

AGAINST THE MARGINS

Mark Z. Danielewski's House of Leaves and the Persistence of Print

Cathryn Piwinski is a Master's Student and Research Assistant at New York University

Mark Z. Danielewski's novel, House of Leaves, is a narratively complex and typographically experimental text that asserts the importance of print books in a digital world. This paper argues that, while its production mingled both analog and digital technologies, it remains steadfastly material to claim the distinctive capabilities of print. Yet, despite this material manifestation, House of Leaves launches a more nuanced debate between digital and print technology within the plot of the novel itself. The novel conscripts the reader into the conversation and demands recognition of the precariousness of print, which is always haunted by a threatening digital presence.

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Mark Z. Danielewski writes upside-down. He writes sideways and includes footnotes for footnotes and leaves pages almost entirely blank. His debut novel titled *House of Leaves*, published in 2000, unapologetically complicates the process of reading with its convoluted narrative and experimental typographic design. At the center of the narrative is a film about a house that

is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside. Photographer Will Navidson's house grows into a labyrinth at its own will, leading to an exploration that Navidson records for a documentary. Yet the printed *House of Leaves* cannot and does not present the film; instead, it offers layers of narrators-as-archivists who attempt to discover the truth of what each who came before them alludes to in their own piece of a manuscript. First comes an academic

analysis of Navidson's film, written by a man named Zampanò. Johnny Truant then discovers the disorganized remains of this manuscript and attempts to reconstruct it for an imaginary reader. Before reaching 'us', however, the quasi-restored work winds through one last round of revisions by an otherwise unnamed group of 'Editors'. When presented in printed form, this layered narrative—filled with mis-leading, misinterpretations, and mistakes—twists itself into a visual labyrinth to parallel both the house and the plot. When a bullet strikes and 'splinter's a wooden door, the words scatter themselves across the page.¹ As Navidson stares at a 'stretching' and 'expanding' staircase, so, too, do the letters stretch and expand across the largely blank page.² The way the novel looks, then—meaning, the way the words are precisely placed, the way they are colored, oriented, and sized—matters a great deal to the story told. This means, though, that the process of producing and printing *House of Leaves* was particularly complicated, especially during a period where the publishing industry began to focus more on digital presentations.

Roughly eighteen years after its initial publication, *House of Leaves* still has no authorized e-book, audiobook, or film adaptation.

Despite the narrative's interest in filmmaking and the experimental design of the text that necessitates the use of technology, Danielewski's novel remains steadfast in its printed form. The book directly engages with popular questions of the rise of the digital and the death of the analog, as it negotiates the limitations of both mediums through the manipulation of text in a traditional book format.

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Yet while the resulting book of this internal debate is printed, I argue that the musings within its narrative are far less concrete. After examining the complicated process of its construction, which blurred the divide between analog and digital production, this paper turns to the narrative within *House of Leaves* to study how the book thinks of itself and its readers. I ask: how does *House of Leaves* and its author respond to the supposed death of the printed form? What does this response mean

for its readers and, most importantly, what do these readers mean for it? When focusing specifically on how the book engages with the reader, a paradox of technological priorities and limitations emerges. While *House of Leaves* intentionally never resolves this problem, it does make clear that the audience of a medium plays an essential role in its continuing conversation between print and digital media. This paper aims to ultimately discuss why,

despite Danielewski's claim that *House of Leaves* always tries to 'get beyond the page, get beyond the binding,'³ it necessarily remains within it to assert to and for its readers the significance of the print book in a digital world.

In many ways, the production and manifestation of *House of Leaves* parallels Johnny Truant's encounter with the fictional manuscript he comes to restore for his own readers, which already alludes to a book aware of its material self. He remarks that there were 'reams and reams' of material paper, with 'endless snarls of words, sometimes twisting into meaning, sometimes into nothing at all.'⁴ Danielewski's own 'snarls' faced publisher trepidation in response to the unconventional design specifications of his manuscript—and it was only when he travelled to Pantheon's offices and typeset the manuscript himself that 'everyone believed in it.'⁵ With digital technology as a useful tool during this typesetting process, it is no surprise when N. Katherine Hayles initially wrote that the novel 'screamed "digital!", for it would have been almost impossible to set without a computer.'⁶ Yet she comes to remark that:

'Mark makes a point of underplaying the role of the digital... pointing out that he storyboarded the ferociously complex Chapter IX, where print runs riot in many directions on the page, entirely in pencil, a technology he praises for its robustness and reliability.'⁷

Hayles writes of a phenomenon unique to *House of Leaves*: it is a book that feels digitally

produced—and it certainly needed modern technology to successfully come together—yet it ultimately denies further relationship with the digital. Once printed and circulated, *House of Leaves* settles into its tangibility both literally and within its own narrative, becoming a text that exists for this particular reader engagement.

When asked about the reasons behind the design of *House of Leaves*, Danielewski talks about ways of reading, thus spotlighting the role of the reader in material production. In an interview circulated on his publisher's website, Danielewski emphasizes:

'How quickly pages are turned or not turned can be addressed... pages can be tilted, turned upside down, even read backwards. I'd love to see that. Someone on the subway spinning a book as they're reading it.'⁸

Here, Danielewski points to a demand that *House of Leaves* makes of its readers: the roughly 700-page novel is wider and heavier than most, requiring the reader to hold on with both hands as they alter its orientation to read the winding type. This design is intentional, as Danielewski aims to emphasize the intensity and wonder of print. He claims:

'Books have had this capability all along, but somehow the analogue powers of these wonderful bundles of paper have been forgotten. Somewhere along the way, all its possibilities were denied. I'd like to see that perception change. I'd like

to see the book reintroduced for all it really is.⁹

This quotation explicitly underlines Danielewski's belief that book production has recently turned its focus from print to digital. Regardless of accuracy, this authorial idea nonetheless emphasizes that *House of Leaves* is necessarily printed with a goal in mind: to showcase the power of paper to its readers. Yet, as will come to be seen, the printed novel 'for all it really is' is more complex to *House of Leaves* than simply text on a page; rather, it is a form capable of actively communicating its malleability to, with, and for the readers.

To emphasize the crucial role of the audience in engaging with and sustaining the form, Danielewski assigns several characters in *House of Leaves* the role of reader. Most obvious is Johnny, who leaves footnotes behind detailing the traumatizing process of working through the manuscript. At one point, he directly addresses his imaginary reader and simulates the fear he feels while reading:

"To get a better idea try this: focus on these words, and whatever you do don't let your eyes wander past the perimeter of this page. Now imagine just beyond your peripheral vision... something is quietly closing in on you, so quiet in fact you can only hear its silence... But don't look. Keep your eyes here."¹⁰

Here, Johnny pulls the reader into the novel; he makes them into a character, participating in an anxious act of reading alongside the narrator. This scripted engagement

with the text reinforces it as markedly physical: the reader, here, must accept the power inherent in the material, which makes them an essential participant in the novel's conversation about printed matter. With the width of the book obscuring any peripheral vision and the weight of the book in the reader's hands emphasizing the intensity of the experience, the reader is called to engage with a passage that would not hold as much power were it digitally produced. Alongside these directions to the reader, though, Johnny also forces the reader into a much broader project: to accompany him in this panicked effort of restoration.

When Johnny demands that the reader take a position empathetic to his work, he conscripts the reader to join him in decoding the contents and materiality of the text, which has already begun to actively impact his (and now the reader's) mind. Such an effort alludes to what Jessica Pressman terms an 'aesthetic of bookishness'.¹¹ She notes a certain genre of books, ascribing to this theme, emerging since 2000 that 'pursue a thematic interest in depicting books as characters and focal points of narrative action'.¹² While she only briefly discusses *House of Leaves* in her essay, she locates the novel as a primary example of aestheticizing the book-as-object to not only blur the lines between reality and fiction, but also between print and digital.¹³ In making Johnny's found manuscript a character—that is, in making it a *being* with agency which does the very blurring of which Pressman writes—Danielewski engages with 'aesthetics of bookishness' in a way that simultaneously asserts the importance

and consequence of *House of Leaves* as a printed book. Deeper into the manuscript, Johnny indicates that he feels those consequences when he writes that:

[T]his terrible sense of relatedness to Zampanò's works implies something that just can't be, namely that this thing has created me; not me unto it, but now it unto me... inventing me, defining me, directing me.¹⁴

Here, Johnny nervously writes of the agency of the manuscript—an agency he attributes neither to himself 'or even for that matter Zampanò'¹⁵—as something that has both captured him and created him. And because of his earlier invitation to the reader to participate in its reading, the reader becomes captured as well; the fictional manuscript is to Johnny what the actual novel is to the reader. *House of Leaves*, then, creates a tenuous relationship with its own printed form: though by its very nature it must remain analog, it also alludes to a danger inherent in materiality. It is an elusive danger that blocks your peripheral vision, weighs down your arms, and eventually threatens your mind.

Danielewski's second character-as-reader faces an even more immediate danger as he engages with his own iteration of *House of Leaves*. As Will Navidson sits lost within the ash-black labyrinth of the house, he

turns to his only form of entertainment: a novel he brought along, titled *House of Leaves*. While the reader never knows exactly what is inside Navidson's *House of Leaves*, both his novel and the reader's novel contain 736 pages;¹⁶ it is enough to determine that, even if the stories inside are not the same, the reader's version is aware of Navidson's. Yet, in an ironic or paradoxical twist, the reader's *House of Leaves* resolves to destroy itself. As Navidson sits in the dark and burns through his limited box of matches to read the book, he eventually must apply 'the flame to the page'.¹⁷ Zampanò writes:

'House of Leaves repeatedly engages with ideas of print and affirms its place as necessarily so to express them'

'Here then is one end: a final act of reading, a final act of consumption. And as the fire rapidly devours the paper, Navidson's eyes frantically sweep down over the text... until... the book is gone leaving nothing behind but invisible traces already dismantled in the dark.'¹⁸

In this moment, Navidson completely transcends the role as (one) protagonist and becomes, instead, the reader. But, more importantly, he becomes the reader of a *material* book. Were he to take his imaginary e-reader along on his journey into the labyrinth, he would not face that same poignant choice of burning the object to read it. This scene, though, presents a paradox within *House of Leaves*: as something that emphasizes its materiality while simultaneously obliterating it. With this reality, we are faced with an even more nuanced debate between the digital

and the analog that extends beyond the mere production of the actual text.

When writing about this moment in *House of Leaves*, Alexander Starre points to the concept of ‘medial metalepsis’.¹⁹ Metalepsis—which he defines as the ‘paradoxical transgression of narrative boundaries’—describes the phenomenon in which Navidson’s consumption of *House of Leaves* within *House of Leaves* both ‘reinforces’ and ‘[subverts]’ the borders of the novel.²⁰ ‘It strengthens the borderline between different media’, Starre writes, ‘while undercutting narrative realism’.²¹ Yet, while this scene emphasizes *House of Leaves*’ preoccupation with printed matter, there is a silent recognition of its precariousness versus the imaginative, yet relative stability of the digital. Too easily is the paper destroyed, a property echoed in Johnny’s own volatile consumption of the manuscript—to ‘make it only a book’²²—and the reader’s conscripted role of uncovering whatever mysteries Johnny presents to them. Yet, as already shown, this manuscript-taming or destruction seems to elude Johnny and, as he hints to the reader in the introduction, ‘there’s a good chance you [the reader] won’t leave it behind either’.²³ Whatever precariousness exists alongside the materiality of *House of Leaves*, so too is there a certain level of persistence. Indeed, to ‘make it only a book’, Johnny acknowledges he must allow its contents to overwhelm him as he writes: ‘the horror beyond all horrors, sits at last upon my chest, permanently enfolding me in its great covering wings, black as ink’.²⁴ It seems, then, that the scene in which Navidson destroys his own novel demonstrates

the ways in which Danielewski’s novel plays with the reader: to assert its weaknesses while steadfastly preserving its strength, to claim that its material can ruin itself but also you. *House of Leaves* destroys itself within itself to prove its agency once more, to prove the power that lays inherent in its precariousness.

With this show of might to its audience, *House of Leaves* constructs its argument: print is *precious*. The use of precious, here, carries not only the definition of something of value, but also of something delicate, something elusive. Starre emphasizes that *House of Leaves*’ metalepsis ‘invites the reader to rethink the text as a book’, to ‘navigate the printed maze of the book’, and to ‘finally realize the extent to which the printed product is calibrated and controlled’.²⁵ Though Starre ascribes more stability to the printed form of *House of Leaves* than I, he nonetheless hints towards a unique awareness gained *by the reader* in response to the material nature of both the book itself and the media within its narrative. Danielewski writes precisely, granting *House of Leaves* that ‘calibrated’ and ‘controlled’ consciousness with which to interpolate the reader. From its actual, medially-muddled production to the self-aware ‘bookishness’ within it to the paradoxically stable and porous boundaries between its printed form and the digital world around it, *House of Leaves* repeatedly engages with ideas of print and affirms its place as necessarily so to express them. *House of Leaves* incorporates the readers—both as pseudo-archivists acting upon the text and, perhaps at times, the text’s hostages—into its

concern with remaining steadfastly printed, precariously and preciously so, to overtly claim its physicality, yet flirt with digital influences. A material book needs hands to hold it. And while it proves its internal malleability by incorporating the ghost of the

digital world in its production, in its typographic experimentation, and in its narrative, *House of Leaves* remains within its borders as it presents itself to us. But not without the underlying threat to the reader that it can break right through.



¹ M.Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), p. 233.

² *Ibidem*, p. 289.

³ YouTube, 'Mark Z. Danielewski | The Familiar Volume 5', < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mF_Rmx1-VCg> (14 January, 2018).

⁴ M.Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, p. xvii.

⁵ M.Z. Danielewski, 'The Brash Boy, The Misunderstood Girl, and the Sonogram—the Works of Mark Z. Danielewski', interviewed by K. Carpenter, *The Cult* <<http://chuckpalahniuk.net/interviews/mark-danielewski#42>> (20 April, 2017).

⁶ N.K. Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), p. 126.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ M.Z. Danielewski, 'A Conversation with Mark Danielewski', interviewed by S. Cottrell, *The Wayback Machine* <<https://web.archive.org/web/20060101050917/http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype0400/danielewski/interview.html>> (15 April, 2017).

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ M.Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, pp. 26-27.

¹¹ J. Pressman, 'The Aesthetic of Bookishness in Twenty-First-Century Literature', *Michigan Quarterly Review: Bookishness: The New Fate of Reading in the Digital Age*, 48:4 (2009), p. 465.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 465-466.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 467.

¹⁴ M.Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, p. 326.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 467.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ A. Starre, *Metamedia: American Book Fictions and Literary Print Culture after Digitization* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015), p. 156.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 155-156.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 156.

²² M.Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, p. 327.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. xxii.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 327.

²⁵ A. Starre, *Metamedia: American Book Fictions and Literary Print Culture after Digitization*, p. 158.