

## Documenting the (Un)official Kevin Carter Narrative: Encyclopedism, Irrealism, and Intimization in *House of Leaves*

Jason S. Polley

Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong

### Abstract

Mark Z. Danielewski extends his critique of reliability – to the “destabilization” of “center” and “origin” and “totality” that Derrida famously exposes in “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” in 1966 – to all of *House of Leaves*’ paratexts, even to the narratives readers traditionally approach non-ironically or -critically, like the copyright page, the index, the cover blurbs, and the footnotes. Danielewski’s much-studied encyclopedic 2000 novel features a *mise-en-abyme* of competing “narrators,” thus compelling readers to encounter every text in and about the main text with critical suspicion. This unconventional, formal remove, however, is apparent to any reader who simply thumbs through Danielewski’s text. Paradoxically, beneath this deconstructionist instability, the novel is anchored in a form of stability, namely connection. Protagonist Will Navidson is a Pulitzer Prize-winning photo-journalist and documentary filmmaker modelled on actual Pulitzer Prize-winner (and 1994 suicide) Kevin Carter. At stake here is how Danielewski blurs classical boundaries between fact and fiction, between reality and its reportage, in order to reclaim a modernist centre based on “readerly” identification. Danielewski’s encyclopedia of the famous Carter photograph comes to un-complicate the complicated subject positions post-structuralism first exposed. Speaking to this un-complication of complication by way of the irrealism and intimization that recent documentary theory propounds, the article considers *House of Leaves* as a case study about belief. Realism, which documentary theory shows is all about artifice, has no affective bearing on belief. Belief, Danielewski illustrates, can transcend binaries like official-unofficial and fiction-nonfiction.

**Keywords:** *House of Leaves*, documentary, deconstruction, paratexts, remediation, irrealism, readerly identification

A second set of critics were cleverer than the first: they identified a genuine paradox in the modern routine of documentation, which claims to require that one prove both that each sentence is original and that it has a source.

(Grafton 1997: 143)

[...] a tension between evidentiality and aestheticization, accommodated in a much-debated balance in John Grierson's famous phrase 'the creative treatment of actuality.'

(Rotha qtd. in Austin 2007: 88)

At the conclusion of the Bangladesh war, photographers in Dacca were invited to a 'photo opportunity' in a polo field. It turned out to be a bayonetting of Biharis who were alleged to have collaborated with the Pakistani army... People were to be murdered for the camera; and some photographers and television camera crew departed without taking a picture in the hope that in the absence of cameramen the acts might not be committed. Others felt that the mob was beyond the appeal to mercy. They stayed and won Pulitzer prizes. Were they right?

(Evans qtd. in Gross, Katz, and Ruby qtd in Chapman 2009: 166)

This article aims to move past poststructural politicization of the effects of paratextuality on the orders of information and the self. I do not stop at problematizing official narratives, something the deconstructionists, extending de Saussure, inaugurated in the 1960s. Certainly, my analysis celebrates unofficial narratives as it questions the blurred boundary between the two most general genre distinctions: "fiction" and "nonfiction." However, I also apply theories from recent work in documentary and documentary audience studies. I do so in hopes of un-complicating "truth" in order to enhance "reader" identification. (I use "reader" interchangeably with spectator, audience, and/or viewer here.) Ohad Landesman sees readerly identification as a "practice[e] of looking [that] can move beyond detached observation" (2015, p. 16). Thomas Austin considers the audience attachment that documentary furnishes as a process of "confronting, re-imagining, and grappling with a new, less complacent sense of self" (2009, p. 181). This documentary-motivated sense of association, Landesman writing elsewhere, marks "The urgent need to make a sharp distinction between documentary and fiction [a]s only a futile academic exercise that trivializes [a] film and its effects" (2008, p. 41). Landesman attests that "genre cannot reveal an a priori self-evident truth, and should therefore assert a more relative veracity by exercising strategies of fiction and exploiting the grey area between story and fact" (p. 43). "Truth," Jane Chapman correspondingly stresses in *Issues in Contemporary Documentary*, "isn't guaranteed by style or expression. It isn't guaranteed by anything" (Morris as cited in Chapman, 2009, p. 24).

Non-guaranteed "truth" coupled with connection could be the lede of Mark Z. Danielewski's much-studied encyclopedic novel *House of Leaves* (2001). After (or before) all, one of the four

back cover blurbs, attributed to *Time Out New York*, reads “A love story by a semiotician. Danielewski has a songwriter’s heart as attuned to heartache as he is to Derrida’s theory of the sign.” Key to my complication of official narratives as characterized in *House of Leaves* is my close, reflexive reading of the novel’s Kevin Carter paratext. At once echoing the complex literary strategies of *House of Leaves* and the critical ones of deconstruction, I take into account and apply postmodernist concepts like reflexivity, reliability, and remediation. And key to my un-complication of these deconstructive complications is the new application of documentary studies to the wide swathe of scholarly studies on *House of Leaves*. My goal is to provide a new angle on postmodernism and the representation of “truth” in *House of Leaves*. In some ways going against the Derridean spirit of poststructuralism, which eschews more traditional/modernist conceits like origin, centre, and totality, documentary theory enables me to anchor the context of my particular reading of *House of Leaves*, and the Kevin Carter paratext(s) most specifically.

Paratextuality highlights a paradigmatic shift in the construction and analysis of literature *qua* literature, not to mention genre *qua* genre, and stages a textual shift that dismantles the mastertext of narratorial identity and order. Paratexts are Chinese-box narratives – or narrative “boxes” of graduated “size.” Sometimes narrative boxes fit into others. At other times, they appear not to, thereby destabilizing traditional notions of chronology, order, and privilege. Paratexts complicate traditional storytelling by interrupting or obfuscating a more “central” narrative with additional material by critics, editors, publishers, etcetera. But a mere glance at *House of Leaves* and its unconventional structure makes this so-called complication immediately apparent to savvy readers.

At stake in this discursive study of an edited novel about a partial manuscript about an apocryphal documentary about a haunted house owned by a man based on Kevin Carter is adducing challenges to authorship, truth, and trust – and in some ways solving them, especially if *House of Leaves* is read through the lens of “the phenomenon referred to as the ‘democratization of documentary’” (Chapman, 2009, p. 3). Danielewski’s novel first complicates “reality” by critiquing the reliable remediation of information. We can therefore apply the documentary term “irrealism” to *House of Leaves*. According to MacLennan and Hookham, the term speaks to how “emphasis on the mediating properties of the film [is] such that reality itself [is] called into question” (as cited in Chapman, 2009, p. 21). As we learn from Dziga Vertov’s 1929 “documentary” *Man with a Video Camera*, where we see a filmmaker filming, then an editor cutting, then the audience viewing their filmed and edited selves, there is no “unimpeded access to reality” (Nichols as cited in Chapman, p. 121). We see the same process in the documentary *Derrida*, not only when Derrida himself watches himself being interviewed, but also when he comments on how whatever he’s filmed doing will come, anecdotally, to define him (Dick & Ziering Kofman, 2002). “[I]n respect to the proximity of the fiction film to reality,” it is useful to recall André Bazin’s “famous claim that ‘realism in art can only be achieved in one way—through artifice’.” (Bazin, as cited in Landesman, 2008, p. 37)

The deconstructive *mises-en-abyme* that Danielewski makes a virtue of in *House of Leaves* revisit how we read what we read – and how we connect with what we read. The narratorial instability of *House of Leaves*, alongside Kevin Carter’s at once literal and figurative narrative presence (Danielewski’s diegetic “Editors” make plain that the “fictional” Navidson is an alternate or possible still-living version of the “nonfictional” Kevin Carter) enhances the text’s value as a journalistic and artistic experience. And lying beneath the superficial complication that Danielewski’s unstable narratorial deferral introduces is a serious sense of what Lizbet van

Zoonen termed “intimization” at the beginning of the 1990s reality television boom (qtd. in Austin, 2007, p. 93). But *House of Leaves* belies the “compassion-fatigue” (Chapman, 2009, p. 33) that van Zoonen’s apt pathological coinage suggested. At first diegetically, and then non-diegetically (through the myriad Web 2.0 reader-responses the novel provokes), *House of Leaves* offers alternate “speaking positions.” Austin reminds us that “Debates about the politics of speaking positions and the impossibility of speaking beyond them emerged as part of the major epistemological shift associated with the post-structuralist turn in humanities and (some areas of) the social sciences” (2009, p. 3). “Middle-classness,” Austin later stresses, “has remained largely unmarked, naturalized in countless ways, an invisible centre at the heart of most academics’ social identities” (p. 111). Early in *House of Leaves* readers recognize through the novel’s unconventional form and its unconventional narrative paratexts that Danielewski is exposing and deconstructing his own always-already flawed, multi-dimensional role. Akin to a documentary filmmaker, to appropriate Chapman, Danielewski is at once “discoverer, observer, inventor of approach and form, [and] composer of style” (2009, p. 4). Danielewski also ironically deconstructs his/the given (academic) middle-class speaking position through the personage of narrator Johnny Truant, himself also a version of photo-journalist Kevin Carter.

Even before our current social networking era, *House of Leaves* challenged now-dated modernist reading strategies: later footnotes in the text return readers to “previous” ones; endnotes appear “relatively early” in the circuitous novel; and a specious bibliography is inserted around the novel’s more conventionally delineated “one-quarter” point. Plus, the novel challenges “traditional linear reading” because *House of Leaves* is replete with footnotes, footnotes to footnotes, barely sketched, much-less elaborated, exhibits, appendices that are complete, incomplete, or resting somewhere in between (due to editorial omission, or ~~sometimes intentional~~ redaction, caused by ink stains, coffee spillages, the over-folding of appended rough notes to the point of expurgation, and numerous other detriti of modern time, error, and care), *and* an index that challenges standard academic understandings of indices.<sup>1</sup>

Integral to my discussion is Danielewski’s reflexive writerly *mise-en-abyme*. *House of Leaves* is about a much (in-text) commented-upon Direct Cinema documentary called *The Navidson Record*, directed by the (in text) fictional character Will Navidson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer of lasting repute inspired upon actual (or extra-textual) Pulitzer Prize-winner, and 1994 suicide, Kevin Carter. But we, the readers, obviously do not literally see or view *The Navidson Record*, nor do the plethora of (in-text) fictional and nonfictional academics, celebrities, and researchers who comment upon the apocryphal auteur “cult” film. Nor does Zampanò (who is the original, though dead, author-collector of the disorganized manuscript eponymously titled “The Navidson Record”) see the film *The Navidson Record*. To reiterate, Zampanò does not view the documentary film he purportedly critiques in exhaustive detail; his diligence includes referencing a plethora of other articles and monographs about *The Navidson Record*, one measuring 4000 pages! Zampanò indeed cannot view *The Navidson Record*. Not unlike his encyclopedic anxiety-of-influence producing literary precursors, ranging from the

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<sup>1</sup> It can be helpful to situate Danielewski and his amalgamation of deferred encyclopedic annotation and stylistic innovation in a literary tradition that includes the paratextuality of J.J. Abram’s and Doug Dorst’s *S.* (2012), the limitlessness of Rebecca Solnit’s *Infinite City* (2010), the unreliability of Junot Diaz’ *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), the underworld impasses of Paul Auster’s *Oracle Night* (2004), the logorrhea of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996), the meticulousness of Nicholson Baker’s *The Mezzanine* (1986), the telegraphic reportage of Renata Adler’s *Speedboat* (1978), the meta-textuality of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962), the high-modernist detail of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1921, 1993) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939, 1976)... and the serious play of Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759, 1988).

blind Homer, to the blind Milton, to the blind Joyce, to the reflexive cycloptic-by-*House of Leaves*'-end main character Will Navidson, old man Zampanò is blind. And since Zampanò is the narrator *manqué* as soon as the novel opens, readers receive his work-in-progress as seen through the editing and editorializing eyes of the ironically named, and perhaps John Fante-inspired, Johnny Truant, an unreliable drug-addled tattoo apprentice irreparably traumatized by his young life as an abused orphan.

Johnny Truant readily admits to, and even boasts about, changing textual details, and readily interjects into what readers encounter as the novel *House of Leaves* with long, personalized footnotes. Some of these paratextual apparatuses are at-best tangentially related to what readers are to believe is originally presented in Zampanò's untidy manuscript "The Navidson Record." Furthermore, anonymous "Editors" also intervene in *House of Leaves* to correct or qualify the remarks of Johnny Truant. As readers, we too are often hailed into the text: Johnny addresses us as "you" in his frequent literary and nonliterary excursions. As an extension of this paratextual deferral from (the idea of) the novel's central plot, it proves unbearable, at least for this readerly interlocutor, not to make marginal notes, not to haunt the text that is constantly in the process of being supplemented by competing innovation and intervention. This interpellation into the deferral process subverts objectivity – or unfiltered truth – by eliciting readerly participation and care in a way that echoes the subjective involvements of Johnny, Zampanò, and Navidson.

Protagonist Will Navidson's fame originally derives not from his auto-ethnography *The Navidson Record*, but from his Pulitzer Prize-winning photo "of a dying girl in Sudan" (Danielewski, 2000, p. 6). This notoriety is first pointed out in the novel at several degrees of remove: "photographers in the news community" recognize him as "the prize-winning photojournalist" (pp. 5–6). Danielewski's "Index" to *House of Leaves* includes a concordance of seven-pages – "xxi, 6, 333, 368, 392, 394, 419" (p. 693) – whereupon Navidson's well-known photograph is mentioned. Already influenced by the unconventional look of the novel, readers approach said "Index" with warranted suspicion. Given the creative constraints of memory and the exhaustive breadth and depth of *House of Leaves*, however, we critical readers are compelled to read the "Index" as a more-or-less reliable industry-standard index. Danielewski's index is, after all, one of the numerous framing texts (or what Gérard Genette has coined as paratexts in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1987)) of *House of Leaves*, a text so replete with paratexts that locating a more modernist central text could prove problematic or strategically redundant. This returns me to Landesman's point about "futile academic exercises" (2008, p. 41). Applying Chapman's appraisal of "Fictional techniques" when it comes to the definition of documentary can un-complicate this poststructural complication and politicization of "centre." After quoting Michael Renov's point that "Fiction is oriented towards a world, non-fiction towards *the* world" (as cited in Chapman, 2009, p. 15), Chapman reminds us that "it is not necessary to see the difference between fact and fiction as an either/or" (p. 15). "Roscoe and Hight", Chapman continues, "prefer to see documentary as 'existing along a fact-fictional continuum, each text constructing relationships with both factual and fictional discourses'" (pp. 15–16). In Danielewski's novel about an apocryphal documentary by a fictionalized version of a non-fictional Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist, truth is not – cannot be – merely an "either/or."

*House of Leaves* is a(n endless) labyrinth of competing paratexts, or secondary and tertiary texts, all of which arrest attention from a sustained focus on any main narrative, thereby problematizing more conventional ways of reading fiction and nonfiction while simultaneously obfuscating (or, better, rendering futile) the fiction-nonfiction dialectic. Footnote 1 above

briefly delineates the canon with which *House of Leaves* keeps (experimental) company. Given how these texts and others like them embrace the conventions of both fiction and criticism, we can characterize such work as critifiction. And if “critifiction,” in the style of Danielewski, Pynchon, Nabokov, and Joyce, why not “ficticism?” Though I’ll keep said genre blending and bending to a minimum, it is important to stress that *House of Leaves* scholarship tends to imitate the very paratextual apparatuses that *House of Leaves* is known for. Michael Hemmingson, for instance, makes his Danielewski-inspired self-reflexive ficticism patent in one of his 20-plus endnotes: “The 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” (2011, p. 285). (Also see *House of Leaves* “ficticism” scholarship by Aghoro, 2012; Askin, 2012; Belletto, 2009; Bemong, 2003; Cox, 2006; Chanen, 2007; Dawson, 2012; Greve, 2012; Hagood, 2012; Hansen, 2004; Hayles, 2002; Huber, 2012; Jones, 2004; Letzler, 2012; Shastri, 2006; Slocombe, 2005; Söder, 2012; Taylor, 2013; and Toth, 2013. Admittedly, many, but not all, of these are collected in Polhman’s edited volume *Revolutionary Leaves* [2012]. It is evident that Danielewski’s fictional critique of conventional scholarship has come to influence conventional scholarship.)

In *House of Leaves* it is in the Editors’ footnote 336 (we know it’s the intervention of the editors not only because it’s followed, as is the novel’s convention, by “—Ed,” but because these Editors write in Century Schoolbook font, whereas Zampanò does in Times New Roman, and Johnny in Courier) that readers first encounter an overt reference to Kevin Carter. The “Editors” plainly remind readers of the extra-textual nonfictional source of Navidson’s award-winning photo, thereby ironically inscribing or framing their editorial selves as ordinary and reliable superintendents of certainty: “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” (Danielewski, 2000, p. 368). The Editors continue with a quotation they attribute to The Florida St. Petersburg *Times*, which apparently noted that “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” (p. 368). The Editors then “Regrettably” conclude that “constant exposure to violence and deprivation, coupled with an increased dependency on drugs exacted a high price. On July 27, 1994 Carter killed himself” (p. 368).

Danielewski’s punctilious Editors source this information (and heavily so; and sans attribution) from Scott Macleod’s piece “The Life and Death of Kevin Carter,” originally published in *Time* in September 1994. The 3000-word report speaks to the “acclaim” and “critical focus” accompanying the fame associated to Carter’s Pulitzer. Macleod details the publicly questioned veracity of the famous photograph: “Some journalists in South Africa called his prize a ‘fluke,’ alleging that he had somehow set up the tableau. Others questioned his ethics. “The man adjusting his lens to take just the right frame of her suffering,” said the St. Petersburg (Florida) *Times* [sic], ‘might just as well be a predator, another vulture on the scene’” (n.p.). Macleod goes on to lament that “Even some of Carter’s friends wondered aloud why he had not helped the girl” (Macleod, 1994, n.p.).

For a better understanding of Navidson, who, like Johnny Truant, is a “fictional” extension of the “nonfictional” Carter, it’s worth quoting the bulk of the final paragraph of Macleod’s article:

The suicide note [Carter] left behind is a litany of nightmares and dark visions, a clutching attempt at autobiography, self-analysis, explanation, excuse. After coming

home from New York, he wrote, he was “depressed... without phone... money for rent... money for child support... money for debts... money!!!... I am haunted by the vivid memories of killings & corpses & anger & pain... of starving or wounded children, of trigger-happy madmen, often police, of killer executioners...” (1994, n.p.)

An unsettling irony is how the reproduced suicide note that Macleod prefaces as a “litany of nightmares” itself contains a litany of ellipses, elisions that beg questions of authorship and omission. Are these truncations in Carter’s original note? Or did Macleod insert them? If the former, they might be read as expressions of exasperation, fatigue, surrender, and/or threat. If the latter, if the ellipses are indeed inserted by Macleod, which is plausible given that he describes the note as “a clutching attempt at autobiography, self-analysis, explanation, excuse,” readers might wonder what Macleod may have strategically dis-included from his article, and why he may have done so. Certainly, we could ask him, or could have asked him closer to the time of his article published nearly twenty-five years ago. But how reliable might those answers have been? Whom, colleague or confidante, friend or adversary, might he, should he, could he be, protecting? Or, rather, protecting himself from – this particularly in light of the journalist’s emphasis on the journalistic reality/wisdom/necessity of “bond[ing] with gun-toting street warriors” that prove so pervasive in the townships of civil war-torn South Africa in the early 1990s (1994, n.p.).

A related question, one that continues to speak to the Derridean (endless) deferral of information Danielewski uses to complicate authority and centrality, concerns the source of Macleod’s own procurement of the Carter suicide note. Was it already redacted? Did *Time*’s legal counsel dictate to Macleod what he could (not) say? In other words, even if we requested these details from the journalist, he may not be able to answer. Maybe the death is suspicious? Perhaps an investigation into Carter’s death is still extant at the time of the *Time* publication in early autumn 1994. Perhaps something related or reminiscent to the Carter suicide occurs in Macleod’s circle of friends or associates in the over month-long interim between the Carter death and the article about Carter’s death. Or maybe Macleod’s memory is flawed? Or his imagination is overactive? Or a statute of limitations on information dissemination endures or is about to be inaugurated? My point is that a host of intangibles can surface between any given event and the reportage of that event. So much also depends upon who reports on any given event – and upon the details the reporter pursues, the (un)official narratives she privileges, and the (un)official narratives she constructs, critiques, and/or counteracts. Landesman, of course, would view this line of questioning as mere academic quibbling – or worse. Truth in representation, realist or not, documentary or not, is not about so-called accuracy. Quoting Nichols, Chapman contends that “the central space documentary occupies is located in ‘the gap between life as lived and life as narrativized’” (2009, p. 6). What Danielewski does in *House of Leaves* is illustrate this “gap.” In so doing, he exposes the danger of (post-structural) theoretical remove.

Speaking to this theoretical danger, *House of Leaves* includes what we should perceive to be a Carter-modelled non-redacted letter, one that integrates, to reiterate, “a clutching attempt at autobiography, self-analysis, explanation, excuse” (Macleod, 1994, n.p.). The letter is crafted by the contrite and drunken Pulitzer Prize-winning Carter-modelled photojournalist Will Navidson. The photographer and filmmaker’s illuminating and ironically exacting epistle also addresses one of the principal mysteries of Danielewski’s text. The first half of page three of the five-page missive—a missive dated “March 31, 1991” (Danielewski, 2000, p. 389), two in-text years before Kevin Carter’s real prize-winning photo was actually snapped – is worth reproducing, *sic erat scriptum* inclusive, with original *House of Leaves* spacing preserved.

it. I miss you. I miss you. I won't reread this.  
 If I do I'll throw it away and write something  
 terse, clean and sober. And all locked up.  
 You know me so so well. I know you'll strip  
 out the alcohol fumes, the fear, the mistakes,  
 and see what matters—a code to decipher  
 written by a guy who thought he was  
 speaking clearly. I'm crying now. I don't  
 think I can stop. But if I try to stop I'll stop  
 writing and I know I won't start again. I miss  
 you so much. I miss Daisy. I miss Chad. I  
 miss Wax and Jed. I even miss Holloway.  
~~And I miss Hansen and Latigo and PFC~~  
~~Miserette, Benton and Carl and Regio and 1<sup>st</sup>~~  
~~lieutenant Naeklebend and of course Zips~~  
 and now I can't get Delial out of my head.  
 Delial, Delial, Delial—the name I gave to the  
 girl in the photo that won me all the fame and  
 glory, that's all she is Karen, just the photo. (Danielewski, 2000, p. 391)

Even the ostensibly simple duplication of a portion of the letter addressed “My dearest Karen” (p. 389) and signed “Navy” (p. 393) resists reliable replication. Paper size, for one, invariably varies. The hard copy of *House of Leaves* from which the passage is for all intents and purposes faithfully copied is narrower and shorter than the A4 paper size upon which it is facsimiled by me. And perhaps my facsimile is now in the process of being read on 8½ x 11” dimensioned paper, or on the small screen of a smartphone, or the 42” screen of a monitor, or in the pages of a journal or magazine measuring, say, 6½ x 8”. This is to say nothing of font type and size. Nor color. As a matter of fact, an obvious complication of transmission in the above is that the three American-War-in-Vietnam-referencing struck-through lines on page 391 are in red font, while the line crossing them out appears in black font in the copy of *House of Leaves* I am sourcing.

A seemingly and indicative question about this Derridean absent-presence, this conspicuousness by way of erasure, concerns the source of said editorial intervention: Navidson candidly exposing – or failing to expose? – something else he fails to expose/conceal? Zampanò preserving? Zampanò concealing? Johnny doing (n)either/(n)or? The Editors (not) doing the same? In the larger context, however, *House of Leaves* is replete with red-font text struck-through in black, a move indicated three times in three distinct ways on the copyright page of my edition of *House of Leaves*. To wit, for instance, “The word house in blue; minotaur and all ~~struck~~ passages in red” (iv). Once again, I did not, or could not, reproduce the blue and red of my source; albeit, perhaps with or without my (veto) knowledge this has been corrected, in which case you, or some of you, are not reading this. Furthermore (a furthermore that is likewise no longer present here if the previous sentence is silently removed), I added the Roman numeral (iv) to the copyright page by simply counting backwards from the first page of Johnny's “Introduction,” which starts at xi. All in all, Danielewski extends his critique of reliability – to the “destabilization” of “center” and “origin” and “totality” Derrida first famously exposes in “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1978) – to all of *House of Leaves*' paratexts, even, or most especially, to the very narratives readers traditionally approach non-ironically.



In brief, Danielewski compels his readers to encounter every text in and about his text with the critical suspicion and contingency that postmodernists and deconstructionists prize. When navigating *House of Leaves* it is prudent to bear in mind the principal thesis of Fish's *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (1980): meaning is always already contextualized, always already shared by particular readers in particular shared spaces. The ostensibly apparent, or the apparently obvious, can change, thus obviating any stable sense of the unambiguous. So-called literal meanings, *tout court*, are unstable or provisional. This is all well and “true,” but recent documentary studies tell us that communities, that readers and viewers, even from within increasingly balkanized (online) groups, crave connection and intimacy with the (artistic) products they consume – notwithstanding progressively more reflexive formal sophistication in “fiction,” “nonfiction,” and documentary alike. It's worth quoting Austin's quotation of Smith:

The paradox is obvious: the cinemas, the places where previous generations hunkered down, suspended their disbelief and engaged in a communal dream, are to some extent becoming refuges from the relentless artifice, places where we can go to wake up, to find out what's really going on. Or at least to engage with stories and experiences in which we can believe. (as cited in Austin, 2007, p. 15).

Even as “the basic integrity of the camera as a *recording* instrument is fundamentally undermined (Roscoe & Hight as cited in Landesman, 2008, p. 35), audiences can experience cinema (and books) as correctives to the “relentless artifice” of the official narratives ceaselessly bombarding us. Mediation, here, is not the problem, nor is truth. Rather, belief, in the sense of affective and affecting, is.

“Having studied at Yale during the halcyon days of deconstruction,” Mark C. Taylor notes, “Danielewski knows his literary theory inside out” (2013, p. 118). Continuing, Taylor likens Danielewski to a “precocious graduate student in literary theory [who] had written a demanding work of fiction that includes every possible interpretation of it that might be proffered by the professors sitting on his doctoral committee” (p. 119). Another one of Danielewski's theoretical problematizations extends to spatiality. Spacing *vis-à-vis* the reproduction of reality (or irrealism) is a complex issue in *House of Leaves*. Witness, for example, line 18 from page 391: “girl in the photo that wonme all the fame and.” In my copy of *House of Leaves*, the “wonme” I have just reproduced appears more like a cross between “wonme” and “w o n m e,” a spatial maneuver I am unable to imitate. I qualified the point just made with “[i]n my copy” because, so Josh Toth explains in an article's endnotes, “there is no definitive edition of *House of Leaves*, just variant ‘versions’” (2013, p. 195). “For more on this,” Toth continues, “see the interesting [though nonacademic] summary of these variants at the forum titled “Comprehensive Guide to printings/Editions/ISBNs etc” (p. 195).

Additionally, to continue this reflexive *mise-en-abyme*, had I included a longer reproduction of the Navidson letter above, say a block quotation requiring a page break, the gap I would have inserted between what I would have tried to imply is page 391 and page 392 would almost certainly be “artificial.” Navidson does not leave spaces between the individual paragraphs of his letter. In two obvious cases, pages 390 and 392, his sentences carry over from one page to the next. These sentences either end in conventional full-stops or seemingly conclude in a drunken version of the Joycean spacing evident in the “Penelope” chapter of *Ulysses*, a 42-page closing without punctuation beyond the seven line breaks evinced by new, indented paragraphs (in Oxford's 1993 republication of “the original 1922 text,” so the 1993 reissue of the novel's back cover blurb advertises at least in (Joyce, 1993)).

What my intended-for-readerly-clarification-addition-of-a-simple-space-between-two-pages also speaks to is the “original” letter’s place in *House of Leaves* overall. The letter, “reproduce[d] in facsimile” (Danielewski, 2000, p. 388), appears in *The Navidson Record* documentary for “only a few seconds of screen time,” so Zampanò’s notes toward his manuscript “The Navidson Record” explain (p. 388). Three pages earlier, the Zampanò manuscript details where the researcher sources the Navidson letter, one that is not a suicide note like Kevin Carter’s, but rather an apology and ostensible goodbye to his longtime partner Karen, whom Navidson is betraying by breaking his promise not to return to the shifting labyrinthine hallways of their house’s basement, which has already claimed the lives of Navidson’s brother Tom and two mountaineering experts hired to explore and map the cavernous basement’s infinite gothic horrors.

Under the subtitle “**Why Did Navidson Go Back To The House?**,” a question that is page-centered, in larger font than the text surrounding it, and with the word house in blue, Zampanò mentions “three schools of thought” that address Navidson’s motivations for reentering the rural house (p. 384) that is discomfitingly bigger on the inside than it is on the outside. Incidentally, as my constant qualifications and remediations are meant to evoke, incidental subjects provoking additional encyclopedic investigation proliferate almost *ad infinitum* in *House of Leaves*. Let’s return to the fact that the word house is always in blue. “House” in blue font functions like a hyperlink leading to evermore information – or to what David Letzler likens to “cruft,” which is a “half-slang/half-technical term from technical programming” evoking that which is “excessive to no clear purpose, simultaneously too much and too little” (2012, p. 308). In whatever language “house” appears it is always in blue in *House of Leaves*, even on the cover (of my copy at least). The sole exception to this rule (in my copy) is the “Random House” indicated, under “Credits,” as the publisher of the unnamed poem extracted from Hirshman and Aratami’s *The Ink Dark Moon* (Danielewski, 2000, p. 708). I read and accept this (seemingly) sole house-in-blue anomaly as an intentional oversight, as yet another instance of the author’s deconstruction of authority. I do not accept this intentional error simply because Danielewski claims in the interview “Haunted House” that “there are no errors in the book” (McCaffery & Gregory, 2003, p. 114) – which is a brilliant assertion since it’s impossible to verify *a posteriori* – but instead because even the house in “Random House” and “www.randomhouse.com” indicated on the text’s back cover appears in blue font.

*House of Leaves* readers, in other words, are forever encouraged to hunt the text, which includes its paratexts, for putative aberrations, thus evoking Navidson’s explorations of his own property, a figurative and literal text/home that defies the customary limits of space, expectation, and navigation, not to mention any totalized sense of textual completion. Mapping the space of this haunted place always already entails the endless process of charting the actual and metaphorical extensions of its correlated spaces. Excursus, so Danielewski illustrates, compounds and confounds the encyclopedic drive for closure. Danielewski gave himself the task of writing the provisional encyclopedia of Kevin Carter’s Pulitzer Prize-winning picture. He, however, does not do this merely as a post-structural exercise. I contend that he does so at least partly because he’s aware, to appropriate Chapman, that “Documentaries and photographs can supplement or replace oral history as a means of providing continuity and a sense of community” (2009, p. 5). Danielewski seems to have anticipated the return to character identification that occurred in the early 2000s, a reinvestment in character that has variously been called late-postmodernism, post-postmodernism, or new conventionalism. With his interests in theory, film, fiction, and “reality,” and his finger on the pulse of emerging official media and reality TV cultures, Danielewski appeared aware that “[cinema] [would] no longer [be] an indexical media technology but rather a subgenre of painting” (Manovich as cited in

Landesman, 2008, pp. 34–35). At the heart of Danielewski’s theoretical novel about writing, documentary, photography, and the possible worlds of the late Kevin Carter is an investment in the art, commitment, and care that determine our everyday experience of the (artificial) reality/realism in the making all around us.

The last time that the “Navidson” Pulitzer Prize is mentioned, so Danielewski’s “Index” reminds us, is on page 419. What surrounds the mention of the award concerns the wider contextualization(s) that any single artistic instant ought to entail:

Consider for the last time the image that won [Navidson] the Pulitzer Prize. Not even taking into account the courage necessary to travel to Sudan, walk the violent, disease-infested streets, and finally discover the child in some rocky patch of earth—all of which some consider a major part of photography and even art—Navidson also had to contend with the infinite number of ways he could photograph her (angles, filters, focus, framing, lighting, etc., etc.) He could have used up a dozen rolls exploring these possibilities, but he did not. He shot her once and in only one way. (Danielewski, 2000, pp. 419-20).

In order to continue this dilation of ekphrasis, which in this case is the expansive treatment of a single, photographic image to encyclopedic discursive embellishment, let me turn to another Zampanò paragraph. It follows the one quoted just above:

In the photograph, the vulture sits behind Delial, frame left, slightly out of focus, primary feathers beginning to feel the air as it prepares for flight. Near the centre, in crisp focus squats Delial, bone dangling in her tawny almost inhuman fingers, her lips a crawl of insects, her eyes swollen with sand. Illness and hunger are on her but Death is still a few paces behind, perched on a rocky mound, talons fully extended, black eyes focused on Famine’s daughter. (p. 420)

Whether or not these two quoted paragraphs are historically “accurate” in terms of process and product, meaning photographer and photograph, meaning the actual and its remediation, is beside the point. What matters is Navidson and Delial’s instantaneous visceral – and hauntingly eternal – connection.

The chapter containing these quoted passages is one of the shortest in *House of Leaves*. Chapter XIX, of a total XXIII (not including almost 200 pages of additional material: exhibits, appendices, etc.), begins with the following Susan Sontag epigram (from page 97) of *On Photography*: “*Contrary to what Weston asserts, the habit of photographic seeing—of looking at reality as an array of potential photographs—creates estrangement from, rather than union with, nature*” (as cited in Danielewski, 2000, p. 418). A handful of pages later, Zampanò includes another selection from Sontag’s *On Photography*, this one a critical reading of the prized photo that gestures toward connection in lieu of estrangement: “Her proximity suggested to us that Delial was still within our reach” (as cited in Danielewski, 2000, p. 421). This closeness, this touchableness, is Sontag’s response to the fact that in the photo, as Zampanò explains, “Delial is not exactly in the centre. She is closer to Navidson, and hence to the observer, by a hair” (p. 421). The same page of Zampanò’s includes this “diagram” –

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– surrounded by a substantial amount of empty space, as my (compromised) simulacrum of the bottom half of 421 illustrates. The missing diagram supposedly evidenced what Zampanò called the “political consequences” of the “photograph’s composition” based on the observer’s proximity to its off-centre, “by a hair,” subject (p. 421).

Footnote 416, appended directly to the absent diagram, provides an instructive excuse for the misplaced data: “Presumably Zampanò’s blindness prevented him from providing an actual diagram of the Delial photograph. — Ed” (p. 421). Ironic, here, is the Editors’ tellingly naïve dismissal of meticulousness based solely on the fact that Zampanò is blind. The texts’ original conceit, we recall, is that *House of Leaves* itself is initially compiled from the dead Zampanò’s own extensive manuscript, a document with a title duplicating that of the documentary film it academically assesses. “The Navidson Record” is a critical study of *The Navidson Record*. Illustrative is the fact that Zampanò’s blindness, coupled with Johnny Truant’s editing (and editorializing), and the Editors’ emendations, not to mention any reader’s own misreading, is the unreliability of authority in this composite text. And the fact that this speculative hairsplitting ultimately doesn’t alter the suffering that readers witness/experience as they attach themselves to Johnny’s attachment to Zampanò’s attachment to Navidson’s attachment to Delial. As Elaine Scarry suggests in “The difficulty of imagining other persons,” to appropriate Austin’s appropriation of her article, “art can facilitate ‘the imaginative labor of knowing ‘the other,’” overcoming the relative poverty of mental imagining to ‘achieve the vivacity of the perceptual world’” (Scarry as cited in Austin, 2007, p. 179).

Note 2 of Will Slocombe’s “‘This is not for you’: Nihilism and the House that Jacques Built” confronts this same “problem of ‘remediation’” (2005, p. 106). Slocombe’s title and subtitle are themselves palimpsests of remediation. “This is not for you” is the undocumented epigram to Johnny’s 14-page “**Introduction**” to a book Johnny comes to ambiguously title *The Navidson Record* (Danielewski, 2000, p. 1). Slocombe’s subtitle, among other things, appears to address the text’s *Time Out New York*-attributed back-cover blurb – that is, the abovementioned “A love story by a semiotician. Danielewski has a songwriter’s heart as attuned to heartache as he is to Derrida’s theory of the sign.” On the surface, the blurb addresses the Derridean theory permeating/directing the text’s theoretical paratexts. It likewise nods towards Derrida himself appearing “in character” in Karen’s short film “**What Some Have Thought**,” a companion piece to her absent film “**A Brief History of Who I Love**.” Zampanò’s blindness, Slocombe avers, “raises the question of how Zampanò watched the video and was able to offer a reading of ‘The Navidson Record.’ This is yet another example of the problem of ‘remediation’ inherent within *House of Leaves*” (2005, p. 106). The problem of remediation, however, is not the principal issue in Danielewski’s first novel. Love is. (Jacques) Derrida’s very brief two-part conversation with Karen at an “Artaud exhibit” centres on the word “other,” a word/concept he repeats six times in but a handful of short sentences (Danielewski, 2000, pp.

361, 365). Derrida's own personal story of "love," so we learn in the documentary *Derrida*, is not something the father of deconstruction is willing to discuss; he knows that the remediation of his talking about his love always already reduces intimacy to the echoes of anecdote (Dick & Ziering Kofman, 2002).

Before concluding, or to conclude, allow me to address another illustrative reliability/reality/realism conundrum in *House of Leaves*. Footnote 415 is attributed to "Zampanò"'s "original" manuscript, a footnote chronologically preceding the Editors' guileless conclusion about why a certain diagram is "[p]resumably" absent. In footnote 415, Sontag's pithy comments on Delial are attributed to "p. 394" of "The Revised Edition" of "On Photography," a book purportedly published by "(Anchor Books, 1996)" (Danielewski, 2000, p. 421). This 1996 remediation of *On Photography*, however, does not exist. Sontag's 200-page essay collection *On Photography*, which won the National Critic Book's Circle Award for Criticism in 1977 – 18 years before the "Delial" photo! – has no revised edition, and was last reissued (if I can trust my searches and sources) by Anchor in 1990.

Readers are therefore compelled both to trust and to distrust the scholarly gestures of *House of Leaves*, and by extension the real world it at once fictionalizes and emulates. The first Sontag quotation, the epigram opening Chapter XIX, is genuine; it exists beyond *House of Leaves*. The second one does not. Yet within the province of *House of Leaves*, the quotation very well *can* be genuine. Fictional representation allows for, even requires, the overlap of the "authentic" and the "inauthentic" – or perhaps it is better to phrase this visible palimpsest, this overlapping of the fictional and the nonfictional, as the commingling of real(ist) world(s) and possible ones. Susan Sontag quotations tellingly frame Chapter XIX. Chapter XIX in a later list in *House of Leaves* is attributed the "**Possible Chapter Title**" "Delial" (Danielewski, 2000, p. 540). And not unlike the representative Delial photo, the composition of this chapter, a composition that is poetic/literary in lieu of photographic/visual in this case, proves to be off-center. Even with Zampanò's diagram conspicuously absent, other words follow the second "Sontag" "quotation" (which we scare quote from without the possible world of *House of Leaves*, but should represent as a Sontag quotation sans rhetorical remove within said world). The framing technique, therefore, is artificial. Or maybe a preferable description is imperfect? Or, this even more demonstratively, is impossible?

To perform ekphrasis, to describe the central action of a painting or a photo, to dilate upon a climax experienced in a single glimpse, is to engage in by-definition endless encyclopedic embellishment. Neither the limits, nor the centre, can hold. More points/questions about these putative limits and debatable centres can likewise be theorized in relation to the second "Sontag quotation"/Sontag quotation. Maybe the "quotation"/quotation actually anachronistically originates in Sontag's coda and corrective to *On Photography*, that is, her 2003 book *Regarding the Pain of Others*. If the "quotation"/quotation does (come to) originate in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, rather than in *On Photography*, is this due to editorial "error" on the part of Danielewski's "Editors"? or Danielewski's narrator "Johnny"? or Johnny's source "Zampanò"? or Danielewski's actual publisher Pantheon? Or is this "error" not an "error" at all? Or perhaps the so-called "error" really is a comment on the usefulness of indices in "nonfictional texts"? After all, Sontag herself (or is it her editor[s]? or her publisher?) refuses to append indices to both *On Photography* and its follow-up, leaving assiduous or enthusiastic *House of Leaves* extra- and intra-text readers to (re)read the 100-plus-page *Regarding the Pain of Others* in hopes of encountering an at least similar comment on the Kevin Carter photo – a comment that might counteract or at least complicate what comes to be Sontag's thesis concerning how violent images desensitize their audiences. Danielewski's encyclopedic

treatment of the photographer of a famous photo, after all, is a complex, haunting, exercise in exorcising the spectacular from photographic experience. Because of Danielewski's ekphrastic deferrals we intimately invest not only in Delial, but also in Carter – and the narrators/characters who intimately invest in them.

But maybe in the world of *House of Leaves* the Sontag coda is different from the one extant in the world beyond *House of Leaves*. Therefore, both Sontag texts could in fact have indices in the world of *House of Leaves*. Yet what if these indices are incomplete or misguided or (un)intentionally obfuscating? Or perhaps in the world of *House of Leaves*, the first Sontag quotation is spurious and the second genuine? or the opposite is true? or neither is genuine? or both are?

Obvious extensions of Danielewski's complications of the transmission of reliable information in the real world are legion. Consider, for example, global, historical who's whos like JFK, Oswald, and J. Edgar Hoover, three American figures epitomizing the image, information, and disinformation that have so consumed and defined middle-class academic subjects since the 1960s, when the conventions of social reality and order and agency were overturned. But who's who? Don DeLillo's Hoover in *Underworld* (1997) or James Ellroy's in *The Underworld USA Trilogy* (1995, 2001, 2009) or Clint Eastwood's in *J Edgar* (2011)? Which Oswald? DeLillo's in *Libra* (1988), Stephen King's in *11/22/63* (2011), Gerald Posner's in *Case Closed* (1993), Norman Mailer's in *Oswald's Tale* (1995) ... or Vincent Bugliosi's in *Four Days in November?* (2007). Or who's JFK do we invest in: Schlesinger's in *A Thousand Days* (1965); or Oliver Stone's in *JFK* (1991); or Christopher Hitchens' in "In Sickness and by Stealth" (2003)? How can we access a non-politicized, non-remediated version of these historical subjects – or is a better, a *truer*, word "characters"? Plus, what is this ability we have to utter and *believe* in truer truths if we don't believe in unmediated truth? If everything is indeed contingent, how can we even say that everything is a contingency? It seems we are somehow logically capable of investing into that which we cannot invest into. How can I disbelieve in any notion of truth, when that very disbelief necessitates a belief in falsity? Even the claim everything is false posits itself as a truth. So what do we privilege, de we trust, de we (re)present?

In returning to the issue of *House of Leaves* and its main focus on endless deferral and reliability, can we not make the claim that the apocryphal film *The Navidson Record* does exist? It exists in the same fashion as the fictional Hamlet, Rosalind, The Ancient Mariner, and Bartleby yet at one extra level of remove or mediation. A more useful illustration, perhaps, is to understand the absent in-text *Navidson Record* in light of other perennially absent characters – and in fact never fictionally represented beyond anecdote. Think of Godot in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1956), of Charlie from the TV series *Charlie's Angels* (1976-81), and of Vera from TV's *Cheers* (1982-93). These characters, or examples of presence through in-text absence, exist in our "fiction"-informed imaginaries. They exist in similar ways to the notorious Witches in Puritan New England, to Orson Welles' Alien Invaders in the radio drama era, to the infamous Reds in the Cold War imaginary, and to the pervasive Sex Rings and Satanic Cults in America's sensationalist 1980s. All of the above are characters or readerly-invested processes that find their bases, their creations and their credibility, however long- or short-lived, in "the art of fiction" – which we recall Bazin roughly described as the necessary artifice of realism (as cited in Chapman, 2009, p. 37). Danielewski's *House of Leaves* reflects upon how fiction, or what Derrida would call myth, determines so-called fact. Whether or not the characters in *House of Leaves* literally see the in-text fictional or in-text nonfictional documentary *The Navidson Record*, readers of the novel do "see" the film, do in fact experience a viewing of the film, precisely because they/we are provided with detailed readings and

counter-readings of the film. This *mise-en-abyme* of mediation (of endlessly deferred remediation) endows *The Navidson Record* with existence, with actuality. In regarding the pain of others, in investing in the reality of others, we connect. In connecting, the suspension of disbelief transforms into belief itself. For readers, for viewers, for audiences, for (cultural) subjects, connection can bridge – can belie – the theoretical divide between realism and “reality.”

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**Corresponding Author:** Jason S. Polley

**Email:** [jspolley@hkbu.edu.hk](mailto:jspolley@hkbu.edu.hk)