

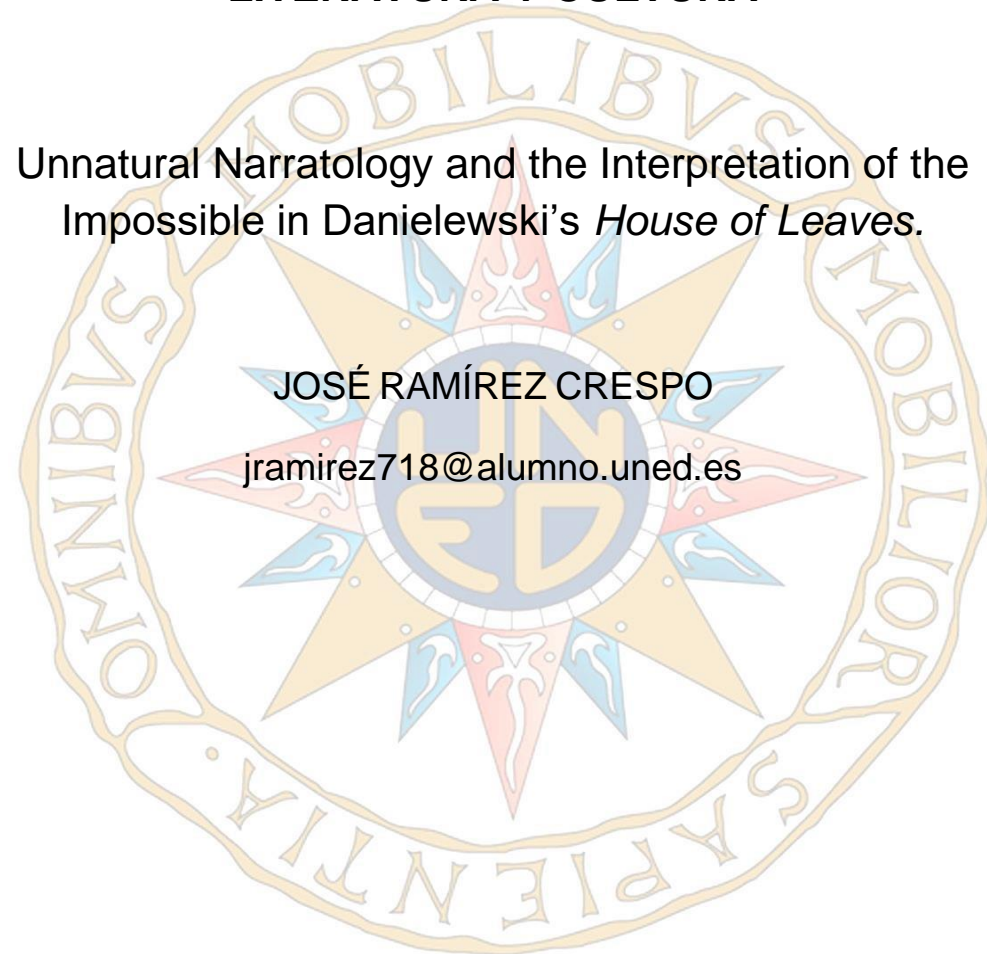


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Unnatural Narratology and the Interpretation of the
Impossible in Danielewski's *House of Leaves*.

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ABSTRACT

Unnatural narratologists defend the pervasiveness of unnatural elements in literature and complain about the mimetic bias that classical narratology shows towards conventional realist texts. This paper will explain why unnatural elements are so significant in the eyes of unnatural theorists and how these theorists approach unnatural phenomena in fiction. Especial attention will be given to some sense-making strategies that readers allegedly use to deal with impossible scenarios in fiction. In this regard, it will be contended that Danielewski's *House of Leaves* is an extreme case of unnatural narrative; and in the process, the above-mentioned reading strategies will be put to test.

Keywords: *unnatural narratology, antimimetic fiction, interpretation, Mark Z. Danielewski, House of Leaves*

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Goals and justification

Unnatural narratologists defend the pervasiveness of unnatural elements in literature and complain about the clear mimetic bias that classical and natural narratology have towards conventional realist texts. One of my goals is to explain why unnatural elements are so significant in the eyes of unnatural theorists. It will be shown that, according to some unnatural theorists, unnatural phenomena not only are at the heart of postmodernism, but also have a crucial role in the development of new literary genres.

It will also become clear that not all unnatural narratologists approach unconventional narratives in the same way. While some of them —like Brian Richardson— go against domesticating the unnatural and try to accept the impossible as it is without trying to make sense of it, other scholars —like Jan Alber— consider that no matter how unconventional a narrative is, readers will still regard it as a meaningful communicative act and will try to make sense of it following a series of reading strategies. This paper will study these different approaches to unnatural literature and its interpretation. *House of Leaves* (2000) has elicited a vast and multidisciplinary corpus of scholarly work. I will deal with some of the most significant attempts to interpretation trying to link them with Alber's sense-making strategies.

The physical house at the center of *House of Leaves* has been taken as a perfect example of antimimetic space by Jan Alber; however, this paper will contend that unnaturalness spreads to other textual components in Danielewski's novel — such as narrators, characters, or narrative levels— turning this text into an extreme case of unnatural fiction.

House of Leaves has also been described as a piece of *ergodic* literature, that is, a text that demands considerable mental effort on the part of the reader. Non-linear typography, multiple narrative levels, fake footnotes that break the rhythm of reading, cross-referenced appendices, hidden codes that reward the reader with extra content... one cannot but wonder why readers read this kind of novels and how they face their challenging strangeness. In this regard, I believe that

unnatural narratology's effort to give an answer to these questions is praiseworthy, to say the least.

1.2. Methodology

In a joint article, Alber, Iversen, Nielsen, and Richardson suggest a two-step methodology to tackle unnatural narratives: firstly, the identification and study of unfamiliar elements in order to determine whether they are antimimetic or not; secondly, assessment of what is to be done with unnatural elements. Therefore, it is each particular reader who decides “what is odd and what is to be done about it” (Alber 299).

This paper will follow a similar approach, looking first for the unnatural elements of *House of Leaves*, and, showing then how some scholars have interpreted them. During this process, these multidisciplinary meaning-making efforts will be linked —when possible— to Alber's reading strategies.

2. UNNATURAL NARRATOLOGY

2.1. Origins

According to Herman and Vervaeck, the origins of unnatural narratology can be traced back to Brian Richardson's writings in the early 2000s and later collected in *Unnatural Voices* (2006). Following the lead of Richardson's work, scholars such as Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Maria Mäkelä started focusing on unconventional fiction and questioning accepted narratological concepts (295).

These authors began to use the term “unnatural” as a reaction to the concept of “natural” narratology developed by Monika Fludernik in *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (1996). Thus, in the above-mentioned joint article “Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models” (2010) —considered by many a manifesto of unnatural narratology—, Alber, Iversen, Nielsen, and Richardson defend the pervasiveness of unnatural elements in literature and complain about the fact that classical and natural narratology “have a clear mimetic bias and take ordinary realist texts or ‘natural’ narratives as being prototypical manifestations of narrative”. In their opinion, narrative texts usually

defy and mock “core assumptions about narrative” (114). Alber and Heinze helpfully spell their goal out for us:

[t]he aim of an unnatural theoretical approach is to approximate and conceptualize Otherness, rather than to stigmatize or reify it; such an approach is interested in various kinds of narrative strangeness and in particular in texts that deviate from the mimetic norms of most narratological models. (qtd. in Ensslin & Fuchs 47)

2.2. Definition and terminological issues

The Living Handbook of Narratology puts forward a widely accepted definition of unnatural narrative by Jan Alber: an unnatural narrative is one that “violates physical laws, logical principles, or standard anthropomorphic limitations of knowledge by representing storytelling scenarios, narrators, characters, temporalities, or spaces that could not exist in the actual world” (Paragraph 1).

Brian Richardson, however, gives a narrower definition. According to him, unnatural narratives:

conspicuously violate [. . .] conventions of standard narrative forms [. . .]. Unnatural narratives furthermore follow *fluid, changing* conventions and create *new* narratological patterns in each work. In a phrase, unnatural narratives produce a *defamiliarization* of the basic elements of narrative. (qtd in Ensslin & Fuchs 47; my emphasis)

Thus, to Richardson, the definitory trait of unnatural narratives is “the degree of unexpectedness that the text produces, whether surprise, shock, or the wry smile that acknowledges that a different, playful kind of representation is at work” (Richardson, *Unnatural Narrative* 5).

It follows that unnatural theorists seem to use different criteria to determine whether a narrative is unnatural or not. Richardson's definition of unnatural narrative is more restrictive than Alber's. Alber applies the term “to physically, logically, and humanly impossible scenarios and events (regardless of whether readers find them estranging or not)” (*Impossible Worlds* 14). Richardson, on the other hand, requires that the impossible scenario or event be necessarily estranging, or in Richardson's own words, “antimimetic”. Richardson considers antimimetic representations those that “violate mimetic expectations and the practices of realism, and defy the conventions of existing, established genres” (3).

In addition to this terminological issue, Herman and Vervaeck point out a further complication, that is, the fact that "[w]hat is considered antimimetic and unconventionalized may vary from reader to reader and from period to period" (296). Monika Fludernik, for instance, restricts the unnatural to fables, romances, "before-the-novel" narratives and to "the discourse of postmodernist anti-illusionism, transgression, and metafiction" (363). Unnatural theorists, on the other hand, regard Fludernik's perspective as very reductive and consider that the unnatural has always been present in literature (Alber et al. 115). Most importantly, as they see it, even conventional narratives contain "odd and unwieldy elements" (Herman and Vervaeck 297). Dorrit Cohn, for instance, points out the "unnatural power" of third-person narrators "to see into their characters' inner lives" (qtd. in Alber et al. 8).

Furthermore, Raphaël Baroni suggests that, when evaluating whether an element is unnatural or not, the "semiotic constraints of the medium" should be acknowledged as well (181-182). In other words, elements that come across as unnatural in a novel may be perfectly natural in a film, or—as Baroni specifically alleges—in a graphic novel:

time travel in comics should not be considered as an impossible experience of time, but rather as a reflection on the way temporality is experienced in graphic narratives, which presupposes a spatial representation of the flow of time. (166)

To avoid confusion, I will focus on literary narratives in this essay. Likewise, I will follow the restrictive definition posed by Richardson. I will restrict the term "unnatural" to antimimetic representations, that is, physically, logically, and humanly impossible scenarios and events which have an estranging effect, and consequently demand a more intense cognitive effort on the part of the reader. I will also adopt, as Alber does, the perspective of "a contemporary and neurotypical reader who has a rationalist-scientific and empirically minded worldview" (38).

2.3. Methodological approaches to unnatural narratives

As was the case with the definition of the term "unnatural", unnatural theorists propose different approaches as to how to deal with unconventional narratives. In this regard, Richardson and Alber exemplify the two opposite perspectives on what readers are to do with this sort of texts.

2.3.1. Richardson's unnaturalizing approach

Richardson contends that we should leave the unfamiliar and unnatural elements as they are, accepting “the polysemy of literary creations” (19). As he states, “[w]e need to recognize the anti-mimetic as such, and resist impulses to deny its protean essence and unexpected effects” (qtd. in Alber 18). Richardson, thus, defends a “resistance to interpretive recuperation” (21). This does not mean that he rejects the use of strategies of interpretation by the reader; he just rejects a reductive and all-encompassing use of those sense-making strategies “in an effort to place the entire work safely within a single totalizing interpretation” (ibid.).

Richardson calls himself a “dual-level-reader” (45), that is, a reader who, on the one hand, is aware of the “conventional framework” of a text and, on the other hand, “enjoys the antimimetic assaults on those conventions”. In other words, Richardson “uses classical narratology and at the same time shows how a text undermines its application” (Herman and Vervaeck 299). In this sense, Richardson allows for retaining Genette’s mimetic accounts, as long as they are “augmented by new categories that can include the many important texts that elude or defy Genette’s model” (Hansen, Per Krogh, et al. 194).

2.3.2. Albers's sense-making approach

In Alber’s opinion, each and every narrative —no matter how unnatural it is— implies “a purposeful and meaningful communicative act” (46). Therefore, it is only logical that readers make every effort to give meaning to what they read. Following this line of thought, Alber proposes nine reading strategies that the reader can (often unconsciously) use to make sense of unnatural elements:

1. The blending of frames. Mark Turner beautifully explains the process of blending: human beings have the distinctive “ability to pluck forbidden mental fruit— that is, to activate two conflicting mental structures . . . [such as tree and person] and to blend them creatively into a new mental structure [such as speaking tree]” (qtd. in Alber 49).

2. Generification. When the frame blending has already happened and the unnatural element has already been conventionalized, the reader can make

sense of the unnatural element “by identifying it as belonging to a particular literary genre” (Alber 50).

3. Subjectification. This strategy consists of explaining an unnatural element as part of the internal state (dreams, imagination, hallucinations...) of a character or narrator (Alber 51). This is the only strategy that actually naturalizes the unnatural insofar as it interprets the impossible as something “entirely natural, namely nothing but an element of somebody’s interiority” (ibid.).

4. Thematic foregrounding. Readers use this strategy when they look at impossible phenomena as thematical elements.

5. Reading allegorically. In this case, the reader interprets unnatural elements “as parts of abstract allegories that say something about ... the human condition, or the world in general” (52).

6. Satirization and parody. Alber argues that narratives may also use unnatural elements to “satirize, mock, or ridicule certain psychological predispositions or states of affairs” (ibid.) commonly through distortion or caricature. Here the unnatural is merged with social critique and/or didacticism.

7. Positing a transcendental realm. This strategy consists of assuming that an unnatural scenario or event is “part of a transcendental setting (such as heaven, purgatory, or hell)” (53).

8. Do it yourself. The reader can deal with logical impossibilities acting as if the impossible storyworld conformed a “construction kit or collage that invites free play with its elements” (53).

9. The Zen way of reading. Interestingly, this strategy shows a clear resemblance to Richardson's refusal of sense-making. In Alber's opinion, this reading strategy

presupposes an attentive and stoic reader who repudiates the earlier explanations and simultaneously accepts both the strangeness of unnatural scenarios and the feelings of discomfort, fear, worry, and panic that they might evoke in her or him. (54)

Alber points out that, during the reading process, the reader does not make use of these strategies in sequence, that is, one after the other; instead they overlap in our mind as potential interpretative options at any given time; the strategies can also be combined in the search for the mix that renders “the most coherent

interpretation of the unnatural element” (55). In any case, what is important to Alber is that “these reading strategies lead to provisional explanations that illustrate that the unnatural is not completely alien to our thinking” (ibid.).

2.4. Postmodernism and generic conventionalization

According to Alber, “[p]ostmodernism is just one specific manifestation of the unnatural” (13). Therefore, whereas Patricia Waugh focuses on the meta-fictional quality of postmodernist narratives, or Linda Hutcheon centers on historiographic metafiction, Alber, on the other hand, foregrounds “the central role of representations of the impossible in postmodernism” (7-8). The postmodernist project, Albers argues, systematically undermines our “natural” worldview:

postmodernist narratives are full of physically, logically, or humanly impossible scenarios and events that relate to the narrator, characters, time, or space. Postmodernist texts deconstruct the traditionally human narrator and the anthropomorphic character as well as our real-world understanding of time and space by confronting us with impossible narrators or storytelling scenarios, antirealist characters, unnatural temporalities, and antimimetic spaces. (8)

Alber also contends that the unnatural is a “hitherto neglected driving force” behind the development of new literary genres (9), because, when unnatural elements are conventionalized, they become building blocks of new genres. It is also important to note that many unnatural elements have already been conventionalized and have no anti-illusionist or metafictional effect on the reader anymore. Alber helpfully lists some examples:

the speaking animals in beast fables and children’s stories; the use of magic in heroic epics, certain romances (such as Breton lais and romances that deal with “the matter of Britain”), Gothic novels, and more recent fantasy literature; the speaking objects that narrate the circulation novels of the eighteenth century and other satirical exaggerations that merge with the unnatural (as in the works by Swift and Twain, for instance); the omnimentality of the omniscient narrator in much realist fiction; the impossible renderings of character interiority (through free indirect discourse, psychonarration, or direct thought) in modernist fiction; and the many represented impossibilities in science fiction. (43)

In Alber’s view, then, the antimimetic stamp of postmodernism is not as innovative and striking as one might expect. Indeed, postmodernist texts feed on conventionalized impossibilities which are linked to traditional genres. In these terms, it can be argued that a major postmodernism’s goal is precisely to recover the estranging and disorienting effects that these unfamiliar elements once had—and have lost in the process of conventionalization.

3. DANIELEWSKI'S *HOUSE OF LEAVES*

3.1. Plot summary

Due to the fact that *House of Leaves* has been described as a Chinese box narrative structure, probably the best way to make a summary of the novel is moving through the main layers of narration one by one from the deepest level upward.

The first layer of narration is presented as a documentary film produced by Will Navidson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist. The documentary focuses on the Navidson family (David, Karen Green and their two children) while they try to settle and start a new life in a house they've just bought somewhere in Virginia. However, when a dark hallway mysteriously appears in the living room, the documentary film turns gears and starts focusing on the exploration of the house. Later the film is released and starts circulating as an avant-garde film: *The Navidson Record*. It is important to note that readers do not have direct access to this layer of narration; they only know about the content of the film through the mediation of Zampanò.

In the second layer of narration, Zampanò, an elderly man who lives alone, devote the last years of his life to the academic study of *The Navidson Record* making all kind of annotations and gathering diverse materials about the film — some of them included in the various appendixes of the novel. Confusingly, he also names his critical project *The Navidson Record*¹.

After Zampanò's death, Johnny Truant, a young tattoo shop assistant from San Francisco, finds Zampanò's writings and decides to edit them into an organized format. He also adds his own commentary as footnotes. Most of the footnotes become personal accounts of his deranged personal life. These footnotes together with the introduction of *House of Leaves* —also written by him— constitute the third narrative layer.

The fourth layer of narration include footnotes added by some mysterious editors —signing as “The Editors”. They comment both Johnny's and Zampanò's texts.

¹ To avoid confusion, I will refer to the film as *The Navidson Record* (film) and to Zampanò's narrative about the film as *The Navidson Record* (text).

These layers of narration do not appear sequentially but overlap each other sharing space on the page. To make the navigation through these narrative layers easier, Danielewski assign different font types to each narrator: Zampanò's text appears in Times New Roman, Johnny Truant's introduction and footnotes in Courier, and The Editors' footnotes in Bookman.

Importantly, the content provided by these four narrative layers is further engrossed with some additional materials in the appendixes: poems, letters, collages, polaroids, interviews, film scripts and so on.

3.2. Impossible narration

When readers think about impossible narrators or storytelling scenarios, the first phenomena to come to their minds are probably weird elements such as talking animals or speaking objects. But there exist other instances of impossible narrators: those who “combine human and superhuman features (the telepathic first-person narrator, the voice in you-narratives, the omniscient narrator, and the reflector-mode narratives of literary modernism)” (Alber 62). As mentioned above, Alber notes that many of these unnatural narrators have already been conventionalized —losing their estranging effect— in beast fables, children's stories, or the circulation novels of the eighteenth century. In the case of *House of Leaves*, unnaturalness affects the narrator's ontological status, as well as his ability as narrator, as I will argue next.

3.2.1. Zampanò

It is in the “Introduction” of the novel that Truant uncovers Zampanò's striking secret, namely, that Zampanò is “blind as a bat” (Danielewski xxi). As Belleto has it, since “Zampanò has been blind since well before *The Navidson Record* (film) appeared, readers are especially alert to the interpretive problem being staged—how could a blind man describe in such detail what he has never seen?” (103). Obviously, such a narrator is clearly an impossible or unnatural narrator: one who is able to report what he cannot see. But there is more, Truant goes on to affirm:

Zampanò'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 theaters or video stores. Furthermore, most of what's said by famous people has been made up. I tried contacting all of them. Those that took the time to respond told me they had never heard of Will Navidson let alone Zampanò. (xix-xx)

If one is to believe this new piece of information by Johnny Truant, the unnatural narrator is all of a sudden naturalized: Zampanò would not be the impossible heterodiegetic narrator of the visual contents of an embedded documentary but the author-narrator of a fictional gothic narrative about a mysterious house and its appalled dwellers. Belleto points out that Danielewski himself could be — unwittingly— endorsing this second line of interpretation when, in the course of an interview, he is asked about “Zampanò’s novel” by an interviewer and “Danielewski does not correct him” (103).

Yet, in a new turn of the screw, The Editors include a section in Appendix III called “Contrary evidence” that provides diverse material which would hint at the existence of the documentary film (in Zampanò’s ontological level). There is, for example, an inside page of a graphic novel called “Rescue: The Navidson Record” allegedly created by Tyler Martin and published in *Magoo-Zine* in October 1993², and a monochrome still-frame taken from a VHS copy of the film.

Perhaps, in order to make sense of Zampanò as narrator —someone who allegedly spends his time commenting on a film he has not even seen—, it may be helpful to know a little bit about Danielewski’s background. As McCaffery and Gregory explain, Danielewski’s father was a Pole who, after surviving the Nazi camps, settled in America. There he worked as a filmmaker and “eventually directed avant-garde art works, commercial features, and documentaries” (102). Danielewski and his younger sister Ann were exposed to films daily; but, more importantly, they were encouraged to talk about them in an analytical way. As the author revealingly explains:

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. [. . .] Over dinner he might also discuss a film he hadn’t brought home with him . . . He would describe it in great detail in a near state of rapture, providing a running commentary. . . 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 re-created for us in our heads. (McCaffery and Gregory)

It is not difficult to see a connection between Danielewski’s father hermeneutic passion and Zampanò’s function as impossible commentator. As Johnny Truant

² A quick research allows to ascertain that, while the magazine is fictional, there exists indeed a factual comic creator called Tyler Martin. This combination of fact and fiction is, as we will see, a common feature in *House of Leaves*.

acknowledges, ultimately, the factual existence of the house is secondary: “See, the irony is it makes no difference that the documentary at the heart of this book is fiction. Zampanò knew from the get-go that what's real or isn't real doesn't matter here. The consequences are the same” (xx). In other words, the effect of the narrative on the reader is the same regardless of the ontological status of its main source. Strangely enough, the readers will discover, as Danielewski and his sister did, that the actual film is not as interesting as the “conversation” about it (McCaffery and Gregory 109). This ontological void at the center of the storyworld prompts Belleto to state that:

...the real world of *House of Leaves* exists only in mediation and remediation. The appropriation of scholarly discourse, both formally and conceptually, allows Danielewski to write a novel about interpretation, his house of leaves is a house of interpretation that does not exist in spite of these competing claims to meaning but because of them. (102)

Consequently, one possible way to make sense of the unstable ontological status of the house is by regarding it as a means of thematic foregrounding of the concept of interpretation, both by the diegetic scholarly voices and by the readers.

Yet, a different reading might look at this issue from the point of view of the strategy that Alber calls “satirization and parody”. The fact that a blind person devotes himself to “in-depth discussion[s] of light, vision, photography, and film” and comments on hundreds of academic writings revolving around a non-existent topic is referred to as Zampanò’s “biggest joke” and “greatest ironic gesture” by Johnny Truant (xx). Polley proposes to apply the term *critifiction* to works like *House of Leaves* that “embrace the conventions of both fiction and criticism”. He rejoices that some factual academic writings about *House of Leaves* have mocked the “paratextual apparatuses that *House of Leaves* is known for” (10). As an example, he mentions Michael Hemmingson, who in an article’s endnote ironically remarks that “[t]he reader will take notice that, emulating *House of Leaves*, I am using footnotes within footnotes, which is often frowned upon in the academic community – that is, for the critic to take on the style of the work under scrutiny” (Polley 10). It follows, then, that it is possible to read Zampanò’s narrative —if not the whole novel— as a satire of literary academicism.

3.2.2. Johnny Truant

If Navidson's documentary film exists (in the world of Truant and Zampanò), readers only get access to it through the suspicious mediation of Zampanò. Yet, Zampanò's commentary is further mediated by Johnny Truant who edit and arrange Zampanò's notes and drafts for publication. In the process, Truant adds his own annotations upon Zampanò's original text. But Truant's mediation goes far beyond that.

McCaffery and Gregory remind us that "[t]he most sacred duty of any editor in readying someone else's manuscript for publication is to produce a published version that faithfully renders the author's original intentions, to the degree that these can be inferred" (131). But this definition of editorial ethics remains troubled by Truant's "unauthorized interventions" upon Zampanò's original manuscript. In fact, Zampanò's text seems to be "less a sacred text to be faithfully reconstructed than a springboard allowing Johnny to explore the darkest regions of his own past" (ibid.).

The first hint at the unreliability of Truant as editor-narrator is his admission that he has written "water heater" where Zampanò had originally written only "heater" in order to force a coincidence between Zampanò's text and Truant's footnote:

Now I'm sure you're wondering something. Is it just coincidence that this cold water predicament of mine also appears in this chapter [in Zampanò's narrative]?
Not at all. Zampanò only wrote "heater." The word "water" back there— I added that.
Now there's an admission, eh?
Hey, not fair, you cry.
Hey, hey, fuck you, I say. (16)

Of course, this admission has the effect of casting doubt on the faithfulness and accuracy of *The Navidson Record* (text) in its entirety, which now results "contaminated by outside influences" (McCaffery and Gregory 131). But there is more. Another important intervention involves the recuperation and inclusion in the final edition of *The Navidson Record* (text) of words and paragraphs which Zampanò had erased in the original manuscripts. These recovered fragments of text appear in the novel as red struck passages. Again, Truant himself comes clean: "Note: Struck passages indicate what Zampanò tried to get rid of, but which I, with a little bit of turpentine and a good old magnifying glass managed to resurrect" (111).

Truant's additions and modifications do not only involve Zampanò's manuscript, but also an appendix including the letters that Truant's mother, Pelafina, wrote to Truant while she was institutionalized. One of Pelafina's letters to his son shows hundreds of repetitions of the phrase "forgive me" piled on top of one another in a way that makes necessary a word processor and some designing skills. As McCaffery and Gregory points out:

The words might be hers, but someone else must have intervened and created this document that must be only a visual representation or interpretation of what she wrote originally. [. . .] 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. (121)

So, just as Zampanò's role as narrator elicited ontological issues concerning the existence of the house, Truant's unfaithful mediation creates a similar problem with the concept of narration itself. At this point, it is no longer possible to create a trustworthy hierarchy of narrators along the narrative levels (as I did in the plot summary) nor be sure about whether any of the embedded narratives is to be trusted. Danielewski himself confirms this suspicion:

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." [. . .] Pretty soon you begin to notice that at every level in the novel some act of interpretation is going on. (McCaffery and Gregory 121)

These words bear a resemblance to Belleto's concept of *House of Leaves* as a novel of interpretation. Danielewski, however, goes a step further as for him the mere act of recalling entails interpretation: "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" (McCaffery and Gregory 121). Danielewski's words sound almost like an exculpation of Truant's wrongdoings. Truant's unfaithful mediation can be seen, thus, as an allegorical allusion to the inaccuracy of human memory. What is important, Danielewski goes on to explain, is the effort of interpretation on the part of the reader:

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 must we, in order to act, necessarily pretend to know? (McCaffery and Gregory 121)

Conscious unknowing versus pretending to know: interestingly, these two opposing attitudes towards the unknown seem to parallel the two ways of confronting unnatural narratives: Richardson's "Zen" way and Alber's meaning-making path. In this terms, *House of Leaves* can be regarded as a sort of cognitive training camp where, as in life, the reader will encounter all kind of unfamiliar and disorienting scenarios and will need to make decisions about their meaning—or lack thereof—without the helping hand of any authorial guide.

3.3. Characters & ontological metalepsis

Mieke Bal acknowledges the dual nature of literary characters as linguistic constructs and imagined humans. Following this line of thought, Alber regards unnatural characters as "*both* artificial entities and imagined human beings" (105). Similarly, N. Katherine Hayles maintains that "the unnatural characters of postmodernism transform the traditional human subject into an artificial amalgam, "a collection of heterogeneous components ... whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (qtd. in Alber 143). In this regard, this paper will focus on two characters, Will Navidson and Zampanò, whose porous ontological boundaries put in jeopardy the whole narrative structure of *House of Leaves*.

3.3.1. Will Navidson

As Zampanò bluntly puts it, Will Navidson is a "prize-winning photojournalist who won the Pulitzer for his picture of a dying girl in Sudan" (6). Later we learn more about that famous photograph: it "shows a Sudanese child dying of starvation, too weak to move even though a vulture stalks her from behind" (368). At this point, many readers will be aware that the description of Navidson's photograph is suspiciously quasi-identical to a factual photograph taken by the South-African photographer Kevin Carter also in Sudan. The Editors curb any doubts with a revealing footnote:

This is clearly based on Kevin Carter's 1994 Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of a vulture preying on a tiny Sudanese girl who collapsed on her way to a feeding center. Carter enjoyed many accolades for the shot but was also accused of gross insensitivity. The Florida St. Petersburg *Times* wrote: "The man adjusting his lens to take just the right frame of her suffering might just as well be a predator, another vulture on the scene." Regrettably constant exposure to violence and deprivation, coupled with an increased dependency on drugs exacted a high price. On July 27, 1994 Carter killed himself. - Ed. (368)

On the face of these words, Polley argues that Danielewski is blurring “classical boundaries between fact and fiction, between reality and its reportage, in order to reclaim a modernist centre based on ‘readerly’ identification” (Polley 5). In other words, even when readers may feel disoriented by the presence of this impossible character —at once real and figurative—, they still may empathize with Navidson. This leads Polley to state that *House of Leaves* is a case study about belief. As he has it, “[r]ealism, which documentary theory shows is all about artifice, has no affective bearing on belief. Belief ... can transcend binaries like official-unofficial and fiction-nonfiction” (5). He then concludes that *House of Leaves* allegorically “celebrates unofficial narratives as it questions the blurred boundary between the two most general genre distinctions: ‘fiction’ and ‘nonfiction’” (6).

3.3.2. Zampanò

But Navidson is not the only character whose ontological boundaries remain blurred. Although readers are not given much information about Zampanò as a character through Truant’s narrative, McCaffery and Gregory points out a “hidden passageway [which] provides access to Zampanò’s life and background, one that Johnny Truant never discovers but that the careful reader of *House of Leaves* should eventually uncover” (124). According to them, Zampanò’s name leads us to Fellini’s film *La Strada* (1954), whose main character is named Zampanò as well. *La Strada*’s Zampanò (played by Anthony Quinn) resembles Danielewski’s Zampanò “in being so self-involved and narcissistic that he cuts himself off from the people around him, even those who loved him and cared about him” (125).

But there is a more radical interpretation of this coincidence between film’s and novel’s character names. McCaffery and Gregory contends that Zampanò might actually be “an imaginary character drawn from another work of art” (126). That is, *La Strada*’s Zampanò and Danielewski’s might be one and same character:

[Fellini’s Zampanò] later went blind (just as he claimed he might in *La Strada*) and then eventually made his way to Los Angeles where he lived out his final days as an eccentric old man who enjoyed the company of cats and women while attempting to complete an autobiographical novel in which he recast the original sources of his current sense of guilt, loneliness, and anguish into a story about the making of an imaginary documentary film entitled *The Navidson Record*. (126)

Apart from the fact that Fellini's Zampanò provides Danielewski's Zampanò with what we could call a non-diegetic characterization, the most important consequence of this reading is the effect it has upon the narrative structure: if it is assumed that Fellini's Zampanò and Danielewski's Zampanò are the same character, then the ontological status of Johnny Truant's embedding narrative has to be reconsidered. One cannot even be sure if Zampanò and Johnny Truant are inhabiting the same ontological level. Or as McCaffery and Gregory concludes:

[. . .] if Zampanò is only an imaginary character existing in a work of art, then everything else in the framing tale involving Johnny—including his mother, his (re)construction of the manuscript, and everything relating to the world in which this framing tale occurs— would necessarily also have to be "unreal," even in the sense of the imaginary "real" posited in most works of fiction. (126)

3.3.3. *Ontological metalepsis*

Alber considers ontological metalepsis, that is, “jumps between narrative levels that involve actual transgressions or violations of ontological boundaries”, as an unnatural phenomenon (203). Following Monika Fludernik, Alber distinguishes between ascending metalepses (when a character travels from an embedded narrative into the framing or embedding storyworld) and descending metalepses (in which a character moves from the primary storyworld into an embedded narrative).

One subtle instance of descending metalepses is related to the roar that the house explorers hear in the passageways whenever the walls shift their configuration. In the appendix “The Three Attic Whalestoe Institute Letters”, we learn that the reason why Johnny Truant's mother, Pelafina, was sent to a mental institution was that she tried to strangle his son Johnny when he was a kid. Interestingly, it is said that when “Johnny's father took her [Pelafina] away from him [Johnny], she roared like an animal, and this roar still haunts Truant's mind” (Alber 191). This means that a sound from an embedding narrative level — Truant's— has sneaked into an embedded one —Zampanò's. Of course, one might be tempted to think that this is just a coincidence, but in any case, it is a coincidence carefully arranged. As Danielewski admits on an interview, “[s]ometimes I think the best plan is to plan on a little coincidence” (McCaffery and Gregory 105).

Another subtle estranging type of ontological metalepsis affects “The Pelican Poems”, written by Johnny Truant during his various travels in Europe. These poems are included in the Appendix II, and in McCaffery and Gregory’s interview, it is revealed that Danielewski wrote them while going himself all over Europe with the only company of an Euro-rail pass, a copy of the King James Bible and the tragedies of Shakespeare. As he recalls:

Most of the 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 the poem 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 that now resides in a novel. (123)

This means that “The Pelican Poems” inhabit two ontological realms at once: the fictional storyworld of Johnny Truant and the factual world of Danielewski. It follows, then, that these poems are non-diegetic and diegetic simultaneously. Therefore, “The Pelican Poems” not only provide another hidden passage into Johnny’s personal inner life but to Danielewski’s background, which, in turn, may help us interpret other thematic spheres of *House of Leaves*.

3.4. Unnatural space

As Alber (2019) explains, “impossible spaces undo our assumptions about space and spatial organization in the real world”. Some typical instances of unnatural spaces include: containers that are bigger on the inside than they are on the outside; shape-shifting settings; visions of the infinite and unimaginable universe; non-actualisable geographies; and metaleptic jumps between different ontological spheres. I will deal now with some of these instances of unnaturalness.

The first line in chapter four announces the first unnatural event in the house: “In early June of 1990, the Navidsons flew to Seattle for a wedding. When they returned, something in the house had changed” (24). That change is the sudden appearance of a “space resembling a walk-in closet” (28) between the main bedroom and the children’s room. Zampanò himself warns us about the unnatural nature of what is to come: “What took place amounts to a strange spatial violation which has already been described in a number of ways — namely surprising,

unsettling, disturbing but most of all uncanny” (24). What makes the sudden appearance of the new space especially odd is the fact that the video cameras placed in the bedroom (within the project of his documentary) have not been able to capture the shift in the house:

Navidson does check the Hi 8s but discovers that the motion sensors were never triggered. Only their exit and re-entrance exists on tape. Virtually a week seamlessly elided, showing us the family as they depart from a house without that strange interior space present only to return a fraction of a second later to find it already in place, almost as if it had been there all along. (28)

This failure of technology in capturing space distortions introduces a very important thematic element in the novel: the (impossible) representation of unnatural spaces. As Giamarellos has it, *House of Leaves* documents the effort “to represent a space that undoubtedly exists, yet —by its very nature— is non-representable” (150).

The discovery of this new space is swiftly followed by another one equally disturbing when Navidson finds out that the width of the house as measured from the inside exceeds the width of the house as measured from the outside by $\frac{1}{4}$ inches (30). It is then that Navidson asks for help in an effort to unravel the mystery. But the arrival of his brother Tom and his friend Bill Reston only make things worse precipitating a crucial phenomenon on which *The Navidson Report* (film) will focus: the appearance of a new space in the living room, the so-called “Five and a Half Minute Hallway”. Upon the first exploration of the mysterious hallway, Navidson discovers its unfathomable dimensions and its changing nature.

According to Ryan, “the reader’s imagination needs a mental model of space to simulate the narrative action” (qtd. in Alber 186). However, in *House of Leaves*, as the exploration of the house develops, the creation of such mental models by the reader is more and more demanding. The reader must not only deal with spaces which are physically impossible but with spaces that defy the principle of noncontradiction, as Truant points out in a footnote:

There's a problem here concerning the location of "The Five and a Half Minute Hallway." Initially the doorway was supposed to be on the north wall of the living room (page 4), but now, as you can see for yourself, that position has changed. Maybe it's a mistake. Maybe there's some underlying logic to the shift. Fuck if I know. Your guess is as good as mine. (57)

Albers points out that unnatural containers (spaces where the interior exceeds the exterior) can be found in children's books and fantasy novels, however:

[w]hile the impossible geometrical organization of the house represents the threatening nothingness of our existence, both *Mary Poppins's* unnatural carpetbag and the impossible tent in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* highlight that certain wonder-inducing creatures (such as otherworldly nannies, wizards, or witches) in children's books and fantasy novels are capable of magic and therefore not bound by real-world limitations of space.

Therefore, the unnatural container which in fantasy books has no estranging effects becomes antimimetic in *House of Leaves*. In this regard, Belleto argues that what sets apart *House of Leaves* from novels of other genres like magic realism is "the pervasiveness of academic scholarship", a circumstance that "suggests that this is a world bound by the same rules as our own—and yet the house pointedly defies explanation" (105).

Will Slocombe, on his part, interprets Navidson's impossible house as "an allegory on the objective nothingness of the poststructuralist or nihilist universe, in which our desperate quests for meaning are ultimately rendered futile". This view is regarded by Alber as an example of meaning-making through an allegorical reading (189). Similarly, Alber himself contends that the house "becomes a version of the hostile world as such—a world that systematically undermines successful interactions with others" (190). However, in his opinion, the novel offers the reader different solutions to counter the house's nothingness: "the redemptive power of love" in the case of Karen and Navidson, and the confrontation of his traumatic childhood and the memories of his mother in the case of Truant.

It is also possible to use Alber's subjectification strategy to interpret the unnatural spatial dimensions of the house: this entails looking at the impossible passageways as the external materialization of the internal states of the characters. External materialization of internal states is already a convention in fantasy novels where wizards, for instance, can cause changes in the world through the use of magic (196). In these narratives, the external materializations are consciously unleashed and have a predetermined goal, be it "the celebration of superhuman qualities" in the case of white magic, be it the overcoming of "the fear of being dominated by malicious powers" in the case of black magic. But, in

House of Leaves, the house shifting quality seems to echo the mind of the explorer, as Zampanò notes:

[. . .] some critics believe the house's mutations reflect the psychology of anyone who enters it. Dr. Haugeland asserts that the extraordinary absence of sensory information forces the individual to manufacture his or her own data. Ruby Dahl, in her stupendous study of space, calls the house on Ash Tree Lane "a solipsistic heightener," arguing that "the house, the halls, and the rooms all become the self-collapsing, expanding, tilting, closing, but always in perfect relation to the mental state of the individual. (165)

So if one assumes that the unnatural house is an external materialization of the mental state of the people who enter its passageways, the mutations do not correlate to any kind of magic, but probably to traumatized minds. Once more, Danielewski's biography may cast some light over this issue. He recalls the house where his sister and he grew up in as a place "created out of great shadows ... filled with many very painful and dangerous resonances" and "with many rooms [they] knew were off-limits and passageways [they] were too terrified to enter alone. Moreover, the spatial nature and dimensions of this house were constantly changing" (McCaffery and Gregory 115). In the case of Navidson, interestingly, the first unnatural phenomenon in the house coincides with Navidson's saying the name "Delial" in dreams. We learn later that Delial is not the name of a lover—as Navidson's wife resents—but the name Navidson gave to the dying girl he photographed in Sudan. Navidson's guilt and remorse, thus, could be playing an important role in the shifting configuration of the house.

Another point of departure in the interpretation of the house consists of regarding its impossible passages in the light of the theme of the labyrinth. According to Wendy Faris, literary narratives employ the labyrinth to symbolize a journey either toward the self or toward the text. In other words, the symbolic journey represented by the maze may be psychological or metafictional. Natalie Hamilton builds on Faris's view and shows how in *House of Leaves* both paths converge: "Each level of Danielewski's text involves characters attempting to navigate the maze of the self, and these attempts are in turn echoed in the structure of the text" (5). Along these lines, *The Navidson Record* can be analyzed as Karen and Navidson navigating

their inner mazes to reach one another at the center of the labyrinth. The strained relationship between the two is a result of her insecurity and his obsession with his

work. [. . .] Thus, the novel implies that their love for each other brings them safely out of their individual labyrinths. (Hamilton 6-7)

So, these ideas surely may cast light upon the unnatural scenario of *The Navidson Record* (film); yet, Hamilton reminds us that all labyrinths have historically been static, man-made structures, and therefore, they always have a solution. And while it is obvious that the textual labyrinth of *House of Leaves* has been constructed by Danielewski, it is difficult, however, to imagine who could have built such a spatial anomaly as the Navidson's house (12). This claim by Hamilton probably relates to chapter 16, which focuses on the geological analysis of the house based on samples collected from the walls of the spiral staircase. In that chapter, the chemical analysis of house reveals the presence of particles over 4 billion years old. As Hamilton points out, this geological dating makes impossible that the labyrinth was constructed by humans, which, in turn, opens "the possibility of a divine architect" (12). Here readers and scholars are entering the realm of transcendental interpretations, according to Alber's strategies. Yet, Zampanò does not lose the opportunity of mocking at these intents:

some fanatics of *The Navidson Record* assert that the presence of extremely old chondrites definitively proves extraterrestrial forces constructed the house. Others, however, claim the samples only support the idea that the house on Ash Tree Lane is a self-created portal into some other dimension. As Justin Krape dryly remarked: "Both arguments are probably best attributed to the persistent presence of schizophrenia plaguing the human race." (378)

3.5. Unrepeatable reading

When reading a piece of fiction, readers normally expect to dive into the text and lose themselves into the (unconscious) act of imagining the storyworld. For this to happen, the "fictional world requires that the physical aspects of a book fade into the background", that is, readers need to forget that they are immersed in the physical act of reading, which include moving their eyes through the words, turning the pages and so on. *House of Leaves*, on the other hand, "incentivizes the exact opposite of this conventional reading process". In Danielewski's novel, the reader's willingness to stop his or her reading in order to explore parallel narratives, footnotes, and appendixes "is rewarded with additional narrative content" (Corrigan and Ogden).

Let us consider, for instance, one of the letters sent by the institutionalized Pelafina to his son Johnny. In order to avoid her letters to be read by the medical

personnel, Pelafina decides to encode them. Accordingly, she gives Johnny instructions as to how to decodify the letters: “use the first letter of each word to build subsequent words and phrases: your exquisite intuition will help you sort out the spaces” (619). However, some perspicacious readers have applied Pelafina’s decoding process to the whole novel being rewarded with surprising discoveries. For instance,

[t]hose, however, who have chosen to follow an earlier footnote and read Pelafina’s letter, are able to apply the acrostic code to “**a wild ode mentioned at New West hotel over wine infusions, light, lit, lofted on very entertaining moods, yawning in return, open nights, inviting everyone’s song**” exhuming the confirmatory message: ‘A woman who will love my ironies’. (117; my emphasis).

Instances like this turn *House of Leaves* into an example of what Aarseth defines as *ergodic* literature, that is, a text where “nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text” (qtd. in Corrigan). Due to its intricate network of footnotes and its non-linear typography, the reader must “engage actually in the process of reading the text”, a fact which, according to Corrigan and Ogden, links *House of Leaves* to hypertextuality and online gaming.

Instances like Pelafina’s acrostic “creates an ergodic awareness within the reader, lifting them out of a passive mode of meaning-apprehension, and into the role of game-player, attempting to make Danielewski’s text submit to an arbitrary game rule” (Corrigan and Ogden). McCaffery and Gregory also acknowledge this game-playing role performed by the reader as he or she is offered “multiple pathways into a new kind of textual space whose successful navigation requires multiprocessing” (99). According to Corrigan, this conceptualization of reading as game-play “helps us to understand the digital as a function rather than a platform”. However, she differentiates this approach from reception theory’s views in that “this process is a physical rather than a hermeneutic one”. Indeed, the reading of *House of Leaves* becomes a “profoundly physical activity” as the reader must rotate the book at different angles, use a magnifying glass for some pages and so on.

This conception of the novel can be linked to one of Alber’s reading strategies, namely, the “do it yourself” or invitation to “free play” strategy. As Danielewski admits, “there are many ways to enter *House of Leaves*” (McCaffery and Gregory). Given the multiple pathways into the narrative that a reader is offered

—some of them mutually contradictory—, the novel can be regarded as an invitation to create one’s own story. Even the multiple narrative levels of narrative—each with a distinctive font— can be viewed as paths through the textual labyrinth that the reader may follow:

One may choose to follow Zampanò’s text, ignoring the footnotes; to follow Truant’s exploits; or to follow the narrative and the footnotes as they are presented. There are hundreds of opportunities for the reader to pursue a reference to a footnote and return to the narrative. However, as with all labyrinths, there is the danger of following a chosen path and becoming lost in the convolutions. (Hamilton 12)

Hamilton calls *House of Leaves*’ reader a “Theseus”, “twisting and turning, never knowing if the minotaur is around the next corner” (14).

Furthermore, if one agrees with this view of reading as game-playing, it follows that each reading becomes absolutely unrepeatable. According to Waldron, this fact is allegorically suggested in the scene where Navidson is lost in a dark room trying to resolve an apparently insolvable problem, namely, the feasibility of reading a book he is carrying with him (interestingly also called *House of Leaves*) with the help of just 24 matches:

With only 24 matches plus the matchbook cover... Navidson had a total of five minutes and fortyfour seconds of light.

The book, however, is 736 pages long. Even if Navidson can average a page a minute, he will still come up 104 pages short (he had already read 26 pages). To overcome this obstacle, he tears out the first page, which of course consists of two pages of text, and rolls it into a tight stick, thus creating a torch which... will burn for about two minutes and provide him with just enough time to read the next two pages. (467)

The process of reading this *mise-en-abyme* copy of *House of Leaves* by burning the previous page represents, Waldron says, “the ultimate unrepeatable reading” (103): even the same reader will not be able to recreate the reading in exactly the same way. It can be argued then that Navidson’s role as an “active reader” serves as a model for real readers, who should make their own personal and unrepeatable reading as well.

Lastly, Corrigan regards *House of Leaves* as an instance of participatory literature as it “promotes feedback between the printed copy and the ongoing digital commentary that surrounds it ... inspiring numerous expressions of fandom”. This view denotes, Corrigan argues, readers’ desire for active participation as

opposed to the “passive engagement demanded by television and non-ergodic literature”.

3.6. *House of Leaves* as an unnatural artifact

As mentioned elsewhere, in *House of Leaves*, various narrative levels share the space of the page, each of them printed with a distinctive font. But not only must the readers deal with this multi-threaded narrative structure, but they must also, as Hamilton says, tackle “a textual layout that incorporates upside-down, backwards, horizontal, vertical, and otherwise oddly placed text” (14). According to him, Danielewski uses typography so that the reader physically experiences a literal maze:

the text itself often mirrors the narrative events, looping into spirals, crossing up and down pages, or unfolding word by word across a dozen near-blank pages. Wordplay and textual games abound [. . .] Danielewski, however, puts it right out in front: the book is the labyrinth, a textual reflection of the warped interior of the Navidson House. (qtd. in Hamilton 14)

This bizarre typography, Hamilton adds, not only hinders the interpretation of the parallel plots, but also turn the act of reading the novel into “an unfamiliar experience” (15).

A related issue along these lines is determining which narrator —if any— is responsible for these layout features. In a footnote the Editors point out that “Mr. Truant refused to reveal whether the following bizarre textual layout is Zampanò's or his own” (134). Of course, it is also possible to assign these textual elements to what Manfred Jahn calls the level of nonfictional communication —a non-diegetic narrative plane which includes the author and the reader. However, Waldron believes that such ambiguity about the source of these features

calls into question the levels of embedded narrative: textual layout and formatting necessarily exist at the surface of narrative and as such cannot be mediated or transmitted, only replicated or simulated by an embedding narrator. To bring attention to them is to collapse the illusion of narrative and ontological depth into the reality of textual surface.

This is why, *House of Leaves* (as a book) can be regarded an unnatural artifact. The reader gets driven again and again onto the surface of the text. In this way, *House of Leaves* emphasizes its book nature, a conceptual stance that Waldron interprets as a means of “advocating for the potential of the printed book as a

medium” in the digital age (91). Moreover, according to Waldron the textual configuration of *House of Leaves*

challenges the reader to consider whether and where borders can be drawn around a text. Magnifying its margins, and dramatizing its own creation and revision, Danielewski’s novel insistently identifies itself as a work in progress, an incomplete stage of evolution — rejecting the idea of completion or organic wholeness. (77)

A side effect of these focus on the surface of the text is the autonomy of every page as a significant component in their own right. In this sense, it is noteworthy the enthusiasm shown by the interviewer Larry McCaffery for a particular page. His question to Danielewski also illustrates the striking effects that text layout may have on immersive reading, as mentioned above:

Could I get you to say something about the page I always point to as being my favorite in the entire book—p. 205. [. . .] 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. 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. (122; my emphasis)

4. CONCLUSION

This paper started by defining unnatural narratives. It was explained that even if there are terminological differences between the main theorists, they all agree that unnatural narratives radically deconstruct categories such anthropomorphic narrators, human characters, and real-world notions of space (Alber et al. 2).

To say that Danielewski’s novel contains various unnatural elements is a patently obvious statement. In fact, in *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama* (2016), Jan Alber includes a chapter dedicated to antimimetic spaces and takes Navidson’s house as a paradigmatic example. However, no further mention is made about other unnatural aspects of Danielewski’s novel by Jan Alber —or, to the best of my knowledge, by any other unnatural narratologist, for that matter. This circumstance left ample room for this paper to employ an unnatural perspective and study not only other narrative components —such as narrators, characters, or narrative levels—, but also the figure of the reader as embodied in a particular reading, and the physical book as an unnatural artifact. It is this pervasive unnaturalness spreading into all aspects and layers of the novel that prompted me to regard Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* as an extreme case of unnatural narrative.

One of my goals was to explain why unnatural theorists devote themselves to the study of such narratives and why they consider this task to be a significant one. In this respect, unnatural narratologists point out that unnatural elements are everywhere and decry what they call “mimetic reductionism”, that is, the belief that readers will be able to explain and make sense of every aspect of a narrative by using their real-world knowledge and cognitive parameters. Unnatural narratologists contend that taking natural narratives as models for examining and interpreting all kinds of texts is an impoverishing bias, not least because one may lose sight of what make narratives interesting in the first place, that is, the fact that “they can depict situations and events that move beyond, extend, or challenge our knowledge of the world” (Alber et al. 3). In other words, reading unnatural narratives should be compelling to people because antimimetic scenarios reveal new “remote territories of conceptual possibilities” (ibid.).

As Brian Richardson claims in “Unnatural Narrative Theory: A Paradoxical Paradigm” (2017), a mimetic definition of fiction such as

“narrative is somebody telling somebody else, on some occasion, and for some purposes, that something happened to someone or something” ... leaves no place for narratives like those of Samuel Beckett or many practitioners of the nouveau roman or postmodernism. (202)

One might add that such a conception definitely leaves no space for Danielewski’s novel. In this sense, Richard argues for the importance of the unnatural narrative model as “an essential corrective to the limitations, omissions, and blind spots of mimetic theories” (193). As Lubomír Doležel states,

Mimetic reading, practiced by naïve readers and reinforced by journalistic critics, is one of the most reductive operations of which the human mind is capable: the vast, open, and inviting fictional universe is shrunk to the model of one single world, actual human experience. (qtd. in Richardson, “Unnatural Narrative Theory: A Paradoxical Paradigm” 203)

Unnatural narratives, thus, are important to us because they constitute “a means of combating [our] tendency to reduce life and fiction to simple terms that [we] can understand but which inevitably fail [us] because of their limited perspective” (qtd in Alber & al. 7). Ultimately, as Ruth Ronen remarks, readers may think of unnatural narratives as “a new domain for exercising [their] creative powers” (qtd in Alber & al. 7).

It was also noted that unnatural narratologists approach unnatural phenomena following different perspectives and methodologies. Thus, while theorists (like Brian Richardson) defend that we should leave the unfamiliar and unnatural elements as they are, accepting their polysemy, others (like Jan Alber) propose some sense-making strategies that readers may use to deal with impossible scenarios in fiction.

In this work, Alber's strategies have been employed in the interpretation of the diverse unnatural elements in *House of Leaves*. But, at the same time, as requested by Brian Richardson, it has been avoided a reductive and all-encompassing use of those sense-making strategies (21). Therefore, the various theories and interpretations taken from a number of essays, monographs, theses, interviews, etc. have not been exposed in an effort to unveil the multiple enigmas hidden in Danielewski's novel or to give solutions to the numerous questions left unanswered through the text —this would have been a dismissal of the unnaturalness of the novel and a betrayal of the spirit of unnatural narratology—; instead, this paper has attempted to show that *House of Leaves* is a perfect playground for scholars and readers to exercise their above-mentioned “creative powers” of interpretation.

On that basis, this paper has engaged with some unnatural elements of the novel using a practical perspective: firstly, focusing on their unconventional and anti-mimetic components; and secondly, playfully confronting these components with ideas and perspectives from a multidisciplinary corpus of scholarly writing. In this way, it has been shown that *House of Leaves* “resists fixity or finality of meaning as another form of containment” and that, instead of a single interpretation, this novel “embraces multiplicity of meaning: readings, re-readings, different versions, additions” (Waldron 103).

Ultimately, this is why this novel has been called “a house of interpretation” (Belleto 102): contrary to expectations, it is the “competing claims” made by scholars and readers that allow the novel's impossible house to exist. From this point of view, I would like to think that, by means of this paper, I myself have added one more leaf to the *house of leaves* —the house of interpretation—, and in the process, Danielewski's impossible universe has come into existence, if only for the duration of a few matches.

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