

The Body of a House in Mark Z. Danielewski's

House of Leaves

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Masters in English

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that:

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2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Approval

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Epigraph

Strange house we must keep and fill.

House that eats and pleads and kills.

House on legs. House on fire. House infested

With desire. Haunted house. Lonely house.

(...)House with skin and hair for walls.

House the seasons singe and douse.

House that believes it is not a house.

-- "Ash", Tracey K. Smith

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 angels, 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.

- Will Navidson, in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

- Abstract

Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) is a tour de force of a debut novel that makes maximum use of the strengths of the novel as a medium. Its groundbreaking format, as well as the way it showcases the power of the written word has generated a lot of critical attention over the two decades since its publication. But at the crux of any analysis of *House of Leaves* run into the issue of the House on Ash Tree Lane. It is central to the novel, yet it very deliberately escapes interpretation. Any meaningful engagement with the House must deliberately avoid flattening it into a purely textual entity. In that vein, this dissertation provides a reading of the body of the House on Ash Tree Lane by engaging with the intensities that move through it. I employ affect theory and hauntology to read around the House to examine the way the nuclear family itself carries a haunting in its structure and the way the House serves as a conduit for that haunting.

Keywords: House, Nuclear family, Spatial Affect, Affective Body, Hauntological potential, Remediation

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The Body of a House in Mark Z. Danielewski's

House of Leaves

Chapter 1: Introduction

There is no shortage of iconic houses in the history of literature. From Dracula's Castle to Thornfield Hall to Green Gables to 221B Baker Street to Gatsby's mansion to Hill House, each of these locations stand out as vividly as the characters of these stories and play just as varied yet integral roles in the stories in which they appear. Houses in literature only reflect the importance of houses in the lives of ordinary people. Shelter is a basic necessity and there is no understating its role. The ubiquity of houses in all forms of art is no more unexpected than the prevalence of food. Perhaps, due to this constant presence the house blends into the background of most stories. They serve as settings and symbols that are in service to the narrative, but very rarely display any kind of active agency. In the past decade or so, especially due to the world being more accessible without ever leaving the comfort of your own home, the house has become increasingly more important to the individual psyche. Consequently, the representation of the house has also seen somewhat of a shift. The house as an isolated object explored more often, especially in newer and more interactive artforms. *House of Leaves* (2000) by Mark Z. Danielewski predates this interest, but it is often cited as an inspiration for much of the media that engages with the potential of a house as something more than just a location (Geller).

Danielewski's genre-defying novel *House of Leaves* places the House on Ash Tree Lane at the center of its labyrinthian structure. It is a house revealed through a twice-edited academic text about a non-existent documentary, referencing existing and non-existing sources alike, all

while the annotations run on wild tangents to tell a completely separate story. The House on Ash Tree Lane is an empty construct, a non-orthographic simulacrum, a physics-bending entity that is as non-literal as it is anti-phenomenological (Cox 9-10, Bekavac 255, Ghosal 208, Travers 11). In other words, the abstracted figure of the house contains nothing solid even as it continues to dominate every layer of *The House of Leaves*'s narrative. As expected from an incredibly successful horror novel with an extremely dedicated cult-following, there has been quite a lot of critical interest on Mark Z. Danielewski's *The House of Leaves*. This thesis aims to build on the incredible work by previous researchers to attempt to posit an understanding of the House on Ash Tree Lane as an autonomous body. Despite and perhaps because of the abstraction of the house, it is a figure that can be placed in history through a hauntological reading and it can be read as a body with an ability to transmit and receive affects from those who engage with it.

As Danielewski has a fictionalized playwright remark, "the house—resists interpretation. (356)". By reading the House as a body, it becomes possible to explore the hauntological potential of the nuclear family without necessarily limiting it through rigid definition. The goal of this dissertation is to engage with the figure of the House on Ash Tree Lane by reading its affects so as to not collapse its impossible dimensions utterly flat. To that end, I argue that the protagonists of *House of Leaves* are chased by the idolized image of what a family is supposed to be. They carry a haunting in their structure that is ultimately expressed and transmuted by the House on Ash Tree Lane, even as the House remains a separate entity with unlimited and alien capacity for movement in itself. At the heart of this narrative is the complex relationship between the characters and those they love. The failure of the nuclear family causes a haunting in the very structure of the family which in turn becomes architectural in *The House of Leaves*. The House functions as both a vessel and an essential part of the family structure.

Overview of the Text

There are few novels that engage with the figure of a house as thoroughly as Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* despite the majority of this novel not being set at the House on Ash Tree Lane. This text was chosen as the subject of this thesis because of its thoughtful, innovative and experimental approach to the cliché of the haunted house trope, the relationship between the house and the housed, and finally, for the way it collapses the distance between creating a family and creating art. It takes themes that feel as though they should be in different realms but connects them through the architecture of the novel. This novel also went on to inspire other narratives that substantially engaged with the possibility of the house as a concept; so it was only fitting to choose this novel as the point of investigation.

It's difficult to succinctly summarize Danielewski's *The House of Leaves* because of its avant-garde approach to the form of the novel. It is an easier novel to just read rather than describe and most casual readers do not find the novel easy to read. The main story of the novel is about a war photographer, Will Navidson, discovering that the new house his family has moved into, which is referred to as the House on Ash Tree Lane, is bigger on the inside than on the outside and decides to incorporate it into the documentary he is making. As extra rooms appear in this House, culminating in the appearance of an impossibly long hallway in the external wall, Will, along with his brother Tom, long-time friend Billy Reston and three seasoned explorers, Holloway Roberts, Kirby "Wax" Hook and Jed Leeder begin to explore the hallway and find a labyrinth inside. The labyrinth is ever shifting and the text hints at the existence of a beast, referred to as the Minotaur, hidden in its depths. The already strained relationship between Will and his partner Karen begins to break down further as Will refuses to move despite the House becoming increasingly dangerous. Obsessed and driven to madness, Will disappears in the

maze of the House alone leaving Karen to look after their two children alone. Karen, in Will's absence, begins to edit "The Navidson Record" from the footage captured by Will, and through editing it, she begins to understand her partner in a way she did not at the beginning of the documentary. Later, when Karen enters the House once again while in the process of selling it, Will stumbles out into her arms quite abruptly. The documentary ends with the family reconciling despite having lost pieces of themselves.

This documentary titled the Navidson Record is presented to us as the subject of an academic, a man named Zampano, who couldn't have possibly seen the documentary on account of the documentary not really existing and also due to Zampano being blind. A troubled young man called Johnny Truant finds the draft of Zampano's paper, after the old man's death, assembles it and adds his experience of piecing together the paper in the footnotes. Johnny finds out that Zampano has young women volunteers coming over to help him put together this piece. However, no one person ever stuck around for long enough to be clued in on the complexity of the project. Parts of it are in braille, some are typed, some are hand-written across different scraps of paper. Johnny, also gripped by obsession, painstakingly puts the monograph back together, while also grappling with his own past and present. He struggles to make sense of what happened to him in his childhood and his relationship with his own life as he feels a sense of something terrifying and unspecific begin to stalk him like the invisible figure of the Minotaur was stalking the explorers of the House on Ash Tree Lane. In his need to make sense of Zampano's text, Johnny all but destroys his own life and eventually ends up homeless.

The text Johnny puts together is then edited by unnamed and unspecified Editors. The readers are presumably experiencing that book which credits Zampano as its author and Johnny Truant as the editor. There are poems by Zampano added to the novel as appendixes by the

Editors. The second edition of Danielewski's *House of Leaves* also includes letters from Johnny Truant's mother Pelafina that were previously published as a separate novella titled *The Whalestoe Letters*. These letters focus on Pelafina's turbulent mental health and her devoted but dysfunctional love for her son to subtextually explore the impact Pelafina ultimately had on Johnny.

While it's not necessary, typically the experience of reading *The House of Leaves* is not isolated to just the written word of the novel. Diegetically, Zampano and Johnny's "The House of Leaves" as well as the "The Navidson Records" are circulated through niche spaces on the Internet, and by word of mouth through a cult-following. It is not surprising that the readership of Danielewski's novel mimics that fictional fanbase. It is incredibly common for readers of *The House of Leaves* to look up aspects of the novel. There are entire forums¹, blogs, youtube channels and small communities on the internet dedicated to examining *The House of Leaves*. Most readers also end up picking up some of the supplementary texts to the novel, so it would be a disservice to not mention the media that serves as companions and paratext to *House of Leaves*.

Singer-songwriter Poe's electronic-rock album titled *Haunted* (2000) is based on and inspired by *House of Leaves*. This album was a collaboration between Mark. Z. Danielewski and Poe. The pair are siblings. The songs in these albums generally incorporate events of the novel and explore the same themes of distance, grief and hauntings. Notably, the song "5 & 1/2 Minute Hallway" seems to be a version of the song the unnamed band Johnny encounters at a bar who somehow managed to read the diegetic "House of leaves" before Johnny managed to publish the manuscript. The album also incorporates Daneilewski's voice as well as direct quotations from the novel. Several songs are from Karen's or Daisy's perspective, but they do not expand the plot

¹ Danielewski himself encourages this kind of engagement. While he maintains a level of distance, he hosts a forum in his own website and has a patreon account that facilitates communities around discussing and scrutinizing his work.

of the novel as much as it adds to the texture of it. The album is linked in the back of *House of Leaves*. In 2017, Danielewski attempted to adapt *The House of Leaves* into a tv series. When the show did not come to fruition, Danielewski digitally published the scripts of the first three episodes. The script carries the events to the 2010s from the 1990s and adds more layers of obfuscation. Though some of the letters from *The Whalestoe Letters* were incorporated into the second edition of the novel, the novella still contains a few extra letters that give more insights into both Pelafina and Johnny's characters.

Outline

This first chapter of this dissertation has attempted to explain the rationale for this thesis and provide a short overview of its subject matter. It introduces the novel *House of Leaves* and the reason it was chosen as the topic of this dissertation.

Before any analysis of and around the House on Ash Tree Lane, it's necessary to place *House of Leaves* in context. To that end, Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of the origin and evolution of the haunted house to demonstrate how the House is inspired by past literary haunted houses and also a subversion of its predecessors. The next section discusses the tradition of play regarding the form of the physical book and the form of the novel to contextual *House of Leaves's* formatting. It also reviews the critical literature on the novel that this dissertation aims to expand upon and identifies the gap this analysis fills.

Chapter 3 turns its attention to the figure of the modern house and its place in American culture. The first section of this chapter dives into history to connect the process of the nuclear family and living in single unit houses in the suburbia becoming part of the American identity. The second section portrays the way safety, family and the house are connected in the psyche of the Navidson family and Johnny Truant despite their own experiences. It argues that houses are

meant to assimilate with the family unit and contends that the House on Ash Tree Lane inspires horror because it refuses to do so.

Chapter 4 delves into the various familial relationships and the absence of family that plague the novel. This chapter is concerned with juxtaposing the historical role of the family and the image of the idealized family with the actual family. Drawing on hauntology, this chapter showcases how Will and Karen's family of origin traumatized them to the point where their current family is affected. The second half focuses on how family still continues to affect Zampano and Johnny Truant despite both characters lacking any. It aims to highlight the hauntological space that the family occupies for the characters in this novel as both a place of relief and abuse.

Building on these the two previous chapters as well as the existing literature, in Chapter 5 argue that The House on Ash Tree Lane is an autonomous body that carries affect across time and is transformed by the affect left by the failure of the family, which is longing. Due to *House of Leaves*'s non-orthographic narratology, the house's affect bleeds into the lives of Zampano and Johnny Truant, just as the affect of the two narrator's lives is manifested in the House.

Chapter 6 concludes this dissertation by highlighting the expanding possibilities of reading the body of a house as an affective one especially in the 21st century.

Chapter 2: Background & Literature review

The Haunted House and the personified house

Scary stories have always been means for human beings to explore their own experiences of living, particularly their anxieties (Thomas 29). For as long as ghost stories have existed, so has the haunted house. Houses are necessarily meant to be safe places for human beings to relinquish consciousness. So that very shelter being the ultimate danger is a very obvious subversion that has compelled horror narratives for centuries. Some of the oldest known haunted house stories date back to the roman empire. Authors such as: Plautus, Pliny the Younger, and Lucian deal with ghosts haunting houses where they lived until they are avenged (Felton). Sylvia Ann Grider locates the concept of the haunted house as the focus of a distinctive type of Romantic literature to have originated in the Gothic novels of the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century. Previously, the house typically served as a backdrop for more interesting plots to unfold. But Gothic novels featured large manors and mansions inspired by the real landscape of Europe during the period, which came to represent the hierarchies of aristocracy which the new revolutionary spirit of the era detested (Bailey 5). The rotting castles and ancient ruins scattered across Europe were both inspiration for and signifiers of the end of an era explored through ghost stories. Across the sea, Americans lacked the same historical runs, so instead the American literary imagination focused on architecture popular among wealthy aristocrats of the country during the Gilded age of the 19th century. Dowager Victorian and Second Empire mansions that were littered across America often came to be abandoned and fall into disrepair during the economic depression around the turn of the century. But these buildings stayed as foreign and as imposing to the average American as the faraway European castles, allowing their distinctive features, like the turrets, towers, and mansard roofs, to become symbols

of opulence and decadence (Grider 146). These abandoned structures naturally became figures in local legends and folktales which later came to be incorporated into the larger sphere of ghost stories.

The American Haunted house, however, holds power over popular culture in a way that is distinct from its European counterpart. In *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction* (1999), Dale Bailey agrees that the haunted houses of contemporary popular fiction are indebted to the gothic tradition. But to him, the houses of popular fiction also serve as metaphors for the moral, psychological, and economic failings of contemporary society. Bailey writes, the haunted house formula is “a profoundly versatile tool for examining the anxieties and tensions inherent in our national experiment, the haunted house finally seems like nothing less than a symbol of America and the American mind, of all the ghosts that haunt us, from the dark legacy of slavery to the failed war in Vietnam” (114). Indeed, the trope of the haunted house remains incredibly popular because of its versatility. In the latter half of the 20th century, American culture began to portray home ownership as a notable milestone for the average person. Naturally, the house becomes an incredibly meaningful symbol for American culture. The American haunted house became an icon to the point there is a near-universal depiction of a haunted house that has been commodified into tourist attractions, amusement park features, free-to-use graphic assets, etc.

However, the question still remains, what exactly makes a house haunted? The iconic haunted house is just an abandoned, disrepaired, old house with an inclination towards a few architectural styles. But that is not the essence of the haunted house. Usually, a house is haunted because there is an external supernatural presence within its walls. This is the most common type of haunted house in popular culture. From the aforementioned, classical roman ghost stories to

horror movies in the 21st century, houses are often haunted by ghosts, poltergeists, demons, etc. It's these supernatural factors that make the house uninhabitable and these spirits must be purged or released in order for the house to drop the "haunted" prefix. In American horror stories, the haunting is usually undeserved or unprovoked. The focus is on the damage that comes from the haunting and the innocent hero must act against the repetition of harm that a haunting typically signifies (Tuck and Ree 641). There is also the house that is haunted because of its history. Particularly, as a settler colony, America struggles with its relationship with the land of its own country (Tuck and Ree 643). Houses built on top of an Indian burial ground or desecrated sacred sites is also an extremely common trope. The focus of these stories are also on the innocence, or rather the degrees of separation between the historical injustice and the injustice being perpetrated in the present, in order to reconcile victims across time.

There are also houses that are the haunting in itself. The most prominent example that comes to mind is Shirley Jackson's Hill House from *The Haunting of Hill House*. Jackson portrays the house itself to be something utterly wrong. Its dimensions are unbearable, its very architecture is malicious. The horror of Hill House is the horror that protagonist Eleanor "Nell" Vance carries in from the outside as well as the horror of who she is. Jackson is not the first person to use the concept of a house itself being the haunting. But Hill house remains one of the most memorable literary haunted houses that inspired countless others across genres and mediums. In her article "What does a house want? exploring sentient houses in supernatural literature", Cristiana Pugliese notes that while houses are frequently personified, they are rarely sentient in adult literature. She cites *House of Leaves* among the few haunted houses that are truly and utterly sentient without any human faculties. She says "comparison [of the house] with a virus, a simple living organism, is an apt one. The house on Ash Tree Lane is sentient in that it

is able to respond to stimuli and change its shape accordingly and react to the presence of extraneous (human) bodies. Maybe, like a microorganism on a Petri dish placed under a microscope, the house started mutating under the eye of the cameras. (308)”.

Ergodic Literature

The first striking thing about *House of Leaves* is its astonishing formatting. It is stylized as an academic text on a documentary with extensive footnotes by a third party, and finally edited by a fourth. The novel uses four different typefaces to indicate who is speaking, with Times New Roman being used by Zampanò, Courier for Johnny, Bookman when notes from The Editors pops up and Dante is used by Johnny's mother, Pelafina, for her letters to him. Occasionally, other fonts show up to indicate other voices, for example: the Director's letters use a smaller typeface and Navidson's letter shows up in Book Antiqua (Bianco). The novel also colors the word “House” in blue throughout the entire book, including in the front matter where the “house” part of Penguin Randomhouse is colored. The word Minotaur is always in red and crossed out, including any lines pertaining to the Minotaur. The text of the novel warps and shifts with the narrative forcing the reader to turn the book around in all directions to continue reading. Unique as *House of Leaves* is, there is also a tradition of playing with the format of the book amongst authors. Texts as early as from 900 BCE have used their formatting to better explore their themes and messages. These types of texts are now widely grouped together under the title of “Ergodic Literature”. *House of Leaves* is one of the most frequently cited examples of ergodic literature alongside Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (1963), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010), and *S.* (2013) by Doug Dorst and J. Abrams (Baron; Raine; Wakde).

The term “Ergodic Literature” was coined by Espen J. Aarseth in his 1997 book *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Aarseth characterizes the genre by its essential demand of “nontrivial effort” or “efforts beyond eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages” (1) from its reader to comprehend it. This kind of literature employs cybertext, as in the mechanical organization of words upon the page, to its maximum. The concept of cybertext and ergodic literature is closely related to other dynamic forms of media, particularly: video games (Hayot and Wesp 41) . He argues that reading ergodic literature is similar to exploring a labyrinth or maze. There ought to be multiple paths for a reader to take and explore and each path must lead to a different experience entirely. The act of reading should be a more active experience where reader agency plays an important role. Aarseth uses the example of Vladimir Nabakov’s *Pale Fire*. *Pale Fire* presents a 999-line poem with extensive footnotes which the reader can choose to follow along as they appear or address later. There are ostensibly two narrative voices within the text and depending on whose voice the reader initially prioritizes, the exploration of “labyrinth” that is the text will also differ. The crucial aspect of cybertext is that it is not non-linear in the sense that the narrative is non-linear, it is non-linear in the sense that it is not sequential. Readers must actively participate in piecing together the narrative. Aarseth highlighted that cybertexts are a perspective from which to approach literature and argued that as the media shifts to become more dynamic, it’s important to reevaluate static literary terms in order to critically engage with new forms of media more meaningfully.

Literature Review

Considering that *House of Leaves* heavily satirizes academia, it is equal parts ironic and unsurprising that it has generated a lot of critical attention. Most of this attention, justifiably, placed on this novel’s take on what a postmodern novel is capable of and what the novel as a

medium may look like in the era of the digital. Danielewski's efforts in the typography of the novel also drew a lot of attention. *House of Leaves* is rightly considered a tour de force of the novel and it pushed boundaries when it comes to genre, form and content. Most of the critical literature on the novel focuses on its postmodern modality, examining the narratological structure, the non-orthographic typography and the narrative obfuscation. The following discussion summarizes some of the most influential articles written on *House of Leaves*.

In one of the earliest and one of the most widely cited papers on *House of Leaves* titled "Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*", N. Kathrine Hyles identifies how this novel manages to transform the subject into something that may stand up to postmodern scrutiny by means of remediation. She comments on the way the haunted house story at the core of the novel is presented through at least four layers of remediation which allows for interplay between the narrative voices. She also points out that the house is "unrepresentable" and its emptiness in itself is "so commanding and absolute that it paradoxically becomes an especially intense kind of presence (788)". She concludes the article by noting how the materiality and typography of the novel goes on to show the suitability of the novel to contain unrepresentable objects in its narratives.

Mark B. Hansen is in direct conversation with Hyles in his article "The Digital Topography of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*". It, too, is one of the more widely cited papers on the topic of this novel. This extensive article also often provides the backbone of the frameworks deployed to analyze ergodic novels in general (Bekavac, Fan 44). In it, Hansen's primary concern is with the "post-orthographic" modality of the novel and he coins the idea of a "future-directed process of embodiment". He finds that Danielewski pushed the novel's limit as a genre through evoking the digital through the typeface and drawing attention to the fact that the

house on Ash Tree Lane is a simulacra. All fiction to a certain extent is non-representational, but rarely does it bring attention to that fact, which is to the detriment of the novel to an extent.

House of Leaves subverts this expectation as it casts doubt on its own narrative and proudly proclaims the truth of the story is not the point. The narrator, Johnny, is conscientious that the house on Ash Tree Lane cannot exist. Navidson and Karen, even as they experience the house, cannot fully bring themselves to accept it. The house is definitionally reality-breaking. Through his experimental style, Danielewski presents a record of the attempts recording this impossibility. For Hansen, the style of the novel communicates that impossibility by its own intentional awareness of the limitation of the medium. He writes,

...[T]he house must also and more fundamentally be viewed as a figure for the otherness of the digital, both as it enters thematically into the world of the novel and also as it punctures the surface of its textuality....[W]hat we encounter in this impossible house is a figure for a spatial dimension-a topological figure-that cannot find adequate representation in the forms of orthographic recording exhaustively inventoried by the novel, but that still manages to exert an immense impact as the very motor force driving both the host of recording technologies thematized in the novel and the recording technology that is the text itself. (607-608)

That is to say, the House on Ash Tree Lane is a paradox that exclusively exists on record, all while failing to be recorded in its entirety. Its existence is fundamentally a textual one, both inside and out of the narrative, however that makes it a complete other. He agrees with Hyles in the sense that Danielewski highlights the failure of photography, videography and other forms of media to capture something like the House on Ash Tree Lane. But he argues that the novel proves that the written word, at least in its traditional form, is also inadequate. The House

remains just as elusive on the page as it would be on a screen. Danielewski's later attempt to adapt the *House of Leaves* into a series for television only substantiates this claim. The problem of representing the House does not lie within the mimetic capacity of different mediums but in the idea of mimesis as desirable in itself.

Hansen also comments on the way the body of the reader is incorporated into the text. He disagrees with Danielewski believing that the novel has suggestions for infinite readings, rather he finds that Johnny Truant, as the first reader of Zampano's text, holds a privileged position that inhabits the actual act of reading for consequent readers. Nevertheless, the remediation process of the novel draws the reader's interpretation of the text as a conscious act of remediation too. As Hansen puts it, "what appears to happen from the moment the reader (with Truant as model) decides to concentrate on what's given, rather than on the veracity of what's given, is a shift in emphasis from the text (or film) as a referential object to, as Barthes might say, the "necessarily real" impact that it has on the embodied life of its reader (622)". He uses the example of photography as a past-oriented process of embodiment. A photograph's mimetic quality necessarily makes the subject of the photograph something of the past, as a photo is seen as a moment from the past that has been framed and captured. There is a body of the past that serves as a point of stable reference. But in the digital text of *House of Leaves* where reading and mediation is the central to the subject of the novel, the embodiment of the subject is more abstract and Hansen contends that it is future directed. The body of the House is constantly in flux and its subjective nature makes it impossible to relegate it to the past. Essentially, there is a process of embodiment in *House of Leaves* but it is not a fixed referent.

Similarly, Luka Bekavac deals with incongruity between the representable and un-representable in *House of Leaves* in the chapter titled "Matrix Pauoris: Material Dislocation

in *House of Leaves*” from his book *Diseases of the Head*. His main argument is that *House of Leaves* tackles the challenge of creating “text as a graphic embodiment of the cognitive inaccessibility of space (315)”. He classifies the House as a “folly”, as in, a hypothetical space that is a manifestation of Will Navidson’s desires and fantasies. It is fundamentally unrepresentable and thus manifests as an absent non-space. He also finds the book’s visual component to add to that inaccessibility of space by adapting mimesis at some points to highlight the failure of mimetic gestures at other points. There are several possible ways to interpret the narrative of this novel, but Bekavac refutes them as being unstable because of the folly of the house pointing to a postmodern radical eligibility of its subject.

In a similar line of approach, Will Slocombe finds that the House on Ash Tree Lane represents not just an absence, but a blankness or nothingness he describes as literary nihilism. Nothingness, in this case, is defined as the opposite of being. Just as Hyles and Hansen, he also notes that the House on Ash Tree Lane is outside the realm of possibility in a distinctive way that its non-existence becomes the point of haunting. He calls *House of Leaves* a deconstructive novel that plays with the function of a house and the hermeneutic practices of academia to show the “nihil” upon which being is based. Building on Slocombe, Sean Traver goes on to argue that the terror at the heart of *House of Leaves* is the emptiness of its haunting. The House on Ash Tree Lane “is no longer occupied by ghosts and apparitions but depicted instead as disturbingly empty, as a void-like non-sensical space that is haunted by the far more chilling reminder of life’s apparent meaninglessness (68)”.

Other scholars have also commented on the metafictional and digital nature of the novel specifically focused on mimesis, remediation, interpretation and closure by drawing on Hyles, Hansen, and Travers in particular (Blazer 84, Brick, Fan 41, Graulund 388, Hemmingstone

273-274, Hering 3, McGrath, Toth 196-197). But not all are interested simply in how *House of Leaves* reveals itself. This novel's content is just as thematically rich as its formatting.

Katherine Cox's analysis is more focused on the narrative of *House of Leaves* rather than the implication of its format. She employs psychoanalysis to examine how the labyrinthian text of the novel, the reconciliation between Navidson and Karen, and Zampano's mediations all lead Johnny to reexamine his relationship with his mother Pelafina. While some authors like Nele Bemong have attributed the labyrinth in the House on Ash Tree Lane to be a reflection of Navidson and Karen's relationship, Cox attributes it to Johnny's suppressed memory of the moment his mother was taken away from him. She demonstrates how the House's transformations intersect with Johnny's breakthroughs and how Johnny's experiences shape the House even more so than Will Navidson's. Similarly, Nick Lord draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis to place the conflict between Pelafina and Johnny as a conflict between the Real and the Symbolic. They both stress that Pelafina's presence in the margin of the text is crucial in the conflict of the text as she tries to keep Johnny in the realm of the Symbolic.

The research done on *House of Leaves* so far is incredibly layered and reflects the complexity of the novel. However, most of the research done on this novel shows keen interest only on its potential as it pertains to the postmodern novel. Even when critics like Cox and Lord look at the content of the novel, the exploration remains focused on the individual. This focus is warranted, seeing that in a way, *House of Leaves* is quite myopic in its narrative. In typical postmodernist fashion, Danielewski presents a micro-narrative that, on the surface, does not appear to make any claims at examining human nature. Its interests are deep rather than wide. However, it would be a mistake to think anything can escape its own context. Danielewski's novel was published in the year 2000 and Zampano's last note dated 5 January 1997 places it in

the late 90s. Johnny's diary entries also range from 1997 to late 1998. Outside of these dates, the novel avoids engaging with its own place in history, so as any good contrarian should, this analysis looks at the novel with that in mind. I use the framework of Hauntology, as initially suggested by Derrida and then later developed by Mark Fischer, to ground the house and the family in its context of late 90s America, to provide a reading of the *The House on Ash Tree Lane*'s affect that travels through the novel to different narratological levels.

Chapter 3: The Question of the House and the Family

What is a House?

A house is an architectural entity, usually featuring four walls and a roof, intended to provide shelter and be a location of long-term residence. The “house” also serves as a verb that means “to enclose”. The word “house” originates from the Old English *hus*, “”, derived from the Proto-Germanic **hūsan*. The origin of **hūsan* is unknown, but it is speculated that it is derived from the root word of “Hide” (Etymonline). Simply put, a house is a place to hide. Houses are as old as civilization itself, and different cultures have constructed houses differently, based on climate and available building materials. These structures typify the private sphere and the domestic space. They are strongly associated with families, to the point where a family is referred to as a “household”. Apartments can be categorized as a house, but they are not. Mostly due to an apartment building being divided up into many separated spaces that are not equally accessible. A house is defined by one’s access to it, the exclusivity of that access and familiarity with others who have similar kind of exclusive access to the place. Only when a house acquires a sense of familiarity and safety, can it be referred to as a home.

Owning a house became an important part of American culture after the end of World War II. The Great Depression of the 1930s and 40s saw more than half of all mortgages on property being defaulted. In response, American president Franklin D. Roosevelt introduced the New Deal in order to combat the economic repercussions and provide much needed relief. He created the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), which began purchasing and refinancing existing mortgages at risk of default. HOLC introduced the amortized mortgage, allowing borrowers to pay back interest and principal over twenty to thirty years instead of the then standard five-year mortgages. Another New Deal organization, the Federal Housing

Administration (FHA), began to increase access to homeownership by providing lenders with insurance in order to prevent any kind of financial loss in the event of a default. This initiative began in the midst of the Great Depression to mitigate the devastating economic conditions of the late 30s and 40s, the influence of these initiatives persisted in the postwar economy (Marsh 580). It can be seen as fuel for the growth in homeownership and the rise of the suburbs in the 1950s.

A house with a white picket fence, two kids and a dog epitomized what it meant to be American in the 1950s and 1960s (Lane 4). As the economy began to pick up pace, and aided by the policies put in place by FDR's office, home ownership was as crucial to an American family as it was to own a car. The American Yawp claims that,

The country's suburban share of the population rose from 19.5% in 1940 to 30.7% by 1960. Homeownership rates rose from 44% in 1940 to almost 62% in 1960. Between 1940 and 1950, suburban communities of greater than 10,000 people grew 22.1%, and planned communities grew at an astonishing rate of 126.1%. As historian Lizabeth Cohen notes, these new suburbs "mushroomed in territorial size and the populations they harbored." Between 1950 and 1970, America's suburban population nearly doubled to 74 million, with 83 percent of all population growth occurring in suburban places.

There was a shift in what the American family is supposed to look like at this point in history as well. Up until the 1950s, it was more common for Americans to live in multi-generational households rather than in single family units. But the culture began to shift around this as well, as the nuclear family began to take over as the standard model of the family structure as more and more Americans began to live in single household units in the outskirts of cities.

Additionally, after the Supreme court of America ruled that separation is inherently unequal and

lifted education segregation in the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* case, racial tensions were higher than ever in urban areas of the USA. Suburbanization served as means of continuing segregation between Black and White Americans through practices like red-lining and keeping the middle and upper classes separated from the working class (Warner). America's zip-code based schooling system allowed for this practice to be used to functionally separate upper class and working class children as well as white children from the racialized black children in public schools. Real estate moguls, urban planners and policy-makers saw this shift as a solution to urban congestions and encouraged it (Marsh 581). This is not to say there wasn't cultural resistance to the new standardized suburban lifestyle. It was often criticized as conformist, but traditionalists embraced this "return" whole-heartedly, as it saw women returning to being home-makers as the post-war baby boom began (The American Thwarp).

The beginning of the cold war also saw a rise in performative patriotism that necessitated strong national identity. Consumerism and capitalism, under the guise of Freedom, was the chosen characteristic of the United States at that point. The American identity was based around the idea of having, or at least the freedom to have, endless commodities. Suburbia itself served as an important symbol for the American dream. The house, the car, the television, the landline telephone, the washing machine, the vacuum cleaner, etc., all of which essential to the suburban lifestyle, similarly become signifiers that one was living the American dream. Conservatives, traditionalists and patriots all insisted that the American lifestyle was indeed better than the life people had across the Iron Curtain cutting through Europe.

Entire books have been written on the effect televisions and cars have had on American culture². The small appliances of convenience also had a thorough impact on the average

² See Peter Dahlgren's *Television and the Public Sphere: Citizenship, Democracy and the Media* (1995), Sam Bass Warner's *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston* (1978) or Margarat Marsh's "Reconsidering the Suburbs: An Exploration of Suburban Historiography" (1988)

person's life. But the house remains a separate entity. It is not so transparently tied to the cultural zeitgeist as the television and is a much older monument than the car. The architectural style of each era expresses a lot about the cultural context upon which it was built. Houses across America vary depending on the state, its climate, main sources of export and import, average yearly income etc. but some generalizations can be made of the houses built post-WWII (Lane 198). American houses have always been more spatial than its European counterpart. Some of it is due to the abundance of space in rural America. But up until the mid-20th century, most of the USA's population lived in close vicinity in cities. As images of brutalist and extremely functionalist architecture began to take root in Eastern Europe, the American houses became even larger, almost in response. These houses always had room for cars, seeing that suburban communities are in relation to nearby urban ones and private transportation serves as the primary means of connecting the two (Daynes 2, Huttman 90, Marino 490, Warner). Cars were also incredibly important as most of the suburbs are entirely inaccessible without cars. The yard is a very important part of the American house as owning a house was strongly connected to raising a family. Houses were designed with buyers in mind and most buyers looked for homes suitable for raising children (Lane 218). While new houses built during this post-war period reflect this association best, old houses and houses in more rural and even urban areas also began to carry this association as the decades progressed.

With this history in mind, let us return to the initial question this subsection asks. What is a house? From the 1950s onward, a house is meant to be a place for long-term residence for typically, a white, middle class family. Houses carry an expectation of a family residing in it. While households may consist of members who are not biologically related, it is typical for them to occupy a house. Apartment buildings are also set apart from houses, despite carrying the same

connotation of residences, because houses carry a sense of exclusive accessibility in its entirety. In an apartment building, one only has access to their own unit, leaving the rest of the space as unexplored, inaccessible and potentially hostile. Moreover, there is an expectation of starting a family, raising a family, or lingering after having finished child-rearing tied to the American house that arose from multi-generational family units separating into nuclear units and moving into suburban houses. Note that the house's default state is to be the resident of a family. A house, when it's unoccupied, is labeled as empty or abandoned. Houses that serve as residents for biologically or legally unrelated households are also typically labeled differently, such as: a "bachelor" house, or "shared" house.

The contemporary American house is inevitably tied to the family, however, this relationship runs both ways. A family unit is also assumed to be in an atypical status if they do not own a house. Couples usually wait to have children until after they are able to purchase a house in the suburbs. It is also unusual for a couple to remain child-free if they are living in a suburban house. The recent crash of the housing market in the United States is often seen as one of the reasons the birth rates are at a decline. Millennials and older Gen Z cannot afford home-ownership due to the incredible inflation of prices in the house market as well as unwieldy mortgage and loaning processes. This is the reason people who are at an appropriate age to rear children often put it off until they reach that level of security (Nova). That is to say, in American culture, especially for White American couples, owning a house and starting a family is inextricably linked.

Houses and Families

A lot of critical attention is given to the labyrinth that exists within the dimensions of the House on Ash Tree Lane. But its tangible and physics-abiding spaces remain unexamined.

Before the first inexplicable room appeared in the space between the master bedroom and the children's room, the house on Ash Tree Lane was just a house. Zampano describes it as a “small, old-style, heritage house.” located near rural Virginia (9). The property is not particularly large. It has two bedrooms on the second floor, a large living room and a kitchen below. The first anomaly of the House is when a room appears in between the master bedroom and the children's room. This room, while how it came to be is a bizarre mystery, is not wholly unreal. The only odd thing about it is that it appeared when the Navidsons were not home and the motion activated Hi-8s mounted in every room of the house detected nothing. They just returned from a short trip and discovered the House changed in a way they could not specify until finding two doors to a room that decidedly weren't there before. This room has specific measurable dimensions, while unsettling and odd, is not outside of the realm of reality. It looks like a “walk-in closet” with “walls are perfectly smooth and almost pure black—'almost' because there is a slightly grey quality to the surface (28)”. After Karen and Will find the blueprints for the house, they can explain the existence of the room by finding that one of the previous owners tried to shrink the house through renovation and there was a crawl space measured at 4 feet, which more or less matches the measurement of the suddenly appearing room. This is what prompts Will Navidson to measure the house in full and discover that the wrongness of the House goes further than conjuring strange doors. The house is measured 32 feet 9 inches and 3/4th of an inch lengthwise and 32 feet 10 inches exactly from the inside. Virtually, making the house bigger on the inside and thus, making the house an impossibility. This is only the beginning of the house's betrayals.

But before the House became un-home-like, or unheimlich, the house was appropriately normal. The reason Will and Karen move their children to the house is to work on their strained

relationship and mend the rift between them. Will's work had always been his first priority, to the point where Karen felt that she and the children were being neglected. She issued an ultimatum, that if his priorities did not change, she would take the children and leave. The novel goes out of its way to portray how badly Karen did not want to do so. Will Navidson, as a famous war photo-journalist and a veteran of the Vietnam war before that, had seen more than his share of violence. He wanted to be a proper family and a quiet life too. As he said himself, he wanted the House to be a place where he "watched the sunset and drank lemonade" (11). In simple terms, the Navison family hoped to embody the archetypal American family, living in a house with two parents, two children, one of each gender and two pets, a cat and a dog. The documentary Will Navidson was supposedly making aimed to document the process of making a house into a home. But all that is quickly derailed after the Navidson's discovery of the anomaly of the House's dimensions.

It is also notable that the other important characters of *House of Leaves* don't own or live in houses. Both Zampano and Johnny Truant live in apartments. Zampano's apartment used to be in the same building as Johnny's friend Lude. It was located on the first floor with an overgrown yard filled with stray cats. Inside the apartment,

All the windows were nailed shut and sealed with caulking. The front entrance and courtyard doors all storm proofed. Even the vents were covered with duct tape. That said, this peculiar effort to eliminate any ventilation in the tiny apartment did not culminate with bars on the windows or multiple locks on the doors. Zampano was not afraid of the outside world. (...) My best guess now is that he sealed his apartment in an effort to retain the various emanations of his things and himself. (xvi)

Johnny's own apartment also begins to resemble Zampano's as the narrative grips him and Johnny begins to feel an anonymous presence in his own wake. He boards up his windows and closes any gaps through which anything can get in or out. Unlike Zampano, he does install multiple locks. He goes so far as to even buy guns. Johnny also takes to pinning notes on his walls and even writing on them. As his mental state worsens, Johnny stops going to work and stops paying his bills. He eventually just takes his car to Virginia in search of the House on Ash Tree Lane. At that point, he begins to sleep in motels and later, as his funds deplete, his car. Johnny doesn't find the House. His mental state declines even more following Lude's death and Johnny becomes homeless. At the end of the novel, Johnny is still homeless and it's unclear if his mental health ever fully recovers.

Houses play an interesting role in Johnny's life. While he does not live in a house anymore, he remembers living in a house with his mother Pelafina and his father. It was in that house, Pelafina experienced a psychotic episode and attempted to end her beloved son's life via strangling him. Johnny also remembers an incident where his mother was cooking and spilled boiling oil on him— an event he frames as himself trying to catch burning oil and he bears the burn scars even to the modern day. As Catherine Cox's analysis of *House of Leaves* frames the novel as Johnny's attempt at reconciliation between his loving mother and the trauma she caused, it's notable that the most traumatic event of Johnny's life takes place within the house, but Johnny still associates safety and recovery in the context of a family and as a result, within the house.

This becomes clear in Johnny's narration when Johnny takes another gander at deceiving his reader and himself. After Johnny abandons his apartment and shortly before he learns of Lude's death, he writes about two of his friends helping him get back on his feet. These two

friends, living in a house near Seattle, both work as doctors and invite Johnny to stay with them for a while after they find the state he's in. They help him recover with the help of a new kind of medicine in the form of a bright yellow pill. This story, too good to be true, is an obvious deception—Johnny's self-admitted attempt to console himself by playing house with friends who essentially roleplay parents to him. Johnny chastises the reader for believing this story, but through it he also chastises himself for believing there is any hope for him at all. Following this episode, Johnny learns of Lude's death and experiences what can be charitably called a psychotic break. It is unclear if it's just hallucinations, another attempt of using fantasy to cope with grief, or if Johnny does enact vengeance on Lude's behalf through killing the Gdansk Man and raping and murdering Kyrie. But Johnny stops looking for the House at that point, accepts himself as an irredeemable monster and resigns himself to being permanently homeless.

The House on Ash Tree Lane was meant to be a place for the Navidson family to come together. When the impossible spatial dimensions of the House prompts Will to reach out to Tom, the House is still not seen as sinister. In fact, by reuniting the brothers, the House seemingly becomes a place of wonder. There is a joviality between Will, Tom and later Billy as they measure and re-measure the House to try to right a wrong. Even as frustrations climb, the House is still not seen as actively harming the family. Karen's disinterest in engaging with what Reston calls a "spatial rape" within the House puts a distance between her and Will, but it is nothing new for their relationship. They are still on the same page when it comes to the kids. They both want the children as far from the house as possible. But this desire put a level of distance between the parents and the children that was not present before the room appeared to put distance between the master bedroom and the kids' bedroom. The House becomes dangerous and sinister to the Navidsons, only as the Hallway appears in the external wall by the living

room. One evening Chad and Daisy cry out from distress after ending up lost in the hallway. Both Will and Karen react as concerned parents might, with Will rushing into the hallways without thought to rescue his children. From this point onwards, any association the House on Ash Tree Lane had with a safe place for a family was completely destroyed. The House on Ash Tree Lane begins to show its face by refusing to be a safe place for the family to seek refuge in and by actively creating unwanted space between loved ones.

Chapter 4: Family as a Haunted Structure

Hauntological potential of the Family

Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* begins with a meditation on the common expression of "I would like to learn to live finally!". Derrida pursues several angles of contradictions in his argument, one of them asking the question what it might mean to "learn to live" when living was a state of being that hung between the notions of life and death. Similarly, in *House of Leaves*, when the Navidsons move into the House on Ash Tree Lane, the sentiment is that they are finally going to be a family. How can a family "finally" be a family? The answer is simple, before this point, Will spent long stretches of time away from Karen and the kids to pursue his work. Karen, during that time, was not strictly faithful to Will. The children were under the sole custody of their mother, and their father was absent for a significant portion of their development. Despite having children together, Karen and Will remain unmarried. The Navidsons are not an archetypal family. The sentiment is not that the Navidsons will become a family, rather that they will become what a family is supposed to look like and finally find content by fitting in.

The term hauntology is credited to Jacques Derrida in a lecture at a conference titled "Wither Marxism", later published into a book, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Hauntology is a play on the term ontology. In the original french, the H in hauntology is silent. The only way the French words "ontologie" and "hantologie" separate themselves is through writing, in speech they are one and the same. As the term itself implies, as the opposite of ontology, which is the study of being and becoming, hauntology is the study of that which is not, and of unbecoming yet lingering. The hauntological is absent, but it remains because its opposite contains a reference to it in its very structure.

Derrida's concern in *Specters of Marx* is the way despite the body of Marxism dissolving, the "specter of communism" from *The Communist Manifesto* continues to affect the new international. He identifies ten problems that have emerged in the West following the cold war and he is highly skeptical about international institutions and laws. Derrida uses the word hauntology only thrice in his book, but this book is considered the one of the founding texts of hauntology and is at the center of what critics called the "spectral turn" of the 1990s. Particularly, Derrida's conception of time being out of joint, or temporality of objects not being fixed. Objects like Marxism continue to be specter because they cannot be left in the past and they contain in them a possibility of return.

Since Derrida, the term has been adapted by cultural critics and psychological anthropologists. Mark Fisher expands on Hauntology in the context in *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Fisher contends that by the arrival of the 21st century, the future has been canceled. He cites the imaginative way science fiction portrayed the future as a place full of wonders but the reality was disappointing to say the least. As a consequence almost, new ideas have been far and in between. He discusses various cultural monuments and the way these ideas keep reiterating the past through ideas like retrofuturism. Fisher argues that contemporary culture is obsessed with what it could have been and is perpetually in a state of mourning for that lost future. Its temporal disjunction comes from a sense of nostalgia for what never truly was. In psychological anthropology, hauntology offers a framework that allows for examining subjecthood without limiting it to the present moment. Sadiq and Rahmi argue that "Hauntology as a language of human subjectivity in time(...) is the natural continuation of the logic of ex-centered selfhood (410)". Hauntology allows for

anthropologists to look for cultural histories in relation to personal history, which is never mute nor benign (Good 411).

With that in mind, the family as a concept holds an immense amount of hauntological potential. It is a social structure as old as society itself. But family has never looked the same across time or across culture. As the locale of an individual's beginning of the enculturation process that is ultimately crucial to social cohesion, the family is also an important object of representation (Mintz 4). The image of the idealized family gives individuals something to aspire towards and also serves as the conduit to propagate social values. But the reality of family is not so simple. Human beings rarely manage to meet the high standards they set for themselves and others. Child-rearing is framed as an essential and natural part of life, but practices of child-rearing are not instinctive for people. More often than not, family is the site where a person first encounters trauma (Gelles and Straus 15, Popenoe 528). The idealized image of the family serves as a guiding principle and a standard to measure oneself as. Inevitably, no family fits the idealized image perfectly, but there is social pressure to treat the family as a perfect institution. This disjunction between performance and reality, representation and experience results in the family being haunted by the form it can never achieve.

The Haunted Family

As has been already established, at a glance, the Navidsons embody the archetypal American family quite well. Though statistically far from the median American family, with two parents, two children, two pets, two cars and a house with yard, most would consider the Navidsons to fit the image near perfectly. But a closer look immediately reveals that is not the case. Will Navidson and his children share a loving relationship, but he is frequently absent. His

children, both very young, do not hold it against him. His partner Karen, however, does resent it. Equally, though he is less transparent, Will is not happy with Karen's infidelities and holds a deep-seated fear of settling down. However, *The Navidson Record* goes out of its way to establish the tenderness the pair shares for each other. Will's reverence for Karen and Karen's almost desperate dependence on Will is established quite early on, though the pair never married. Their shared love for their children is another aspect of their family that keeps them together. Their goal is to repair their relationship and live as a "normal" family. But the "normal" family is defined by what it is not and what it cannot become just as much as it's defined by what it is.

Neither Will nor Karen come from a happy family. Though we never see Karen directly interact with her family on the page, Zampano makes it clear that something happened to Karen in her adolescence that permanently altered her. "All [Karen's] choices reflected unattenuated self-confidence—a remarkably healthy sign for a thirteen year old girl(....)By the time she turned fifteen, all of that was gone.(58)" It is presented to us as speculation, but Karen's sister claims that both she and Karen were repeatedly raped by their step-father when Karen was fourteen, which is the reason for this abrupt change in her. Karen is deeply protective of her children and she does not see the point in unnecessarily putting them in danger. She does not share Will's fascination and later frustration when the measurements of the House don't match up. Karen makes Will swear to not enter the hallway much to her partner's anguish. She tries to reclaim the monstrous space of the House by installing bookshelves, by inviting in good energy through Feng Shui, and ignoring the mounting unease as best she can. The same way she's reclaimed herself after whatever happened to her age fourteen. From a confident young girl, she became the sought-after woman by sitting in front of a mirror and developing an arresting smile—the same smile that got her through her modeling days, the same smile she deploys to navigate a

sexist world that continues to objectify her. She denies anything happened to her and her sister the same way she tries to avoid that there is anything strange happening in her House and the same way she pretends that her and Will's relationship is a healthy one. Karen's gentlest moments are with her children, and she also loves Will through his warm moments with their kids. The last frame of her "Brief History of who I love" holds on a picture of Will holding Daisy as the pair crosses into a moment the camera cannot follow.

Considering Karen's history, it is absolutely no surprise that her priority is for her family to be safe and together, even if it comes at the cost of who Will Navidson is. At the end of the novel, she is only able to find Will by piecing together Will's history using his old family photos, photos of him and of course, the photos taken by him. Only when she accepts who the man she loves is, her hold on him becomes stronger than the House's.

Will's relationship to family is different to what Karen has. Will and his Fraternal twin brother Tom had a very distant mother and aggressive alcoholic father. The brothers ended up growing estranged in adulthood despite getting on well enough when they were under the same roof. They were both victims of neglect, which became a motivator for Will to become a workaholic and Tom to become an unambitious alcoholic himself. Karen conjectures that it is Will's success that drove a wedge between Tom and Will. But Tom shows very little sign of envy. The fact still remains the debacle with the House is when the twin brothers speak to each other in 8 years. They are not as close as twins are expected to be. Will, in particular, seem to have a low opinion of Tom, a fact which Tom is aware of and resents. Tom is adverse to danger, a fact that is quite opposite of Will. But Tom is also reliable unlike what Will thinks of him. He does come through for Will and Billy when they go to rescue Holloway and his team. Later, Tom saves Daisy's life at the cost of his own. The manner in which Tom holds Daisy and runs to hand

her to Will mimics the way Will once ran with Delial in his arms but only to hand her over to the vultures. Tom, despite not having a nuclear family of his own, manages to provide Will's family with a sense of reassurance and protection that Will himself cannot.

Part of the reason that Will holds back from his family is Delial. Delial is the name Will gave to the young Sudanese girl who's photo won him the Pulitzer prize.³ In his letter to Karen, Will Navidson finally reveals this information to Karen. He confesses that Delial is not a lover he's kept close to his heart, but a manifestation of his own guilt— his inability to do nothing but “document” in the moment of need.

Not the photo—that photo, that thing—but who she was before one-sixtieth of a second sliced her out of thin air and won me the pulitzer though that didnt keep the vultures away i did that by swinging my tripod around though that didnt keep her from dying five years old daisy's age except she was pecking at a bone you should have seen her not the but her a little girl squatting in a field of rock dangling a bone between her fingers i miss miss miss but i didn't miss (...) i cant stop thinking of her never have never will cant forget how i ran with her like where was i going to really run i was twelve miles from nowhere i had no one to her to no window to pass her through out of harms way no torn there i was no torn there and then that tiny bag of bones just started to shake and it was over she died right in my hands the hands of the guy who took three minutes two minutes whatever a handful of seconds to photograph her and now she was gone that poor little girl in this god awful world i miss her i miss delial i miss the man i thought i was before i met her (392-393)

³ This image is based on Kevin Carter's *The Vulture and the Little Girl* or *The Struggling Girl* (1993) as revealed by footnote 336. It's notable that the photographer Kevin Carter suffered immense guilt for not helping the child depicted in the photograph, a matter that was a factor in his later suicide.

There is a clear parallel between Daisy and Delial to Will and his own failure to help either affects him deeply. Even before the House on Ash Tree Lane pulls on his daughter to hurt Will, he's never been able to leave Delial behind. His photography is always focused on people, on human beings as Karen highlights in "A Brief History of Who I Love", and his art highlights the distance between photographer and his subject. Will clearly believes his work to be important, but he can't help but berate himself for creating that art. He wants his work to be important, but as a capturer of human misery, he can't help but be painfully aware of his complicity in it.

His inability to even admit his shame about Delial is what drives an initial wedge between him and Karen. It's perhaps to make up for that one failure that drives him to go to dangerous places far from his family. The image of Delial overlaps Daisy's in his mind, manifesting itself through the persistent idea that he is not worthy to be a family man. This is partially his reason for diving into the depths of The House once the SOS starts reverberating through the walls, despite him knowing this could be the last straw between him and Karen. He chooses the unknown over the terrifying but familiar love of his family. Later, Will's inability to protect his daughter proved, and his twin brother having paid the price for it, truly convinces him that a family is not for him. Will gives into his obsession and dives into the labyrinth of his house, fully alone. But it is in the cold, dark, nothing of the House does Will find the need for his family to be stronger than the call of oblivion. He is able to find his way out of the House a second time.

Long before moving into the House on Ash Tree Lane, Will and Karen were already pushing undue weight of their own psychological trauma on their families. They both have infinite love for their children, but that love doesn't make "being" a family that simple. The House on Ash Tree Lane simply reflects the complexities that the couple ignores to draw them in

or perhaps push them out. It is no coincidence that as distance between the couple and their kids grows, so does the space between their bedrooms. The hallway reflects the labyrinth that is a relationship, something that is always bigger on the inside despite the way it appears. Karen wants a safe and comfortable childhood for kids more than anything, but she wants her partner there too. She does not want to sacrifice the possibility of achieving an idealized family. But Will Navidson fears he cannot be the protector that his role of father requires of him, and so he takes every chance the House gives him to escape. The possibility of them maintaining the idealized family facade is disrupted by the bizarre events they experience.

The Family in Absentia

While “The Navidson records” center the Navidson family, but the haunting of *House of Leaves* goes beyond them. Zampano and Johnny Truant both appear to be stalked by the figure of the Minotaur and just as obsessed with the House as Will Navidson became. Neither of these two characters have houses or families, but the haunting they experience is still fundamentally related to this absence.

The spatial distortions of the House on Ash Tree Lane, while gripping, does not affect Zampano and Johnny to the same degree. Neither of them ever set foot in the House. Johnny doesn’t find the House even when he goes to look for it. He can’t even find The Navidson Records, so his experience of the House is entirely through Zampano’s narration. But the aspect of the House that does chase Johnny and presumably Zampano is the Minotaur.

There is a presence within the labyrinth of the House on Ash Tree Lane. This presence is never directly witnessed but it still looms. It first manifests as a roar that reverberates through the impossible space. As Holloway and his team descend down the staircase, the presence only grows stronger. Their caches of provisions are tampered with and the growl grows closer and

closer. They find strange scratches on the walls. Lude found similar scratches on the floor where he found Zampano's lifeless body. There were no other signs of trauma or struggle in the apartment, and Zampano had seemingly died of his heart simply giving out. The same scratches appear on Johnny's back as he feels an inhuman presence that makes him experience a terror unlike anything else. This presence lurks in Zampano's writing, only he crosses it out as though by excluding any references to it he can avoid it. This presence is referred to as the Minotaur, because that is the way Zampano addressed it in his draft "Possible title of chapters" shared in Appendix A.

The Minotaur in contemporary culture is any monster that is half bull, half man. But the Minotaur in *House of Leaves* is never seen, only felt. It is difficult to justify this unseen terror in the House as a bull-man. Rather, the reason for this title for whatever it is, is due to the mythological roots of the Minotaur. The Minotaur, roughly translated as the bull of Minos, is named after his stepfather. Minos, king of Creton, displeases Poseidon and as punishment Poseidon has his wife fornicate with a Bull and give birth to a monster. Ashamed of this creature, Minos has Daedalus build a labyrinth in which he traps this child, the Minotaur. Every year Minos sacrifices men and women to appease and feed the Minotaur until Theseus comes along. Theseus, with the help of Minos's daughter Ariadne, not only manages to navigate the labyrinth but he also slays the Minotaur. The myth of the Minotaur is so closely tied to any discussions of labyrinths or mazes, Zampano is compelled to include a discussion of this myth. But he methodically cuts out any discussion of the inhuman creature that might dwell in the House, yet he still cannot remove references to Ariadne. However, calling the impossible space within the House a labyrinth is also a choice made by Zampano. The space in the House is not referred to as

a maze or labyrinth by anyone in The Navidson Records. It is Zampano who carries that meaning into the documentary.

Zampano tries his best to maintain the detached impersonal tone of a critic while engaging with The Navidson Records, but his personality still shines through. He has a penchant for dramatic writing, Greek mythology and, as Johnny identifies, unnecessary but elaborate metaphors. Appendix I also includes Zampano's notes and his diary entries and a few of his poems, while the rest of his poems are included in Appendix II under the title "pelican poems". Zampano is a lonely man, who died completely alone, with nobody to even claim his remaining worldly goods. But the journal notes and the poems imply he was not always as solitary as he was at the time of his death. Zampano sought the company of women up until his death, he wrote a great deal of love poems to women, and a few to men. From the locations on his date, Zampano is well-traveled. But most importantly for this analysis, Zampano shows a longing for a family. His many poems to the women he's loved are scattered across the world and he shows a longing for a child, a son to be specific, in his journal entry from December 15, 1974. He typed out,

Perhaps in the margins of darkness, I could create a son who is not missing; who lives beyond even my own imagination and invention; whose lusts, stupidities, and strengths carry him farther than even he or I can anticipate; who sees the world for what it is; and consequently bears the burden of everyone's tomorrow with unprecedented wisdom and honor because he is one of the very few who has successfully interrogated his own nature. His shields are instantly available though seldom used. And those who value him shall prosper while those who would destroy him shall perish. He will fulfill a promise I made years ago but failed to keep. (543)

In a lot of ways, Johnny serves as the hypothetical son Zampano wished for. He excavates Zampano's legacy and sees it published according to Zampano's wishes, almost against his own. His life does seem like one that is beyond Zampano's imagination, only that it also is not. At certain points of the novel, Johnny questions if he is even real or if he is just another one of Zampano's fictions. The Editors who claim to have only communicated with Johnny via mail cannot guarantee his existence. However, they also include emails and notes from the women who wrote to the publishers about their interactions with Johnny. Yet, still being notes sent via mail does not definitively prove that Johnny is real. Zampano's existence is less in contention within the novel, but a possibility remains that the blind old critic is an invention by Johnny.

In that case, the Minotaur becomes an interesting name for the inexplicable presence. Minos may have not sired the Minotaur, but it is very much his legacy. The myth of Minos's struggle to become King has been entirely overshadowed by his fraught relationship with this son who was a divine punishment for him. He builds the maze that Creton is known for to "house" this son and he sacrifices young men and women to keep it alive. He hates this son who is a living reminder of his transgressions, but he is also enraged when Theseus slays the Minotaur. Zampano feels similarly complicated emotions regarding the version of "House of Leaves" that he produces. In his last note, he writes,

Whoever finds and publishes this work shall be entitled to all proceeds. I ask only that my name take its rightful place. Perhaps you will even prosper. If, however, you discover that readers are less than sympathetic and choose to dismiss this enterprise out of hand, then may I suggest you drink plenty of wine and dance in the sheets of your wedding night, for whether you know it or not, now you truly are prosperous. They say

truth stands the test of time. I can think of no greater comfort than knowing this document failed such a test. (xix)

Despite wishing for the failure of this work, Zampano still cannot help but painstakingly put it together. It is clearly a labour of love, but the erraticness of the way he left the documents, on scraps of paper, some typed and some handwritten, some in braille and some almost illegible—also shows a lack of reverence. Zampano is almost compelled to write about The Navidson Records, only for his heart to stop beating before he could publish it, and a happenstance that he knew was a possibility, if not an inevitability. Johnny acts as the progeny that he fantasized about whom he never even met. Essentially, Zampano and his work haunt Johnny, passing on the obsession which manifests as this unseen terror. The same way Navidson's photograph haunts both him, and all who laid witness to it.

Zampano's solitary death invited pity over all other emotions. Lude remarks on finding Zampano's body, "I don't want to end up like that. No wife, no kids, no nobody at all. Not even one fucking friend (xiv)." Though we don't know much of Johnny's fate after the publication of the first edition of the in-universe "House of Leaves", but in the last instance we hear directly from Johnny, that is exactly the state he is in. As far as we the readers are aware, Johnny repeats the cycle of Zampano's life due to the old man's influence, as sons often repeat their father's failures.

Johnny's relationship with his mother has been theorized extensively, through multiple frameworks, as discussed in the literature review portion, so this dissertation will not dwell on the way the Navidson Records prompt him to re-examine and confront his childhood trauma. But it is of note that the way Johnny explains it and the way Pelafina insists on it, she also had a complicated relationship with Johnny's existence. Pelafina loves her son dearly, but she cannot

also bear the thought of his existence in the world without her protection. To the point, Johnny believes that his mother tried to strangle him to spare him the pain of their separation. In that manner Pelafina and Zampano have opposite views to their creations being surrendered to the world. Zampano, despite his complicated feelings about his work, wanted it out in the world, while Pelafina, filled with sincere love and faith in her child, did everything in her power to stop him from facing the world. Both left their mark on their progenies, despite their “distance”, on Johnny and on the book he edited. Consequently, Zampano and Pelafina serve as competing voices in *House of Leaves* (Hemmingson).

Though they are not family in the biological sense, the closest Johnny has are in the form of two minor characters—Thumper and Lude. Thumper, whose real name is never revealed to the reader despite Johnny learning it eventually, is the object of Johnny’s most naked desire. He proclaims himself to be “in love” with her and remarks on her total lack of inhibition as the point of his fascination with her. He also shares a genuine connection with her in the aftermath of the first time the Minotaur finds him in public. Should he have pursued it, Johnny and Thumper could have a real possibility of falling in love and starting a family one day. But both halves of the pair are far too cynical for that. Johnny, by this point, spends his time in the grip of memory, terror and obsession. As their connection becomes something solid, Johnny ends up letting go of Thumper instead of pursuing anything deeper. She is one of the few people he says goodbye to as he leaves his apartment to search for the House. Letting her go is the beginning of his abandoning any hopes of finding love and a family through whole-heartedly embracing the terror of the hostile House.

Lude, in a sense, is the catalyst to the destruction of Johnny’s life in two-folds. He is the one who brings Johnny to Zampano’s apartment. But he also keeps him grounded by constantly

inviting him out and checking on him long after Johnny quits his job and begins to withdraw. He consistently served as a way out of the labyrinth for Johnny, however temporarily that may be. But as his obsession with the House grows and Johnny begins to get lost in re-evaluating his past, Johnny calls on Lude less and less. But even at his worst, when Johnny has let go of Thumper and fully commits himself to finding the House on Ash Tree Lane, Lude is the first person he contacts from his old life once he confirms the House is fictitious. Later, his death completely devastates Johnny and pushes him to the point where Johnny can no longer live even a semblance of a normal life. As commented on before, Johnny enacts revenge in Lude's name and embraces homelessness. The possibility of a future family is destroyed, and he no longer has anyone to return to. Johnny attempts to burn the manuscript containing the House after finding out that a version supposedly edited by him is already being circulated. Despite this, his name and legacy is also tied to the labyrinth that is the House on Ash Tree Lane. He is one more layer of narration of the complicated relationship between sire and progeny, creators and their art, parents and their children, and the house and what is housed.

Chapter 5: The Bilateral Affect of Haunting

The affective turn in criticism came shortly after the spectral turn from the 1990s. Both theories are concerned with the way incorporeal interacts with the material world, making them complementary theories upon which to build a framework. The last chapter has argued for the family being an inherently haunted structure due to one's past experiences and future expectations which collapses time itself that manifests itself in the way the Navidson family experiences the House and in the way Johnny and Zampano experience the text of Zampano's criticism and the Minotaur. This chapter focuses on how affects from Johnny and Zampano have traveled through time and space to shape the Navidsons' experience of the House.

Just like hauntology, the term "affect" has also been somewhat nebulous. As with hauntology, it is a term that is used across disciplines and its meaning shifts accordingly. The idea of affect, is that it is the aspect of a body that justifies it being called a body. Massumi famously wrote: "When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name, two things stand out. It moves. It feels. In fact, it does both at the same time (1)". To grossly simplify, affect is the preconscious intensities that moves that body and creates the possibility for a body to create such intensities. The unifying aspect of affect is its "endeavoring to configure a body and its affects/affectedness, its ongoing affectual composition of a world, the *this-ness* of a world and a body (Seigworth and Gregg 3)". Gregory J. Seigworth locates affect in the encounter between intensities and the process of negotiation involved in translating that intensity into movements. Affects can be studied as autonomous emotions or the state of consciousness preceding emotions, and its main feature is that it transmutes from body to body. Ruth Leys rightly criticized the abstractness of this theory, especially in the context of socio-political theorizing. By asserting the autonomy of affect, academics often minimize the role of power structures and

human agency. Brian Massumi and Eve Sedgwick, both credited as foundational authors for the school of Affect, assert that affect is not independent of power. Later scholars like Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant combatted Lyes's accusation through placing affect in reactionary politics⁴. However, affect remains porous and malleable. The very malleability of affect allows for it to engage with the spectral.

No critical work on the affect of a House can commence without mentioning *The Poetics of Space* (1958) by Gaston Bachelard. In this book, Bachelard uses phenomenology to reframe the way houses and emotions are fundamentally linked. He also draws on Carl Jung's work to provide a psychoanalysis of the way architecture and the psyche interact. Notably, Mark Z. Danielewski wrote the introduction to the 2014 edition of this book, calling it as influential as Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and Thomas Pynchon's novel *Against the Day* (2003). Bachelard's work is more concerned with emotions directly, rather than emotions as affect. But it can be read as the precursor of spatial affect theory, popularized by the likes of David Harvey, Henri Lefebvre and Iris Marion Young.⁵ Bachelard's subject in *The Poetics of Space* is the intimacy between the house and those who live in it. One's memories and associations with a house can fundamentally transform them and architectural elements play a crucial role facilitating those connections. He dedicates entire chapters to architectural features like the rounded wall, the window and the doorway. But *The House on Ash Tree Lane* embodies the exact opposite of everything Bachelard highlights.

I have already noted the way the impossible spaces in the House on Ash Tree Lane reflect the relationships between members of the Navidson family. Critics have also remarked that the

⁴ See *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2014) by Sara Ahmed and *Cruel Optimism* (2012) by Lauren Berlant for more detailed analysis of how affect factors into politics.

⁵ "Spatial Justice" by Stephen Przybylinski covers the evolution of spatial affect into a theory of justice, bridging the gap between seeing affect as "autonomous" and seeing affect as byproduct of existing system of power.

labyrinth in particular serves as a metaphor for Will Navidson's psyche— this parallel stands so clear that even Danielewski anticipates this reading and has Zampano acknowledge it (Hansen 601, Hemmingson). But the House on Ash Tree Lane's hostility becomes a matter of architecture. The House grows. It adds space to create more distance between the Navidson family members, and it succeeds. In the depths of the labyrinth, it turns entirely blank, being so big that walls or ceilings seem to be non-existent and shrinking and growing as it pleases to not allow anyone to make any associations with it. It turns its floors into a treadmill, it grows and shrinks staircases, it even reverses gravity. During Will Navidson's final exploration it deposits him in front of absolute nothingness, pure oblivion as it would. It denies any sense of intimacy that one might derive from a home by breaking every law of physics and architecture.

But the House is not only reflecting the Navidson's psyche back at them. The House on Ash Tree Lane is equally shaped by the experiences of Johnny Truant. The first part of the Navidson Record that appears is titled "The Five and a Half Minute Hallway". It's a short five and a half minute video where Will Navidson documents the impossibility of the hallway that appeared in his living room. This short video is almost insignificant in comparison with what's to come, but the time is important for Johnny. It took five and a half minutes to take his mother out of his arms and out of their house into a vehicle to the mental institute. Johnny also similarly remembers a walk across an impossibly long hallway to reach his mother's room in the Whalestoe Institute. Endless white corridors with rooms that look all the same, are in stark contrast with the blackness of the House's hallways with windowless rooms whose shape and sizes cannot be determined. The growl of the Minotaur also transcends the Navidsons— in Johnny's memory the roar of the Minotaur is the noise his mother made as she was torn away from him. Johnny writes, "and there it was the roar, the one I've been remembering, in the end

not a roar, but the saddest call of all—reaching for me, her voice sounding as if it would shatter the world, fill it with thunder and darkness, which I guess it finally did.(517)”

Even more interestingly, there is the “House of Leaves” itself. In his lone journey into the depth of the House, Will Navidson takes a single book with him. Trapped on a platform, faced with absolute nothing, he turns to reading the book, a copy of “House of Leaves”. As Will does not have any light, he lights the pages of the book itself on fire and it reads the page in the light of its own kindling. Similarly, Johnny burns the manuscript that we read presumably while still writing the last footnote of his after encountering some people who seem to have already found a copy of the book he was still working on. The way “House of Leaves” supposedly predates *House of Leaves* certainly gives rise to interesting lines of inquiry. Scholars have already exhaustively discussed its many implications (Hansen 599, Pugliese 306). Less explored among them is the implication of authorship within this text. It’s reasonable to question if Johnny or Zampano is making up the two other narrative voices, but it really does not matter seeing that we already know Mark Z. Danielewski made up all three of these voices. But the manner in which the novel is displaced in time within itself has implications in terms of hauntology and affect.

Many critics agree that the the title “House of Leaves” is essentially a pun referring to a book, but it is also a reference to The House on Ash Tree Lane because of the difficulty of representing it even in partial form in any medium other than the novel (Hansen 618; Hayles 803). Danielewski equates the novel with the House on Ash Tree Lane, through the architecture of this book as well. It, too, is not accommodating to its reader, if not outright hostile. Will Navidson’s experience of the House exists prior to Zampano’s narration of it, but the way Zampano arranges the typeface also directly reflects that experience, to the point it can be argued that Will’s experience of the House is posterior to Zampano’s desire to create an experience that

might justify this kind of typography. The Navidson family's bizarre tragedy is a vehicle for Zampano's craft— a craft that he cannot quite reconcile with, the same way Will Navidson struggles with benefitting from tragedies that he cannot help prevent. The innards of the House is named a labyrinth, a term none of the characters in *The Navidson Record* uses and the horror at its center is named the Minataur, because that myth best represents Zampano's spectral relationship with Will and Johnny.

The way the House is experienced by the Navidsons is also shaped by Johnny. He is a deeply troubled young man whose dysfunctional lifestyle and repressed memories were slowly eroding him. Zampano and "The Navidson Records" served as means for him to reach that reconciliation (Cox). Only Johnny, left with no family and no loved ones, has no means of returning to safety. As a result, only when Johnny withdraws from the text, Will can be reunited with Karen and his children and properly leave the House.

The House on Ash Tree Lane, its physical body which the book that we the reader hold, serves as an affective body. It is conduit for the affect of longing for a family that manifests in haunting that is dislodged in time.. The idealized family and the impossibility of the idealized happy family, looms over three authors as they make art out of their misery and resent that misery is the cause of their art. The House on Ash Tree Lane, creating space where nothing should be, giving nothingness a body, is shaped the way it is because of the haunting presence of the family that never was and never could be. It disrupts the potential of "normalcy" for the Navidsons because of the haunting affect that transcends time, but it's the paradoxical existence of that affect within the House that allows for the cause of that haunting to be manifest. The shape of the House both carries affect for the Navidsons, Zampano and Johnny Truant and in turn is affected by the trio which results in its own shape.

Despite this bilateral transmission of affect the House remains autonomous. Through ferrying affect across time, it also asserts its own agency. As Cristina Puglese notes, the desires of the House on Ash Tree Lane remain entirely alien to its inhabitants. There is no denying that there is agency in its transformations, but the motivations for these transformations remain entirely in the dark. Going back to the very beginning of this analysis, Danielewski, through the vehicle of an invented playwright tells us—"the house—resists interpretation. (356)". The only way for us to recognize the House is through those who engage with it. Consequently, the House on Ash Tree Lane becomes an affective body that moves other bodies and is moved through intensities of encounters.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Houses have personalities and the potential to transform the lives of those who choose to make it their homes. Houses are also necessarily shaped and transformed by its dwellers. It has been a prolific literary symbol for no good reason. The House on Ash Tree Lane pushes the bounds of that history by blurring the line between architecture and the novel. In that process, *House of Leaves* presents us with a deeply compelling story about families that carry hauntings in their very beings.

This dissertation has argued that in the American cultural zeitgeist, families and houses are fundamentally intertwined. For a house to refuse to be a place of safety is just as harrowing a betrayal as a mother trying to harm her own child. But we live in a world where such betrayals are not uncommon. The family is very rarely a true place for refuge, yet one is compelled to make it so because there are very few other means of finding love and community outside of it. This cultural expectation creates an affectation of longing for those who are not granted access to the traditional family. *House of Leaves* presents the reader with a closed system of longing that is transmuted into sinister cycles of terror through the House on Ash Tree Lane. Will Navidson, Zampano and Johnny Truant are a trio connected across time by the family that never was and never could be. The House inspires obsession in all three, only for that obsession to drive them into madness. Will Navidson makes it out alive, because despite his family not being perfect, it is still filled to the brim with love. Lacking that love, Zampano is doomed to die alone, his legacy being tied to a young man whom he never got to know. Johnny's fate is perhaps the worst of all. He is haunted by his mother's abuse, but even as he explores it, he is unable to move past it. In the grip of his obsession, he loses the woman he could have grown to love and the only friend

who stuck by him despite it all. Even as he burns the book he put together, it is already out in the world and finding sympathetic readers despite the intentions of both its author and editor.

The House on Ash Tree Lane occupies two modes even within the novel. Being the titular “house of leaves”, it embodies its architecture within its pages and contains all three narrative voices. It is also the House, wearing its abnormality plain, so that kindergarten teachers and policemen can witness it too, but nobody can ever truly make meaning out of it. It collapses time within its reality-bending depths for unknowable ends, tying together men whose lives intersect only through art. I have attempted to read around the nothingness of the House, so as to leave the deliberate ambiguity and obscurity that Danielewski imbues it with. Though the House on Ash Tree Lane remains unique, despite inspiring countless haunted houses in the past 2 decades, there is room for using the methodology of placing postmodern subjectivities in their historical contexts to identify the specters that they do not want to name.

In Chapter 1, I claimed that the House on Ash Tree Lane was at the center of the labyrinth that is *House of Leaves*. In a similar vein, at the center of this analysis lies the flawed structure of the family. Families are the smallest unit of society, but they carry the heaviest burdens. As families transform with the march of time, it’s important to converse with the specter of families that haunt us. Since the spaces where we converse with the ghosts are inevitably tied to our understanding of them, the house has to be included in the way we discuss families. That may warrant an examination of the houses which do assimilate into the family unit and the affects that they carry.

At the end of the day, what binds the family together and what makes a house a home remains the same, it’s love. This is why Mark Z. Danielewski concurs with one of his reader’s opinion that *House of Leaves*, like every other story in the world, is about love.

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