3. *House of Leaves*, the Network Paradigm, and the Abstract Supernatural Media Virus

"Old shelters – television, magazines, movies – won't protect you anymore. You might try scribbling in a journal, on a napkin, maybe even in the margins of this book. That's when you'll discover you longer trust the very walls you always took for granted."

Mark Z. Danielewski, House of Leaves

"And so, when it comes to the relationship between wholes and networks, it is not always clear which form will dominate. Some networks can be contained; others thwart containment."

Caroline Levine, Forms

3.1 Lost in the (Textual) Labyrinth: The Multimodal Transmedia Narrative

Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves* (2000a) is a fascinating, highly complex text that confronts its readers with not one network, but with a multitude of different overlapping networks: networks pervade every aspect of the novel at both the thematic and the structural levels. *House of Leaves* shares significant characteristics with the BBC broadcast *Ghostwatch* in terms of its focus on the nuclear family in the haunted house, its satiric treatment of scholarship and scientific investigation, and its blurring of fact and fiction. As with the aforementioned mockumentary, Danielewski's narrative explores ongoing

changes concerning society, the personal relationships between people, and the understanding of information, knowledge, and of reality. There are, however, significant differences between these two narratives with regard to their portrayal of the network as well as the representation of the supernatural media virus, as this chapter shows.

Whereas the haunted house in *Ghostwatch* serves mostly as a symbol for society at large, *House of Leaves* introduces the house metaphor to explore the loss of homeliness and familiarity caused by the seeming omnipresence of networks everywhere. Danielewski's novel is preoccupied less with the concrete implementation of the network society than it is with the shift towards the network paradigm, where networks of all kinds are unquestioningly regarded as the prime organizational principle in all matters, and where the networking process is perceived as a natural imperative. The narrative emphasizes that the network paradigm does not introduce one, all-encompassing network; this was a major point of critique voiced by Levine in her discussion of Castells' technology-focused approach to the network society (Levine 2015: 114). Instead, *House of Leaves* encompasses the implementation of numerous intersecting networks: communication networks, transportation networks, information networks, social networks, technology networks, and media networks.

House of Leaves is a labyrinthine novel that continuously asks its readers to interact physically with a book that has been composed as a multilayered, multiperspectival, and multimodal text featuring at least four interlinked narrative levels: these interactions include leafing back and forth in search of hidden clues and lost footnotes or turning it on its head as sections of writing might be upside down, to name two examples. These footnotes often take up as much space as – or even more than – the supposed main text, thereby destabilizing the distinction between main narrative and subplot, text and paratext, center and margins. The use of color coding to accentuate certain words and passages as well as the use of diverse encryption ciphers, such as Morse code or acrostic code, imply that seemingly every page of the novel may offer some deeper, secret meaning. Further complicating the mystery, the novel was released alongside two companion pieces: the novella *The*

Whalestoe Letters (2000b), written by Danielewski himself, and the music album *Haunted* (2000a) by the artist Poe, Danielewski's sister Anne Decatur Danielewski; parts of the narrative's meaning, therefore, lies outside of the novel. Reading *House of Leaves*, in other words, resembles detective work.

Readers find not only written text within the book, but also numerous photographs – many of which, in turn, portray drawings or handwritten letters. These photographs allow the reader to investigate how well the "original" artifact – a letter, a scrap of writing on a napkin, and so on – has been transposed into printed text.[1] The novel emphasizes the process by which a book comes to be through such multimodality, illustrating that a book page never presents an unmediated version of such a handwritten letter – somebody deliberately created the novel's confusing typography. Additionally, the novel provides a musical staff of the song "Johnny Comes Marching Home" (Danielewski 2000a: 479). This inclusion further underlines this process and emphasizes the extent to which mediation always depends on conventions: only readers who can decipher Western musical notation can recognize the song to which the novel is alluding.

As N. Katherine Hayles points out, none of the techniques used in *House of Leaves* are truly novel (2002: 112). For instance, similar strategies can be found in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), the latter of which was released merely a year before the first online release of *House of Leaves* by Danielewski himself. Furthermore, *House of Leaves* has by no means remained the last of this

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1   Wolfgang Hallet discusses the multimodal novel's capacity to portray "deviant forms of world apprehension" (2014: 153). In other words, novels tend towards multimodality when they feature focalizing characters with unusual cognitive skills, such as the narrator in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, who might be autistic (ibid). Such texts go beyond the conventions of the monomodal novel by featuring a range of nonverbal forms making the experiences of the character accessible. A similar claim could be made for *House of Leaves*, as this novel features a large number of characters suffering from some form of mental disorder. However, such a discussion would go beyond the scope of this chapter.

brand of experimental literature to achieve cult status in popular culture: most novels published by Danielewski are known as examples of visual writing, in which the complex typography mirrors the events of the story. As an additional example, the 2013 novel *S.*, written by Doug Dorst and conceived by J. J. Abrams, presents itself not only through a series of handwritten comments to be found in the book's margins, but further features loose supplementary materials such as postcards, photographs, newspaper cutouts, and so on, inserted at specific points throughout the novel. What sets *House of Leaves* apart from these texts is the fact that it is a distinctly Gothic network narrative that explores anxieties relating to networks, the networking process, and the potentially harmful and contagious information that might travel through these connections. Networks function as both thematic focus and discursive strategy in this novel.

Like *Ghostwatch*, Danielewski's Gothic narrative blurs the boundaries of fact and fiction by both telling the tale of a mysterious, fragmented, and madness-inducing manuscript, and by presenting itself as that specific piece of writing. What appears to be the initial text is actually an unfinished scholarly manuscript written by a man named Zampanò, in which he provides a detailed analysis of a documentary film called "The Navidson Report."[2] This film portrays the Navidson family, and tells the story of how their life is turned on its head as they move into the uncanny house on Ash Tree Lane, which constantly transforms its inner layout, growing and shrinking spontaneously. After his death, Zampanò's increasingly confusing and extremely fragmented monograph is retrieved by the young tattoo artist Johnny Truant, who edits the text and adds his own footnotes, introduction, and appendix to the already vast body of text. As his footnotes reveal, there are several inconsistencies in Zampanò's tale: not only is Truant unable to locate either the mysterious house or the documentary film, but he also, and more importantly, explains

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2   In order to avoid confusion, the documentary film is here identified as "The Navidson Record" with quotation marks, whereas Zampanò's monograph is denoted as *The Navidson Record* in italics.

that Zampanò "was blind as a bat" and therefore could not possibly have watched "The Navidson Record" (Danielewski 2000a: xxi). Truant continues editing the manuscript nonetheless. However, his writing eventually becomes incomprehensible as well, increasingly diverging from the task of finishing Zampanò's monograph and instead writing about his own mental struggles. While Truant's exact fate remains unknown, his manuscript somehow gets into the hands of a group of unnamed editors who add a third set of footnotes to the text as well as some additional documents scattered throughout the manuscript's three appendices that reveal detailed information about Johnny Truant's life and family relations. The implication is that it is this version – edited multiple times by different people – that the reader of *House of Leaves* is holding in their hands.

Further complicating its ontological status, the novel fictionalizes its own publication history. The book's title page claims that the reader is holding a second edition in their hands, whereas the copyright page features the struck-out words "First Edition." Additionally, the edition notice claims the existence of four editions: Full Color; 2-Color – which can be either the "red" edition or the "blue" edition; Black & White; and Incomplete. Significantly, even scholars writing about *House of Leaves* come to no definitive conclusion as to which of these editions truly exist: Michael Hemmingson has discussed the differences in color coding in the two versions of the 2-Color edition (2011: 285), yet he fails to discuss the other editions; Pressman even claims that only the 2-Color and Black & White editions actually exist, whereas the Full Color and Incomplete versions are a hoax (2006: 124); however, in this study, it is precisely this Full Color edition that I refer to.

In contrast to *Ghostwatch*, which focuses predominantly on television and its reception in order to reflect on the evolution of the network society, *House of Leaves* expands this focus to encompass a variety of media, thereby negotiating the general prevalence of the network paradigm, instead of only the specific case of the network society. Multiple networks overlap in the novel, be it the growing house on Ash Tree Lane and the annotated monograph, which both resemble networks in their tendency to grow new links/hallways and to connect an increasing

number of nodes/rooms, the invisible network through which the documentary film and Zampanò's manuscript circulate, or even the novel itself, which comprises only one part of a larger transmedia network. The novel, therefore, reflects on the omnipresence of such networks and its consequences.

Furthermore, *House of Leaves* does not feature a clearly identifiable creature as a supernatural media virus. Of all of the narratives discussed here, *House of Leaves* provides the most abstract portrayal of a supernatural media virus; instead of a vicious monster or an unruly ghost, the text itself functions as a virus – growing, spreading, mutating, infecting, and consuming other media. Fred Botting writes: "*House of Leaves* introduces a significant shift in horror, ghost and gothic genres. It locates monstrosity elsewhere, unseen, an elsewhere associated with, but not confined by, an allusive, ludic and elusive movement of texts, forms and media" (2014: 199). It is precisely through this abstract portrayal of the supernatural media virus that *House of Leaves* exemplifies the extent to which the network and the virus have become co-constitutive.

Analyses of *House of Leaves* usually focus on its postmodernist aspects (Hayles 2002; Graulund 2006; Belletto 2009; Hemmingson 2011), its commentary on a post-print, digitalized media environment (Hayles 2002; Pressman 2006), or its treatment of scholarship, authority, and authenticity (Hayles 2002; Graulund 2006; Belletto 2009; Hemmingson 2011). Pressman, for instance, views *House of Leaves* as "the central node in a network of multimedia, multiauthored forms that collectively comprise its narrative" (2006: 107). The novel's readers are encouraged to engage in a "networked reading strategy" (ibid: 116). It no longer makes much sense to speak of a linear plotline when discussing *House of Leaves*; instead, readers must develop new approaches to this particular "house of leaves," actively seeking out the links and pathways it offers.

Hayles focuses specifically on the novel's postmodernist perspective, claiming that the text is "[c]amouflaged as a haunted house tale" in order to question the notions of reality and mediation (2002: 110). In *House of Leaves*, according to Hayles, the unreliable narrator has been supplanted by the "REMEDIATED NARRATOR, a literary invention foregrounding a proliferation of inscription technologies that evacuate con-

sciousness as the source of production and recover in its place a mediated subjectivity that cannot be conceived as an independent entity" (ibid: 117, original emphasis). In other words, the novel self-reflexively emphasizes that the characters it represents exist only because they have been recorded and mediated.

In a similar manner, Rune Graulund explains how "Danielewski's tale of the haunted house is [...] a parable for the postmodern realization that the concepts of the real, the authentic and the true – once stable and familiar concepts – now ring uncannily hollow" (2006: 387). Harking back to Gérard Genette's concept of the paratext[3] – textual and typographic elements framing the published main text, such as page numbers, footnotes, publishing information, and so on – Graulund discusses how *House of Leaves* deliberately foregrounds these usually unobtrusive features in order to unsettle the balance between authenticity and fiction (ibid: 379). In this novel, the boundary of what belongs to the main narrative and what is mere paratext is constantly challenged; even the edition notice and the publishing information already appear to be infiltrated (see Fig. 3.1).

Johnny Truant and the anonymous Editors hence become the "creepy evil things down below" in this interpretation, destabilizing what would otherwise appear to be the central narrative level of the book and oftentimes intersperse Zampanò's already dubious research with false references and incorrect information.

It is this play with paratext, in which the footnotes oftentimes take up as much space as the apparent main narrative, that inspired Hemmingson to read the novel as an architectural building:

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3   Genette divides paratext into two subcategories: peritext and epitext. The former exists within the book, whereas the latter consists of instances outside of the book, such as marketing campaigns or author interviews (Genette 1977: xviii). Strictly speaking, Graulund discusses the peritextual features of *House of Leaves* exclusively. However, since the distinction between peri- and epitext may prove difficult at times – for instance, epitexts such as interviews might at some point be included in a book as bonus material, thereby becoming peritexts – this chapter, too, uses the broader term of the paratext.

Fig. 3.1 The novel's edition notice
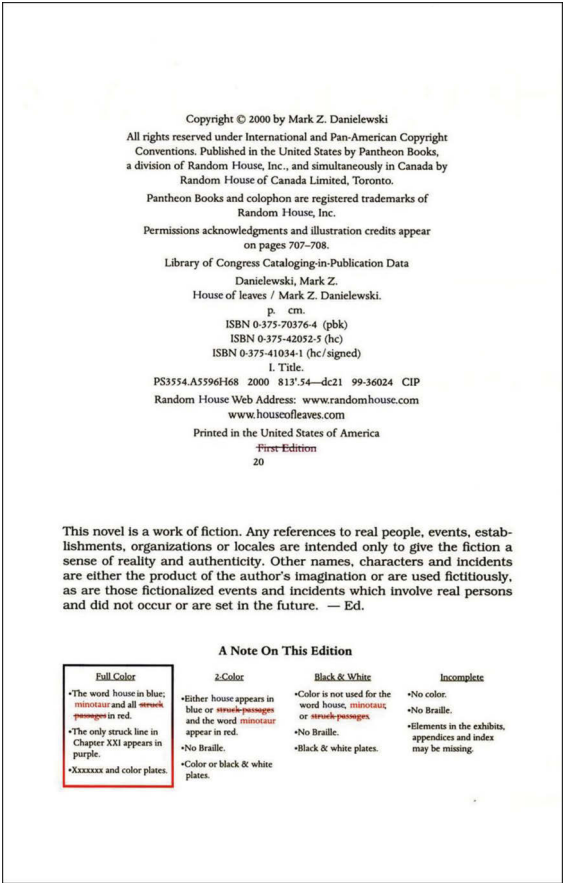
Source: Danielewski, Mark Z. (2000a): *House of Leaves*

> Taking the metaphor of the book as a house, with each chapter working as foundation, walls, doors, windows, and rooms, the footnotes, then, are found underneath the floorboards, in the crawlspace or basement. In some haunted house tales, the creepy evil things live down below, so it is fitting that the other voices separated from the main text reside here. (2011: 276)

House of Leaves is a Gothic haunted house tale in which the book itself turns into that house. In this chapter, I examine how the house metaphor and its diverse connotations – homeliness, familiarity, safety on the one hand and functionality and structure on the other – are used throughout the novel. Significantly, these metaphorical mappings pertain not only to the mysterious house on Ash Tree Lane, but to the monstrous text as a whole. In order to demonstrate this claim, the following section "enters" the narrative by focusing on its use of the house metaphor. *House of Leaves* reflects on the consequences of the network paradigm by interweaving metaphors of the house and the network: a sense of familiarity and safety is exchanged for confusion, alienation, and uprootedness.

Subsequently, the final section of this chapter draws attention to the portrayal of the supernatural media virus. The network and the virus are inseparable in the novel: an infectious information overload is an inherent part of the network itself. People subjected to the diverse networks inevitably become virus hosts, forced to expand upon and further circulate the corruptive film and manuscript. This section further analyzes how the virus always threatens to break beyond its boundaries: not only does the virus continuously evolve new viral vectors, but *House of Leaves* is also riddled by multiple metalepses and presents itself in the form of a transmedia narrative, indicating that the virus cannot be contained within a singular narrative layer or even within the print novel itself.

3.2   Alienation, Homelessness, and the Instability of the Text

For the Navidsons, the horror at the house on Ash Tree Lane begins after they return from a trip to Seattle. During their absence, an additional door has appeared in the bedroom upstairs, opening into a small closet space with smooth, black walls. Will Navidson, family father and photojournalist, attempts to fathom this "strange spatial violation" (Danielewski 2000a: 24) by acquiring the blueprints of the house and measuring its dimensions. Not only do his measurements fail to correspond to those of the plans, but he also discovers that the inner dimensions of the building exceed its outer length by a quarter of an inch. The investigation into the house begins with this unsettling discovery. Navidson calls in his brother, Tom, as well as the engineer Billy Reston, hoping that together they will be able to eliminate what at first appears to be a mere measuring inaccuracy. Instead of solving the riddle, however, they soon discover that a new hallway has emerged in the Navidsons' living room. Whereas the outer walls of the house remain unchanged, this hallway leads into a seemingly unending labyrinth of black rooms and hallways within the house. Navidson eventually contacts a small group of professional explorers – Holloway Roberts and his two assistants Kirby "Wax" Hook and Jed Leeder – hoping that they will be able to uncover the supernatural house's mystery.

It is through the tale of the Navidson family, and through the Holloway expedition in particular, that a key theme pervading all layers of *House of Leaves* becomes most apparent: the motif of scientific analysis, of taking measure and of gathering as much information as possible – and the failure to establish control through such knowledge. Navidson's attempts at eliminating the discrepancy of the house's dimensions cause him to acquire ever more sophisticated tools in the hope that such technology will solve the mystery. Yet, even those high tech devices only offer a more precise measurement of the ontological impossibility: "The interior of the house exceeds the exterior not by 1/4" but by 5/16"" (ibid: 32). Likewise, while the explorers approach the maze as a scientific puzzle – collecting wall samples, measuring distances, monitoring temperatures – the data that is collected is confusing, rather than

enlightening: the wall samples indicate that the house must be older than the solar system, whereas a sonar logging of a staircase within the maze implies that the depth of the house exceeds the circumference of the Earth. The gathering of knowledge becomes an attempt at familiarizing oneself with the rules and functions of the house; however, the endeavor always fails.
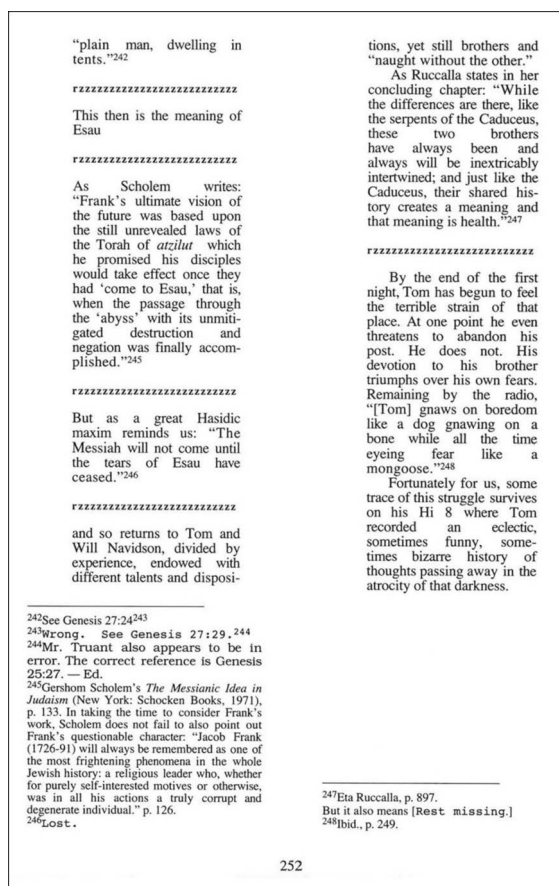
Zampanò, too, proves to be obsessed with analyzing and interpreting data. His main object of study is not the house, but rather the question of how it is represented in the documentary film. His monograph is annotated extensively in an attempt to cover every possible angle of interpretation,[4] thereby often foreclosing the reader's approach to the text:

> Fans of poststructuralism, for example, might conceive of the house as having a center that is not a center, so perhaps a judicious use of Derrida would be helpful when writing an essay on *House of Leaves* for a journal like *Genre*. But Zampanò has already provided a footnote, "strictly as an aside," that quotes liberally and in French from "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" […]. In this way, then, *House of Leaves* offers numerous pre-emptive readings: that is, it folds in various interpretive acts that would make sense to those coming to the novel from differing theoretical perspectives. (Belletto 2009: 107-108)

Once again, the knowledge gathered does not make the house, the film, or even the monograph itself easier to comprehend. After all, how does a Derridaean reading solve the mystery of a house that continuously morphs its interior structure? Instead, these numerous approaches unhinge *The Navidson Record*, which in the end is too detailed, too complex, and too unfocused to advance a clear reading of the film.

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4   One extreme example of Zampanò's treatment of footnotes can be observed in footnote 75, which spans two pages and simply consists of a list of photographers' names without any comment about their relevance (Danielewski 2000a: 64-67).

Fig. 3.2 Three sets of competing footnotes

"plain man, dwelling in tents."[242]

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This then is the meaning of Esau

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As Scholem writes: "Frank's ultimate vision of the future was based upon the still unrevealed laws of the Torah of *atzilut* which he promised his disciples would take effect once they had 'come to Esau,' that is, when the passage through the 'abyss' with its unmitigated destruction and negation was finally accomplished."[245]

zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz

But as a great Hasidic maxim reminds us: "The Messiah will not come until the tears of Esau have ceased."[246]

zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz

and so returns to Tom and Will Navidson, divided by experience, endowed with different talents and disposi-

tions, yet still brothers and "naught without the other."

As Ruccalla states in her concluding chapter: "While the differences are there, like the serpents of the Caduceus, these two brothers have always been and always will be inextricably intertwined; and just like the Caduceus, their shared history creates a meaning and that meaning is health."[247]

zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz

By the end of the first night, Tom has begun to feel the terrible strain of that place. At one point he even threatens to abandon his post. He does not. His devotion to his brother triumphs over his own fears. Remaining by the radio, "[Tom] gnaws on boredom like a dog gnawing on a bone while all the time eyeing fear like a mongoose."[248]

Fortunately for us, some trace of this struggle survives on his Hi 8 where Tom recorded an eclectic, sometimes funny, sometimes bizarre history of thoughts passing away in the atrocity of that darkness.

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[242]See Genesis 27:24[243]
[243]Wrong. See Genesis 27:29.[244]
[244]Mr. Truant also appears to be in error. The correct reference is Genesis 25:27. — Ed.
[245]Gershom Scholem's *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 133. In taking the time to consider Frank's work, Scholem does not fail to also point out Frank's questionable character: "Jacob Frank (1726-91) will always be remembered as one of the most frightening phenomena in the whole Jewish history: a religious leader who, whether for purely self-interested motives or otherwise, was in all his actions a truly corrupt and degenerate individual." p. 126.
[246]Lost.

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[247]Eta Ruccalla, p. 897.
But it also means [Rest missing.]
[248]Ibid., p. 249.

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Source: Danielewski, Mark Z. (2000a): *House of Leaves*

As Truant is drawn into *The Navidson Record*, he exhibits a similar obsession. At first somewhat detached from the text, his comments and follow-up research eventually become increasingly detailed, providing translations of foreign phrases that were used by Zampanò or by correcting his mistakes (see Fig. 3.2). This work affects his mental health severely: he eventually nails measuring tapes to his apartment's floor and walls as if he were scared that these walls might also begin to shift. In *House of Leaves*, taking measure and gathering knowledge turn into a means of establishing familiarity, defining borders, and hence staying in control – at the same time, however, both the house on Ash Tree Lane and the fragmented monograph constantly evade any attempts at measurement and interpretation. In this case, knowledge neither reveals the underlying structure of the object, nor does it establish control over it – instead, it always remains alien and otherworldly.

This impotence of knowledge and instability of structure are due to the continuous transformations that the house on Ash Tree Lane undergoes. Any floorplan of the house is ultimately useless, given that it can only portray the labyrinth's pattern with temporary validity. This house is more than merely a maze: structurally, it resembles an evolving network, continuously changing its shape and size, thereby making any form of definite representation of its underlying design impossible. It can create new rooms and hallways – a network's nodes and links, respectively – but it can also destroy them in an instant. This overlapping of the house and the network metaphor is merely one of several mappings performed in Danielewski's narrative, where supposedly stable forms are contested by means of the network. As Levine phrases it, "networks usefully confound containing forms" (2015: 112); a house that resembles an expanding network lacks the central features of a building: it no longer offers a clear separation of inside and outside; its structure is not fixed, and the distinct rooms do not necessarily follow clear rules and functions anymore.

In a similar manner, the narrative also extends the network paradigm to written text. The network has not only become a cultural key metaphor, but also a behavioral paradigm: the process of networking is paramount (Friedrich 2015: 382). *House of Leaves* is an excellent

example of this network's dual function, because not it just the house, but also the text itself that behaves like a network. With its numerous footnotes and appendices provided by multiple authors as well as its multimodality, *The Navidson Record* is not a linear monograph, but rather a fragmented, interlinked manuscript. Through its complex structure, *House of Leaves* fits Mousoutzanis' definition of network fiction, where multiple narratives are interlocked (2014: 95, 223). Readers wishing to access the narrative, therefore, must engage in a nonlinear, "networked reading strategy" (Pressman 2006: 116). They have to choose which approach they want to use, which links of the network they want to follow, and which they wish to ignore.

Significantly, the networks established by *House of Leaves* extend beyond the confines of the book; the narrative consists of multiple media texts. Readers in search of the entire story necessarily need to read the companion novella *The Whalestoe Letters* as well as listen to Poe's music album *Haunted*. The novel invokes the networks established by new media through this transmedialization and the frequent use of remediation. *House of Leaves* is reminiscent of digital media, due to its multimodality, and it specifically simulates properties such as interactivity and networking capabilities – key properties of digital media (Ryan 2004b: 338). While the novel cannot rewrite itself in the same way that a website can be updated, it is nevertheless composed in such a complex manner that it offers numerous possible interpretations. As Pressman puts it: "in a digital age, wherein information can be easily altered and updated, the book is never a discrete and complete object but always a node in an ever-changing network of information, interaction, and potential or 'virtual' readings" (2006: 120). Readers of *House of Leaves* will discover something entirely new to them with every read-through, depending on which paths of the narrative network they explore, and how deeply they enter the (trans-)media network.

Using a media-conscious narratology to discuss the interplay of narrative and medium is indispensable in any discussion of Danielewski's novel. A key logic at work in the novel is remediation, the refashioning of one or multiple media within another medium (Bolter/Grusin 2000: 273). Significantly, media differ in their expressive

power; when it comes to narration, "different media filter different aspects of narrative meaning" (Ryan 2004a: 17). For instance, whereas a novel is ideal for representing a character's inner thoughts, a film can offer a visual portrayal of the goings-on, but it probably features less inwardness. This remediation fulfills several functions: first, *House of Leaves* utilizes it to foreground its own mediality, illustrating the extent to which any media artifact is always grounded in a set of conventions. Second, by remediating diverse media within the confines of a print novel, it emphasizes how new media can create new networks, and how these interconnections affect analog media. Third, as this chapter's final subsection illustrates, remediation in *House of Leaves* reveals the supernatural media virus' evolution, which deploys multiple media as vectors of transmission.

This self-reflexive emphasis on mediality is further underlined by the novel's remediation of film and its invocation of the found footage horror genre in particular. The blue color of the term "house" is reminiscent of the blue screen used in film production (Hayles 2002: 123). Through its topical focus on the documentary film and its creation, *House of Leaves* provides what Irina Rajewsky has termed *explizite Systemerwähnung* ("explicit reference") to film, meaning that film and the filmmaking process are reflected upon in the literary text (2002: 159). In addition, the novel features an implicit reference to film by engaging in filmic writing at many points, borrowing from the conventions of film by recreating cinematic techniques – such as jump cuts, montage, or quick changes in points of view – in the written text. For instance, the positioning of the text visually portrays the events described at several points. When the expeditionary team is separated, due to one of the house's unforeseeable shifts, the text is alternately positioned at either the very bottom or the very top of the page, depending on whether the focalizer is Will Navidson, who is stuck at the bottom of an incredibly long stairwell, or his brother Tom and Billy Reston, who are at the top (see Fig. 3.3 and 3.4).

Fig. 3.3 Navidson at the bottom of the stairwell...
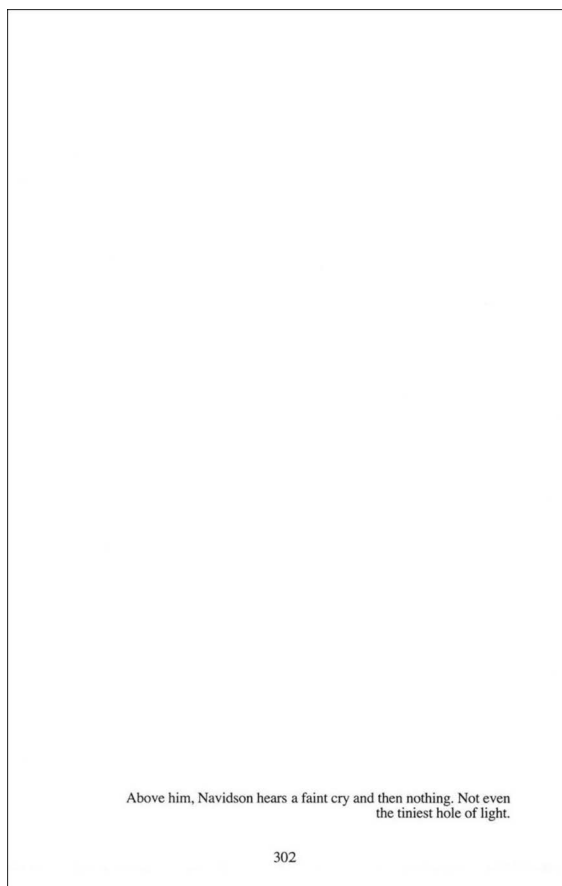
Source: Danielewski, Mark Z. (2000a): *House of Leaves*

Fig. 3.4 ...and Reston at the top

In The Reston Interview, we learn from Billy how the pulley at the top was torn from the banister. Luckily, Tom managed to grab him as well as the rope before "the whole kit and caboodle" plummeted back down the shaft. "It took us a few minutes to get our bearings," Reston tells the camera. "We still weren't sure what happened."

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Source: Danielewski, Mark Z. (2000a): *House of Leaves*

This scene not only explicitly refers to film through its allusion to "The Reston Interview," but also simulates that medium: first, by alternating quickly between viewpoints over the course of several pages and, second, by visually portraying this alternation. *House of Leaves* specifically invokes the genre of the found footage horror film through the utilization of filmic techniques and the conceit of the discovered manuscript. Scott Meslow defines found footage as a genre "built on the conceit that the movie was filmed not by a traditional, omniscient director, but by a character that exists within the film's world – and whose footage was discovered sometime after the events of the film" (qtd. in Heller-Nicholas 2014: 16). Films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Paranormal Activity* (dir. Oren Peli, 2007), and *Cloverfield* (dir. Matt Reeves, 2008) are, therefore, marked by their authentic, observational, and amateur style, which oftentimes denies a crisp, well-framed portrayal of the horrific goings-on. As Alexandra Heller-Nicholas explains, found footage films derive their power from an inherent paradox:

> On one hand, the formal construction of these films encourages a sense of verisimilitude and suggests that what is being shown is raw, unprocessed "reality." At the same time, however, it does this by making it impossible to forget that we are watching a film: If the shaky camera and the regular glitches in sound and vision fail to remind us of this, then the appearance of and references to filmmaking technologies in many of these films makes it inescapable. (2014: 24)

House of Leaves can be regarded as a textual take on the found footage horror film. In place of handheld camera footage and video glitches, the novel presents itself as a manuscript, of which several parts are missing or too confusing to be comprehensible. Furthermore, the novel continuously reminds readers of how this manuscript came into being through the explicit reference to the writing processes that have created the book. The found footage genre is a modern take on one of the oldest Gothic tropes: the discovered manuscript. While this trope features prominently in early Gothic texts, more modern fictions tend to represent these manuscripts, and the reading thereof, as dangerous. By remediating a film genre that in itself is already a remediation of a lit-

erary trope, *House of Leaves* fuses this implied danger of reading, as it can be observed in Gothic texts such as Chambers' *The King in Yellow*, with the tension established by the found footage genre, in which the concept of "raw, unprocessed 'reality'" (Heller-Nicholas 2014: 24) stands in stark contrast with the obvious mediation process.

In addition to film, *House of Leaves* remediates the Internet's central properties. As Pressman points out, the novel resembles an analog hypertext: footnotes lead the reader throughout the entire book and even outside of it, asking them to perform further research or to discuss their interpretation of the text with fellow fans via Danielewski's official online forum. The blue coloring of the word "house" is, therefore, reminiscent of an active hyperlink (ibid: 108). Indeed, the novel mirrors the rhizomatic structure of the Internet, lacking a stable center and providing the reader with more information than they can process. In remediating such a vast and complex medium, the narrative rejects the conventions of the print novel and instead transforms the text into a network as well.

Further exploring the affordances and constraints of the print novel in comparison to new media, text here also functions like an architectural structure, as a "house of leaves," with "leaves" denoting the pages of a book. The novel does what no digital text could ever do: it exploits the three-dimensionality of the physical object that is the book *House of Leaves*. Similar to the characters walking for miles through the labyrinth without ever making much progress, or even ending up back where they started, readers who attempt to read every footnote and follow every cross-reference offered in the manuscript will have to leaf back and forth through the book, oftentimes skipping several hundred pages in the process. The most extreme example of this can be found in Chapter IX, which tells of the experiences of the Holloway expedition. Mirroring their endeavors, this chapter presents itself as the most labyrinthine section of the entire narrative, with footnotes oftentimes leading the reader into dead ends or sections that they already have encountered. Of particular interest here is footnote 144 (Danielewski 2000a: 119-144): spanning more than 20 pages, this footnote is set in a small box with a blue outline – the same color used for the word "house"

– that is always placed in the same position on the subsequent pages. Significantly, when the reader turns the page over, the box sports exactly the same text as on the previous page, only in mirror writing. This footnote thus "calls into question an assumption so commonplace we are not normally aware of it – that book pages are opaque, a property that defines one page as separate from another" (Hayles 2002: 123). However, the novel does more than challenging the assumption of the opaque page: this box bores through several book pages, layers upon layers of three-dimensional text that only become meaningful if presented in a physical book, thereby self-reflexively foregrounding the materiality of the medium.

The novel not only reflects upon the increasing prevalence of networks and on how they affect our perception of reality, but also specifically identifies any form of engagement with these networks as dangerous, as both Navidson's documentary and *The Navidson Record* are detrimental to their consumer's minds. Mirroring this, attempting to come up with a final interpretation of *House of Leaves* is extremely difficult for the reader, because the multiple narrative layers of Danielewski's novel make it impossible to define the central narrative: the Navidson family and their experiences at the house? Zampanò's attempt at writing a scholarly monograph? Truant's everyday struggles? Maybe even the story of his mother's mental demise? Simultaneously, its form makes it difficult for the reader to decide how to engage with the book. They can read it cover to cover, focus on one of the narrative voices exclusively, or instead leaf wildly through the pages in an attempt to follow every footnote. Importantly, each reading approach will yield a different interpretation of the novel. Danielewski's novel is an excellent example of Levine's idea of the ideal representational mode for networks (2015: 129-130): it refuses totality in favor of undecidability, constantly confounding the reader's expectations of the narrative form. The supernatural media virus, thus, becomes a metaphor for the seeming instability of these networks. Reading *House of Leaves* appears maddening and, to some extent, this effect is viral.

Danielewski's narrative establishes a web of metaphors in which every term resonates with, reflects upon, and ultimately affects each other

term. Significantly, the novel does not foreground the presence of networks or the network society by portraying a house as well as a text that resembles a network. Rather, it emphasizes the prevalence of the network paradigm: it does not matter whether these diverse networks truly exist or whether society today really has become a network society; the relevant thing is that networks are *seen everywhere* – they are imposed on all life matters. The novel illustrates this obsession with connectivity by likening diverse concepts such as "house" and "text" to a network.

In *House of Leaves*, the consequence of the network paradigm includes the loss of any sense of familiarity and safety. People living in this paradigm are increasingly alienated from their social environment; like the Navidsons, they are lost in the labyrinthine network. The more characteristics the "house" – be it the literal house on Ash Tree Lane or the "house of leaves" in the form of written text – shares with the network, the more it becomes detached from the notion of "home." The networked house, hence, becomes unfamiliar and unhomely, or rather: uncanny.

With its focus on supernatural, terrifying domestic spaces, *House of Leaves* continuously evokes the concept of the uncanny. While discussed by a variety of scholars, it is predominantly Sigmund Freud's notion of the *Unheimlich* ("uncanny") that is inferred when discussing the concept in the context of Gothic studies. The uncanny exists in opposition to the homely, and is paradoxically part of it – it is the familiar defamiliarized: "this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (1981 [1919]: 241). The haunted house, in which what is supposed to be a safe and familiar place is transformed into a locus of horror, is another excellent example of the uncanny – hence, *House of Leaves* appears to lend itself to such a reading.

However, the reader's expectations are thwarted in Danielewski's novel: when the uncanny nature of the Navidsons' house becomes apparent, Zampanò cites Heidegger's concept of "Unheimlichkeit" rather

than Freud's.[5] Unlike the Freudian uncanny, which is an aesthetic concept first and foremost, Heidegger's notion of "Unheimlichkeit" is of ontological concern. It describes an indeterminate anxiety that is closely related to "Dasein" as a continuous state of "not-being-at-home" (Danielewski 2000a: 25). Our being-in-the-world, according to the Heideggerian uncanny, always entails a sense of homelessness: "Dasein's way of Being-in-the-world is that of being not at home in the world" (Mulhall 2005: 115). Therefore, "Unheimlichkeit" is an "existential condition of mankind" (Masschelein 2011: 139). Whereas the Freudian uncanny is usually connected to specific objects or to people that evoke a feeling of uncanniness, the Heideggerian uncanny is an unspecific, generalized fear that accompanies mankind's very existence.

It is these existential implications of Heidegger's uncanny that make the concept so apt for critical application to the novel. The moment that the first, comparably small, change at the Navidson's house occurs, it no longer functions as a home. Significantly, this is also the moment at which the house begins to demonstrate its networking capabilities, creating new rooms and new hallways between existing rooms. For the Navidsons, the result is certainly a feeling of not-being-at-home and a profound anxiety that eventually even causes physical symptoms of disease; feelings of homelessness only increase the more the house comes to resemble a network. Johnny Truant points to this anxiety and the loss of familiarity in his introduction, linking it specifically to the function of media. He writes:

> Old shelters – television, magazines, movies – won't protect you any-more. You might try scribbling in a journal, on a napkin, maybe even in the margins of this book. That's when you'll discover you no longer trust the very walls you always took for granted. Even the hallways you've walked a hundred times will feel longer, much longer, and the

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5   The Freudian uncanny is only alluded to in Chapter XV, which presents itself as a transcript of a series of interviews conducted by Karen Green with a variety of scholars, authors, artists, and others. One of those is Harold Bloom, who quotes from his *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), in which he devotes a section to the uncanny (Danielewski 2000a: 359).

shadows, any shadow at all, will suddenly seem deeper, much, much deeper. (Danielewski 2000a: xxiii)

The house metaphor is mapped onto media in this passage and with it, the notion of the home. It is specifically *old* shelters – that is, old media – that cannot maintain a feeling of security, familiarity, and, hence, homeliness. This type of home is lost with the rise of the network society and with digital media. "House of leaves," thus, might also be understood as a "house of leave-taking."

Indeed, the deeper that the characters of the novel immerse themselves in their respective networks – Navidson wandering into the labyrinthine house; Zampanò attempting to make sense of "The Navidson Record" and tying it to valid scholarly interpretative approaches; both Truant and the Editors delving into a manuscript cobbled together out of many fragments that need to be connected in a coherent manner – the more the notions of homeliness, familiarity, and safety are lost to each and every one of them, and the more alienated they become. The network paradigm's detrimental effect is a recurring theme in portrayals of the supernatural media virus; *Kairo* in particular centers on the disintegration of personal relationships and feelings of alienation in a similar manner, as I explain in Chapter Five of this book.

The Navidson family begins to break apart alongside the initial changes to the house. As Navidson cannot stand the fact that his partner Karen Green does not want him to explore the maze, he grows increasingly distant from both her and their children, until he eventually decides to walk into the labyrinth after all. Likewise, Karen, who suffers from claustrophobia and is terrified by the house's ashen walls, neglects their two children and who, in turn, develop their own problematic habits. Finally, the Navidsons' two pets are simply never mentioned again at any point of the narrative – their fate remains unknown. It is only when Navidson suffers severe physical injuries, during his last expedition, that he can finally let go of the house and put his family together again.

This loss of the homely and the familiar is a central theme in *House of Leaves*; this theme is brought to the fore by the network paradigm.

According to Levine, networks may confound confining forms, but they do not necessarily override them: "networks and enclosures are constantly meeting, sometimes sustaining and reinforcing one another, at other times creating threats and obstacles. It shows that neither form has the final organizing word – neither always regulates the other" (2015: 119). Globalization may have enabled multinational corporations, the worldwide flow of capital, and similar far-reaching, networked ventures, but it has also reinforced the interest in national boundaries and the walls that protect them. Danielewski's narrative similarly pits networks against enclosures; here, however, the walls can hardly be sustained and crumble under the influence of networks. This becomes apparent in Zampanò's attempts to "contain" his 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. Zampanò 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. (Danielewski 2000a: xvi)

With his work on *The Navidson Record*, Zampanò's home – his apartment, in the material sense, but also his life and identity, in a more abstract sense – is no longer safely encompassed within enclosures. Networks also affect his very identity, which is no longer primarily defined by his personality and personal relationships, but instead is comprised of various documents and raw data. Little is known about Zampanò by the time of his death: he has no family relations and, therefore, nobody to claim his belongings. It appears as though he was completely isolated from other human beings, with the sole exception of the women who typed up his monograph for him – and even they all lost contact with him after a short while. Instead, his identity – his being a person – is solidified by a network of documents:

He called himself Zampanò. It was the name he put down on his apartment lease and on several other fragments I found. I never came across any sort of ID, whether a passport, license or other official document insinuating that yes, he indeed was An-Actual-&-Accounted-For person. (ibid: xii)

There is also the possibility that Zampanò's name is fake, inspired by a character of the same name from the 1954 film *La Strada* directed by Federico Fellini. The identity of Johnny Truant's mother, Pelafina Lièvre, is expressed in a similar manner in *The Whalestoe Letters*. Walden D. Wyrhta explains how he saved Pelafina's letters from a fire in his introduction to the collection of letters:

[T]hat spring much of that "furniture" [...] found itself curling into ash on a large fire spilling sparks and smoke into the blue. But for the slender wisp of her Js and Ys, she too – or part of her at least – would have slipped permanently into that unrecoverable sky.
Fortunately while rounding the perimeter of that large pyre [...] I caught sight of her and retrieved her and kept her.
She has been for all these years mine. (Danielewski 2000b: xiii)

Through this personification, Pelafina's entire identity is represented as something consisting solely of written documents.[6]

Johnny Truant's demise is the clearest portrayal of the relationship between the network and homeliness. As he starts work on the manuscript, Truant gradually begins to neglect his personal life: he becomes inattentive at work, goes out with his friends less often, stops paying his rent, and is eventually thrown out of his increasingly decrepit apartment. Now literally homeless, Truant turns into one

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6   In its portrayal of human identities as networks of information, *House of Leaves* also predicts the increasing quantification of the human being as it is occurring at the moment: smartphones reveal our position on the planet at any given moment; fitness trackers monitor everything from calorie intake to heart rate and sleeping behavior; our everyday behavior – leisure time activities, purchases, political views, and so on – is the focus of so-called data miners, who transform these data into a marketable profile of the individual.

of those characters described by Mousoutzanis in his discussion of narratives of interconnectedness, who are "often in a constant state of travel and mobility as they find themselves involved in or affected by incidents from a distant time, place or storyline" (2014: 223). Truant moves through yet another network, namely the transportation network of the United States, all while trying to illuminate the truth of the manuscript and to rediscover his own past. He crosses the country by train in search of the mysterious house on Ash Tree Lane, revisits his old home as well as the mental hospital in which his mother was institutionalized. His search remains fruitless: the house he grew up in has been demolished and replaced by a lumberyard; the Whalestoe Institute has been closed for several years; the existence of the house on Ash Tree Lane remains a mystery. There is no longer any home to be found.

The network paradigm's effects reveal themselves on the level of the Editors as well. Arguably, their involvement in the network is the deepest, given that they are working on a version of *The Navidson Record* that has been annotated multiple times already. These Editors remain completely anonymous and identity-less throughout the entire narrative. Unlike Navidson, Zampanò, and Truant, they are never even associated with anything such as a home or a personal identity from the beginning. It appears as if feelings of homeliness and familiarity are eliminated entirely once the network is in full effect; instead, anonymity and alienation prevail.

Danielewski's narrative gradually detaches the house metaphor from the notion of homeliness, familiarity, and safety by interweaving it with the network metaphor, introducing alienation, chaos, and instability instead. The text of *House of Leaves* is rendered chaotic and unstable as well in the process of representing the house's transformation. The novel negotiates a changing view of the world through this intersection of house, network, and text: networks are everywhere. Networks of diverse kinds restructure our very understanding of the world around us to the point where even a person's identity is reduced to a web of documents. What used to be familiar and comprehensible now appears to be in a constant state of disorienting flux, evading any

means of comprehension, prediction, and control. Truth itself becomes irrelevant: "it makes no difference that the documentary at the heart of this book is fiction. Zampanò knew from the get-go that what's real or isn't real doesn't matter here. The consequences are the same" (Danielewski 2000a: xx). Hence, what belongs to the "old" world – the "old shelters" that Truant writes about – offers no stability, because the very access to reality is transformed by the network paradigm.

One additional consequence of the network paradigm is its focus on function and efficiency within its diverse networks. This is what Castells hints at when he asserts that "everything, and *everyone*, which does not have value, according to what is valued in the networks, *or ceases to have value*, is switched off the networks, and ultimately discarded" (2010b: 134; my emphases). Johnny Truant has to be a part of some kind of a social or communication network in order to be able to pass on the corruptive manuscript; yet, by the time that his edition of the text is published, he himself is both homeless and uprooted. Both Zampanò and Truant either die or disappear after having ensured that the corruptive manuscript will be passed on to somebody else. With that, their function is fulfilled.

A third effect of the network paradigm in *House of Leaves* is an obsession with collecting data: almost every character in the novel is driven by the need to record every piece of information and to attempt to embed these data in a preexistent network of information. However, the information provided is seldom organized in a meaningful manner and never reestablishes familiarity or control. Instead, information in the narrative illustrates David Shenk's pessimistic prediction that is explicated in his book *Data Smog* only a few years before the publication of Danielewski's novel: "the glut of information no longer adds to our quality of life, but instead begins to cultivate stress, confusion, and even ignorance" (1997: 15). Indeed, as I show in the next section, this information overload is viral in *House of Leaves*.

3.3   The Supernatural Media Virus as Inherent Network Accident

While the term "virus" is used explicitly only once in *House of Leaves*, virality is the key logic at work in the narrative, pervading all its narrative layers. On the one hand, as discussed in the previous section, the relationship between connectivity and virality illustrates that networking, as a behavioral paradigm, might constitute a dangerous objective in itself: each person who explores such networks becomes increasingly alienated from other people, drawn into delusions, and, thus, loses their grip on reality.

On the other hand, this interrelation exemplifies the fact that the virus is an inherent part of any network. According to Paul Virilio, each type of innovation always brings about its own failures and accidents. He terms this the "*prospective of the accident*: [...] the accident is invented at the moment the object is scientifically discovered or technically developed" (1993: 212, original emphasis). Train accidents came with trains; the boat introduced boat accidents; computer technology gave rise to computer viruses (Parikka 2016: xiii). By transposing this idea of the inherent accident to *House of Leaves*, we can see that the supernatural media virus is the inevitable consequence of the network paradigm – it is the built-in accident. This is the reason why, in comparison to the other fictions discussed here, this supernatural media virus' particular portrayal is so abstract. Whereas the supernatural antagonists in *Ghostwatch*, the *Ring* franchise, and *Kairo/Pulse* are all ghosts – or at least ghostlike – *House of Leaves* refrains from making the nature of the supernatural media virus explicit and focuses instead on the processes of infection and mutation, and on the channels through which the virus spreads.

Danielewski's narrative exploits a narrative technique of the outbreak narrative through this abstract portrayal of the supernatural media virus. As Kirsten Ostherr explains, a key paradox in visually representing any disease lies in the invisibility of the microbe (2005: 2); it is only through complex technologies, such as electron microscopes, that the pathogen becomes visible. Thus, many representations of

disease instead relocate the problem elsewhere: they portray danger-
ous locations where disease lingers, such as train stations or dingy
bars (ibid: 135-136). Significantly, these locations are tied directly to
presumptions regarding behavior: potentially unhygienic travelers
making physical contact with the innocent uninfected; unsavory
nightly activities, from heavy drinking and drug use to promiscuous
sexual practices. Truant's lifestyle makes him part of what such rep-
resentations classify as a disease risk group: he is an apprentice at a
questionable tattoo shop, engages in heavy partying, frequent promis-
cuous sex, and regular drug use. Paradoxically, it is not those dangerous
behaviors and environments that bring about his demise, but rather a
written manuscript. In *House of Leaves*, it is impossible to pinpoint the
virus. Instead, the disease becomes tangible only through portrayals of
dangerous locations (the house on Ash Tree Lane; both Zampanò's and
Truant's apartments) and the practices associated therewith (entering
the labyrinth; reading and perpetuating the manuscript).

   The consequences of seeking out such danger spots and with en-
gaging in these problematic behaviors provide yet another means of
portraying the pathogen: symptoms of infection. Each person to enter
the house on Ash Tree Lane, even if it is only for a short visit, suffers
from diverse postexposure symptoms. While some of these symptoms
are exclusively of a psychological nature – anxiety, insomnia, and ob-
sessive behavior, for instance – others are physical symptoms, such as
migraine attacks, ulcers, fever, and persistent coughing (Danielewski
2000a: 396). The bodily symptoms in particular strongly resemble those
of a pathogenic infection. However, the risk of infection appears to vary
from person to person. Whereas some people grow obsessed with the
house, others instinctively flee. This becomes apparent in the respective
reactions of Billy Reston and Will Navidson, both of whom have already
wandered through the labyrinth by this point of the narrative:

> While Reston continued to remain curious about the properties of the
> house, he had absolutely no desire to return there. [...] "Sure I was ob-
> sessed at first, we all were," he says in The Reston Interview. "But I got
> over it pretty quick. My fascination was never the same as Navy's. [...]

> After we escaped, going back to the house just didn't interest me."
> Navidson had a completely different reaction. He could not stop think-
> ing about those corridors and rooms. The house had taken hold of him.
> (ibid: 384)

Whereas Reston appears to have developed some kind of immunity,
Navidson is compelled to explore and document the labyrinth again
with his film equipment, almost dying in the process. It is only after
this experience, which costs him his right hand, his left eye, and shat-
ters his hip, that he can let go of the house. Of course, by this time,
he has already amassed enough film material to create "The Navidson
Record," a powerful viral vector.

This film comprises the first of several mutations through which
the supernatural media virus evolves new vectors of transmission: the
virus, residing only in the house at first, eventually propagates through
film and finally written text, exploiting the advantages of each medium.
Both the documentary and the manuscript make it increasingly simple
to pass the virus along. They are examples of the unofficial circulation
of media artifacts in today's society, as discussed by Jenkins, Ford, and
Green in *Spreadable Media*:

> This shift from [top-down] distribution to circulation signals a move-
> ment toward a more participatory model of culture, one which sees
> the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages but
> as people who are *shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media con-
> tent* [...]. And they are doing so not as isolated individuals but within
> larger communities and networks, which allow them to spread con-
> tent well beyond their immediate geographic proximity. (2013: 2, my
> emphasis)

The documentary film is a mobile, easy-to-spread viral vector, which
eventually causes a spiral of infection that will befall Zampanò, Tru-
ant, and the Editors. *The Navidson Record*, in turn, is a literally corrup-
tive manuscript that infects every person that spends too much time in
its company. Like the documentary, this manuscript can be copied and
passed on easily. However, unlike film, it is significantly easier for every

person to continue the editing process on the manuscript – no technical equipment is needed. Hence, the monograph can be read as a nondigital analogy of the digital "spreadability model" heralded in *Spreadable Media*: it is mobile, easily reproducible and changeable, and consequently spreadable with little effort. In the process, this textual vector blurs the distinction between producer and audience by allowing every consumer to reshape its contents according to their own interests.

Yet, this evolution affects the form of each medium. This already becomes apparent through the mode of circulation of a small section from "The Navidson Record": "Dissemination of 'The Five and a Half Minute Hallway' seemed driven by curiosity alone. No one ever officially distributed it [...]. Rather, VHS copies were passed around by hand, a series of progressively degenerating dubs of a home video" (Danielewski 2000a: 5). Circulated as a copy of a copy, this section is a true "viral video," but this mode of dissemination also implies that the vector is deteriorating with each new copy. In *The Navidson Record*, this degeneration is even more apparent. As Hayles writes, Danielewski's novel "in a frenzy of remediation attempts to eat all the other media, but this binging leaves traces on the text's body, resulting in a transformed physical and narrative corpus" (2002: 112). The result is a book that does not behave like the conventional print novel; at points, it must be turned around, read backwards, and so on. However, as is explained below, it is precisely this "frenzy of remediation" that makes it highly virulent: its chaotic, degenerate appearance only increases its allure, entrapping potential hosts the moment that they come into contact with the virus.

The corruptive manuscript not only invites, but also actively forces its readers to propagate it by affecting its hosts' behavior towards the supernatural media virus' vector. While we can assume that something similar must have happened to Zampanò before his death, this enforced behavior becomes most obvious through Johnny Truant's mental and physical demise. As his introduction reveals, he is infected almost immediately after stumbling upon the manuscript and soon begins to lose his grip on reality:

> At first only curiosity drove me from one phrase to the next. Often a few days would pass before I'd pick up another mauled scrap, maybe even a week, but still I returned, for ten minutes, maybe twenty minutes, grazing over the scenes, the names, small connections starting to form, minor patterns evolving in those spare slivers of time. I never read for more than an hour. [...]
> And then one evening I looked over at my clock and discovered seven hours had passed. Lude had called but I hadn't noticed the phone ring. [...] That wasn't the last time I lost sense of time either. In fact it began to happen more often, dozens of hours just blinking by, lost in the twist of so many dangerous sentences. (Danielewski 2000a: xviii)

The longer he works on the manuscript, the worse its effects on him become. Eventually, Truant experiences not only such mental lapses, but suffers bodily symptoms as well – yet, he is compelled to continue working on the monograph: "Maybe I have an ulcer. Maybe I have a tumor. Right now the only thing that keeps me going is some misunderstood desire to finish <u>The Navidson Record</u>" (ibid: 297, original emphasis). Truant is not only driven to finish the manuscript, but also to protect it, if necessary, as becomes clear during a visit by his longtime friend Lude:

> "Throw it away, hoss" Lude said and started to cross to my desk for a closer look. I sprung forward, ordered by instinct, like some animal defending its pride, interposing myself between him and my work, those papers, this thing.
> Lude backed away – in fact that was the first time he'd ever backed away [...].
> "Get rid of it Hoss, it's killing you." (ibid: 324)

At this point, Truant already is isolated from his social environment due to his infection; he has both neglected his friend and stopped mingling with other people at bars and parties. Replicating and propagating the manuscript has become his sole goal in life.

Despite this alienation, however, he can pass on the virus and must, hence, still be part of some kind of network; this exemplifies that it is

specifically *personal* relationships that suffer. Truant finds out that he must have released his edited version of *The Navidson Record* to a publisher during one of his mental lapses (ibid: 513). It seems as if Truant is compelled to finish the monograph and to pass it on to more people, even though his bodily and mental health has already been severely affected by the corruptive manuscript. Unlike the passive "couch potatoes" of *Ghostwatch*, hosts in *House of Leaves* function unknowingly as active disease spreaders, ensuring the viral vector's continued circulation.

Truant frequently uses biological metaphors to describe the corruptive manuscript with the increasing manifestation of bodily and mental symptoms. This becomes apparent shortly after the encounter with Lude, where Johnny describes what is perhaps the strongest reaction that he has had to *The Navidson Record*:

> I wash the sweat off my face, do my best to suppress a shiver, can't, return to the body, spread out across the table like papers – and let me tell you there's more than just The Navidson Record lying there – bloodless and still but not at all dead, calling me to it, needing me now like a child, depending on me despite its age. After all, I'm its source, the one who feeds it, nurses it back to health – but not life, I fear – bones of bond paper, transfusions of ink, genetic encryption in xerox; monstrous, maybe inaccurate correlates, but nonetheless there. (ibid: 326, original emphasis)

In this passage, the manuscript is infused with a parasitic, even vampiric force. This textual vampirism is described by means of medical terminology: "*bones* of bond paper, *transfusions* of ink, *genetic encryption* in xerox." Truant here describes the transformation of written text into a biological entity, in which the supposedly inanimate manuscript is infused with the capacity for mutation and infection.

This theme of transformation into something biological is already present in the novel's ambivalent title. Reading the titular element "leaves" as the leaves of a tree, the novel's title evokes notions of growth, but also of decay. Like a tree, The Navidson Record grows larger and more complex with each editing. Significantly, while some

Fig. 3.5 Illegible text as evolution

Source: Danielewski, Mark Z. (2000a): *House of Leaves*

sections of the treelike monograph grow and branch out, others simply die off as they are struck out or otherwise tampered with during the process of editing (see Fig. 3.5). Textual and biological degeneration go hand in hand in *House of Leaves*: Truant is already experiencing strong symptoms caused by his mysterious illness while he is reading those sections of the manuscript that are almost illegible because parts of the text have been obscured by ash or ink.

However, the presumed degeneration of the vector does not weaken its effects; instead, it is a form of evolution. The supernatural media virus bypasses one of the model of spreadability's central problems: the "ongoing tension between durability and mobility" (Jenkins/Ford/Green 2013: 38). It is precisely the limited durability of its vectors that upholds the virus' allure. A biological virus is constantly undergoing genetic variation in response to its host's immunity. Such random mutation might increase or decrease a pathogen's virulence (Wagner/Hewlett/Bloom/Camerini 2008: 5-6). Transposing this logic to media studies, and to so-called viral media in particular, it is specifically those artifacts that fascinate their audience that are passed on and reproduced innumerable times. Deliberately engaging in the use of virus metaphors, Rushkoff claims that, by being interesting, such a media object bypasses a society's "immunity": "Media viruses spread rapidly if they provoke our interest [...]. The more provocative an image or icon [...] the further and faster it will travel through the datasphere. [...] Our interest and fascination is a sign that we are not culturally 'immune' to the new virus" (1996: 10). In *House of Leaves*, each mutation of the supernatural media virus – that is, each editing process which might clarify some aspects of the monograph while obscuring others – keeps the text interesting. Both readers of and characters in the narrative alike attempt to fathom the truth behind the viral manuscript and attempt to discover the story behind this supernatural media virus. By denying them a clear, straightforward answer, this virus encourages its hosts to spend long periods of time on it and to spread it to other potential carriers. The only time that the virus is explicitly referred to in the novel, it is immediately linked to the impossibility of any immune reaction. During Karen Green's interviews, the British playwright

Byron Baleworth claims: "You've created a semiotic dilemma. Just as a nasty virus resists the body's immune system so your symbol – the house – resists interpretation" (Danielewski 2000a: 356). Using the virus as a metaphor for the house, the fictionalized Baleworth specifically compares the process of interpretation to an immune reaction. However, no interpretation can tie all of the loose ends together – the text remains fatally fascinating.

Importantly, the reader is implicated in this perpetual loop of infection, mutation, and spread as well; this supernatural media virus always threatens to break out of its confines. This already becomes apparent when picking up the print novel: mirroring the uncontrollable growth of the house on Ash Tree Lane, *House of Leaves* is literally bigger on the inside – the book jacket is slightly smaller than the book's pages. The novel's transmedia extensions are an additional indication of this, given that the narrative cannot be contained within a singular novel. Finally, increasingly frequent metalepses and the fact that *House of Leaves* conflates its narrative medium and viral vector (both written text), signify that the virus has the capacity to break the barrier between the distinct narrative layers and might even be able to move beyond the book to infect the reader.

The most extreme example of metalepsis occurs when Will Navidson reads a novel called *House of Leaves* while lost in the labyrinth. His book has 736 pages (ibid: 467) – exactly the same number of pages as the novel *House of Leaves* that the reader is holding in their hands. In other words, not only is Navidson reading a book about himself, but he is also reading the same book as the reader. Yet, there are also more subtle examples of metalepsis in the novel. For instance, the color purple features prominently in Johnny Truant's memories of his mother. References to the color within Zampanò's monograph could be further proof of Truant's unreliability as an editor, implying that he has changed the original text. However, the color also appears on the narrative level of the Editors, which logically should be one step above Truant.

The reading process of the manuscript challenges and confuses the reader as well with its monstrous, chaotic structure. Trying to find one's way through this narrative is the Gothic reading experience, where it

becomes impossible to determine which clues are relevant, which are misleading, and what information is omitted from the text (Brewster 2012: 485). Both Zampanò and Truant have already succumbed to this process; their work becomes unfinishable on the basis of their inability to propose a final interpretation to either the documentary or the monograph. Additionally, it appears as if this state of mind is truly contagious, and as if it might also infect the reader of the novel, because such a final reading is impossible for them too. To make matters worse, *House of Leaves* extends the Gothic reading experience beyond the print novel through its use of transmedia storytelling.

According to Jenkins' theory, a transmedia narrative is a tale that "unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best" (Jenkins 2006: 97-98). Consumers of such a narrative are invited to actively seek out each transmedia extension in order to experience the entire narrative. This results in what Jason Mittell has referred to as "forensic fandom": fans of a franchise are encouraged to "drill" into a narrative in order to uncover its complexities and to make sense of even the smallest details (Mittell 2012). Arguably, transmedia storytelling provides an ideal basis for the Gothic's obsession with mystery and secrecy, with its excessive style which cannot be confined to a singular medium and its extensive use of narrative fragmentation. Consumers of a transmedia tale such as this are invited to piece the story together like a puzzle, scrutinizing and interpreting each text that belongs to the overall narrative. In the case of *House of Leaves*, readers are encouraged to seek out *The Whalestoe Letters*, *Haunted*, and the official online forum in order to collect further clues. Yet, while all of these extensions reveal more details, they also further destabilize the narrative. It becomes impossible for the reader to decide which of these clues are relevant and which are not – in the end, they all lead to different interpretations of the narrative.

For instance, these transmedia extensions unhinge the supposed narrative hierarchy of *House of Leaves* by focusing explicitly on Johnny Truant's mother, Pelafina Lièvre. She is a literal "madwoman in the at-

tic":[7] she has been institutionalized at the Three Attic Whalestoe Institute due to severe mental illness. In the novel, she only makes an appearance in Appendix II-E in the form of a selection of letters that she wrote to Johnny. Other than that, Truant gives insights into memories he has of her at some points in his narration. Thus, in the novel, Lièvre seems to have only minor importance; her centrality is foregrounded in the novella and in the music album, however. The novella is a collection of Lièvre's letters, featuring some additional letters that are not present in the appendix of *House of Leaves* as well as a foreword by the "Information Specialist" Walden D. Wyrhta, who worked at the institute during Lièvre's hospitalization (Danielewski 2000b: xi). The novella destabilizes the narrative layers of the main novel with its emphasis on Truant's mother, implying that Lièvre might be of greater importance to understanding *House of Leaves* than it first appears – after all, of all minor characters appearing in the novel, it is *her* tale that deserves its own novella. It does not seem to be coincidental that "Whalestoe" is an anagram for "whose tale," begging the question of whose tale this narrative is truly telling.

This focus on Truant's mother is further elaborated on in the companion music album *Haunted* by Poe.[8] The music album "removes the privilege of Truant's position" (Evans 2011: 69); instead, it emphasizes previously marginalized perspectives and themes, such as the focus on Pelafina Lièvre. Only attentive readers will notice parallels between Poe's music and Danielewski's novel in some of the songs. With other tracks, their intertextual relation to the narrative is already easily identifiable through their titles: "Exploration B," "House of Leaves," and "Dear Johnny." Some titles uncannily fuse several narrative levels of the novel together:

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7   This phrase was coined by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their feminist study *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, first published in 1979. As Gilbert and Gubar explain, their title is an allusion to Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* and its portrayal of Bertha Mason (1979: xii).

8   For more information on the intertextuality of novel, novella, and music album, consult Pressman (2006) as well as Evans (2011).

Johnny dear, don't be afraid.
I will keep your secrets safe.
Bring me to the blind man who
Lost you in his house of blue. ("Dear Johnny" 2000b)

This song might be one of Lièvre's letters, in which she refers to Zampanò directly and to his "house of blue" – yet, she could not possibly know either the man or his manuscript, let alone the house on Ash Tree Lane. Equally unsettling, the song "5&1/2 Minute Hallway" is played by a band in *House of Leaves* (Danielewski 2000a: 512). Almost all of these songs either subtly refer to or outright quote directly from Lièvre's letters and, thus, shed new light on Truant's memories.

The transmedia extensions of *House of Leaves*, therefore, imply that central parts of its meaning lie outside of the confines of the novel itself. Depending on how readers approach the narrative – whether they decide to consume these extensions as well, or whether they focus solely on the novel instead – they will arrive at different, incommensurable interpretations of the text. Consumers are faced with an information overload similar to that of Johnny Truant through the networkedness of the narrative, which in itself is reminiscent of digital media and of the Internet. This overload bears two implications: first, no narrative is a discrete text in itself in the age of interconnected and mobile media, but it always exists in a network of other media objects. This is exemplified by the proliferation of transmedialization as a key marketing strategy in today's culture. Even if few fictions truly live up to Jenkins' top-down image of a transmedia narrative, it has become common practice to add subordinate transmedia extensions to a main text. Such extensions might be a short web series to cover the season hiatus of a television show, an online minigame, or even a marketing campaign that allows fans to buy products that are available in their beloved storyworld, thereby playfully blurring the distinction between fiction and reality.[9] In most cases, these extensions are not necessarily of vital im-

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9   Such transmedia techniques are discussed in detail in Mittell (2014) and Ndalianis (2012).

portance for following the main narrative. However, the inherent narrative instability of *House of Leaves* makes it impossible to decide what the "main" narrative truly is; it is up to the consumer to decide whether these transmedia texts are of any relevance to their own reading of the novel or not.

Secondly, and consequentially, the resulting information overload implies that even for the supposedly safe reader Zampanò's corruptive manuscript has not lost its infectiousness, forcing its "victims" to continue scrutinizing the narrative. The frequent metalepses further indicate that the virus can move upwards through the narrative hierarchy with little difficulty. This impression is intensified through the conflation of viral vector and narrative medium; when picking up the novel, the reader supposedly holds the dangerous corruptive manuscript in their hands. Thus, similar to *Ghostwatch*, the fourth wall does not protect readers of *House of Leaves*: this virus continuously threatens to break out of the book's bindings.

Through the intermingling of metaphors, *House of Leaves* reflects on the implications of the increasing pervasiveness of the network paradigm. Personal relationships come under attack as the network becomes the cultural key metaphor – shaping both our view of the world and our behavior towards it. Individuals, such as Johnny Truant, are subsumed by the paradigm's diverse networks; if they move too deeply into it, they will become homeless and uprooted. The supernatural media virus is itself an inherent part of this network paradigm – it is an inevitable result of the growing information overload and the urge for greater connectivity. In the end, the readers of the novel are implicated in this loop of infection; even they are not safe from the viral network's detrimental effects.