



Ergodic pathways into mark z Danielewski’s “House of leaves”

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Abstract

Reading in the digital era has always been a subject of considerable academic study. The arrival of digital technology and the transformation from one media to another today foregrounds a different regime of art. Though the development of internet and the digitally active reading contributed by the technology are believed to have negated the traditionally acclaimed field of codex textuality, it has originally revolutionised and revitalised the former textuality, both extending and expanding its limits. The transformation that the spread of digitality entails has brought significant revolution not only in the medium through which it gets represented but also in the traditional reader figure.

The present thesis is an attempt to explicate the transposition and transformation that have overwhelmed the traditional reading persona, elevating them from the realm of passive readership to that of active interpretation in order to traverse the text. By drawing instances from the fiction *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski, and theoretical support from Espen J. Aarseth and N. Katherine Hayles, the thesis also probes into the new narrative strategies developed through the emerging electronic media.

Keywords: Ergodic Literature, codex textuality, hypertext, Cybertext, pathways, multicursal labyrinth, navigation

Introduction

“Ergodic Pathways into Mark Z Danielewski’s “House of Leaves”

The present age abounds in technological advancements. In the contemporary scenario, the realm of individual life hold mirrors to the truth about them being the upholders of the advents of new technologies. In such an era, a discussion of the changes that technology entails is necessary for analysing literary studies, since they cannot progress in their accustomed way. Digital technology has today embraced every aspects of individual life and literature is of no exception in this scenario. And with the new media affecting every facet of individual life, the early definitions of text and literature seems to have been undermined.

The new media and technology have completely subverted, interrogated, and redirected our preceding ways of reading and perception, narration and writing. The present thesis, through an exploration of Espen J Aarseth’s notion of ergodic literature and N Katherine Hayles’ idea of electronic text, analyses the changes that have overcome the figure of traditional reader in the novel *House of Leaves* by Mark Z Danielewski. With an analysis of the novel the thesis probes further into the depths of new narrative strategies and explorative readings contributed by the wake of new media technologies, where the printed text becomes the stakeholder of digitality.

Ergodic literature is a term devised by Aarseth in his work *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. It refers to both text based and digital literature, where the traditional reader finds himself being elevated to the realm of interpretation rather than passive reception. His work introduces the theory of ergodic literature that has brought a theoretical foundation to the field of cybertext and hypertext fiction. It made known to the world new patterns of reading and writing in the new media, and brought forward the notion of the death of the reader, where the politics behind

the reader’s death in the cybertextual arena leads to the birth of the interactive user.

Cybertext is a neologism that was rendered and given articulation by Aarseth in his work. According to him, cybertext is not a genre in itself, but a broad textual media category. It is a perspective on all texts, a perspective that takes into account and foregrounds the functionality of all texts. It is any text-based work possessing an information feedback loop that functions for the production of a variety of expressions. It can be a paper or a computer-based, codex or software and the reader or the user in a cybertext becomes deeply integrated in the meaning making process. While in novels and drama, what is being highlighted is the narration of text, a reader in the cyber space discovers herself out of the reading space, and occupies an intermediary position, questioning their own existence as a reader of the text. At every point of reading they are made to question the very strategies they embrace as an authenticate reader, and thus oscillates between the decision they make. It is a space where the user’s interpretation alone plays an active role in weaving the narrative, a space where gaps are offered and inventively filled, and silences were rendered poignantly articulate.

Here one may be reminded of Italo Calvino’s novel *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, where the narrator begins the story by addressing the readers of the text. By placing the narrator’s voice and Reader’s voyage after the book he wants to read in an alternative sequence, Calvino has interrupted the linearity of the text. But even in such a context, the fiction only demands for a linear mode of reading, following one chapter after the other, though the reader can skip this owing to their freedom. Cybertext on the other hand, anticipates the reading strategies, where the conventional reader finds herself standing outside the threshold of the reading space.

History of narration and reading have taken on a different

course with the advancements from oral to written, listeners to readers, mere memorisations to hard, and soft copies. An analysis of literary history will prove that about eighty percent of literary works were orally transmitted narratives. From times in memoriam, there existed different narrative strategies. Let it be the literature in any language, they all have evolved to the present stage almost the same way.

Later it was by the fifteenth century that the world began to witness a revolutionary change happening to the entirety of narrative strategies followed hither to. Johannes Gutenberg's invention of printing press in 1439 brought a radical insurgency in both reading and writing. For thousands of years before this ground breaking innovation, access to literary works was considered a luxury. However, the evolution of moveable type was decisive in the development of a visual perspective that now reached its zenith in the digital era (*The Gutenberg Galaxy* 136).

The novels gathered their present shape and impetus in the sixteenth century, and it was Miguel De Cervantes Saavedra's Spanish novel *Don Quixote* that has been commonly observed to have initiated the change. But at this juncture, while considering all these radical shifts, one serious question arises that how the humans have reacted to these changing literary innovations. One of the illustrious philosophical figures of the twentieth century Marshall McLuhan has commented on this in his pioneering work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*.

McLuhan argues that the medium has shaped and controlled "the scale and form of human association and action" (11). For McLuhan, it is the medium, and not the content that plays a vital role in effecting a remarkable change. In his view, while printing enabled humans to think in a straightforward style, the mediums that emerged later like television encouraged men to travel in multiple directions. Significant in this context are the ways in which ergodic texts allows for a variety of textual possibilities of reading.

The emergence of digital reading has pressed literary readership to an unfamiliar territory. The method of close reading of the minimally changing texts had been the default practice of classical readership. But with the advent of web over the past few decades, these unchanging models of print media seem to have lost its locale. The future of the narrative is shifting in the wake of the newly founded digitalized media technologies, thereby creating a change not only in the earlier reading strategies, but also in the narrative strategies. It revitalises and discontinues earlier reading strategies, transposing conventional reader into the figure of interpreting user.

House of Leaves is a highly experimental novel, where the subject of the text is a documentary film "The Navidson Record", produced by a Pulitzer Prize winning photojournalist Will Navidson, after moving into the House of Ashtree Lane in Virginia. The story progresses alternatively with Navidson's narratives that provide records of his encounters at the mysterious house, which was in turn a subject of academic research by a blind old man Zampano, who has compiled a commentary on the film, complete with appendices, indexes, citations, and allusions to other academic works, both real and imaginary, and that of Johnny Truant, who later decides to create a narrative out of Zampano's notes.

Along with these multiple narrations that direct the reader's path to the courses that were not navigated before in the text, since in *House of Leaves* a return back to the

previously traversed safe zone disappears as the reader progresses from one part to the other, Danielewski has provided them with numerous footnotes and images that play a decisive role in the narration. Thus, at this point, the realization of the narrative creation proceeds to further realms with the choice of the reader, where one is forced to hear the voices unheard, the roads not taken.

The concept of Cybertext incorporates both the computer-driven textuality and the printed text. It is not a minimalistic approach that limits itself to the study of electronic textuality alone.

On the other hand, as Aarseth states, it focuses on "the mechanical organization of the text... as an integral part of the literary exchange", and "on the consumer, or user, of the text as a more integrated figure than even the reader-response theorists would claim" (1). While the reader of a codex text functions as per the reading strategies, the cybertext reader performs in an Extranoematic sense, which is well beyond human thought as:

During the cybertextual process, the user will have effectuated a semiotic sequence, and this selective movement is a work of physical construction that the various concepts of "reading" do not account for. This phenomenon I call ergodic, using a term appropriated from physics that derives from the Greek words *ergon* and *hodos*, meaning "work" and "path". In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. (Aarseth 1)

For Aarseth, cybertext produce verbal structures similar to any other literary phenomena. It is a machine for the production of a variety of expressions. He criticizes the general tendency of literary theorists to attribute ambiguous meaning whenever confronted with a forking text like hypertext. Instead of the way the hypertexts produce texts, they focuses mainly on the linear sequence that was produced during reading. Aarseth negates this idea by stating that while they focused on what was being read, he "focused on what was being read *from*" (3).

Aarseth equates the idea of narrative text as a labyrinth, a game or an imaginary world where the reader is free to explore at will, get lost, and discover secret paths through the "topological structures of the textual machinery" (4). For him, cybertext is a perspective which he uses to describe and explore the communicational strategies of dynamic texts as "[a] reader... engaged in the unfolding of a narrative, is powerless. Like a spectator at a soccer game, he may speculate, conjecture, extrapolate, even shout abuse, but he is not a player.... He cannot have the player's pleasure of influence.... The reader's pleasure is the pleasure of the voyeur. Safe, but impotent" (4).

But the scenario that abounds in Cybertext is totally different as

The cybertext reader... is not safe, and therefore it can be argued, she is not a reader. The Cybertext puts its would-be reader at risk: the risk of rejection. The effort and energy demanded by the cybertext of its reader raise the stakes of interpretation to those of intervention.... The tensions at work in a cybertext... are also something more: a struggle not merely for interpretative insight but also for narrative control: "I want this text to tell *my* story; the story that *could not be* without me." (Aarseth 4)

Peter Bogh Andersen's definition of interactivity as defined in his work *A Theory of Computer Semiotics: Semiotic Approaches to Construction and Assessment of Computer Systems* is relevant here. For Andersen "[a]n interactive work is a work where the reader can physically change the discourse in a way that is interpretable and... where the reader's interaction is an integrated part of the sign production of the work, in which the interaction is an object-sign indicating the same theme as the other signs, not a meta-sign that indicates the signs of the discourse" (89).

In this context, Aarseth states that a successful fiction must be interactive in one sense. But in the case of interactive fiction like adventure games, it is less fictive than a staged drama since here the user is free to explore the simulated world and establish a causal relationship between the encountered objects, which is a possibility denied to the ordinary readers. Here the user does not rely on his imagination alone, but she or he must deduce non-fictive laws of the simulated world by trial and errors to complete it. In such a way, ergodic or cybertext is no more a pure fiction as fiction is not something to be tested and proved, but a construction of a different kind.

Aarseth opines that that physical stratum of the medium does not necessarily affect or influence the user-text relationship as "[a] text is... any object with the primary function to relay verbal information" (62). This definition follows two observations that a text cannot operate independently of some material medium, and that a text is not equal to the information it transmits. The text directs its users by social interaction, mechanisms, and convention. The reader is a necessary part of the text, but in ergodic textuality she or he performs more than one function and thus the terminology of reader ceases to exit.

Digital texts, for him, are not a negation of the codex texts and print culture, but a continuation of it. Though theorists tend to call digital texts as hypertexts, Aarseth prefers the term cybertext instead as it incorporates both digital and print texts. The discontinuous and fragmentary reading offered by hypertext forces the literary theorists to compare it with idea of tmesis proposed by Roland Barthes. But Aarseth states that such an attempt would make a grave mistake. For Barthes, tmesis is the reader's freedom of skipping and skimming of passages, an act that is far beyond the author's control (11). But hypertext reading is quite the opposite of tmesis as when the hypertext reader explores the text, she cannot tread lightly through the text, but must scrutinize the nodes and links in order to avoid the mistake of meeting the same text fragments again and again.

According to Aarseth, the cybertexts heavily relies on the mechanism of hypertext to alienate its reader. The engaged hypertext in the scene suddenly changes into a multicursal labyrinth and the reader becomes caught or imprisoned in it by the circulating paths and the impotent choices he make, which instead leads to the creation of a sense of aporia in the work. Unlike the aporias which the reader experience while reading any codex text "the hypertext aporia prevents us from making sense of the whole because we may not have access to a particular part" (Aarseth 91).

In the traditional sense of narrative, the relationship between the author, narrator, narratee, and reader is linear. "The author puts the words into the mouth of a fictional narrator, who addresses a narratee with whom the real reader identifies (Aarseth 93). On the other hand in modernist fiction there is a distance between the narrator and narratee

which is "a monologic stream of words that does not seem to reach an intended listener" (Aarseth 93).

In an ergodic hypertext fiction, the communication between narrator and narratee works well. But the relationships between the author and narrator, narratee and reader are problematic. When the reader moves between the narrative strands, it appears as if the story loses its focus and slips away, subverting and there by disturbing the narrative progress and the reader's attempts to identify with the narratee. The same happens in the case of narrator-narratee relationship. In both the cases, one feels the presence of an "other" (Aarseth 93), an anti-narrator who wants to sabotage the possibility of narrative process and distract it. For Aarseth, this other may or may not be the real author, but is as powerful as the author and even more powerful than the narrator.

In a cybertext, says he, there are certain narrative elements that work in the text to achieve meaning and coherence. But one also cannot avoid the presence of a "destabilising disfiguration that bears down on the reader's patience and sense of progress" (Aarseth 94). At this juncture, the reader has to become a meta-reader in order to counter this hermeneutic circle, which will be a counter attack on the limited role or perspective offered by hermetic text on the reader. Thus the best descriptive term for describing cybertext is as a "game of narration" (Aarseth 94), a feature peculiar to all ergodic texts. It is not an anti-narrative, but something other than a narrative.

Ergodic encompasses this entire feature but for the common eye such features appear to be limited by the type of media by which it gets represented. "The successful ergodic work of art", according to him, "maintains tension and excitement while providing a path for discovery, a coming into focus of a didactic of the design and hidden principles at work in the art"(179). Ergodic literature is not defined by the medium it represents but by the way the text functions, and in such a context, paper-based and electronic texts can be both ergodic as "[t]he ergodic work of art is one that in a material sense includes the rules for its own use, a work that has certain requirements built in that automatically distinguishes between successful and unsuccessful users" (Aarseth 179).

In order to read an ergodic work, it requires hard work in the form of concentration and conscious effort instead of the automatic adjustment of eye focus. The role of reader in such a realm is one that of a user in a "transcending, co-creative, author mode" (Aarseth 183). Whether it is hypertext or cybertext, the traditional user here finds him being elevated to a different realm of usership, where one is expected or even forced to confront with her or his own talents to interpret and control, a space where one needs to work to find out the path to traverse the text.

Danielewski's *House of Leaves* employs the feature of defamiliarisation of traditional reading procedures in order to reinvigorate the novel form and establish a new understanding of the book as a physical entity. Every time moving through the novel, the reader is forced to acknowledge the presence of an anti-narrator, who despite the strenuous efforts of the reader to decipher the text, subverts the narrative content thereby forcing her or him to relocate their position. Working within the realm of electronic-print media dichotomy, the novel situates itself within a liminal space between print and hypertext fiction. The story of the novel mainly revolves around a documentary film named "The Navidson Record" produced

by a Pulitzer Prize winning photojournalist Will Navidson, after moving into House on Ashtree Lane in Virginia with his family comprising of his partner Karen Green and their children Chad and Daisy. The novel begins with the first person narration of a Los Angeles tattoo parlour employee Johnny Truant, who discovers the document after moving into the apartment of Zampano, an old blind man, who in turn made the film a subject for his academic research, despite being unable to see. Truant, who often introduces himself as the unreliable narrator of the work, discovers Zampano's study after he has been mysteriously found dead in their garden with claw marks on his body.

Johnny soon discovers that the film is fictitious but regardless of the discovery he decides to create a narrative out of Zampano's narrative by adding footnotes to the text, which on the other hand reveal his own shady past and the eerie experiences which he undergoes while reading though the notes. There are also occasional inputs in the novel from anonymous editors to whom Johnny has submitted his complete work.

On the outmost level there are three main narratives in *House of Leaves*, that run adjacently through the work; Zampano's narrative that deals with the Navidson family with his footnotes, references, appendices and insertions, Johnny's narrative with his own footnotes that details his life before and during when he assembles Zampano's manuscripts, and there is "The Whalestoe Letters" almost near the end of the book which consists of Johnny's mother's letters for him from a mental hospital, that deploy traces of her psychological instability. All these three narratives in the work play on the individual existence of other narratives and together they contribute to the ergodicity of the novel coupled with insertions from fictional editors, interviews, diary accounts, screenshots, images, absences, and graphics.

In all its essential employment of features like font, colour, narrative structure, format, and ways of reading and writing, *House of Leaves* leave the touch of ergodicity, which is not elegantly visible at the first glance. The structure of the novel demands complete attention and interpretation not of a passive reader, but of an active interpreting user to evoke and decipher it, as *House of Leaves* with its game-like structure demands non-trivial effort to traverse the text. It is also interesting here to note that the very structure of the novel parallels the story which it conveys.

The narrative format of *House of Leaves* comprises of three categories for the reader to decipher; a traditional horror or love story, an ergodic world, and a gnostic approach to retrieve the secret knowledge hidden in the work. Interpretation of the narrative user plays a prominent role in *House of Leaves*, the varying level of which makes it a horror or love story. The three set of narratives that run beneath the entire structure of the novel divides the interest of the conscious reader, placing them in a perplex situation of which narrative to follow. But this is often interrupted by the multiple references and footnotes added to the narrative by Johnny, Zampano, and the fictional editors thus disrupting the narrative progress and leaving the reader no choice but to interpret and decide.

On the very outset of the novel, it can be argued that the house itself exist as a main character in the novel, whose metamorphosing capabilities and fathomless labyrinth-like structure coupled with the shady and cold winding interiors reflect the structure of the novel itself. It is possible to draw

a paradigm between the house and the novel as such, and often this scenario goes to the extent that it creates an effect not only on those who read the narratives within the narrative like Johnny, but also on the reliable narrative interpreter.

Mark C Tylor, in his *Rewiring the Real*, provides an important concept of the text which identifies with the nothingness and conflict that the novel tries to bring forth as "[the text] is about nothing-always about nothing. Nothing is what keeps the text in play by rendering it irreducibly open and in/finately complex.... The void that empties everything of itself is the incomprehensible gift that never stops giving. Art figures the unfigurable by giving what cannot be taken" (109).

Danielewski's book eludes every established genre both in becoming and unbecoming a novel, by including its own commentary and analysis, appendices, footnotes, and thirty two pages of index. It freely mixes different genres like film theory, philosophy, psychoanalysis, theology, architectural theory, and other to create a complex work compounded by a graphic design which performs the idea explored by multiple authors and characters.

Much more conflict is evoked by the fictitious editors of the work who warns the readers that "[t] his novel is a work of fiction. Any references to real people, events, establishments, organizations or locales are intended only to give the fiction a sense of reality and authenticity. Other names, character and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously...." (vi)

This confusing winding structure that positions the novel in nowhere runs through every pages of the work. *House of Leaves* is, as to render the words of Aarseth, a game-world or world-game where one is left with no scope of exiting a world one has just entered (4). It is a labyrinth-like structure where every single word plays on the reader's cognition and puts to test his own very belief of comprehending the text. At every turning, the novel becomes interlaced with multiple references that indeed lead one to nothing other than further references.

Usually the act of reading a print or paper based book is a physically passive activity but a mentally active experience. The physical interactivity is restricted here in the sense that the reader is required to turn the pages in a linear sequence. But on the other hand, reading a hypertext fiction is a physically active experience and endeavour at the same time as the reader there is required to navigate through the text. Aarseth's claim of ergodic text is relevant in this scenario where ergodic is a literature in which "non-trivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1).

In traditional texts, the reader navigates the narration offered in a way the author wants her to do it, thereby moderating interactivity to the minimum. But hypertext on the other hand allows more plurality. Danielewski's novel exhibits a medial space between both the print and electronic textualities. It is an ergodic work of art, where the medium does not matter. Relevant in this scenario are the features that qualify *House of Leaves* as a hypertext fiction. Hypertexts are characterised mainly by the hyperlink feature they provide, which is itself a reference provided in the hypertext document to another that allows the free navigational space in electronic texts.

The same feature proliferates in the case of *House of Leaves* where the footnotes added to the text by Zampano and Johnny forces the readers to traverse the text in a disoriented

manner, turning to several pages and then returning back to continue. Often, the misplacement and juxtaposition of both the narratives disrupt linear reading, and the readers are caught up in a textual space where the footnotes route them. This idea, though initially seems alien to traditional writing, is what contributes to the ergodic feature of the text.

House of Leaves is a hypertext ergodic fiction in print. Ergodic includes both print and digital media, thereby occupying an intermediary and transitional position. Ergodics is a perspective that does not delineate between the medium in which it performs, but rather preoccupy its focus on the “performance of... reader” (Aarseth 2). It is a space or textual scenario where the reader is “constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard” (Aarseth 3).

The author is the authority who usually enjoys the configurative power both over the text and its content. But cybertext replaces this authority partly and places the configurative power over the reader, thereby complicating her individual position. While entering the narrative labyrinth of *House of Leaves* the readers are never reminded of the presence of the authoritative figure of Danielewski the author, except for the two cover pages that bound the text. Instead they are strewn between the authors Zampano and Johnny and also the editors of the work. Though it is possible to argue that they are the creation of Danielewski himself, even such a possibility is disrupted at the very beginning itself with an inscription like:

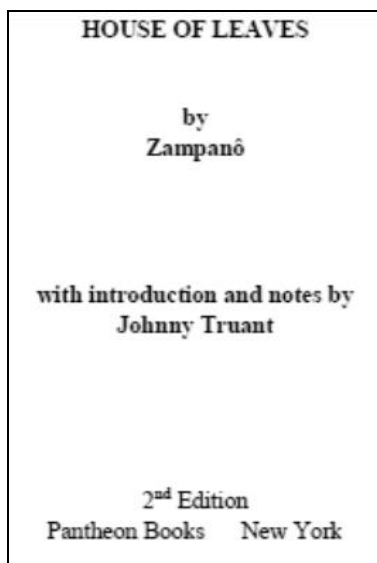


Fig 1: First page, *House of Leaves*

House of Leaves persuades its readers to acknowledge the physicality of the text at the very first glances, providing no scope for subjective immersion at any point. The numerous presence of the book itself within the text also complicates its individual existence. In the text, there are instances where the readers are told that Navidson is carrying with him a book entitled *House of Leaves*, while inside the labyrinth. The book is later burnt by Navidson, page after page, as a source of light in the dark labyrinth. Later Johnny, one of the narrators in the book, stumbles over a rock band who presents him with a book *House of Leaves*. All such instances and incidents adds to the labyrinthine quality of the book, that interlace each narrative to one another, where the reader becomes entangled in the multiple

layered narratives, and at the same time questioning the authentic existence of the text itself. It also puts to test, the homogenous nature of Danielewski’s narrative. Thus the text becomes a “game-world or world-game” (Aarseth 4), a place where the readers faces the possibilities to, “explore, get lost, and discover secret paths... through the topological structures of the textual machinery” (Aarseth 4).

Like a multicursal maze, Danielewski’s work only offers the possibility of entering the text, and not exiting it with a complete comprehension of the world as “The cybertext puts its would-be reader at risk: the risk of rejection. The effort and energy demanded by the cybertext of its reader raises the stakes of interpretation to those of intervention” (Aarseth 4).

House of Leaves is about the physical act of reading. It addresses and challenges the conventions of narratives through placing its titles, plot arrangements, and format. It interrogates the traditional left-to-right type setting, by placing the words on the page in a way that it forces the reader to interpret them to decipher the meaning inherent in it:

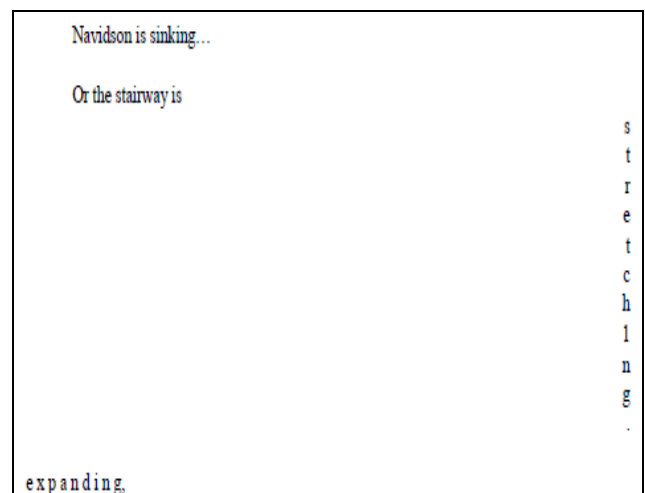


Fig 2: Metamorphosing of labyrinth, *House of Leaves*

As an ergodic work, it is the metaphorical relation between the text and its topological feature that allows for the interpretive intervention of the reader in the text. It is the reader’s own choice within the variously spread narratives that leads to a plurality of reading. They are to interpret the scenario presented before them, and fill the gaps that appear in the form of pages dominated by blank white spaces, featured to force the readers to undermine their own reading strategies.

The navigation through text offered by hypertexts demands conscious and deliberate rendering of the user’s attention in order to avoid the possibility of encountering same paths they have traversed before. The winding narrative strategies of *House of Leaves* exceeds in such possibilities while following the footnotes, where the reader has to be aware not to face them for a second time, as it would displace the narrative progress. The sense of rejection they find while navigating through the text and the sense of disorientation which they are forced to experience while trying to comprehend the text are what forces the stake of interpretation and intervention out of the text.

Subverting the homogeneity of the text as a whole, a feature common to traditional reading, Danielewski’s text is about the very act of reading. The novel on the other hand prompts

heterogeneous reading through problematising the reader’s choice to comprehend a text and summarize it. For every new reading, the novel appears a new text with unexplored winding surfaces, exploring the transparency of written words, and demanding a diverse reaction at every turning, unrestricted by discipline.

The factual representation of comments and interpretation by critics inside Zampano’s narrative make *House of Leaves* an academic research, more like a dissected copy where imagination plays little part. These factual representation, while prompting the reader to stay away from the text and search for the credibility of such representation, often collide with the fictional representation mingled with the facts, complicating the identical existence of reader and comprehension:



Fig 3: “The Navidson Record”, *House of Leaves*

In the above mentioned figure, a page from “The Navidson Record” is displayed within the *House of Leaves*. This employment by Danielewski complicates the conventional reading strategy as the novel is strewn between fiction and reality. The unorthodox structure of the novel with several pages excluding words, and sections where the main textual body is surrounded by footnotes, are unconventional and unique. Sometimes the work is strewn with theories drawn from film, psychology, and critical theories, and at others, there are mere renderings of factual occurrences.

The textual hierarchy within *House of Leaves* instigates the challenge for prominence. The deferral of meaning created by such a challenge complicates the act of reading within the text. As mentioned earlier, *House of Leaves* is a game-world that relies heavily on intertextual games. The footnotes, references to fictional and non-fictional authors, journals, films, and theories contribute to the “real” existence of the text within, while maintaining the fictionalised existence of the text at the same time.

The multiple references of the text to itself is one such instance, trivialising the integrity and coherence of text as a whole, thereby conferring the attention of the reader on what is not there on the text. The reader’s action and realisation of reading a self-contained fiction is thus the first step in the empowerment of interpretive user of the text.

Through the employment of typesetting and colour formats, Danielewski has constructed the novel more as a physical artefact, rather than as a mere fiction with scopes of subjective exploration. His incorporation of language, which the native users are unfamiliar to, is significant as it disrupts any attempt to weave out a linear narrative, thus challenging the preconceptions of reader. The unconventional graphic surface of the page, that abounds in multiple insertions, images, letters, numerals, and colours demand a second-level interpretation as to why they are preferred, an act that displace the reader out of the narrative and forcing them to recognize the physical existence of the fiction.

The changes that the reader encounter in the natural reading method are manifested through the topological features of the text, creating the novel a tool in the interpreting venture to follow. The vertical and upside down placements of the text in several sections of the narration encourages physical turning of the book, urging the readers to focus more on the words than on comprehending the meaning inherent.

The uniqueness of *House of Leaves* lies in its ability to reflect the situation in which the novel has placed the characters and the users. Significant here is the letters sent to Johnny by Pelafina from the mental institution. The overwritten letters of her could be interpreted as her slow progression towards insanity, displaying the chaotic scenario. It could also be interpreted as foregrounding the layered structuring of the novel, in which the text itself has placed its users, a space that is overwritten and out-written:

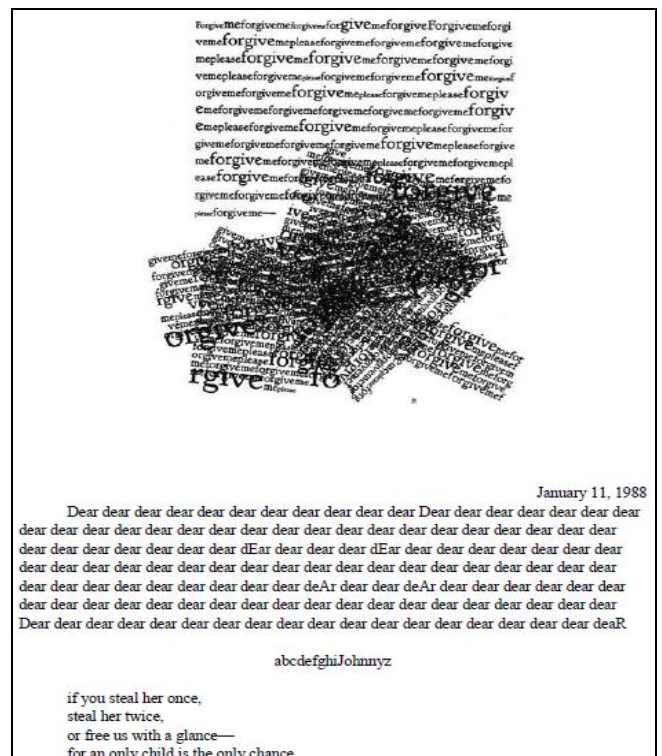


Fig 5: Pelafina’s Letter, *House of Leaves*

The level and degree of interactivity of user evoked in a print novel like *House of Leaves* is well explained by Hayles who asserts that in Danielewski’s novel “the recursive dynamics between strategies that imitate electronic text and those that intensify the specificities of print reaches an apotheosis, introducing complexities so entangled with digital technologies that it is difficult to say which medium is more important in producing the novel’s effects” (175).

The vertically ascending and descending texts in *House of Leaves* subvert traditional structural method, thus challenging the act and conventions of reading. The focus demanded of the readers on the page through the continual disruption and structural changes in the text echoes Aarseth's idea of cybertexts, where the difference in teleological orientation of the text in which the reader is invited to "complete" the text through various self-manipulating devices are at the core of *House of Leaves*.

As Aarseth's theory suggests, cybertext is a machine for the production and consumption of verbal signs, which will not be complete without the human operator. The performance and workings of the text here takes place within the triad of medium, verbal, sign, and operation. *House of Leaves* fits well into this category as the human operator in the novel work within the structural boundaries of the text to decipher the sign. The winding paths that are spread well beyond the house evoke the image of multicursal paths through which the user needs to traverse the text. *House of Leaves* is therefore an indication of the wide range of textual possibilities. The user within the cybernetic structure of the novel engages continually in a "cybernetic intercourse" (Aarseth 62) with the text while traversing the paths.

The absential presence of several texts in the novel demands a deep level of intervention by the user as they are expected to fill the narrative, an idea that instigates a feeling that missing elements in the text act as a key to unlock textual mysteries. This sense of absence ranges from the blank page to the comments made by fictional editors regarding the missing of Johnny's footnotes. Here the reader is placed amidst the possibility of entering into space to create the missing text, a possibility that demands interpretation and thus elevating her position to that of usership.

The sense of interactivity is realised here only through the coherence between user and text. They are no longer isolated from the textual machinery, but have become engrained within its textual possibilities. The ideological implication of interactivity, where both humans and machines become equal participants is what that is emphasized here. In this context, Danielewski's text becomes the textual machinery within which the user traverses the text to interpret the scenarios presented before.

In a cybertext like *House of Leaves*, the control of navigation is invested upon the participant user to control the material they read. The feature of multicursality transfers the control invested in the hands of the author to the reader here, who in turn becomes the user of text. Aarseth dispenses with the figure of reader in ergodic textuality and instead brings in the figure of participant user as a way of upholding the variety of textualities provided. Within such textuality "the user is allowed a wide range of behaviour and roles across the field of media, from the observing member... to the subcreator of a game world" (Aarseth 173).

In the novel the use of the term reader thus becomes a mere appropriation, as somewhere along the track, readership has been superseded by usership. *House of Leaves* does not force its participants to deliberately avoid traditional readership, but instead those who enter the text with expectations of working with a conventional typesetting will immediately be made to acknowledge their own incapability to meet the expectations of the text. In the novel, the user is expected to perform its role as a viewer and participant just like the way the different omissions and narrations demand

them.

House of Leaves provides multiple levels of creative intervention with the text, thereby defining a new level of creativity. As a successful ergodic work of art, the novel "maintains tension and excitement while providing a path for discovery, a coming into focus of a didactic of the design and hidden principles at work in the art" (Aarseth 179).

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