

Multimodality as a Limit of Narrative in Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*

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Abstract:

*This essay challenges the prevalent notion that multimodality is basically a narrative strategy and instead discusses it as an instance of narrative liminality that is informed by both sides of the limit. This is the premise of a reading of Mark Z. Danielewski's pentalogy *The Familiar* (2015-17) with the aim to show how the textual, visual, and material aspects of this multimodal text combine beyond ekphrasis or illustration and how they expose, challenge, and transgress the boundary between narrative and nonnarrative features without dissolving or reinforcing it. This analysis focuses on two particular aspects of narrative liminality in *The Familiar*, namely the combined visual aesthetics of simultaneity and sequentiality as well as the peculiar narrative instances of the *Narcons* and *VEM*.*

1. Multimodality and Narrative Liminality

For a form that is fundamentally defined by being narrative, the modern novel in the English language has a remarkably long history of nonnarrative elements that explore the limits of this very defining quality, and its starting point—Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67)—already indicates the most important (though not the only) aesthetic strategy of doing so: multimodality, or the use of more than one semiotic mode to convey meaning (on multimodality, cf. Gibbons, *Multimodality*). *Tristram Shandy* famously includes visual elements other than text, as well as metamedial references to the materiality of the book medium itself (on metamediality, cf. Starre; on such bookishness, cf. Panko; Pressman; Schäfer and Starre). These visual and material elements are nonnarrative in the sense that their meaning-making operates differently and requires a different process of readerly engagement as they may not be integrated into the temporal logic of a sequential reading process but rather contrast it with the “space-

logic” Joseph Frank describes in his famous essay “Spatial Form in Modern Literature” (229), to which I will return.

Yet, these nonnarrative elements are not necessarily considered as equal with narrative ones in theorizations of multimodality. For example, Alison Gibbons in her excellent introduction to the subject defines multimodal literature as “a body of literary texts that feature a multitude of semiotic modes in the communication and progression of their *narratives*” (“Multimodal Literature” 420; my emphasis), and her perspective is representative of approaches to multimodality more generally. Even if she references poetry repeatedly (along with “children’s picture books” [421]), her premise is nevertheless a *narrative* one. Understood in this particular way, multimodality is the proper object of narratology, a different way of telling stories than in “monomodal (verbal) texts” (421). This position, I venture, needs to be challenged along with the larger paradigm on which it is based, namely the dominance of narrative as the privileged and indeed *normal* form of contemporary literary and cultural production and analysis. The goal is certainly not to return to a similar privileging of nonnarrative forms such as the New Critical focus on a particular type of lyric poetry. Instead, I want to suggest that multimodality should not be considered a narrative technique by default, in which any nonnarrative aspect serves a narrative purpose after all, but rather also as a particularly effective way of going *beyond* narration.

The concept of narrative liminality is a useful critical tool in this endeavor as it draws attention to the complex contact zone between narrative and nonnarrative modes of representation instead of assuming that the two can be as neatly separated as the binary terms at first suggest. In the following, I want to analyze a particularly salient example of such an aesthetic practice, Mark Z. Danielewski’s pentalogy *The Familiar* (2015–17), which was originally conceived as a twenty-seven-part series but has been ‘paused’ indefinitely after the first ‘season’ (@markzdanielewski; on seriality in [and of] *The Familiar*, cf. Ven). *The Familiar* is probably the most ambitious novelistic project in contemporary US literature, a blend of manifold visual, textual, and material features combined in the book object whose range combines the very local—the plot of the twelve-year-old girl Xanther who finds a mysterious kitten in Los Angeles in 2014—to the universal, as eight other stories and protagonists (Xanther’s parents Astair and Anwar, Luther, Özgür, Shnork, Jingjing, Isandõrno, Cas) radiate from this center and numerous other perspectives expand the novel to include, potentially, anything. This encyclopedic range is paralleled by a wide variety of styles that include software code as much as free indirect narrative, concrete poetry, or comics, all kept together by a formal rigidity that also establishes the serial quality of the novels.

With more space available it would have been desirable to discuss all of Danielewski’s major works in order to show how *House of Leaves* (2000) enacts the process of transforming metafiction into metamediality, how *Only Revolutions*

(2006) shows us the complete result, and how *The Familiar* expands it further by fully incorporating more non-textual visual elements. All three base their meaning-making on a genuine connection (and not subordination) of narrative and nonnarrative aspects, and all three consider not the text but the book their proper medium. Restricting myself to Danielewski's pentalogy in the following, I will argue that it is aesthetically situated on this fuzzy border between narrative and nonnarrative meaning production, and that its manifold strategies of combining visual, textual, and material elements serve to create a productive tension between the narrative form of the novel and nonnarrative symbolic practices without privileging one or the other. In other words, this aesthetic is neither interested in making the novel a nonnarrative form (and thus abolishing it as a form in the process) nor in enriching or illustrating a basic narrative with nonnarrative ornaments. Rather, its goal is to have neither of the two as a secondary supplement of the other but to incorporate them as equal halves of an aesthetic form that diminishes the dominance of narrative and the primacy of the textual without giving up on narrative or the text. This means analyzing the multimodality of Danielewski's five novels in terms of how they mark the limit of narration and include both sides of this permeable border in their meaning production. This oscillation seeks to neither clarify nor dissolve the distinction, to neither construct nor destruct, but to genuinely deconstruct it in a strict Derridean sense.

In terms of Frank's notion of spatial form,¹ Danielewski's novels thus complicate the sequentiality of narrative with the simultaneity of other semiotic modes that create meaning not by progression but by juxtaposition and superposition.² They also mark a shift from a narrated sequence of events to a nonnarrative symbolism. Notably considering both modernist poetry and the modernist novel together in a conflation of narrative and nonnarrative literary forms, Frank argues that the reader of both is supposed to apprehend these works "spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence" (225), and that both undermine "the inherent consecutiveness of language, frustrating the reader's normal expectation of a sequence and forcing him to perceive the elements of the poem as juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time" (227). This dichotomy results in a productive tension rather than in a complete shift from one aesthetic paradigm to another; such texts strive toward spatiality while still being rooted in their inescapable temporality. Even if the text is there all at once it cannot be read as such but only in sequence (and never two texts at the same time), and its mediality constrains it to a sequential temporality much more than other media such as image, film, or music, which are much

1 For different considerations of *Only Revolutions* in light of Frank's concept, see Hayles; McHale; and Pöhlmann.

2 This is one way in which *House of Leaves*, in Ridvan Askin's Deleuzian reading, achieves a "differentiation of narrative" (100).

more based on synchronicity. Multimodality is a way of negotiating between these extremes and setting them to work in a combined process of meaning-making. Visual and material elements are a particularly effective way of introducing true simultaneity to a textual medium that is necessarily sequential, adding a spatial axis to the temporal one.

The multimodality of *The Familiar* involves typographic aspects such as font, color, and visual arrangement like in Danielewski's earlier novels, but the pentalogy expands this visual-material repertoire by a more extensive use of actual images throughout the text (and not just in the appendix or on the cover as in the prior novels). *The Familiar* is full of images that may or may not be constituted typographically, and it is best described as a multifarious exploration of the relation between image and text that operates beyond the linear and hierarchical notions of illustration or ekphrasis (which would consider one secondary to the other). This is the first sense in which the novels use narrative liminality in their meaning-making, but they also take their readers to a narrative limit in a second, related sense, in that they offer a unique narrative perspective that is inextricably tied to the visual and material qualities of the book instead of just the text.³ I will discuss these limits by moving from the first to the second and then back, hoping to eventually show both sides of this same coin.

2. The Visual Aesthetics of *The Familiar*: Simultaneity and Sequentiality

The nine narrative strands of the book are distinguished visually by different fonts and marked by different colors in the corners of the pages of the respective chapters. Xanther's color is pink, and both the title and each instance of the word *familiar* are set in pink so that each instance of this color—be it in the recurring omission marks, the thread of the book's binding, or the fractals in the book's gutter—hints at the presence of the cat that Xanther finds in volume one, which accompanies not only Xanther but also the whole novel as an uncanny familiar. Aside from the different fonts, each of the nine sections is also marked by certain typographical idiosyncrasies: Anwar's and Astair's chapters are full of parentheses ('parent-heses'), hers only round, his in all sorts of styles. Cas's chapters are typographically most conspicuous since their text is usually aligned around a round blank space. This is more or less explained narratively in the course of the novels: Cas owns an 'Orb,' a human-made machine that enables her to 'scry,' a peculiar way of seeing. Readers are being made aware of her dependency on this unique mode of perception by this

3 For clarity, I will refer to this second type as 'VEM liminality' in the following, explaining the term in due course.

blank space, a central presence and absence in her narrative, a gap that is formed by the text itself and as such demands a visual and symbolic interpretation.

More generally, visuality is so prominent in *The Familiar* that it no longer makes sense to consider the novel to be fundamentally textual, as still was the case with *House of Leaves* and *Only Revolutions*. The merging of image and text is omnipresent, and it operates between the reductive extremes that would consider one merely an illustration or description of the other. Instead, they are at times placed in contrast, and especially the text in Xanther's chapters is often pushed aside by visual elements or overlaid by them. At other times there is a unity of image and text that is usually found in concrete poetry, such as when Xanther wonders in the rain how many drops there might be, and this question is repeated across the page in slanted lines (TFv1 62-63)⁴. Xanther's increasing connection to the spiritual world of her familiar is expressed by a multiplication of lines and hashmarks that condense into needles, branches, trees, and eventually a forest that leaves no more text visible (TFv2 779). This forest corresponds to the animalistic power of the familiar as well as to Xanther's epilepsy, and her transition into this parallel world and her loss of control during a seizure are conveyed through a clash between image and text. As a consequence of this transgression in the second volume, the branches first overlap (TFv2 90) and then fully cover the pink corner of the page (TFv2 782-83), and their presence causes the absence of a page number (TFv2 91). In the fourth volume (TFv4 539-55), the forest also changes color, and images as well as colored words distort and smear until both combine in the chaos of a typographical and pictorial representation that is dominated by the Orbs that appear in Cas's chapters and the inside covers of each novel. These images are arranged serially, but the novel nevertheless leaves sequential narration behind in these passages and turns toward a nonnarrative symbolism of simultaneity whose meanings are created by the visual arrangement on the page rather than by linguistic semantics.

The novels contain yet another kind of temporality and text-image relation in the form of C++ code when Anwar is debugging a program called "Cataplyst" (suggesting a combination of cat, catalyst, and cataclysm) (TFv2 112-15). Anwar also shows Xanther a version of the game "Paradise Open," on whose engine he is working. He comments on the execution of the code by saying: "Image subitizes language [...]. But at what cost?" (TFv1 380). This transformation of text into image occurs practically immediately, and it points toward a possibility of how the different temporalities of textuality and visuality may be approximated. 'Subitization' usually refers to the instantaneous recognition of quantities without counting their elements individually (for instance on six-sided dice), yet the term is not only used metaphorically for the execution of software here but also describes the tension

4 In citing the different volumes of *The Familiar*, I am following the format used in the novels themselves, as they cross-reference each other.

between the different temporalities of image and text in the novel. It would be too simplistic to just always consider this to be a linear process in which the image provides the cognitive shortcut to linguistic and textual perception; instead, this very discrepancy is part of the novel's meaning-making, and this dialectic intertwines with that of narrative and nonnarrative elements. This does not mean that text would play the narrative role and image the nonnarrative one. On the contrary: *The Familiar* breaks with such simple assignments and instead uses these two axes to create a coordinate system that allows for much more complex positions.

The novel repeatedly uses the pictorial qualities of text to play with sequentiality and simultaneity. For example, in volume two, Astair cannot remember the name of the artist who made the expensive glass sculpture in her living room (TFv2 52), and thus the name also remains blurred for the reader (even if one may decipher it as Jim Helhenny Joab after the name has been mentioned later on). The fifth volume, when Jingjing has traveled to Xanther in L.A. to accompany the old woman Tian Li, contains two more significant instances of such textual visuality. Tian Li, the prior custodian of the cat, initially speaks to Xanther using Jingjing as an interpreter, and when he fails to understand her, there is no word but only a blurred cloud between the quotation marks (TFv5 338). However, Xanther understands Tian Li herself even though she does not speak Chinese, and this is represented on the page by having both the Chinese and English sentences in front of said cloud, as if they were spoken at the same time. This is the situation in which the central catastrophe (yes, 'cat-astrophe') of the novel occurs, and much like Xanther's seizures it is represented textually and visually—it is shown rather than told. However, this transgressive catastrophe may only be analyzed in full when considering it in conjunction with the second aspect of narrative liminality I already mentioned, VEM liminality, which connects all of Danielewski's publications.

3. Narcons as Narrative Limits

Readers are taken to this limit by way of a presence that at first seems to be narrative and metanarrative. In the first volume, they encounter it in the opening narrative of prehistoric humans, in which each sentence is bracketed by the symbols ∴ and ∴, using two different fonts. The scene ends with a commentary in a third font: "For alternative set variants of gestural translations, including alveolar clicks, numerous sibilants, bilabial fricatives, retroflex approximants, pharyngeal consonants, see 19210491-07289230-030566763230, order VI, v. 26, n. 13" (TFv1 43). This mysterious narrative instance reappears again in the first chapter to add a date to Xanther's thoughts about *Battlestar Galactica* (TFv1 52), and a little later it offers some context to help readers understand what is going on: "The Ibrahims moved to California last year" (TFv1 54). However, the first Jingjing chapter shows rather

clearly that this is more than just some kind of annotating commentary, and that these narrative instances cannot simply be described as narrators in the classical sense. While we still get a straightforward explanation on the first page of “pelesit” as “[a]nimistic spirit frequently aligned with Polong” (TFv1 101), we do *not* get the translation of Tian Li’s Chinese we might hope for depending on our language skills, but instead an irritated “[r]eally? Not your Google bitch” (TFv1 104). This is the point when, at the latest, it becomes evident that this is not a neutral, objective, omniscient narrator, and this is further confirmed in Cas’s first chapter when we encounter for the first time a statement by one of these three instances that has apparently been redacted (TFv1 156). Shortly after, three of them comment on the narrative in different fonts, although at this point it is still unclear if they are actually communicating with each other. Notably, these comments all pertain to Cas’s Orb: “Here where the ontology of thought lives. [...] Here where the epistemology of living incarnates Judgment. [...] Here where the origin of eschatological limits finds every consequential thread” (TFv1 157). It is no accident that this reference to threads connotes the three fates, as Cas—whose name evokes Cassandra—makes the connection herself: “But the more Cas looked into her Orb of Lachesis, the more it seemed that Clotho and Atropos looked back at her [...]” (TFv2 283). These mythological associations are certainly justifiable, but they do not explain the three narrative instances. Instead, they reveal themselves after two thirds of the first volume in a way that is marked as a radical break by symbolic, narrative, and medial means and which hints at the full scale of what ‘metafictional’ hardly begins to describe.

Anwar’s chapter is followed by a vertical line that begins this parenthesis, just like another vertical will end it. The first sentence is “[a] good enough place to pause” (TFv1 564), so that both lines may be read as a pause symbol (a visual and symbolic reference to *Only Revolutions*). This singular moment reveals the massive narrative framework, as the insertion takes place metaphorically in the minimal time span between the lines of the pause sign. The parenthesis is marked visually as well, as it occurs on purely white pages whose clarity distinguishes them from the other pages of the book, whose light beige tone readers may perhaps only notice when offered this contrast. There are no page numbers and no colored page corners, which significantly only occurred before when Xanther asked about the raindrops (TFv1 62-65, 68-69, 478-79, 494-95, 506-07, 514-15). This visual parallel indicates that Xanther potentially has access to this higher order, and her question of “[w]hat kind of counting equals this sort of overwhelmingness?” (TFv1 61) is an inquiry into the processing power that may represent, calculate, and simulate a chaotic system like a thunderstorm down to the very last drop of rain (which she may encounter during the demonstration of ‘Paradise Open,’ TFv1 348). The narrative instance that then introduces itself as “[n]arrative Construct. Narcon for short” and as a programmed entity, “nothing but numbers. Zeros and ones” (TFv1 565), can be described as a

tool of said power—and it remains unclear whether this power is representing or simulating the world.

This expository chapter introduces mainly TF-Narcon⁹ but also TF-Narcon³ and TF-Narcon²⁷, which operate on different ontological levels and at least initially are not aware of their respective higher instances; two of the five parameters that TF-Narcon⁹ describes deny such a possibility: “MetaNarcons Do Not Exist” and “Narcons Cannot Interact With Other Narcons (Though rumor has it we can sometimes hear each other.) / (I can’t.)” (TFv1 573). TF-Narcon²⁷ is in charge of cross-references within the twenty-seven-volume series of novels, which usually happens retrospectively but occasionally also in reference to future volumes within a ‘season’ (cf. TFv4 181). Furthermore, TF-Narcon²⁷ can narrate what will happen to certain characters in the future (cf. TFv1 576). TF-Narcon⁹ does not have access to these levels but contains all nine narrative strands of *The Familiar* as subsets of a narrative instance that is very much formally variable. Notably, its long catalogue of possible forms includes the “Chronomosaic” (TFv1 566) and thus establishes a parallel to *Only Revolutions*, in which the term is used on the copyright page to describe the ‘history gutter’ that runs parallel to the ‘main’ body of text. This suggests that the Narcons are not only active in *The Familiar*, and there are a sufficient number of cross-references to assume that Danielewski’s works are connected: The word “house” is printed in blue on several occasions in *The Familiar* (cf. TFv1 729, TFv5 760), as it is throughout *House of Leaves*, and Freya claims that “there’s a ladder in the floor” (TFv4 217); the insertion of a second L in a different font turns ‘always’ into “allways” (TFv1 798) like in *Only Revolutions*; Xanther’s eyes have different colors (TFv1 388), blue and brown, but like Sam’s and Hailey’s in *Only Revolutions* they are “allways sparking with green and gold” (TFv2 522) and “of yellow and green. Same old same old” (TFv2 767); and Cas and her partner Bobby are addressed by others as Sam and Hailey (cf. TFv4 62). These intertextual references situate all of Danielewski’s works in the same universe, only not trivially with regard to setting or character but in a more complex way in reference to a metalevel called VEM, which is also the most comprehensive instance of narrative liminality.

4. VEM Liminality

While VEM still remains a rather obscure phenomenon in and across Danielewski’s works, *The Familiar* at least contains a number of strong hints as to what it may actually be. I venture that VEM is a mode of accessing the entire reality of all “manifold universes” (TFv3, n.p.), a transcendent site of the imagination that, as the Narcons state the first time they say something together, combines ontology, epistemology, judgment, and eschatology (cf. TFv1 157). Apparently, the Narcons have limited access to this infinite resource so that they, in their different ontological orders, may

theoretically truly narrate anything and everything, including for example the pre-historic scenes that open each volume. Cas's Orb grants her a similar access, only to a much more restricted extent, "summoning to life within her Orb those early glimmers of VEM" (TFv1 569). She can only see the past, and there are only six confirmed so-called Clips that show, among other things, Xanther and Cas herself. The most remarkable thing about these Clips is best exemplified by "Clip #4," which is the subject of a short story Danielewski published separately in 2012.

In this text, Realic S. Tarnen pursues this very Clip, which was apparently shot in Toulant Ouse's kitchen, and which shows him watching a film projected on the wall that, in turn, shows his daughter Audra drowning in the Pacific. The projected film is shot from an impossible perspective and in impossible conditions underwater. This is enhanced even further when Ouse describes his own Clip as just as impossible:

'You tell me this instant! Because there—' and he pointed an accusatory finger at his blank if egg-shelling wall, as if he were pointing from the page you now read this on, as if he were pointing at you. 'There, where it should have stood, had to have stood, to record your 'Clip 4,' to do all that panning and zooming, close-upping and such, there, right there, there never stood no one, and there sure never was no camera.' (185)

Ouse's metafictional gesture points beyond the printed page and blurs the ontological boundaries between text and reader, and it indicates the revolutionary power of VEM that makes it, in the words of Cas's antagonist Recluse, an omnipotent weapon, "a weapon that no individual has a right to wield. It represents an imbalance of power grossly disproportionate to the way the world must create consensus" (TFv3 698). He furthermore describes VEM in contrast to art: "See, you and I are far greater than any artist. What we created isn't something to be experienced by others. What we created is the means through which to experience that which will always exceed art and us: here" (TFv5 470). The extent of this experiential power is "the majesty of infinite revelation" (TFv5 101), or the possibility of truly being able to see everything, for example the scene in Ouse's kitchen or the death of his daughter. The access to this metalevel radically questions the ontological and epistemological foundation of this world, and the complexity of this condition goes far beyond the linear ontological transgressions that occur for example when a character in a novel meets his author.

This difference is evident in that Cas's tenuous access to VEM does not grant her contact with the Narcons, and she does not gain full insight into the nature of her ontological metalepsis. In turn, the Narcons are aware of their own nature as software but are also explicitly limited in their programming to prevent them from asking what may lie beyond their own boundaries. VEM then describes the most fundamental or all-encompassing instance of this order, the software engine that

makes possible and contains all possible executions of the program. Anwar's genius friend Mefisto is a candidate for having created or discovered it, as he describes a secret project that also involved Cas by saying "[c]oncerns seeing. Or perceiving" (TFv3 493), while asking Anwar about the ideal compression of information: "But even if we could compress everything into something manageable in a lifetime [...] or even manageable in the blink of an eye: what would such knowledge look like?" (TFv3 485). Later on, they discuss God as an artist and conclude that such a creator would only produce one thing, "[n]o product. Just the algorithm itself," and they describe their own existence in these terms: "Here then is to living in the algorithm.' Or to just being the algorithm" (TFv3 683). Mefisto's own programming language, "My Word Ode" (TFv3 491), could contain or be the VEM algorithm, since "Word Ode" is an anagram of the name that Xanther eventually gives to her cat, Redwood, and of the name "Mister Doder Wo" (TFv1 254) that she uses to describe her epilepsy (and when she does, her alleged aphasia is purely textual, as she also asks "Door? Wed?" in yet another permutation that is visual, not auditory).

5. Xanther's Transgression

This example indicates that Xanther, in conjunction with her cat, has a special role in this initially stable constellation of narrative levels of reality: not rather trivially, by becoming aware of her own textuality, but by interfering with these ontological boundaries. Mefisto calls her an "Aberration" (TFv3 494), an anomaly that should not exist in this order. This is implied early on in the novel. While Xanther's question about the number of raindrops, about the engine of her world, at least suggests her metaphysical interest, she goes on to speculate in a conversation with her therapist about the existence of what will later be revealed to be the Narcons:

'Dr. Potts? Do you ever think, like, there's a conversation going on, you know, like somewhere out there, somehow parallel to the one you're having with yourself, like in your head, or even with someone else? [...] Uhm, like there are these voices that know everything. ∴ So close. ∴ Like voices that don't really live and can't die and have been around forever ∴ such a noisy, boisterous parade ∴, before the start of things and will be even around after the end of things. ∴ She has no idea. ∴ You know, privileged with all that's that. Like Google, only true.' (TFv1 193)

The Narcons recognize themselves in Xanther's description as timeless, omniscient "voices," but this privileged, untouchable position is increasingly challenged as Xanther, through her familiar, gradually gains access to the world behind her world, and there are more and more of the "glitches" that TF-Narcon⁹ mentions as a consequence of narrative imponderabilities (cf. TFv1 566). When Astair draws a floor

plan of their house, the Narcons surprisingly do not have access to it, and the image is covered by black blots for readers as well: “: Hold on! How is it that I can't see this but Anwar can? Is that possible? : / : It's impossible for me not to see this but I can't. : / : ERROR: uncategorized disturbance :” (TFv3 489). The Narcons increasingly recognize that the parameters are breaking down, so that TF-Narcon²⁷ is forced to do a reset at the beginning of the fourth volume: “Retrace COMPLETE. / Remap COMPLETE. / Overwrite SUCCESSFUL. / TFv3 pp. 322, 453, 837. / Peace” (TFv4 53).

However, the Narcons lose this struggle for the execution of the narrative program within its parameters, as Xanther herself becomes a glitch (or rather a virus) that can neither be corrected nor controlled and which fundamentally shocks the system as such as a presence that treads the line of narrative liminality. TF-Narcon⁹ recognizes Xanther's exceptionality already in the Narcon exposition chapter, stating that it knows her “down to a near-atomic level—near because Planck-scale analysis must address quantum superposition resolutions which do not always resolve considerably and broach VEM IDENTITY suppositions” (TFv1 571). Yet this tiny rest of uncertainty will continue to grow in proportion during the course of the pentalogy—and as it does the Narcon parameters break down—so that, for example, TF-Narcon⁹ can make its cross-references to earlier volumes that used to be reserved for TF-Narcon²⁷ (cf. TFv4 344). Especially parameter 3, “Narcons Cannot Interact With Non-Narcons. And Vice-Versa. No Matter What” (TFv1 574), becomes increasingly questionable. TF-Narcon⁹ actually already has its doubts about that one when describing it:

Sometimes I swear she can see—without mediation, without processing, without artifice, definitely without me—other people's Narcons! Sometimes she even seems close to seeing me and in a way too that suggests exceeding even my possible awareness. Which is impossible. Categorically impossible. I can't even see myself. (TFv1 574).

However, Xanther increasingly uses the very words that the Narcons use in their conversation, which they at first dismiss as coincidence (cf. TFv4 141). As she gradually opens herself to this plane of reality, her anchoring in her own plane becomes weaker so that, for example, she wants to spend an evening during her visit to New York City to see “this really popular musical,” *Hamilton*, which however has not yet premiered in 2014 and of which no other character has even heard: “: Confirming: not part of her historical possibilities ... :” (TFv4 450). Xanther's transgression even leads her to repeat on the first page of her chapter the sentence that concluded Luther's preceding one (cf. TFv4 737-39). Yet her access to other textual levels merely marks the transition to her access to the material level of the book itself. The question “Is she smelling smoke?” (TFv4 751) overlays an image that suggests the

page itself is burnt, and the widening hole reveals Xanther's forest as a reality behind reality.

This dissolution of the boundaries of reality has already been suggested by the visual representation of the forest itself, which covers or displaces other markers such as page numbers or the colored corners. Yet, these pages retain the predominant beige and do not shift to the purer white of the Narcon exposition, and so Xanther does not simply change to this metalevel but remains in a contact zone between both realities. The changing fractals in the gutter of the book support this interpretation further. They may basically be read as signs of Narcon activity, which are "fractally locatable" (TFv1 565). When the fractals are missing, for example, near the blank of the Orb in Cas's chapters (TFv1 146-47) or next to the three large pink periods (e.g. TFv1 271) that signify the cat's cry for help, their absence points toward a level of reality beyond the Narcons that intrudes on their narration. Notably, Xanther rescues the cat precisely from such a transition zone as she reaches for it just when it is about to be flushed away by the torrential rain, "half of her on the sidewalk, the other half in the gutter" (TFv1 503), and this access to the gutter in her world is also access to the gutter of the book. Xanther's existence between these two worlds, on the most important narrative limit in *The Familiar*, is conveyed concisely in this situation, and the cat, after its rescue, is present in the book's gutter as much as the Narcons. The fractals occasionally change color from black to pink after the Narcon exposition, but this is never the case before Xanther's deed. The fractals usually remain in the gutter, but in one instance (cf. TFv2 779) they break onto the page as if to point at the branches next to it, which, if seen as redwood branches, would indicate the presence of Redwood and its constituent role in creating the forest that Xanther may enter. The fractals are missing accordingly in some passages relating to the forest.

This presence in the gutter becomes most significant at the end of the pentalogy when Xanther brings about the aforementioned ontological catastrophe. This was already foreshadowed by the complete breakdown of the Narcon parameters: "∴ She can't hear you. She mustn't. ∴ ∴ Would the world end? ∴" (TFv5 803). The world does not end, but it is fundamentally reconfigured. During a confrontation with Jingjing, Xanther instinctively causes an event that could be described as setting off "the bomb the imagination constructs" (TFv5 577-78): Across more than fifty pages (cf. TFv5 570-625), a circular, pink and black blast wave is gradually expanding and its power is not only distorting the words on the pages but also the paratextual page numbers and the time stamps that begin and end each chapter. It even forces the fractals from the gutter (cf. TFv583). This event not only unsettles the narrative or the text but really *the book* itself, and in this remarkable section *The Familiar* assumes a unique multimodal form that cannot sufficiently be described in the conventional terms of a novel or a comic. The circles transcend all narrative strands and chapters, and the ontological catastrophe that

caused them affects all aspects of the work. Even the Narcons do not remain unaffected. TF-Narcon⁹ has apparently suffered the narratological equivalent of blast trauma: “What’s happened, happening, I don’t understand, except like I’m deaf, in my right ear for sure, hearing there is definitely going cotton on cotton” (TFv5 614). Xanther directly picks up on the fight the other two Narcons are having, and so they all must accept the fact that Xanther can not only interact with them but also influence them: “Are we, uh, like, just as susceptible to distortions?” (TFv5 619). The question of these distortions is, however, already answered by the text in which it is posed, since it is itself distorted by the blast wave, and readers witness directly how VEM liminality has been revealed and breached at the same time.

6. Conclusion: Treading the Narrative Limit

As Xanther’s cat finally comes awake, the Narcons admit to their failure with regard to this world and the counterforce that has arisen in it: ∴ How The Verse speaks through us ... ∴ / ∴ Voice is never enough. ∴ [...] ∴ We tried to describe a world. ∴ / ∴ Therein lay our vanity. ∴ / ∴ But I never tried to circumscribe a world. ∴ / ∴ Therein lay your salvation ∴” (TFv5 824-25). The Narcons remain active, but their access to “The Verse” is no longer privileged or exclusive, and the boundaries between the realities in the book (and not just in the text) are enduringly blurred—by a shock that may well be considered a deconstructive discharge of all the tension between narrative and nonnarrative elements that has built up in *The Familiar* and all of Danielewski’s works up until this point. This is a revelatory eruption that exposes narrative liminality as such but does not eradicate either the line or what it distinguishes; instead, it reveals this limit as the aesthetic driving force of the book itself as it oscillates between narrative and nonnarrative semiotic modes, between text and image, between the materiality of the book and its content as a medium, and also between narrative instances and those they narrate into existence. In short, this is the dialectic of the multimodal narrative liminality of *The Familiar*: The pentalogy takes us to multiple limits at the same time from both respective sides. It always insists that any of these lines is best considered a potential interface rather than a boundary that circumscribes a world and that we had better be very careful about the hierarchies we may want to introduce in describing these sides.

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