before Theseus eventually slew it.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 110)

In these footnotes, Zampano describes his reinterpretation of the myth:

> At the risk of stating the obvious, no woman can mate with a bull and produce a child. Recognizing this simple scientific fact, I am lead to a somewhat interesting suspicion: King Minos did not build the labyrinth to imprison a monster, but to conceal a deformed child - his child.
>
> (*ibid.*)

Minos's motivation for concealing the child is that "pride would not allow Minos to accept that the heir to the throne had a horrendous appearance" (*ibid.*). In order to protect the mythology of the king as a regal, god-like being, Minos creates the myth of the Minotaur as an opposition to it, while the 'monster' is in actual fact an inherent part of the king-myth, the heir to the throne. The king is the figurehead and embodiment of nationhood, and in preserving the myth of nation in this manner, a myth of Otherness is created, a myth embodied in the deformed child trapped in the maze. The maze then "serves as a trope for repression" (*ibid.*) rather than as a representation of the struggle against evil. The Minotaur is only a terror by virtue of being set up as such in order to preserve the myths of king and nation. The excision of the myth from the text can then be read as a representation of the excision of the Minotaur from society; and the Minotaur's imprisonment can be read as the repression of historical facts that do not fit in with the foundational metanarratives of nation, in the same way that American myths of frontier efface events such as the following: "In 1637 [settlers] surrounded and set fire to the Pequod stronghold in Connecticut, with 400 people in it who were burned alive or killed as they tried to escape" (Kiernan 1980: 22). The reinterpretation of the myth highlights the cruelty of 'heroes' such as the settlers, in the figure of Theseus, "a drunken, virtually retarded frat-boy" (Danielewski 2000: 111) who slays the

Minotaur, described as "a gentle and misunderstood creature ... [with] an elegiac spirit, an artistic sentiment and most importantly a visionary understanding of the world" (*ibid.*). Truant's "resurrection" of the myth thus serves as a figure for the reconsideration of events and peoples who have been erased from the myths of nation because they were not commensurate with the image those myths wished to create. Such events and peoples have effectively been consigned to a death-like state - hence the need for "resurrection" - buried beneath the surface of nation, which "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail ... is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 1991: 7). The "horizontal comradeship", the official historical surface which hides the Othered depths, thus has as part and parcel of its make-up the very 'horrors' it seeks to exclude; these things are only horrors because they have been labelled as such by the 'normal': "It is nationality itself which narrows the focus of belonging to negativities of exclusion, where what is essentialised as alien is underwritten by what is essentialised as 'our own' (Pickering 2001: 107).

The purpose of this attention to the processes by which the relationships of the individual to the nation, and of the nation to the ownership of space, arise and interact, specifically in the formation of identity, is revealed when Danielewski says that when he conceptualised the house, he was "creating something akin to a vast literal theatre, one that the reader could use to project his or her own histories and anxieties" (Gregory and McCaffery 2003: 107). In these terms, the monster at the heart of the maze, the generalized Minotaur, is whatever readers as individuals, and as members of nations, most fear, that which they view as threatening, or Other, to their stability, to the manner in which they view themselves and their lives.

In this way, the role of the individual in developing an identity which has a reciprocal relationship with conceptions of nation and nationalism is emphasised. 'Nation' depends on individuals sharing agreement as to national identity, and so agreeing on what should be ***excluded*** from that conception. If individual identity is called into question by the destabilising of what is felt to be 'truth,' then the conceptualised nation as a whole is in jeopardy. If the surface is probed, the depths below are revealed, and it is impossible to continue to believe in the 'truth' of the surface. Navidson's house is no longer just a house after the discovery of the labyrinth, it is something else. Exactly what that something else is,

is not specified, *cannot* be specified, because there is no language, no means of building an appropriative discourse, or metanarrative, with which to specify the unknowable. But the mere fact of its existence requires a radical shift in conceptualising reality, and it is this requirement that destabilises identity, which is dependent on a stable reality. The idea of nation is subject to similar destabilisation when it is revealed that the foundations upon which it has been constructed, are flawed. This questions the historical, shared sense of identity which constitutes nation (the feeling of being American, or Israeli, or South African, etc.) as an honourable source for feelings of patriotism, thus challenging the right of a nation such as America, or Israel, or any nation, to the ownership of the space it occupies, given that such ownership is very often based on a process of violent appropriation and exclusion through the building of nationalist myths which assign those who do not fit into the national self-image, as Minos's son did not, to at least figurative death in the margins of society.

Danielewski thus forces readers to confront not only the self, but metanarratives of national identity. Although the American theme is prominent due to the American origins of the book, the space of the house exists not just outside America, but outside the known world, and thus provides a platform from which to consider the manner in which narratives, particularly historical narratives, may be fabricated, and shown to be false. This in turn persuades us to reconsider of their value as a truth upon which to base any understanding of ourselves. *House of Leaves*' use of the myths of nation and nationality provokes reconsideration of those myths and thus constitutes a meaningful element to be considered while reading the text, without supplying specific meaning; that is, it destabilises the metanarrative without replacing or wholly effacing it.

3. Representation

A very important aspect of the book is the way in which Johnny Truant, the narrator, is represented. The unreliable narrator is a familiar figure in postmodernist literature, and Truant is indeed that:

> Now I'm sure you're wondering something. Is it just coincidence that this cold water predicament of mine also appears in this chapter? Not at all. Zampano only wrote

> "heater." The word "water" back there - I added that. Now there's an admission, eh? Hey, not fair, you cry. Hey, hey, fuck you, I say.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 16)

The effect of this admission is that:

> once this first brick has been removed from the "sacred text" Johnny is supposed to be faithfully reassembling, the entire edifice immediately collapses and can never be made whole again ... the real effect of Johnny's admission is to cast doubt on the entire Zampano manuscript, which has now become, as it were, contaminated by outside influences.
>
> (Danielewski in Gregory and McCaffery 2003: 131)

Earlier in the Gregory and McCaffery interview, Danielewski has explained that:

> The way that Johnny projects himself into, or onto, Zampano's book shows how the text of ***The Navidson Record*** functions as it is being read and assembled by the readers themselves. Johnny even goes so far as to modify it. Not only does the book permit that, it is really saying to the reader, "Now ***you*** modify it."
>
> (Danielewski in Gregory and McCaffery 2003: 121)

Truant can therefore be seen as setting an example, to the readers of the book, of how to read it. What is accomplished by calling Truant's reliability into question is to shed doubt upon the story he tells of his own life. The manner in which he openly invents stories about himself was discussed earlier, but there is some basis to extend this doubt to Danielewski himself. There are a number of parallels between the events of Truant's life, and of Danielewski's, especially in the abuse, emotional for Danielewski and physical for Truant, they each suffered at the hands of their father and foster father respectively. For Danielewski:

> One moment ... warm and proximal ... our father would be saying, "You're wonderful! You're the best! You're going to be great artists ..." Then, without warning, everything would get cold and dark, and the promise of the future failed ... In many ways he was like the father in ***Shine*** - one moment warm, generous and funny;

> petty, vindictive and hateful the next.
>
> (Danielewski in Gregory and McCaffery 2003: 115)

For Truant:

> we didn't go directly to the hospital. Raymond took me somewhere else first, where I lost half my tooth, and a lot more I guess, on the outskirts, in an ice covered place, surrounded by barbed wire and willows, where monuments of rust, seldom touched, lie frozen alongside fence posts, and noone ever comes near enough to hear the hawks cry.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 93)

The "ice covered place ... surrounded by barbed wire" is highly evocative of the concentration camp in which Danielewski's father was interned during the Second World War, and suggests an ultimate source for the violence portrayed. Danielewski places Truant in an environment which reflects the source of his own father's emotional dysfunction, and thus the source of the violence Danielewski suffered. Truant can in this manner be read as a representation of Danielewski.

This link raises the question of the extent to which a writer is free to choose the manner of his self-construction and representation:

> Men and women do write their own history, but ... they do not write under circumstances chosen by themselves. Instead they write it under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted by the past, a past that can indeed weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living. Much ... literature can be seen as an attempt to awaken from the nightmare of history, or to fan a spark of hope in the past by safeguarding or defending the dead.
>
> (Holton 1994: 164)

The weight of the past is "like a nightmare" because, as discussed in "Space and Identity", the memory of the past is not fixed; there are instead various versions of the past from which it is impossible to select one definitive version. There is thus a return to the figure of the labyrinth in the presence of multiple versions of the past, the multiple pathways of personal history, as an analogue for the difficulties associated with concepts of self-identity. By subtly referring

to his personal history in the context of Johnny's creative memory of his past, Danielewski points out the fallacious belief in the personal history of the self as an immutable construction. For all the characters of the book, the manner in which they represent themselves, their understanding of who they are, is severely undermined by the 'direct encounter' with the labyrinth. The "nightmare of history" results from the perception that history is not what it was thought to be. As the artificial construction of it crumbles, there is a creeping horror which develops while the narrative of self falls away to leave a gaping and dangerous absence:

> ... people dwelling on *The Navidson Record* have shown an increase in obsessiveness, insomnia and incoherence. Most of those who chose to abandon their interest soon recovered. A few, however, required counselling and in some instances medication and hospitalisation. Three cases resulted in suicide.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 407)

The removal of the reassuring foundations of self-representation brought about by an encounter with the unknown, and seemingly impossible, has a profound effect. Truant describes it as "awful havoc ... tearing through me" (Danielewski 2000: 410). As the text is "read and assembled by the readers themselves" (Danielewski in Gregory and McCaffery 2003: 117) they are forced to consider the manner of construction, and as Truant loses his grasp on reality, readers become aware of the ease with which their grasp may similarly slip. The text of *House of Leaves* reflects the labyrinth of Navidson's house, which can be read as a reflection of the human social and historical environment, in terms of which people seek to understand themselves and their place in the world. The way that Truant is thrust into an academic undertaking then takes on a new significance. His acting as a critical reader causes him to suffer because his enquiries reveal the horror of the essential meaninglessness of the artificial constructions he relies on to make sense of the world. Their stability is an illusion, but one upon which people depend to preserve their sanity:

> Wow, not doing so well. But where else to turn? What mistakes have been made. A sudden vertigo of loss, when looking down, or is it really looking back?, leaves me experiencing it all at once, which is way too much ... The floor writhes with a hundred

> black serpents. I want to burn these pages. Turn every fucking word to ash.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 493)

The rage directed at the pages is a result of the loss of the ability to build a coherent self-representation that Truant suffers as he reads a text which all too clearly points out the fallacy of assuming that one's understanding of one's self is immutable and non-contingent. The "hundred black serpents" perhaps represent the network of narrative possibilities from which people must choose a basis upon which to construct understanding. Difficulties arise from the fact that people are usually aware of only one of these possibilities, in fact assume that there *is only one* possibility. The serpent is a traditional figure for treachery, an imagery effectively evoked in the writhing mass Truant finds before him, which effaces the narrative possibility he had chosen, and assumed to be singular. He finds himself betrayed by his own assumptions; as do the readers who face a similarly writhing mass.

Truant represents author, reader and subject simultaneously, a position each person finds themselves in when they look below the surface of history and identity. Each person continuously writes and reads themselves as their own subject, and when that narrative is shown to be fragile in the extreme, a panicked sense of vertigo derails the narrative track, so that, to paraphrase Calvino's words, the traveller finds him- or herself leaning from a steep slope indeed. Whatever understanding of the labyrinth, and the text itself, is available, is ultimately to be gained through the effect it has upon the characters of the narrative, and on the readers who find themselves participating on the level of character. The 'house of leaves', Navidson's maze, is a representative destabilisation of the narratives people construct for themselves, and reveals the manner in which self-representation is woven into a tapestry which is all too easily unravelled. The principal effect of this is a deconstruction of the processes by which the unfamiliar is represented as Other. Once this is understood, it becomes apparent why it is that the word 'house' appears in a lighter grey colour every time it is printed. The house, the labyrinth, is the lens which reveals the othering process inherent in the construction of a representation of the self, especially in terms of national identity. It is therefore appropriate that the house itself, the unfamiliar, Other, object which the characters of the book must confront, be othered through print technique, and shown to be 'different'. The irony is that the house assumes increasing prominence as the narrative progresses, pushing what was considered the centre, the basis for self-representation, to the margins. It is

important to point out that this marginalisation is not specifically designed as a critique of Western ideology alone, but of every person, and every nation, that has the tendency to view itself as the centre of the universe, in much the same way that limited understanding inaccurately placed the planet Earth at the centre of the universe for a very long time.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion demonstrates three meaning-making strategies identifiable in the text. There are of course others, but these clearly demonstrate the manner in which 'meaning' is replaced with the quality of being 'meaningful.' The narrative is suggestive rather then prescriptive, and most importantly, undermines the very mechanisms of prescription. The structures normally used to lend meaning and identity are revealed as fallacious in their claim to truth value. This is a revelation which prevents the construction of metanarratives, as the platforms upon which these are usually based are removed.

Furthermore, readers themselves are persuaded to consider the sense in which they are characters in their own narratives of self, as it becomes clear that the characters of the book inhabit a world (symbolic of the world of the readers) capable of subverting these narratives. The path through does not exist in any stable sense. There is instead a series of paths, the existence of many of which is hidden beneath a veneer of 'normalcy' which is stripped away to reveal a tangled web of possibilties. The choice of path is personal and contingent, and no path is ever repeated by one person, or group of people in the form of a nation. The perception of a single, 'right' path is an error which arises from the effacement of anything that does not fit in with the previously selected model.

To negotiate the labyrinth is not a task to be undertaken with the expectation of success in the sense of coming to a final conclusion. Negotiation is just that - a process of give and take, which is ongoing and does not have an end point. There is a range of tools available to aid in the process, but none of these can function independently of the others, and to attempt to select one and make exclusive use of it is to condemn oneself to existence in a shadowed corner of the maze, alone and afraid of anything that does not conform, anything that does not prop up the image of the universe as it is desired to be.

The subversion of absolute meaning may seem terrifying, especially for those who

depend on, for instance, Christian mythology, or the myths of nation to explain their existence. To have one's sense of purpose removed is unpleasant to say the least. But what it accomplishes is to persuade one to consider the proposition that there are other possibilities which are equally valid. Most of the violence people experience at the hands of other people is conducted in defence of a specific way of life which is viewed as sacrosanct: Protestants hate Catholics; Hutus hate Tutsis; Israelis hate Palestinians, etc. (and all vice versa). At the risk of sounding warm and fuzzy, all that is required is a shift in mentality to an acceptance that ways of being that contradict one's own are not neccessarily evil; mutual understanding is not required, merely tolerance, and the recognition that Other(ed) cultural norms, which may seem alien from the persepctive of one's own culture, are perfectly valid. This is the shift in attitude that allows for the construction of meaningful narratives in the context of postmodernity, as opposed to classic liberalism which still relied upon, and privileged, the metanarratives of, for instance, Newtonian physics.

The following chapter considers the value of postmodernist theory (and literary theory in general), and of the production of texts in accordance with such theory/theories; together with the question of to whom they have value, and why. The argument will be that the postmodernist understanding of the world sets the stage for what may be termed a 'new realism', in that it establishes the ground rules for a more accurate portrait of (human) existence than has ever been achieved before.

. **CHAPTER THREE**

BEYOND POSTMODERNISM: A NEW REALISM?

It must be made clear from the outset that it is *not* my intention to launch a defence of postmodernism in this chapter. What I intend to consider are the questions of to whom, and why, or why not, this movement has value; and if it has value, what sort of value?

A useful starting point is the question of the origins of postmodernism (as opposed to the *character* of postmodernism considered in Chapter One). The term of course contains an indication of its beginnings within itself, in the prefix *post*; that is, it is in the first instance that which comes after modernism. In this sense postmodernism can be understood as containing, responding to or in some way modifying, modernism. This is an oversimplification, though, as some of the principles and tendencies of postmodernism can be identified not only in modernism itself, but long before, for instance in the writings of Chaucer. In order to arrange the Canterbury tales in a manner best suited to his purposes, Chaucer devises a technique which is able to overcome the metanarrative of mediaeval social structure, according to which a mediaeval audience would have expected the tales to have been presented in order of the social rank of the pilgrims. Chaucer simply says:

> Also I prey yow to foryeve it me,
> Al have I nat set folk in hir degree
> Heere in this tale, as that they sholde stonde.
> My wit is short, ye may wel understonde ...

(Chaucer 24: 743-746)

He then uses the device of the drawing of straws to arrange the tales as he sees fit, unconstrained by the strictures of the external social system. Furthermore, Chaucer demonstrates incredulity towards the courtly metanarrative in *Troilus and Criseyde*, in which the idealized courtly lover, Troilus, is wholly ineffectual without the aid of his far more practical foil, Pandarus. By highlighting the ineffectiveness of courtly behaviour in a real relationship, Chaucer warns against blindly accepting the idealised courtly code as a standard of behaviour, thereby undermining its authority, and leaving readers to draw their own conclusions (another tendency of postmodernist literature) as to its real-world efficacy:

> As early as in *The Book of the Duchess* ... [Chaucer] portrays himself as a man who views the conventions and symptoms of courtly love with sympathetic detachment ... anxious to avoid giving the impression that he himself has any personal experience or expertise in these matters ... *he ... does not presume to offer any opinion* (my emphasis).
>
> (Mehl 1986: 9)

So it is not possible to pin down the origins of the ideas contained within postmodernism to the early decades of the twentieth century. All that can be stated with relative certainty is that it was at that time that the tendency to resist the conventions of genre, form and audience expectations began to take shape as a coherent cultural tendency, although it was a tendency that had been around for a long time. As B.R. Tilghman describes it, "new developments are sometimes ... the result of the influence of a tradition, but ... sometimes it is the new works themselves that help mark out just what that tradition is" (Tilghman 1984: 77). That is, the "new works" of postmodernism reveal a long-standing, but hitherto largely unrecognized, tradition. Postmodernism, then, is not so much a new invention as the crystallization of a long-established recognition that 'the way things are' is neither natural nor inevitable but contingent: that "there is nothing ... but thinking makes it so" (Shakespeare in Craig 1993: 882). Humanity's purpose, the 'meaning of life' as defined by the self-legitimating metanarratives which postmodernity rejects (such as those of religion, or politics) is *not* as readily apparent as these metanarratives would suggest.

Bearing this in mind, it is possible to consider the emergence of postmodernism as a cultural movement in terms of a response to realism, the dominant mode of representation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries (and to a large extent today).[6] The need for something beyond Modernist realism stemmed from the recognition that:

> realism has become not a form which can tell us about life in the modern world ... Naive where it should be subtle, confident because unreflective, realism has become the form which, far from showing the way past illusion, itself perpetuates the illusions

[6]As well as a response to the developments in modern physics, which moved well beyond the physics of the nineteenth century.

> on which our blind, ideology-ridden life in society depends.
>
> (Shaw 1999: 3)

In other words, realism as a mode of representation is impervious to the realisation that for all its radical innovativeness, Modernist discourse still "legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse ... making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative" (Lyotard 1984: xxiii). So, even while engaging, criticising and modifying ideologies of, for instance, church or state, Modernism did not address the paradox of authority described earlier as inherent in postmodernism, a paradox which was present in Modernism itself. For instance, in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, the self-legitimating authority of Mr Ramsay may be subverted, but there is no ironic self-reflexivity in the realist position which conducts the subversion. Self-reflexivity is crucial for there to be an awareness of the inevitable presence of controlling metanarratives, even in a subversive position. This is an awareness present in the self-reflexivity of the postmodernist perspective, and a development postmodernism makes upon Modernism.

Since Chaucer's time, and increasingly, perhaps, since the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century, there have always been those who recognised the inherent inability of literature to accurately and completely reflect the world. But it was the realisation of ***the inevitability of a locus of authority*** that provided the impetus for the development of postmodernism's radically self-reflexive criticism. Such loci are present even in the subversive discourses of Modernism, Robbe-Grillet's *nouveau roman*, the reaction of Roland Barthes and other French radicals to realism perceived as an instrument of bourgeois hegemony, and the post-structuralist insistence on the absolute division between representation and its object, signifier and signified. Ultimately, postmodernism has arisen as the latest development in this chain of subversive thought, and is concerned, as were its predecessors, with the eternal literary-theoretical questions of "How far ... novels influence society, and how far [they are] influenced by society? [What is] the connection between the novel and 'life' or society?" (Walder 1995: 98). These are questions which have always underpinned the very nature of the novel. It is an artform which is popular because it makes some connection with, or comment upon the world as people experience it. What has changed, in response to the ways that people's experience of the world has changed, is the nature of that commentary, the manner of novelistic expression. The question to be answered

is, then, has this change in expression made the novel more useful as a tool for understanding the world, or life, or society? In other words, is the contemporary novel, and specifically *House of Leaves*, a more accurate, and thus more valuable, representation of existence than earlier work, and thus aptly able to be described as a new realism? Or has it merely become, on the one hand, the plaything of intellectuals, an elitist stage on which to demonstrate one's cleverness; or on the other hand, a mere commodity for mass consumption (see Chapter 4)?

1. Naive and Critical Readers

The question of whether the contemporary postmodernist novel — for which *House of Leaves* will serve as an example — has become the plaything of intellectuals tends to assume the existence of a polar opposition between the status of 'academic critic' and 'naive reader' (one not schooled in recent literary theory). Is it the case that a work of theoretical fiction, such as *House of Leaves*, will be of greater value to a 'critical' reader than to a 'naive' reader, or even that a naive reader will not be able to understand such a work?

The contrast between a strictly academic approach and one less regimented is clear in the following:

> Yesterday I managed to get Maus Fife-Harris on the phone. She's a UC Irvine PhD candidate in Comp Lit who apparently always objected to the large chunks of narrative Zampano kept asking her to write down. "I told him all these passages were inappropriate for a critical work, and if he were in my class I'd mark him down for it. But he'd just chuckle and continue ... 'Why won't you listen to me?' I demanded one time. 'You're writing like a freshman.' ... [He] chuckled again and pressed on." Not a bad way to respond to this whole fucking book, if you ask me.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 55)

In this extract there are three approaches to literature apparent: Maus Fife-Harris (a name absolutely dripping with pretention) represents the strictly academic; Zampano is the writer of theoretical fiction, where criticism meets narrative; and Johnny Truant is, at first glance, the naive reader who finds the whole endeavour laughable. In terms of value, Fife-Harris feels that Zampano's work is flawed because it does not correspond to academic norms for the

writing of a critical work, a label she applies because Zampano's work is, ostensibly, a critical commentary on Navidson's work. She is unable to appreciate that while Zampano's work may indeed be a study of other work, it is, possibly, simultaneously a work of fiction. This is because she is one of "those people [who] were still in their universities, still on their net and nowhere near Whitley when an old man without friends or family finally died" (Danielewski 2000: xx), which implies the disconnection of academia from the outside or 'real' world, especially the human emotional world. The term "universities" in this context denotes a self-contained discursive system, an arena with a specific set of rules governing the activities undertaken within that arena. It is Fife-Harris's belief in the value of these rules that leads to her condescending attitude towards Zampano's work. She cannot accept that he wishes to add "chunks of narrative" which have a personal, subjective register, as opposed to the critical, distanced register she considers appropriate. She sees him as a naive reader/writer, as opposed to her own (self-ascribed) status as a critical one. The division between naive and critical readers is thus laid open at an early stage in the text.

Johnny, then, seems to be situated at the opposite end of the scale to Fife-Harris. He finds Zampano's text frustrating ("this whole fucking book"), yet interesting. It somehow captivates him, and he continues with his work, reconstructing Zampano's narrative, despite his apparent distaste, disillusionment, and frustration with the task he has set himself. Why does he continue? Zampano's narrative has a profound effect on Johnny. The point at which he starts to suspect that this is something more than a simple story is identifiable in the text. In one of his long digressions, this time on echolocation, Zampano says: "Echolocation comes down to the assessment of simple sound modulations, whether in the dull reply of a tapping cane or the low eerie flutter in one simple word - perhaps your word - flung down empty hallways long past midnight" (Danielewski 2000: 48). In response to this, Johnny has

> one of those deep, piercing reactions, the kind that just misses a ventricle ... taking me completely by surprise, a sudden charge from out of the dullest moment, jaws lunging open, claws protracting, and just so you understand where I'm coming from, I consider "long past midnight" one claw and "empty hallways" another.
>
> (*ibid.*)

This captures perfectly what Arthur Kroker describes as "the menacing quality of postmodern

times" (Kroker 1988: 182). It is this menace that Johnny senses, although he does not articulate it in terms of an awareness of 'postmodernity'. For Johnny, the menace lies in the ability of Zampano's words to affect him on an emotional level so profound as to seem physical, visceral. His subsequent research has physiological effects on him:

> My fear's gotten worse. Hearing Hagley describe my screams ... has really upset me. I no longer wake up tired. I wake up tired and afraid. I wonder if the morning rasp in my voice is just from sleep or from some inarticulate attempt to name my horror ... I've also noticed the insides of my cheeks are now all mutilated, lumps of pink flesh dangling in the wet dark ... My teeth ache. My head aches. My stomach's a mess ... Ever since leaving the labyrinth, having had to endure all those convolutions, those incomplete suggestions, the maddening departures and inconclusive nature of the whole fucking chapter, I've craved space, light and ... any kind of clarity.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 179)

It is these effects which drive him to continue with his work, the need to "name [his] horror" and escape from the "maddening ... inconclusive nature" of Zampano's work. And it is this need that brings about an intersection of the standards of naive and critical reading. Johnny, as a non-academic, does not have a conception of his reality in terms of the theoretical notion of the postmodern era, and does not have the ability to express the responses he senses in himself in the ratiocinative jargon of critical writing. For instance, in response to an extract from Heidegger, he says, "when I copied down the German a week ago, I was fine. Then last night I found the translation and this morning, when I went into work, I didn't feel at all myself" (Danielewski 2000: 25). In this sense, and from an academic point of view, Johnny is a naive reader. However, 'naive' does not necessarily imply 'stupid.' Johnny is capable of intelligently analysing his circumstances and what he senses to be the effects of the labyrinth on himself. It is important to note that the labyrinth is equated with the text he reads when he says: "Ever since leaving the labyrinth, having had to endure ... the whole fucking chapter, I've craved space, light" (Danielewski 2000: 179). That is, Johnny feels that he actually enters the labyrinth through his reading of Zampano's work. His actions are thus driven by the same need as Navidson, who could not rest until he had shown it to be impossible for his house to be larger on the inside than the outside, and so proved the laws of (Newtonian)

physics to hold true. Johnny, too, needs to prove to himself that the world is as he has always believed it to be. In reading Zampano's work, he, like Navidson, has encountered a mysterious labyrinth and is trying to possess it, to control it. The labyrinth arises as Zampano's writing evokes for Johnny the way he constructs his own life, the way he fictionalises it, and suggests to him that there exists the possibility of forgetting, or losing his grasp on, who he is. If a sense of self consists of the memory of past events, and memory is fallible, then how can such a sense be definitive? There is the possibility that this sense is a fallacy, something misremembered, and that there are thus an infinite number of possible selves, an infinity which constitutes a labyrinth of narrative threads. The understanding of 'I' is itself a metanarrative, constructed from and overarching these threads. It is as architecturally insubstantial as Zampano's exposition of the labyrinth and Navidson's mapping explorations, neither of which ever reveals the design of the labyrinth, only that there *is* a labyrinth, and that they are unable to capture and express it. Instead of understanding, there is a space lit only by the frail and brittle light of creative invention. Johnny's situation is as Kroger describes:

> Here, the pain of the external condition is so overwhelming that the gaze turns inward as the body implodes into the density of a sign with no referent; and there the body is turned inside out — actually peeled open — as its organs are splayed, like negative photographic images, across the field of a dead, relational power. To be buried alive in the perspectival fictions of their own skins, or splayed across the postmodern scene with all their organs hanging out: these are the alternative images ... of panic bodies.
>
> (Kroker 1988: 185)

Johnny describes what it is that brings about the fear that effects him so, that so radically destabilises his view of existence, as he warns readers of *House of Leaves* that:

> Old shelters — television, magazines, movies — won't protect you any more ... your eyes will no longer linger on the light ... You'll care only about the darkness and you'll watch it ... trying in vain to believe you're some kind of indispensable, universe-appointed sentinel, as if just by looking you could actually keep it all at bay. Then no matter where you are ... you'll watch yourself dismantle every assurance you

> ever lived by. You'll stand aside as a great complexity intrudes, tearing apart, piece by piece, all of your carefully conceived denials. And then ... you'll turn ... to face the thing you most dread ... the creature you truly are ... buried in the nameless black of a name. And then the nightmares will begin.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: xxiii)

Johnny is trying to figure out who he is, what manner of creature he is, because the nature of the work he is doing on the book, and the nature of the book itself, force him to reconsider "every assurance [he] ever lived by". In theoretical terms, what is happening to Johnny is that the metanarratives (assurances) according to which he has structured his life and his conception of self are being stripped away, leaving "a great complexity" — something Baudrillard describes as "an enormous saturation of our senses" (Baudrillard 1988: 23). The notions of simplicity and complexity register the inherent conflict between metanarratives, which simplify, and any thinking that reveals them as artificial structures. Showing the simplicity to be false reveals the complexity of which metanarratives are used to make sense, and it is this revelation, characteristic of the postmodern condition, which exposes Johnny to menace and horror. Things which he believed to be relatively simple, his place in the universe and the way that the universe works, are shown to be vastly more complex than he had suspected. The important point is that he expresses this realisation in terms no less descriptive or commanding than those of a literary theorist, which belies the distinction between 'naive' and 'critical' readers insofar as the epithet 'critical' is believed to be earned through formal training. Johnny is clearly capable of critical thinking, and the implication is that academics do not have a monopoly on the ability to be critically analytical.

Is this then the ultimate purpose of postmodernist literary theory, to strip away (false) confidence by exposing the artificial simplicity of metanarratives, to leave one "splayed across the postmodern scene" with nothing to believe in and nothing upon which to hang a sense of self? It would seem that such a purpose could be of value only to people who have nothing invested in metanarratives — that is, practically nobody, other than those who view this purpose as an exercise of purely academic interest: literary theorists. Or can the subversion of metanarratives indeed have a useful application for people other than theorists?

If this subversion can indeed force one to "face the creature you truly are," why should this be "the thing you most dread"? Douglas Adams provides an explanation for this dread in

his book, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, in the form of the Total Perspective Vortex, which shows:

> The Universe ... the whole infinite Universe. The infinite suns, the infinite distances between them, and yourself an invisible dot on an invisible dot, infinitely small .... Trin Tragula ... built the Total Perspective Vortex ... into one end he plugged the whole of reality ... and into the other end he plugged his wife: so that when he turned it on she saw in one instance the whole infinity of creation and herself in relation to it. To Trin Tragula's horror, the shock completely annihilated her brain; but to his satisfaction he realized that he had proved conclusively that if life is going to exist in a Universe of this size, then the one thing it cannot afford to have is a sense of proportion.
>
> (Adams 1980: 201-202)

Metanarratives are the structures that hold at bay the fatal "sense of proportion", structures which make sense of the massive, chaotic complexity of the Universe in which people find themselves living out their existence. If metanarratives are removed, what is left is a vast unknown. These are "the creatures we truly are" — sentient beings in a universe far too large and complex for any understanding of the whole, and of our position in relation to it, without the construction of some reasoned framework. The questions "Who am I, and what am I doing here?" demand answers. Literature is a vehicle for the exploration and development of answers to those questions. Why, then, is postmodernist literary theory engaged in stripping away the answers, the framework upon which people build their sanity?

The important question to ask is, where did the metanarratives upon which people so rely come from? If "knowledge is always and everywhere a product of dominant social interests, a symptom of the technocratic will to power over nature and humankind alike" (Norris 1997: 1) then metanarratives are a characteristic product of that technocracy. So while they may provide a reassuring sense of security, they actively discourage and ultimately prevent any form of self-exploration which may undermine their (self-)legitimation. The value of *House of Leaves*, of a text written in a manner which makes overt use of the theoretical position of postmodernism, is the very fact that, to combine and paraphrase Kroker and Danielewski, for readers "the gaze turns inwards ... to face the thing you most

dread," the self without the reassuring external structures of definition. As the artificial authority of metanarratives is subverted, the very concept of 'value' (revealed as a feeling, not a fixture) becomes transitory and "originality [becomes] a novel way of understanding the present ... of coping with the present" (Currie 1998: 100) — a present in which value, and what is of value, is no longer conveniently delineated by some authority. "Coping with the present" is indeed what the stripping away of metanarratives is intended to achieve — to adopt a viewpoint that goes beyond the all-too-familiar description of postmodernism as "the interpretation of interpretations or the interpretation of metanarratives rather than narratives themselves ... ideas which present the problem which can be described ... as criticism beside itself or, in stronger language, as criticism up its own backside" (Currie 1998: 12). Entering into the critical space around and beyond metanarratives represents an opportunity for a return of the originality postmodernism views as irretrievably lost. By removing the structures of security, originality is forced to the fore, as a coping mechanism. So, while the removal of the structures which, in the face of a massive and seemingly hostile universe, provide a basis for some understanding, is undoubtedly traumatic, as evidenced by what Johnny endures, this process nevertheless provides a space in which can be developed an understanding which is free of the technocratic metanarratives of "dominant social interests." As Johnny says, just before the end of his narrative: "There's time now. Plenty of time. And somehow I know it's going to be okay. It's going to be alright. It's going to be alright" (Danielewski 2000: 515). He has come to the realisation that:

> Of course there will always be darkness but I realise now something inhabits it. Historical or not. Sometimes it seems like a cat, the panther with its moon mad gait or a tiger with stripes of ash and eyes as wild as winter oceans. Sometimes it's the curve of a wrist or what's left of romance, still hiding in the drawer of some long lost nightstand or carefully drawn in the margins of an old discarded calendar. Sometimes it's even just a vapour trail speeding west, prophetic, over clouds aglow with dangerous light. Of course, these are only images, my images, and in the end they're born out of something much more akin to a Voice, which though invisible to the eye and frequently unheard by even the ear still continues, day and night, year after year,

to sweep through us all.

(Danielewski 2000: 518)

The vast complexity, the maze, the Universe, is not wholly empty and hostile. It is just largely unfamiliar, hidden behind assurances and therefore inaccessible until those assurances are removed. The seeming darkness that enfolds the unwary, and threatens sanity, is not empty, is not absolutely dark: instead, "something inhabits it". This something consists of "images, *my* images ... *akin to a Voice*" (emphasis added). The word "Voice" is capitalised because of its value to Johnny. He has found a way to construct *his own* theory, to find his own, original Voice, in a space external to that governed by the usual tropes of understanding. His reading and work on Zampano's writing become a vehicle for the development of his own, personal narrative, a way for him to examine himself, particularly in the long digressions in which he remembers his own history, and re-examines it through reinvention, eventually arriving at a version of events that, at least, seems close to *a* truth, even if that truth is that he will never be sure. This is why, as long as these are [his] images, "it's going to be alright."

Johnny has given up the protection of the "old shelters" of television, magazines and movies. These are shelters by virtue of their character as storehouses of familiar imagery. They confirm all the reassuring beliefs; they do not question value systems. They are, for the most part, there to entertain, not question. The images they employ are generic, produced to appeal to the largest number of people possible. This observation can be extended to many other sources of imagery in terms of which it is possible to find a sense of self-definition: religion, politics, sports, career — all alike are sources of standardised imagery. The darkness that engulfs Johnny is the darkness of the unimaged, from which he emerges after starting to develop his own images, to demonstrate the originality which is, ironically, the unavoidable response to postmodernism: "The new view admits that our knowledge is, indeed, not *final*; that in many ways our picture will in the future be changed; that it can everywhere be superseded by new ... discoveries ... Values are just *feelings*" (Putnam 1990: 132). If values are feelings and knowledge is not final, there is no reasonable way for postmodernism to deny originality, or to say that there is no novel way in which to respond to the world; or that there is nothing novel in the world to demand original response. Is theory arrogant enough to hold that being "splayed across the postmodern scene" is an end, and that

it has reached some sort of pinnacle of achievement by announcing that end as a meaningless babble of conflicting discourses? If theory insists that there is no possibility of movement beyond this point, then the answer to this question is yes. Postmodernism cannot move beyond this point without undoing itself, for it can only proceed by assuming some authority that cannot help but mask or override others. All postmodernist theory can do is provide an awareness of the situation, by pointing out the way in which the perception of reality is mediated by standardised filters which draw a veil over the extraordinary. It is this veil that is torn by the claws that Johnny feels are Zampano's words, and it is through the tear that we glimpse the possibility of moving beyond postmodernism.

Johnny is indeed naive in thinking that he has a grasp on truth, a naivety which leads to his terrors, just as it did for Navidson. However, Johnny also demonstrates the ability to be critical, to express his situation in a manner as effective as the scholarly productions of literary critics; more so, if his survival is a measure of his success in comparison to Zampano. This position is reversed in those who, like Maus Fife-Harris, consider themselves critics because of their training, but who are actually naive in terms of the limits their training sets upon them, limits they fail to recognise. These limits would, in this context, include a sense of academic decorum and traditional generic distinctions, which would in turn predispose an academic critic to disapprove of a text that mates criticism with narrative. This, however, reveals limitation rather than accomplishment. The true value of the perspective of postmodernism lies in its ability to assist the supposedly naive in finding a critical voice of a kind which enables self-examination— that is, self-examination of a kind that reveals and builds upon the constrictions of metanarratological discourses, self-examination that (to borrow a political buzzword) empowers the individual. When Johnny says that the voice he has found may be "Historical or not" he assumes an ability to look at himself from beyond the perspective of historical identity, beyond the sense of himself as defined in relation to a larger 'truth' epitomised in standardised tropes of origin and belonging. Such a sense, if not historical, can take account of the new, the unknown; and the unknown need not be terrifying. The terror lies in the fallacy that the unknown is an end to understanding, beyond which it is impossible to move. Postmodernism, by demanding originality through its effacement of metanarratives, enables a move beyond itself, and herein lies its value: the self-scepticism that admits limitations, even while pointing out those of others, and encourages further

inquiry. To say that originality is a means with which to cope with the present is one thing, but originality unfettered by the real, by the sense that there is something in the darkness, is useless. Without that connection, originality, in coping with the present, may lead to madness, as imagination informs reality. The key ingredient is scepticism. Without that, the real and the imagined are indistinguishable, and sense of self will be irretrievably lost. Postmodernism is sceptical, but in such a way that ***all*** authority is mistrusted, which means that all ideas are equal, but equally insubstantial. What is needed is a scepticism which has the ability to provide some basis for grasping the very thing language struggles so to evoke — reality. This is the value of the postmodern position to the non-academic and academic alike: the provision of a starting-point for the development of a sensible scepticism.[7]

Through his work on Zampano's manuscript — lost in its labyrinth, as it were — Johnny comes to doubt the truth of his perceptions of the world. This sort of shift in perception on the part of the individual is needed as a response to a mass consumption-oriented living environment, which brings about and perpetuates an apathy that masks the crucial role that the individual can play in determining their reality. Perception of identity is largely dependent upon the metanarratives of the globalized economy: fashion dictates lifestyle, ambitions, social relationships, even health. And on the other side of the coin, the desire for instant gratification dictates convenience: fast food, faster computers and Internet connections, still faster travel. If Johnny's rebelliousness in youth amounts to his being a tattoo artist, he has no more escaped the authority of the metanarratives of society (represented in Johnny's case by Raymond, his ex-marine corps step-father), than has Kyrie's boyfriend, Gdansk Man, the powerful industrialist. Johnny's identity as tattoo artist is, socially speaking, an alternative to corporate industrialism, but no less engendered by society. It remains dependent on fashion and gratification, the fashion of the anti-mainstream, and the associated gratification of drugs, sex and rebellion. However, as Johnny's assurances fall away, he finds a new creativity which is a facet of his attempts to redefine himself: he develops a literary flair. As he rediscovers the Voice which "sweeps through us all," but

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[7]With reference to this and the discussion to follow in the section titled "Literature and Reality" — the sceptical individualism put forward here is distinct from that of Enlightenment thinking by virtue of the progress made in science from a Newtonian vision of reality to one based on quantum mechanics. This distinction will become clearer in the following section, but needs to borne in mind.

which cannot be heard in the shelters of the mass-consumer imagery of TV, movies and magazines, he instinctively learns a beautiful new language to tell his story, an art through which to express himself. For example:

> they were after all only cats, quadruped mice-devouring mote-chasing shades, ***Felis catus***, with very little to remind them of themselves or their past or even their tomorrows, especially when the present burns hot with play, their pursuits and their fear, a bright flash to pursue (sun a star on nothing's back), a dark slash to escape ... the spry interplay of hidden things and visible wings flung upon that great black sail of rods and cones, ... a covenant of light, ark for the instant, echoing out the dark ... harmonizing with the crack-brack-crisp-tricks of every broken leaf of grass
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 77)

His tattoo designs, dismissed as useless by his boss, have up till now been the only manner of self-expression he had. This explains his persistence with the book. The bitterness evident in his words about those who "were nowhere near Whitley when an old man ... died" (Danielewski 2000: xx) suggests a need to honour the old man and his work, but the motivation is probably more akin to fear of ending up like Zampano, a crazy old man alone in a ratty room. This fear aids in the change of motivation from remembrance to self-discovery, as the approach to life that Johnny has chosen is revealed to be as artificial as any other. This revelation drives him to question his sense of identity and face the labyrinth of possibilities opened by the labyrinth of the text, and thus to discover original and unique, because self-described, images. The beauty of a vapour-trail is prophetic for Johnny in the same sense that the beauty of religious iconography is prophetic, predicting in its beauty the existence of something greater. In the case of religion, that something is God. For Johnny, it is the knowledge that the something is essentially unfathomable, and that that's alright.

2. <u>Literature and Reality</u>

In spite of — or because of — its anti-realist traits, postmodernist fiction offers a more accurate representation of the condition of postmodern society (or of the experience of living in such a society) than mainstream commercial fiction does. This is because it reflects the

insecurity, fear, temporal discontinuity[8] and lack of information that people have to contend with, as opposed to the ordered existences seemingly led by characters in the oversimplified world of a realist novel. In point of fact, "realism" in reference to such texts is increasingly an anachronism. The ideas crystallized in postmodernist representation point towards what could be called a new realism, in that they more accurately reflect the condition of contemporary (Western) society. If "art exists that one may recover the sensation of life" (Smitten and Daghistany 1981: 81), then *House of Leaves* is a radical, defamiliarizing transformation of the novel in order to give a more accurate reflection of life in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In this context, the ineffectiveness of Will Navidson's attempts to explore and understand, and ultimately gain mastery over, the mysterious labyrinthine extension of his house is analogous to individuals' attempts to understand their position in contemporary society. The labyrinth becomes a figure both for contemporary society, and for the labyrinthine masses of information that this society depends upon, to the extent that there are legions of people employed purely in the management of information. What is particularly emphasised is the insignificance of Navidson in relation to the labyrinth, and the insecurity inherent in this position. This insignificance becomes the focal point of the analogy. In the same manner in which Navidson's explorations parallel and become a facilitating device for Johnny's self-exploration (they both have their "assurances" stripped away) *House of Leaves* becomes such a device for its readers, allowing them to enter the labyrinth as Johnny does, and demonstrating that knowledge is a process rather than a state, its seeming stability a fallacy.

Chapter 16 of *House of Leaves* is concerned with Navidson's scientific analysis of the house. "Science is an attempt, largely successful, to understand the world, to get a grip on things, to get hold of ourselves, to steer a safe course ... [science] now explains what only a few centuries ago was considered sufficient cause to burn women to death" (Sagan 1997: 28).[9] The state of science, and of the technology it enables, are a defining index of the state

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[8] Temporal discontinuity, in the way that events long forgotten may come back to affect the present; and how new events may efface long-held values and beliefs.

[9] In the way that Sagan describes, science has moved away from the conception of the universe it held at the time of the Romantics. Their conception of a scepticism based on a scientific outlook is not applicable to the twenty-first century.

of human knowledge.

When Navidson initially discovers that his house when measured on the inside is larger than on the outside, he turns immediately to science and technology for an explanation. The physics he turns to is Newtonian. But, as he explores, there is a shift from the certainty of a Newtonian universe to one governed by uncertainty. Newton's laws cannot account for the mysterious spaces of Navidson's house. Uncertainty is a characteristic of a quantum universe, and its scientific significance is described by Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle — "The more accurately we know the position of an object, the less certain we are of its momentum — where it is going. And if we know its momentum very accurately, then we can't be quite sure where it is" (Gribbin 1984: 119) — which describes the behaviour of the fundamental particles of which all matter is composed. Uncertainty is characteristic of the universe which both Navidson and Johnny encounter.[10] As was the case with the shift from the Newtonian conception of the universe to the quantum and relativistic, the development of physics requires a constant reappraisal of one's understanding of the universe. This applies equally to any of the theories generated by disciplines other than science, including literary theories, whose formulation rests upon the state of scientific knowledge. It is such a reappraisal that literary studies has tended to shirk, taking long-standing and outdated assumptions, such as the Newtonian universe,[11] at face value. One of the key elements of quantum physics is probability. Because there is no certainty, events are either probable or improbable. There is a very small, yet quantifiable, probability of the seemingly impossible actually happening. This is the point at which Newtonian physics ceases to be effective. The realization that knowledge, and especially the prediction of future events, can never be complete and perfect, is antithetical to the Newtonian clockwork paradigm of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There is now no way for the illusion of the stability of the present state of knowledge to be maintained. This is the key ingredient of the scientific method, and

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[10]There is a heated debate around the applicability of the characteristics of the microscopic quantum world to the macroscopic world of everyday human perceptions. The extra-dimensional labyrinth of Navidson's house provides a space in which such an application, for the purposes of ***House of Leaves***, and this thesis, holds true. This complements the science-***like*** outlook described here.

[11] Newton's principles cannot explain a quantum universe, yet retain practical, everyday applications in, for instance, ballistics.

of the scepticism described above: "every value is itself subject to the force of [re-] evaluation" (Connor 1992: 3). It is also the reason why the Romantic conception of sceptical individualism needs to be revised and updated to bring it in line with the conception of the universe held by contemporary physics. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scepticism continued to invoke universal principles; for instance, although "the works of the English Romantics ... encouraged others to break taboos, and showed how the forces of society ... shaped these taboos" (Blatchford 1998: 57), they yet lacked the radical scepticism which can be seen to emerge from the postmodernist perspective. The very idea of a universal principle is fallacious if even the laws of physics are subject to revision. The scientific rationality that Enlightenment thinkers saw as the appropriate response to the dogma of religion and state has been replaced by what amounts to a new science, that of quantum physics. A new form of radical realist thinking, based upon this new science, is required, a form which emerges from postmodernism. The Romantics may have proposed principles based on individual sensibility, but again, the sensibility of the individual has changed radically since their time. Some contemporary writers recognize and respond to this change. Doris Lessing, for example, was initially an ardent supporter of the techniques of classic realism, but changed her position as she realised: "It's too narrow ... we have gone beyond it. My train of thought was that we now live with our heads in the middle of exploding galaxies and thinking about quasars and quarks and black holes and alternative universes and so on, so that you cannot any more get comfort from the old moral certainties because something new is happening" (Ziegler and Bigsty 1982: 192). Lessing goes on to say: "The novelist now cannot keep up with the physicists in what they say" (ibid.). Keeping up with the physicists is in part what Danielewski attempts in ***House of Leaves***, as he allows for the development of a radical scepticism based (at least in part) on the understanding of the universe gained by the new physics.

Science is unavoidably a metanarrative, but it is one which has as a central element the inbuilt recognition that its understanding and knowledge are incomplete and imperfect. It recognises that the 'laws of science' are not absolute and accepts that its large-scale formulation is subject to radical reassessment in the face of new information (Sagan 1997: 30; Norris 1997: 157). This is in contrast to religion and politics, for example, which do their best to preserve the status quo in their respective spheres of influence. This is not the place

for consideration of the whole question of the applicability of the scientific method to the study of literature. What is proposed is merely the value of a sceptical, science-*like* outlook, with which it is possible to look beyond personal investment in any particular theory. The irony of this suggestion is that the value of such an outlook is illustrated, in *House of Leaves,* through the presentation of Navidson's ineffective scientific analysis.

Despite his experiences, Navidson has absolute confidence in the ability of laboratory analysis of the samples taken from the labyrinth walls to answer the questions posed by the presence of the labyrinth:

> In lush colour, Navidson captures those time-honoured representations of science: test-tubes bubbling with boric acid, reams of computer paper bearing the black-ink weight of analysis, electron microscopes resurrecting universes out of dust, and mass-spectrometers with retractable Faradays and stationary Balzers humming in some dim approximation of life. In all these images there is a wonderful sense of security ... Various instruments ***promise answers, even guarantees.*** [emphasis added]
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 371)

The parallel between Navidson's and Johnny's experience takes an interesting twist here. The pages with the laboratory results are overwritten with Xs. Johnny explains:

> I wish I could say that this mass of black Xs was due to some ... frantic act of deletion on Zampano's part. Unfortunately this time I'm to blame ... On top of this particular chapter I stupidly placed a bottle of ... ink ... all of the ink tunnelled down through the paper, wiping out forty pages ... The footnotes survived only because I hadn't incorporated them yet.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 376)

What remains are fragments of words, and Johnny's and Zampano's footnotes. Johnny, and his readers, lose the results of the tests, and with the words "17 pages missing" (***ibid***.) are left with Navidson's and Dr O'Geery's interpretations of the data. It is significant that Johnny himself loses the results that are his best hope of reaching an understanding of the maze and thus of himself, a reflection of the way in which the promise of resolution is easily denied by the inevitability of human fallibility. O'Geery concludes that there is "[nothing] peculiar or

out of the ordinary" about the samples,

> "except maybe the chronology ... Your samples all fall into a very consistent scheme. Sample A is pretty young, a few thousand years old, while K is a few hundred thousand. Q over here is in the millions and these —" referring to MMMM through XXXX " — well, in the billions. Those last bits are clearly meteoritic ... deuterium could indicate matter older than even our solar system. So there you have it - a very nice little vein of history. Where did you say you got all this from ... Antarctica?"
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 378)

This brings Navidson no closer to a resolution:

> Perhaps the most significant thing gleaned from this segment is Navidson's persistent use of all the data to deny the internal shattering ... He only speculates ... about what it could mean that samples A through XXXX form a timeline extending back before the birth of even the solar system ... Navidson turns to the time telling tick of radioactive isotopes to deny the darkness eviscerating him from within.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 381)

The answers given by O'Geery's dating of radioactive particles are not the answers Navidson is looking for, but in desperation he nonetheless clings to them in a bid to "deny the internal shattering", "deny the darkness". The parallel between the experiences of Navidson and Johnny is very clear here. Navidson's response to their shared situation is desperation. Johnny's, however, is a pointed disillusionment, hardened by his responsibility for losing the results:

> In my case, would Ogelmeyer ... have begun first with a biological examination? Look for hyperactivity of dopaminergic systems? Check for an increase in norepinephrine? Or more than likely run an MRI on my brain to see if the lateral and third ventricles were getting larger. Maybe he'd even take a peek at my delta activity on the good old electroencephalogram ... how conclusively could he or his specialists read them?
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 379)

As well as further illustrating that Johnny does not lack the ability to express himself critically, in this extract Johnny directs cutting, yet playful, scepticism towards science, because of its apparent inability, as evidenced by Navidson's inconclusive response, to provide answers beyond a description of the properties and ages of the samples. In this way, the scepticism so valued by science is illustrated through its application to science itself. The implication is that while science may be the most effective method for apprehending the unknown, it too has human limitations. The only informative conclusion is that some of the material of which the labyrinth is constructed predates the formation of the solar system. Such information, however, can only deepen the "darkness" as it evokes the infinity of time, and the insignificance of an individual life in relation to it, and thus strengthens the sense of the labyrinth as implacably huge and unknowable. The point is that 'traditional' realism may have once portrayed reality accurately, but that particular mode of representation is no longer commensurate with the nature of reality today, as it is understood by contemporary physics. The question is whether the postmodernist novel, specifically *House of Leaves*, better evokes everyday existence, (as framed by this understanding) conceived by science, than the works of classic realism.

The fact that science, "largely successful" in explaining the universe, cannot explain the labyrinth deepens Navidson's sense of insignificance. When Johnny equates reading the text with physically entering the labyrinth, he allows the sense of insignificance to spread to himself and, most significantly, to readers of *House of Leaves*. When *House of Leaves* provides the opportunity to move beyond its postmodernism, as it reveals and destabilizes its own metanarratives, it is with the accompaniment, for readers, of this sense of insignificance. By evoking the uncertainty of the quantum universe, science's self-reflexive awareness of its own limitations — as illustrated above in the implications of the effaced report — is demonstrated. We become aware of science's fundamental inability to provide answers to 'big' questions such as "Why am I here?" and "What is the meaning of life?" which are raised for Johnny, Navidson and readers by their encounter with the labyrinth. Such questions are simply beyond the ability of humanity to answer (so far) without recourse to religion, which, by depending on unfounded belief, automatically grants people the status of "universe appointed sentinels" (Danielewski 2000: xxiii), and allows them to feel that they are somehow especially important in the universal scheme of things. The essential point is that

they are not. In this manner, the sense of alienation Johnny feels in respect of the nation called America, his insignificance in relation to the society in which he lives (Chapter 2), is compounded.

In general terms, people look either to science or religion to explain their existence and lend meaning to their lives. However, religion is increasingly unable to reassure people in the face of what Anderson calls the "overwhelming burden of human suffering":

> the eighteenth century marks ... the dusk of religious modes of thought. The century of the Enlightenment, of rationalist secularism, brought with it its own modern darkness. With the ebbing of religious belief, the suffering which belief in part [ameliorated] did not disappear ... nothing makes another style of continuity more necessary.
>
> (Anderson 1991: 11)

The seemingly logical replacement for "the ebbing of religious belief" is scientific evidence. However, science, like religion, clearly cannot provide all the answers. So where then, if in neither religion or science, is one to find "another style of continuity"? In the historical context of the recession of religion, Anderson identifies the nation as the source of continuity. But given Johnny's sense of alienation from the USA, it is clear that nationalism is no longer a solution. This is where the value of a science-***like*** outlook becomes apparent. In the process of constant reappraisal which is an inherent part of the scientific method lies another style of continuity. Constant reassessment of circumstances helps develop the ability to deal with radical change by preventing over-investment in stability:

> It is not merely that there are [many] kinds of stories that people tell about themselves ... it is also that given the multiple, heterogeneous, shifting, and more or less mutually inconsistent and conflictual nature both of our desires, beliefs and actions and also of the relations among them, we must ask whether — and at the cost of what else — any of us ever does or ***could*** "give sense to our lives" in some ***single, particular*** way.
>
> (Smith 1988: 167)

Smith goes on to say:

> "community" [cannot] serve as a replacement for ... the continuous task of figuring out and working out sociopolitical choices and actions ... it can only encourage the illusion ... that there is some mode of thought or set of principles that would ultimately eliminate all difficult and disagreeable encounters.
>
> (*ibid.*)

The ineffectiveness of science, religion and nation/community in dealing with the mutation of what is held to be "the real" suggests that an approach dependent on individual scepticism may be most suited to "the continuous task of figuring out ... sociopolitical choices and actions." Navidson, Johnny and Zampano are all left to find their own way through the labyrinth (which, to reiterate, in my interpretation here represents society), as is the reader of *House of Leaves*. Such scepticism is an inherent characteristic of what may be described as a new realism, ironically reflecting the value accorded to individualism by contemporary capitalist society (see Chapter 4). The critical stance that Johnny adopts when he senses the claws of Zampano's words "tearing through the veil" is necessarily isolationist (in that it depends on an escape from the triviality of consumer society, as it shall be described in Chapter 4), even if he does not wish it to be so, trying to cling to his existing social interactions as they slip away from him. To be part of a group means giving up a part of the self, whether that group be a nation, a religion, a political party, or an informal group joined through the adoption of an alternative lifestyle. This is the part of himself that Johnny reclaims, with much difficulty, through his writing, writing which allows him not only to examine, but to experience, the construction of narrative, and to reconstruct a narrative of self which, crucially, is independent of the traditional conception of a self that relies on external responses to measure its worth. As Johnny says in one of his many footnotes, to be an artist is to "fashion a work independent of everything that has gone before it including yourself. This is accomplished through experience and is what is meant by 'Maker'" (Danielewski 2000: 420). That Johnny becomes his own 'Maker' is suggestive of the individualism that is the driving force behind contemporary (capitalist) society, a force under which "any particular subject's 'self' is also variable, being multiply and differently configurable in terms of different roles, relationships and, in effect, identities, in relation to which different needs and interests will acquire priority under different conditions" (Smith 1988: 2). However, 'Maker' here (and this is the crucial point) is ironic, as Johnny's need to 'make' himself stems from

the way in which society has forced roles upon him, and has thus made him, so that now he must *re*-make himself, become his own Maker, without recourse to the preconstructed identities, based upon metanarratives, which form a discontinuous labyrinth in themselves. New realism is the representation of reality without metanarratives; or at the very least, reality with an awareness of metanarratives which moves beyond the postmodernist trick of pointing them out and leaving it at that. This is a realism which does not presume to be able to present a full picture of reality, but which overcomes the postmodernist inability to give significance to *any* representation by focussing the attention of the individual on his or her relationship with reality. It is a theoretical basis upon which to consider individual as opposed to collective perceptions. It pushes the individual out of the social envelope so that s/he can critically examine the envelope and how s/he has been affected by existence inside the envelope. The most effective way of doing this is to examine the individualism inherent in what have been called the individual's "errors": "I've come to believe errors, especially written errors, are often the only markers left by a solitary life: to sacrifice them is to lose the angles of personality" (Danielewski 2000: 31). Errors are only errors insofar as they contradict the accepted wisdom, and the category automatically includes actions and utterances which do not agree with this wisdom. Individual thought is discouraged by the fear of being labelled erroneous. It is only by taking this risk that an individual representation of the self may be developed; it is only in differing from convention that "the angles of personality" become clear.

To return to quantum mechanics as both explanation and an analogue for the characteristics of contemporary existence: Hilary Putnam describes "the curious feature which was not present in classical physics — any application of the theory requires that, in addition to the 'system' being talked about, there be ... an observer which is *not* included in the system" (Putnam 1990: 4). By pointing out the existence of the system of metanarratives, postmodernist thought enables the observers (Johnny and readers) to take the next step and position themselves *externally* to the system, as their assurances are stripped away. It thus enables a step away, a position that may be described as '*extra*-modernity', where 'extra' signifies 'outside' and 'modernity' signifies 'contemporary' or 'current', thereby providing a critical space external to the contemporary, one from which it may be viewed without the hindrance of the prejudices inherent in adopting a position *within* the contemporary; that is,

without adopting one or more of the multiply configurable identities.

House of Leaves enables this step away as it reveals "the system" and positions itself outside of it. As an example of contemporary literature, it approaches reality (as the text itself construes it) far more closely than either traditional realist works or 'traditional' postmodernist works which have recognised the contingency and artificiality of metanarratives, but thus far have not provided any answers to the problems related to this artificiality, merely using it as a basis for technical experimentation. To say that no point of view is more valid than any other, and to point out the inherent bias in any point of view, is all very well, but can only lead to a wholly ineffectual egalitarianism. Society is fundamentally ***not*** egalitarian, but favours positions of power, such as that held by Gdansk Man. Merely saying, as postmodernism does, that those with power have no right to wield that power, does not deal with the reality that power ***is*** wielded. The system that postmodernism addresses is essentially biased, and pointing out that fact has no effect. What is needed is a confrontation.

Such confrontation is seen in the relationship between Johnny and Gdansk Man. Johnny initially subverts the position of power of the industrialist by having an affair with his girlfriend, Kyrie. Johnny describes him as "a prehistoric shithead, reeking of money and ignorance," and says that the opportunity for the affair is provided by his being "out of town, working on some construction site in Poland, single handedly dislodging supertankers stuck in drydock in Gdansk" (Danielewski 2000: 88); hence the appellation "Gdansk Man". Gdansk Man, upon his return, finds out about the affair, and unable to find Johnny, retaliates by beating up Johnny's friend Lude so badly he ends up in hospital. Johnny is initially frightened by this, but as he goes through the process of discovering his "Voice", he finds the strength to stand up to Gdansk Man after he attacks Johnny, drawing blood:

> He should have paid attention. He should have looked closely at that blood. Seen the color. Registered the different hue. Even the smell was off. He should have taken heed. But he didn't. Gdansk Man just yelled something ridiculous, made his point and that was that, as if he really had asserted himself, settled some score, and that

> really was just that. And maybe it was. For him at least. End of story ... Good old Gdansk Man.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 495)

The extreme violence that follows, as Johnny beats Gdansk Man to near-death, is a figure for 'taking the power back'. Johnny draws readers into collusion in the violence, as he imagines what he will do to Kyrie, who smiled as she watched Gdansk Man's initial attack. He talks about "How I would have her ... Where I would take her. To a room. A dark room. Or no room at all. What will *we* call it? What will *you* call it?" (Danielewski 2000: 497; emphasis added). The "room" is Johnny's imagining of a position outside the system, and is created by the violent disruption of the relations of unequal power between Johnny and Gdansk Man, between the average person and the one with the privilege accorded by wealth. Johnny attacks the assumption of the privileged that their position is unassailable and inviolate. He says his actions are "unspeakable but still mine" (*ibid*.), recalling the role of originality in coping with the destabilization of perceptions of reality, the effect of adopting the postmodernist perspective. The "different hue" in his blood represents the change in himself that allows him to attack the seemingly much more powerful Gdansk Man, a shift in identity from submissiveness to strength as defined by corporate success. Johnny has become a "creature unstirred by History, no longer moved by the present" (*ibid*.). There is no moral ambiguity in his attitude towards his own violence. The latter is necessitated and justified by his need to move out of the reality which defines him as insignificant, into one where significance belongs to the individual who resists the effects of ascribed status. This movement is further emphasised as he begins to overcome reliance on Zampano's work, and Navidson's explorations, as facilitating devices for his self-exploration: "I begin to see I'm tracing the wrong history. Virginia [the location of the Navidson house] may have meant a great deal to Zampano's imagination. It doesn't to mine" (Danielewski 2000: 502). This is similar to the manner in which, once its processes are grasped, ***House of Leaves*** becomes the "wrong history" for its readers. They must determine their own history/histories for themselves, having been shown History's artificial constructions and the manner in which it sets up present inequalities. This is why Johnny draws readers into collusion in his violent confrontation; as Danielewski says (to reiterate) in an interview: "I was ... very aware that I was creating something akin to a vast literal theatre, one that the reader could use to project

his or her own histories and anxieties" (Gregory and McCaffery 2003: 107).

The purpose in drawing readers in in this manner goes beyond the familiar technique of pointing out how readers are, at least partly, responsible for the construction of the meaning of a text. It is a way of persuading them to consider their relationship with the reality they inhabit, and how they approach that reality. The "old shelters" discussed earlier — television, magazines and movies — offer a standardized mode of approach in contemporary society through their function as storehouses of familiar and standardised imagery, relegating imagination to the sidelines:

> The impact of those images seems related to the crisis of representation associated with postmodernism, the fact that we are increasingly inhabiting what Susan Sontag refers to as "The Image World," the seeming devaluation of the word as images increasingly become people's main source of input about the world. And in *House of Leaves* we find ... [examination of the] implications of people increasingly receiving their information about and understanding of the world through visual representations rather than through books.
>
> (Gregory and McCaffery 2003:116)

The media provide representations of Saussure's sign, signifier and signified (that is, they provide representations which are generally not open to multiple interpretations) and literature representations of only sign and signifier (allowing for multiple interpretations). Literature's power as a mediator for relations between internal and external reality is usurped by the image-maker. There can therefore be no deconstruction of narrative in the context of multimedia, except on the commercial level which drives its narratives, and no unconscious or subconscious depths to explore. In terms of the relationship between representation and reality, in the contemporary world literature takes a back seat to visual media such as film, television and perhaps magazines too, with their emphasis on glossy images rather than text. This "is changing our relationship to memory and imagination - and even to reality itself" (ibid.). Image-based media require people to use the imagination of association rather than memory, and do not require scepticism; they supply the images they wish the audience to view, a manipulation based on corporate economics. What the audience remembers are the images, standardised for commercial purposes, and these images then become the reflection

of reality that people use to make sense of reality. This is "the wrong history" in the same sense that Zampano's writing and Navidson's explorations become so for Johnny when he realises that up till that point he has been exploring their histories, and not his own. Any exploration of self in these circumstances becomes a reflection of the will of others. There is no freedom of thought here. Early on in the book Johnny senses that this is the case, and that he should try and escape this control, but the prospect frightens him:

> And so now, in the shadow of unspoken events, I watch Zampano's courtyard darken. Everything whimsical has left ... the glass of my memory ... the moonstream of my imagination ... But the old man is not there, and the cats are all gone. Something else has taken their place. Something I am unable to see. Waiting. I'm afraid. It is hungry. It is immortal. Worse, it knows nothing of whim.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 78)

The persistently repetitive nature of familiar imagery (misleadingly presented as whimsical), which effaces the horrors of the unknown and unexpected, is what Johnny seeks to escape even if he does not know it at this point in the novel because he has not yet realised the value of his own "Voice." He is unable to see what is waiting for him because it *is* imagination, the working of his imagination inspired by his reading of Zampano's writings. It is hungry because unused, immortal because an inherent part of the working of the human mind; and it is waiting for the opportunity to resurface through the shallows of commercial imagery.

Thus to describe ***House of Leaves*** as a radical defamiliarisation of the contemporary novel is to demonstrate the fact that, in addition to moving beyond the concerns of the typical postmodernist novel, it refuses to allow the familiar imagery of the "old shelters" to dominate its narratives. Commercial novels for mass consumption make extensive use of the imagery of television and movies, for instance in the figure of the hero who solves the problems at hand, the heroine who needs to be protected and rescued, and the 'evil' that must be defeated (be it in the form of a serial killer, a supernatural entity, or some other representative of anti-social, anti-capitalist behaviour such as a foreign spy). Here, though, the 'evil' is the system of familiar imagery itself, evil[12] in that it prevents individual, sceptical thought processes,

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[12]'Evil' not in the religious sense, but in the sense of having a negative effect; the term is used to denote the shift in the conception of evil from an othering device invoked to uphold

instead supporting the status quo of commercial culture and the imagery associated with it[13]. This is a culture which for Neil Postman is epitomized by Las Vegas:

> we must look to the city of Las Vegas, Nevada, as a metaphor of our national character and aspiration, its symbol a thirty-foot-high cardboard picture of a slot machine and a chorus girl. For Las Vegas is a city entirely devoted to the idea of entertainment, and as such proclaims the spirit of a culture in which all public discourse increasingly takes the form of entertainment ... politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business ... the result is that we are a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death.
>
> (Postman 1987: 4)

The all-pervasiveness of American popular culture is readily apparent in the broadcast and print media. Postman describes this trend as a "descent into a vast triviality" (ibid.) (note the contrast with the "vast complexity" discussed earlier). It is this triviality which *House of Leaves* evades in its treatment of the epistemology of the modern world. It seeks to provide a new epistemology, to allow for an understanding of the trivial nature of commercial culture to seep through its pages, effacing the trivia as Johnny's ink does the laboratory report; but also replacing it, with a critical reformulation of imagery into imagination. So when Johnny remakes himself, he does so in terms of this new epistemology, evading the all-pervasive triviality, the very all-pervasiveness of which ensures that Johnny ends up alone in his endeavours.

Navidson's explorations fail because he resorts to the creation of images, without imagination. He cannot see that to "capture the sight of darkness itself" is of necessity a process of the imagination, and must be metaphoric in the same way that the translation of the science of quantum mechanics into everyday language is metaphoric. Such translation can only be accomplished by a process of metaphorical transformation into language of the rigorous mathematical background of quantum mechanics. Navidson's insignificance in

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the status quo, to its application to the status quo itself.

[13]It goes further than this, though, eroding the "shelters" of any theory used to prop up a narrative, whether postcolonial, feminist, postmodern, or Marxist.

relation to the labyrinth is thus his own doing. He lacks the ability to extract his own "Voice" from the imagery he perpetuates in his brash "frontier" approach to the maze (see Chapter Two). He is unable to perform a reappraisal of his beliefs, unable to overcome the deep-seated desire to exert ownership over the house, as a man must do, in terms of the contemporary imagery of mass media: "Even though Navidson and Karen own the house together (both their names appear on the mortgage), Navidson frequently implies that he is the sole proprietary ... He snaps at Reston ... 'Let's not forget that this is *my* house.' ... The obsession just grew and grew" (Danielewski 2000: 386). Johnny has no such attachments. He recognises that the only way to retain (or rather, reattain) his humanity is to confront and then exit, an exit achieved by reassessing his comfortable, and comforting, beliefs in the face of new information inconsistent with the way he, up till that point, believed the world to work. In other words, he adopts a science-like outlook, and is willing to change his epistemology. As Norris describes it, the "least disruptive way of maintaining overall coherence is to make some adjustment to the logical ground rules rather then to strive to interpret new data in accordance with hitherto 'unassailable' laws" (Norris 1997: 157). There is no such thing as an "unassailable law." And if postmodernism undermines laws, but cannot move beyond them, then the new realism shows a way of dealing with the lawless environment through constant adaptation.

It is only in such an environment that Johnny could come upon a band singing a song about Navidson's house, ask them about it and be shown their copy of the book he is still working on, the book which tells the story of Johnny, and which contains this very encounter. Is Johnny in the (his) real world, or the world of the book, the labyrinth? Has he found a way out or not? The way in which his work, his life story, can be handed to him, even as he lives it, suggests that he exists outside of the reality he seems to experience, that he has truly taken a step outside of "the system" and is now an observer in the true quantum sense. This is ultimately the position from which 'sensible scepticism' can become effective, a position in the quantum universe as opposed to the Newtonian universe of the Enlightenment. Johnny says:

> I was amazed and shocked and suddenly very uncertain about what I had done. I didn't know whether to feel angry for being so out of the loop or sad for having done

> something I didn't entirely understand ... There's no question I cherished the substance of those pages, however imperfect, however incomplete. Though in that respect they were absolutely complete, every error and unfinished gesture and all that inaudible discourse ... an echo from across the years.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 514)

He senses an echo of his own life, in a sense reminiscent of the earlier treatment of echo as a means of determining the characteristics of space. He has overcome the lack of echo in the labyrinth, because his new approach to reality allows him to determine, finally, the characteristics of his own space, his own existence. This is the existence effaced in the cacophony of voices created by postmodernism, now reduced to a single echo, his own, the echo of the self he has reconstituted. When the band presents him with his own work, it becomes his reward for his struggles with the devolution of his multiple narratives into a single one, one which takes into account the possibility of uncertainty and radical change; an outlook characterised by the scepticism of science, but with a loose enough formulation to allow for a human existence — an existence with the hope usually attendant on belief in a reward after the end of life, as promised in various religions. "Error[s] and unfinished gesture[s] and ... inaudible discourse[s]" are part and parcel of this hope, not a source for despair: part of a wholeness derived, paradoxically, from being *in*complete. 'Completeness' is an illusion, if it depends on absolute resolution. To accept the irresolvable nature of existence is the only solution. This is the standpoint of the new realism, which accepts that there is no theory powerful enough to explain reality, that there is no 'theory of everything,' but that there is hope in the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, to move past the insecurity of postmodernism, and accept the only available assurance, the only continuity: that reality continues, even if we can't yet understand it. There is a cold clarity to this vision, captured in Johnny's final words:

> A short while ago, a great big gray coated husky emerged out of nowhere and started sniffing my clothes, nudging my arm and licking my face as if to assure me that though there was no fire or hearth, the night was over and the month was August and nothing close to seventy below would threaten me. After petting him for a few moments, I walked with him around the park. He sprinted after birds while I stretched

> the sleep out of my legs. Even as I scribble this down, he insists on sitting by my side, ears twitching occasionally in the dawn air, while before us a sky as dark as a bruised plum slowly unfolds into morning.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 515)

That there is hope in this vision, hope in the new dawn unfolding into a new morning, a new life, is suggested by Johnny's waking up beneath "an old ash tree" (*ibid.*). The final page of *House of Leaves* has the word "Yggdrasil" printed vertically, a typographic representation of the "world tree of Scandinavian mythology that, with its roots and branches, binds together heaven, earth and hell. It is an ash, but it is evergreen, and at its roots is Mimir's fountain of wonderful virtues ... It is the tree of time, space, life and knowledge ..." (Room 2001: 1291). Johnny has redefined his fractured existence, planted a new tree of life, found a new centre (inside himself, removed from societal centres of power, as indicated by the positioning of "Yggdrasil" on the last page). He has made a new beginning, and awoken from the nightmarish slumber of insecurity.

CONCLUSION

The value of the postmodernist perspective is that it crystallizes some long-standing ideas: first, that any representation of reality is necessarily a simplification; secondly, that there exists the possibility of escape from the inclusivity of generic narrative; and thirdly, that it is possible to question the legitimacy of narratives of power (metanarratives). Ultimately, postmodernism deals with the failure of realism to provide an adequate representation of modern existence. *House of Leaves* takes these elements of postmodernist theory as a starting point, and self-consciously uses them to demonstrate that while literary theory may have elitist traits, the issues dealt with by theory may be approached by anyone in possession of critical faculties — that is, anyone with the ability to think analytically, though not necessarily in the jargon of literary criticism. *House of Leaves* and the issues it raises and discusses are not only for theorists, but are relevant to any person living in postmodernity, a period in which the issues raised in this paragraph are of particular relevance. People are (willingly) bombarded with representations of reality almost constantly, on TV, in the cinema and on the Internet (which itself acts as an alternative reality - see Chapter 4), the majority of

which act simply to confirm that reality is simple and that there are very few questions that remain to be answered. Perhaps, more insidiously, the message that there are yet fewer questions that need to be asked, especially when it comes to the motivations and actions of those in positions of power in the spheres of politics and business. What is required is that the underlying complexity of social reality (the labyrinth) be revealed, so that questions can be asked about the ability of generic narrative (the various, readily identifiable genres of mainstream television and other fora for public narrative) adequately to apprehend such complexity; and so that further questions can be posed as to the source of the ideological basis of such narratives. This is important because the narratives that pervade the media are the ones that come to have the greatest influence upon people, the ones which they use to determine how they should act, dress and even speak.[14] In other words, these narratives play a large part in setting up the assurances with which people shape their lives and their understanding of reality. Of these assurances, dominant is the one that the accumulation of wealth brings freedom and happiness (see Chapter Four).

As *House of Leaves* goes about the subversion of assurances, or metanarratives, and reveals the underlying complexity of existence, the book demonstrates, as Douglas Adams intended to with his Total Perspective Vortex, that humanity in general, and individual humans, are not essential to the workings of the Universe. The resultant need to redefine one's position in relation to a reality unsimplified by metanarratives gives rise to the return of the originality lost to postmodernism, as it becomes necessary to apply original, critical thought to a reality not delimited by the familiar patterns of authority (even if such original thought must necessarily have its roots in these patterns). However, it is shown that the quantum Universe, infinitely more complex than Newton's universe, is not absolutely hostile, just very big and largely uncaring. This is suitably humbling to those who feel they are somehow vital to the Universe, that they are "Universe-appointed sentinels", but simultaneously allows a sense of humanity to remain, in the ongoing process of interpretation and (re)narration which marks existence outside the "old shelters". The newly available recourse to originality enables the recovery of a "Voice," by which is meant a sense of self

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[14]For instance, in the way black South African television and radio presenters, and those they interview, almost invariably put on American accents and imitate the slang used by 'African-Americans' on television.

free from the reductive modelling of the mass media which make independent thought unnecessary and essentially impracticable. There *is* novelty in the world, beyond the vacuous shallows of the imagery of mass media and the lifestyle(s) it dictates.

Scepticism is needed to sort useful theories from those that are less so. Scepticism is the key to avoiding the ascription of identity, and to overcoming the insignificance of the individual in relation to the greater good or purpose of humanity. The value of the approach outlined in *House of Leaves* lies in its advocacy of a science-like outlook, which has the ability to reassess the individual's relationship to reality in terms of the new information gathered from stepping out of the "postmodern scene." Again, it must be emphasised that this scepticism differs from that of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries in that the science upon which it is based has changed radically from the Newtonian vision of that earlier epoch. The science is more radical, and so is the complementary scepticism. In terms of the quantum conception of reality, the most important and valuable realisation is that there is not just no guarantee of answers (from science itself, philosophy, religion, or any other such construct) but that there are no answers that are not affected by the act of observation.

That observation affects the state of a system and, more importantly, knowledge of it, is emphasised by the fact that Navidson discovers that his maze predates the solar system. Its origins are therefore a matter of speculation, of observation and inference, just as science can only provide answers as to the origin of the materials from which the maze is constructed, not *how* or *why* it was constructed, or what it 'means'. Ultimately, as it shifts and changes its shape as it is explored, it comes to mean different things for different people, as shown in the "Post-Exposure Effects Rating Table" (see Chapter Four), and particularly in the effects it has upon Johnny and Navidson. It forces them to reconsider what they believe to be fundamental to reality, which is what the book itself seeks to do to its readers. The radical scepticism of what is here described as a new realism is the only way to move beyond the effacement of metanarratives achieved by postmodernist literature in general (which is taken as a starting point by *House of Leaves*). This scepticism can be used to step outside the system of metanarratives, by confronting and rejecting it, while retaining some sense of purposeful humanity, as an active observer. The human ability to make a philosophical connection with reality therefore lies in our recourse to scepticism; scepticism suited to the twenty-first century, more radical and aggressive than earlier versions, directed not only at those who hold

positions of authority, but also at oneself, at one's own privileged discourses. The maze is a tool for self-examination.

The final value of *House of Leaves* lies in the way it illustrates the value of imagination as opposed to imagery. Commercial images, even those of the broadcast news, do not require the use of imagination, and the loss of imagination is one of the greatest losses modern humanity faces.[15] In the terms of the new realism, imagination is essential in order to develop the analogies needed to cope with an environment which only the abstractions of scientific mathematics can describe with anything approaching objective accuracy. Each person must use their imagination to plant their own Yggdrasil, their own tree of life; in other words, use their imagination to build a conception of the mathematical descriptions which are the most accurate portrayal of reality, but which cannot engage with it on a personal level as people must do.

[15]Especially as this loss in turn effects the ability to answer other crises such as Aids, poverty, environmental destruction, George Bush ...

CHAPTER FOUR
THE SECOND SENSE OF VALUE - COMMODIFICATION

"Hey kids, look what I can do!" - Mark Danielewski

The all-pervasive triviality discussed in the previous chapter has, as an inherent element, an all-pervasive commercialism. Triviality results from the reduction of the intricate web of human needs, desires and perceptions to a lowest common denominator, a facet of global corporatism which allows products to appeal, and therefore be sold, to the widest possible consumer base. Publishing is an enterprise within the industrial hub of capitalist democracy,[16] and because this system is their primary means of distribution, books are unavoidably commercial products. The question is, in this context: has the activity of creating a book, of becoming an author, become — in the first instance — a commercial rather than an artistic activity? And if so, what are the implications of this for literature? And for literary theory?

Mark Currie writes that, "if fiction is sometimes a better vehicle for ideas than the essay, it is fiction with theoretical intent, or theoretical fiction ... [Some authors] have forsaken theoretical discourses for the advantages of fiction ... Literary theory has seen the same kind of defection." He then poses the question, "Is it perhaps sexier to be a writer than a critic?" (Currie 1998: 51). In other words, is the "defection" from literary theory the result of a desire to have intellectual achievements noticed beyond the sphere of the academy; a desire for public acclaim as opposed to the acclaim of a limited number of intellectuals, and for the commercial success attached to such acclaim; to cry, as Danielewski does, with heavy irony, "Hey kids, look what I can do!" (Gregory and McCaffery 2003: 106)? One of the conclusions drawn during Chapter Three was that *House of Leaves* was not intended for a specifically academic audience, and that it could be of intellectual value to any interested reader. This positive conclusion, that the book is capable of bringing important critical issues into the public sphere, may be undermined by the status of the book as a commercial product,

[16] The "publishing industry" as discussed in this chapter refers to the corporate, mass-publishing networks through which *House of Leaves* is distributed. Specific attention is not given to independent or 'alternative' publishers, although many of the same points that will be made here are equally applicable to these.

a book thus strategically positioned to maximise sales and thus less concerned with making theoretical issues accessible than with generating profits.

Genre could provide a useful indicator of the degree of commercialism of a text, as texts which resist genre and thus defeat readers' expectations are less likely to be concerned with commercial success than are those which pander to such expectations. However, with the rise of theoretical fiction, a genre unto itself, the use of genre in this way is severely problematized: 'genre-bending' becomes itself an aspect of genre, the genre of 'resisting the mainstream,' an ambition always in danger of becoming mainstream — in the same way that Johnny's 'alternative' lifestyle as tattoo-artist, an artificially constructed opposition, almost immediately becomes a standard in its own right.

1. Commerce versus Artistry

In his seminal study of postmodernism as "the cultural logic of late capitalism," Fredric Jameson writes:

> In postmodern culture, "culture" has become a product in its own right; the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself: modernism was still minimally and tendentially the critique of the commodity and the effort to make it transcend itself. Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process.
>
> (Jameson 1991: x)

Jameson goes on to say that, "postmodernism ... is also at one and the same time, and *necessarily*, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today" (Jameson 1991: 3). In order to answer the questions posed above, then, it is necessary to consider what stance ***House of Leaves*** takes in relation to its existence within the system of multinational capitalism; or rather, what approach the book's author takes to writing within this context.

In the last chapter, a parallel was drawn between the labyrinth of Navidson's house and contemporary society. Navidson's explorations can be construed as readings of society, just as Jameson's critical assessments are. The outcomes Navidson hopes will spring from

his ‘readings’ are thus especially significant:

> both Navidson and Holloway expect to gain a great deal of fame and fortune. Even if Holloway's team does not reach the bottom of the staircase, both men agree their story will guarantee them national attention as well as research grants and speaking opportunities. Holloway's company will more than likely thrive, to say nothing of the reputations of all those involved.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 91)

These hopes can be seen to typify the outcomes of publication desired by authors working within the framework of a capital-controlled market: fame and wealth. Holloway and Navidson seem to embrace a capitalist ethos, as their primary desire is to achieve personal wealth and power by establishing intellectual and financial ownership over the labyrinth, monopolizing for personal gain its discovery, exploration and publicisation, thus commodifying it. At this initial level, then, the synonymous relationship that Jameson sees between the terms “culture” and “market” seems to hold true — the labyrinth as cultural artifact is eminently marketable. This sense of commercialism is emphasised by the fact that Navidson does not use ‘cameras’ per se, but branded equipment (also discussed in Chapter Two, in the context of his dependence upon his equipment): “a Quadra Mac, two Zip drives, an Epson colour printer, 16mm Arriflex, 16mm Bolex, a Minolta Super 8 ... fishing line (anything from braided Dacron to 40 lb multi-strand steel)” (Danielewski 2000: 97).

Navidson's motivation is not only to map and thereby exert a form of control and figurative ownership over the labyrinth, but to exert ***literal*** ownership, with the financial benefits attached, through the development of proprietary knowledge — proprietary, in the sense that its dissemination requires payment. One can imagine Navidson setting up a trademark shop, possibly online, selling labyrinth memorabilia and branded products. This possibility can be extended to the entirety of Danielewski's ***House of Leaves***, which actually does have a promotional website and online memorabilia shop, as well as, in counterbalance, a separate discussion site, where readers may exchange opinions and ideas, although this is arguably another form of advertising in itself. There is a sense in which a book amounts to an advertisement for its author, evident when people ask one another, for instance, “Have you read Eco?” rather than “Have you read ***Name of the Rose***?” It is the author that takes

precedence, not his work, and it is in this rather innocuous distinction that the commodification of literature, in this case as a promotional tool for authors, may be clearly seen.[17] So, as Jameson says, "it is the very idea of the market that is consumed with the most prodigious gratification; as it were, a bonus or surplus of the commodification process" (Jameson 1991: 269): text, literature itself, becomes a vehicle for the ***self***-commodification of the author, who consumes the market, deriving benefit from its commodified nature, as a direct result of the positioning of his work within the generalised system of capitalism. What distinguishes the position of the author in such a situation is the ***flow*** of capital, which of course tends towards the author. Crucially, though, this flow is regulated by the industry which is responsible for the dissemination of the author's works, and which derives its profit from the self-same processes by which the author becomes a commodity. There is a power differential which regulates the flow of capital through the industry and towards the author, based upon popularity: popular authors sell more, draw in more profits and thus have more power. It is at this point, though, that the danger of commodification becomes especially clear. An author with a successful track record of publications is more likely to hold, or be held, to the proven formula, and thus have his or her creativity undermined by the profit motive. Even highly successful authors who undertake radical departures in style are likely to face popular rejection. A good case in point is Stephen King's attempt to break into the market for e-books, an attempt which failed dismally, despite his wide fan base. It is clear, then, that a commodified literature can be highly restrictive, even as an author reaps the financial rewards; or perhaps ***because*** there are financial rewards to be reaped, and which become a controlling interest.

Danielewski is evidently aware of the commercialised nature of the publishing industry, as he makes the following predictions, through Zampano, regarding ***The Navidson Record***, the ultimate source of ***House of Leaves***. These predictions can be read as a comment on the likely commercial reception of ***House of Leaves*** itself, as they capture the book's essential character:

The Navidson Record now stands as part of this country's cultural experience and yet

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[17]This should not be confused with the debate surrounding the "death of the author" and the role of author and reader in determining the meaning of a text.

> in spite of the fact that hundreds of thousands of people have seen it, the film continues to remain an enigma. Some insist it must be true, others believe it is a trick on par with the Orson Welles radio romp *The War of the Worlds*. Others could care less, admitting that either way *The Navidson Record* is a pretty good tale. Still many more have never even heard of it. These days, with the unlikely prospect of any sort of post-release resolution or revelation, Navidson's film seems destined to achieve at most cult status. Good story telling alone will guarantee a healthy sliver of popularity in the years to come but its inherent strangeness will permanently bar it from any mainstream interest.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 7)

There is clearly some self-reflexivity at work here. Currie says that the "defection from theory to fiction inevitably results in narrative self-contemplation" (Currie 1998: 52), and Danielewski himself feels he "is probably fortunate [to] live in an age in which 'self-consciousness' isn't a bad thing for an author" (Gregory and McCaffery 2003: 106). What is important here is the question of what his self-consciousness pertains to: that is, the market-driven nature of writing and publishing that defines his work as outside of the "mainstream." The difference between this work and others which themselves become fashionable in their populist resistance to the commercial standard lies in the way that it resists the point of view of the 'intellectual' market segment, characterised by its susceptibility to intellectual fashion, which results in an essentially shallow knowledge of a very few vogueish issues, such as the concept of the Other, overused and hackneyed. *House of Leaves* embodies a far more aggressive approach to theoretical fiction than any other. The strictly 'highbrow' reader will frown on its preoccupation with violence and vulgarity, while the 'alternative' reader will embrace it for these features, and little else. But behind these two possibilities lies the "elegiac spirit" of Mint, the son of King Mynos, condemned to the labyrinth to preserve the image of the kingship (Chapter Two). The deformed wonder at the heart of the maze is the book which awaits discovery by a Johnny Truant, one who will not value it simply for its academic characteristics, or for its more brash side, but will see what lies behind or beyond these. It is an elegiac spirit because of the inevitability of this discovery being a matter largely of chance; because of the likelihood of the book's being appreciated by very few of those whose interests are as segmented, as artificially divided and falsely specific, as the

market place in which they will find the book. And it is deformed, like Mint, simply in terms of the way in which it differs, or rather is differentiated, from the class of things to which it essentially belongs: people for Mint, and works of fiction for *House of Leaves*. What ultimately becomes apparent is that *House of Leaves* is very much aware of its inevitable commercial context. It ironically describes the release of *The Navidson Record*, and the responses of audiences to it, in the knowledge that it is describing likely reactions to itself. There is artistry in the way in which this awareness is put to use: in the way that, by promoting among its readers an awareness of the system that segments the market, the book seeks to overcome the boundaries of its placement as a product.

An excellent illustration of these processes is to be found in the description of various responses to the part of *The Navidson Record* which records the point at which Navidson is trapped in the maze and is forced to burn the pages of his copy of *House of Leaves* for light (see Chapter Two), the only light by which filming is possible, so that "nearly six minutes of screen time is black ... somewhere behind the audience a projector continues to spew out darkness" (Danielewski 2000: 468):

> Michael Medved was appalled. In his mind, six minutes of nothing spelt the end of cinema. He was so shocked, indignant, even incoherent, he failed to consider that *The Navidson Record* might have absolutely nothing to do with cinema. Stuart Deweltrop in *Blind Spot* (v.42, spring, 1995, p.38) described it as "a wonderful fiasco - n'est-ce pas?" Kenneth Turan called it "a stunt." Janet Maslin, however, had a completely different reaction: "At last, a picture with cojones!" Nor did Navidson's ending escape the gang in the monkey house. Jay Leno quipped, "You know how they made *The Navidson Record*? Left the lens cap on. This really <u>was</u> a home movie." While Letterman scowled: "Think about it folks: no stars, no crew, no locations. Very inexpensive. A lot of studios are taking this idea very seriously ... Seriously." Whereupon the lights on stage were turned off for several seconds. On *Home Improvement*, Tim Allen offered a one minute parody in the dark, mostly having to do with stubbed toes, broken dishware and misdirected gropes.
>
> (*ibid*.)

The critical response as represented here is essentially shallow, and the popular(ised)

response wholly empty. However, in the obvious division between Medved and Allen's responses lies an illustration of the segmentation upon which a market-driven philosophy of literature depends. The same cinematic moment is presented in distinct ways appropriate to the perception of specific audience expectations. And all the while, the projector continues to "spew out darkness" unaffected by the excited commentary. This is an explicit comment on what has come to be understood as the "illusion of choice," as described by Schmookler in his book of the same title, in consumer/consumption-oriented society. Desire is limited in the way that audiences are told what they need and what to think. Preservation of the market system depends upon preservation of belief in the importance of the products upon which it is based. A blank screen signifies the end of the multimillion dollar cinema and television industry. Hence the need to make a mockery of it, as Tim Allen does, as Allen is dependent for his fame and livelihood on preventing a blank screen from being taken seriously, which would bring about the situation, fatal for commercial television and cinema, that Schmookler describes in the following extract:

> To the market system, the human being is a resource whose great potentiality can be realized only by a motivational and affective configuration which, from an internal human perspective, is far less than optimal. As masters of our own destiny, we might well choose to refuse the demands of the market and allow our children to bloom quite differently ... free to choose our way of life, we might choose to live in harmony.
>
> (Schmookler 1993: 260)

The crucial point Schmookler makes is that people ***are not*** masters of their own destinies, even if they may feel that to be the case; choices are made for them:

> So long as we buy into the illusion that our systems are allowing us to choose our destiny, we will be trapped in our complacency. The first step in our liberation is to recognize our bondage. We will gain the power really to choose our future only when we understand the ways in which what the market system gives us is the illusion of choice ... .
>
> (Schmookler 1993: 5)

Thus any sense of harmony is necessarily false. It is an illusion comparable with the idea of

the “old shelters” discussed previously. These shelters, and the security they seem to offer, are the primary method by which the illusion of choice is perpetuated. Choice is in actuality limited to one drive — to succeed, and to succeed alone, and for oneself:

> In the first four decades of the nineteenth century ... economic and cultural forces [created] a new kind of person ... a personality type built around ambition, a sense that time was money, and an appreciation of progress ... In this transformation of values ... two main dimensions particularly warrant ... exploration. First, there arose a worship of success. This success meant the fulfillment of ambition in the arena of economic competition. And second, there was a tendency to enshrine ***wealth*** as the essence of value.
>
> (Schmookler 1993: 145)

So there is a dark irony in Letterman's quip that studios are taking the possibility of reducing cinema to a black screen seriously — if such an action were practicable, they surely ***would*** embrace it as a means of saving money, making a mockery of any artistic sentiment that such a film may have. The implication of a dark screen is that the imagery of cinema is so trivial as to be valueless, equivalent to nothingness. The corporate mentality lacks the ability to grasp this statement, blinded by avarice, and so commerce effaces artistry as the critics flounder, unable to engage with the mutation of their critical medium with anything other than pretentious and hollow evocations of their own lack of understanding.

If wealth is enshrined as the essence of value, then it is essential to ask why Danielewksi chose to publish his work commercially, to ask whether profit was the motive. ***House of Leaves*** started as an e-book, what could be called a ‘non-profit’ book, as there was no charge to enter the site. It was later picked up by Random House, presumably — given that they are not a non-profit organisation — because they saw a profitable market for such a book. However, this does not necessarily mean that Danielewski's motivation was purely commercial. The positioning of the publishing industry in the system of capitalism means that the mode of distribution of any book is necessarily capital-based. Arguably, Danielewski could have published privately and distributed his work without charge, but such a statement (it must amount to a statement) would be essentially ineffectual unless it was coupled with a radical revision of the way in which society functions, as otherwise it would be heard by very

few people. What is of particular interest here is that instead of following the pattern generally identified as a threat to printed literature and moving into the field of Internet literature, he moved from Internet to printed literature, thereby, it would seem, ***decreasing*** the size of the audience with ready access to the text. The e-version of the book remains, though, and it is here that the possibility of text as advertisement comes into play, as the book becomes an advertisement for the website and simultaneously becomes a multimedia event, so that despite appearances, audience size is actually ***maximised***. This would seem to be a symptom of a greater freedom of information, an ability to disseminate ideas to greater effect. But as Terry Eagleton warns:

> It is a striking feature of advanced capitalist societies that they are both libertarian and authoritarian, hedonistic and repressive, multiple and monolithic. The logic of the marketplace is one of pleasure and plurality, of the ephemeral and discontinuous, of some great decentred network of desire of which individuals seem the mere fleeting effect. Yet to hold all this potential anarchy in place requires strong foundations and a firm political framework. The more market forces threaten to subvert all stability, the more stridently one will need to insist upon traditional values. These regimes can neither abandon the metaphysical nor properly accommodate it, and they are thus always potentially self-deconstructing.
>
> (Eagleton 1996: 132)

In these terms, the illusion of choice stems directly from an illusion of freedom; the postmodernist subversion of stability is reflected in the language of commerce as a facet of the deep need of commercialism to ***preserve*** the very values that the postmodernist perspective in general seeks to subvert. Insofar as the labyrinth can be read as a figure for society, and Navidson's explorations as readings of society, the character of the labyrinth reflects this illusion of freedom:

> This desire for exteriority is no doubt further amplified by the utter blankness found within. Nothing there provides a reason to linger ... Back in 1771, Sir Joshua Reynolds in his ***Discourses on Art*** argued against the importance of the particular, calling into question, for example, "minute attention to the discriminations of Drapery

> ... the clothing is neither Woollen, nor linen, nor silk, satin or velvet: it is drapery: it is nothing more." Such global appraisal seems perfectly suited to Navidson's house which despite its corridors and rooms of various sizes is nothing more then corridors and rooms.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 119)

The language of commerce, with its seeming multiculturalism and global reference, is dependent on exteriority, as it is similarly composed, internally, of "blank corridors and rooms" hung with a facade of meaningful engagement with the concerns of the globalised community, reducing difference to sameness. The question is, is *House of Leaves* similarly blank?

The term 'blank fiction' is actually in currency to describe fiction dealing with the state of contemporary society. Citing Bret Easton-Ellis as a leading practitioner, James Annesley describes the concerns of blank fiction as follows:

> Common sets of themes are being articulated. There's an emphasis on the extreme, the marginal, and the violent. There's a sense of indifference and indolence. The limits of the human body seem indistinct, blurred by cosmetics, narcotics, disease and brutality ... This portrait of American culture can be developed by considering the specific implications raised by its preoccupation with violence, indulgence, sexual excess, decadence, consumerism and commerce.
>
> (Annesley 1998: 1)

All of the themes Annesley mentions are symptomatic of capitalist society. Blank fiction describes the rootless, emotional blankness of the experience of contemporary (American) youth. This and associated characteristics are the result of the self-obsessed apathy bred by capitalism and its principal tenets: take care of yourself; relationships are irrelevant unless they further the goal of personal success; there is no advantage in caring for others; money will solve any and all problems and is the ultimate goal and source of happiness. These attitudes obscure the ultimate ruin which they will bring to the Earth and to humanity.[18] In

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[18]This is not the place to discuss the disastrous environmental consequences of the stripping of the Earth's natural resources, the pollution of water, and the continued (and unnecessary) use of fossil fuels, but it is important to recognise that these practices flourish unchecked as a direct result of the apathy induced by global capitalism.

the case of *House of Leaves*, the transformations that Johnny undergoes enable him to reconstruct a link with this world-under-threat, and thus move beyond the emotional disconnection of the experience described in blank fiction. He may remain disconnected from his fellow humans, but that is because they have not undergone the transformation he has, and not because he is only concerned with taking care of himself. What is being suggested is the need for a revolutionary change in attitudes, for a transformation such as Johnny's, but on a massive scale. Johnny has not been left behind or excluded from humanity — he has taken the step all people need to take in order to escape the dehumanising effects of global capitalism. It is in pointing to this need, as well as in the self-reflexivity described above, that the artistry of *House of Leaves* lies.

Initially, though, the novel seems to be itself an example of blank fiction: sexually explicit, violent and emotionally disconnected, an escapist horror/mystery novel. But as it progresses it becomes increasingly clear that is these very aspects of itself that it rejects and criticizes as it conducts what Eagleton has called a process of self-deconstruction. The point at which this self-deconstruction begins to become clear is when Navidson reaches the following conclusion about his house and the labyrinth in a letter to his wife Karen, estranged by his obsession with the maze:

> Do you believe in God? I don't think I ever asked you that one. Well I do now. But my God isn't your Catholic varietal or your Judaic or Mormon or Baptist or Seventh Day Adventist or whatever/whoever. No burning bush, no cross. God's a house. Which is not to say that our house is God's house or even a house of God. What I mean to say is that our house *is* God.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 390)

In the maze, his hopes of deriving commercial success from it dashed, Navidson comes to seek the spirituality lost to the capitalist worship of wealth. Jesus's remark — "In my father's house are many mansions" — is modified into Navidson's idea that 'the Lord *is* many mansions or rooms.' But, as the labyrinth reflects society, the 'Lord' becomes that which overshadows the 'many rooms' of the shallow multiculturalism of the god of globalization — capital. The rooms are not important, the god is; or rather, the rooms' only importance is to hide the true nature of the god. In the same way that Christianity embraces everybody as long

as they are Christian, globalization embraces everybody as long as they submit to its dictates. An apt illustration of this totalitarian logic is to be found in Henry Ford's famous words: "Any colour as long as it's black."

This insight enables a deconstruction of the way that *House of Leaves* draws a multiplicity of discourses (many rooms) into its own in the construction of the textual labyrinth, so that the book itself seems to overarch them, godlike in its narcissism, seeing itself reflected in each of the discourses it consumes. Thus the book seems to embody the hopelessness of the reality described by blank fiction, a hopelessness inescapable in its all-pervasiveness (omnipresence and omnipotence). This changes when Johnny abandons the masses of paper that constitute his work and takes to the road. On his travels he encounters the band with a copy of *House of Leaves* (Chapter Three), and it is at this point that the narration begins to focus on exteriority, and self-deconstruction becomes its primary function. Johnny's story ends here, and Navidson's in the next few pages, as Karen, in an interview, says: "[The house] just dissolved" (Danielewski 2000: 524). That the house is an analogue for the narrative is clear as the narrative similarly dissolves, into "Exhibits" and appendices — almost two hundred pages' worth. These exhibits comprise Zampano's planning for his writing: lists of illustrations he wished to include, provisional chapter titles; Johnny also includes, as a first appendix, "a selection of journal entries, poems and even a letter to the editor, all of which I think sheds a little more light on [Zampano's] work as well as his personality" (Danielewski 2000: 537). The second appendix consists of material which provides insight into the position from which Johnny writes, including sketches and polaroids of the maze, a collection of poems (authorship unattributed, but most likely Johnny's), and most significantly, a collection of letters to Johnny from his mother, who spent the last years of her life incarcerated in a lunatic asylum, after repeated attempts to kill Johnny in his youth. She explains why she tried to kill him in a letter, written to eleven-year-old Johnny:

> How can you ever understand the awful weight of living, so ridiculously riddled with so many lies of tranquility and bliss, at best half-covering but never actually easing the crushing weight of it all, merely guaranteeing a lifetime of the same, year after year ... and all for what? ... I tried ... to grant you the greatest gift of all. The gift to end all gifts ... But it was love just the same Johnny. Believe me. For that, should I be

> ashamed? For wanting to protect you from the pain of living? From the pain of loving?
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 630)

She sought to protect him from the "weight" of existence, [19] a weight hidden behind "lies of tranquility and bliss" — lies such as those of the "old shelters." The weight has its source in these lies, which make it impossible to have any contact with the reality they efface for their own self-perpetuating purpose — just as it is impossible to have a sense of self untouched by the imagery of global capitalism and the self-perpetuation it accomplishes through dictating lifestyle 'choices'. Johnny's mother sees this weight as inescapable, reducing to emptiness all facets of human life, including love. Crucially, it is the love she regards as empty that drives her to this extreme act; she thus, ironically, contradicts herself. So, as *House of Leaves* deconstructs itself, revealing the material and intentions upon which it is based, readers are able to deconstruct Johnny as they see the profound influence such a traumatic event has had on him. This, coupled with the death of his father and Johnny's subsequent placement in the brutal foster care of Raymond, epitomises the emotional vacuum of the generation of youth that is the concern of blank fiction. Johnny's work on the book allows him to rediscover emotional depth: as he recognises the tortuous constructions of the book as a reflection of himself, he is able to deconstruct the elements of his past that have so weighed upon him as he sought to escape them. Ultimately, *House of Leaves* seeks to persuade readers to perform a similar self-deconstruction, to examine the ways in which they have been shaped, or have shaped themselves, according to the commercial value system of contemporary society, with its fetishization of money and material success. Danielewski says:

> I'm sure there are many people out there who have absolutely no sympathy with Johnny. They see him as only a Los Angeles club rat who likes to party, and they just don't want to hear about his escapades with sex, drugs and rock and roll. But a good reader starts to realise that this is a stereotype that has to be, and is in fact being, disassembled. Suddenly a transformation takes place: you realise that this isn't just

---

[19] "Weight" in the same sense that Kundera evokes in his *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, similarly hidden behind the lie of irresponsibility.

> some kid — this could be *my kid*, this could be *your kid*."
>
> (Gregory and McCaffery 2003: 112)

Or more to the point, this could be *you*. The book is addressed directly to those whose existence blank fiction describes as essentially empty. *House of Leaves* restores the hope missing from blank fiction. As one of the band members warns Johnny as he hands him his copy of the book, in another heavily ironic moment: "It'll change your life" (Danielewksi 2000: 513). *House of Leaves* thus positions itself under the mantle of blank fiction, but with a deeper purpose, and in a manner which mocks marketing strategy. Probably the book's greatest irony, then, is its display of an enthusiastic blurb from Bret Easton-Ellis, master of blank fiction, on its front cover. His is exactly the sort of fiction that *House of Leaves* mocks for its inability, and lack of desire, to escape consumerism, for its bland perpetuation of the all-pervasive commercialism, and for its pretentions of 'hipness'; for its refusal to offer any solutions beyond the insanity of Bateman in *American Psycho*. Such fiction offers nothing *but* hipness, of the (intentional) variety that makes a profitable film version of the book possible, the very hipness that is at the root of the alienation of the blank generation.[20]

2. Hypertext and Reality

The previous section took as its starting point the position of the publishing industry within the system of capitalist industry, and saw the means of distribution of literature as thus inherently capital-based. This section will be concerned with developments in the means of distribution and their effects on literature, specifically the rise of hypertext. De Beer describes hypertext as follows:

> Hypertext ... refers to a form of electronic text, a radically new information technology ... [it is] nonsequential writing — text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen. As popularly conceived, this is a series

[20]This said, one should at least give Ellis credit for having confronted the abyss. Art, of course, need not necessarily offer solutions, but there is a sense in which profiteering from a situation as desperate as the one in which humanity finds itself is morally contemptible.

> of text chunks connected by links which offer the reader different pathways.
>
> (De Beer 2002: 18)

Hypertext is a facet of the rise of computer-based communication, and of the Internet as a means for disseminating literature. Rita Wilson phrases the problem at hand very succinctly:

> How ... does literary culture perform its age-old ritual of narrative in an era when fragmentary and discrete units of information — the mass-media soundbite, television's corporate icons, or hypertext links on the World Wide Web — have become the dominant means by which we communicate? ... the latter half of the twentieth century [is] a historical moment in which the paper and ink with which [novelists] have traditionally worked have begun dissolving into the electronic hyperspaces of the post-print era.
>
> (Wilson 2002: 35)

Wilson goes on to say, following McLuhan, that "we must refocus our attention on the ways in which the technological characteristics of the medium itself reshape our lives not just by giving us new tools with which to play, but by reshaping our consciousness on a fundamental ... level" (Wilson 2002: 36). The argument here will be that *House of Leaves* directly addresses this shift in consciousness, and explicitly examines the effects upon narrative of the changes in the means of distribution of literature as embodied in hypertext.

The fragmented nature of the information contained in hypertextual writing reflects a characteristic of the culture of contemporary commercial media that Neil Postman describes as the "Now ... this" world-view:

> "Now ... this" is commonly used on radio and television to indicate that what one has just heard or seen has no relevance to what one is about to hear or see, or possibly to anything one is ever likely to hear or see. The phrase is a means of acknowledging the fact that the world as mapped by the speeded-up electronic media has no order or meaning and is not to be taken seriously ... The newscaster means that you have thought long enough on the previous matter (approximately forty-five seconds), that you must not be morbidly preoccupied with it (let us say, for ninety seconds), and that you must now give your attention to another fragment.

(Postman 1987: 102)

The fragmentation of discourse, and the attenuation of attention span,[21] are characteristic of the shift in consciousness associated with the development of the information age, in which information itself is a commodity. Hyperlinked text allows readers to move swiftly between discourses, selecting the direction they wish a narrative to take, making radical jumps in thematic concerns and subject, so that the term 'narrative' loses any sense of the continuity it usually implies, even as used in the postmodernist sense. It is quite possible, with a few clicks of a mouse button, to jump from an online horror story to a site dedicated to fishing, if fish take the reader's interest.

There is an important distinction that must be drawn at this point, between the user-interface and the hypertext mark-up language (HTML) itself. The user interface is what users see on the screen while using an Internet browser such as Internet Explorer, Netscape Navigator or one of the search engines, such as Google or Yahoo. HTML is the language that the program writer uses to make the websites that users browse. The user interface itself can be explored in a random manner (surfing the web), and its narrative(s) can therefore be regarded as fragmentary, but HTML itself is structured according to the laws of Boolean algebra, each action dependent on the preceding one, so that a single misstep requires a restart. Beneath the surface of apparent random choice, there is a system of guided choice, in that the user is guided by foregrounded buttons and links, highlighted options, and limited possibilities for return once a choice has been made, some options made more attractive than others for reasons of marketing and market research. The Internet, then, also offers an illusion of choice, as 'surfing' the web is guided by the HTML programming; the randomness is ultimately illusory. In the following discussion, when reference is made to hypertext, this will refer to the user interface which constitutes the narrative, and not to the HTML programming itself. However, it is important to bear in mind the HTML background which subtly directs the narrative, a direction analogous to the subconscious drives which inform the writing and reading of a print narrative, in that the user is usually not overtly aware of the influence. Internet writing is not as 'free' as it appears. So, what happens to the traditional print narrative of literary culture in this context?

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[21]A study of Attention Deficit Disorder in terms of this cultural trait may be of great interest, though not relevant here.

House of Leaves began life as an e-book, an example of the literature which reflects the techno-fragmentation of narrative, the fragmentation of consciousness which is the message of the medium of computer-based information exchange. During the stage in its development during which it was only available on the net, it could only be an example of this fragmentation, and not an effective comment upon it. It is with its transfer to the print medium that it is able to make effective comment on the effects of such fragmentation.

The narrative of *House of Leaves* begins with Zampano's fragmented writing, on various odd bits of paper (as described in Chapter One), which reflects the book's origins as an e-book, as a text fragmented by the nature of the electronic medium through which it was created. This lends another aspect to Johnny's attempts to compile Zampano's work into some sort of coherent whole, to de-fragment the narrative. He is in effect seeking to overcome the effects of the change in the means of distribution of literature from print format to web-based, to re-establish continuity as a means to overcome the fragmentation of Zampano's and his own identity-narratives, through the re-establishment of a series of hard links, as opposed to hyperlinks (where hyperlinks represent seemingly random possibilities although hardwired by HTML, and hard links are perceived as definitive). The previous chapter made it clear that he is ultimately unsuccessful in this endeavour (even if he does find some form of security), but it is the attempt that is significant.

At the outset of the book, references to Milton and Dante capture the dangers of the view of reality which arises from the treatment of an agglomeration of information as an end in itself:

> In the 17th century, England's greatest topographer of worlds satanic and divine warned that hell was nothing less than "Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace/ And rest can never dwell, hope never comes/ That comes to all" thus echoing the words copied down by hell's most famous tourist: " *Dinanzi a me non fuor cose create/ Se non etterne, e io etterna duro./ Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate.*"[22]

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[22]References and translation are given in a footnote: "That first bit comes from Milton's Paradise Lost, Book I, lines 65-67. The second from Dante's Inferno, Canto III, lines 7-9. In 1939, some guy named John D. Sinclair from the Oxford University Press translated the Italian as follows: 'Before me nothing was created but eternal things and I endure eternally. Abandon every hope, ye that enter.'" (Danielewski 2000: 4)

> Even today many people still feel *The Navidson Record*, in spite of all its existential refinements and contemporary allusions, continues to reflect those exact sentiments. In fact a few eager intellectuals have already begun to treat the film as a warning in and of itself, perfectly suited for hanging whole above the gates of such schools as ... Information Theory.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 3)

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines Information Theory as "the quantitative study of the transmission of information." This implies that what is of importance is information itself, as a category, and not content. "Information" is a generalised commodity, and the question of its content takes a back seat to that of its effective management. Information does not necessarily imply meaning, and Johnny's attempts to organize Zampano's manuscript represent the fruitlessness of an attempt to convert information into meaning. Milton and Dante's warnings about the nature of hell are relevant to contemporary times in that they capture the character of reality in the information age. The endless deferral of an endpoint in the infinite series of hyperlinks that constitutes information on the Web means that "peace and rest can never dwell" and "hope never comes" to those caught in the Web, as it were. Once it is entered, there is no route through, only endlessly branching routes, without conclusion, which is why Dante's warning is applicable. Those who enter must abandon hope of ever exiting with any modicum of a coherent answer to whatever questions brought about their entry. There is no actual connection between hyperlinked subjectivities beyond the hyperlink itself. The study of information for its own sake reveals nothing about the content of the information being studied, hence the warning to those who enter the halls manipulated, but never entered, by Information Theory, which becomes a special kind of hell unto itself, permanently ensnaring those who look to it for answers to questions which, in its disconnection from content, it can *never* answer.

To return to the question of what becomes of print narrative in a context where, as it is now clear, content is secondary to information for its own sake, a text such as ***House of Leaves*** is exactly what could be expected. The vast number of footnotes and cross references act as hyperlinks, departing radically from the subject of the material to which they are attached, sending readers off at tangents to the initial narrative, which itself becomes merely one of the plethora of subjects that constitute what amounts to a collection of information,

managed, but not contained, by the covers of the book. The narrative situation of the book is an actual reflection of the reality of the information age at large, the book in its entirety constituting a warning of the vacuity of the fetishization of information for its own sake. This is especially clear in a table rating "Post-exposure effects" upon people who have encountered the maze, a table which could just as well be describing the effects of the stresses of existence in the everyday world of capitalist (information) society:

> **POST-EXPOSURE EFFECTS RATING**
>
> 0-1: Alicia Rosenbaum: sudden migraines.
> 0-2: Audrie McCullough: mild anxiety.
> 2-3: Teppet C. Brookes: insomnia.
> 3-4: Sheriff Axnard: nausea, suspected ulcer.
> 4-5: Billy Reston: enduring sensation of cold.
> 5-6: Daisy: excitement; intermittent fever; scratches; echolalia.
> 6-7: Kirby "Wax" Hook: stupor; enduring impotence.
> 7-8: Chad: tangentiality; rising aggression; persistent wandering.
> 9: Karen Green: prolonged insomnia; frequent unmotivated panic attacks; deep melancholia; persistent cough.
> 10: Will Navidson: obsessive behaviour; weight loss; night terrors; vivid dreaming accompanied by increased mutism.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 396)

There is also recognition in the text of the facts that there is an awareness amongst some people of the social reality in which they live; that they are capable of contemplating this existence; and that there are both rewards and dangers in doing so:

> As evidence continues to come in, it appears that a portion of those who have not only meditated on the house's perfectly dark and empty corridors but articulated how its pathways have murmured within them have discovered a decrease in their own anxieties ... However ... this course is not without risk. An even greater number of people dwelling on *The Navidson Record* have shown an increase in obsessiveness,

> insomnia and incoherence. Most of those who chose to abandon their interest soon recovered. A few, however, required counselling and in some instances medication and hospitalisation. Three cases resulted in suicide.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 407)

That the book reflects the social reality of contemporary capitalist society is clear. The "perfectly dark and empty corridors" are the paths that exist below the surface sheen of the information age, endlessly hyperlinked, reflecting the essential meaninglessness of the agglomeration of randomly associated information found on the 'information superhighway,' the World Wide Web. The appearance of technological accomplishment is not sufficient in and of itself to lend meaning to human existence. The anxieties mentioned in the above extract arise from the suspicion that the message of this medium is that there is no message. Some people are able to deal with this emptiness, adjusting their world-view and so lessening their anxieties. Others are simply unable to adapt to this world-view, and suffer varying degrees of collapse, from nervous tension to suicide.

A particularly telling phrase is, "Most of those who abandoned their interest soon recovered," because it can be paraphrased as: "Most of those who ceased questioning reality as represented and revealed by the spaces of hypertext fiction were able to safely return to the world of faceless (blank) consumerism." This is a situation notably similar to that presented in the film ***The Matrix***. In the film, technology, in the form of sentient machines, has enslaved humanity, using human bodies as batteries, but conceals this situation from people through the use of a virtual reality, the matrix. This seems like a satisfying existence until, by accident, or as a result of the exertions of the resistance movement, one is extracted from the matrix and shown the true nature of humans' existence, as slaves to technology. There is then a choice to be made: to remain outside the matrix and resist the machines; or, to forget (chemically[23]), and return to the blank fiction of the virtual world. This is the exact choice that readers of ***House of Leaves*** are being asked to make for themselves, with recognition of the psychological difficulties concomitant with making such a choice duly registered in the effects felt by the characters of the book, as tabulated above. The implication is that

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[23]There is a suggestion that the use of drugs is a coping mechanism for dealing with the emptiness of existence in global technocracy, a suggestion reflected in Johnny's extensive drug use. This is but an interesting aside here.

hypertextual fiction implies a certain virtuality in contemporary reality, reflecting the reshaping of social consciousness referred to by Rita Wilson (Wilson 2002: 36), which is why there can be no message; a virtual medium implies a virtual message, and thus effectively no message at all. Hence the anxiety. Marshall McLuhan captured the source of this anxiety in his description of "electronic man":

> Electronic man loses touch with the concept of a ruling centre as well as the restraints of social rules based on interconnection. Hierarchies constantly dissolve and reform. The computer, the satellite, the database, and the nascent multicarrier telecommunications corporation *will break apart what remains of the old print-oriented ethos*. [emphasis added]
>
> (McLuhan 1989: 92)

McLuhan is describing a hyper-reality overarching experiential reality,[24] and the associated, *Matrix*-like disconnection from experiential reality. He sees the demise of the print medium as directly responsible for this shift in "ethos". The reassertion of print media enacted by *House of Leaves*' return to print enables it to exit this hyper-reality and reassert the missing message, to assert ***a*** message.[25]

Wilson, on the other hand, does see a message in the world of virtuality, one which is associated with the shift from print to computer-based technologies: "To live and understand fully we need not only proximity but also distance. It seems that the information age we now live in represents and reinforces this human need to be simultaneously connected and disconnected ... our need to be both proximate and distanced" (Wilson 2002: 37). On the contrary, her error here is to confuse a need on the part of *critics* (such as herself) for a critical distance with a generalised need on the part of humanity. The transformation Johnny undergoes (Chapter Three) achieves the exact opposite. He overcomes the distance from the real world that is the effect of the information age and its inherent hyper-real commercialism.

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[24]Debates about the objectivity of experiential reality are put aside for the moment in order to concentrate on the effect of the overarching hyper-reality.

[25]This does not contradict the postmodernist deferral of meaning, because this is one instance, one possibility within the broader scope of the narrative, and does not provide closure to the text as a whole. It is a single interpretation amongst the many offerred by the text as a whole which fall outside of the topic of the present discussion.

He reestablishes a connection lost with the demise of print. Wilson goes on to say that "friends, colleagues, merchants, and infinite resources are all just a click away; we can send, receive and connect from a safe and comfortable distance" (*ibid.*). She seems to feel that distance is desirable, that people prefer faceless contact. Facelessness may indeed be an outcome, but it is not necessarily desired; it is a facet of the convenience mentality of the commercial world. It is simpler and faster to e-mail than to call in person, and simplicity and speed are desires imposed by the culture of hyper-reality as reflected in hypertext. The message of the book's return to print medium (not to be confused with the absence of message in the information age, upon which the printed work reflects), then, is the need to reestablish the connection Johnny makes, a connection with a reality not delimited by technologies; a connection visible in the following words of Johnny's, which interpose and oppose elements of technological, industrialised society with elements of the non- and pre-industrial:

> the memory came back to me with extraordinary vividness, as clean and crisp as a rare LA day, which usually happens in winter, when the wind's high and the haze loosens its hold on the hills so the line between earth and sky suddenly comes alive with the shape of leaves, thousands of them on a thousand branches, flung up against the opaline sky ... weird sea-stories strangely reminiscent of something else ... deckwood on fire, the ship tilting, giving way to the pursuit of the sea, water extinguishing the flames in a burst of steam ... fills up deck after deck with the Indian Ocean, leaving those on board with no place else to go ... leaving [the] sinking ship for the garden where who should I find but my memory ... away from all those ugly ends ... and found flowers and a fountain, perfume and a breeze, a warm breeze.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 297)

The ship represents the false reality epitomised in the techno-industrial hub of Los Angeles (LA), sinking under the return of the natural as embodied in the Indian Ocean, allowing a return to the pre-industrial "garden" under an "opaline sky". Memory clearly plays a crucial role here, the memory of what has been effaced by the technocracy specific to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and lost to the world-view represented in hypertextual writing. The stylistic appropriation of hypertext conducted by ***House of Leaves***

seeks to reveal the hyperreal as the figurative ship which *needs* to be sunk by the return of memory. Memory, of a self not disconnected from other selves by optic fibre cables; of a self not confounded and contained by the superimposed 'ship' of the hyperreal, floating some indeterminate distance above the 'garden' of the real, the garden where flowers are not composed of bits and bytes, but cells and water.

3. Ownership and the Individual

The argument above may seem to suggest the existence of some sort of utopic state prior to the rise of the information age. Such an idea would, of course, be naive. However, this study will stand by the proposition that, whatever the problems associated with social systems prior to the information age, this latest age represents a far more radical form of dehumanisation than any preceding. The nature of the reality described by hypertextual and blank fiction goes directly to what it means to be human in the information age, the latest incarnation of commodity-based capitalism; and one in which, more than ever before, people are themselves regarded as commodities:

> Today's model is the world of the temporary contract and the service provider, where each individual is encouraged to perform as a "Me & Co.", selling themselves into the marketplace. In the interminable jargon of 'downsizing', 'delayering', 'outsourcing' and 'outplacing', jobs have disappeared and been replaced by functions ... individuals need the ability to ... live with high levels of uncertainty and find security from within rather than from without.
>
> (Franks 1999: 65)

In such a situation, terms like 'solidarity' and 'loyalty' are meaningless beyond a generalised allegiance to consumerism, and temporary inclusion in the web of ownership by a few, massive corporations. The worth of the individual is not just a function of his or her individual success; it also becomes merely a temporary worth, in the eyes of the corporate owners. Success in one temporary placement, in one contract, does not guarantee overall success. It is a worth which can be lost at any moment, as an individual quite literally goes out of fashion. In "selling themselves into the marketplace" the individual *becomes* a

product, and one for which there is by no means a high level of demand. Furthermore, the kind of product one becomes is not self-determined. Desired career path is unlikely to be reflected in actual career path; or rather, desire itself is imposed by external forces, as career path is chosen in terms of what the market requires people to become to fulfill the needs of the market.

These are all facets of global corporatism. Another facet is that the vast majority of employment opportunities arise in the retail and service sectors, which have come to be known as 'McJobs,' an indictment of the employment practices of fast-food giant McDonalds, punning their branding strategy of labelling their cheap and nasty food products with the prefix 'Mc' — McBurgers, McShakes, McFries ... McJobs. In the attempt to cut the cost of responsibility for employees, corporations

> have become artful at dodging most commitments to their employees, expertly fostering the notion that their clerks are somehow not quite legitimate workers, and thus do not really need or deserve job security, livable wages and benefits ... [they] tend to view their employees as [on] a quick stopover on the road to a more fulfilling and better paying career ... What is distressing about this trend is that over the past two decades, the relative importance of the service sector as a source of jobs has soared.
>
> (Klein 2001: 232)

In other words, more and more people are working for fewer and fewer owners for less and less money. This makes an absolute mockery of any justification of this system by appeal to the idea of the 'American Dream' (now extended to the International Dream of global capitalism): that hard work within the system brings reward. The all-pervasive triviality of the commercial 'Now ... this' world extends to the existences of the majority of the people within it.

One reaction to such a situation is simply to regard making the effort to succeed as pointless, seeing that the quest for success is nothing more than the objectification of the self as product. A good case in point is that of Navidson's brother, Tom, who

> is nothing like his brother. He has neither the fierce ambition nor the compulsion for

> risk-taking ... Tom passively accepted whatever the world would give or take away. Consequently Tom won no awards, achieved no fame, held no job for more than a year or two ... though Tom is better liked than Will .. and exudes a kind of peacefulness typically reserved for Buddhist monks.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 246)

Tom is the kind of person looked down upon by those in positions of power, but who is simultaneously liked by those (almost everybody) who recognise in him a sort of bravery they themselves wish they had: the bravery not to feel to compelled to sell oneself in order to be a good consumer. He is in possession of a Zen-like detachment from the world, as opposed to Navidson who attacks it headlong in pursuit of success. The irony is that Navidson fails in his quest to explore and commodify the maze, while Tom is the one who emerges as a heroic figure (as Navidson sought to do), sacrificing his own life to save Daisy, Navidson's daughter, as the labyrinth of the house dissolves. In these terms, Navidson's continued life is more of a (personal) loss than Tom's death, as Navidson's sense of purpose is shown to be empty folly, while Tom's rootlessness is revealed to be due not to an inability to face reality, but to an understanding that 'purpose' within this schema is itself purposeless, and in fact dehumanising: "Tom never hid behind the adjunct meaning of a career. He never acquired the rhetoric of achievement" (Danielewski 2000: 250). Tom has no need for the temporary worth of success, and places more value on the loyalty that drove him to answer his brother's call for assistance in the exploration of the maze: "More than likely when Tom first stepped foot in that place, every instinct in his body screamed at him to immediately get out ... Unfortunately, it was not an impulse he could obey as he was needed near the Spiral Staircase in order to maintain radio contact" (Danielewski 2000: 246). This is a loyalty all but forgotten by Navidson in his quest for the perfect family and career success of the illusory American Dream.[26]

Tom's solution, though, is far from perfect. He may have escaped the vacuous clutches of the commodified world, but its influence is so dominant that he cannot help but feel he has somehow failed: "He drifted, bending to daily pressures, never protesting when he was deprived of what he should rightfully have claimed as his own. And in this sad trip

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[26]Note that the American Dream Navidson pursues is the debased version that gives rise to the Mc Job phenomenon, and not the beautiful ideal of unlimited personal freedom.

downstream, Tom dulled the pain with alcohol and a few joints a day — what he called his 'friendly haze'" (Danielewski 2000: 246). Despite "the kind of gut-level affection people feel for him" (*ibid.*) he is deeply unhappy. So neither he, nor Navidson, find satisfactory paths out of the blank maze.

If neither passive rejection nor aggressive acceptance of the social reality of the twenty-first century provide a solution, then what courses of action remain? Passive acceptance? Aggressive rejection? This last is the route gaining in popular credibility, the need to actively resist the ever-growing power of ownership held by an ever-smaller number of corporations.[27] The massive and violent demonstrations at the most recent G8 and World Bank summits are the latest instances in the emergence of an increasingly large and vocal group of protesters, objecting to the way in which the labyrinth[28] of corporate ownership, which functions to place control of the majority of the world's wealth (and thus the balance of power) in the hands of a very few people, has increasingly effaced the rights of the individual:

> The triumph of economic globalization has inspired a wave of techno-savvy investigative activists who are as globally minded as the corporations they track. This powerful form of activism [has] members [who] are young and old ... suffering from 'brand fatigue' ... worried about slavish devotion to 'logo tribes' ... concerned with the quality of community life ... by October 1997 there were so many disparate anticorporate protests ... that Earth First! printed up an impromptu calendar and declared it the first annual End Corporate Dominance Month.
>
> (Klein 2001: 326)

This activism constitutes a resistance to a new form of imperial colonialism, globalization, which does not just invade across national boundaries. It ***erases*** them, converting national identity into brand identity; that is, identity determined by loyalty to a brand and the lifestyle

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[27]The focus of activism has shifted from states to corporations, since "[of] the world's largest economies, 51are now corporations, only 49 are nation-states" (Hertz 2001: 7). Attention is here focused on the corporations, and not on the ways in which they have outstripped nation-states; again, a thesis unto itself.

[28]Labyrinthine in the chains of subsidiaries and holding companies, branded outlets and national branding strategies, which efface who finally holds ownership; the centre is well hidden.

image attached to it (“logo tribes”). There is a sense in which the labyrinth of the house can be read as a logo, Navidson's obsession with its empty promise (imposed and then read by Navidson himself) of some sort of fulfillment echoing the similarly empty promise of the brand logos of the commercial world. ‘Logos’ here is both the plural of logo, and a simultaneous trivialising of ‘the word,’ responsible for the erasure of identities associated with a sense of community. This is another effect of the virtual deification of wealth, and the products (avatars of the god of capital) which impart the image of wealth. “Community life” in the sense of shared habitat, desires and needs is replaced and fractured by communities determined by loyalty to the logo/logos - Nike, Gap, Adidas; Ferrari, Audi, BMW; Apple, Microsoft, IBM. Corporate dominance insists that what you own determines who you are. This renders the ‘McJob’ tendency particularly insidious, as the corporations who control McJobs do not pay their employees enough to have — in terms of the criteria the corporations themselves set — any meaningful sense of self or identity.

The pinnacle of this empty existence must be the world of fashion and modelling, the primary means for the distribution and perpetuation of the vacuous ideals of the world of the commercial logo(s), literally labels hung on ‘ideal’ frames. Navidson's wife, Karen, is a model. There is an extensive discussion of her childhood development, and of the reasons for the claustrophobia she suffers as an adult. Of her childhood, readers are told:

> Karen was exuberant, feisty, charming, independent, spontaneous, sweet, and most of all fearless. By the time she turned fifteen, all that was gone. She hardly spoke in class. She refused to function in any sort of school event, and rather than discuss her feelings she deferred the world with a hard and perfectly practiced smile ... Karen spent every night of her fourteenth year composing that smile in front of a blue plastic handled mirror ... her creation proved flawless and ... was invariably rewarded with the pyritic prize of high school popularity.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 58)

At this young age, Karen has learnt that distant beauty is an ideal. This is then revealed as the root cause of her claustrophobia, which manifests in her first encounter with the dark, enclosed space of the labyrinth. Karen is unable (or unwilling) to enter to retrieve her children, who have wandered into the maze: “She freezes on the threshold, unable to push

herself into the darkness towards the faint flicker of light within ... This is the first sign of Karen's chronic disability ... crippling claustrophobia" (Danielewski 2000: 57). In a footnote, a psychologist diagnoses the causal factor of her claustrophobia as follows: "Karen's attacks ... increase proportionally with the level of intimacy — or even the threat of potential intimacy — she experiences whether with Will Navidson or even her children" (Danielewski 2000: 59). The value attached to distant, unattainable beauty by the commercial modelling culture has damaged her to such an extent that she is unable to form meaningful relationships with anybody, including her own family, emotional intimacy being equally threatening to her as a confined space. Her own sister has the following to say about her:

> Karen Green [is] a cold bitch, plain and simple. A high fashion model, not much smarter than a radiator, who grew up thinking life revolved around club owners, cocaine and credit card limits. Watching her burble on about her weight, her children, or how much she needs Navidson made me want to retch. How can she say she loves a man when she's incapable of anything even remotely resembling commitment? Did I say she was a cold bitch? She's also a slut.
>
> (Danielewski 2000: 16)

Another commentator is reported as saying, "She hardly gave up the promiscuous behaviour that marked her 20s. She only became more discreet" (ibid.).

There is no clearer illustration of the concept of the individual as product than the case of Karen, her body as a primary asset in her promiscuity and in the world of modelling. There is nothing beyond the beauty which she has learned to sell, nothing behind the beautiful smile: "Karen's smile is tragic because, in spite of its meaning, it succeeds in remaining so utterly beautiful" (Danielewski 2000: 60). This is a tragedy that extends to a society in which the system of ownership determines, to a large extent, the personality of the individual. In the pursuit of wealth, industry dictates fashion, and fashion dictates lifestyle. A relatively large proportion of the very little money the holders of McJobs earn is likely to be spent on attempts to emulate people like Karen, funnelling salaries straight back into the corporate hub which pays them, in a self-perpetuating, self-legitimating cycle, the serpent swallowing its own tail:

> Such is our legacy. A world in which consumerism is equated with economic policy, where corporate interests reign, where corporations spew their jargon onto the airwaves and stifle nations with their imperial rule. Corporations have become behemoths, huge global giants that wield immense political power ... All the goods we buy or use are increasingly controlled by corporations which may at their whim choose to nurture, support or strangle us.
>
> (Hertz 2001: 6)

This is a new form of paternalism as insidious as that of the colonial mentality of the national expansionism of the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The question to be asked is: "What is the worth of representation if ... our politicians now jump to the commands of corporations rather than of their own citizens?" (Hertz 2001: 4). It is not just the capitalist American Dream which is revealed as empty, but the way in which social consciousness has been manipulated under the very system of 'democracy,' a term which has been synonymous with 'freedom' and is now seen to be, rather, a form of enslavement, as corporate-image-branding identity replaces community-political identity with a simple premise: you are what you buy. And if you do not buy, you are less than human. The true trap, however, lies in accepting the value of consumer identity, as this is no identity at all, functioning only to extend the reach of corporate ownership to the human body itself.

In the characters of Tom and Karen, particularly, ***House of Leaves*** clearly demonstrates the effects of the social system of consumer-based capitalism on the psychology of its citizens. The effects of the system of corporate ownership underlying 'democracy' are as all-pervasive as the triviality and commercialism of the commodified world. Attention is deflected from such damage, by the mentality of the 'Now ... this' media representation of reality. People are schooled not to dwell for too long on the issues that have such radical effects on the quality of everyday life, while the corporate centre hides behind the facade of choice offered by the labyrinthine array of brands — an array that ultimately limits choice to a handful of vague and empty promises of a satisfying existence.

CONCLUSION

The highly commercial nature of contemporary society would seem to imply that the drive to

write is commercial rather then artistic, that artistry itself threatens to reduce to nothing but the art of creating a text that is saleable. *House of Leaves* overcomes this tendency by appropriating the discourses of what amounts to the imperialism of the commercial system. It reveals the manner in which authors position themselves as commodities in the marketplace of publishing, through the self-consciousness implicit in Navidson's explorations of the labyrinth. It does this in order to expose the restrictions, ironically often self-imposed, upon the authors of a commodified literature. It plays with these restrictions, poking fun at a recognisable 'intellectual' market segment, and discussing its own release and reception. To return to the epigraph, "Hey kids, look what I can do!": Danielewski draws attention to the way in which he manipulates layers of narrative and levels of discourse, simultaneously narrating and deconstructing, returning in time to human origins, linking these to contemporary space, while treating his novel as both an ethical exploration and a commodity.

In doing so, *House of Leaves* exposes the illusions of commercialism: the illusion of choice, and ultimately of freedom. The 'blank fictions' of the 'blank generation' are deconstructed in order to suggest the need for a revision of artistic, political and popular responses to global capitalism. Primarily, *House of Leaves* demonstrates that the apparent multiculturalism of globalization hides the underlying unicultural force — capital, and its fetishization. The dissolution of the text into appendices and "exhibits" figures the dissolution of the capital-based means of production. Complementary to this is the deconstruction of the fragmentation of discourses as represented in the rise of hypertextual writing, arguably a profound threat both to literature itself and to the manner in which people relate to reality. This is demonstrated as Johnny attempts to de-fragment Zampano's narrative, the resulting narrative reflecting the reality of the information age, inevitably fragmented, but not without hope of reconstruction. It is made clear that there is a crucial, if difficult, choice to be made: to submit to the hollow existence of the world of technology and its discourses, or to resist its influences. This is the message recognisable in the book's shift from internet publication to the print medium, the need to remain connected to the real world, as opposed to the distanced isolation of the virtual world. It is crucial to shun the notion that virtuality and information for its own sake are somehow of greater value than the real world of content.

The most insidious facet of the corporatism prevalent today is the manner in which people are treated as commodities, and taught to treat themselves as products, of value only in

terms of the salary they can extract from the sale of their bodies (literally and figuratively). The very concept of a shared humanity is threatened, as ‘logos' becomes ‘logo' and branding effaces spirituality, suggested in the way in which Navidson turns to the labyrinth, the empty logos of the commercial world, for meaning and purpose. Karen's claustrophobia figures the sense of captivity that all people, even if subconsciously, suffer from in a world where even the human body is branded and for sale. Ultimately, what is revealed is the damaged psychology of people whose purpose is to consume, whose very identity is determined by consumption.

CONCLUSION

According to the reading of *House of Leaves* conducted in this thesis, the novel is concerned with building (Chapter One) and negotiating (Chapter Two) a literary structure that reflects a new realism (Chapter Three) that is capable of meaningfully engaging with the social reality of a world in which the creation and amassing of wealth are imposed as the primary and virtually exclusive goals of human lives (Chapter Four). In *House of Leaves* Danielewski constructs a metaphorical space in which to reflect upon the effects upon the individual of the social system of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

The figure of the labyrinth pervades the text and informs its significance(s). First, the book is 'about' a labyrinth, the one which extends from Navidson's house. At this initial level, attempts to explain the mysterious appearance of this maze, and its significance, underlie the text as a whole. Navidson, Zampano and Johnny's narratives are all initiated for these reasons. This labyrinth is not an ordinary one. It exists outside of 'normal' space, is seemingly infinite in extent, and can shift the arrangement of its passageways. Navidson's maze also forms the initial focus for the reader's attention, arousing expectations that the book will be concerned with explaining the presence and significance of the labyrinth in terms of the conventions of the horror genre, a genre to which *House of Leaves* ostensibly belongs. However, these expectations do not hold for very long. For Johnny, but especially for the reader, understanding Navidson's maze soon becomes a secondary concern as emphasis shifts to elements analogised in and by the labyrinth.

The first of these analogies is with the text itself. The first twenty-three pages, constituting Johnny's introduction, are relatively straightforward, apart from some references to events which readers will assume will be cleared up as the narrative progresses. However, from the beginning of the first chapter, this relatively straightforward character changes dramatically. From a theoretical perspective, it becomes clear that *House of Leaves* is a literary representation of the theoretical concerns of postmodernist literary studies. The book is lent a labyrinthine character by the manipulation of genre, layered narratives, footnotes, cross-references, intertextual references, appendices, "Exhibits" and diagrams, none of which are usually expected from a 'horror' novel. There is also an intense metafictive self-reflexivity, as Johnny constructs what becomes *House of Leaves* from Zampano's fragmented

narrative, focusing attention on the acts of both reading and writing. Thus, Navidson's maze reflects the character of the text of *House of Leaves* itself, and the character and concerns of postmodernist literature in general.

The second, and more important, analogy is with the reality of the readers. The text seeks to make a connection between itself and social reality in order to position itself as a direct commentary upon this reality. In this sense the book is a form of social theorising. In its structure, its concerns with space and identity, and its manner of representation, it draws links between the figurative space of the labyrinth and reality as experienced by its readers. These themes, discussed in Chapter Two as meaning-making strategies employed in the text (as possible means to 'negotiate' the labyrinth), illustrate, as each of the strategies fail, that there is no final meaning available either in the realm of text or the realm of human existence. The effect is, primarily, to destabilise conceptions of identity, as happens to Johnny as his "assurances" are stripped away. This is arguably the book's primary concern: the stripping away of assurances, based upon metanarratives, held by its readers. But this is done in order to prepare the way for a new way of conceptualising reality, a new (literary) realism. The social reality that this new realism can be used to examine is the system of capitalist democracy which governs the lives of the majority of people in western nations.

Thus, *House of Leaves* analogises the way in which postmodernism crystallises long-standing ideas regarding, first, literature and its representation of reality; and secondly, ideas regarding reality itself. In the first instance, literary representations are necessarily incomplete and biased towards the perspective of the author and his/her ideology; and in the second, these representations reflect the tendency of humanity to regard itself as somehow essential to the universe at large, a sense of importance which goes a long way towards defining people's self-assurance(s) and identity, and which also leads to the apathy of consumerism and destructive behaviour. Postmodernist thought recognises these biases and seeks to address them in its attack on the apparatus of legitimation, attempting to overcome the way in which "realism ... perpetuates the illusions on which our blind, ideology-ridden ... society depends" (Shaw 1999: 3). But even if postmodernism attacks ideology, it is ineffective against the most powerful metanarrative of the current age — wealth. It is the metanarrative of wealth that the new realism seeks to subvert, pitting the actual complexity of existence against this simplifying ideological construct.

In order to subvert the primacy of wealth as a defining influence in people's lives, the novel must take the theoretical criticism of its practices 'to the people' in such a way that non-academic readers will be interested and affected. This goal is subverted and problematised by the prevalent culture of entertainment, a sound-bite culture incapable of sustained attention to any issue; and further subverted by the capacity of entertainment media to generate and perpetuate the facile opinions and beliefs that corporations need to sustain in order to sustain themselves. This problem cannot be addressed as long as political power has an interest in the corporate sector. An interesting field of inquiry that could lead on from this is the possibility of putting in place some form of separation of powers between political and corporate interests, similar to that which exists between the legislature and the judiciary, in order to overcome the perpetuation, by political powers who gain financially from corporate interests, of the social inequalities prevalent in capitalist society.

In terms of pitting the actual complexity of existence against the simplifying ideological construct of the metanarrative of wealth, social theorising needs to become accessible, and indeed relevant, to the average person, which is what *House of Leaves* sets out to do, and — as this study has sought to demonstrate — succeeded in doing, in the figure of Johnny Truant. Literary theory, a form of social theorising, is for the most part a strictly academic field in which non-specialists have little interest because it seems to have no intersection with their own lives. This is why Johnny's work on Zampano's text is so important. It represents just such an intersection. Zampano is in a sense a revolutionary, his writing a psychological weapon aimed at people like Johnny, disaffected and, even if subconsciously, looking for alternatives to their mundane existences. Zampano's writing simultaneously causes disaffection amongst the Maus Fife-Harrises of the world, the archetypal academics, by deposing them from their thrones of intellectual authority. If people can theorise for themselves, as Johnny learns to do when he develops a faculty for original, critical thought, there is no need for an elite academy. From the academic point of view, this adds a menacing quality to the way in which Zampano, while dictating to Fife-Harris who objects to his literary style, "chuckled again and pressed on" (Danielewski 2000: 55) in spite of her objections. He is using her to construct a weapon designed to destroy everything she stands for. His weapon is aimed at academia because academia is implicitly tied to the prevailing ideology, the metanarrative of wealth. The richer the university, the greater its

chance of attracting rich students to pay higher fees for the honour of attending a rich and powerful, and by extension 'better', university, providing such students with an education which gives them a better chance of getting a well-paid job, while further enriching the university; and so perpetuating the cycle of enrichment, and widening the divide with the 'McJob' sector of society. There is thus a strong sense in which the division between naive and critical readers figures the divide between poor and rich.[29]

Johnny's interest in Zampano's text stems from the fact that his work on it brings within his reach an understanding of issues that were not just beyond his reach, but not even a part of his world-view. They are issues that nevertheless fundamentally affect the way he lives and the way he views reality. For example, his interest in the book frees him from having to work as an unappreciated tattoo-artist's apprentice in order to *be* an artist at all, instead enabling him to express himself through the literary art he discovers as he works on the book. His art need no longer be defined in relation to his need to work in order to earn money to survive. It becomes art for its own sake, and more importantly, a process of self-discovery. Furthermore, in the same way that Zampano's writing evokes for Johnny the way in which he constructs his own life and identity, Johnny's writing evokes the same for readers, showing how an identity predicated on any metanarrative, but especially that of success (and even its 'alternatives' which only serve to further strengthen it by confirming its position of power) is psychologically damaging if it lacks any simultaneous sense of scepticism towards such metanarratives.

Zampano's book introduces into Johnny's life the disruption which characterises the "menacing quality of postmodern times" (Kroker 1988: 182), compounded by the terror that there may be nothing to replace that which is destabilised. However, textual destabilisation for its own sake is meaningless. The purpose of a new realism is to enable some sort of sense to be made of such destabilisation, a destabilisation figured in the dark and shifting labyrinth. The figurative labyrinth is robbed of light and form by primacy of, in particular, the metanarrative of wealth, which ensnares people in a dark and shifting social labyrinth, from which there can be no escape without a shift in social consciousness. For in this social

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[29]This said, it is important to recognize that even though this cycle of enrichment is a facet of 'quality education', 'rich' universities have nevertheless in the past been, and will surely continue to be, important seedbeds of radical thought.

labyrinth (figured in Navidson's maze), "There is no hope of survival ... Life is impossible. And therein lies the lesson of the house, spoken in syllables of absolute silence, resounding within [Navidson] like a faint and uncertain echo: ***If we desire to live, we can only do so in the margins of that place***" (Danielewski 2000: 387; original emphasis).

The need for a financial system of symbolic exchange is obvious, but the support and perpetuation of such a system, to the advantage of a select few, should not be the purpose and meaning of so many lives. This is not to suggest that such a shift in social consciousness is easy to achieve. People fear and resist change, as evidenced in the way in which both Navidson and Johnny are driven to ***re***stabilise the reality subverted by the presence of the labyrinth. But it is the attempt to restabilise that causes them torment; and it is when they instead move forward into the new conception of reality, which takes the inexplicable presence of the maze into account, that they regain some sense of contentment.

A new realism must be one that recognises that, for the moment at least, it must necessarily function within the metanarrative of wealth, in order to avoid being instantly subverted by this metanarrative, because to position itself without any such connection is to disconnect itself from the very lives it seeks to alter. That said, this new realism is not concerned with the preservation of any system of beliefs or social interaction, as it recognises that all are at best temporary products of a dynamic knowledge. Hence the value of a science-like outlook, as it is science that most willingly recognises that its state of knowledge is temporary and fallible; and shares with postmodern consciousness an awareness of the limitations inevitably imposed upon it by the engrained human tendency of its practitioners to favour accepted wisdom. Furthermore, such a new realism is not itself a system, but an attitude, a means of approach to reality which embraces one of reality's defining characteristics — dynamism. It is an attitude that precludes the fear of change, and erases the ultimate human vanity, the belief in the status of the human race as the purpose of the existence of the universe. This thesis suggests that in ***House of Leaves***, Danielewski rewrites postmodern concepts of change, disruption and uncertainty by siting them within the context of scientific thinking.

Both fear of change and anthropocentrism are defining human characteristics, the subversion of which is captured in the following words describing the apprehension of the labyrinth: "You'll stand aside as a great complexity intrudes, tearing apart, piece by piece, all

your carefully conceived denials ... trying in vain to believe you're some sort of universe-appointed sentinel" (Danielewski 2000: xxiii). The postmodernist destabilisation of metanarratives reveals the underlying complexity and concomitant insecurity, but provides no way to deal effectively with these: in the case of the culture of commodification, a core of financial power with a controlling interest remains as a product and perpetuation of the divide between rich and poor, as figured in the divide between naive and critical readers. However, it is a mistake to dismiss the critical ability of the 'naive'. Johnny, as a figure for naivety, manages to theorise a new position for himself, a practical theorising which has real-world effects because it is not delimited by the elite, disconnected sphere of academic enquiry. He "faces the creature [he] truly [is]" (Danielewski 2000: xxiii), one who has been dependent on an identity which hides the frightening vastness of the actual universe. The new realism is one which stems from this realisation, and aims to tame the terror through the foregrounding of the similarly infinite human capacity for questioning and discovery, even while it admits that there is no final discovery to be made. It is necessary to embrace the (supposedly fatal) sense of proportion which arises from the conception of an infinite universe and humanity's insignificance in relation to it.

The infinite capacity for questioning is a capacity that the metanarrative of wealth seeks to hide, as its continued success depends on the way in which it positions the quest for wealth as the meaning of life. It doesn't want there to be an awareness of the immensity of reality, as such an immensity makes a mockery of the quest for wealth. It instead mocks those who seek to define themselves without wealth, labelling them failures, and imposing immense social pressure upon them to conform to its ideals. People are actively socialised to seek financial security, as if its attainment makes the fact of an infinite universe comprehensible.

The true value of the postmodernist perspective lies in its ability to provide a starting point from which the supposedly naive may find a critical voice, denied by the authority of metanarratives. But this is a critical voice which can only be acquired through resistance to the metanarrative of wealth, a challenge which postmodernist theory has been incapable of meeting as the metanarrative constitutes the very environment in which the theory was developed. But the new realism enables self-examination that reveals and builds upon the confines of the metanarratological discourse of wealth, self-examination which empowers the

individual in a metaphysical sense. A new reality is revealed, as people see the way in which the course of their lives has been determined by the narratives of capitalism, and further see that these narratives serve only those who control the economy. Scepticism must be directed at such narratives, *as well as at oneself,* at the personal belief in the 'freedom' to be gained from the accumulation of wealth, a false freedom.

The "Voice" Johnny finds with which to express himself, his new language, is a figure for the idea that there is a form of art within each person, a means of expression kept down by the social conditions of existence under capitalist hegemony. Under these conditions, creativity is confined to and equated with work, as illustrated by Johnny, who channels his creativity into his tattoo designs, his means of employment, but who is shown to have a great literary talent, which he only discovers, painfully, as he is forced to direct a sceptical gaze upon himself and his social reality. The labyrinth figures social conditions in which creativity is stifled by the easy escapism of entertainment culture.

Postmodernism moves beyond realism, and a new realism seeks to move beyond postmodernism as it generates a subjectivity which is openly contingent, making no claims to objectivity or 'truth', allowing individuals to embrace his or her own point of view, *with an ironic awareness of such a point of view's artificial and temporary nature.* The latter, crucial point is assisted by what can be described as a science-like outlook, as science is the only field of inquiry that has an inbuilt, and essential, recognition of knowledge as a process rather than a state. The recognition of knowledge as a process rather than a state is one that has not been successfully applied to the metanarrative of wealth, so pervasive and seemingly foundational and indispensable to contemporary culture that it has been beyond question. In this context, ideas of "community ... can only encourage the illusion ... that there is some mode of thought or set of principles that would ultimately eliminate all difficult and disagreeable encounters" (Smith 1988: 167). Such encounters are in fact crucial to the process of knowledge, especially the encounter with oneself. The only alternative to such encounters is a tacit agreement to avoid them, either by ignoring them, or by imposing some form of authoritative perspective, eliminating personal and social progress.

To take up a position outside of the system being observed, as a 'quantum observer' of society must do (Chapter Three), is a metaphorical position, first because it is impossible to fully extricate oneself from the system in which one lives (hence the problems with the

metanarrative of wealth), and only possible to build upon the perception of that system; and secondly because any transfer of scientific knowledge and attitudes to the experience of the real world is necessarily metaphorical. But as long as observers recognise that they are inevitably a part of the system being observed, such observers can adopt an attitude which allows them to build a perspective based upon a metaphorical exteriority to that position. It is the realisation of this possibility that at first terrifies, but ultimately comforts Johnny, as he develops the ability to conceptualise, in infinite variety, the infinity of reality, leaving the security of the "old shelters" to face the quantum, relativistic universe of physics as evoked in the figure of the labyrinth.

In the final analysis, postmodernism undermines laws, but cannot move beyond them. The new realism shows a way of dealing with the lawless environment of postmodernism, through constant adaptation to the endlessly shifting conception of the universe, complemented by acceptance of the irresolvable nature of the puzzle of human existence.

The need for such a new realism stems largely from the fact that the lawless environment of the postmodernist perspective is not immediately obvious in the context of everyday life in the twenty-first century. This is because the metanarrative of wealth sets out a structure of laws that thoroughly pervades every aspect of life. The postmodernist subversion of metanarratives is itself subverted by the metanarrative of wealth. But this is not the case from a literary perspective only. All social interactions and utterances are delimited by the metanarrative of wealth, the situation upon which a new realism must be built.

The illusion of freedom is of primary concern. Commercial media have adopted the egalitarian principles of postmodernism, but express them only in such a way as to generate profit. ***Selling*** the notion of free discourse fatally subverts that very freedom, as it is then by definition not free discourse, either economically or philosophically. In the same sense that the vast range of ***brands*** of products masks the reality of a limited selection of products, the apparent range of discourses masks the reality of a limited range of commercially viable voices. This range of voices is, like Navidson's maze, a blank labyrinth. It shifts in response to psychology, but a psychology determined by the labyrinth of commercialism, and is therefore not a 'free' psychology. The primary goal of the literature of new realism should be to reveal the effects of the metanarrative of wealth in limiting discursive possibilities, even as it recognises that escape without radical social revision is impossible, the latter in turn

depending upon some form of isolation from this system (an isolation nonetheless dependent upon the metanarrative as a starting point). This is reflected in the way that Johnny finds himself isolated, but with the sense that he has gained something valuable and otherwise unattainable — the ability to connect with the natural world, the world with which science seeks to connect, and his own place in that world beyond commercialism.

House of Leaves, finally, does not seek to sell itself as a 'cool' tale of consumer society. If anything, it resists a formula that will sell millions of copies by appealing to the damaged psyches of the consumer generation and thereby reinforcing the belief in the primacy of money. It is instead formulated to grab the attention of those who seek something beyond the endless confirmation of the pursuit of wealth as the end goal, something beyond the glamourised violence and empty self interest of blank fictions. *House of Leaves* shows a new way of looking at society, and urges an extended consideration rather then the fleeting interest of the high-speed world of information technology and multimedia. Its format forces its readers to take the time to think about what it is that drives them, and the effects of these drives. It asks readers to slow down and purposefully consider what the figure of the labyrinth represents, in the hope of revealing the trap of the labyrinth of consumer society, which adapts and shifts continually to hide any exits, as does Navidson's maze. It hopes to show readers that the exit lies within themselves, in making the choice to reject the reassuring 'final' knowledge of consumerism and the driving force of 'I do not own enough.' The literary representation of the need for such a change is not of course equivalent to its enactment, but it is hoped that work such as *House of Leaves* and this thesis may be a starting point.

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