

Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory

*Haunted House—An Interview with Mark Danielewski (Take Two<sup>1</sup>)*

Remember those dire, pre-Millennial pronouncements about the alarming marginalization of reading and writing in our increasingly visually-oriented, digitalized Internet era? Or the claims that the ascendancy of visual media—most notably cinema but also television, video, and photography—had eclipsed the novel as our culture’s preeminent means of providing a means of modeling and interpreting contemporary experience? Or the related insistence that that Internet, hypertext, and other new forms of electronic writing capable of combining text, sound, and image have already made old-fashioned print-bound books, with their cumbersome physicality, increasingly unlikely to survive at all within the global village’s electronic system of communication, with its bewildering proliferation of lingo, databases, and 57 channels?

In the following interview, Mark Z. Danielewski dismisses such concerns with an almost audacious sense of casual self-assuredness that might seem arrogant were Danielewski not the author of *House of Leaves*, a stunning, mind-and-genre expanding work which is not only arguably the most impressive debut since Thomas Pynchon’s *V.* nearly forty years ago but which certainly renders any such commentary about irrelevance and obsolescence of the novel instantly irrelevant and obsolete. Like Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (to cite only the most obvious comparisons), Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* is a grandly ambitious, multi-layered work that simply knocks your socks off with its vast scope, erudition, formal inventiveness, and sheer story-telling skills, while also opening up whole new areas of the novel as an art form. It’s also many different kinds of books rolled into one—part horror novel (and a truly terrifying one at that), part psychological study, part send-up of academic criticism, part family saga, part metafictional and metaphysical speculation, part meditation on the nature of fear (and the ways that fear is projected outwards into hatred, anger and sadomasochism impulses, and part reflection upon the ways in

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<sup>1</sup> This interview is a “second take” of an earlier interview we conducted with Mark Danielewski in Hollywood in July 2000.

which the technologies of reproduction have already profoundly transformed our relationship to memory, ourselves, and “reality” itself. *House of Leaves* is also a book deeply concerned with exploring the whole issue of what a novel is (or might be)— and with demonstrating that novelists have as yet barely scratched the surface of story-telling options that have always been available to writers.

Unfolding as a maze of competing texts, idiosyncratic voices, commentaries and footnotes, typographical designs, poems, collages, letters, drawings, photographs, and other documents, *House of Leaves* is a work whose many formal innovations are perfectly suited for our own information-dense age. Like any groundbreaking art, it makes new demands on its audiences that may seem initially daunting. Here instead of requiring readers to follow their familiar, linear, progression through a novel—left-to-right, top-to-bottom, first page to last—Danielewski offers them multiple pathways into a new kind of textual space whose successful navigation requires multi-processing (think of a multi-storied house, with many stairways and elevators offering different entryways and exit points, with each room connected to other rooms by various doorways—and with a secret passageway leading down a long winding staircase into an impossible large, utterly black cellar). While certain readers are surely not going to be up to the challenges involved in moving through this literary labyrinth, it also seems likely that today’s readers—which is to say, people who have grown used to parallel processing huge amounts of information from magazines, television, data bases, cell phones, radios, CD players, not to mention word processors aren’t going to have any greater difficulties reading this novel than they encounter every day routinely logging onto the Internet.

At the center of this book’s Chinese-box-like narrative is a Blair-Witch-like horror story every bit as creepy and psychologically resonant as anything by Poe, King, Lovecraft, or (perhaps a more relevant comparison) Kubrick. Will Navidson (a photojournalist of some renown who once won a Pulitzer Prize for a photograph he took of a young girl dying of starving in Sudan), his wife Karen Green, and their two children, move into an old house in Virginia. Struggling to mend his dissolving relationship with Karen, Navidson decides to create a film that will document their reconciliation by recording the family settling into

their new home, making a new beginning for their lives, putting down new roots. But before long Navidson's cameras begin to record some minor but unsettling events: Navidson notes some discrepancies between the house's inside measurements and the outside. When repeated efforts to resolve the contradiction measurements fail, Navidson bring in help, first his cheerful, dope-smoking twin brother and mirror opposite, Tom, and longtime friend, Bill Reston, a gruff, black engineer and paraplegic. Somewhat later, when a dark, door less hallway appears out of nowhere, he contacts two professional spelunkers. Loading themselves with provisions, camera, video cameras flashlights and a high-caliber rifle, the men begin exploring the dark, ever-shifting labyrinth beneath the house; as they make their descent, they begin to hear the roar of some kind of monstrous Minotaur. Like Ahab's quest, like Dante's descent, like Jonah's entry into the whale, their fabulous journey into the unknown becomes a confrontation with their own personal demons, fears, and obsessions, a point literalized here by the tendency of the enormous subterranean corridor to expand and contract in response to the characters' inner emotional states.

But, wait, there's more. Navidson's documentary film, "The Navidson Record," doesn't actually exist, even within the world of the novel; rather it's being invented, described, and commented upon (and this is surely the most inventive use of the language of cinema to be found anywhere) in a manuscript of the same title by an old blind man—an eccentric genius named Zampanò, who may be quite mad and may have once been a character in a Fellini film. When Zampanò dies mysteriously (his cats have all disappeared, there are enormous claw marks of unidentifiable origin on his floor), a twenty-five year old tattoo artist, orphan, and former poet named Johnny Truant discovers the old man's jumbled, incomplete manuscript in a trunk. Truant spends most of his nights cruising LA's decadent, sleazed-out club scene in search of alcohol, drugs, and one-night stands. By day, however, Truant begins painstakingly assembling "The Navidson Record" and before long he finds himself being drawn more and more deeply into Zampanò's imaginary maze. Soon he starts to have nightmares and horrifying flashbacks of his own traumatic childhood and begins to add rambling, often pages-long footnotes to Zampanò's already extensively footnoted book that

depicts his own spiral downward—and his own eventual confrontation with his own personal demons as well.

In developing this monstrous novel, Danielewski draws upon an astonishing array of sources, including a host of non-literary forms such as architecture, painting and other visual arts (Ken Burn's documentaries, video games, Escher's "House of Stairs" and other depictions of impossible spaces, Susan Sontag's *On Photography*, digitally altered news photographs, even the Zapruder film all figure prominently), history, psychology, and philosophy (Marx, Freud, Derrida's *Glas*, Heidegger, Bachelard, numerous theorists associated with Danielewski's alma mater, Yale). The range of literary allusions and borrowings is equally impressive—Poe, Melville, e e cummings, Pynchon, Nabokov, Borges, O'Neill, Joyce, the King James Bible and Shakespeare (the two most important sources), and dozens of other authors and works make important contributions. But perhaps the most significant influence evident here is that of film and the enormous body of film theory that has appeared as the cinema gradually became recognized as a unique art form. It is hardly surprising that the cinematic medium had such a major role in shaping his literary sensibility is hardly surprising; indeed, as Danielewski recounts in a series of fascinating anecdotes about the ways aspects of his family life filtered into his novel, given the prominent role that films and filmmaking have played throughout his life it would be almost impossible for the cinema NOT to figure prominently in his work. Danielewski's father was originally a Pole who survived the Nazi camps during WWII, then fled to England, and eventually arrived in America, where within just a few years he managed to reinvent himself as a filmmaker who eventually directed everything from avant-garde art works, commercial features, and documentaries; he also worked in television doing television commercials, soap operas, and major dramatic productions in for mainstream American television for the Hallmark Hall of Fame series. One direct result of his father's film career was that Mark and his younger sister Ann (who has released two stunning albums under the stage name "Poe") were exposed to films and encouraged to talk about films almost daily. The impact of this near total-immersion in the cinema is evident *House of Leaves* in fairly obvious ways—for

instance, in Danielewski's appropriations of "content" of various cinematic materials from a disparate array of works (examples include dozens of forgettable B-horror films, Welles' *Citizen Kane*, Kubrick's *The Shining* and Ridley Scott's *Alien*, classics of the French New Wave and Italian neo-realist era, and Fellini's *La Strada* and *8 1/2*). Of even greater significance are the ways that Danielewski employs a whole host of the cinema's formal features for his own literary purposes. The most obvious example of this influence is Danielewski's typographical experiments, which include some of the most unusual and innovative treatments of visual design ever seen in a commercially published work of fiction. Less obvious are ways are Danielewski's borrowings from film theory and from the grammar and syntax of the cinema—especially his reliance on principles of montage, and the ways that editing is used by directors to control the pacing of scenes and manipulate the viewers' perceptions, point of view and other aspects of the audience's reactions to visual sequences.

But as is always the case with any book as truly original as *House of Leaves*, even a truly exhaustive citation of possible influences ultimately seems beside the point. Much more relevant, for example, is Danielewski's prose—or more precisely, the rich array of idiosyncratic voices and idioms that Danielewski enters into, reconstructs, and projects with such startling ease and joyfulness. On this basic sentence-by-sentence level, Danielewski is often astonishing. Consider the following single sentence, one in which Johnny Truant is describing a sexual encounter:

Our lips just trespassed on these inner labyrinth hidden deep within our ears, filled them with the private music of wicked words, hers in many languages, mine in the off color of my own tongue, until as our tones shifted and our consonants spun and squealed, rattled faster, hesitated, raced harder, syllables soon melting with groans or moans finding purchase in new words, or old words, or made-up words, until we gathered up our heat and refused to release it, enjoying too much the dark language we had suddenly stumbled upon, carved to, not a communication really but a channeling of our rumored desires, hers for all I know gone to Black Forests and wolves, mine banging back to a familiar form, that great reverent mystery I still could only hear the shape of which in spite of our separate lusts and individual cries still continued to drive us deeper into strange tones, our mutual desire to keep gripping the burn fueled by sound, hers screeching, mine I didn't hear mine only hers, probably counter-pointing mine, a high-pitched cry, then a whisper dropping unexpectedly to practically a bark, a grunt,

whatever, no sense anymore, and suddenly no more curves either, just the straight away, some line crossed, where every fractured sound already spoken finally compacts into one long agonizing word, easily exceeding a hundred letters, even thunder, anticipating the inevitable letting go, when the heat is ultimately too much to bear, threatening to burn, scar, tear it all apart, yet tempting enough to hold onto for even one second more, to extend it all, if we can, as if by getting that much closer to the heat, that much more enveloped, would prove. . .—which we did clutch, hold, postpone, did in fact prove too much after all, seconds too much, and impossible to refuse so blowing all of everything apart, shivers and shakes and deep in her throat a thousand letters crashing in a long unpopulated fall, resonating deep within my cochlea and down the cochlear nerve, a last fit of fury describing in lasting detail the shape of things already come. (*HOL*, 89)

*House of Leaves* seems likely to have a major impact on the current generation of American authors; among its other accomplishments, it offers a convincing model for those writers struggling to find a means to use the novel to produce a convincing sense of our age's exponential increase in sensory input—this blizzard of white noise, data, random codes, and competing narratives which has made it difficult enough to locate anything (including yourself), much less create art about it. At any rate, we would like to conclude this introduction by saying to readers who by now may well have feel that the claims we've made for *House of Leaves* are hyperbolic: Read this novel with skepticism about these claims, read it for the insights into the alienating effects of art and narcissism, into the nature of the unknown or unrepresentable, or for the poignancy and brutality of its depiction of the deforming power that parents have over their children, read it to see where the novel has been and where it is heading, read it to scare yourself silly. But read it.

**Larry McCaffery:** *House of Leaves* gives every indication of having had a complex gestation period.

Could you talk a bit about its origins and evolution?

**Mark Danielewski:** In 1990 I was living in New York City doing odd jobs and making very little money when I learned my father was in the hospital in Los Angeles. At the time, my father and I hadn't really seen or spoken to one another for a long time, other than a few sporadic phone calls here and there; it would only be years later that I recognized the severity of our estrangement, with its dull, persistent throb of fear and memories. But there was no question I had to go see him once I heard he was dying of prostate cancer,

which had begun affecting his kidneys enough so that by the time he was admitted to the hospital he was on the verge of kidney failure. Without the means to buy an airplane ticket, I went down to the Greyhound Bus Station and got myself a seat heading west towards Los Angeles. By the time I climbed aboard I was so wound up that I couldn't sleep a wink, so I began writing a piece in which I tried to articulate what my father's mortality meant to me. It was a long ride—three days, two nights; four days, three nights; I can't remember; day for night, night for day—I just kept scribbling, steadily, furiously, writing on the move, at various bus stops, jotting things down at night with a little flashlight because the light over my seat was broken. And by the time I stepped off the bus, I had this bit of writing called "Redwood." That was at least one beginning of *House of Leaves*.

**Sinda Gregory:** You've referred to "Redwood" as a "piece" and a "bit of writing"—would you describe it as a short story, a meditation, or what?

**MZD:** It was a bit like a novella in some ways and more like a screenplay in others, but it's hard for me to fit it into a category,<sup>2</sup> I wasn't concerned with a specific narrative structure or a set of grammatical rules. Basically, it was just an outpouring—a means of articulating this torrent of conflicting emotions I was feeling about my father. My sister met me when I finally reached Los Angeles, and we went home and looked after my father until his cancer went into remission. At that point I presented him with my story—as a gift. His response was unbelievable, full of rage—outraged, I think, by the audacity that I had written something so passionate and so focused on him. And so he applied all his years of intellectual edge and shredded me, going on to describe how useless art was, demanding *why I didn't just go get a job at the post office!* Well, I probably should have expected his reaction, but I was just devastated. My first response

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<sup>2</sup> When later asked to clarify the nature of the specific content of "Redwood," Danielewski declined to elaborate. He does, however, provide clues in *House of Leaves* about the nature of "Redwood" and why his father responded so angrily when it was read to him. One of the textual "bits" which Zampanò never incorporated into *The Navidson Record*, for example, appears to be a crucial clue in this regard:

Redwood. I saw him once a long time ago when I was young. I ran away and luckily, or no luck at all, he did not follow me. But now I cannot run and anyway this time I am certain he would follow.

("Bits," Appendix B, *HOL* 547)

afterwards was to attempt to eliminate myself from this equation. I was an affront to my father's will and my father's place in the universe, and so rather than challenge that will and that place, I would sacrifice myself. And I did exactly that; 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. Ripping this thing apart in this Dionysian manner was a violent act but certainly not one inspired by joy and wine.

A few days later my sister and I got together for dinner and began going over all that had happened, attempting to reassemble the emotional fragments, trying to put these recent events into some kind of perspective, including the toll the illness was having on my father and how that had influenced his response to what I had written. But no matter how much we thrashed this stuff out, the numbness didn't really dissipate. 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. This rescue of what I had impulsively destroyed allowed me to see that I could keep writing. It was like a Greek goddess coming down to breathe fire again into my lungs, saying in an awful whisper “Go now, go get Hector.” A life changing moment. I doubt I would have continued to write had she not rescued me that night.

**LM:** You said *House of Leaves* originated with “Redwood,” but in what sense? Did you later incorporate parts of it somehow into the novel, or are the connections more abstract?

**MZD:** What became part of *House of Leaves* and what did not is a complicated issue. 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. It was more a matter of “Redwood” having a certain spectral presence as I began my formal pursuit of the novel. This came about due to another incident that occurred immediately following my father's death, about two-and-a-half years after I'd first read “Redwood” to him. During that time I'd been

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Although this is pure speculation on our part, it seems likely that this passage, with its dark association of Redwood with a

going to film school at USC, and was actually beginning to put down roots here when my father's prostate cancer returned with a vengeance, metastasizing throughout his body, finally destroying him in January 1993. Following the funeral my sister and I opened my father's will and discovered he'd left instructions for his ashes be scattered among the . . . redwoods.

**SG:** That really *is* spooky!—like something out of a horror film. Were you ever able to figure out if he had made this redwood request in his will before or after you had read him your story?

**MZD:** We never did. Dad was certainly wily enough that I wouldn't put it past him to have recognized his first take had not been OK, and then to use the request in his will to have his ashes scattered in the redwoods as a way of having his voice speak to us, to me, from beyond the grave, so to speak, to let us know he had reconsidered. I'll complicate this even further by saying that it is only having done what I've done and published what I've written that makes it now possible for me to come to this interpretation that my father had accepted the story that he couldn't accept when I first read it to him. But at the time, it just seemed like one of those strange coincidences. Sometimes I think the best plan is to plan on a little coincidence.

Not long after my sister and I returned from the redwoods, I had an image of a house that was a quarter of an inch bigger on the inside than on the outside. At first I couldn't tell if this image contained a story, or was just a footnote to a story, or a poem, or maybe something else entirely, but the image persisted, keeping me company as I continued writing, until finally after what had been years of pushing ahead blindly with no clear direction (all this, bear in mind, having started in the late 80's at an inn in Vermont: character sketches, scenes, theoretical essays on film, odd monographs on the unseen), one night, completely out of the blue it seemed, I had one of those flashes of recognition that every struggling artist dreams about, and I suddenly found myself saying "Oh my god!—all the characters I've been working on *live in this house!* And all the theoretical concepts that I have been wrestling with *are represented by this house!*" My unconscious had showed me how all the threads of meaning I had been considering—all these riffs I had about memory,

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nightmarish avenging father figure, is probably a fragment drawn from Danielewski's original "Redwood" text.

death, art and life, youth and old age, the nature of fear, and so on; as well as all the storylines I had been so entangled in—could be compressed into one icon.

**LM:** How much of the specifics of these tangled storylines eventually made their way into *House of Leaves*? For instance, at what point were you already working with the narrative materials that would later go into *The Navidson Record* or Johnny Truant's story?

**MZD:** As I was saying at the outset all I had was a wild array of ideas and impulses—characters, dialogue, a bunch of essays concerning how cinematic grammar might be applied to text. Intuition instructed me that these were all part of a larger whole, but I had no idea how they might be related on a narrative level. For instance, I knew I wanted to explore how text could be used cinematically long before the Navidsons entered the picture. Likewise, it was only after I did a great deal of writing that the Johnny Truant character finally cohered.

A kind of footnote here concerning some of the methods I used to make these different parts finally come together under the roof of one novel. *House of Leaves* has been praised as a wonderful “experimental novel,” but really it would be unlawful for me to accept such a description. Anyone with a real grasp of the history of narrative can see that *House of Leaves* is really just enjoying the fruits of a long line of earlier literary experimentation. The so-called “originality” claimed by my commentators must be limited to my decision to use the wonderful techniques developed by Mallarme, Sterne, B.S. Johnson, Cummings, Hollander, etc., etc., and of course Hitchcock, Welles, Truffaut and Kubrick, and so on.

Consider *Citizen Kane*. What Welles accomplished there certainly had an enormous impact in suggesting ways cinema might develop into great art. But the wonderful fluidity of motion in *Kane*—the texture of the images, the tight symmetry, and so forth—owes a great deal to earlier German expressionists like Fritz Lang. Orson Welles simply came along and said, “I really like what Lang and others have been doing, so let's use it—but let's also try to *improve it*.” Which is exactly what he did. Similarly, *House of Leaves* is really not so much an experimental novel as it is what comes *after* the experiments. I simply said,

“Okay, I can place text *this* way on the page, so it has *that* effect. And I can use the shape and design of text not just to conjure up some static visual impression, but use it to further enhance the movement of meaning, theme and story.”

**LM:** *House of Leaves* seems incredibly self-conscious about the influences it has absorbed. There’s the sense here of bravura that you find in Pynchon and Nabokov and Coover of a writer who is not only aware of a staggering array of styles and sources of info, but who has fully assimilated them into his own personal vision.

**MZD:** It is probably fortunate that I live in an age in which “self-consciousness” isn’t a bad thing for an author. As a fiction writer, being as self-conscious as I can possibly be would seem to be a very positive thing. By that I mean a writer who’s aware of what she or he’s doing, who knows enough about what’s been done to borrow what’s needed while avoiding merely repeating what’s already been borrowed and done before—and who can somehow display this awareness in a manner that avoids destroying the narrative or seem too much like, “Hey kids, look what I can do!” I don’t mind admitting that I was extremely self-conscious about everything that went into *House of Leaves*. In fact—and I know this will sound like a very bold remark, but I will say it anyway since it remains the truth—I have yet to hear an interpretation of *House of Leaves* that I had not anticipated. I have to yet to be surprised, but I’m hoping.

**SG:** On the other hand, the degree of digestion that seems to be going on in a book such as *House of Leaves* makes it a difficult, even intimidating book to encounter on a critical level.

**MZD:** And I hope it’s intimidating! It would never occur to me to apologize for having written a book that critics might feel at least somewhat intimidated by. You know, I’ve heard quite a few people say they sense a certain amount of antagonism in me towards critics, but quite the opposite is true, really. I *wanted* to write a book that would raise the bar, something that people would feel deserved to be approached with the kind of respectful wariness and willingness which all great art demands. I wanted it to announce, “Look, if you’re going to interpret this in an scholastic way, you’d better be ready for the long haul!” And I do feel confident

that engagement will eventually happen, and I am honestly looking forward to seeing what finally comes out of it. Encouraging a critical engagement with my book—that was at least *one* challenge I set for myself.

**LM:** Did footnotes always play such a prominent role in the formal arrangement of the novel?

**MZD:** Pretty much so, yes. Having the book proceed as a kind of dialogue between different characters was something I determined early on, and in fact it was the theatrical mode that dominated my thinking about how the book would unfold. One reason I was borrowing so heavily from Shakespeare was that I was drawn to the kind of discourse surrounding the same kind of theatrical families I myself had been raised in—the kind of thing you find in Eugene O'Neill, for example. Part of my involvement also had to do with the excitement I felt about my own family scene—I was going to my father's workshop and actor's studio, my mother was an actress, and so I was constantly exposed to a sense of living in a theatrical world where performers played.

I was also very aware that I was creating something akin to a vast literal theater, one the *reader* could use to project his or her own histories and anxieties. There are many different ways to describe what is happening in *House of Leaves*, but I myself have always looked at it as being basically a three-character play. The footnotes just expanded the number of characters who could participate and interact with this main narrative.

**LM:** What you're describing seems to have grown out of some of the theories you were trying to work out concerning film and its relationship to text. Could you talk about your background in film and the various influences that the cinema has had on the novel?

**MZD:** There's a theoretical element here that we can discuss later, but let me approach this first by way of another anecdote. My dad was a filmmaker who made everything from soap operas and documentaries to commercials and avant-garde films. There's little question his passion for the cinema had a decisive impact on my own sensibilities. My father was originally from Poland and a survivor of the war. He was in the Warsaw insurrection and survived a camp. Liberated by the Americans, he first made his way to England

where he was somehow accepted into R.A.D.A. (The Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts) on the basis of an audition where he recited Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy without understanding a word of what he was saying! Weeks later he received a notice in the mail. It was a bill. Tuition due. That was his letter of acceptance. Possibly the only time a notice of money owed ever brought him a moment of joy. Later, as he told it, he saw *Oklahoma* in a theater, and decided right on the spot to head for this new world and reinvent himself in the bosom of a dream.

**SG:** This is sounding like one of those classic American immigrant rags-to-riches stories.

**MZD:** It was actually more of a rags-to-riches-to-rags story. My family moved around a lot during the years my sister and I were growing up because of the films my father was doing. He was constantly pursuing new projects and ideas in new settings; by the time I was twelve we had already lived in Switzerland, Spain, Africa, England, and even India for a little while when I was very, very young. A bit later the money dried up, and he wound up back in New York City directing soap operas. During those years it was not uncommon for my family to sit around the dinner table passionately discussing Borges, Freud, Joyce, Nietzsche. But my father's greatest passion was of course first and foremost film; he was always bringing home 16 mm. prints to show us, projected either on the wall or on these beautiful silver-coated screens he eventually started to collect. The accessibility that people have today to films through videos and laser discs and DVDs makes it difficult to grasp the very special nature of the education I received growing up as a result of having those movies available to me. And, more importantly, the discussions these films inspired. If there was anything my father loved as much as films, it was talking about them, which he frequently did in such an articulate, riveting manner that his talks often seemed to completely supersede the films. So while I was changing the reels, discussions would ensue about what we had just seen, my father asking very pointed questions like, "What kind of political ideas are being presented here?" or "How has the director's use of this lens or those angles or that film stock influenced the way the viewer feels? And how has the visual treatment of the central character affected our responses to this

character? Who is the central voice here? What do we mean by “voice” here, anyway? How, for that matter, can there even be a voice present in a montage of silent images? Answer me!”

Over dinner he might also discuss a film he hadn’t brought home with him—one he’d shown in a classroom or at a screening, which he would describe in great detail in a near state of rapture, providing a running commentary, even outlining the talks held afterwards. Then for the next hour and a half, the Danielewski family would sit around discussing a film not one of us had seen but which my father had so vividly recreated for us in our heads.

My point is that while there’s no doubt that I was immersed in the cinema from an early age, I was also immersed in the language necessary to discuss film. On numerous occasions my sister and I would later see a film which had been spun into our imaginations out of the enthusiasm of my father's words and thoughts, only to discover that we did not like the actual film nearly as much as the conversation we had had about it. Strange, eh?

**SG:** You’ve spoken in other interviews of another anecdote involving your dad that sheds some light on the background of *House of Leaves*—one that involved you and your father walking down a corridor towards a bullring when you were a child living in Spain . . . .

**MZD:** That incident occurred during a period when my family was living in Madrid. My father was at work on a documentary called *Spain: Open Door*. We were only there for two years, ‘69-‘71, ‘70-‘72, somewhere around then. A brief time but very important to both my sister and myself. The title was an echo of a Rossellini film,<sup>3</sup> but its main reference was to the way Spain was supposedly opening its doors to artists during the era of the Franco régime. The documentary itself was full of exotic images—shots of Salvador Dali painting on one of Gaudi's buildings with the entire cityscape of Madrid in the background, an interview with Rubenstein which never made it into the film, shots of Segovia, the classical guitar player, picking ethereal music in some dark, cavernous room, as well as other images of Franco, various matadors,

and lots of other stuff. For the opening credits, a camera was mounted under a jet, and with time-lapse photography, all of Spain from the very north all the way to Gibraltar unfolded in just three minutes.

**LM:** But I understand that this film was never completed because your dad ran into problems with the Spanish authorities.

**MZD:** Right. After my father put all his heart, money and creative energies into that film, the Spanish government confiscated it because they had decided his take on things was unacceptable. So my father lost his film. He did, however, talk about it for years to come; as we grew up, we kept hearing stories and rumors that it still existed in some vault.

**LM:** This sounds like the mysterious-missing-film premise of Zampanò's *The Navidson Record*.

**MZD:** Initially, I wasn't aware I was drawing on this when I first got the idea for *The Navidson Record*; but the more I wrote the more obvious it became what an enormous influence *Open Door* was having on the novel; how symmetrical the story of my father's lost documentary is to *The Navidson Record*.

**LM:** You've referred to this film as being "fantastic" and "incredible," but I gather that's mostly based on your father's descriptions of the film rather than on what you actually saw as a kid.

**MZD:** The truth is I have no idea what was finally included in the film or if it was any good or not because I never saw it! I tried to track it down later on when I visited Spain, but I ran into a lot of bureaucratic difficulties; for one thing it seems pretty likely that after the original film was confiscated, it wound up being re-cut and used for propaganda. Eventually I accepted that my quest was fruitless. The fact that *Spain: Open Door*—this phenomenal documentary which survives in my memory, along with all these vivid images I've just ticked off—exists today at all is purely due to my father's expertise in telling us such loving and highly detailed stories.

One incident I know for a fact was never recorded on celluloid was when my father took me on a daytrip to a bullfighting school outside Madrid. It was run by a family who also owned a ranch for raising

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<sup>3</sup> I.e., Roberto Rossellini's *Rome Open City* (1945), starring Aldo Fabrizi and Anna Magnani, which many people regard to be his

bulls, and after we arrived, my father showed me the area where the young matadors trained. To get there we had to go down into the concrete underbelly where the bulls were normally kept. On this particular afternoon there were no bulls around, but there was a smell in the air that made it *feel* like a bull might appear at any moment; and my father proceeded to show me how the bulls were released to run down this long dark tunnel we were standing in, and which my father and I began walking down, hand in hand, until it eventually led us out into the arena. If we went there now, we'd probably discover the tunnel was only ten or fifteen feet long, but the way my memory conjures the place, it was at least a hundred yards long and seemed to take forever to pass through. I assure you the whole thing was very, very spooky.

**SG:** Do you recall feeling your father's presence there by your side as you were walking down that dark corridor? Was he trying to comfort you?

**MZD:** I seem to recall him trying to let me know we were safe, that nothing bad was going to happen, but that didn't make the circumstances any less terrifying to me. I doubt there was really anything my father could have done at that moment to deflect my fear. In a certain odd way it must have been a very positive moment—father and son striding down this spooky corridor together, the father trying to assure the son that nothing bad is going to happen, the son having to confront this tremendous fear of facing this black bull with monstrously sharp horns.

I remember how dark and cold the walls were, and also how there was a light at the end of this tunnel. I was excited about reaching that light, because it seemed to promise safety, and so we walked and walked through that cold darkness, until we finally emerged into the sunlight, where I discovered the small arena with a dirt floor. There was a high cement wall and these red barricades, behind which the matadors or picadors or *banderilleros* could hide if they were in trouble with the bull. I immediately felt unsafe. But I was also thrilled. I began looking around and noticed now how the tunnel was nothing but a black maw threatening at any minute to disgorge a charging bull.

Again, I can't really say for sure how accurate any of this is. What I do recall though with almost excruciating vividness is how powerful and frightening the whole scene felt, and how my imaginings of that place possessed and utterly terrified me at the time. It was a moment that gave me a primal, timeless understanding of the nature of terror. Afterwards, my father gave me a little matador costume as a Christmas or birthday present, so for a while there, I became a young matador trainee.

**SG:** The influence of women in the novel goes well beyond the letters from Johnny's mother and her influence in shaping and nurturing his own love of words and books. I was struck, for example, by how many of the footnotes and critical references appearing in *House of Leaves* are attributed to women. Irrespective of how aware you were in being politically correct in this regard, it certainly seems refreshingly enlightened to have so many female voices included here.

**MZD:** I would say their appearance is less a matter of conscious intent on my part than of generational differences about feminist issues—a sea change in attitude among male writers emerging today in comparison to those you might find during the 50s, 60s, and 70s. I'm sure the response of some people who pick up *The Whalstoe Letters* is going to be, "Wow, that's remarkable—but where did *that* come from?" The reality is that such sensibilities have been here all along.

**SG:** Some of this may indeed be generational, but I suspect your own mother and sister have had something to do with this . . .

**MZD:** No question about that. I was fortunate to grow up surrounded and influenced by two very powerful, independent women—my sister and my mother. And as a writer and thinker, I have been influenced not only by female writers and public figures, but by women generally—enough so that it would be more bizarre to think that I would write a novel without a major feminine presence. Certainly having grown up with such powerful male and powerful female voices in my life meant that to *not* include either would be to misrepresent the perspective I have of this world.

**LM:** We get to know Johnny and Zampanò in very different ways; while Johnny is given a first-person narrative role in the novel, almost everything we find out about Zampanò is acquired indirectly—through the anecdotes Johnny supplies about the women who read to Zampanò, the appendix materials, and *The Davidson Record*, which is by far the most important source of all. We'll return to Zampanò later, but I felt that one of the justifications for including this large chunk of his mother's letters in the Appendix is that they provide insights into Johnny's background and personality—so we begin to understand the source of his scars and his fears, what has shaped (and deformed) his relationship with women, created his difficulties with intimacy, and so forth. Just as importantly, Pelafina's letters also help us understand the source of his interest in poetry and literature, his love affair with language generally—his fascination with the sound of words, their meanings and etymologies, and so on. It's undoubtedly his mother who instilled these things in him because she so obviously she's a marvelous wordsmith herself—she's a great poet, in a certain way.

**MZD:** Well, there are many ways to enter *House of Leaves*. Do you want to go by way of Johnny Truant or do you want to go by way of Johnny Truant's mother? Johnny is young and “hip” (at least to a certain degree), which means that most younger readers will find his pathway the easiest, certainly easier than Pelafina Lievre's way. But her voice is equally important, and for some readers her letters will prove the better path.

**LM:** They may be equally valid, but choosing one will necessarily affect the rest of your journey. In my own case, when I came across a footnote on page 72 indicating that readers feeling they can profit from a better understanding of Johnny's past should consult the letters written to him from his institutionalized mother in Appendix II-E, I immediately did so. And once I finished her letters and returned to p. 72, several things had occurred. The first was that it was now much clearer to me that the author of this book had a much wider range of styles and voices than I had suspected up to that point. And second, throughout the rest of the novel, I was very aware that I now had a completely different perspective on Johnny Truant

than I would have had I not turned from page 72 to Appendix E. I was quite literally reading a different book from the one most other readers would be reading.

**MZD:** It's nice to find out that some readers have tried that particular route. But of course, most people won't read it that way. Many wait until the very end to read his mother's letters. Some people never read them. An advantage to publishing her letters separately is that they offer readers a way to recognize alternate approaches to moving through *House of Leaves*. So some readers are going to *The Whalestoe Letters* by thinking, OK, I thought that *House of Leaves* had to unfold through the route I originally took but now I see I can travel through it in an entirely different direction. In other words, with *The Whalestoe Letters* not only are you not reading this material at the end or the middle or even a third of the way through a much larger work, you're reading it at the very beginning. My hope is that at least a few readers will read *The Whalestoe Letters* and then decide to move on to *House of Leaves*. Those who do will be much more likely to feel some sympathy for and be more patient with Johnny because they have a greater understanding of his situation. Whereas I'm sure there are many people out there who have absolutely no sympathy for Johnny. They see him only as an LA club rat who likes to party and they just don't want to hear about his escapades with sex, drugs, and rock and roll. But a good reader starts to realize that this is a stereotype that has to be and in fact is being disassembled. Suddenly a transformation takes place: you realize that this isn't just some kid—this could be *my kid*, this could be *your kid*.

**SG:** Stripping away our preconceptions is just as important in the case of our responses to Johnny's mother as it is for Johnny.

**MZD:** Right. You start out by seeing she's been institutionalized for possibly committing some terrible acts and so you say to yourself, Oh, she's a nut case. But if you keep reading, you realize that there's a lot more to her than just another mad-woman-in-the-attic stereotype. The same thing applies to Zampanò. You read what Johnny tells us about him in the introduction and in his commentaries, and you're probably thinking,

*who is this guy? he must be just some old nut.* But eventually these little hints, bits-and-pieces of his history, start to shine through, forcing you to reevaluate him.

**LM:** The reviews and commentary I've seen so far nearly all have a few nice things to say about the letters from Johnny's mother, but mostly focus on Johnny's narrative and the way it interacts with the characters and events in the documentary film described in *The Navidson Record*. Strangely enough, though, there's been very little discussion about the third person in that 3-character play arrangement you mentioned earlier—this fascinating and mysterious character named Zampanò who is, after all, responsible for creating *The Navidson Record* in the first place. It's as if readers regard Tom and Karen Navidson, along with Reston, Holloway, and all the other characters who appear in the imaginary "Navidson Record" documentary as being "real" in a way that the person projecting all of this isn't. To me, then, one of the key things we need to do in the book is to attempt to get a better sense of who this guy is, what sort of a person this guy is psychologically, what kind of an ARTIST he is, what his background and psychological make-up is, and what experiences he's had that have led this lonely blind old man to write *The Navidson Record*. But how DO we get to know this? We get some insights from the anecdotes Johnny hears, but almost nothing first-hand, other than from the visual materials, letters and other texts in the Appendix. Ultimately, of course, the *main way* we get to know Zampanò is through this book he's written, *The Navidson Record*. By the way, how do you pronounce his name, anyway? *Zamp-ano*?

**SG:** Wouldn't it be pronounced *Zam-pan-o* if he's originally from Europe?

**MZD:** I'd say you're both right—it just depends on who's doing the pronouncing. I mean, I would assume Johnny would pronounce it "*Zampano*," whereas the correct Italian pronunciation is "*Zampano*." Don't be embarrassed about your difficulties with this. When you've grown up with a name like Danielewski, you quickly get acquainted with the concept of multiple pronunciations.

**LM:** But a native Italian would pronounce it . . . ?

**MZD:** *Zam-pahn-o*. Fellini sure as hell would have said *Zam-pahn-o*<sup>4</sup>.

**SG:** How did his character take shape in your imagination?

**MZD:** There's a long and a short answer to this. Here's a strange irony: I would say that in some ways Zampanò is *my* youth. I always had these massive journals chock full of madness and reverie while I was in Paris, or wherever I was living when I was traveling around Europe. *Portrait of a Lunatic as a Young Man*. That's the short answer. Or at least *a* short answer.

**SG:** Some of the basis for Johnny's fascination for Zampanò seems to be his mother's influence. She offers him a mode of thinking that has much more in common with Zampanò than it does with the people he's interacting with in Los Angeles. In other words, both Pelafina and Zampanò provide background that helps us get to know Johnny better.

**MZD:** I'd agree, although referring to their function as supplying "background" for Johnny's narrative is tricky because you could also look at them as each being the background for the other. Whichever one you focus on will make the remaining two seem to recede in importance. In Johnny's case, his history is provided by his mother and in some ways by Zampanò. But at the same time, Johnny's presence in the mother's life definitely helps you understand who she is.

**SG:** Perhaps the closest comparison to the narrative structure you set up here is the one Nabokov uses in *Pale Fire*, which has its own labyrinth of texts and commentators leading their independent existences and yet mirroring each other. Was that novel a major influence on the formal arrangement you devised here?

**MZD:** Considering that I have yet to read *Pale Fire*, I would have to say not enormously, although I was of course aware of what Nabokov had managed to do in the book. The more important structural influences came from the theater, especially Shakespeare, who remains unrivaled in his ability to handle numerous narrative threads and cross-commenting characters. Scholastic framing or footnotes, I don't consider

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<sup>4</sup> Readers who are interested in some of the implications underlying MZD's seemingly casual reference here to Fellini may wish to consult the ZAMPANO entry in the Appendix.

particularly original conceits. Let's not forget e, Nicholson Baker and David Foster Wallace<sup>5</sup> (I'll admit to being influenced by Wallace even though I haven't read any David Foster Wallace, because I believe we are often just as influenced by writers we do not read as we aren't by those we do). So the footnote format in itself is a lot less interesting to me than the issue of the content of those notes—of who's responsible for creating them and what they tell you about that person—because footnotes become another lens through which the reader must look at everything. The problem is that it's a lens many people don't want to look through. It's much easier for some readers to dismiss the whole thing by saying, "Oh, Danielewski is just making fun of scholarly work" and leave it at that rather than trying to work out all the math and keep track of all the voices, to say nothing of all the footnote numbers (which admittedly can get very complicated once you get into it).

**SG:** Speaking of which—could I ask you to tell me where the text for footnote 183 appears? I can't seem to find it and have even begun to wonder if perhaps it might have either have gotten lost in the textual shuffle, or been omitted for other reasons.

**MZD:** Okay, just to make sure everyone's getting this, the question Sinda has just asked is: Where is the text for footnote 183? Indeed, does such a text for footnote 183 even exist? Larry, you go ahead and ask the next question while I go ahead and find it.

**LM:** Maybe we could use this as a way to lead into the question of errors in *HOL*.

**MZD:** There *are* no errors in the book.

**LM:** I only brought that up because typos and other so-called textual "errors" often can be very revealing—I'm reminded of John Shade's remark, "Life everlasting—based on a misprint!"

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<sup>5</sup> MZD is referring to such works as Borges *Ficciones*, Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, Nicholson Baker's *Room Temperature*, and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. There is, however, a much longer lineage of this sort of scholarly apparatus being employed, going at least as far back as Swift's brilliant *Tale of the Tub*.

**MZD:** Eureka, I found it!<sup>6</sup> The missing text for footnote 183 can be found on page 140. It was just a little hard to locate because it's written backwards.

**SG:** Thank you, Mark! That's a big relief.

**LM:** Your novel is filled with the same sorts of “dazzling coincidence which poets love and logicians loathe” referred to by Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*. One of the most unlikely of these involves the same reference to a “five and a half minute hallway” in *The Navidson Record* appearing in a letter from Johnny's mother where she describes the incident she claims caused her to be removed from him. The presence of this and so many other unlikely coincidences seems to function in a manner similar to what we often find in Nabokov—that is, they serve as reminders to readers who have been paying sufficient attention that there must be a narrator controlling everything who is introducing these coincidences for some reason. ...

**MZD:** Why don't we cut to the chase here? 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? As you have obviously realized, this is indeed a very important question—one you've managed to articulate in a very guileful way without directly asking it. 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 readers of the private joys of making such a discovery on their own.

**LM:** Fair enough. Having Nabokov go on record to clarify the mystery of authorship in *Pale Fire* would have made things a lot easier for me, but he would have deprived me of one the richest reading experiences of my life. Let's move on to the issue of the role that horror plays in your novel. The many allusions and references you make to this genre, not to mention the central role which horror plays in *The Navidson Record* and to a lesser extent in Johnny's narrative, all make it clear that you are very familiar indeed with this genre. Were horror stories and films something that you and your sister were drawn to while you were

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<sup>6</sup> The EUREKA! entry in the Appendix clarifies why this footnote was so difficult to track down in the first place.

growing up? It can't be just a coincidence that horror plays such a central part in your novel, or that your sister's stage name is "Poe."

**MZD:** It was no coincidence! My sister and I have been very much involved in the American Gothic scene since our childhood, not just in our imaginations or from reading about it, but in the very literal sense of living it. The house my sister and I grew up in and where we attempted to live (and ultimately couldn't live) was created out of great shadows, constantly cast by and filled with many very painful and dangerous resonances. Of course, plenty of kids grow up in houses with shadows, but most of them never get too freaked out because their parents can just turn on the lights, announce loudly that there's nothing there, and POOOF—no more dark to worry about. But Poe and I realized early on that shadows were everywhere in our house, impossible to light and very, very deep indeed.

**LM:** To sustain this house trope for a moment, may we assume that this Gothic house your family lived in had secret rooms that were normally locked and which you and your sister weren't supposed to go into?

**MZD:** Absolutely—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. I remember when my sister was accepted into Princeton and I got into Yale, his reaction was, "That's very nice, I'm so proud of you—but maybe going off to that place isn't right for you, maybe you should go to the tech school here instead." In many ways he was like the father in *Shine*—one moment warm, generous and funny; petty, vindictive, and hateful the next. He was full of these bizarre sets of contradictions that he never resolved—and that he probably wouldn't have wanted to resolve even if he could because he seemed to thrive on them.

**LM:** Did your father ever talk about his experiences during the war or about what happened to him in the concentration camps?

**MZD:** Rarely. But don't think for a moment he didn't communicate to me and my sister the horrors of that world in other ways, ways which expressed its awfulness far more vividly than if he had sat around telling us war stories. His means of communicating this could be as simple as dropping us off at school in the morning and then making a big point about the fact that we should wait there for him to pick us up. Then he'd add, "Don't worry about anything—I will be here to pick you up. Don't be scared, everything will be all right. I will be here to pick you up. Don't be scared."<sup>7</sup> Well, once he was gone, my sister and I could feel the shadows creeping in. Both of us thinking, "Why is he so worried. Oh God, maybe he's telling us he's *not* going to pick us up--and if he doesn't that means . . . ."

**LM:** Kids have no way to understand what's brought on this sort of behavior by our parents--all we know is that there must be something they are trying to protect us from they won't name. In your Dad's case, that kind of response must have grown out of the chaos he had been thrust into during the war.

**MZD:** I'm sure a lot of my father's behavior was shaped when he saw his entire world annihilated in the blink of an eye. One day he's home and then in the next the Germans march in and everything's over, brutally and deliberately—family, friends, all those things that had given him a sense of comfort and security and love. All gone.

**LM:** And the new world he now had to adjust to--the world of the concentration camps and the war, the violence and brutality—must have seemed utterly nightmarish.

**MZD:** And it was from that world-view that my sister and I both inherited a powerful sense of how terrifying the world can be. And you know what else? It fascinated us.

**LM:** The impact of those images seems related to the crisis of representation associated with postmodernism, the fact that we are increasingly inhabiting what Sontag refers to as "The Image World," the seeming devaluation of the word as images increasingly become people's main source of input about the world. And in *House of Leaves* we find numerous references, asides, debates and discussions about the

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<sup>7</sup> See "DON'T BE SCARED" in the Appendix for Poe's treatment of this motif in her liner notes to *Haunted*.

implications of people increasingly receiving their information about and understanding of the world through visual representations rather than through books. This shift that seems every bit as profound as the Guttenberg revolution that McLuhan talked about in that it is changing our relationship to memory and imagination—and even to reality itself. At any rate, certainly one of the aspects of *House of Leaves* that got me most excited was the sense that I was encountering an author who had obviously been influenced by and was open to visual influences, but whose commitment to words and print-bound books was even more obvious.

**MZD:** I would hope that my love of words—their meanings, their sounds and certainly their visual embodiment—comes through, as well as my sense that all this talk one hears today about the death of the word and the irrelevance of books and print is way, way premature. My reverence for books—for the power and flexibility of phrases unfolding on the page—is the reason why I’m not selling film rights to *HOL*. Reading and interpreting what people say requires certain parts of your brain to create images, fire up colors, paint scenes, negotiate geometry and keep twisting all those things around in order to accommodate some sort of understanding.

**LM:** The move away from typewriters to word processors seems to be having an impact on writing today that some people are comparing to the impact that the printing press, and later the typewriter, began to have on writing practices. For instance, I’ve noticed that more and more writers are breaking up the linear flow of the narrative by using devices like footnotes and endnotes, glossaries, and other formal methods to deflect the reader’s eye from its usual left-to-right, front-of-the-book-to-the-end movement. You’ve already mentioned the endnotes in Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, but a much more elaborate example would be the elaborate glossaries, endnotes, appendices and so forth that you find in many of William Vollmann’s novels. When people wrote books on typewriters, the act of creating a footnote was very laborious, time-consuming work, whereas now, you can almost effortlessly insert footnotes, create glossaries, and—an example that has immediate relevance to your book—even generate *indexes*. Just the fact that it’s now so much easier to

create footnotes or other textual “layers” seems to have encouraged writers to think of what they are doing less in terms of developing linear narratives than in presenting works which are “textual assemblages.” Anyway, do you think this shift away from the pen or the typewriter to the word processors wound up influencing your own composition process at all? In particular, did it perhaps allow you to develop this elaborate formal structure that you devised for *House of Leaves*?

**MZD:** This is one of those moments when I get to say, “*HA!*” (please quote me on that accurately, with “Ha” being capitalized, italicized and followed by an exclamation point). And I say “*HA!*” here because I didn’t write *House of Leaves* on a word processor. In fact, I wrote out the entire thing in pencil! And what’s most ironic, I’m still convinced that it’s a great deal easier to write something out by hand than on a computer. You hear a lot of people talking about how computers make writing so much easier because they offer the writer so many choices, whereas in fact pencil and paper allow you a much greater freedom. I mean, you can do *anything* with a pencil! I even used a pencil to storyboard the labyrinth section in the novel, which was by far the most complicated thing to write from a design standpoint.<sup>8</sup>

**SG:** But wouldn’t you agree that word processors encourage authors to pursue certain formal possibilities that were basically unavailable to earlier writers because there was no practical way to implement them? Irrespective of the book’s merits, it’s hard to imagine a commercial publisher ever agreeing to publish a novel like *HOL* simply because typesetting it would be so expensive.

**MZD:** There’s no doubt computers, new softwares, and other technologies play a big role in getting any book ready for production these days. They also make it easier for a publisher to consider releasing a book like mine which previously would have been considered too complicated and expensive to typeset by hand. Yet despite all the technological advantages currently available, the latter stages of getting *HOL* ready for production involved such a great deal of work Pantheon began to wonder if they were going to be able to publish it the way I wanted. So I wound up having to do the typesetting myself.

But I feel I have sidestepped your question, which I don't want to do because it's a good one. Look, despite my pencil pride, there's no question that technology does have an influence not just on the production end of things but on the writing process as well; and I agree with you that we're starting to see longer articles on the Internet, with more endnotes and links to other materials, simply because there's virtually no limitation on page space out in cyberspace. In my own case, when it came time to get the manuscript of *HOL* ready for production, I could insist on certain things because I knew computers could handle them. So, for instance, Pantheon didn't want to include the index because they said it was too expensive—they said, “Oh, we'll have to ship the book off to this company who will have to put everything on index cards.” So I said, “*What are you talking about!?! Why don't we just do this ourselves on a computer?*” To which they said, “*But we've never done that! We don't know how to do it!*” And that was true. They hadn't done it nor had I and as it turned out, for technical reasons too boring to go into here, completing the index was a lot trickier than I had expected.

**LM:** There's a couple of unusual features to the Index included in *HOL* that might lead readers to think this is a kind of elaborate joke. For instance, when you go through the index of this book, you notice a number of words being indexed, such as “for” and other prepositions that would not normally be indexed. But upon closer examination, these words actually wind up having very specific resonances and significances for the novel--they're obviously not just being included to mock the whole notion of indexing.

**MZD:** I've always been drawn to multiple harmonies, meanings and themes. Generally I try to at least work in triplicate. For example, if people treat the index as a joke, then great, they're at least responding to one aspect. And of course there really *is* something funny about coming across *fuck*, *fucker*, and *fucking* in an index.<sup>9</sup> Another function of the index, however, is to allow readers to trace the different contexts in which the words appear and even the frequency of that appearance. So if you come across the listing for

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<sup>8</sup> The MINOTAUR and EUREKA! entries in the Appendix provide good examples of the sheer spatial complexity of the textual arrangements in this section.

<sup>9</sup> See FUCK in the Appendix.

“for,” you don’t have to look up all the passages where “for” appears to be able to say, Wow, there’s a prevalence of this word and here is a certain stylistic habit statistically represented with page numbers. The index allows you to suddenly start asking questions about books you normally wouldn’t think about in these terms. Wouldn’t it be nice to have an easy way to find out how many *and*’s appear in a Faulkner book or the King James? Or how many *for*’s appear in a Virginia Woolf novel? Do they vary? What do these signs of reoccurrence reveal? Maybe nothing at all, but it brings that question to mind. And to me any feature of a book that invites readers to ask different sorts of questions is valuable.

**LM:** Earlier in the interview you mentioned there were some theoretical issues involved in the impact that cinema has had on your work. What sorts of things did you have in mind?

**MZD:** The idea of how text might be placed on the page was something I’d always been interested in, probably due to all those discussions I’d had with my father about technical elements directors use to control the viewer’s perceptions. During my college days at Yale, I was already experimenting with different effects you can achieve by placing text on the page. By that point I had already studied the typographical experiments of people like Cummings and even John Cage. I’ve always loved the way images insist on a certain sensibility, whether by Godard or Goya, Fellini or Blake. It wasn’t uncommon for me to wander into the library hoping to find any old book that looked different, and when I would find something, I was in heaven. I get the same reaction from looking at the Talmud or some scribbled bit of marginalia on one of Conrad’s old letters. Those bits somehow thrilled me with their sense of textual *life*, of participation, even of collaboration.

But as you’ve recognized, the visual experiments in *HOL* are mostly based on the grammar of film and the enormous foundation of theory established over the last century. There’s a complicated craftsmanship involved in controlling the viewer’s perception. It’s a craft where details count. One of my favorite stories concerns Orson Welles’ unhappiness over the way the shadows looked in *Citizen Kane*. They kept shooting them but the results were always too flat or too gray or too dull. Welles finally found

some velvet curtains and stuffed them into the shadows to give them a deeper, richer texture. Hardly noticeable but there nonetheless—communicating a quality nearly impossible to grasp intellectually but easily appreciated emotionally. That’s why my response to those readers who complain about being confused by the look of certain sections in *HOL* is to gently tell them, “Don’t worry, I’m just stuffing shadows.”

I should say intellectual engagement has never been my primary goal. Important, but not primary. Rather I’ve always wanted to create scenes and scenarios which verge on the edge of specificity without crossing into identification, leaving enough room, so to speak, for the reader to participate and supply her own fears, his own anxieties, their own history and future.

**LM:** Which is also exactly what we see Johnny doing—interacting with Zampanò’s novel, which he uses as a means of opening up doors into his own past and the telling of his own story.

**MZD:** Absolutely. The way that Johnny projects himself into, or onto, Zampanò’s book shows how the text of *The Navidson Record* functions as it is being read and assembled by the readers themselves. Johnny even goes so far as to modify it,<sup>10</sup> and the book permits that—in fact, not only is this permitted, what the book is really saying to the reader is, “Now *you* modify it.” That invitational aspect of the book at least has been very successful. I’ve received a lot of feedback from readers who have responded by telling me about their anxieties and why the book evoked these for them.. Even now, you two clearly have your own anxieties; you haven’t yet told me exactly what they are, but you’ve been describing by way of a mood what makes you uncomfortable, and so the next question is, “*Why* does that make you uncomfortable? What specifically makes that sense of falling uncomfortable to you?” and right there you’re on the threshold of a whole series of stories that the book has allowed you to access but that are at the same time particular to you.

**LM:** A moment ago you mentioned that no one had yet pointed out anything or raised any issues about *House of Leaves* that you hadn’t anticipated beforehand. Could I take a crack at being the first?

**MZD:** Be my guest!

**LM:** It concerns the letter Pelafina writes to Johnny where she's begging Johnny to forgive her,<sup>11</sup> it's a heart-wrenching, powerful letter whose visual design—all those repetitions of the phrase “forgive me” piled on top of one another—perfectly captures her anguish, obsessiveness, and guilt. My question is: did it occur to you while you were writing the text and creating the design for this letter that having it appear this way creates a problem for the reader in terms of its “authenticity”? Because what we see here (and this is true of several of her other letters) can't be a facsimile of the letter she originally wrote—she would have needed a word processor to have written something that looks like this. The words might be hers, but someone else must have intervened and created this document which must be only a visual *representation* or interpretation of what she wrote originally—.

**MZD:** I'm afraid my record remains unchanged, but I applaud you for your insight, both about that page as well as what it suggests about the broader issue of how textuality operates in the book. In the case of that letter from Johnny's mother, of course, *someone* must have intervened here by physically altering or representing in some way her original letter. But remember, this isn't the only instance of this. There was a big debate a while back in a *House of Leaves* chat room about the passage where Johnny mentions in a footnote that he added the word “water” to the text of *The Navidson Record* to make it read “water heater” instead of just “heater.” People were very disturbed when they realized that Johnny has changed the text of *The Navidson Record*—because once you see how Johnny's intervention works in that case, it starts to hit you that maybe such trespasses could be occurring in other parts of the book.

**SG:** No wonder they were disturbed! Suddenly you're faced with the possibility that *nothing* here is “authentic,” and all the texts, including the letters, have been transformed somehow, whether by Johnny or somebody else.

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of a crucial early instance of this sort of editorial modification or intervention, see the WATER HEATER entry of the Appendix.

<sup>11</sup> See FORGIVE ME in the Appendix.

**MZD:** Perhaps. Let us say: *there is no sacred text here*. That notion of authenticity or originality is constantly refuted. The novel doesn't allow the reader to ever say, "Oh, I see: *this* is the authentic, original text, exactly how it looked, what it always had to say." That's the irony of the mother's letters: at first you probably just assume that, OK, this is the real thing, but then the artifice of the way they look starts to undercut everything, so you're not sure. Pretty soon you begin to notice that at every level in the novel, some act of interpretation is going on. The question is, why? Well, there are many reasons, but the most important one is that *everything* we encounter involves an act of interpretation on our part. And this doesn't just apply to what we encounter in books, but to what we respond to in life. Oh, we live comfortably because we create these sacred domains in our head where we believe we have a specific history, a certain set of experiences. We believe that our memories keep us in direct touch with what has happened. But memory never puts us in touch with anything directly; it's always interpretive, reductive; a complicated compression of information. In *House of Leaves* you're always encountering texts where some kind of intrusion's taking place. The reason? No one—repeat: no one—is ever presented with the sacred truth, in books or in life. And so we must be brave and accept how often we make decisions without knowing everything. Of course, this poses a difficult question: can we retain that state of conscious unknowing and still act or, in order to act, must we necessarily pretend to know?

**LM:** Johnny's reinsertion of the discussions of the Minotaur that Zampanò apparently had decided to omit from *The Navidson Record* is an arrangement that allows this material to be introduced AND deconstructed right before the readers' eyes.<sup>12</sup>

**MZD:** Zampanò's deleted Minotaur sections are important, as is Johnny's decision to "rescue" that section. But for readers to gain a deeper understanding of Johnny, what they need to consider is just what that "something" is in particular which Johnny has rescued. Unfortunately, having me at this point supply any answers to that question would move us into the territory of explicating the book, which I cannot do. I am

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<sup>12</sup> See MINOTAUR in the Appendix.

willing though to offer a few small hints here and there about topics like this Minotaur business or the significance of the blue house, and so on, but nothing more.

**LM:** And we said earlier in regard to the issue of point-of-view, that's only as it should be. Too much input on your part would be doing readers a disservice by taking away some of the enjoyment of working through these possibilities on their own.

**MZD:** Exactly. I think it's important to have on record that I do not want to talk about certain areas. It's not that I regard the issues you're raising as intrusive or unimportant—it's your job as interviewers to ask such questions, and in fact, I'm delighted you have recognized how crucial topics like Zampanò's Minotaur are to any sort of deeper understanding of the book. But it's my responsibility as the author to say that I'm ultimately not going to provide any definitive answers.

**LM:** You'll notice that Sinda and I have probably already set a record for the longest running interview that has NOT included a question about what you meant by having every reference to "house" in your book appear in blue. And just to clear the air, you can relax: it's never seemed our job to ask authors to interpret their own works.

**MZD:** For which I thank you. I'd hate to use one of those awful dodges authors usually employ at this point, like "I don't address the matter of meaning in my work. I've spent the last decade writing the book, you can spend the next twenty figuring it out."

**SG:** What is the difference between your own refusal to interpret features of *House of Leaves* and say the classic Joycean refusal?

**MZD:** As I indicated earlier, I'm simply unwilling to compromise the thrill which comes when a reader privately uncovers a meaning not yet circulated. It is an experience both intimate and profound and one I've personally relished my entire life. Furthermore I should add I would consider it criminal to abuse the reader's faith with the promise of a sense of meaning or significance which the author knows does not exist.

**LM:** Can you give me an example of honoring the reader's faith?

**MZD:** A simple illustration can be found in the way the word “snaps” appears on pages 294-296. Now a reader who has faith in what I’m doing will look at that word and say, “Ok, I’m willing to put down a little money that Danielewski didn’t just randomly divide up the word, and in looking over the pages more carefully they’ll probably soon notice the way these 3 pages incorporate both cinematic and thematic ideas. They’ll discover for themselves how the breaking rope is visually represented in the way the word “snaps” itself comes apart—a simple literalization—so here on page 294, you have “sn,” then you have the canted “a” on page 295, and then the “ps” on 296. Not only is the *rope* snapping, the *word itself* is snapping; the passage is not only showing what physically happens but also how words, themes, associations can break into fragments which in turn will allow for a new assessment of that particular combination of letters. Suddenly this word that’s so broken and bent can be considered from above and from below. It can be read forward and it can be read backwards, and sure enough when we read it backwards we discover another word—the word “spans.” In other words, a word that “snaps” and “spans” at the same time; and so as it turns out that the word is a literal, thematic, and semantic representation of all that’s happening at that moment in the novel.

**LM:** Many of the reviewers and commentators have understandably devoted most of their remarks to “The Navidson Record” and the footnotes Johnny Truant supplies to it that produce his own narrative. But there’s also a way that this focus basically distorts what’s occurring in *House of Leaves* because, as is true of hypertexts and other forms of electronic writing, the novel isn’t arranged linearly or hierarchically—that is, what appears in the Appendix isn’t necessarily of lesser significance than what you find in the “main part” of the book, and isn’t even necessarily supposed to be read afterwards. There are several examples of materials appearing in the Appendix whose significance hasn’t as yet been noticed, including Zampanò’s poems and perhaps most notably, “The Pelican Poems.” Not only are several individual poems in both sections quite wonderful, irrespective of their relationship to the rest of the book, but several also anticipate and foreshadow key topics and motifs that Zampanò and Johnny will write about later on. So “The Pelican

Poems” provide yet another entryway into Johnny’s personal background and inner life; and as literary works created by Johnny a decade before he began annotating *The Navidson Record*, they provide crucial evidence concerning Johnny’s *literary* background as well—the sorts of themes, motifs and formal issues he was drawn to earlier in his life, that help us gain a better perspective on his later narrative. Without trying to respond to this barrage of interpretations I’m tossing out here, could you talk about how “The Pelican Poems” came to be written, and about how you see the section being situated in relationship to the rest of the novel?

**MZD:** You’re asking me to enter dangerous territory here because I have a very personal attachment to “The Pelican Poems” which has as much to do with the circumstances under which they were composed as with the way they function in *House of Leaves*. I’m, therefore, very aware that what I’m going to reveal about “The Pelican Poems” could be used by some to reduce their significance and role in the novel. And I certainly don’t wish to say anything that would diminish their importance. That said, I won’t dodge because I think their history is worth telling at least once.

Just as you recognized that “The Pelican Poems” reveal various things about Johnny’s background and interests, so one could also say they reveal something about me and my own development as a writer. When I departed for Europe, I brought very little except my Euro-rail pass, a few clothes, and a copy of the *King James Bible* and the tragedies of Shakespeare. Although there was a great deal to see and enjoy, I had so little money it proved a very difficult and trying time for me. Consequently, I spent a lot of my time riding the trains, reading the Bible and Shakespeare, and writing poetry constantly. Most of these poems were written for myself, almost as exercises, but some were written for people who had given me a piece of bread, a glass of beer, or sometimes even a meal. And so I handed them a Pelican poem and promised them that one day it would end up in a book, because I wanted to memorialize their act of kindness. It pleases me immensely to think that there are people all over Europe who’d once been given a piece of paper with a poem on it which now resides in a novel. Of course, I’m sure most threw that piece of paper away, but I like

to think that at least a handful kept the poems, and that maybe even a few of them will someday read *House of Leaves* and discover inside, there in the back, a promise kept.

**LM:** Could I get you to say something about the page I always point to as being my favorite in the entire book—p. 205.<sup>13</sup> It's a moment that encapsulates what I would describe as an almost casual audaciousness, a bravura display of technical control over materials, and fearless risk-taking that most writers would never even consider. On page 205, we have the conclusion to what may be the most dramatic moment in the novel—it's the scene where Jed seems about to be pulled to safety out of the dark hallway when suddenly his head is ripped open by a bullet fired by Holloway. When I first read this passage, my first reaction was of course surprise and then laughter—the juxtaposition in tone and emotional content between what's being presented in the “main text” and the footnote is so startling that it struck me as being funny. But this passage illustrates other features of this book: its control of different sorts of discourses and lingoes, its precise rendering of technical matters which only makes the awfulness of what it's describing have an even greater emotional impact, the use of montage that operates in a truly cinematic manner. But above all, what struck me was how much *confidence* you must have had to be taking such an enormous risk—interrupting what may be the single most powerful moment in the novel with this footnote. I mean, most writers would never have been able to develop such a scene in the first place, much less be willing to undercut their presentation of it.

Having said all this, let me simply ask if you have any recollection of what sorts of things you were considering as you were composing this passage? Weren't you concerned about ruining the overall mood or flow of what you had so meticulously constructed up to this point? Or is this one of those moments where you assumed readers would be able to do the parallel processing necessary for them to respond to the pathos of the scene AND the absurdity and humor splicing this together with this pedantic editorial “correction” of the passage's grammar and syntax?

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<sup>13</sup> See “TO BEGIN WITH” in the Appendix.

**MZD:** All of the above. I was much like a composer introducing different harmonies and chord structures that demand resolution but are denied resolution until the very last possible moment. One of the rules I made for myself early on was not to underestimate the intelligence of the reader. I would write for the reader who gets it all, who can suspend it all, until the last possible moment before it must necessarily resolve with that final chord. During the ten years that went into making *House of Leaves*, I never flinched from that, and gradually this idealized reader I addressed came to life in my imagination, taking in every single note, noticing every twist of phrase, appreciating all the intrinsic complexities of my narrative, understanding every modulation and harmony, hearing the ways the different parts came together to form a single melody. And with that kind of an audience, the rest was easy.

You know, the past hour or so of this interview it keeps occurring to me that here we are, three people sitting at this table, and one of these is a younger man, and another is an older man, and in between us we have a very beautiful woman, and the three of us have been engaged in a dialogue about this dark house, with its shadows and many hallways.

**LM:** Once again life imitates art.

**MZD:** So it seems—at least sometimes. Strange how that works out, isn't it?