

IRRATIONAL PARATEXT: MANIPULATED PARATEXT  
IN THE GOTHIC POSTMODERN NOVELS *HOUSE OF  
LEAVES, THE ADVENTURESS, AND THE THREE  
INCESTUOUS SISTERS*

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## Illustrations

Figure 1. Alison Gibbons. Illustration in  
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## Abstract

Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* and Audrey Niffenegger's two visual novels *The Three Incestuous Sisters* and *The Adventuress* all contain examples of manipulated paratext—paratexts being the devices involved in the presentation of the text such as titles, author names, font, introductions, illustrations, appendices, advertising, and interviews. The emphasis these authors place on these usually inconspicuous devices is an expression of the irrational themes contained within these texts. The irrational is an underlying theme of the Gothic genre and through examining the use of manipulated paratexts this thesis demonstrates how these texts make use of the irrational Gothic elements that are present within the postmodern. While Danielewski and Niffenegger both have these similar themes, the effects they create are extremely different. Niffenegger creates *écriture féminine*, or feminine writing as described by Hélène Cixous, by prioritising illustrations that feature marginalised bodily expression in order to convey the narrative rather than text. Danielewski, on the other hand, produces a text that is a pure pastiche of Gothic and postmodern devices in order to emulate the postmodern media in its creation of hyperreality and to reproduce the sensation of a media that possesses and changes its consumers. *House of Leaves* is the instigator for a number of similar texts that have been published since the turn of the millennium which will be considered an emerging literary movement.

## Introduction

When Johnny Truant introduces *House of Leaves* he ends his introduction with an implicit threat—a threat that the irrational is coming for you, the reader:

Then no matter where you are, in a crowded restaurant or on some desolate street or even in the comforts of your own home, you'll watch yourself dismantle every assurance you ever lived by. You'll stand aside as a great complexity intrudes, tearing apart, piece by piece, all of your carefully conceived denials, whether deliberate or unconscious. And then for better or worse you'll turn, unable to resist, though try to resist you still will, fighting with everything you've got not to face the thing you most dread, what is now, what will be, what has always come before, the creature you truly are, the creature we all are, buried in the nameless black of a name. (Danielewski xxiii)

The function of this piece of writing is to frighten the reader and to open them up to the possibility that they are innately irrational creatures that are inherently corruptible. In doing so, Mark Z. Danielewski, through his character Truant, does a rather convincing job of explaining just what the irrational is. It is a great complexity that defies rational explanation, resists logical reasoning, and disrupts defined categories and norms. Irrational minds distort reality—they are emotional, inconsistent, and volatile. Irrational bodies do not conform to what society or science perceives as normal and contained. Irrational events defy expectations of the everyday—they appear to eschew the rules of cause and effect.

Irrationality—the depiction of irrational minds, irrational bodies and irrational events—is the basis of Gothic literature. As Fred Botting has phrased it: “In Gothic productions imagination and emotional effects exceed reason” (Botting *Gothic* 3). But, it can also be considered as a theme in postmodern literature and feminist theory. Irrationality within the Gothic has been figured as the uncanny, and as an expression of cultural anxiety. In the postmodern, the irrational finds expression in a hyperreality that has lost sight of the real. The

postmodern, hyperreal media without referent is apparent in the creation of the Jamesonian schizophrenic subject. Within feminism, it has been considered through the abject which describes bodies (particularly feminine ones) that defy enclosing order but rather ooze and excrete. Feminist literary theory also offers the idea of *écriture féminine*—writing that expresses the irrational feminine experience. The irrational is the thread that ties the major themes of this thesis together.

Audrey Niffenegger's two visual novels *The Adventuress* and *The Three Incestuous Sisters* and Danielewski's *House of Leaves* are all recognisably Gothic—all engage with many of the tropes that constitute the Gothic genre. They are also, to varying degrees, postmodern texts, characterised by their use of metafictional elements, intertextuality, pastiche, parody, and formal experimentation. Niffenegger and Danielewski express the intersection between what is Gothic (and thus irrational) and what is postmodern by manipulating the paratext (title pages, typesetting, name of author, dedications, prefaces, introductions, illustrations, interviews, advertising, and so on). By extending the readable narrative beyond the borders of the text these authors create a literature of irrationality that demonstrates excess, defies form and order; and distorts the traditional body of the novel. By examining the ways in which these texts engage with the themes of postmodernism and the Gothic through paratext, I will demonstrate how Niffenegger engages with feminist themes and how Danielewski, on the other hand, creates a reproduction of postmodern hyperreal media. I will argue that *House of Leaves* has paved the way for a number of similar texts that have appeared since the start of the millennium, and I will consider the defining features of these postmillennial texts that manipulate their paratext in the pursuit of a sensation of depthlessness.

The Gothic in one sense needs little introduction: Gothic literature and film has permeated society to the point that most people have some sense of what is being suggested if

something is described as Gothic. However, it is worth defining the Gothic through its relationship to the irrational. The Gothic has been based in the irrational from its very conception. The term ‘Gothic’ in its earliest incarnation related to the East Germanic tribal people who sacked Rome in the fifth century A.D. leading to the fall of the Roman Empire. The Goths were painted in history as primitive and barbarians who ravaged the cultured and intellectual society of the Roman Empire; Catherine Spooner argues that this is the origin for “the modern understanding of Gothic as the passionate overthrow of reason” (Spooner *Contemporary Gothic* 13). Gothic literature was influenced by Romanticism, which championed a kind of madness through the rapturous experience of the sublimity of nature. The sublime was considered an experience of something so expansive and consuming that, as Botting writes, it “presented an excess that could not be processed by the rational mind” (Botting *Gothic* 39). Nature, in Romanticism, becomes an experience that allows the spectator/reader to transcend the rational through an almost spiritual awe. Dark Romanticism is merely the other side of the same coin, whereby the rational mind is transcended through the presentation of the supernatural, evil forces, turbulent nature, contemplation of the ruin and the failings of humanity—such as sin and depravity. The fear such violent imagery provokes causes the reader to lose their sense of self; they are so wrapped up in their emotional response to the text that they forget all else. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge stated “But the Gothic art is sublime... it causes the whole being to expand into the infinite; earth and air, nature and art, all swell up into eternity and the only sensible impression left is that ‘I am nothing!’” (qtd. in Beville 5).

The Gothic’s defining characteristic is and has always been the irrational, a state or experience expressed through the Gothic’s fascination with unreliable narrators (in questionable mental states for a variety of reasons), illogical events, bodies that resist normal classifications, spaces that defy order, and characters that eschew reason and logic or are



driven into states of mental decline. For example, *The Turn of the Screw* is often read as a text with an unreliable narrator and the ghosts within the story as a result of the governess's instability as depicted through her manuscript. Likewise, the use of epistolary documents in *Dracula* draws explicit attention to the subjectivity of its narrators. Illogical bodies tend to take the form of monsters such as those found in *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. Gothic spaces are in constant flux and regularly defy physical order. *House of Leaves* offers perhaps the ultimate example of this with its corridor that extends into an impossible labyrinth.

Characters that fall into mental decline are well represented in many of Poe's short stories, for example "The Fall of the House of Usher" with the sickly and delusional Roderick Usher or "The Tell Tale Heart" with the unnamed narrator's auditory hallucinations. Subjects that reflect the irrational—the monster, the Gothic space, the unreliable or declining mind—have become persistent tropes within the Gothic genre.

Gothic *modi operandi* have often been paralleled to the distinctive qualities that exist within postmodern texts. For example, Allan Lloyd Smith in his essay "Postmodernism/Gothicism" has paralleled several concerns between the two modes in sections he labels indeterminacy, surfaces/affectivity, nostalgia/archaism/history, pastiche/reflexivity, criminality/the unspeakable/excess, and science/technology/paranoia (Smith). I posit that the reason for this is that, just like the Gothic, postmodernist texts tend to be suspicious of the fruits of rationality when they are presented as indisputable. Anything that might be considered a metanarrative—what John Stephens and Robyn McCallum has defined as "a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience" (Stephens and McCallum 6)—such as science or religion, is suspect within postmodern literature. Jean-François Lyotard has taken this so far as to write, "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard *The Postmodern Condition* xxiv). He explains this move in almost Gothic terms:

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name. (Lyotard *The Postmodern Condition* 80-81)

In this context we might consider the concept of the self. Once conceived as stable and coherent, the postmodern self (or 'subject') is now considered a social and cultural myth that projects a comprehensible ideology over the fractured individual experience. In the past language (which defines the 'self') would have been thought to represent reality accurately—the signified is the signifier. In the postmodern, language is fluid, arbitrary, and has a complex relationship to what might be thought of as real. These ideas have many recognisable effects on literature. Although no comprehensive list of the techniques of postmodernism exists, and these practices are in no way limited to postmodernism, formal elements indicative of a postmodern text might be considered to include: metafiction, intertext, blurring between high and low culture, a tone of sarcasm and play rather than seriousness, pastiche, and the hybridisation of genres.

The irrational, then, can be defined in a number of ways. It has readily been considered in the Gothic under the Freudian phrase 'the uncanny', which is an experience of the familiar made unfamiliar or the homely made unhomely. Uncanniness is produced "by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, such as when something we had hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions and significance of the thing it symbolises" (Freud 93). So it is a distortion of reality that makes what had previously been familiar now seem unfamiliar. A popular example is that of the doll come to life. A doll is a double of the human form that is

essentially lifeless, like a corpse, which when imbued with its own life force becomes alienated from its status as a safe object, a children's toy. Freud describes that people often imagine dolls come to life as a product of the doll's nature as a double of the human form which is already uncanny—like a person but lifeless (Freud 85). This has obvious implications for the reading of dead bodies, bodies that function outside of what is considered normal, and houses that become unhomey. The manner in which these escape the familiar—essentially what is rational and normative—positions the uncanny in the realm of the irrational.

The production of common fears in Gothic fiction has a relationship to what causes anxiety for the population at large—anxiety often relating to irrational fears or concerns involved with cultural changes. Fred Botting relates this when he writes “In Gothic fiction certain stock features provide the principle embodiments and evocations of cultural anxieties” (Botting *Gothic 2*). In particular we might consider those anxieties produced by the introduction of scientific advancements and societal changes. Indeed, this is a constant theme in Gothic literature. As the study of anatomy and evolution was introduced, taking away the power of God as the creator of life, fiction such as *Frankenstein* began to appear as it became conceivable that life could be created by humans. This is also demonstrated through the depiction of the family unit in teen horror films in the late twentieth century which coincided with the increase in the rate of divorce. Pat Gill, in her influential essay “The Monstrous Years: Teens, Slasher Films, and the Family”, relates the massive rise of the teen slasher film to the increase of divorce in the 1970s: “What is striking about most of these films is the notable uselessness of parents, their absence, physically and emotionally, from their children's lives. Teens must deal with the extraordinarily resilient monsters on their own” (Gill 17). The Gothic in this context can be seen as an expression of society-wide mental breakdown. By taking what causes mass concern, it plays out the worst possible outcome in a

safe space, such as the cinema or the pages of a novel.

Like the Gothic, Postmodernist theory also contains a recognisable theme of irrationality. The theory of the ‘hyperreal’ which was introduced by Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), demonstrates how the current culture has abandoned reality, replacing the original with symbols and signs that stand for nothing but each other—the media has become an entity free from reality. He explains this in gothic terms as a kind of ritual death “Through reproduction from one medium to another the real becomes volatile, it becomes the allegory of death, but it also draws strength from its own destruction, becoming real for its own sake, a fetishism of the lost object which is no longer the object of representation, but the ecstasy of denegation and its own ritual extermination: the hyperreal” (Baudrillard *Symbolic Exchange and Death* 71-72). Within the death of the real is also the demise of the rational, as without reality there is little need for rationality (Baudrillard *Simulacra and Simulation* 2). There is also a loss of history (lost referents) because even as history is mediated, its reality is lost as the mediation becomes more real than the actuality. “The great event of this period, the great trauma, is this decline of strong referents, these death pangs of the real and of the rational that open onto an age of simulation” (Baudrillard *Simulacra and Simulation* 43). From this, Jameson constructs the idea that postmodernism most resembles the experience of the schizophrenic. “With the breakdown of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 27). Therefore, in a Jamesonian sense, we could consider how the irrational author of dark romanticism and the schizophrenic subject of the postmodern are both in a state of mental extremis. However, the frenzy of the romantic is a creative force while the fragmented postmodern subject is dazed by a meaningless stretch of ‘now’ lost within the hyperreality of endless circling signs.

Feminist theory also provides a context for defining the irrational. Excessive, irrational bodies that excrete fluids and escape normative bodily structures are the focus of Julia Kristeva's 'abject'. The abject, building from the theories of Freud and Lacan, stems from the separation of the infant from the mother into the 'symbolic realm' with the introduction of language, which is associated with the paternal. While the infant is entirely reliant on the maternal, with the acquisition of language the child creates an autonomous separate sense of self—an 'I' that is formed in relation to the patriarchal binary systems of religion, media, law, and education, all of which implement ideas of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. According to Kristeva, this is an agonising moment, as the former existence is cast off: "I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself [...] During the course in which 'I' become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit" (Kristeva 3). The infantile experience of bodily fluids and dependence becomes abject and must be cast off. Bodily excretions through this are abject as they occupy a liminal status between self and object. The experience the abject in fiction, of bodies that are outside of the symbolic order, revolts because it reminds us of the infantile state.

In constructing the symbolic realm—and thus written language—as a masculine, paternal site, the French structuralist feminists push for a movement of feminine writing, or *écriture féminine*. This term was first theorised by Hélène Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976). For Cixous, writing has historically been a male tradition bound in binaries and ordering rules that has oppressed feminine bodies and excluded feminine voices. "Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallogocentric tradition" (Cixous 879). In order to oppose this, Cixous (as well as theorists like Luce Irigaray and Kristeva) calls for feminine writing that breaks the structuring, rationalising

rules of the 'phallogocentric tradition'. Cixous does not define the form of this literature with any determinacy as the existence of such writing would defy categorisation and structuring—"this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded" (Cixous 883). What she does suggest though is that, "Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes" (Cixous 886). Within this there is a clear dichotomy between the rational as a masculine tradition that has oppressed other (less rational) forms.

The irrational is mainly definable through its opposition. It is everything other than the rational, the scientifically explained, the categorised, the normative, and the contained. As such it is amorphous and indeterminate. The irrational can describe the dazed and empty experience of Jameson's schizophrenic as well as the excessive and corporal exhibition of Kristeva's abject. Irrationality is a reaction to, and often against, the dominant culture. It is in essence a protest of anything that is too pure, too simple, too clean, and too obvious—an apparent focus for both the Gothic and the postmodern.

*House of Leaves*, *The Three Incestuous Sisters* and *The Adventuress* expand their narratives beyond the borders of the textual body into the paratext, in what might be considered a relatively likely answer to the vein of irrationality and the visual culture present in both postmodernism and the Gothic. In many ways, paratextual subversions can be seen as a metaphor for the irrational. It is a disruption of the normal body of the text. The paratext displays, rather than describes, the irrationality of the narrator's mind or the events that take place, which in turn confuses and puzzles the reader in order to evoke a responding kind of irrationality in them. It tends, also, to mimic hyperreality in an explicit confusion of signs. By extension it presents the possibility of paratexts outside of the physical body of the book being included in the narrative thus suggesting an irrationally endless possibility of texts that could be taken as the paratext. The idea of the narrative appearing endlessly within

continuous paratexts can be described as *mise en abyme*—a series of frames within the narrative that draw attention to the manner in which the narrative is also a frame of reality. With the use of images and pictorial arrangements of text there is a reference to the historical associations the Gothic has with visual media and also the current hyper-visual culture of postmodernism.

The signs that make up postmodern hyperreality take their form most often in the language of the visual. Visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff postulates that postmodern culture “is at its most postmodern when it is visual” going on to write that “[t]he disjunctured and fragmented culture that we call postmodernism is best imagined and understood visually, just as the nineteenth century was classically represented in the newspaper and the novel” (Mirzoeff 3). Baudrillard has also described this inclination as the obscenity of the immediately visual “when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication” (Baudrillard *Simulacra and Simulation* 130) while Linda Williams has called it “the frenzy of the visible” (Williams 7). To some degree the visual has always been part of Gothic media but as the Gothic translates into the current period there is an acceleration of these signs. Take, for example, *Frankenstein*: the book was published in 1818 and as early as 1823 it was adapted into a play. By its third edition in 1831 it was illustrated with a frontispiece by Theodor Von Holst. By the twentieth century, in 1910, the first silent film of *Frankenstein* was released preceding approximately 50 different film adaptations—the latest of which is currently running in cinemas (2014). From the 1950s there were television references to the monster and the 1960s saw him appearing in comics and cartoons, along with the various toys and games these numerous reappearances have inspired. As Nicola Trott has pointed out, “The Gothic is especially remarkable for two things: for proliferation and for persistence. It has become a multimedia idiom. Migrating effortlessly from text to drama to image, and has capitalised (above all via *Frankenstein*) on the modern

technologies of film and video” (Trott 490). This has gone on to the extent that the monster has been removed from his context and has become merely a sign of the Gothic, an archetype of the genre. Even when he is no longer to be feared—when he becomes merely a cartoon character with green skin and bolts in his neck—the creature remains Gothic precisely because he has been boiled down to an image and because that sign sits within a specific history of Gothic reflexivity. It is possible to imagine from this history of adaptation that one might know and understand *Frankenstein* without ever having come into contact with the original text—to osmose the story through the hyperreality surrounding something that is merely a fiction and a set of signs. The original Gothic literature has largely been boiled down to these signs to the point that this is a large portion of what is referenced when we speak of the Gothic. Thus to be a part of the Gothic genre necessitates addressing these signs to at least some extent. Unruly paratext is an inevitable answer to the shared concerns of the Gothic and the postmodern in terms of their commercial relationship to the visual. But, it also represents a mutual interest in finding new forms and experimenting with techniques that break the status quo—this being suggestive of the rebellious, irrational spirit that underpins them both.

The focus of this thesis will be to compare and contrast the manner in which Niffenegger and Danielewski engage in postmodern and Gothic themes through their use of paratext to create different effects. *The Adventuress*, *The Three Incestuous Sisters*, and *House of Leaves* all rely on manipulated paratext in order to relate their narratives. Niffenegger’s two visual novels make use of illustrations and have minimal text, which has been pared down to being almost a series of captions. The narratives feature feminine protagonists, marginalised bodies, and physical transformations. The effect of relating this through visual media is to draw attention to the manner in which the bodies of marginalised groups are held in check by a controlling gaze. But it also subverts the expectations that gaze has of those



bodies, creating a text that protests the normalising function of consumer visual media. The manner in which Niffenegger relies mainly on images, particularly of bodily expression, rather than text in order to relate her narrative can be read as *écriture féminine*—a celebration of the irrational feminine. On the other hand, *House of Leaves* represents, and perhaps has influenced, a particular stand of literature that has emerged since the turn of the millennium. An exploration of *House of Leaves* will relate how these texts attempt to mimic postmodern media. In short, Danielewski does this by creating a sense of a hyperreality, by creating an extended media and mythology that surrounds the text (for example on the internet), and by emulating the assumed effect of the postmodern media on its viewers—where the media is presumed to infect and alter the perceptions of those who engage with it. The effect of this is to create a pastiche of the postmodern media—in a sense a pastiche of what regularly already is pastiche. These points will be extended to include several similar texts, such as J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorset’s *S.*, Marisha Pessl’s *Night Film*, and Steven Hall’s *The Raw Shark Texts* to provide a broader context and support the idea of this as a defined postmillennial movement.

### (i) Terminologies

Before I commence, it is essential to clarify the key terms that will be applied to these texts and consider why these terms have been selected. ‘Paratext’ as described by Gerard Genette is a term that I rely on significantly in describing the manner in which these texts expand beyond normal borders into the illustrations, the outside media, the covers, introductions, and author names. Paratexts are those constructions, existing around the body of the text, that are involved in presenting a text or “ensur[ing] the text’s presence in the world, its ‘reception’ and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book” (Genette *Paratexts* 1). The Greek prefix ‘para’ originally takes the meaning ‘near to, beside, near, or from’, but has also

come to mean ‘altered, beyond, contrary’—from where words such as ‘paranoia’ (*para* ‘altered, beyond’ and *noos* ‘mind’) and ‘paranormal’ originate. Jonathan Gray has noted that “just as a *parasite* feeds off, lives in, and can affect the running of its host’s body, a paratext constructs, lives in, and can affect the running of the text” (Gray 6). Irrationality, too, can be figured in this way—it feeds off the rational mind and effects the actions of the person it lives within. Paratext is the irrational feature of the more rational, traditional and contained body of the text.

Paratexts take the form of the physical and visual presentation of the text (including: covers, illustrations and fonts), as well as any number of adjacent texts (such as: introductions, title, external interviews and advertising). Within the umbrella term ‘paratext’ there are two distinct variants, or branches: the ‘peritext’ or paratexts that are within the text (covers, title pages, typesetting, paper, name of author, dedications, prefaces, introductions, chapter titles) (Genette *Paratexts* 5), and the ‘epitext’ or those that are outside the text (interviews, reviews, public response, advertising) (Genette *Paratexts* 3).

Of course all texts have paratexts—it would be impossible to exist in isolation of them. All texts are presented in some manner, written in some font, and talked about in some forum. However, the texts that I have chosen to discuss make pronounced and conscious use of these adjacent texts and incorporate them as part of their storytelling medium. Niffenegger’s texts *The Adventuress* and *The Three Incestuous Sisters* mostly employ peritext through illustrations that convey their narratives, while *House of Leaves* incorporates both peritext and epitext by manipulating many of the presentation aspects of the text (including a variety of fonts, the copyright page, index and the arrangement of the text on the page) and being consciously involved in the various texts that are external to the physical book.

Other writers have talked about these kinds of texts in terms of paratext. For example, Rune Grauland’s article “Text and paratext in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*”

proposes that Danielewski's text is "a rare example of a novel that has been able to transcend the limits of paratextual experimentations. [...]he paratext is apportioned so much power that it is allowed constantly to encroach on the text, often to the point where there is nothing but paratext left" (Grauland 379). However, these texts have also been considered through other terms, the most persuasive of which is 'multimodality' as discussed by Alison Gibbons. Multimodality accounts for a broad range of mixed media and can be applied to an almost unlimited variety of endeavours, the reason for this being that multiple modes that multimodality accounts for have never been entirely defined. Ruth Page has considered mode in this context to mean:

a system of choices used to communicate meaning. What might count as a mode is an open-ended set, ranging across a number of systems including but not limited to language, image, color, typography, music, voice quality, dress, gesture, spatial resources, perfume, and cuisine. (Page 6)

In order to narrow this term down enough to apply to the texts in question, Gibbons has labelled them "multimodal printed literature" (Gibbons 2). Multimodality is useful in describing the increase of literature making use of these additional techniques that can be seen since the turn of the twenty-first century. However, the term paratext is better employed for discussing specifically printed literature—where multimodality is broad, paratext is more narrow—which reflects an interest that Niffenegger and Danielewski (as well as many others) have in asserting the physicality of their texts in a kind of nostalgia for printed material (none of these texts are available as ebooks). In order to resolve this, multimodality can be restricted—as Gibbons has done—to printed literature, but doing so would include only peritext and exclude epitexts, which I will argue are an integral part of *House of Leaves* and other more recent examples. For these reasons, I intend to discuss *House of Leaves*, *The Three Incestuous Sisters* and *The Adventureess* more in terms of paratextual manipulations.

However, multimodality is still worth understanding as a way of defining the collage effect of these texts.

## (ii) Contexts

While *House of Leaves* and Niffenegger's visual novels can be—and have been—considered experimental (thus new), they actually reflect a long history of such literature—the complete exposition of which would be too lengthy to reproduce here. However, an overview and introduction to various texts and movements, of which some will be later expanded upon, seems appropriate. This section will proceed more or less chronologically beginning in the mid eighteenth-century, not terribly long after the term 'novel' was introduced to describe brief fiction that was focused mainly on modern life—as opposed to the epic romances that had previously dominated. While romances and many other cultural conditions have influenced the path of Gothic literature, the rise of the novel (derived from the Latin *novus* meaning 'new'), and its concurrence with the Age of Reason, strikes a most portentous chord in the examination of these particular texts.

Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* published between 1759 and 1767 is often considered the earliest novel in the English tradition to take a heavily self-conscious interest in the problems of language leading to various humorous and playful occurrences within the text. The humour in *Tristram Shandy* tends to rely on subverting reason in an unexpected manner for an amusing effect—such as taking passages from serious texts (such as Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*) and placing them in new contexts to create wildly different meanings. In terms of visual interaction—being most applicable to Danielewski's work—we might consider Sterne's full black page that signifies the mourning of a character's death, the visual representations of the narrative structure in the form of wavering lines, the inconsistent and erratic pagination of

Volume 4 (between pages 146 and 156) on account of the missing chapter 24, and the blank page in Chapter XXXVIII where the reader is invited to engage with the text by illustrating it with their own portrait of the Widow Wadman. All of these instances manipulate the paratext in order to convey information about and within the narrative. They subvert the usual inconspicuousness of paratext and engage the reader in more than the standard business of reading the lines and turning the pages.

At approximately the same time, Gothic literature was making its debut with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* first published in 1764 under the full title: *The Castle of Otranto, A Story. Translated by William Marshal, Gent. From the Original Italian of Onuphrio Muralto, Canon of the Church of St. Nicholas at Otranto*. This text claimed to be a translation of a found manuscript that was printed in Naples in 1529 and based on a story that harked back to the time of the crusades. By removing his name from the authorial site, Walpole infused the text with a sense of 'real' historical mystery that amplified the Gothic feeling of the text as a whole. With the printing of subsequent editions Walpole confessed his authorship of the entire text and critics became less inclined to give the book a favourable review. For the Gothic, establishing fear or mystery outside of the text rather than just within the fiction has naturally led to a destabilisation of the author, as authorship always carries an implication of the safety of fiction rather than the terrifying implication of reality. With the removal of authority there is also a kind of awe related to the improbability of such a manuscript surviving; that chance has ferried the text from some unknowable past to the current circumstance where it may be puzzled over but never fully explained.

The period following the publication of the first Gothic has been described as having a "taste for fantastic and supernatural themes which dominated British culture from around 1770 to 1830" ("Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination"). Within this period (and that immediately after) most of the Gothic classics were published: Ann

Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), in America Edgar Allan Poe's tales were being published in magazines with "The Fall of the House of Usher" first appearing in 1839, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* appeared under the pseudonym 'Currer Bell' in 1847, and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* was a later addition in 1897. These novels all contain a relationship to the Enlightenment that is both critical and also engaged with the ideas and even linguistic practices dictated by empirical reason. Trott explains "Instead of being the work simply of reaction, Gothic writing took part, even if it also took sides, in an *unresolved* argument between rationality and more suggestible and mysterious states of mind" (Trott 458). The fanaticism for the Gothic, however, was not contained within the literary tradition but, driven as it was by popularity, it cross-pollinated with many different mediums. In line with this path of enquiry, we might consider the illustrative print work of William Blake, the most famous examples of which were his illustrations of biblical tales and those of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. For Blake, "Grecian art is mathematical form: Gothic is living form" (qtd. in Istituto Italiano di cultura di Londra 128). Blake's assertion demonstrates the aesthetic shift that was happening from neoclassicism (associated with the Enlightenment) to Romanticism with its appeal to transcendence, passion and emotion. Because of the liminal status of Blake's work there is debate on exactly where he should be placed, but a strong argument can be made for his work containing strands of Dark Romanticism in his visual appeal to the terrible and the fantastic. Debate also arises over the level of commentary that Blake makes with his prints concerning the text—over and above simply depicting the narrative. However, it is possible to consider these images as more of a paratextual conversation than a submissive act of straightforward illustration ("William Blake: Exhibition themes: Gothic Art"). We might also note that the printing techniques that Blake employed are very similar to those used by Niffenegger in *The Adventuress* and *The Three Incestuous Sisters* nearly 200 years later.

The Gothic was consistently involved in new media. Botting has noted that the rise of the Gothic coincides with the rise of mass media technology, writing that “[p]rinting presses create a monstrous reading public; ghosts attach themselves to phantasmagorical, photographic or cinematic projections. The uncanny wanders spectrally between readers, viewers, pages and screens, and the mechanisms of projection” (Botting “Gothic Technologies”). David J. Jones in *Gothic Machine: Textualities, Pre-cinematic Media and Film in Popular Visual Culture 1670-1910* (2012) has traced how the Gothic appropriated visual technology almost from its inception. Jones starts his investigation with phantasmagoria (from Ancient Greek phantasma, “ghost” and agoreuein, “assembly”) which was a form of theatre involving an early model of a projector in the eighteenth century. Officially the purpose of these events was to disabuse the public of superstitious beliefs in ghosts and according to Terry Castle were “complete with preliminary lectures on the fallacy of ghost-belief and the various cheats perpetrated by conjurers and necromancers over the centuries” (Castle 143). Yet, because the creators never revealed their own deceits, these shows served instead to cast doubt on the infallibility of scientific investigation and the fear inspired in the audiences reflected only their belief in the ghouls presented to them. This is confirmed by the most famous director of phantasmagorias, Etienne-Gaspard Robertson, who has been quoted saying “I am only satisfied if my spectators, shivering and shuddering, raise their hands or cover their eyes out of fear of ghosts and devils dashing towards them” (qtd. in Carlson 36). This early connection between the literary and early visual media has prompted Jones to suggest that as early as 1800 the term ‘Gothic’ encapsulated an interrelated network of quickly evolving media (Jones 5).

By the start of the twentieth century the Gothic was in a decline in high culture, and in its purest form was kept alive only in low cultural representations—the cinema (early examples including the first adaptation of *Frankenstein* (1910), *Nosferatu* (1921), *The*

*Phantom Carriage* (1921), *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1923), *Metropolis* (1927) and *Freaks* (1932)), pulp fiction such as the magazine *Weird Tales* first published in 1923, and slightly later comic book anthologies like *Tales from the Crypt* published by EC Comics in the 1950s. From here we can gather the origins of Botting's 'candygothic'—Gothic that more or less permanently crosses the border from terror to comedic while still engaging Gothic motifs (Botting *Gothic* 133).

High cultural artistic movements remained interested in ideas of the unconscious as well as a return to the kinds of linguistic experiments that Sterne put into practise. Dadaism was a movement that arose in reaction to the horrors of the First World War—a war that these artists saw as the result of reason and logic. In response they prized irrationality, nonsense, intuition and a contrarian stance whereby they rejected artistic standards by creating instead what they called 'anti-art'. Within literature this often resulted in an interest in typography that reduced language down to linguistically meaningless images—to symbols without referents. Within Dadaism examples can also be observed of what was later to be called concrete poetry where the poem takes on pictorial form (also present in other modernist movements of the early twentieth century, such as Futurism), which in the previous century had been reserved for humorous and nonsense writing such as Lewis Carroll's "The Mouse's Tale". It also produced a form of writing that relied on chance as described in Tristan Tzara's "To Make a Dadaist Poem" (1920).

Take a newspaper

Take some scissors.

Choose from this paper an article the length you want to make your poem.

Cut out the article.

Next carefully cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them all in a bag.

Shake gently.



Next take out each cutting one after the other.

Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag.

The poem will resemble you.

And there you are—an infinitely original author of charming sensibility,  
even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd. (Tzara qtd. in Robinson 7)

This poem describes the Dadaist movement quite successfully and also demonstrates the strands of Dadaism that were to have a lasting effect on art. There is an obvious contrarian stance whereby the artist is positioned apart from the ‘vulgar herd’, which is typically Dadaist. It is amusingly self-referential; as a poem about the making of poetry it foreshadows the interests of postmodernism. It has no recognisable form or rhyming structure thus rejecting order and externally enforced standards of art making and, in doing so, suggests that if the world seems to be lacking order and logic so too should poetry, reflecting the ideals of modernism (although within modernism there is also a rage for order in opposition to the fundamentally unordered nature of the post war world). Finally, it describes how chance might be employed in the making of literature—that poetry might emerge from cut up words, essentially from the soup of language itself.

Surrealism followed Dadaism relatively neatly, remaining suspicious of rationality and still reeling from the war. However, Surrealism took account of Freudian theory and sought to unleash creativity from the unconscious mind. To this end, much of Surrealist literature took the form of automatic writing—writing in a spontaneous manner without censorship (previously a tool for engaging with the spirits now taken as a method of communing with the unconscious).

During this period wordless novels—books comprised entirely of images with no linguistic input—were becoming popular, perhaps in part due to the rise of the silent movie. In the afterword of *The Three Incestuous Sisters* Niffenegger labels her texts ‘visual novels’

in order to associate them with the wordless novels of the 1920s and 30s—specifically Lynd Ward's *Gods' Man*. These novels were particularly popular in Germany and are recognised as part of the expressionist movement which has been characterised by its rejection of the dehumanising effect of the new industrial metropolises of the early twentieth century. They were in essence socialist protests against the negative effects of capitalism.

There are a few twentieth century texts, all of which are considered highly postmodern, that manipulate the paratext for particular effects. Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire* (1962) takes the form of a poem written by the fictional John Shade as well as a foreword and commentary written by the equally fictional and insane academic Charles Kinbote. There are obvious parallels that can be made with *House of Leaves* in the use of a fictional academic writing a non-fiction text to make up the body of the novel. Also of note is the use of the unreliable narrator of questionable sanity. *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) by Kurt Vonnegut again questions sanity offering a sane-looking but deeply deranged business man and a science fiction writer who looks like a crazy old man but who is, relatively speaking, as sane as his two main characters. Crudely rendered illustrations are scattered throughout the novel sometimes in direct relation to the narrative and at other times seemingly peripheral. *Glas* (1974) by Jacques Derrida is a text that questions form and distances itself from genre categorisation. However, it should suffice to say that it is a deconstructionist nonfiction text on philosophy and literature that raises questions through its form about the nature of literature and literary critique. The text of *Glas* is composed of two columns with differing fonts, one of which concerns the philosopher Hegel and the other the autobiographical writing of Genet. Around these columns Derrida inserts quotations, definitions and other supplementary marginalia. In *Glas*, as with *Pale Fire*, the text can be read in a number of ways because the paratext inserts itself into the body of the text and interrupts the chronology of the narrative.

While obvious examples of these texts can be found from the beginning of postmodernism, they have flourished since the start of the twenty-first century—in fact, the publication of *House of Leaves* marked the turn of the century, which has not gone unnoticed by academics. Gibbons notes, “Indeed, even within mainstream publishing, the period surrounding the turn of the millennium has seen an increase in the inclusion of typography and illustration in fiction for adults” (Gibbons 2). Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) incorporates illustrations that tend to stand in for unspoken moments within the narrative which depicts a nine year old boy coming to terms with the insanity of the 9/11 attacks and the incomprehensible death of his father. *Woman’s World* by Graham Rawle was published in the same year and relates a humorous mystery story through magazine clippings from the 1960s questioning the role of femininity in the language of woman’s magazines. Steven Hall’s *The Raw Shark Texts* concerns Eric whose memories have been devoured by the Ludovician—a conceptual predator that feeds on ideas. Thus, in order to cure his dissociative fugue and escape the creature that still hunts him, Eric sets out to find the one person who can explain his lost memory. While the printed text does contain a few images, externally there are said to be 36 un-chapters, one for each of the printed chapters, that are hidden online or in the real world. Many of these have been located and shared in online forums. *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (2008) by Brian Selznick, although intended for children, should be mentioned for its hybrid status as a novel that tells the story through images and flip book sequences about an early inventor of film. Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes* (2010), rather like *Woman’s World*, takes a found text, in this case Bruno Schulz’s book *The Street of Crocodiles*, and cuts away the majority of the words leaving only the ones that form his new story. The resulting book is a sculptural work with delicately cut pages. Marisha Pessl’s *Night Film* is a thriller centred on a mysterious cult-horror-film director over whom there is much speculation over the relating to his sanity and

potentially depraved lifestyle. Throughout the text are screen shots of news and gossip websites, newspaper clippings, and other insertions—while in the e-book there are further hidden audio visual clues that can be uncovered with the help of a downloadable app. Finally, *S.* (2013) by J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst takes the form of an old library book called *Ship of Theseus* by fictional author V.M. Straka. Within the text are footnotes written by the translator F.X. Caldeira and in the margins are handwritten notes between students Jen and Eric. The lead character in *Ship of Theseus* is without his memory and gets shanghaied onto a mysterious ship with a paranormal crew, while simultaneously Jen and Eric try to solve the mystery surrounding the author and his translator. Externally, there are websites that relate to the fictional happenings within the text and provide supplementary clues to the internal mystery.

The rise of these texts that make active use of their paratext coincides with the rise of the internet, improvements in design and printing technology, and with a society that is arguably more involved with visual media than at any time in the past. This is relatively similar to what Botting says about the initial rise of the Gothic novel and its relationship to new media. In terms of our twenty-first century texts those with a Gothic bent are more inclined to be highly technologically involved and consequently they push their paratextual involvement out into the epitext. *The Raw Shark Texts*, *S.*, and *Night Film* are all to some degree invested in horror motifs and take the most advantage of external websites, hidden media, and the possibilities of new book forms.

Throughout these texts and movements is a repeating theme of the limits of the mind. The experimentation of literary format has consistently gone hand in hand with a rebellion against reason, a questioning of reality, and with an indulgence in irrational characters.

### (iii) The Chapters

#### **Chapter One: Genre**

Chapter One investigates how Gothic tropes operate in *House of Leaves*, *The Adventuress*, and *The Three Incestuous Sisters* and the manner in which they relate to my key claim of the Gothic as irrational. The chapter is loosely divided into two subsections: the first considers the theme of ‘ghostliness’ while the second focuses on ideas of ‘monstrosity’. The section on ghostliness considers the role that actual apparitions have in the text and also reflects on the role of history within the Gothic. Historical references are considered for their involvement in the construction of hyperreality and the role of epistolary documents are examined for their production of a sense of inheritance through generations. The concept of the haunted house (prison, castle, asylum) is considered both for the way in which the haunted house in *House of Leaves* stands in for the unrepresentable—a common theme in both the Gothic and postmodern—and the manner in which these spaces relate to gender roles, which I argue Niffenegger subverts while Danielewski tends to reinforce. The section on monstrosity considers the irrational bodies that populate Gothic texts—from the monsters created through technological, scientific means such as the *Adventuress*, through those that are created through trauma (a common postmodern trope) like *House of Leaves*’ Johnny Truant, and finally those that are born monstrous such as The Saint from *The Three Incestuous Sisters*. These marginalised figures are placed in a historical context and discussed in terms of their relationship to ideas of feminism and postmodernism. The concept of monstrous consumption and production in the face of both the tradition popularity of the Gothic and the effect of late capitalism are also considered.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that Niffenegger puts the Gothic to use for a specific purpose relating to ideas about gender by utilising parody, while Danielewski involves the Gothic in a way that is mainly interesting in creating a text that perfectly reflects as many

Gothic tropes as possible in order to create an effect that his text is entirely surface—that it is pure style—in an example of pastiche.

## **Chapter Two: Authorship**

Chapter Two examines the ‘death of the author’ narrative that has been so persuasive in postmodern analysis particularly in consideration to what part the paratext plays in constructing and deconstructing the authorial role in Danielewski and Niffenegger’s texts. Roland Barthes’s essay “Death of the Author” (1967) offers a critique of biographical readings of literature based on the author and instead maintains that as an author’s intentions can never fully be brought into focus, so to impose authorial intention on a text is not particularly useful. These readings, he argues, also impose a limit to analysis based on further information the author may or may not choose to disclose to their readers apart from the text. If the author remains in control of how their text is read, they impose a restriction on what may be said of their text—they are an authority figure. For Barthes, the site of meaning resides within an impersonal reader—liberated from the control of the author. He notoriously concludes his essay by writing that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes “Death of the Author” 130). However, while there may be a death of the author’s subjectivity, we might still consider what Foucault has described as an author-function in his essay “What is an Author?” (1969). The author-function allows for the concept that some aspect of the author (the author’s name for example) may have some relationship with the text but the author remains unessential to readings of the text.

Having framed Niffenegger’s two visual novels as feminist text in Chapter One, Chapter Two discusses the place of the female author in light of the death-of-the-author thesis, as well as a history of Gothic literature in which women have used masculine pseudonyms in order to be read. While removing the authorial figure from the text seems to provide liberation, for authors who have traditionally been silenced it merely continues to undermine their

experience (which may be closely tied to their work) as unimportant or irrelevant. This section argues that the author's name, along with some of the ways in which Niffenegger reinserts herself into her texts, are explicitly feminine and, as such, demand that at the very least some form of subjective information does impact on the reading of the text.

Danielewski, on the other hand, constructs a specifically Gothic identity that is intended to be read as a paratext alongside the text of the narrative. *House of Leaves* represents a strand of postmodern Gothic writing that has occurred in the twenty first century that incorporates epitext as part of its narrative content. By directing the reader outside of the text (particularly onto the internet) for information concerning the narrative, the text opens up to include information the death of the author paradigm is in opposition to. The fictional websites, fan forums, and the social media sites these authors set up tend to be strategically constructed for certain effects. Even the information Danielewski chooses to divulge in interviews and the way he frames his biography as explicitly Gothic are part of an effect that is being created for the benefit of the readers. Within this, however, what is being asserted is not author subjectivity, but rather an additional text that can be read. As such, the author loses control even of themselves as they assert themselves as merely another text whose meaning resides within the reader.

### **Chapter Three: Reader/Viewer**

Chapter Three considers the reader in the context of paratext and discusses how manipulated paratext has been utilised to convey Gothic meaning. Even in approaching these texts the reader must decide how to engage with them and in several cases they must even construct a plan of action—for example in what order to read the narrative of *House of Leaves* when it splits into multiple streams. Gothic literature has traditionally been centred on creating an experience of sublime and irrational terror for its readers and has thus focused very explicitly on the reader's response. Botting has written of how this differed from earlier moralising or

educational literature, noting that “Gothic produced emotional effects on its readers rather than developing a rational or properly cultivated response. Exciting rather than informing, it chilled their blood, delighted their superstitious fancies and fed uncultivated appetites for marvellous and strange events” (Botting *Gothic* 4). As Gothic literature has developed terror has become a less integral component leaving the irrational as its defining feature.

This chapter compares and contrasts the ways in which *House of Leaves*, *The Adventuress*, and *The Three Incestuous Sisters* evoke the irrational as a response to their texts in order to reproduce the Gothic within their readers. By employing visual techniques these texts create readers that are also viewers and spectators and, as such, their gaze is engaged to create particular effects. Niffenegger regularly involves her viewers and characters in a scopophilic gaze—an enraptured and controlling gaze that takes pleasure in viewing—in order to comment on the way women’s bodies are controlled when they are seen as transgressive. Similarly, the Panopticon—the architectural design for a prison that relies on the constant threat of surveillance—provides a model for how the institutions that commonly appear within Gothic literature control those that are considered irrational. This appears both in Niffenegger’s and Danielewski’s texts when various characters are institutionalised. In both cases the reader’s gaze is directed in a manner that makes them implicit in this control but also paradoxically controlled.

Among the theoretical frames employed, ‘cognitive poetics’ is used to describe the manner in which the manipulations of paratext in these novels affect the reader. Cognitive poetics applies the principles of cognitive psychology to the interpretation of literature and provides a useful way of explaining how literary effects can be employed to disturb the psychology of the reader. The discussion particularly covers how *House of Leaves* and similar recent texts have blurred the boundary between the discourse world (the ‘real’ external world) and the text world (the world inside the narrative) in an unusually aggressive



manner. This is achieved in *House of Leaves* by creating multiple levels of fictionality—the non-existent documentary, the academic text, the commentating footnotes, and the editors' footnotes—while other texts have achieved this by extending their essential paratext into other media, such as entire websites that relate to the narrative. The purpose of this is to create an effect where the reader feels as though the Gothic effects within the text are infecting their reality and encroaching on their rationality.

## Chapter One: Genre

*Take* – An old castle, half of it ruinous.

A long gallery, with a great many doors, some secret ones.

Three murdered bodies, quit [sic] fresh.

As many skeletons, in chests and presses.

An old woman hanging by the neck; with her throat cut.

Assassins and desperadoes, 'quant. suff.'

Noises, whispers, and groans, threescore at least.

Mix them together, in the form of three volumes, to be taken at any of the watering-places before going to bed. (Anon qtd. in Botting *Gothic* 29)

For the Gothic effect to be attained, a tale should combine a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration. (Baldick *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales* xix)

Gothic is a genre that has enjoyed many definitions and categorising lists—most likely due to its nature of being both extremely formulaic and regularly intertextual. For example, several tropes might be expected from a Gothic text: ghosts (*The Turn of the Screw*), monsters (*Dracula*, *Frankenstein*), a locked up woman (probably mad) (*Jane Eyre*), a family in decline (*The Castle of Otranto*, “The Fall of the House of Usher”), criminality (*The House of the Seven Gables*), a haunted house or other architectural structure (as in the majority of the previous texts). However, not all Gothic texts have these things; for instance, a text might have a lingering feeling of irrationality and dysfunction that could lead it to be labelled Gothic. It is also true that the mere presence of such features does not necessarily create a

Gothic text. To this end, Esther Peeren and Maria del Pilar Blanco have argued that even if a text contains ghosts, this does not make it generic; to insist on such a categorisation may be to limit a text's meaning: "Genre, as a tool for reading, is predicated on generalization and always runs into the danger (or tedium) of producing allegorical and conventional(izing) readings" (Peeren and Blanco xvi- xvii). However, for *House of Leaves*, *The Adventuress*, and *The Three Incestuous Sisters* there is no need to search for Gothicism—I contend that these texts have ample examples of every one of the listed tropes. The novels are such clear examples of parody and genre pastiche that it would be impossible to read them as anything other than Gothic.

More specifically, I contend that Niffenegger's two visual novels are examples of parody, while *House of Leaves* makes use of pastiche. These terms are synonymous in a casual sense—both imply the copying or mimicking of a text or group of texts—but there is a distinct difference. Genette explains this variance by suggesting that parody is involved in transformation while pastiche is only imitative (Genette *Palimpsests* 27). For Genette parody takes from some original text and alters it in a manner that creates a new effect, while pastiche recognisably and consciously copies without any intention to create (or refer to) an original product. While parody is often considered to be only a humorous exercise—an exaggeration of an original—Linda Hutcheon describes how parody does not merely dismiss the object it translates but sits in a conversation with it:

the textual doubling of parody (unlike pastiche, allusion, quotations, and so on) functions to mark difference. From the double etymology of the prefix *para*, I argue that on a pragmatic level parody was not limited to producing a ridiculous effect (*para* as 'counter' or 'against'), but that the equally strong suggestion of complicity and accord (*para* as 'beside') allowed for an opening up of the range of parody. (Hutcheon *A Theory of Parody* 53-54)

Jameson makes a similar statement when he writes that “parody capitalizes on the uniqueness of these styles and seizes on their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities to produce an imitation which mocks the original. [The] parodist has to have some secret sympathy for the original” (Jameson *The Cultural Turn* 4). *The Adventuress* and *The Three Incestuous Sisters* both sit in a conversational relationship to the Gothic genre. The manner in which they appropriate Gothic tropes simultaneously critiques and participates in the implications that Gothic fiction has traditionally had—particularly in relation to gender and marginalisation.

Pastiche has been considered the mode of postmodernity; according to Jameson it represents “a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum” (Jameson *The Cultural Turn* 7). Pastiche is implicated in the creation of hyperreality as it facilitates the humourless copying of copies and allows itself to lose sight of originality—it is production created from preceding productions. Ultimately pastiche creates depthlessness for Jameson—a culture of superficiality (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Culture of Late Capitalism* 9). While Niffenegger’s texts appropriate Gothic tropes to create new meaning and comment upon the old in a parodic relationship with the Gothic, I claim that *House of Leaves* does the exact opposite. It copies the Gothic precisely to say nothing new at all—it seeks only to create a sense of surface and depthlessness. The other texts that I claim have followed in *House of Leaves* footsteps have a similar relationship to genre—although none are so bound to the Gothic. For instance, *Night Film* can be identified as a thriller that follows an investigative journalist trying to solve a murder case; as he gets deeper into the case the danger to him increases. *The Raw Shark Texts* too can be considered a thriller, as Eric attempts to uncover the truth of what happened to him whilst being pursued by the Ludovician—more explicitly it can be seen as a pastiche of *Jaws*. *S.* strongly reflects the spy fiction of the mid-twentieth century relating the political and revolutionary

involvement of both the protagonist of *Ship of Theseus* and the author V. M. Straka. These genres relate to the irrational and to terror (particularly suspense) in ways that cross over with the techniques of the Gothic. In combination with the use of paratext and postmodernism many parallels can be drawn.

### (i) Ghostliness

Ghostliness is a significant trope within the Gothic which Niffenegger and Danielewski both purposefully evoke. This section will investigate the idea of Ghostliness in several ways: the manner in which history is put to use in these texts will be explored as a production of hyperreality, the haunted space will be considered both as a symbol of the unrepresentable and as a gendered site, and apparitions will be examined both as creations of the mind and as marginalised victims in need of guidance from the living. Ghostliness can be considered as a theme that is explicitly Gothic and thus has a strong relationship to the irrational.

Ghostliness is also an inherent quality of the technology that makes up postmodern media. Paratext in its appropriation of visual culture becomes by default a liminal and haunted mode of writing. Photography, and later film, has been constructed as a haunted technology. Photographs immortalise their subjects and bring to mind the mortality of their flesh and blood twins, while the dead can appear to us once more in two dimensional space because of the temporally delayed nature of these art forms. Susan Sontag, like many others, has noted the photograph's preoccupation with death and memory: "All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt" (Sontag 15). The internet too can be regarded ghostly, not only because it teems with visual media, but also because of the insubstantial

nature of the technology: signals sent and received imperceptibly through (often) wireless internet connections. Manipulated paratexts reproduce and emulate these technologies; including photographic content, re-enacting the techniques and structures of film, and creating choices that the reader must make—thus mimicking hypertext. Peeren and Pilar Blanco define ghostliness as “that which is present yet insubstantial (the spirit rather than the body), secondary rather than primary (a faint copy, a trace, a ghost writer) and potentially unreal or deceptive (a spurious radar signal)” (Peeren and Blanco x). Paratext then, in its secondary nature and liminality, emulates and becomes a trace of the technology that is haunting postmodern culture.

A further sense in which haunting can be considered is through the evocation of history—ghosts are, after all, just the embodied form of some theoretical past. Baldick has seen this historicising within the Gothic as one of its main features, he refers to this as “a fearful sense of inheritance in time” (Baldick *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales* xix). Indeed, this is apparent from the start with Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*—an epistolary document that has been (falsely) constructed to demonstrate a material legacy and also a narrative that concerns a prophecy predicting the downfall of the family that preside over the Castle of Otranto. The idea of an inheritance in time is a theme that continues throughout Gothic fiction. Regularly it is demonstrated with declining families like in “The Fall of the House of Usher”, or with immortal beings that come from some ancient time as with *Dracula*, or the often humorously parodied ‘haunted house built on an ancient burial ground’ as in *The Amityville Horror* films. In discussing Baldick’s claim that Gothic is constituted from a fearful sense of inheritance and an enclosing sense of space Spooner writes that “in twentieth-century film and fiction, the troubling ghosts of past traumas were not restricted to architectural locals, but made the mind a kind of prison” (Spooner *Contemporary Gothic* 18). So, while the enclosing spaces of early Gothic were populated by the effects of the

traumatised and irrational mind, the gap between the mind and the physical space has closed over time.

The epistolary form (text that includes letters, diary entries, and other documents) has been reasonably popular within Gothic fiction as a way to physically represent this inheritance in time. It demonstrates an early engagement with the paratext as these document insertions occasionally make use of different fonts or formats to express the change of mode. In *House of Leaves* the document that Zampano writes, *The Navidson Record*, is a physical item that Johnny inherits that threatens his sanity; this same document is inherited by the reader. *S. too* presents the reader with a document that has been the object of Eric and Jennifer's obsession—this time in the form of a library book.

These texts create a fearful sense of inheritance from the past that begins with the original 'fictional' author, travels through the characters, and ends with the current 'real' reader. *House of Leaves* makes further use of inheritance in its pastiche of haunted house narratives. It constantly evokes intertextual references to a variety of real and fictional texts such as a history of brief occupation to represent the idea that there is something wrong with the house. Danielewski has employed the trope of the haunted house with its constant repetition and appropriation to create the effect of highlighting the emptiness of these references when they lack any referent. Even if one were to know all of the critical and pop culture texts that are called upon, *House of Leaves* simulates the effect of a hyperreality for the reader by containing these fictional references. In a sense, even as *House of Leaves* evokes the idea of inheritance it is also placed within a context where it flies free of history as it references only other signs, signs that need not attempt to mediate reality and that can be entirely fictional themselves. Smith notes that just like the Gothic "The same, if more extensive museum of imaginary, pastness characterises the postmodern cannibalisation of images from the detritus of global history in which the past, in Jameson's words, has itself

become a vast collection of images, a ‘multitudinous photographic simulacrum’” (Smith 11). *House of Leaves* inserts itself into an irrational media that has no relationship with anything other than itself. *S.* and *The Raw Shark Texts* create the effect of removing history in a more transparent manner by having lead characters that begin the narrative without memory and thus without history. These characters are literally thrust into the role of the postmodern schizophrenic who can only perceive the now.

Niffenegger also evokes relationship to history by employing the use of visual signs that signal a sense of pastness. Much of what the illustrations depict is based in an unspecified past—signified by the modest clothing of the characters, a lack of technology, and vintage prams and bicycles, and yet the image which accompanies the text “The naming of things” includes an electric toaster. Time is confused and indeterminate, underlining the fact that Niffenegger is engaging in a genre that is constantly reinventing a past moment. Furthermore, by including the figure of Napoleon Bonaparte, *The Adventuress* reproduces the romance between Napoleon and Josephine de Beauharnais. The Adventuress’s unhappy marriage to the baron parallels Josephine’s marriage at sixteen to Alexandre de Beauharnais. Just as the baron is killed causing the Adventuress to be imprisoned for some time, Alexandre was guillotined during the Reign of Terror and Josephine was imprisoned for a period of three months. Both in the story and in history Josephine and the Adventuress then soon become Bonaparte’s mistress. Josephine and Bonaparte both had affairs and their marriage ended in divorce following which Josephine died of pneumonia. The Adventuress’s relationship similarly ends when Bonaparte has an affair and following this grief she dies from an illness with similar symptoms to pneumonia. Yet *The Adventuress* is clearly meant only to echo history, to evoke it obliquely, as demonstrated by the supernatural elements included and the differences often evoked for Gothic effect—such as the fire in the castle that kills the baron as opposed to a guillotine.



The historical references and inconsistencies in *The Three Incestuous Sisters* and *The Adventuress* also relate to the postmodern declaration of the end of history. Postmodernism is distrustful of grand narratives in which “the past was historicized (was conceptualized in modernist, linear and essentially metanarrative forms)” (Jenkins 57). In Baudrillard’s words “the acceleration of modernity, of technology, events and media, of all exchanges—economic, political and sexual—has propelled us to ‘escape velocity’, with the result that we have flown free of the referential sphere of the real and of history” (Baudrillard *The Illusion of the End* 1). Niffenegger creates narratives that are so excessive with temporal references—so blurred between the past and the contemporary—that they reflect a mistrust of the grand narrative of history by demonstrating its very mutability. The Gothic, too, juxtaposes objects of the past with the modern in order to create particular effects.

Gothic is a playful admixture of inaccurate histories, versions of feudalism and medievalism restaged for the amusement of an age of industrial capitalism. Though a product of history, in the sense that its charades were doubtless generated by contemporary pressures—as symptom—it is not historical in the sense of displaying any informed historical consciousness. Instead the tokens of pastness are exhibited without discrimination, as fancy dress worn by contemporary sensibility and consciousness. (Smith 10 -11)

In wearing these tokens of pastness, Niffenegger’s texts use the idea of a fictionalised past to contrast with more specifically modern ideas in order to highlight a particular agenda based on a contemporary sensibility. For example, *The Adventuress* presents the reader with a version of femininity that is an exaggeration of archaic models of gender roles in the knowledge that the narrative will be consumed in a cultural climate that is rather more progressive. When viewing these texts it should be apparent to any modern reader that the manner in which the *Adventuress* is confined within a patriarchal society is abhorrent, even irrational. It becomes an allegory for what patriarchy remains within the current culture.

*House of Leaves*, on the other hand, makes use of the historical and cultural context of the text to demonstrate how it too is another simulacrum participating in an endless chain of hyperreal imagery. These relationships to genre for both Danielewski and Niffenegger continue within the haunted house setting that all three texts make use of.

The haunted house (castle, ruin, prison, asylum, mansion) is the setting for the archetypal Gothic narrative. It is the other condition, along with an inheritance in time, that Baldick identifies for creating the Gothic effect—what he terms “a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space” (Baldick *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales* xix). The haunted house is the epitome of the uncanny; it is literally a home-made unhomely (*unheimlich*), the familiar made unfamiliar. It is the site of not only ghosts, but also other uncanny constructs such as doubles, the supernatural, family dysfunction, and the animation of the inanimate. This space is ultimately prone to destruction by either fire (*Jane Eyre*, *The Adventuress*) or collapse (“The Fall of the House of Usher”, *House of Leaves*). The haunted house has been treated extensively in filmic depictions of the Gothic, and in its most authentic form appears as a shadowy derelict building surrounded by leafless trees and perhaps with a family graveyard nearby. It is likely to be besieged by sublime weather (such as thunderstorms or fog) and its appearance is usually accompanied by staccato music in a minor key, perhaps punctuated by solitary bird calls, howls, screams, clashes of thunder, or, most theatrically, demonic laughs. This image is one of the most regularly repeated and subverted of Gothic tropes. Much like the image of Frankenstein’s monster, it has become a caricature of the original—an enduring symbol of Gothicism.

*House of Leaves* follows the archetypal haunted-house narrative quite precisely in the Navidson storyline. Barry Curtis in his book *Dark Places: The Haunted House in Film* describes the characteristics of the haunted space:

Haunted house films are interested in all the things that can go wrong with houses and the optimistic intentions of people who foolishly fail to take heed of warnings about their isolation, or their cheapness, or who fail to be adequately suspicious of estate agents' explanations of why the house is on the market, or to take heed of the warning signs manifested in the behaviour of local people, children and servants. (Curtis 16)

Navidson, Karen and their two children Daisy and Chad move into a secluded house away from the city in order to make a fresh start (echoing *The Amityville Horror* tradition). There is a suggestion that the house has passed through a number of owners in a short amount of time. After a trip away the house develops a wardrobe space that was not there before and Navidson notices that the house fails to conform to spatial rules (it is larger on the inside than the outside). Curtis has noted that “[o]ne of the features of the haunted house film is the uncanny animation of the house and its interiors [...]. The structure itself is prone to metamorphosis and agitation, often in ways that threaten its own integrity as well as the lives of those who explore it” (Curtis 11). Following the appearance of the wardrobe, a hallway appears off the lounge, which expands and contracts to become a seemingly endless maze.

The characters respond to the supernatural occurrences in a highly gendered manner. Houses are extremely gendered sites, dictating divisions in labour and normalising certain behaviours and appearances. Christine Wilson argues that haunted houses expose the futility and superficiality of these binary roles.

[T]he deployment of domestication in an attempt to settle unruly houses exposes the gender implications of haunted house texts. It is no coincidence that females in these texts try to use traditional housekeeping tasks to subdue the houses, while males try to conquer the house through exploratory tactics. (Wilson 204)

Karen attempts to ward off the disturbing effects of the house by redecorating using the principles of *feng shui*, while Navidson puts together a team of male explorers and scientists

to attempt to uncover the mystery of the maze. Neither of them is successful in their attempts—the house swallows the objects Karen introduces and remains so vast and so unconquerable that Navidson is unable to master the space. The house is not explicable by scientific reason. Ultimately, regardless of gender or attempts to explain or control it, the house drives its occupants mad, causes injury, illness, death, and collapses in on itself. However, what is being said about gender within *House of Leaves* is not any kind of challenge to traditional gender roles: both representations of gender are equally ineffective. Yet, at no point does Karen attempt to conquer the maze with exploration and Navidson is defined by his inability to adopt a passive role. Gender roles are in no way challenged or subverted by any of the characters. They are just shown to be typically unsuccessful in their own ways. In fact all actions are shown to be equally ineffectual.

Another typically Gothic space that Danielewski engages with occurs in the letters from Johnny's mother, Palafina, which appear in Appendix II E and also in their own expanded volume titled *The Whalestoe Letters*. These letters are from the Whalestoe Institute where Palafina is being treated for mental illness. This follows a relatively gendered Gothic trope of the incarcerated madwoman that focuses on the poor treatment perpetrated by the asylum. The effect of these letters in *House of Leaves* is not to show the systematic abuse of women by these potentially patriarchal institutions, as might be demonstrated in a text such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). Because, even as Palafina writes of the rape that is perpetrated by the Whalestoe staff, hiding the message in a coded letter, doubt is cast over her ability distinguish reality as her letters become increasingly paranoid, incomprehensible, and distorted by the effects of the medications she receives; her testimony is unreliable at best. Palafina's role seems to merely fulfil the Gothic locked up madwoman quota rather than to make any specific comment about gender. To this end, it is worth noting that while many of the characters of both genders have some experience of

mental illness, she is the only one treated in an institution. The engagement with gender seems only to reassert the kinds of gender assumptions that have previously taken place within similar texts, which is to say it only serves to align *House of Leaves* with other examples of Gothicism.

The paratextual asides and footnotes also present the maze-like structure of the haunted house in the presentation of the text. Lyotard explains that the postmodern engages in experimentation in text to present the unrepresentable.

[T]hat which in the modern invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself, that which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into new presentations – not to take pleasure in them, but to better produce the feeling that there is something unrepresentable.

(Lyotard *The Postmodern Explained* 15)

Both the Gothic and the postmodern have a preoccupation with the unrepresentable, that which is liminal and experiential (which in the Gothic might be termed the irrational). In both cases it is the role of the text to create an approximation of this. By offering a physical experience of the narrative the paratext in *House of Leaves* is able to offer an experience that goes beyond what can be expressed with language. The title of the novel “*House of Leaves*” can be read as the house being constructed from the pages (leaves) of the book so that the pages and the words make up the architecture of the haunted house. Throughout the *House of Leaves* the word ‘house’ is printed in blue ink (including the reference details with the publisher’s name, Random ‘House’). This creates a visual pun on the idea of the ‘blueprint’, the technical drawing from which structures are built. By invoking the precise measured origins of the construction of the house Danielewski underlines how far it deviates from scientific and logical understandings of space. As the labyrinth in the house becomes more incomprehensible the text reflects this by forcing the reader to navigate the text as it moves

around the page. On Navidson's final trip into the labyrinth the text mimics the form of the architecture—for example, the section in which he finds himself in a corridor that gets smaller and smaller until he is crawling.

On the other side, we find a narrow corridor sliding into darkness. "These walls are actually a relief," Navidson comments after he has been walking for a while. "I never thought this labyrinth would be a pleasant thing to return to." Except the further he goes, the smaller the hallway gets, until he has to remove his pack and crouch. Soon he is on all fours pushing his pack in front of him. Another hundred yards and he has to crawl on his belly. As we can see the pain from his already injured leg is excruciating. At one point, he is unable to move another inch. (Danielewski 443 – 454)

The words at the start of this quote are in a rectangular form in the centre of the page and as each page turns the rectangle becomes smaller and smaller until it takes the form of two short lines of text—a narrow crawl space indeed. By creating paratext that mimics the shape of the haunted house Danielewski creates a space that can be experienced by the reader as uncanny. The unrepresentable within the narrative, the actual experience of the space within the text, is gestured at through the form of the text.

Niffenegger too, depicts Gothic space through the visual, paratextual elements within her novels. *The Three Incestuous Sisters* introduces an isolated structure through both pictures and the accompanying text. "They lived together in a lonely house by the sea, near the lighthouse, miles away from the city" (Niffenegger *The Three Incestuous Sisters*). Isolation is a common motif of haunted houses that distances the characters from societal influence and forces them to fall victim to the circumstances of their location. The text opens in a filmic manner: on the first page the three sisters are introduced, after which the house is shown in a series of three images that demonstrate its position in relation to the city and the lighthouse, and then the sisters are presented in more detail, naked as they prepare for bed. In

the following image a curtain rises over the house. Through this opening sequence as much emphasis is given to location as to the characters. Much of the story is based in the house and each illustration projects the image of another room, building for the reader/spectator a fragmented picture of the house as an entity: the garden, the bedrooms, a library, the dining room, a lounge. Stylistic references to Gothic architecture are to be found in the intricate gates, the arched doorways and the angel statue that watches over the entrance.

*The Adventuress*, on the other hand, is not based around one place, but instead engages with many structures that depict the overwhelmingly gendered nature of the Gothic space. What Niffenegger creates mimics the themes of women's gothic (as displayed by Charlotte and Emily Bronte, Mary Shelley and Ann Radcliffe), which is usually set within patriarchal institutions. *The Adventuress* goes from one patriarchal system to the next: from the domestic home (which is emphasised as she is created through science by a lone man), to the Baron's castle and prison (the dwelling of an inherited male title and position), to Napoleon Bonaparte's home (a representative of masculine military and political systems) and finally to the nunnery which, although occupied by women, is controlled by a patriarchal religious institution. Eugenia C. DeLamotte notes that:

[ . . . ] women's Gothic shows women suffering from institutions they feel to be profoundly alien to them and their concerns. And those institutions were all too contemporaneous with the lives of the women who wrote and read Gothic literature in the 1790s and early 1800s: the patriarchal family, the patriarchal marriage, and a patriarchal class, legal, educational, and economic system. (DeLamotte 152)

Even before her death, the *Adventuress* seems to be haunting these male spaces, a ghost always marginalised and at the borders—never fully present and in control.

In contrast to *The Adventuress*, *The Three Incestuous Sisters* presents the reader with an

entirely matriarchal, feminine space. The three sisters live together, seeming to own the property and while Paris and later his son, The Saint, join them there, the men are never in a dominant role. If anything, there is a fluidity of gendered behaviour. Paris is the object of sexual desire between the three sisters and The Saint is marginalised and incarcerated for his irrational body. While the women are active the men seem relatively passive. This can be related to the idea of ‘gender trouble’ as proposed by Judith Butler who posits the theory that both gender and sex is performative rather than innate. The idea that sex is innate or natural is, for her, an effect of the cultural representation of gender. As she argues in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), “gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘pre-discursive,’ prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts” (Butler *Gender Trouble* 11). Gender is constantly reinforced by rituals and acts that are culturally regulated. According to Butler, the only way to upset these gender binaries that are culturally regulated and enforced is to provoke ‘gender trouble’—because if all gender is constructed then it can be resignified and redefined in subversions of performance (Butler *Gender Trouble* XXV). In creating characters who subvert the expected Gothic gender roles Niffenegger makes a kind of gender trouble and demonstrates how in a matriarchal narrative the roles are easily reversed or blurred—marking gendered behaviour as unfixed. The gender relations of the Gothic space have been rewritten between the two novels. The first is an exaggeration of the persecuted, tragic heroine of the past, while the latter is a projection of more modern gender ideals onto a past form.

*House of Leaves*, by contrast, reinforces ideas about gender by depicting the haunted house as a specifically gendered site, whereas, *The Adventureess* takes those same stereotypes to an extreme in order to demonstrate the manner in which patriarchal institutions marginalise and control feminine bodies. *The Three Incestuous Sisters*, on the other hand, offers the exact



opposite of the traditional gendered space by using a haunted house that is an explicitly matriarchal space and creating a fluid depiction of gender.

The ghostly occupants of these haunted structures challenge reason through their very existence and they also highlight the Gothic preoccupation with death and with ‘othered’ beings that can be cast as embodiments of evil (as they were traditionally) or as victims. The ghost exemplifies Freud’s uncanny double; he believed, in fact, that “the ‘immortal’ soul was the first ‘double’ of the body” (Freud 9). Ghosts are chilling in their denial of death, they are the same as the living (conscious, active, formed, familiar) and yet changed. Freud considers that ultimately the uncanniness of ghosts resides in their possible enmity towards the living and their desire for the living to join them in death. However, Peeren and Blanco suggest that ghosts have become domesticated in more current portrayals. “The increasing normalcy of the ghost also manifests in the way many ghosts in current fiction, film, and television are portrayed in an exceedingly mundane manner, as part of the everyday and as having everyday concerns” (Peeren and Blanco xiv). Ghosts have become “impotent and ineffectual victims rather than powerful aggressors. [... T]he dead can only resolve their problems with the help of the living” (Peeren and Blanco x). *House of Leaves* has no specific occurrences of ghosts—yet there are many instances that seem to signify haunting. Niffenegger’s two visual novels contain tangible apparitions, yet they do not seem uncanny.

In *House of Leaves* haunting most often takes the form of aural cues or marked absences, both through the use of paratext and within the narrative. The labyrinth seems to be haunted by some presence: perhaps a Minotaur, perhaps Holloway, perhaps something else entirely or maybe merely a space that is filled by the minds of the characters. The first indication of this is the growl, which throughout the text is attributed to the movement of the walls and the fluctuation of the size of the maze. Yet, at several points this noise is ascribed to some sentient being. When Holloway is questioned about bringing a gun into the maze he

answers “‘I mean what if you’re wrong?’ [...] ‘What if that sound’s not from the wall’s shifting but coming from something else, some kind of thing? You wanna leave us defenceless?’” (Danielewski 95). Tom also refers to a monster lurking around his campsite at the top of the stairs.

**Day 3: 00:49**

(Outside tent; reaching into his ziploc bag for the last joint)

And all through the [house](#) not a creature was stirring not even a mouse. Not even you Mr. Monster. Just Tom, poor ol’ Tom, who was doing plenty of stirring around this [house](#) until finally he went stir crazy wishing there was a creature any creature—even a mouse.

(Danielewski 271)

Later, the growl pursues Tom, Wax and Reston as they carry Jed’s body back from the maze. “Reston emerges from the hallway next, the growl growing louder behind him, threatening to follow him into the living room” (Danielewski 317). This sound has no discernible origin and so marks an absence, a space where something may lurk. The idea of ghosts as an absence or gap ties into what Derrida has written about spectres as outside of systems of knowledge.

It is something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it is, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence. One does not know: not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present this being there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge. (Derrida *Specters of Marx* 6)

Situated between a binary of being and non-being “the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living” (Derrida *Specters of Marx* 11), ghosts are a challenge to the concept of existence in their liminality.

Because of the liminal nature of the ghosts in *House of Leaves* the characters attempt to

fill in this epistemological gap, tending towards monstrous beings such as the Minotaur. The passages on the mythology of the Minotaur in *The Navidson Record* are struck out and in red ink because, as explained in a footnote, Zampano attempted to get rid of them but Johnny has later uncovered them. These sections haunt the text as a trace of what was once written, notably different from the intended text, yet still present. The very real stand in for this lurking monster is Holloway, who becomes possessed by the idea that there is a creature to hunt within the walls of the labyrinth. After Holloway has shot Jed he becomes spectre-like—foreshadowing his own suicide—so that he appears and disappears seemingly out of nowhere until he is described as subhuman. “Thanks to this powerful flash, the Hi 8 can now capture a shadow in the distance. The stills, however, are even more clear, revealing that the shadow is really the blur of a man” (Danielewski 213). He is no longer a man; he becomes merely a shadow or the blur of a man. This description invokes the kind of imagery that ghost hunters use as proof when they point out a human shaped shadow or reflection or sun-flare caught through the lens.

Johnny also has a creature haunting him which seems to parallel the one in the labyrinth. He has a panic attack or a hallucination while he is working in the storeroom, during which Johnny believes he is about to be attacked.

Worse, I'm no longer alone.

Impossible.

Not impossible.

This time it's human.

Maybe not.

Extremely long fingers.

A sucking sound too. Sucking on teeth, teeth already torn from the gums.

I don't know how I know this.

But it's already too late, I've seen the eyes. The eyes. They have no whites. I haven't seen

this. The way they glisten, they glisten red. Then it begins reaching for me, slowly unfolding itself out of its corner, mad meat all of it, but I understand. These eyes are full of blood.

Except I'm only looking at shadows and shelves.

Of course, I'm alone.

And then behind me, the door slams shut. (Danielewski 70-71)

These cases of haunting are ultimately about monsters; but because they are never seen nor confirmed—because they live mainly in the minds of those that perceive them—they become the ghosts of monsters. They are never normalised in the way that Peeren and Blanco suggest modern ghosts tend to be. They are not victims and they do not need saving. Rather they threaten to invade the minds of all those that encounter them. This can be paralleled to other texts in which the subject of the horror—who essentially drives the narrative—is never actually revealed. For example, in *The Raw Shark Texts* the Ludovician is a conceptual fish and as such is formed of ideas rather than flesh or Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez's *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) in which the witch never materialises. Smith has reflected on how horror in the postmodern reflects this kind of gap: “as Jameson has observed, the evil of the postmodern version is ‘the emptiest form of sheer Otherness (into which any type of social content can be poured at will)’” (Smith 15). This could also be applied to the maze within the house—an indefinite space that seems to reflect the psyche of those it contains. Castle explains how modern ghosts are often constructed as mental afflictions.

Ghosts are of course only things ‘of the mind’—or so we learn at an early age. Whether or not we recall, each of us was once taught that to see things no one else could see, to envision monsters or phantoms or strange figures at the foot of bed, was really but to imagine—to engage in a certain intensified form of thought itself. The rationalist attitude, it might be argued, inevitably depends on this primal internalization of the spectral. (Castle 143)

The ghosts in *House of Leaves* do not contradict the rational world because there is no empirical real-world evidence of their existence—they are never confirmed or denied. The doubt and lack of evidence for these ghosts instead make them symptomatic of the irrational mind.

Niffenegger's texts depict instances of haunting very differently from *House of Leaves*; the ghosts are mostly characters who have died within the duration of the story (they are knowable), they are made up of concrete outlines, and they have wants and needs that are articulated to the living. In *The Adventuress* the young woman becomes a ghost when she dies, emerging as an outline from her body. She grieves her body and is still distraught over the betrayal of Napoleon. Maurice, her cat child, finds her wandering and leads her back to Napoleon's home where they make up, after which she is free to be led up into the sky. This relates directly to Peeren and Blanco's postmodern ghost who is a victim requiring the living's help in order to find peace, a narrative echoed in many recent television programmes and films such as *The Sixth Sense* and *Ghost Whisperer*. The ghosts in *The Three Incestuous Sisters* are slightly more complex. After Ophile causes Bettine's death she is haunted by her sister's vengeful ghost and by the ghosts of her parents who torment her for what she has done until, so overcome with remorse, she throws herself off the lighthouse. This borders on the tradition of vengeful ghosts, yet in the conclusion of the text when Paris and The Saint return home, the ghosts of Bettine, Ophile and the lighthouse keeper are there to greet them—the bitterness of earlier apparently forgiven. The dead sisters hug their living relatives and the ghosts have a picnic that mirrors that of the living. Again, Niffenegger's texts do not arouse terror or dread and rather than making the *heimlich unheimlich* they do the opposite, taking the unfamiliar and familiarising it. What might be evil, the uncanny, represents instead what is marginalised and victimised.

Niffenegger and Danielewski utilise the ghostly for vastly different purposes. For

Danielewski, ghostliness is put to use as a way of demonstrating depthlessness. He utilises history and intertext in order to create the sensation of hyperreality so that his text flies free of referent and thus originality and depth. The haunted house trope is employed in order to position his text as one that is irrefutably Gothic rather than for any extra meaning. The ghostly figures that he populates this space with are gaps filled by the imagination of his characters—they are only flat projections onto empty space. For Niffenegger, ghosts and the spaces that they occupy are imbued with implications about marginalisation and the unfamiliar being made familiar. Historical material in *The Adventuress* and *The Three Incestuous Sisters* can also be considered as a reflection of the end of historicity as the assortment of objects from various times creates a temporally homogenous but constantly exotic landscape. This combination of what is modern and what is historical has the effect of creating moral judgements as it removes the normalising effect of the familiar, particularly in the context of gender. The Gothic architectural structure, too, represents a relationship with gender and draws attention to the marginalisation of particular people in domestic and institutional space. Apparitions, in their need of help from the living, could represent a variety of marginalised groups. Ghostliness as a theme within the postmodern has the effect of drawing attention to the insubstantial nature of the information age and to what is situated outside of the borders and as such is in direct opposition to the monstrous, which is a celebration of the physical and focuses on disturbances within the familiar and the local.

## (ii) Monstrosity

In the 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley refers to her famous novel as her ‘hideous progeny’—her very own monster brought to life (M. Shelley ix). This is mimicked when Botting refers to a “monstrous reading public” of gothic literature created by the

invention of printing presses (Botting “Gothic Technologies”). Because of the earthly nature of monsters they are often less concerned with the supernatural and more closely related to the failings of science—the unreasonable product of excess reason. That is not to say that monstrosities are free from the uncanny; as Smith acknowledges, “the development of technology itself merges with mysticism and superstition: at a sufficiently refined level technology itself becomes uncanny and reopens the symbol system of the Gothic” (Smith 16). Gothic, unlike science fiction, has little interest in explaining the workings of scientific method, but rather relishes in the near magic of new technologies. Beville has noted how this extends to the present from *Frankenstein*, “which articulated fears to do with the power of science, godlessness, social anarchy and privation. Interestingly, these issues re-emerged with vigour at the dawn of ‘postmodernity’” (Beville 23).

Frankenstein’s monster has set the tone for the creatures that populate the Gothic who, rather like Peeren and Blanco’s postmodern ghosts, are sympathetic beings. As Halberstam points out, it is the monster makers, the monster hunters and all discourses of purity that cause suspicion in the postmodern (Halberstam 27). Postmodern horror is defined by the internalisation of the monstrous that undermines the possibility of purity. Where modernism locates horror outside of domestic borders corresponding to the political climate of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, postmodern horror, beginning with the 1959 book and subsequent film *Psycho*, hosts the unfamiliar within local, familiar spaces of small-town America. Additionally, Spooner suggests that much of contemporary society is based in what is insubstantial and ghostly arguing that the “contemporary Gothic’s preoccupation with freaks, scars, diseased flesh, monstrous births and, above all, blood is an attempt to reinstate the physicality of the body in an increasingly decorporealized information society” (Spooner *Contemporary Gothic* 65). This again reinforces the idea that the monstrous is an affront to the technological: the freak is regularly placed on a scale that leads away from enlightenment reason into the

disordered and uncontrollable nature of the physical experience.

Niffenegger and Danielewski liberally employ freaks, monsters, animal-human hybrids, blood, violence, and madness in an earthy, physical expression of the Gothic. I argue that Niffenegger's representations are more akin to Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque—the excessive but comic body that invokes pleasure and laughter—while Danielewski is more interested in Julia Kristeva's abject: the body that transgresses order and category by being demonstrably uncontainable arousing fear tempered with fascination—the sensation that one cannot bear to look but cannot bear to look away either. The carnivalesque as Bakhtin describes it is always based on laughter—on amusing excesses and spillage. While Niffenegger's texts contain some of this feeling, it is tempered with unease, a sense that what is being presented is still part of the Gothic irrational. Spooner has developed what she calls the 'Gothic-Carnavalesque' which builds on Bakhtin's ideas about the grotesque and the carnival. This new form deviates from its namesakes because “the sinister is continually shading into the comic and vice versa” (Spooner *Contemporary Gothic* 69). It also relates to the idea of the marginalisation of the Gothic being: as with the ghost who needs the living's help, monsters too become the source of sympathy in many postmodern narratives. “Combining a wholly modern notion of the individual subject with the openness to the other found within the carnivalesque, one of the most prominent features of the new 'Gothic-Carnavalesque' is sympathy for the monster” (Spooner *Contemporary Gothic* 69).

Frankenstein's monster supplies the model for the created monster: where humans interfere with nature. Pieces are collected together in order to create an inharmonious whole whose creation is a demonstration of corrupted genius and brilliance and whose tainted birth becomes the symbol of flesh as production and consumerism. Kelly Hurley gives an explanation of the nature of the innate horror of Frankenstein's monster:



As an animated corpse capable of articulate speech and complex thought, the monster blurs the boundary between death and life, between ‘mere’ matter and matter infused with sentience and spirit. Shelley’s monster is liminal: it exists at the *limen* or threshold between two opposing conceptual categories. And so can be defined by both and neither of them.

(Hurley 138)

This liminality is what lends the monster its grotesque or abject nature: that it disrupts the conceptual categories “particularly the binary oppositions by means of which the culture meaningfully organises experiences” (Hurley 139). Frankenstein’s monster is prolific in Gothic fiction in literal retellings of *Frankenstein*, but there is also a less explicit influence that can be seen in many Gothic texts that relate instances of created beings. Recent examples might include *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), and in television with the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode “Some Assembly Required” or *American Horror Story: Coven* with the character of Kyle. *The Adventuress* offers one retelling of the *Frankenstein* story and the text of *House of Leaves* provides a different version in which the text stands in for the flesh.

In *The Adventuress*, the alchemist creates a fully formed woman. The text offers a small explanation: “Evolution: Her father was an alchemist; He created her himself. Of what, he would not say” (Niffenegger *The Adventuress*). The image that accompanies this shows the alchemist with his progeny and in the background there are what appear to be sketches of the human form: skulls showing a progression to fleshed faces, foetuses, a brain, a heart, and the skeleton of a foot. This points to the scientific development of the early Enlightenment where the study of anatomy flourished with the invention of printing presses (illustration being of foremost importance in communicating the information) and to the mid-nineteenth century with the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* and the advancement of the idea of evolution. The expansion of knowledge of biological systems combined with the concept that

nature can govern itself suggested that humans might have the capability to manipulate and even generate life. In opposition to this, we have not a doctor nor a scientist, but an alchemist creating new life. Alchemy draws on an earlier branch of scientific history that stretches from medieval Europe back to the ancient world. Modern discussion propagates two branches of alchemy: the exoteric practical knowledge, and the esoteric mythical or spiritual. Niffenegger is able to suggest a supernatural as well as a scientific origin for the *Adventuress* that aligns with the idea of technology entering into the magical within the Gothic. The lack of information provided about what she is made from advances this, although her less-formed companions—with their part-animal, part-human, and part-plant components—suggest that she is also a composite being. Her later transformation into a moth, which is foreshadowed by her instruction in metamorphosis, and the birth of her cat child, Maurice, supports this supposition.

The way in which Niffenegger calls on not only one, but many past moments is characteristic of the magpie-like tendency of the Gothic as described earlier. However, it is significant that Niffenegger calls on ideas from around the Enlightenment, when Gothicism was first flourishing. Smith has noted the similarities between that time and the present era in accounting for the continued popularity and even resurgence in Gothic literature.

The Gothic flourished in the period of early industrialisation, when Enlightenment science began to translate itself into social change at every level. It occurred alongside social upheavals in political thought and action. Similarly the postmodern condition seems to be occasioned by transformations determined by technology. (Smith 15)

The anxieties about the role of science in the creation and termination of life have, if anything, only become more topical as biological understanding has become more complex.

However, after the creation of the monster *The Adventuress* deviates from and transforms the traditional *Frankenstein* narrative. As a woman, unlike Frankenstein's

monster, the Adventuress is not turned away and rejected but instead is coveted and possessed. Created as one among many, as though on a conveyer belt, she becomes like a consumerist object to be stolen, owned and bought. Luce Irigaray has considered how women have been constructed as consumer products that are exchanged amongst men much in the same way as any other commodity. “The production of women, signs, and commodities is always referred back to men (when a man buys a girl, he "pays" the father or the brother, not the mother...), and they always pass from one man to another, from one group of men to another” (Irigaray 171). Within this social construct of the woman as commodity Irigaray identifies three varieties of women: the mother, who represents use value as she is not exchangeable but is essential to the social order through child rearing and domestic chores; the virgin who is pure exchange value as a potential mother; and the prostitute who is usage value that can be exchanged (Irigaray 185-186). The Adventuress is constructed as both exchange value as the virgin that is stolen by the baron and usage value as a mother to Maurice. In referencing anatomic images and their relationship with the dissemination of scientific information with the development of printing technologies Niffenegger suggests the manner in which bodies are constructed through images in a scientific setting. In combination with the underlying feminist message of the text this can also be considered an allusion to the monstrous reproduction of the female image—in part, through to the use of illustration where the Adventuress is constructed purely from image. In accordance with an objectifying stare, her body tends to conform to a kind of normative order unlike Shelley’s monster. What is being implied is that the female body is constantly reproduced in visual media in a manner that is contained and enclosed. Femininity is endlessly made and remade through the printing press (and more recently on screen) within the hyperreal media—in particular we might consider the female body in advertising or in pornographic imagery. This image can be consumed, just as the Adventuress is consumed by various male characters.

Yet, the *Adventuress*'s body is not terribly much like this contained closed-off outer appearance at all. The first indication that this might not remain the case is that her companions, the other 'creatures' the alchemist created, are freakish combinations and distortions of nature. As it turns out, the *Adventuress* is also some kind of animal combination. Here we can recognise the liminality described by Hurley: the creatures are neither completely animal nor human, yet could be described by both terms, disrupting the separation between categories. The intention of these violations against the normative, constrained, classical body is not to cause fear or disgust but aligns with Bakhtin's carnivalesque wherein the body is renewed and refreshed by its acceptance of the earthy. The body that Bakhtin imagines is "not separate from the rest of the world. It is not a closed complete unit; it [...] outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits" (Bakhtin 26). It is a body that is focused on the unpretentious, clumsy, mortal, changeable and corporeal nature of the human experience, the consuming appetites and excreting orifices that make it a body in process. These natural cycles and bodily changes are shown as renewing and invigorating. This is recognisable in the constant changes in the *Adventuress*' body: no matter how extreme, how irregular, how violent these changes may seem, they are consistently her salvation from masculine consumption. Her transformation into a moth allows her to escape the prison and the birth of Maurice not only provides her with a companion while Napoleon is away but Maurice also provides her with the closure she needs to move on as a ghost. While *The Adventuress* could seem to be disseminating a very normative image of femininity, Niffenegger interrupts the reproduction of the classical female image by distorting it and by showing it in excess, which challenges the media production of the female image as to-be-consumed.

This idea of a monstrous creation is not limited to physical bodies but, as suggested at the start of this section, has been applied to printed material—the hideous progeny of

*Frankenstein* and the monstrous reading public attended to by new printing technology. The text of *House of Leaves* is a collation of fragments from various sources stitched together so that it bursts at the seams. It is an excess of information: of fragments of words, of footnotes and fonts and expanses of empty white page. It is a monstrous creation of intertext: just as *Frankenstein*'s monster is of flesh. Baldick has related how the text of *Frankenstein* parallels its subject matter both in the context of intertext and also the way the text has become a much reproduced mythology within Gothic fiction. "Like the monster it contains, the novel is assembled from dead fragments to make a living whole; and as a published work, it escapes Mary Shelly's textual frame and acquires an independent life outside it, as a myth" (Baldick *In Frankenstein's Shadow* 30). When compared to Shelley's hideous progeny, *House of Leaves* is an outrageous distortion of what could be called the classical body of the novel. The sheer volume of intertextual material ruptures the main body of text overflowing into the paratext—particularly the footnotes and appendices. *House of Leaves* also works to create its own kind of mythology; it tells a tale of two creators: Zampano who gathers the material and Johnny who stitches it together. The text was then apparently released onto the internet, the perfect environment to give text life—like the electricity that shocks the movie version of the monster alive. At the very end of the text, where he concludes his portion of the tale in his own chapter, Truant relates how he meets some musicians who have encountered the text on the internet—one of them hands him a copy with the warning "But be careful [...]. It'll change your life" (Danielewski 513). The readers that he encounters have added to the text themselves. "In a few of the margins, there were even some pretty stunning personal riffs about the lives of the musicians themselves" (Danielewski 514). Just as carnivalesque bodies are in process, it is apparent that *House of Leaves* is a text in process as well. However, it is not carnevalesque. Rather than causing humour or celebration, the excesses are meant to horrify and to disconcert the reader (fictional or real) and they expected to be possessed by

the text: even as they are disgusted they are also fascinated—which suggests that *House of Leaves* not only features abjection but is an abject text.

However, not all monsters are physically built. Postmodern horror is characterised by the psychological monsters born from violence following from Norman Bates, who was abused by his puritanical mother. These monstrous figures include: Hannibal Lecter whose sister was murdered and cannibalised in front of him; Buffalo Bill who was abused by his foster parents; and, more distantly, the vigilantes of comic book realms, such as The Punisher, Batman and V from *V for Vendetta*. These monsters are not only internal in the sense that they are inside national borders. They are also internal in that they are not externally damaged but are generally (although not always) disguised by their external humanness. Such characters can be understood through Kristeva's concept of abjection. These monsters are not themselves a representation of the physical abject; they are not externally repulsive, but they violate cultural codes which according to Kristeva is an abject act. "Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility" (Kristeva 4). The system of laws is commonly considered natural and formed from innate morals, yet these actions prove not only the vulnerability of our governing social systems but also their constructed nature. These monsters are born from a double experience of the abject, from the infantile and some later horrific experience that has shattered their conception of the patriarchal order, making them othered within the linguistic system.

Johnny Truant (Truant because he drops out of society) can be compared to this kind of postmodern monstrosity; he transgresses the social order based on his childhood trauma. Throughout Johnny's narrative we slowly learn of his mother's attempt to strangle him when he was seven, which led to her being taken to The Three Attic Whalestoe Institution. The

abuse was sustained from his stint in foster care when his foster father, on the way to the hospital “took [him] somewhere else first, where [he] lost half [his] tooth and a lot more too” (Danielewski 93). The terrible scars on his arms that are his main external signal of otherness are the result of an accident where his mother knocked a pan of oil from the stove. The Three Attic Whalestoe Institute Letters in Appendix II E (expanded on in their own novella *The Whalestoe Letters*) reveal the tremendous physiological pressure Palafina’s illness put on her son. For example the coded letter in which she reveals how the director and institute staff are systematically raping her and her plea that Johnny might rescue her. Johnny drops out of all societal systems—he simply neglects to show up at work one day, he stops answering his phone, he stops paying his bills, he is evicted from his flat, and he drops out of reality with the assistance of drugs and alcohol. Because it is Johnny’s status as a victim that makes his actions tend towards abjection—making him marginally monstrous—he can also be seen as a sympathetic character. Beville in creating her new genre Gothic-Postmodernism describes this phenomenon so: “The terror of the Gothic therefore, often inherent in its monsters and othered bodies, functions as a deconstructive counter-narrative which presents the darker side of subjectivity, the ghosts of otherness that haunt our fragile selves” (Beville 41). Such monsters garner sympathy because of the understandable nature of the trauma that they have faced—even as they break societal law, it is understood this is a direct result of a previous abject transgression performed against them.

The remaining monsters are not built and they are not created through abject violence, they are simply born different. These monsters tend to be normalised in cultural representations and have been for the majority of the twentieth century, as demonstrated in the 1932 film *Freaks* which features a cast made up of actual carnival performers. The freaks in the film are trustworthy and goodhearted people, while the ‘normal’ trapeze artist, Cleopatra, is devious and schemes to marry and murder one of the freaks in order to gain his

inheritance. During the wedding, they welcome the new bride in with the chant “One of us, one of us” suggesting a kind of inclusiveness despite appearance, yet when she resists this induction the freaks forcibly bring her into the fold. As Spooner points out, the general tone of the film supports the idea that Cleopatra is the real monster based on her horrible cruelty, yet the final scene, where the freaks drag themselves through the mud in a thunderstorm to enact their revenge, “deliberately plays on the disturbing sense of otherness produced by their physical appearance” (Spooner *Contemporary Gothic* 71). This seems typical of its time and I would argue that in the postmodern these freaks, the carnivalesque characters, draw attention to the limiting representations of the body in our current media. To draw on a more modern example, Jamie Brewer, an American actress with Down’s syndrome, appears in two seasons of *American Horror Story*; season one: *Murder House* and season three: *Coven*. As Adelaide in *Murder House* she has the ability to communicate with ghosts and is often privy to information other characters cannot perceive. As Nan in *Coven* she is a clairvoyant witch. In each of these roles she is shown as frequently underestimated by her peers but innately clever and principled. This is a demonstration of Spooner’s construction of the ‘Gothic-Carnavalesque’.

The Saint in *The Three Incestuous Sisters* is born a freak with pallid, greenish skin and wing-like protrusions from his back all underlined by his constant nudity. His bodily excesses and differences are consistent with Bakhtin’s Carnavalesque which is figured by Spooner as:

Carnival, the medieval ‘feast of fools’, is notable for its disruptive laughter, its reversal of conventional hierarchies and its emphasis on the material or grotesque body. The grotesque body is a body in process: a bizarre, exaggerated, hyperbolic body, fragmented and dismembered, distinguished by its protuberances and orifices. It is implicitly opposed to the ‘classical’ body, or that associated with the dominant worldview of the Middle Ages, which is



whole, complete, smooth, closed-off from the world and from other bodies. (Spooner *Contemporary Gothic* 67)

When Clothilde discovers The Saint he is entrapped in a circus very similar to what is presented in *Freaks*. In fact, the parade that Niffenegger depicts with her illustrations references very similar characters: the sword swallower; the ‘pinhead’ (with what would now be called Microcephaly) getting a piggyback ride; the skeleton man, who appears to be a rather literal interpretation of Peter Robinson’s ‘The Living Skeleton’; and the giant. Spooner discusses how this return to the carnival of the medieval and the Renaissance is common in postmodern Gothic unlike the Romantic period of Gothicism where triumphant laughter was cut to cool irony and sarcasm. “In contemporary Gothic, however, something of the ‘original’ spirit of Carnival seems to have returned. Contemporary fictions demonstrate a preoccupation with the ‘folk’ grotesque of the circus, with freakish heroes and heroines and with celebration of bodily excess” (Spooner *Contemporary Gothic* 68). Yet, while his body is later celebrated the carnival is filled with a sense of unease as The Saint crouches in a cramped cage and the spectators look concerned or even angry rather than jovial. While for the reader of the text The Saint is carnivalesque, for the spectators of the parade it is likely that he is the abject. “We need and have needed Gothic ‘abjections’ in order to define our ‘selves’, hence we feel mysteriously attracted to them while casting them off as ‘others’” (Beville 40). The spectators are not taking joy in his excessive body, but are marginalising him implicitly by participating in his incarceration and using his difference to define their normality. On his liberation The Saint tells his story and Clothilde discovers how he was found as a baby by an old woman and sold to the circus where he was forced to perform. In contrast to *Freaks*, *The Three Incestuous Sisters* demonstrates how in the postmodern it is those who seek to control, to own, and to incarcerate the freaks rather than the freaks themselves or even the ‘normal people’ who are monstrous. Once free of this oppression The

Saint begins to embody his true ability to levitate, to be invisible and to fly, engaging in the unique abilities his seeming deformity affords him. The circus and all that is carnivalesque have always been visual celebrations and Niffenegger's texts employ this pictorial language in order to communicate the narrative. The representation of monstrosity in these texts functions in a similar manner to that of ghostliness: once again the postmodern version of these Gothic motifs blurs the boundaries between many grand narrative binaries and instead contests the existence of any absolute—like innocence, purity, cleanliness or sanity.

Monsters can be understood using Kristeva and Bakhtin's models of the abject and the grotesque. Abjection describes the kind of horrifying and hypnotising excess demonstrated in *House of Leaves*, while the carnivalesque outlines the renewability within the transgressive body as seen with the Adventuress and The Saint. Notably Danielewski's relationship to the monstrous is established in the most extremely postmodern versions of monstrosity. His focus is on the excess of the printed text (as a technological and consumerist production) and on the kinds of monsters that are created by trauma and reside within the local areas which have become popular since the end of the Second World War. *Night Film* and *S.* present a similar appeal to trauma monsters, such as Stanislas Cordova the director in *Night Film* and the transformation of *S.* aboard the mysterious ship. There is also a sense of the text as an excessive creature in the Ludovician depicted as constituted from text in *The Raw Shark Texts* and the manner in which the narrative of *S.* exceeds its textual borders in much the same way as *House of Leaves* does. Niffenegger's monsters are of the more enduring kind, carnival characters having roots in medieval and even ancient forms of entertainment. However, the use to which they are put within Niffenegger's texts creates a counter narrative to the closed-off normative bodies that proliferate in modern media.

At the start of this chapter I listed six common Gothic tropes that I claimed were well represented within Danielewski and Niffenegger's texts. To reiterate, these were: a haunted

house, ghosts, monsters, a locked up woman, a family in decline and criminality. Monsters, haunted houses, and ghosts are all well accounted for. Both *The Adventuress* and *House of Leaves* feature women who have been institutionalised: Palafina and the Adventuress respectively, for whom it was for a criminal offense. Truant also represents criminality when he drops out of society and takes various drugs. The Navidson family are torn asunder by the influence of the house and thus are a family in decline. *The Three Incestuous Sisters* also shows decline as two of the sisters have died by the end of the narrative, and *The Adventuress*, in as much as you can call either her connection to her father or the unit she creates with Napoleon and Maurice, is also involved in a disintegration of familial relationships. The reason why Niffenegger and Danielewski take such care to represent so many of these clichés is in order to draw self-conscious attention to the intertextual relationship they both have with the Gothic genre—to use the Gothic genre to make a particular point.

For Niffenegger, this appropriation of Gothicism plays on the manner in which the Gothic has traditionally been used to highlight oppressive patriarchal systems in women's Gothic. *The Adventuress* amplifies the tragic heroine's plight while taking part in a postmodern dialogue in order to demonstrate the ongoing need for such protest texts. Meanwhile, *The Three Incestuous Sisters* subverts all gender roles in order to demonstrate gender fluidity and to rewrite the binary roles within traditional Gothicism. Danielewski, on the other hand, is not interested in rewriting the Gothic for a particular purpose. *House of Leaves* in its Gothic pastiche creates depthlessness in order to participate in a hyperreal media in which nothing is original or new. As will be demonstrated, this ties in to Danielewski's evocation of the Jamesonian schizophrenic—the postmodern irrational. The following chapters will investigate how depthlessness for Danielewski and an interest in marginalisation for Niffenegger affects subjectivity in terms of both the author and the reader.

## Chapter Two: Authorship

Books themselves behave monstrously towards their creators, running loose from authorial intention and turning to mock their begetters by displaying a vitality of their own. (Baldick *In Frankenstein's Shadow* 30)

With the Gothic and the postmodern exploration of the irrational, anyone (or anything) who attempts to enforce order, who is an authority, is met with doubt and hostility. In 1967 Barthes declared that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes “Death of the Author” 130). For Barthes the author is an authority figure who polices the meaning of texts, whose biography and fleeting intentions restrict broader understandings and contexts. The site of meaning, according to Barthes is instead located with the reader who “cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted” (Barthes “Death of the Author” 129). Foucault, rather than killing the author, constructs the idea of an author-function where the author exists as a function of the text within its structure but not essential to its interpretation. Postmodernism has internalised the destruction of the author as authority and demonstrates a number of techniques to achieve this including intertextuality, where a text is shown to exist in a continuum of repeating ideas and motifs; encouraging the participation of the reader in order to make the reader the co-author of meaning; and disrupting the physical, paratextual site of the author’s name which is often employed to disrupt the border between fictional and nonfictional understanding.

This chapter considers whether the author has indeed died and the implications of this for *House of Leaves*, *The Three Incestuous Sister*, and *The Adventuress*. Niffenegger’s two texts will be regarded through the lens of *écriture féminine* as texts that rely on their female

authorship in order to convey their meaning. This will be contrasted to the manner in which many of the women's Gothic texts of the past have employed pseudonyms in order to obscure their gender. The manner in which Niffenegger inserts herself almost as a character through the paratext of *The Three Incestuous Sisters* will be considered for the way in which it asserts the characters' experiences as authentic based on the author's foregrounded femininity.

Danielewski, on the other hand, creates a mythology around his name, which works to erase his subjectivity in order to assert himself as an additional text that can be read alongside his fictional texts. This can be considered as akin to Foucault's 'author-function'. However Danielewski's use of the author-function is a result of his intentional manipulation of the epitext of *House of Leaves*. Thus Danielewski is more significant as an adjacent text as he has authored himself so explicitly. *House of Leaves*, as well as *The Raw Shark Texts*, *S.*, and *Night Film* all point to what is outside the printed text by drawing attention to external websites, hidden chapters, highly constructed social media and fan forums. The fiction extends out into the 'real world' in order to comment on the constructed nature of these external influences on text and, as a result, the text becomes text-in-process to a higher degree than ever before. In both cases, Niffenegger and Danielewski endorse a reading of themselves as author within and through their texts. However, their actions result from markedly different intentions. While Niffenegger draws attention to subjectivity by accentuating her relationship to the text as a feminist text grounded in a feminine subjectivity, Danielewski obscures his subjectivity in order to draw attention to the mythological relationship an author has to text and to demonstrate the unstable nature of subjectivity.

The question of authorship is a question of the representation of subjectivity and when we ask what it means to be an author in some respect we are also asking what it means to represent the experience of being a person. Within the romantic period, where the Gothic has its roots, society was seen as a corrupting force and to be one's authentic self, one ought to

return to the simplicity and freedom of nature. Authorship then, was a matter of inspiration or *afflatus*—an original act of genius that was free from the order and rules imposed by previous movements—spontaneously arising within the author. Prior to this period the author was a scribe to divine inspiration, a host through which god/s or muses spoke, but Romanticism's emphasis on the individual placed genesis within the author. Artistic inspiration became akin to a kind of frenzy or madness as shown by Percy Bysshe Shelley when he wrote that "Poetry [...] differs from logic, that it is not subject to the control of the active powers of the mind, and that its birth and recurrence has no necessary connexion with consciousness or will" (P. B. Shelley). To be inspired was to be possessed by an irrational force of the mind.

When we look at postmodern models of authorship and subjectivity we may note a return to the model where the author is inspired externally, but rather than the supernatural force of Romanticism the author becomes a host for language itself. Yet, in keeping with the Gothic, there are still references to various kinds of irrationality involved in both subjectivity and authorship. Beville has noted various similarities between Gothic subjectivity and postmodern subjectivity using as an example the idea of metafiction, which is employed by both so that the "reader is often left in a condition of both subjective and objective uncertainty" (Beville 47). She goes on to observe that "postmodernism, like the Gothic, operates to expose the nature of those basic binary oppositions that uphold our concepts of self" (Beville 47). To demonstrate this, we may consider within the Gothic the questioning of ideas of rationality versus irrationality, control versus freedom, constraint versus excess, and society versus nature. Meanwhile, within the postmodern all binary oppositions are viewed as unstable and the grand narratives that they are made up from tend to be under doubt. Therefore the subjectivity is constantly undermined as it is something that is necessarily constituted from binaries—for example 'self' versus 'other'.

### (i) Niffenegger: Feminine Authorship

There are certain ways in which we might argue that Niffenegger participates in a death of the author regime even though her project relies on *écriture féminine* and thus her status as a female author. Niffenegger herself in some aspects participates in techniques that have been linked to a Barthesian deferring of meaning away from the author. She writes in the afterword of *The Three Incestuous Sisters* “I never try to explain what it means; you can find that out for yourself. I’m glad that it has finally completed its long journey from my mind to yours” (Niffenegger *The Three Incestuous Sisters*). She does place the text’s origin as herself—her mind—but she does not see it as her role to limit meaning or explain her purpose—the understanding of the text belongs to the reader. Niffenegger’s use of intertextuality also places the origin of the text within the continuum of other literature rather than within herself as a subject. The use of intertextuality throughout *The Adventuress* and *The Three Incestuous Sisters* demonstrates one of the larger overlaps between the Gothic and postmodernism. Spooner has acknowledged that postmodernism “with its embrace of genre fiction, pastiche, sensationalism and spectacle, provided a much more sympathetic climate for Gothic’s revival” (Spooner “Gothic in the Twentieth Century” 38). That Gothic that takes so much pleasure in parody (and pastiche) demonstrates its relationship with popular low fiction and makes evident the manner in which the postmodern has blurred the lines between high and low culture. As has been demonstrated in Chapter One, Niffenegger participates in a parody of the Gothic genre. Smith relates how the use of intertext, parody, and pastiche within the Gothic affects the relationship of the author to the text. “Inevitably along with pastiche we find ourselves engaged with issues of self-reflexiveness, as the fictions self-consciously speak in other voices and employ techniques that undermine the coherent reader-author relationship of the realist novel” (Smith 13). The text becomes part of a body of other texts, part of a

symbiotic relationship through which it is borrowing ideas and making linguistic connections that depend upon the reader's prior experience to be translated. Hutcheon has argued that excessive interest in intertextuality rejects the role of the author, because intertextuality can be found "in the eye of the beholder" and does not entail a communicator's intentions (Hutcheon *Narcissistic Narrative* xvi). By contrast, Hutcheon notes that parody always features an author who actively encodes a text as an imitation with critical difference. Within this context Niffenegger can be seen as an author who is retreating while simultaneously reasserting 'herself'.

Despite the conflict between the postmodern technique of intertextuality, that circumvents the need for authorship by demonstrating the manner in which language emerges from language, Niffenegger still asserts herself as a subjective and evidently feminine author. As I have previously demonstrated, Niffenegger's visual novels are essentially feminist texts and as such they demonstrate various exchanges of power between gendered roles. The *Adventuress* is depicted as controlled and owned by various male agents—offering the reader a stark protest against patriarchal modes of existence—while *The Three Incestuous Sisters* offers a model of resistance where women are acting agents in their own right. This kind of narrative, framed in essence as a protest against patriarchal systems, creates a sense of an authentic feminine subjectivity when related to a female author name.

It is obviously important for readers of certain kinds of writing to know who the author is. On what authority do writers of fiction who depict minorities and people that have been historically underrepresented, and even oppressed, claim the right to represent this group? How do they claim to have internal knowledge and understanding of such a faction? It seems obvious that certain writers, drawing from the reality of particular experiences, would want to claim that they write of those experiences through a subjective involvement in the world, and



that this should impact upon the reading of the text to some degree. Paul Fry in a lecture on authorship baldly introduced the topic thus:

I am a lesbian Latina. I stand before you as an author, articulating an identity for the purpose of achieving freedom. Not to police you. Not to deny your freedom. But to find my own freedom and I stand before you precisely, and in pride, as an author. I don't want to be called an author-function. I don't want to be called an instrument of something larger than myself because frankly that's what I have always been and I want precisely as an authority, through my authorship to remind you that I am not anybody's instrument, but I am autonomous and free. (Fry)

As Fry points out, the reason that Barthes and Foucault cast off the author relates to their rejection of absolute authority in general. But, if authorship is claimed through a pronouncement of freedom, it undermines the proclamation of death or disappearance, as the author still seems to have some relevant role. Carla Benedetti in *The Empty Cage: Inquiry into the Mysterious Disappearance of the Author* (2005) suggests that while subjectivity might be seen as dead, the death-of-the-author paradigm is not the liberation that it was billed to be.

The author, who today has such a high profile in the processes of artistic attribution, is therefore not a 'full' subjectivity, antecedent to the text, with which nineteenth-century criticism was concerned. The 'author' is instead precisely that empty subject, that mere function of the writing that the myth of the author's death ambiguously hailed as a liberation, though it has become so powerful and oppressive as to be anything but. (Benedetti 56)

The death of the author in this case can be seen as an oppressive force that attempts to remove vocalisation away from those who have barely had the chance to speak and to take subjectivity away from those who have barely been regarded as autonomous subjects.

In any case, the name of the author as presented in the paratext—taking its place on the

cover, title page, and within the site of legal possession on the copyright page—necessarily divulges information about the author’s identity. This potentially includes material about race, and certainly about gender, which cannot help but colour the readers’ interpretation of the text. However, while this is quite obviously the case, theorists have struggled to combine a theory of female subjectivity with the Barthesian death of the author narrative. Nancy Miller suggests that although there is a space for female subjectivity within Barthes’ model of authorship, it requires an untenable level of cognitive dissonance to pull off. Using Charlotte Bronte’s *Villette* as an example Miller explains that:

like Lucy in the school play (in another forced performance), who refuses to play a man’s part dressed in men’s clothes and instead assumes ‘in addition’ to her ‘woman’s garb’ the signifiers of masculinity [...], the effectiveness of future feminist intervention calls for an ironic manipulation of the semiotics of performance. (Miller 15)

The death-of-the-author paradigm becomes a signifier of masculinity which the female author must wear as a kind of mask over her female subjectivity. This seems relatively untenable in itself, yet the main issue with Miller’s claim lies in her assertion that because female authors have not had the time or conditions to create identity they should have the chance to do so, while their male counterparts overthrow their ownership of the text as they are burdened with “too much self, ego, cogito” (Miller 6). This seems to be a misreading of Barthes’ intention. For Barthes, the text has its origin within text itself and the author is merely a scribe of cultural meaning, while for Foucault the author exists only as a function of the writing rather than subjectively outside of it. The author disappears or diminishes not through an overload of the ‘self’ reaching some sort of critical mass before collapsing, but because the ‘self’ has always been a cultural construction. Cheryl Walker, on the other hand, concedes that subjectivity in the postmodern is fractured, left only as one of many presences or traces in a text. The author for her exists as a trace about which not everything can be known. In order to

posit this, Walker dismisses the totalising death presented by Barthes but notes the possibilities in Foucault's author-function. Personas presented through the text—within characters and in explicit references to an author—are masks that can be decoded and understood as part of the text.

My own brand of *persona criticism* assumes that to erase a woman poet as the author of her poems in favour of an abstract indeterminacy is an act of oppression. However, every version of the persona will be a mask of the author we cannot lightly remove. When one discovers the proliferations of a certain kind of mask in a given poet (the mask of the passionate virgin in Sara Teasdale, for instance), it is interesting to me to ask: What social configurations of the feminine might have led to this mask? Why did so many women readers of the 1920s delight in it? How representative is this mask and what contradicts it? How can I use my insights about the way masks function in women poets to illuminate previously obscure dimensions of women's history and women's relation to language, authorship, creativity, identity? (C. Walker 571)

While Walker seems to be making an argument for feminist subjectivity, she is actually only making an argument for the cautious recognition of authorial personas in the general sense. Her assertion that denying authorship to woman is a direct act of oppression is not actually supported. Instead we get this:

When Foucault asked 'what difference does it make who is speaking?' he may have been suggesting that we reveal our own epistemological assumptions and our own politics of interpretation by our insistence on a certain notion of subjectivity as speaking. It can never be shown that the treatment of the author as speaking makes *no* difference, since every way of constructing the text makes *some* difference. (C. Walker 557)

It is not the author's subjectivity she is concerned about at all, but the assumed interest that an imagined reader might have in the author's associations with particular ideas; in this case,

about feminism. This minimal subjectivity reduced down to little more than gender association seems to define the problem of searching for a feminine subjectivity within the author. That the author can at best only be a Foucauldian author-function and nothing else can be read from the female claim to authorship.

I suggest that there is an author-function of the woman's name that acts independently of an assumed subjectivity and in a different manner to that of the man's name. One way to illustrate this is to note how women authors have rejected their names in favour of anonymity or a male pseudonym. In a sense, these authors have to remove their subjective connection to the text in order to achieve the role of authorship. There are many examples of this within women's Gothic: most notably the Bronte sisters became Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell; Mary Shelley published *Frankenstein* anonymously; and, of course, Mary Ann Evens became George Eliot. Charlotte Bronte in the 1850 introduction to Emily's novel, *Wuthering Heights*, explained that they took pseudonyms because they had "noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery, which is not true praise" (qtd. in Allott 289). While there were female writers openly writing at the time, their work was considered to be mostly light, romantic and not of serious literary quality. Obviously, the literary world has moved on somewhat since this time, and yet we still get authors like J.K. Rowling who on the publication of the first Harry Potter book was told by her publisher that, as the books would appeal to boys, they would rather publish under her initials so as to conceal her gender (Rowling Archives). In certain contexts it seems to be the case that female writers write for women and male writers write for everyone. It isn't just the author as a subject who limits the text as shown by Barthes, but the female name itself also polices meaning—not through anything that the author does, but in the way that she is perceived as feminine. In writing feminist literature (these days) it is obviously good for the marketing of a text about feminist ideas to have a feminine author name; Niffenegger, in

asserting her femininity, fits this model. In opposition to these earlier Gothic women writers' suppression of their femininity Niffenegger stands (among many) to reclaim the Gothic as a literature about feminine oppression.

In the arena of film these ideas become even more exaggerated as shown in a report called *The Celluloid Ceiling* that only 16% of all directors, executive producers, producers, writers, cinematographers and editors are women (Lauzen 1). This perhaps demonstrates why the Bechdel test, which asks for films to include two named female characters that have a conversation about something other than men, has become such a popular idea and such a common failing in our media. It is masculine authors, and thus male driven narratives, that fill the cultural space. But, when a text is written to represent specifically feminist ideas there is an expectation of female authorship, which is generally answered with a female name. It is not her identity or her subjectivity that is called upon but a function of her name that allows the reader to perceive the author as having acquired female experiences (the actuality of which remain unimportant). The female name—which may have been a source of oppression and may have limited the meaning of the text—is subverted as a sign of rebellion. This does not ultimately answer Fry's request to not reduce the authors of these texts down to an author-function, because, ultimately all paratexts (including the author) are functions of the text.

If authors are always author-functions and paratexts, and the status of authorship offers a representation of the cultural perception of subjectivity, it follows that the subject is a product of language. Kristeva has demonstrated that there is no signification of the self before language, but the linguistic is in process and so 'self' too must always be considered in process (Oliver 15). This theory is based on Lacanian psychoanalysis with its roots in infantile development. It begins with the young infant who feels a part of its mother's body within the realm of plenitude; following this, as the infant begins to notice a gap between its

wants and satisfaction, the imaginary realm where every representation is taken at face value develops; finally, the infant begins to see itself as a separate entity and must enter into the linguistic realm—which is preceded by the mirror stage for Lacan and the abject for Kristeva. It is at this final stage, where a sense of self forms based on the first comprehension of language. Therefore, the subject is at the mercy of signification and “linguistic changes constitute changes in the status of the subject” (Oliver 29). Niffenegger is, then, a feminine author-function who is signified by her feminine name. Fry’s question about the possibility of authorial subjectivity external to the idea of an author-function becomes null, as all subjectivity is foregrounded in language anyway.

The author name is only one site where the author-function might be explored and Niffenegger’s manipulation of paratext offers additional ground for her to be read as a feminine author. Outside of the author’s name Niffenegger places another claim to authorship in the dedication of *The Three Incestuous Sisters*. She writes, “This book is dedicated with love to my sisters Beth and Jonelle Niffenegger” (Niffenegger *The Three Incestuous Sisters*). Beneath this text are the images of three slightly different locks of hair photographed so that they seem to almost sit on the white page in three dimensions. The reader is left to infer that one of the locks of hair is Niffenegger’s and the others belong to her sisters. In doing this Niffenegger draws a line of connection between her own experience of being one of three sisters and the three sisters in the novel, who are differentiated only by their primary coloured hair. Hair carries the DNA that links the sisters together and it also plays a role in the way that many women perform femininity. Locks of hair carry certain cultural meanings as well: a lock of hair is given to a lover as a sign of devotion and, in a somewhat Gothic sentiment, nineteenth century mourning jewellery often contained the deceased’s hair within locketts or incorporated it as part of the decoration in elaborate weavings. Niffenegger has marked the novel as hers with her own DNA and, using her hair as a symbol of her femininity, she links

the feminist, romantic and Gothic themes of the text to the lives of her and her sisters.

Hair has a particular context of meaning within Niffenegger's body of work as well. While she was finishing her debut novel, *The Time Traveler's Wife*, she dyed her hair to match the long red hair of her protagonist Clare in order to say goodbye to the character (Flanagan). In her series of self-portraits, exhibited under the title "States of Mind" in the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Niffenegger uses her hair (for the most part still long and red) to express her mental state. Krystyna Wasserman considers this theme:

"Niffenegger uses her hair as a tool to communicate angst and recklessness. It is alternatively a traditional attribute of feminine beauty and a manifestation of rebellion and personal independence" (Wasserman 15). Earlier portraits such as *Nest* (1985) and *She Was Vain of Her Hair* (1986) demonstrate how hair (or the lack of hair) was important in Niffenegger's construction of personal identity and this became more apparent after she dyed her hair its recognisable shade of vivid red.

In *The Three Incestuous Sisters*, it is not much of a stretch to relate Audrey to the redheaded Clothilde, considering the implied relationship to the three Niffenegger sisters. Clothilde is depicted as intuitive (as in her telepathic connection to The Saint), on several occasions she is shown with books or in the library, and she is portrayed as "in her own little world" (Niffenegger *The Three Incestuous Sisters*). These traits of imaginary worlds and bookishness are easily related to Niffenegger's own interests. Furthermore, as in the self-portrait, *Nest*, Clothilde's hair is put to use in the creation of birds' nests. "Clothilde *knows* that the cause of headache is birds using pieces of her hair to build their nests. Therefore, she saves all her hair in jars hidden in her closet. Despite this, she continues to suffer" (Niffenegger *The Three Incestuous Sisters*). In the image following this text Clothilde is shown with birds pulling the hair from her head. In the next image she sits slumped over a dressing table with only one hair remaining and a bird waiting in the window to remove it. In

the hand mirror she holds, two lovers are reflected from somewhere behind her—presumably Bettine and Paris. This final image reflects the self-portrait *She Was Vain of Her Hair* in which Niffenegger appears with most of her hair shorn off, perhaps in punishment for vanity, with a razor levitating above her head (consider Clothilde’s ability to make objects levitate). It is also reminiscent of another self-portrait, *Hairpiece* (1986), in which a weepy looking Niffenegger is presented bald with a lock of hair collaged under the printed image (similar to the locks of hair in the dedication). For these self-portraits, and for Clothilde, the loss of hair is presented as a punishment and a loss of femininity. Haircutting has been utilised as a punitive act, particularly against women, in a number of different institutions. In the nineteenth century the practice was adopted in female prisons for ‘incorrigibles’ (Damousi 85). In *Jane Eyre*, Mr. Brocklehurst demands her and her classmates’ hair be cut to teach them sobriety, although the rich relations of the reverend who visit immediately following this are described as wearing silks, furs, and beautiful hats atop elaborately curled hair, so it becomes clear it is a punishment for their poverty (Bronte 64). Hair, particularly prior to the 1920s, played a significant role in the performance of femininity. As Butler points out in her article “Performativity’s Social Magic”, “Being called a ‘girl’ from the inception of existence is a way in which the girl becomes transitively ‘girded’ over time” (Butler “Performativity’s Social Magic” 120). Because this ‘girling’ happens from birth it appears naturalised. To transgress these cultural norms for both genders is an act provoking discipline and “we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (Butler “Performativity’s Social Magic” 178). The removal of hair was a punishment, often for performing gender wrong (prostitution for those nineteenth century prisons for example), which resulted in exclusion and isolation as it further demonstrated their inability to perform femininity. For Clothilde, we see her isolated from sexuality as she watches Bettine and Paris from a distance without her hair. In taking paratext as a symbol for the irrational within the Gothic, Niffenegger has



disrupted the expected order of the usual paratextual elements (the dedication) and punctured the postmodern insistence of the invisible author with a symbol of femininity, the irrational, to masculine rationality.

When Cixous calls for *écriture féminine*, she defines femininity as irrational, as bodily and excessive, almost as abject but not in a manner that inspires disgust.

We the precocious, we the repressed of culture, our lovely mouths gagged with pollen, our wind knocked out of us, we the labyrinths, the ladders, the trampled spaces [...]. We're stormy, and that which is ours breaks loose from us without fearing any debilitation. Our glances, our smiles, are spent; laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end. (Cixous 878)

Feminine writing should, according to Cixous, be written through bodies in a manner that challenges rational categories and systems (Cixous 883). Niffenegger's two visual novels feature bodily expression to convey the narrative. They are excessive bodies: bodies that transform (The Adventuress into a moth); bodies that give birth (The Adventuress and Bettine); bodies that bleed (Bettine); bodies that do extraordinary and unexplainable things (levitating, flying); bodies that have sex (Bettine and Paris); bodies that die (Bettine, Ophile, The Adventuress). Much of this happens without the intervention of spoken or written language systems. It is written, just as Cixous suggests, through depictions of bodies. Niffenegger's use of paratextual illustration allows her to circumvent linguistic systems to create a feminine language—a language constructed from irrational bodies—including literal pieces from her own body through the inclusion of her hair. Because of this Niffenegger is not a dead author in the sense that Barthes suggests.

Her feminine name also adds credence to her feminist writing and thus imparts a playful taste of author subjectivity onto the potential meaning of the text. This is not a function limited to names that are representative of oppressed groups either. For Benedetti, her "name

is a sign, or to borrow somewhat provocatively a term that semiotics has reserved for the literary text, a ‘hypersign,’ rich with internal references (‘also the author of...’) and external ones (‘in the tradition of author X,’ ‘totally different from author Y’)” (Benedetti 3). Texts are intertextual and not created in a linguistic vacuum, and this is the same for the similarly linguistically constructed authors. The author’s name, just like the author’s book, can be read as a text in and of itself. While the text is a continuum of the texts before it, without a subjective presence, the author name is an additional text, a paratext that is bound to the body of the text as long as it remains emblazoned across the cover. In a sense, Niffenegger circumvents the idea of the author being reduced to a name with limited subjective connotations when she creates an example of *écriture féminine* through her use of illustrations of marginalised bodies rather than text. She binds *The Three Incestuous Sisters* to her own body through the use of her hair—a non-linguistic signature. But, even if one takes into account the DNA marking that Niffenegger has implied by including photographs of her and her sister’s locks of hair, the biological data that could be gathered from hair says something about the person it relates to. However, this still does not add up to true subjectivity, which is essentially impossible to impart. What Niffenegger does is strategically appropriate certain signifiers of author subjectivity in order to give weight to the message of her texts.

### (ii) Danielewski: The Author as Text

Unlike Niffenegger, Danielewski works rather hard in *House of Leaves* to remove himself as the authority of his text and to put the focus of the text on the reader. Self-consciously aware of the theories of the death of the author, he sets about destroying himself in a bid to create a quintessentially postmodern text. We might consider Foucault’s ‘technologies of the self’ when talking about the ways in which Danielewski has carefully considered the manner in

which he would like to be perceived and has cultivated himself throughout *House of Leaves* in order to demonstrate this. Foucault explains this process as follows:

the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion through practices of the self, these practices are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group. (Foucault “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom” 291)

Except what Danielewski does, through the model of the disappearing author, is to actively extinguish his ‘self’. He uses a variety of methods to achieve this, including: intertextuality, metafiction, encouraging reader participation, the removal of his name, and by distancing himself from the authorial role in his promotional material. His self-erasure can be seen through a phrase Barthes uses to describe the role of intermittence as something that generates pleasure for the reader “the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance” (Barthes *The Pleasure of the Text* 10). While Barthes is using this concept to describe how a text might produce pleasure, Danielewski can be seen to be participating in a similar construct: he is staging his appearance as the author of the text through disappearance.

Intertextuality, as previously discussed, offers a challenge to authorship by showing the text as an evolution of ideas already established. It reduces the role of the writer from the ‘genius creator of art’ to someone who merely transcribes, mimics and rearranges.

Danielewski takes his use of intertextuality further than Niffenegger with many implicit and explicit references to other novels, films, and critical texts. *House of Leaves* also employs metafiction to draw attention to its status as a work of fiction. Intertextuality, of course, also has this effect to a small degree in that our attention is drawn to other similar texts and the textual status of the read text is by association underlined. One of the ways in which this is achieved is that the text is written and read by the fictional characters of the novel; Navidson

films *The Navidson Records*, which are (presumably) watched and written about by Zampano whose text is read and commented upon by Truant. When we consider the other voices present, the mysterious ‘editors’ and Truant’s mother, Palafina, the multiple voices acts as a chorus that functions to block out any one singular narrator that might be confused with a subjective authorial voice. There are stories within stories and at each stage they are being read and commented on by another character, which draws the creation and reception of the text to the fore. In order for this to occur, the novel is presented in the text as a physical object. At first, as messy reams of handwritten “fragments completely covered in the creep of years of ink pronouncements” veering off onto other objects: “old napkins, the tattered edges of an envelope, once even on the back of a postage stamp” (Danielewski xvii). Later, it becomes presumably more like the real-life text as Truant edits it. Truant also addresses the reader directly through the introduction, in which he effectively breaks the fourth wall (the barrier between the fictive world and the reader’s reality). As a result, the fiction seems to be internally creating itself without the help of an external author and the reader is drawn into the narrative as an active participant who is recognised by the characters within the text. In *Narcissistic Narrative*, Hutcheon explains that “[m]etafiction explicitly adds the dimension of reading as a process parallel to writing as an imaginative creative act. The result is that the reader’s degree of participation appears to increase. He must do his share of the work” (Hutcheon *Narcissistic Narrative* 151) and through this “the ‘author’ becomes a position to be filled, a role to be inferred, by the reader reading the text” (Hutcheon *Narcissistic Narrative* xvi).

Perhaps the most indicative act Danielewski makes in his attempt to dispense with himself as the author is to remove his name from one of the places which traditionally hold the author’s signature. While the cover presents the title as *House of Leaves: A Novel* – Mark Z. Danielewski, the title page reconfigures that to read “*Mark Z. Danielewski’s House of*

*Leaves* by Zampano with introduction and notes by Johnny Truant". He appears to forfeit his ownership of the text to the characters, the fictional writers and readers who recognise us and stand in for us as they respond to the narrative. This apparent abandonment of the authorial signature has been repeated in *S.*, which is in many ways a progression from *House of Leaves*—not least in its use of digital printing techniques allowing practically uninhibited demonstrations of paratextual insertions. *S.* is the title that the slipcover displays along with the author names, Abrams as creator and Dorst as the writer. However, the book within this case bears none of this information. Rather, it is made in every aspect to resemble an old library book called *Ship of Theseus* by V. M. Straka. The book contains three separate narrative streams. Firstly, the text of *Ship of Theseus*, which relates the story of a man who awakens with no memory only to be shanghaied onto a ghost ship and cast as an assassin in a revolution. Secondly, the footnotes are attributed to Straka's translator who, without having ever met him or knowing his true identity, is in love with the mysterious author. And finally, in handwritten margin notes Jennifer and Eric, both university students, attempt to solve the mystery of who Straka was by decoding various clues scattered throughout the text and introducing external accompaniments between the pages (all present in the actual copy) about themselves and the text. While Jennifer and Eric solve the mystery, it is not solved for the reader. However, clues left in place allow the reader to retrace their steps to a conclusion. There are, of course, many reasons that the author's signature can be interrupted. However, the actual authors of these texts retain legal ownership of, and named responsibility for, their texts on the external covers, while the fictional authors overflow the body of the text to stand in some of the author's space. It is, then, unlike the hoaxes conducted by Walpole with *The Castle of Otranto* and Poe with "The Balloon-Hoax" where the story is meant to be taken as true or by the fictitious author in earnest. Rather, there is a general appeal to what might be called a 'truth effect' that is merely an affectation that parodies real documentation—such as,

the pretend library book or the academic writing of Zampano. What is being demonstrated is that truth is replicable, which has the effect of destabilising the concept of truth as presented through media. Truth becomes merely a show of certain affectations and styles, such as the ‘real’ handwriting of Jennifer and Eric or a display of ‘non-fiction’ writing. Authors as authoritative figures who control the text are demonstrated to be just names that could just as easily be false names—neither the author nor his name guarantees anything.

When we consider the text as one that writes itself, we are seeing it as part of an interwoven continuation of language that has flown free of an originator. When Barthes and Foucault write about the author as dead, or as disappeared, in a sense they are also referring to what Jameson has discussed as “the ‘death’ of the subject itself—the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual” (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 23). According to Jameson, this can be thought of two different ways:

the historicist one, that a once-existing centered subject, in the period of classical capitalism and the nuclear family, has today in the world of organizational bureaucracy dissolved; and the more radical poststructuralist position, for which such a subject never existed in the first place but constituted something like an ideological mirage – I obviously incline toward the former. (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 15)

Jameson suggests that with the weakening in historicity the subject can no longer be centred and becomes fragmented—just as society and its representation in media is fragmented (while Barthes and Foucault are part of the second ‘radical poststructuralist position’). Through this, Jameson constructs the idea of the schizophrenic subject for whom there is no history and no future. The chain of signification has broken and therefore there is only a constant now. For Jameson, the construction of personal identity relies on the ability to combine the ideas of the past and the future with the present in order to construct any sort of biographical understanding (Jameson *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late*

*Capitalism* 71). Danielewski tries to defuse his identity in this manner; he seeks to be read as an author devoid of biography.

Outside of the text, Danielewski has done a number of interviews about *House of Leaves* where he attempts to distance himself from any position of authorship that implies he has concrete answers about the function of the text; instead, he defers meaning onto the reader. In the following two examples he makes similar claims. The first example provides a kind of evasion that is common—for instance, it is comparable to that made by Niffenegger.

The real issue we're circling around has to do with the question of whether or not the novel can be seen as having a single dominant voice creating all the others, and if so, identifying that voice. In short: who really is the originator of this book [...] But I'm not going to answer because for me to move further and further into the narrative details would require me to begin to deprive reader of the private joys of making such a discovery on their own.

(McCaffery and Gregory 115)

The second example more assertively questions whether he has any continued ownership over his text and recognises the reader as the authority of their own experience.

An older gentleman came up to me [...]. He preceded to tell me a story about how his daughter had tried to kill herself and he was there at her bedside when she woke up, and he said 'Is there anything I can do for you?' and she said 'Can you get me a copy of *House of Leaves*?' and that story stays with me. I don't really know the conversation she had with my book, if it is mine anymore, but I can see that there are important conversations and they're meaningful to people and that becomes extremely meaningful to me. It's also something I don't entirely understand, anymore. I don't understand the valences of that, the privacy of that. But if it granted her strength, that's very important to me. (Knopf/doubleday)

While the second statement endeavours to defer meaning, it manages, ironically, to be somewhat narcissistic. Someone was in terrible pain, but they were reassured by his book, so

the interview becomes both an advertisement for the brilliance of his book and a testament to his generosity in bringing it to a particular audience. It also seems to exploit the story in order to position him as the removed, detached author that he knows his book requires him to be, while simultaneously implying a subtext of personal genius. But, even if his comments do turn upon himself, why should we care? In Foucault's words "What does it matter who is speaking?" (Foucault "What is an Author?" 281). It begins to matter when authority, or the lack of it, becomes some sort of focus within the text and, in so doing, the author, although external to the text, constructs himself as a text to be read that is as pertinent to reading a novel as any other additional text by the same author might be. Benedetti has written about how inescapable the author-function can be:

The author is a phantom, or a doorknob fixed to the top of a rod, to which the reader can append supposed intentions and purposefulness. From this point of view, the author as a full subjectivity is truly dead. What is not true, however, is that this fact brings about a cathartic dispersion of authorial identity. And it is exactly here that the myth is not to be taken literally, but as a denial. The author-function can still be something terribly oppressive and highly identifying. (Benedetti 52)

Implying the author exists as an author-function is not to say that the author offers any kind of final key to understanding the text and, certainly, it is not to suggest his subjective motivations can be conclusively decoded. But, to ignore the paratexts within the media is to ignore a part of the novel—which is to limit meaning.

Problematically, Danielewski does not limit himself to making comments about how he is a removed author, side-lined by the readers' experience and understanding. On the contrary, he has done interviews that discuss the book in terms of understanding it based on his biography. Most explicitly, these comments take the form of relating his life—particularly in terms of his family—to the Gothic and to certain ideas about paratext. When asked about



his familiarity with the Gothic genre, he discusses how the house he and his sister grew up in was filled with “shadows” that could not be dissipated by turning on the lights. He goes on to qualify this by suggesting that the haunted nature of his childhood home was due to the psychology of his father:

There were many rooms we knew were off-limits and passageways we were too terrified to enter alone. Moreover, the spatial nature and dimensions of this house were constantly changing. One moment it was warm and proximal, and our father would be saying, “You’re wonderful! You’re the best! You’re going to be great artists, and we must make sure you go to great universities.” Then without warning, everything would get cold and dark, and the promise of the future failed.[...] In many ways he was like the father in *Shine* – one moment warm, generous and funny; petty, vindictive, and hateful the next. (McCaffery and Gregory 115-116)

This is a carefully constructed claim to Gothic experience: Danielewski avoids making any unsubtle guarantee of a belief in or an experience of any supernatural phenomenon. To do so would come across as a clear attempt at synchronicity and would alienate much of his audience. Yet, he still manages to construct an experience of a house and a childhood that looks characteristically Gothic and reproduces the idea in *House of Leaves* of the Gothic experience being a product of the troubled mind. Ultimately though, what he describes is an experience of abuse, which he has reconstituted in the shape of his text complete with a shifting labyrinthine house metaphor. While the Gothic is often a site of resistance against various ideologies, it does not seem for Danielewski a natural medium to discuss personal trauma—poised as his text is on the verge of hysterical laughter and constantly trivialising itself through pastiche. Rather, it reads as through he is actively seeking ways to implicate himself as part of the Gothic experience of his novel.

In discussing the conception of *House of Leaves* Danielewski suggests its starting point

was with a novella called “Redwood”, which he wrote for his father who was sick with cancer at the time. His father responded to the text badly.

[So I did] the closest thing to suicide I can think of – I tore up the manuscript of “Redwood” into hundreds of pieces, flung them into a dumpster in the alley, and spent the next few days in a kind of emotional coma. [...] Then my sister did something that still chokes me up when I think about it: she presented me with a manila folder in which I discovered “Redwood” – intact. She had gathered up and taped together all the pieces. (McCaffery and Gregory 104)

He goes on to say that it “is not exactly accurate to say that it ‘originated’ with “Redwood” in the sense that “Redwood” directly anticipated what I did in the novel” (McCaffery and Gregory 104-105). It must be assumed that much of the connection lies, then, in the story about his sister taping together the text (a real life Gothic manuscript) as an inspiration for the structure of *House of Leaves* and the idea of it being a document that is a collage of pieces. Through these biographical comments Danielewski seems to say little about how his life has influenced his text and is much more interested in refiguring himself as someone authored by the Gothic. He appears to stretch credulity just a little in how neatly these comments apply to his fictional project and, even if true, they are most certainly being employed in order to portray a particular image.

Barthes’ counter to this, I believe, would be to say that even though externally there is material on the author, it should just be ignored in favour of the text itself. He writes that “[t]he *author* still reigns in histories of literature, biographies of writers, interviews, magazines, as in the very consciousness of men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoirs” (Barthes “Death of the Author” 126). But, even though these external caches of authorial information exist, we should instead be turning our critical attention to what a text is assembled from in terms of linguistic origins and to the only one with the ability to interpret it, the reader. “Thus is revealed the total existence of writing:

a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author.” (Barthes “Death of the Author” 129). In one sense, he is surely right—the attempt to unite a person’s literal biography to the text to interpret its meaning is essentially a futile task. But, what is presented by these very conscious authors is not necessarily any kind of literal biography. Rather, the external paratexts such as interviews, articles and social media personas are not only a requirement of their role as an author, but are pointed to by the text as a continuation of the author’s fictional project—including themselves as the constructed author.

In saying that the author is a series of constructed paratexts, what is being said is not that the author is any kind of authority, but rather that he is another part of the franchise that novels tend to create—in essence, the author is merely a consumerist object. In talking about how this franchise is constructed for *House of Leaves*, we might consider Danielewski’s social media pages, his website and the MZD forums. The largely fictional blurb on the inside cover of *House of Leaves* even points to the Internet as a site for exterior information about the novel when it says:

Years ago, when *House of Leaves* was first being passed around, it was nothing more than a badly bundled heap of paper, parts of which would occasionally surface on the Internet. No one could have anticipated the small but devoted following this terrifying story would soon command. Starting with an odd assortment of marginalized youth – musicians, tattoo artists, programmers, strippers, environmentalist, and adrenaline junkies – the book eventually made its way into the hands of older generations. (Danielewski).

Here he describes something of a cult following who convene through the Internet—which isn’t so very far from the reality. In the build-up to the release of his current project, *The Familiar*, which is to be a twenty-seven volume serial concerning a twelve year old girl and a

cat, Danielewski has devoted his social media pages (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) to publishing images that are completely black squares captioned by a series of numbers that have been discovered to be coordinates. The exceptions to this were that when his cat died he morphed the black squares into what became a collage of an image of the cat (a topical coincidence it would seem), and more recently he has moved to photographs of stars. Pages of the MZD forum have gone into discussing what these clues could indicate as well as fan-built websites that track where the coordinates point to. *S.* has taken this paratextual relationship with the Internet even further. Prior to the release of the book a YouTube channel called “Bad Robot Productions” published two video trailers for the narrative of *Ship of Theseus*; several websites seem to have been set up by the writers to provide clues about the fictional author, V. M. Straka: [whoisstraka.com](http://whoisstraka.com) which just has an ‘S’ symbol on a white background, [radiostraka.com](http://radiostraka.com) which has various static filled broadcasts, and [isla-dirks.tumblr.com](http://isla-dirks.tumblr.com), which is the blog of one of the minor characters; also [SFiles22](http://SFiles22), which appears to be a fan-created website that explores and archives the various clues. Steven Hall’s *The Raw Shark Texts* also participates in the paratextual status of the Internet by producing for each of its thirty-six chapters an un-chapter, or a negative chapter, which has been hidden online or in real life (different editions of the text for example). If everything on the Internet is up for grabs as part of the solution to an explicit mystery the novel sets the reader to solve, the authors of these novels must be aware of how they depict themselves because they have opened up the potential space of their text to include literally anything that can be googled.

It is not overly surprising that texts that employ paratext would migrate onto the Internet. Donna Tartt, who is frequently labelled as something of a literary hermit, said in a recent interview: “The attention of the media on authors, rather than on their books, is worse than ever. [...] It’s prurient curiosity. And now, if you are a first-time writer, they expect you to blog for free as part of your promotional duties, which is terrible” (Baum). If having an

Internet presence is currently a requirement of writing, as expected as a cover or a blurb, then these writers were bound to take advantage of it in the same way they have with most of the other forms of paratext. It is also noteworthy that even though these ideas about the death of the author were in circulation nearly fifty years ago, the attention on the author appears to be more intense to the point that perhaps it is beyond the stage where one is able to ignore it convincingly enough to remove ideas of the author from the text.

Jonathan Gray has discussed this within the context of film directors; he too has understood the authors of films as paratexts in their own right, citing the use of interviews, bonus material, making-of specials and the director's commentary. For him, authors' names function to tell viewers or readers what to expect: "As we saw in the case of Peter Jackson as film author, television authors similarly become paratexts in their own right, constructed by the industry, creative personnel, and viewers alike as signifiers of value [...] but also serving as interpretive decoders and frames for viewers in various ways" (Gray 136). There is a tacit understanding and value judgement of what a Peter Jackson film might look like. There is an expectation of a certain level of quality and, underlying this, a corresponding understanding that it will have had a particular kind of budget that also affects how viewers might meet a new film, coloured, as it is, by Jackson's name. To illustrate this point, Gray discusses how projects that Abrams has had little to do with have still been tainted in the viewer's eyes by his reputation, which is mainly for creating drawn out mystery stories with somewhat open conclusions—such as *Alias* (we might consider too how *S.* fits in with this). Gray claims that many viewers applied the *Alias* bias to later programs, such as *Lost* and *Six Degrees*. According to Gray, not only were the viewers of the earlier Abrams work influenced, but people in general began to accept these kinds of claims without ever having viewed any of Abrams' previous work. "Nevertheless, beyond appraisal of the relative helpfulness of Abrams as paratext lies the fact that viewers not only used them but circulated them to others,

creating a perimeter and airlock around new shows and proposing set frames of interpretation and decoding” (Gray 140). What is really being suggested here is that when an author is constructed as a paratext there is a certain limiting that necessarily takes place and an unavoidable set of ideas that accompany the author’s name. Even as authors attempt to control their presence, they are still being constructed in a manner that is not condoned by them and that is entirely outside their control.

The commercialisation of the author as a product to be consumed in conjunction with the novel being sold is a product of late capitalism. It is both advertisement and additional narrative information that is being delivered through interviews, blogs, social media sites and websites. *House of Leaves*, *S.*, and *The Raw Shark Texts* all manipulate various paratexts, but their involvement in these epitexts is particularly telling. Danielewski, Hall, Abrams and Dorset all extend their potential text out into the irrationally endless labyrinth of information that is not containable or controllable, a place that tends to defy authority and flout borders, where they, themselves cannot help but to exist. They present the Internet within their texts as a way of conveying Gothic information in order to prepare for this use of epitext. They have taken what is a vehicle for late capitalist consumerism, the Internet, and have reconfigured it as a Gothic space full of mystery and dark corners in order to be able to extend their narrative into this space. *House of Leaves* and *S.* specifically also participate in the death of the author narrative and attempt to remove their authorship by assigning fictional characters the authorial role. These two models of authorship sit in opposition with each other. On the one hand these authors are attempting to conform to a postmodern model of authorship in which the author is dead, but on the other they acknowledge the pervasive and contaminable nature of the media within late capitalism. That Danielewski, Dorset and Abrams evoke the removed author is a gesture towards an ingrained postmodern construction—that the author is dead—but it seems to be merely a move to tie themselves to postmodernism as effectively as

possible. To do this, they simultaneously construct themselves through postmodern media, leaving these two ideas to naturally conflict. The death of the author model was considered a liberation from the tyrannical and controlling authority of the text. However, it can be seen as a kind of grand narrative in its own right—one where the author is always dead and buried and in a critical sense should be forever ignored. It also fits into a paradigm where information comes in sanitised, book-sized packages and, while books might relate to other books, outside media is easy enough to exclude. But media now takes contamination from all sides and it would seem that to limit intertextual relationships between some texts while encouraging others is not just authoritative, it is potentially impossible.

## Chapter Three: Reader/Viewer

Writing, when properly managed (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation. As no one, who knows what he is about in good company, would venture to talk all; – so no author who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good-breeding, would presume to think all: The truest respect which you can pay to the reader’s understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself. For my own part, I am eternally paying him complements of this kind, and do all that lies in my power to keep his imagination as busy as my own. (Sterne 75)

The reader of a novel that contains manipulated paratext is not only a reader in the passive sense; they are also a viewer, a spectator, a cryptanalyst, a translator, a participant, and, perhaps at times, even a co-writer. Paratext creates additional means of controlling the reader’s experience. But, affecting the reader to create irrational sensations was the very basis for Romantic and Gothic fiction. For the Romantics, the aim was to produce the sensation of sublime transcendence or ecstasy (Barth 2). For the Gothic writers, the goal was to produce sublime terror. As can be seen from the previous chapter, in postmodernist reader theory the reader becomes the site of meaning for the text. But this reader is, like Iser’s implied reader, impersonal and, in Barthes approximation, lacking any bibliography, history, or psychology (Barthes “Death of the Author” 129). I argue that while the reader is impersonal in the sense they are without history or biography, they still have a manipulable gaze and psychology. Histories and biographies are diverse and individual. However, psychologies react in a similar manner to similar stimulations—which is why psychologists are able to use studies to extrapolate broad inferences that apply to a significant proportion of the population. The gaze, as theorised by Laura Mulvey, is also (more or less) universal in its demonstration of power dynamics, and can therefore also be applied to the implied reader. In this sense, the text can be read for how it anticipates affecting the reader’s psychology and gaze. This is



significant for understanding paratextual manipulations for two reasons. Firstly, with the addition of visual material, the gaze becomes an explicit implication of the text—just as it always has been with film. Secondly, the manipulations of text (the layers of narrative within footnotes, margins, and appendices; the concrete form of the text; the non-fiction styles furnished with documented evidence) attempt to influence the psychology of the reader in a manner that goes beyond, and is more self-conscious than, the average text—*House of Leaves*, *S.*, and *Night Film* do so for specific Gothic and/or postmodern ends.

With the addition of paratextual manipulations, the reader—now viewer as well—becomes a gaze that can be manipulated. In illustrative visual representations the characters' gaze can also be depicted in order to show power relationships between the characters. The first kind of gaze that will be examined is Jeremy Bentham's panoptic gaze as configured by Foucault. The Panopticon is an architectural model for a prison in which the cells are arranged in a circular formation around an observation area from where the staff of the institute may watch inmates at any time while always remaining invisible to them. This arrangement is designed to cause the inmates to act as though they are constantly observed—even when no gaze is upon them. They are therefore perpetually controlled by the potential gaze of their wardens. Panopticism relies on "permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible. It had to be like a faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception" (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 214). This is a gaze that controls and disciplines the viewer. As this theory has been applied to many institutions (for example: schools, asylums and hospitals) it has a broad application to Gothic fiction in general as it so regularly makes use of these spaces. The Panopticon is a model easily applied to both Niffenegger and Danielewski, although Niffenegger makes a more distinct use of it. The scopophilic, gendered gaze is also something that Niffenegger employs regularly, unlike Danielewski.

Scopophilia is “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” 37). But it is also a raptured gaze that projects a fantasy onto those that are looked upon; it carries the viewer away and can be seen as a Romantic irrational force. Likewise, there is a parallel between the characters and the viewer, this time through the look. The reader necessarily looks, but in these texts the characters become implied readers as they gaze amongst themselves—altering and directing the look of the reader in the process.

*House of Leaves*, as well as *S.*, *Night Film* and *The Raw Shark Texts*, consciously attempt to cause a feeling of irrationality in their readers by making use of particular paratextual manipulations in order to affect the reader’s psychology. This is not something that Niffenegger does in any sort of active or mindful fashion. Texts, of course, all affect their reader for some purpose: they attempt to elicit an emotional response, an educative response or a response expressed in the form of an action. *House of Leaves* and similar texts announce that they intend to make the reader feel irrational, possessed or insane. They then set about creating this feeling in a number of ways—most particularly through the use of paratext. In order to discuss this, I will apply cognitive poetics which applies cognitive psychology (which is involved in understanding memory, perception and language use) to the reading of literary texts. Cognitive poetics provides an effective means of discussing how language might interact with the psychology of the reader, which is particularly topical for texts that specifically set out to engage the reader mental state. Using the principles of cognitive poetics, the effect of epistemological texts on the reader will be considered along with the shifting between fictional layers within the text. Both of these function to puncture what McHale has called the “semi-permeable membrane” between the world of the fiction (the text world) and the world of the reader (the discourse world) in rather subtle ways in order to make it seem like the irrational events are escaping the novel and entering into the reader’s

reality (McHale 34). The multitasking required of the reader in these texts will be examined as a re-enactment of the way in which people are engaging with postmodern media, which has been shown to affect memory and attention span—thus fulfilling Jameson’s prophecy of the postmodern schizophrenic. These texts are literally creating irrational readers, not just through fear as the Gothic has traditionally done, but also through the postmodern construction of depthlessness and dizzying surfaces.

### (i) The Gaze

The gaze is a concept usually considered within film theory, but these novels are multimodal and one of the modes that they almost invariably borrow from is the cinematic. Paratextual novels regularly make use of cinematic conventions which are constantly brought to the fore as these texts regularly refer to film within their narratives. *House of Leaves* is based around the documentary film, *The Navidson Record*. *The Three Incestuous Sisters* raises a curtain and presents the sisters as though they were actors in the theatre. *The Raw Shark Texts* is a recreation of the film *Jaws*. *S.* was prefaced by a cinematic trailer. *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* presents in what is nearly a flick book, the story of Georges Méliès. There is not only an implicit encouragement to read these texts in the manner of film, but a constant assertion of their relationship with cinema.

Wordless novels also play with this idea of visually representing the narrative. According to Perry Willett, wordless novels draw heavily on the language of the silent film by emulating cinematic point of view, framing, and sequencing as well as the exaggerated expressions employed by the silent actors to impart narrative without dialogue (Willett 128). One difference Willett notes between these texts and film is that the pace is determined by the reader rather than dictated by the flow of the film—enabling skipping between sections,

lingering over parts that seem interesting and removing those that bore (Willett 130). While this is true for both wordless novels and Niffenegger's visual novels, other texts demonstrably attempt to interact with the readers' pacing to create certain effects using techniques that are similar to those of film editing. For example, in sections of *House of Leaves* with high levels of suspense, this is enacted through pages with very little text creating enforced pauses between pages so that the reader is driven to frequent and faster action in turning the leaves in order to continue the narrative. This is comparable to 'fast cutting' in film editing wherein sequences of shots that last for only a few seconds are cut together to demonstrate frantic energy or chaos. The manner in which the reader looks is controlled and contained by the inclusion of these filmic aspects; so to apply one of the most pivotal concepts of film theory, the gaze, seems crucial. George Walker has noted that the storyboards that are used in the creation of films are influenced by these early wordless novels (G. Walker 11). The purpose of storyboarding is to pre-visualise what the camera and thus the spectator is going to see—it plans where the gaze is going to be directed. This connection makes it very easy to see how visual novels such as *The Adventuress* and *The Three Incestuous Sisters* are also subject to gaze theory.

The intra-diegetic gaze (the gaze that occurs between the characters) is one way in which the gaze is employed. Niffenegger plays with this gaze by emphasising the controlling eyes upon the Adventuress in Baron von K's castle. As soon as the Adventuress arrives at the castle a set of disembodied eyes stares at her from inside the castle gates and this gaze continues for the several pages depicting the wedding where she is surrounded by outlines of hands and a sea of eyes without bodies. The eyes return when the Adventuress is arrested and tried; they encircle accusatorially and on the next page a watchful pair stares through the window of her prison cell door. The gaze here clearly demonstrates a relationship of power: those who look are controlling and dominating, while the one who is gazed upon is in a

position of powerlessness and isolation. What Niffenegger creates with these eyes is something akin to Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon as configured by Foucault. He expands this model out as a metaphor for the ways in which many institutions such as the army, schools, psychiatric hospitals and factories control the people they contain (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 70). Interestingly, within film criticism panopticism has been applied (not always successfully) to feminist film theory. The "sense of permanent visibility seem perfectly to describe the condition not only of the inmate in Bentham's prison but of women as well. [...] The subjectivity assigned to femininity within patriarchal systems is inevitably bound up with the structure of the look and the localization of the eye as authority" (Doane, Mellencamp and Williams 14). Also of note is the consistent presence of these disciplinarian institutions within Gothic literature: schools, hospitals (especially psychiatric) and prisons feature regularly and are frequently involved in policing women's transgressive bodies.

In Niffenegger's story, from the moment the Adventuress enters the castle she is met with an anonymous gaze that monitors her. Most suggestively in this context is the scene in which the Adventuress is tried. The combined gaze of the many eyes is accusatory and they create an orbital ring around her. A finger points in accusation to emphasise this gaze, while two other hands make fists as through indicating a guilty verdict. This seems to be exactly the disciplinarian gaze that Foucault describes when he writes that "the prison with all the corrective technology at its disposal is to be resituated at the point where the codified power to punish turns into the disciplinary power to observe" (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 224). While it could be argued there is a physical element to this through the bodiless hands that accost her, they seem to be only a manifestation of what the eyes already achieve. The hands dress her as a bride in preparation for the gaze; as the wedding commences, four hands restrain her but they seem only secondary to the hundreds of eyes that swarm around the image; and as the eyes squint in a gleeful manner in the "Revelry", this glee is only

reinforced by the hands that toast the wedding with wine glasses. It is the gaze that seems to be the controlling force forming her into a docile body that might be manipulated, and it is only once this gaze is removed that the Adventuress is able to express any semblance of agency—to burn down the castle and escape her marriage, to transform into the moth creature and escape prison.

In *The Three Incestuous Sisters* there is a similar example of a disciplinary gaze when The Saint is held captive in the circus and takes part in the circus parade. In this parade, The Saint is locked in a tiny cage where he seems unable to move and is clearly victimised by the system of the circus. The freaks of the circus are shown to be physically different from the crowd that has gathered to gaze upon the parade and the abnormalities of the freaks are condoned and controlled by the look of the audience.

Generally speaking, all the authorities exercising individual control function according to a double mode; that of binary division and branding (mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal); and that of coercive assignment of differential distribution (who he is; where he must be; how he is to be characterized; how he is to be recognized; how a constant surveillance is to be exercised over him in an individual way, etc.). (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 199)

The circus can be viewed as a system that contains and controls those that are physically different by employing the gaze of those that are ‘normal’. This creates a binary separation between the crowd and the freaks—those with irrational bodies and those with rational bodies. The crowd is depicted with expressions ranging from worry to disgust, rather than pleasure or joy, which demonstrates that this circus is a not a shared entertainment, but rather a punishment for abnormality. The reader is also implicated in these visual representations of the panoptic gaze: for example, when we see The Saint in his cage, he is not on display for the gathered crowd as there are walls blocking their view. Rather, he is presented to the

reader of the text, who seems to stand in the place of the implied crowd on the other side of the parade. From here, the reader can observe Clothilde recognising The Saint and they are also able to participate in gazing upon the spectacle of the freaks. Viewing these bodies is also a commodity for which the audience of the circus performance has paid, just as the reader has (presumably) paid to see the same bodies through purchasing the book. Similarly, in the scenes in *The Adventuress* with the disembodied eyes the reader is implied as another set of removed eyes that gaze upon the scene.

Creating a reader that is implicit with the panoptic gaze is also something that occurs within *House of Leaves* when the reader gazes upon Palafina's letters. The letters to Johnny tell the story of Palafina's stay at the Three Attic Whalestoe Institute and as they progress Palafina discusses how the New Director is watching her: "I fear the New Director insists on reading my mail now. He would not admit to this directly but things he says along with certain mannerisms indicate he intends to study and censor my letters" (Danielewski 609). The panoptic gaze is referred to regularly from this point: the New Director's "prying eyes" (609); "The New Director fixed his beady eyes on me" (611); "the attendants spy on me" (614). This goes on until the coded letter, in which Palafina discloses that she is being raped (620). Following this point, her letters break down into patterns of text and repeating words; before, out of the blue, there is a letter in which she is coherent again and wherein she admits that the New Director is in fact the Old Director. Although the Director may or may not have been monitoring Palafina's letters, the fact that she believes it to be so (as well as the gaze that such a space necessarily inflicts upon its patients) controls her behaviour. The reader, however, is quite obviously monitoring her letters and is the external third party to the letters between mother and son. The unreliability demonstrated within the letters allows the readers to diagnose Palafina and they begin to approach the letters with a medical gaze. Within the medical gaze the patient loses their subjectivity in favour of subjectivity of the disorder or

disease, “The patient is the rediscovered portrait of the disease; he is the disease itself” (Foucault *The Birth of the Clinic* 15). The reader, in participating in this medicalising gaze, is able to disassociate from Palafina as a subject.

The politics of the gaze are also discussed in *House of Leaves* through Navidson’s Pulitzer Prize winning photograph of the little girl he calls Delial. The girl is starving in a field and there is a vulture gazing at her (Danielewski 392). Navidson takes the photograph and leaves the child to die and for this act Navidson is rewarded. The image, as it is described, is the exact replica of the Pulitzer Prize winning picture taken by Kevin Carter in Sudan in 1994. Carter was instructed not to touch the people there for fear of spreading disease, so he after he had taken his pictures, he watched the girl continue to struggle towards a feeding centre. Carter committed suicide three months after winning the prize (MacLeod 70). There is some relationship to the medical gaze in this—the girl is seen as a potential harbour for disease and so her subjectivity is removed. There is also something exoticising about it when the girl is being presented for a Western audience to consume in order to create a generalised point about famine. But, in *House of Leaves* the gaze is muted for the reader. The photograph is only seen through Navidson’s succeeding guilt. If the image was shown, the reader would become implicit in this look (as happens in the depiction of the gaze in Niffenegger’s texts). However, *House of Leaves* merely offers an appraisal of this kind of gaze as explicitly negative and this ties into Danielewski’s running commentary of the postmodern media as something hollow and depthless.

The scopophilic gaze is not a focus within *House of Leaves* and, just like the above example, the lack of pictorial depictions erases the reader’s participation in such a gaze. Niffenegger, however, is exceptionally interested in creating depictions of the gendered gaze that involve the look of the reader. Within feminist film theory, Laura Mulvey’s article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” has been the launching pad for much discussion and



adaptation within the Lacanian model of the gaze. Within this article, Mulvey introduces scopophilia—the pleasure in looking, “the desire to see (= scopic drive, scopophilia, voyeurism), which was alone engaged in the art of the silent film” (Metz 58)—as one of the possible pleasures of engaging with cinema (Mulvey “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” 37). This gaze is divided along gendered lines: men look and women receive the look.

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” 39-40)

It is worth considering how Mulvey’s understanding of the gaze is at work in *The Adventuress* before examining how it varies from this in *The Three Incestuous Sisters*. *The Adventuress* demonstrates this gaze in a particularly evident manner when Baron von K. is watching the Adventuress in her window from his carriage which is accompanied by the text “One day she stood at the window and was espied by the powerful Baron von K., who desired her” (Niffenegger *The Adventuress*). She is depicted to signify to-be-looked-at-ness through her conventionally attractive body, her youth, her feminine skirt and gloves and (later) most significantly, her nudity, which contrasts with the fully clothed Baron and the later male characters. The clothed male, naked female dichotomy—which imposes a binary of passive femininity/dominant masculinity—has a long history of depiction in fine arts, as discussed by John Berger: “[i]n the art-form of the European nude the painters and spectator-owners were usually men and the persons treated as objects, usually women” (Berger 63). This has continued into the present in film and other media (particularly advertising). According to Mulvey, the meaning of the female icon that is looked upon is ultimately sexual

difference denoted by the lack of a penis, which poses a threat to masculinity in its allusion to castration and the end of pleasure (Mulvey 42). There are two ways to cope with this anxiety:

fetishistic scopophilia, builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself. [...] While] voyeurism, on the contrary, has associations with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control and subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness. (Mulvey "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" 43)

The baron is participating in a voyeuristic gaze, and he sadistically controls and punishes the Adventuress. The image is composed with the viewer positioned behind the baron meaning that "the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film [image] are neatly combined" (Mulvey "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" 40). The baron directs the reader's gaze onto the Adventuress and the reader's gaze is forced into an ultimately masculine perspective. For Mulvey, as written in her follow-up essay "Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)", the female viewer might enjoy taking on this male gaze, but she will remain "restless in transvestite clothes" (Mulvey "Afterthoughts" 79). However, the way in which Niffenegger adopts the male gaze is exaggerated in order to demonstrate a point about how patriarchal systems oppress—it is a parody and, as such, it subverts the purity of the gaze. Feminist parody "takes the original male gaze [...] and turns it into a female gaze" (entonceshazlo) or possibly even an ungendered gaze: one that sees the harmful gaze directed at the Adventuress and is critical of it.

*The Three Incestuous Sisters* stages a variety of different forms of gaze from scopophilia as described by Mulvey, to a masquerade of femininity, and finally a return of the gaze. The title of the novel "*The Three Incestuous Sisters*" foregrounds a sexualisation of the sisters and produces an expectation in the reader. The picture opposite the title page depicts the three

sisters asleep in bed together, their bodies are covered and they sleep without touching. Yet, the fact that this occurs opposite the title—captioned by it, even—makes it implicitly sexual. A few pages later, there is an image that shows the nude sisters preparing for bed accompanied by a body of text that introduces each of them with minimal personality traits: ‘prettiest’, ‘smartest’ and ‘most talented’. They recall a history of paintings featuring women at their *toilette* and of nudes who admire themselves in mirrors (as Ophile does), such as Giovanni Bellini’s *Young Woman at Her Toilette* (1515) and Edgar Degas’s series of paintings of the 1880s that depict women bathing, towelling off and combing their hair. These women are passive, vulnerable, and their gaze is generally directed away from the viewer so that they are non-confrontational and the viewer’s eyes may roam their bodies freely. Berger has addressed the implications of the female nude who gazes into the mirror:

You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure. The real function of the mirror was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight. (Berger 51)

The three sisters in this image are displayed as objects of scopophilic pleasure, yet the way that the viewer’s gaze is directed constantly shifts.

When Paris enters the narrative there is an image captioned by the text “Paris’s choice:” referencing the Greek mythological tale “The Judgement of Paris” where the mythical Paris must choose who to bequeath the golden apple meant for the fairest goddess: Hera, Athena or Aphrodite. In the myth, the goddesses offer Paris bribes: Hera offers a royal position, Athena wisdom and skill in war and Aphrodite (who wins) offers him Helen, the world’s most beautiful woman. This myth has garnered a great many artistic depictions, presumably for its applicability to sumptuous displays of the female form, many of which participate in the portrayal of the nude female and clothed gazing male. Niffenegger’s version operates in a

slightly different manner to the traditional image that Berger describes (51). The three women, fully clothed, collect apples from a tree and all look upon Paris. Bettine is shown in the act of throwing an apple to Paris who is ready to catch it and her skirts are gathered up in order to hold the apples the women have picked. While the text tells us that it is Paris's choice, what is being depicted is really Bettine choosing Paris. This is comparable to Gaylyn Studler's discussion of the film *Morocco* (1930) when the female lead throws the protagonist a rose, singling him out as an object of desire amongst the males in the audience. Studler describes a:

complex image of the female in which she is the object of the look but also the holder of a 'controlling' gaze that turns the male into an object of 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. In *Morocco*, Private Tom Brown (Gary Cooper), a notorious 'ladykiller', is reduced to the passive 'feminine' position as object of Amy Jolly's appraising, steady gaze. Amy throws him a rose, which Brown then wears behind his ear. Operating within the limitations of the patriarchy, the Dietrich characters in these films displays her ability to fascinate in confirmation of what Michel Foucault has called 'power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalising, or resisting'. In response to the male gaze, Dietrich looks back or initiates the look. This simple fact contains the potential for questioning her objectification. (Studlar 212)

Bettine can be read as a vamp figure, one who is actively sexual, who wears femininity as a masquerade whereby a woman, "in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed" (Doane 427). The lack represented by femininity is replaced by a lack or a space between oneself and the representation that one chooses to display. The wearing of sexuality is a way to avoid objectification of the self, but "to wish to include in oneself as an object the cause of desire of the Other is a formula for the structure of hysteria" (Safouan quoted in Doane 427). In this context, Ophile could be described as desiring to be objectified, to become the one who connotes to-be-looked-at-ness, and because

of this her behaviour becomes erratic. It is possible to see Bettine and Ophile as two sides to the same femme fatale character: Bettine is the enchantress while Ophile represents the fatal and irrational aspects. Bettine, described as the prettiest sister, takes her life into her own hands; she successfully pursues Paris and sets about creating a life with him. The femme fatale for Zizek is not fatal for men, rather “she presents a case of a ‘pure,’ nonpathological subject fully assuming her own fate” (Zizek *Looking Awry* 66). This is ultimately a threatening position, and also an unstable one. Ophile, described as the smartest sister, represents the disintegration of the vamp masks. Zizek in describing the breakdown of the vamp figure shows how without the masculine presence in the narrative she simply ceases to exist.

Now, when the fascinating figure of the femme fatale disintegrates into an inconsistent bric-a-brac of hysterical masks, he is finally capable of gaining a kind of distance toward her and of rejecting her. The destiny of the femme fatale in film noir, her final hysterical breakdown, exemplifies perfectly the Lacanian proposition that ‘Woman does not exist’: she is nothing but the ‘symptom of man,’ her power of fascination masks the void of her nonexistence, so that when she is finally rejected, her whole ontological consistency is dissolved. (Zizek *Looking Awry* 65)

When Ophile kills Bettine through her scheming she takes on the role of the femme fatale in decline. She is rejected by Paris, one of two possible responses to the femme fatale, causing Ophile to literally cease to exist when she, through guilt and sadness, throws herself from the lighthouse and drowns. We might compare Ophile to the Adventuress in that they both exist only through the male gaze.

Ultimately, *The Three Incestuous Sisters* addresses the readers in a manner that makes it obvious that the characters exist only within the gaze. The second-to-last image has the three sisters lined up in a final bow, their hands clasped together as though in the theatre. What is

taking place is a return of the reader's gaze: it is the extra-diegetic gaze that acknowledges the fourth wall and recognises that they are being read and that they have been seen. The return of the gaze is a kind of rebellion against the view that invisibly consumes, just as the nudes of Édouard Manet through their confrontational gazes strike a difference from earlier classical nudes. It also draws attention to the silence of the sisters—while they are captioned we never hear their voices, their gaze is their only weapon just as it was for the rebellious characters in wordless novels and the eyelash fluttering stars of silent movies.

When Clothilde spies on Paris and Bettine engaging in intercourse there is a demonstration of a non-gendered scopophilia. This occurs over the course of two images: in the first Clothilde has her eye (or conceivably her ear) pressed against the headboard, which is accompanied by the text “Clothilde, raptured” (Niffenegger *The Three Incestuous Sisters*). The second the image is accompanied by the text “The conception.” (Niffenegger *The Three Incestuous Sisters*) and is split to show both Clothilde with her head shattered into pieces and Bettine and Paris making love. Scopophilia is to be seized by the ecstasy of looking: to be raptured, like Clothilde, to be carried away by overwhelming emotion. Clothilde's peeping Tom gaze causes her head—her mind—to break apart. Žižek has questioned whether irrationality and darkness hides behind the gaze: “We say the eye is the window of the soul, but what if there is not soul behind the eye? What if the eye is a crack through which we can perceive just the abyss to the netherworld? When we look through this crack we see the dark other side where hidden forces run the show” (Žižek *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*). Again, though, Niffenegger complicates the idea of a gendered gaze. It is a woman who participates in the gaze and, even more unsettling, it remains unclear upon whom she gazes. Does she gaze at her sister as one of the three incestuous sisters? Does she gaze at Paris, the man her two sisters compete for? The sexual act as a whole? Or does she merely gaze at the spectacle of conception—an unexpectedly unsexual gaze?

This gaze, I think, is the key to the mystery of the ‘incestuous’ sisters. Clothilde’s mind becomes shattered at the moment of the conception, and remains possessed by Paris and Bettine’s child throughout the rest of the book. She communes with the foetus and teaches him lessons about the world while he is still in utero, before he has a chance to see it for himself. She names him The Saint and tells him he will one day fly like a bird. When Bettine dies Clothilde senses it from afar and believes The Saint to be dead as well as she can no longer telepathically communicate with him. After many years she hears his voice again and saves him from the circus before teaching him to be invisible and to fly, introducing him to his father, and welcoming him to the family home. The final image of the book is a double page spread featuring a family picnic where the ghosts occupy one side and the living are on the other. Among the living is a child—a girl with long red hair and wings—combining the defining attributes of both Clothilde and The Saint. The main evidence for incest within *The Three Incestuous Sisters* is not between the sisters at all, but rather between Clothilde and her nephew. Her raptured gaze upon Paris and Bettine reveals a dark undercurrent to the story: the conception of The Saint is also the beginning of a forbidden love carried out through supernatural forces. This gaze is not the gendered gaze of the scopophilic masculine. Rather, Clothilde’s gaze is a crack through which the viewer might perceive the Gothic, irrational forces that, as Žižek says, run the show.

The Gothic themes in these texts are demonstrated in the manner in which they take advantage of the gaze; most particularly, the panoptic and the medical gaze. This is apparent in *House of Leaves* as well as Niffenegger’s visual novels. In both cases, the effect of watching eyes is employed to control characters in the institutions that are constantly being figured as Gothic spaces. As Niffenegger’s texts are both visual and, as I have previously discussed *écriture féminine*, they, unlike *House of Leaves*, make consistent use of the gendered gaze. *The Adventuress* engages in a very traditional model of the gaze that fits

easily within Mulvey's original conception. The point of this, though, is to exaggerate and critique this kind of gaze: the reader is made implicit in the masculine gaze, but is also encouraged to take a critical stance and to see it in the light of feminist parody. *The Three Incestuous Sisters*, on the other hand, does not parody the masculine gaze so much as attempt to subvert it and to change the power dynamics the gaze has historically represented. This is partially achieved through various acts of returning the gaze—to the masculine characters as well as to the reader. As well as doing this, Niffenegger takes the scene of Clothilde spying on Bettine and Paris—what might be compared to the Peeping Tom trope which is the very definition of the scopophilic gaze—and not only makes it a female gaze, but also removes or subverts the sexuality involved. The gaze of the reader in these cases is interrupted or diverted in unexpected ways in order to make a point about the systematic power dynamics of viewership and to interrupt them in ways that disrupt the status quo.

## (ii) Text World Theory and Epistolary Gothic

*House of Leaves* uses paratextual interruptions that cause the reader to traverse pages as the text transforms to translate various languages and codes. These force the reader to make decisions about the chronology of their reading experience and create a reader who is deeply implicated in the authorship of their own experience of the text. Barthes would term this a “writerly text”—one in which the reader participates in more than a non-trivial way (for instance, in reading the lines or in turning the pages) where ideas must be attributed to meaning and even physically manipulated (such as, in the case of the flip book). In this way, in reading the text the reader is actively participating and almost engaging with it as a writer might (Barthes *The Pleasure of the Text* 5). At its extreme, this kind of writing borders on “ergodic literature” (as proposed by Espen J. Aarseth), which describes literature or other



texts (such as, cybertexts, video games or choose-your-own-adventure books), wherein the reader must make choices that create multiple paths through the text (Aarseth 3). Aarseth uses the terminology applied to mazes to describe these different modes of participation. To texts that are read from beginning to end he applies the term ‘unicursal’ (used to describe a maze that has a single non-branching path), while ergodic literature that provides forks and options he labels ‘multicursal’ (describing a maze with a complex branching structure that is intended to puzzle the participant). According to Aarseth, texts can behave in both of these ways simultaneously, as in the case of footnotes and appendices. In reading a text such as *House of Leaves*, the reader is invited to refer to the footnotes throughout. This creates the possibility of deviating from the main flow of the text, which—if followed—eventually leads back onto the original path. Aarseth advises that “a footnoted text can be described as multicursal on the micro level and unicursal on the macro level” (Aarseth 8). Of course, the more multicursal a text is, the more control a reader has over the outcome of the narrative. This diminishes the author to someone who proposes a set of circumstances within which the story will unfold.

The effect of multicursality in *House of Leaves* is to disorientate the reader, just as multicursal mazes attempt to confuse and lead astray those who enter them. Attempting to follow the narrative through its various diversions takes a certain level of fixation. It becomes almost an obsessive action. Gibbons has made a persuasive case for the reader’s autonomy being responsible for a large part of the intensity of *House of Leaves* (Gibbons 84)—there is certainly a parallel drawn between the actions required of the reader and the fictional actions taken by the characters. It is as though the reader becomes next in a line of legacy following Zampano and Truant as they are forced into a similarly compulsive relationship with the text. Gibbons claims: “Just as it grows into an obsession for Truant, and Zampano before him, reading (and writing) this novel becomes an exhaustive preoccupation, consuming the

reader's thoughts and time" (Gibbons 84-85). Danielewski isn't just writing about irrational characters in a way that is designed to produce a sensation of fear in his audience. Rather, he is attempting to produce a conscious shift in his readers' thinking so that they are made to see a parallel between themselves and the irrationality of the characters.

The idea that the reader is the next in line for whatever the characters are involved in begins with a claim that the text haunts that characters who handle it—the characters stand in for the readers who hold the same text in their hands. This follows in a tradition of found manuscripts (such as, *The Turn of the Screw*). Johnny's part in the *House of Leaves* traces how *The Navidson Record* possesses him to the point where he is unable to leave the house or sleep and he suggests that others who read it will be similarly changed.

This much I'm certain of: it doesn't happen immediately. You'll finish and that will be that, until a moment will come, maybe in a month, maybe a year, maybe even several years. You'll be sick or troubled or deeply in love or quietly uncertain or even content for the first time in your life. It won't matter. Out of the blue, beyond any cause you can trace, you'll suddenly realize things are not how you perceive them to be at all. (Danielewski xxii)

*Night Film* provides a similar (although less affronting) passage about the power of a text to possess its reader.

To watch the film once was to be lost in so many graphic, edge-of-your-seat scenes that when it was over, I remember feeling vaguely astounded that I'd returned to the real world. Something about the film's darkness made me wonder if I would—as if in witnessing such things I was irrevocably breaking myself in (or just breaking myself), arriving at an understanding about humanity so dark, so deep down inside my own soul, I could never go back to the way I was before. (Pessl)

This is also a theme in *S.*, as demonstrated in Jen and Eric's obsession with *Ship of Theseus*. Through suggestion, this opens the reader up to the idea that the text has a particular power

over readers. It makes it possible for the reader to entertain the idea that, whatever irrationality it contains, the text causes the fictional reader to experience is a potential outcome for them—making them more receptive to further inferences of this nature.

One of the concepts that Gibbons employs from cognitive poetics to explain the process of inheritance is the Text World Theory. The Text World Theory distinguishes between ‘text worlds’ (which are the vivid mental worlds produced between the writer and reader) and the ‘discourse world’ (which is the external situation of the reader where the communication event takes place). A boundary exists between the text world and the discourse world that Gibbons labels a semipermeable membrane—an idea developed from Brian McHale’s *Postmodernist Fiction*. *House of Leaves* creates layers within the text world using stories within stories, which Gibbons considers to be “ontological manoeuvres, breaches of the semipermeable membrane, work not to fortify the boundaries between worlds by foregrounding the artificiality and fictionality of the text, but instead to obscure, and to some extent conceal the boundaries” (Gibbons 50). One of the ways in which this can be applied is through the readers’ participation with the text. For example, when the reader decodes Pelafina’s encoded message by taking the first letter of each word, they might write this on the margins of the book or scribble it on a sheet of paper that will be deposited between the pages. Gibbons has related how this involves the reader in the chain of inheritance that *House of Leaves* attempts to create.

In the process, we create an additional layer to the novel [...] so that it becomes out rendered copy of a book introduced and noted by Truant, and written by Zampano. In many novels, this act would not carry the same semantic weight, but *House of Leaves*, with its recursive narrative structure and multiple authors, turns this act into a significant narrative event.

(Gibbons 83)

This is demonstrated in Gibbons’ diagram (Figure 1.):

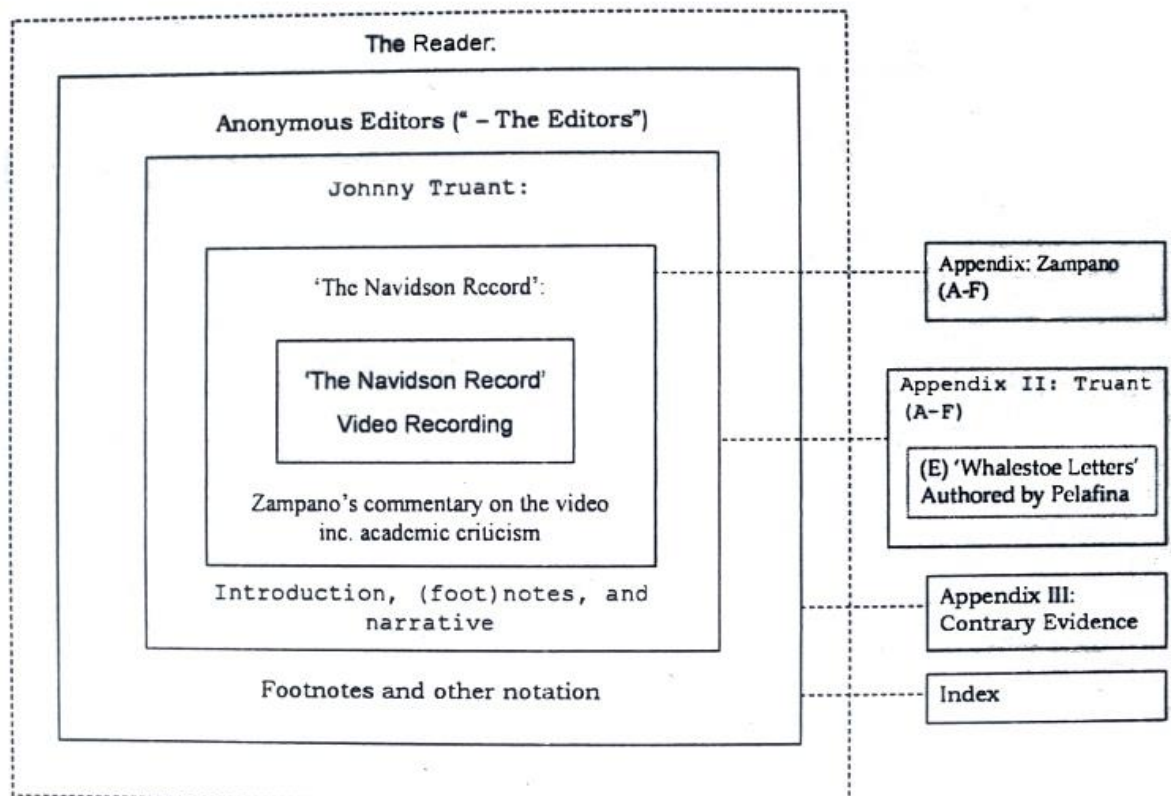


Figure 1.

The point where the discourse world begins and the text world ends is constantly blurred throughout *House of Leaves* in order to instil doubt in the reader. As an example of how these texts explicitly take advantage of this, we might consider their use of epitext to show how the text literally extends out from the physical book and into other spaces. The irrational instances in the text start to take place outside of the official text and this further distorts the sense of where fiction ends and reality begins. This doubt is essentially an uncertainty between what is most likely ‘real’ and what is most likely ‘fiction’—the distortion of reality with non-reality is clearly irrational.

One consideration that must be accounted for in employing cognitive poetics in this case, is that poststructuralism has been understood as mistrustful of the absolute authoritative tone of scientific discourses—as has the Gothic—and has, in some cases, considered it a

grand narrative to be deconstructed, as Lyotard has claimed in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report of Knowledge*. On the other hand, cognitive poetics tends to rely on the findings of science and psychology as essentially true within a system that is open to new data. Gibbons, perhaps in response to this issue, considers the texts she addresses (*House of Leaves*, *VAS: An Opera in Flatland*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and *Woman's World*) as part of a movement and era beyond postmodernism siting the new millennium and the events of 11 September 2001 as the moment of this paradigm shift. The validation that Gibbons offers for this shift relates to vital features of postmodernism that she asserts are missing in these multimodal texts (such as, questionings of historiography and grand narratives, and explorations of urban space), even though she concedes that other common aspects remain (such as, self-consciousness, a questioning of ontological stability, metafictional writing and mixing of genres) (Gibbons 3). In opposition to this, as I have demonstrated in the previous chapters, *House of Leaves* (as well as *The Three Incestuous Sisters* and *The Adventuress*) contains ample examples of these apparently missing features. Ellen Spolsky has considered how cognitive poetics may mirror poststructuralist understandings in the manner it considers meaning vulnerable to displacement and subject to cultural shifts. Her argument focuses on the clear inadequacies of the human psychological experience in relation to communication and the gap between the signifier and the signified (Spolsky 56). In considering irrationality in *House of Leaves* the way in which cognitive poetics can be applied to understanding how the text can affect the psychology of the reader seems particularly apt.

The epistolary technique, can be considered alongside cognitive poetics' Text World Theory. Epistolary insertions are well established within the Gothic tradition and also partake in the model illustrated in Figure 1. Letters and diary entries are the original epistolary form (epistolary from the Greek *epistolē*, meaning letter), of which *House of Leaves* exhibits several examples. The most obvious of these are Palafina's letters, which appear in Appendix

II E. The purpose of these—as described by the mysterious Editors—is to interpret Truant’s past in order to understand his “asides that may seem impenetrable” (Danielewski 72). Notable examples of Gothic epistolary novels include Stoker’s *Dracula*, Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Stephen King’s *Carrie*. The purpose of conveying these texts through letters, diary entries and magazine or newspaper clippings is typically to create an effect of truth for the reader through an appeal to nonfictional devices and eyewitness accounts. *House of Leaves* takes advantage of many epistolary techniques: the base found object of Zampano’s academic tome and Truant’s footnote additions are in the epistolary form themselves, but within these there are many other inclusions, such as: transcripts, interviews, letters, diary entries and photographic evidence. *House of Leaves* does not simply offer these entries as straightforward evidential support, as can be observed in many other examples of this technique. Rather, he submits and then, subtly (or not so subtly), withdraws them so as to disconcert the reader.

The epistolary novel has been viewed historically as a form occupied by women’s voices and in *House of Leaves* it can be observed that the longest body of letters in the text is written by a woman who gets minimal answers from her male correspondent (Truant). Further, the letters are censored by the masculine Director. The Whalestoe Letters do provide insight into Truant’s past, but through a narrator who is incredibly unreliable. She has been institutionalised and her letters drift in and out of coherence with her state of mind and level of medication. The reader is never able to trust what is said unless it is confirmed by Truant’s text. In a similar vein, there is within Zampano’s text a letter written by Navidson after Karen has left him that has been composed while he was drunk. It is written as a stream of consciousness and as it continues it loses coherence and grammar. “Think I’ve lost my mind? Maybe, maybe, maybe just really drunk. Pretty crazy you have to admit. I just made God a street address. Forget that last part. just forget it” (Danielewski 390). Another epistolary

insertion that describes a descent into madness is “Tom’s Story”, which is the transcript of Tom’s video journal within the house. Again, there is a reference to psychoactive drugs when Tom smokes a joint and his language disintegrates into a combination of nursery rhymes, fairy tales and dirty jokes: “The seven dwarves went to the Vatican and when the pope answered the door, Dopey stepped forward: ‘Your Excellency,’ he said. ‘I wonder if you could tell me if there are any dwarf nuns in Rome?’” (Danielewski 259). There is pattern of mental decay repeated throughout the narrative of *House of Leaves* by almost every character and the epistolary entries allow the reader to get very close to the characters’ subjective experience of this decay. Joe Bray claims the epistolary novel engages in “sophisticated ways of representing individual psychology [... exploring] with great subtly complex tensions within the divided minds of their characters” (Bray 2). The universality of the characters’ decline implies the possibility of the reader experiencing similar symptoms—inducing something akin to ‘medical students’ syndrome’, a phenomenon of suggestibility that has been commonly observed whereby medical students develop temporary delusions of experiencing a disease they are studying for the first time (Baars 104). Their feeling of inevitability, a sensation of fate that is evoked for all that interact with *House of Leaves*, recalls the page preceding the title page of *The Navidson Record* on which is written “*Muss es sein?*” (German for “Must it be?”). This is a reference to Beethoven’s String Quartet No. 16, where under the introductory slow cords Beethoven is said to have written “*Muss es sein?*” (“Must it be?”), a question that finds its response in the faster body of the movement “*Es muss sein!*”. The multiplication of perspectives creates a doubling effect as described by Peter Garrett “different versions entail subject positions though the troubling relation between its doubled narratives. As they tell the ‘same’ story twice, their perspectives seem to be at first complimentary and eventually incommensurable” (Garrett 67). Having multiple narrators is an experience of uncanny doubling.

In a larger sense, these entries participate in a series of shifts between the layers of fiction that exist in *House of Leaves*. These shifts blur the boundaries between what is most likely fiction (even within the fiction), such as: the documentary film *The Navidson Record*, and what is most likely true (in the fiction), such as: Truant's narrative; and where the real world begins to encroach such as references to and quotes from actual existing texts as Figure 1. shows. So, in one sense the reader is being pulled in close for an eyewitness account and an exclusive experience of subjectivity, while simultaneously being made aware that what is being read is considered fiction even by the other (less) fictional characters. As Truant writes in his introduction "Zampano's entire project is about a film which doesn't even exist. You can look, I have, but no matter how long you search you will never find *The Navidson Record* in theatres or video stores" (Danielewski xx). So, in the case of Navidson and Tom, the reader is inclined to distrust their words because they are unreliable characters in unreliable circumstances and also because they may just be figments of Zampano's imagination. In spite of this, the reader is given large amounts of information about them and is encouraged to seek engagement with their experience. Because of this, there is a sensation of dissonance created for the reader—a discomfort caused by the uncanny shifting between layers of fictionality.

Zampano's Letter to the Editor in Appendix B. produces quite a different effect to those written by the other characters. Written many years before *House of Leaves* is set, the contents of this letter have little to no bearing on the narrative as opposed to the previous letters all of which are involved in furthering the plotline. Within it, Zampano accuses a seller of collectables of falsely claiming in the newspaper to sell a rare World War II Ithaca Model 37 Trench gun and below this *The Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* responds with an apology. The main reason for this inclusion would seem to be proof of Zampano's existence—it is just the kind of chance media interaction someone might find if they were to research the average person. This letter can be seen as part of a body of proof that is presented in *House of Leaves*,



which Grauland has described as “always playing on the need of the reader to believe in the authority of the text by referring to common authoritarian standards (such as the legal practice of presenting a long line of ‘evidence’), yet repeatedly shattering this authority by deviating from the chosen standard in some form or another” (Grauland 381). Much of this ‘proof’ appears within Zampano’s academic text *The Navidson Record* and is, in consequence, subject to those shifts through the semipermeable membranes between the fictional layers.

“A Partial Transcript of What Some Have Thought” by Karen Green demonstrates this shift. It contains interviews with various intellectuals and writers such as Anne Rice, Harold Bloom, Jacques Derrida, Stephen King and Hunter S. Thompson giving their opinions on the film *The Navidson Record*. Yet, in a footnote Truant comments “To date, I haven’t heard back from any of the people quoted in this ‘transcript’ with the exception of Hofstadter who made it very clear he’d never heard of Will Navidson, Karen Green or the house and Paglia who scribbled on a postcard ‘Get lost, jerk.’” (Danielewski 354). Within Zampano’s text this exists as evidence—these influential people saw and made comment on this film—but the reader is simultaneously told it is part of the fiction—making it a parody of these critics and of academic criticism as a whole. *House of Leaves* fosters a resistance to academic systems, because within this pastiche Danielewski demonstrates the amusing limitations of these figures’ ideas. For example:

Derrida: Well that which is inside, which is to say, if I may say, that which infinitely patterns itself without the outside, without the other, though where then is the other? (Danielewski 361)

Paglia: Notice only men go into it. Why? Simple: women don’t have to. They know there’s nothing there and can live with that knowledge, but men must find out for sure. [...] They

must penetrate, invade, conquer, destroy, inhabit, impregnate and if necessary even be consumed by it. It really comes down to what men lack. They lack the hollow, the uterine cavity, any creative life-yielding physiological incavation. The whole things' about womb envy or vagina envy, whatever you prefer. (Danielewski 358)

Hunter S. Thompson: What I'd call a bad trip. I never thought I'd hear myself say this but lady you need to lay off the acid, the mescaline, or whatever else you're snorting, inhaling, ingesting ... check yourself into rehab, something, anything because you're gonna be in a bad way if you don't do something fast. (Danielewski 363)

Derrida is portrayed as deliberately obtuse, Paglia is single minded and reductive, and Thompson is characteristically paranoid but unusually out of his depth in the perceived delirious irrationality of the narrative. Through these interview transcripts the reader is actively discouraged from too straightforward a critical engagement with *House of Leaves* because it addresses some of the critical theories that might be employed to discuss the text and undermines them. It is an intimidation technique and a challenge to would be theorists and critics. Danielewski has in fact said "I have yet to hear an interpretation of *House of Leaves* that I had not anticipated [...] I hope it's intimidating!" (McCaffery and Gregory 107). This transcribed section also interacts with the permeable membranes between the fictional strata in a relatively complex manner: the transcript exists within Zampano's text *The Navidson Record*, which is commented upon by Truant in the footnotes where he highlights the fictional quality of these accounts. Additionally, the copyright page contains this note from the Editors:

This novel is a work of fiction. Any references to real people, events, establishments, organizations or locales are intended only to give the fiction a sense of reality and authenticity. Other names, characters and incidents are either the product of the author's

imagination or are used fictitiously, as are those fictionalized events and incidents which involve real persons and did not occur or are set in the future. – Ed. (Danielewski)

This disclaimer constitutes a repetition of Truant’s observation that the references to the real people are not factual—according to this, they are intended to provide a truth effect. The Editors, though, are including Truant in this—he is now to be seen to be a product of the author’s imagination. Of course the Editors are also part of the fiction even though they have infiltrated the legal paratext of the copyright page; they are the outer layer of the fictional membrane within the physical book. The interplay between the strata is clearly a bid to obscure the point where the reader begins to suspend belief, making certain parts of the story more likely compared to those parts that are openly admitted to be fictional. This leaves the reader susceptible to the suggestion that some of the things in the story may overlap into their own reality.

Another bid for proof that can be found in Zampano’s *The Navidson Record* is its appeal to scientific evidence based on the analysis that Navidson has done on the house. This is recorded in Chapter XVI, which starts with an itemisation of the “incontrovertible facts” about the house and leads into a description of the laboratory where the samples taken from the walls are analysed: “there is a wonderful sense of security. The labs are clean, well-lit, and ordered. Computers seem to print with a purpose. Various instruments promise answers, even guarantees” (Danielewski 370-371). The Gothic has often employed the lexicon of science. This is often from an anti-Enlightenment perspective—intended to demonstrate the terrible results of science with created monsters such as in *Frankenstein*—although science is also used to describe the supernatural and to give credence to the narrative. Kathleen Spencer in her discussion of *Dracula* writes, “To be modern also means that science is the metaphor that rules human interactions with the universe, so the new fantastic adopts the discourse of empiricism even to describe and manipulate supernatural phenomena” (Spencer 200). In

*House of Leaves*, the initial promise of this scientific examination ultimately leads nowhere—demonstrating the inability of the purely rational to explain that which is irrational. “It would seem the language of objectivity can never adequately address the reality of that place on Ash Tree Lane” (Danielewski 379). The experience of reading this chapter is shaped by large passages blocked out by ‘X’s and notices about missing pages. This can be compared to the asemic writing in Luigi Serafini’s *Codex Seraphinianus* which is an illustrated encyclopaedia of an imagined world. In this case, the purpose of the asemic writing is to reproduce the experience of a preliterate child when confronted by written language—they know that meaning exists, but it is beyond grasp. Similarly, removing large passages of this scientific text gestures at providing information while simultaneously leaving the reader with the knowledge that although information exists it is ultimately inaccessible. Just as the scientific enquiry within the narrative is frustrated, the reader is correspondingly hindered.

Finally, the appendices contain a number of photographs provided as evidential support of various aspects of the narrative. Photographs function in nonfiction media as proof of an event or occurrence due to the means through which they are created—as light reflecting off real objects on to photosensitive material (negatives or digital image sensors). This is discussed by Susan Sontag:

Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it. [...] The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture. Whatever the limitations (through amateurism) or pretensions (through artistry) of the individual photographer, a photograph—any photograph—seems to have a more innocent, and therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects (Sontag 531).

The first collection of photographs appears in section C. of Appendix I (which contains documents relating to Zampano) and is a series of four images that seem to be of pages from

the original *The Navidson Record* manuscript (Danielewski 549-552). The pages are torn, damaged and faded in a manner similar to the aged effect applied to the pages and inserts in *S.* and they are intended to provide a sense of history. In Appendix II A. there is a grid of Polaroid photographs: Twenty-three of the thirty images provided here are of houses that share a number of features in that they are all in rural settings, they are all white and many of them have similar dark coloured shutters on the windows (Danielewski 572). The remaining images are landscapes or are under-exposed so that little can be seen. These images, especially when taken next to those where the house is so small and distant that they almost disappear into the landscape, seem haunted by other houses that are just out of view of the lens or that hide behind the black of under-exposure. These pictures have the appearance of someone trying to locate the original Navidson house. Yet, because there are so many possible options, there is a doubling effect where all of the houses become sinister because they are alike and any one of them could be the original haunted house. They are demonstrations of Sontag's *memento mori* in that they show a specific time, signifying the inevitable decay of these other houses and an obsession with a time that has already passed. Finally, in Appendix III—which the Editors label “Contrary evidence”—the final one of these images is captioned “‘Man Looking In/Outward.’ Titled still-frame from ‘Exploration #4.’ The Talmor Zedactur Collection. VHS. 1991” (Danielewski 662). This black and white image depicts the outline of a human figure looking towards a light source at the top left corner; the image is so blurry and indistinct that it relies entirely on the caption to explain and validate it. Titling this ‘contrary evidence’ implies that although the reader is under the impression that the *Navidson Record* film does not exist in the world of Truant or the Editors, they have found some proof that it might exist—another blurring of those text world boundaries.

All of these examples I have highlighted demonstrate the extreme regularity of the

movement between various layers of fictionality within *House of Leaves*. This is clearly an attempt to distort the outermost layer, the semipermeable membrane between the text world and the discourse world, so that it comes to resemble an entirely permeable layer. The effect of this is to implicate the reader within the text and create a parallel with the characters, who are also struggling with the distinction between reality and fiction.

From the idea that these texts are distorting reality, there is a significant claim to be made in how this relates to postmodern media, which is what Danielewski, as well as *S.*, *The Raw Shark Texts*, and *Night Film* are ultimately emulating. *House of Leaves* invokes one of the most resounding fears of postmodernity—that the texts we consume are changing us and changing our reality. While it would be erroneous to suggest the idea that media can be corrupting is in any way a new concept—Halberstam comments that even ultimately moralising works of Gothic were censored as ‘degenerate’ in the 1890s (Halberstam 12)—the lack of censorship and the overload of material in late-capitalist society makes this a prominent concern. While the validity of these anxieties is debateable, whenever a violent incident occurs—especially one involving a young person—the question of whether the media (violent computer games, television, movies or music) is the underlying cause of these violent actions is inevitably asked. Was the offender literally possessed by the media they consumed? Perhaps more realistic is the idea presented by Neil Postman in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985) that the media (especially television) operates like ‘soma’, the pacifying drug depicted in Huxley’s *Brave New World* (Postman 80). The idea, then, that the readers will become infected/influenced/changed by the media they consume—that they will become monsters or zombies when the ghostly flickering of screens and signs possesses them—is exactly the kind of media that Danielewski conjures.

Postman also explains the manner in which television jumps from one idea to the next, only spending approximately forty-five seconds on each segment (Postman 99). He goes on

to posit that the effect of this is a literal form of insanity: “I should go so far as to say that embedded in the surrealistic frame of a television news show is a theory of anticomunication, featuring a type of discourse that abandons logic, reason, sequence and rules of contradiction. In aesthetics, I believe the name given to this theory is Dadaism; in philosophy, nihilism; in psychiatry schizophrenia” (Postman 105). Postman has anticipated the effect of a postmodern media that has only been exacerbated by the Internet. Use of the Internet has been shown to literally rewire our brains; it has affected our memory and ability to retain information (Sparrow, Liu, and Wegner) and it shortens our attention span (Carr 142). In part, this is caused by the multiple platforms within the Internet encouraging users to jump around between short bursts of information—we are constantly interrupted with the newest video, social media update, news item, and email. Most particularly, *House of Leaves* and *S.* mimic this and force the reader to engage in very similar acts within the bounds of the written text by including several streams of information at once that must be jumped between. What is being demonstrated by the mental effects of postmodern media and within these texts is the Jamesonian postmodern schizophrenic—we are losing history because we are losing our memory and we are in a constant ‘now’ because attention spans are shortening. *House of Leaves* reflects the depthlessness of postmodern media and demonstrates its Gothic and irrational results upon its viewers.

## Conclusion

In discussing *House of Leaves* with Niffenegger's *The Three Incestuous Sisters* and *The Adventuress* there are several obvious points of comparison. They both manipulate the paratext in order to relate their narratives, they both mimic the Gothic genre in a very self-conscious manner, and they are both engaged in representations of the irrational through these main themes of postmodernism, Gothic, and manipulated paratext. Despite these similarities, the goal of these texts is remarkably different. Niffenegger's project is based around a discussion of gender and marginalised bodies. Her work is postmodern in that it is self-conscious, representative of a loss of historicity and intertextual—but, only as far as it needs to be to make her point about gender. On the other hand, Danielewski is devoted to creating a completely postmodern Gothic text—it is as though he takes everything he knows about the Gothic, and everything he knows about the postmodern, and attempts to pack as much of that into one space as possible. His goal is to display these movements so particularly all that remains is surfaces and depthlessness. The reason for this, I believe, is that Niffenegger's texts, although published in the mid to late 2000s, were written between the 1980s and the 1990s. Essentially this means they are prior to the proliferation of the Internet and prior to the new millennium. They are visual, but in the way that films are visual rather than in the manner the Internet is visual and interactive. In contrast to this, *House of Leaves*, which was published just that little bit later, is completely engaged in the issues surrounding new media. This difference, I argue, defines the way in which these texts interact with genre, the relationship to their authors and the manner in which they are read.

Throughout my chapters I demonstrate how Niffenegger's texts create a specifically feminine literature. I show how through her use of Gothicism, Niffenegger makes use of parody in order to critique how the typical Gothic narrative depicts gender and also to subvert the expected tropes in order to create a depiction of gender fluidity. For example, this is



demonstrated in the depiction of the Gothic space and how this changed between *The Adventuress* and *The Three Incestuous Sisters*. *The Adventuress* engages with many examples of the Gothic structure—the house, the castle, the prison, the mansion and the convent. All of these are explicitly patriarchal spaces in which the Adventuress is controlled and manipulated by the masculine figures that inhabit these institutions. *The Three Incestuous Sisters* offers a counter narrative of the Gothic space as one that is matriarchal, which I relate to Butlers' theory of gender fluidity.

The differences between *The Three Incestuous Sisters* and *The Adventuress* are related to these texts' relationship to historical representations. In Niffenegger's texts, history is distorted and compounded with more recent references to create texts that jump between temporal references. The blurring of temporality in *The Adventuress* includes taking historical gender constructs and presenting them to a critical modern audience, while in *The Three Incestuous Sisters* a more fluid understanding of gender is superimposed on top of the historical Gothic setting provided.

Another way the evocation of history can be considered is through the use of ghostly apparitions as reanimated figures who reference some past time. Several of Niffenegger's figures die during the course of the narratives and return as ghosts who exist on the side-lines of the lives of the living. Often they require help from the living to make their way and, as such, ghosts are marginalised from life and stand in as a representation of marginalisation. Monsters are similarly marginalised in *The Adventuress* and *The Three Incestuous Sisters*. The Adventuress I liken to Frankenstein's monster in that she too is also created and is set loose in society. However, the Adventuress subverts the *Frankenstein* mythology with her femininity, making her a figure that is consumable rather than one to be feared. In *The Three Incestuous Sisters*, The Saint is representative of freaks and, as such, is owned and shown by a carnival. The freak show has the effect of normalising the viewers as it marginalise those

that are viewed. But, *The Saint*, once he is released also demonstrates Bakhtin's model of the carnivalesque whereby the body is constantly in a state of renewal and revival through the grotesque. Monsters and ghosts in Niffenegger's texts are marginalised figures but, with help, they generally overcome their marginalised status and become in some manner renewed through the particular abilities that their difference grants them.

Similarly, Niffenegger as an author is figured as a marginalised character with something particular to say about the experience of oppression. In a context where woman's Gothic was frequently released under masculine pseudonyms, where female authors still hide their gender in certain circumstances, and where a large portion of our current media is written, directed, and produced by men, female authorship implies the representation of female experiences. Niffenegger has also included herself in her texts through means other than her name in order to reinforce this relationship to a feminine authority. Most particularly this is demonstrated through the use of hair in the dedication of *The Three Incestuous Sisters*. Her hair represents her DNA and acts as a signifier of her identity as well as something Niffenegger has used to represent her subjectivity in her self-portraits particularly as a woman. While authors within the death-of-the-author paradigm have been marginalised, and female authors in particular have always been marginalised, Niffenegger reasserts herself through her femininity.

Femininity is also the focus of the scopophilic gaze. *The Adventuress* creates an exaggerated form of the scopophilic gaze in order to induce the reader into a critique of this sort of sexualising gaze. In contrast to *The Adventuress*, *The Three Incestuous Sisters* subverts the scopophilic gaze. For example, the sisters also turn the gaze back onto the viewer, which breaks the fourth wall in a visual confrontation by giving them agency within the gaze.

From these points, I consider Niffenegger a writer of *écriture féminine*, as Cixous has

described it. Feminine literature casts off the rational, masculine structures that literature has typically conformed to, creating narrative through irrational bodily expression instead. The effect of *écriture féminine* for Niffenegger is achieved through the visual depiction of feminine bodies engaged in organic changes and fluctuations in order to impart the narrative and through referencing herself as the feminine author of her texts.

Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, I argue, is the instigator of a movement of literature that has appeared since the start of the new millennium. Using *House of Leaves* as my primary example, I note a number of defining themes within these texts and the impact of that these themes create. In particular, I argue, these texts make use of genre pastiche and pastiche of postmodern techniques.

*House of Leaves* creates a pastiche of genre by repeating particular gothic tropes in a particularly verbatim manner. We might note the use of the haunted house including the usual gender divisions, or the monstrous Johnny Truant created through childhood trauma, or even the idea of the found manuscript that imparts a horrifying (and apparently 'true') narrative. These tropes are not only common Gothic tropes, but are the specific tropes that appear most frequently in postmodern Gothic narratives for the manner in which they intersect the interests of postmodern fiction. For example, the found document creates an extreme sense of self-reference and becomes an example of metafiction, the idea of a monster created through trauma upsets the idea of the purity of the local and the safety of the familiar, and the haunted house, similarly, takes the familiar and makes it unsafe and inhospitable disrupting the sentimental image of home life.

The extreme use of intertext creates a hyperreality in which any sense of history or reality is lost. This shows how the postmodern contains a particular form of irrationality which is demonstrated through the creation of a hyperreality. Hyperreality is implicated in the creation of the Jamesonian schizophrenic subject who, lost in a current now, is interested only

in surfaces and effects. Johnny Truant, through his consumption of drugs, alcohol, and women creates a depiction of this subject—particularly when he loses sight of the boundary between fiction and his reality. The reader, in consuming media that changes shape and attempts to confuse with diverging narrative paths, is drawn into a dazed relationship with the text. Danielewski, too, depicts himself as an author who fictionalises his own reality to create a depthlessness of character—he fictionalises over his own subjectivity.

The reason Danielewski is able to create himself as a fictionalised author is through his use of epitext. Epitexts, the paratexts that exist outside of the physical body of the book, are implicitly referred to within the text so that they can be consumed as part of the fiction. Because these texts point outside of the text, often to the Internet, what can be read as in some way related to the narrative becomes more or less limitless. External texts, such as interviews or the author's social media pages, become possible loci for paratext, and Danielewski takes advantage of these additional texts. While Danielewski is aware of the removed author ideal, and references it in interviews, he cannot help but Gothicise his own life in order to create the effect that he writes from Gothic experience. This creates a tension between the removed author theorised by Barthes and an author that, although fictionalised, is still explicitly inserted.

The effect that referencing epitexts has on the reader is to blur the boundary between the text world and the discourse world, as is described within cognitive poetics. This is combined with passages describe how the text has the ability to infect the readers psyche which is illustrated with characters that are infected by part of the text. *House of Leaves* demonstrates this through Johnny Truant's character when he reads *The Navidson Record* and is essentially driven crazy by the narrative. He warns the reader that they too will be infected by the text as they read on. In doing this, Danielewski mimics one of the most pervasive fears of the postmodern media—that the media is literally changing its consumers' minds and

actions. This neatly combines what is fearful within the current society with a Gothic tradition of being sceptical and concerned about the advancement of new technology.

The themes that *House of Leaves* displays that are also recognisable in the other texts I have investigated as part of this new postmillennial movement (*Night Film*, *The Raw Shark Texts*, and *S.*) can be reduced down to the following points: manipulated paratext, genre pastiche (particularly of genres that have a horror or suspense element), pastiche of postmodern techniques, creation of hyperreality, purposeful use of epitext, and an evocation of the idea that that texts have the ability to mentally infect their readers. I argue that these techniques are the result of an extreme postmodern media that is largely facilitated through the Internet. The multicursal forms and intense hyperreality the Internet represents have, in these cases, influenced the creation of the physical novel.

This thesis constitutes a new contribution to its field in two ways. Firstly, it is one of the only critical examinations of Niffenegger's visual novels and so, in that sense, covers new ground. Secondly, it considers *House of Leaves* as part of a definable literary movement that has occurred since the turn of the millennium.

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