

## God is a House

A discussion of Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

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*'Call me impetuous or just curious,' we hear him mutter as he shoves his sore feet into a pair of boots. 'But a little look around isn't going to do any harm.'*

*Without ceremony, he unlocks the door and slips across the threshold with only a Hi 8, a MagLite and his 35 mm Nikon. The commentary he provides us remains very spare: 'Cold. Wow, really cold! Walls are dark. Similar to the closet space upstairs.' Within a few seconds he reaches the end. The hallway cannot be more than seventy feet long. 'That's it. Nothing else. No big deal. Over this Karen and I have been fighting.' Except as Navidson swings around, he suddenly discovers a new doorway to the right. It was not there before.*

If there is one genre of literature in which architecture indisputably plays a leading role, it is the gothic novel. Set in macabre edifices, the genre established its reputation in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century, when the paranormal and the diabolical were common literary themes. Today, the house of horrors is chiefly a fairground attraction. Stories about haunted houses are shelved next to thrillers, for culturally less advanced readers, or with children's books. Thirty years ago, in the poem *Oude Huizen* (Old Houses), the Dutch children's writer Willem Wilmink wrote:

You know what's strange and can make you smile? / To be in an old, old house a while / With places no-one else has found / Where you're the only boss around. / You climb a ladder and open wide / A secret door to the other side. / There's the attic; above your head / Is the roof of the house with its tiles of red. / And in the attic you hear a squeak / As that old house begins to creak. / The sound comes from those heavy beams / They talk among themselves, it seems. (1)

The old house, with its secret rooms and spooky noises, is exciting but not truly frightening. Fun for children, but these days, no-one else believes in ghosts. Or do they? In 2000, critics raved about a new book telling the tale of an *unheimlich*, uncanny house – Mark Z. Danielewski's monumental *House of Leaves*.

The peculiar thing about the house at the heart of *House of Leaves* is that it is larger than an ordinary house, considerably larger, so large in fact that it beggars the imagination of the people who live within its walls. This is a recurring theme in the genre, which filmmakers in particular have eagerly exploited; the extra spaces in such a house demand to be explored, creating opportunities for great visual drama. Take Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), based on a book by Stephen King, in which seven-year-old Danny rides his tricycle through the Overland Hotel, his home for the six-month winter season. A more recent example is Terry Gilliam's *Tideland* (2005), adapted from a novel by Mitch Cullin (dubbed a 'modern gothic version' of *Alice in Wonderland*), in which eleven-year-old Jeliza-Rose discovers a dream world in the attic of the ramshackle house on the Texas prairiewhere she has come to live with her father, a drug addict, following her mother's death. A house that is *unheimlich* is a house where you lose yourself, lose your way, literally or figuratively.

*House of Leaves* was Danielewski's debut novel, the product of ten years' labour, and it defies easy summary. Johnny Truant, who works at a tattoo shop and is addicted to drugs and sex, takes responsibility for the legacy of his friend's neighbour Zampanò, a blind, seedy recluse. He finds a hand-written manuscript (dictated to volunteers) about – of all things – a film, *The Navidson Record*, which the blind man could never have seen and which, as far as Truant can tell, does not really exist. Nonetheless, Zampanò turns out to have amassed an enormous amount of information about it. According to that information, *The Navidson Record* is about a house in the country where

the photojournalist Will Navidson and his wife Karen settle with their children Chad and Daisy (aged eight and five) in an attempt to save their marriage. One day, they discover that the house is larger on the inside than it is on the outside. New spaces spontaneously appear: first a cupboard in the master bedroom, then a hallway off the living room. Navidson begins to film this inexplicable phenomenon. He mounts cameras throughout the house and – sometimes alone, sometimes with others – explores the new rooms, which turn out to be unimaginably large. All of these experiences are captured on film.

Zampanò's study is a meticulous description of the many fragments that make up the film, the family tensions created by the new situation, and the reams of commentary that supposedly followed Navidson's finished documentary. It is crammed with footnotes. Truant, who attempts to tidy up the manuscript and prepare it for publication, adds further notes describing his own experiences. He loses his mind in the process, so these interpolations are not always entirely relevant. On top of all this, there is an editor (also fictional) who inserts comments.

Reflecting on the role of architecture in *House of Leaves* means joining a long queue. This is not because so much has already been published about the book, but primarily because Danielewski included every conceivable commentary in the novel itself, in the form of the endless series of responses to the film that are cited by Zampanò, as well as Zampanò's own innumerable notes, which muster such authorities as Palladio, Christian Norberg-Schulz, Kevin Lynch and Gaston Bachelard. The sources selected in connection with the novel's countless other themes show similar erudition, although just as often they are non-existent works invented by Danielewski for purely narrative reasons. Danielewski's book is a true post-modern novel, which puts Jacques Derrida's lessons into practice. What Danielewski has produced is not a story, but an interplay of commentaries. What is more, he has created a layout to go with it. The labyrinthine structure of the book, and the equally labyrinthine house, have their counterpart in the book's typography, which is at times experimental in the extreme, with passages rotated or mirror-imaged, crowded together or splayed apart. Through the book's 700-plus pages, the word 'house' is consistently printed in blue, as if it were a hyperlink. And you find yourself wondering: a hyperlink to where?

The combination of these elements made the novel an instant hype when it appeared, but it was also criticised. In a way this is understandable. If you are looking for a page-turner, this is not the book for you. It is above all a book for those who can relish the structure of the story. Despite the haunted house theme, it is never truly unsettling. The events are always put back into perspective by the commentary. Without a doubt, that is also the reason this tale of a haunted house has managed to reach a broader public than just horror readers; this is avant-garde literature, an experiment by a focused writer. One is inclined to call it the ultimate self-referential book – or, in Derrida's words, there is no *hors d'oeuvre*.

As irony would have it, however, Danielewski's book draws heavily on biographical details. Though it may seem to have incorporated every possible form of commentary, that does not apply to the final, additional layer that is such a taboo in some literary circles: the author's personal history. The Will Navidson character is unmistakably modelled after Danielewski's father Tad (1921-1993), a film director. His best-known work, *No Exit* (1962), is an adaptation of Jean-Paul Sartre's well-known play *Huis Clos* (*No Exit / In Camera*), about three people trapped forever in a room that turns out to be hell. He also worked on a documentary about Salvador Dalí in Spain during the Franco regime. Before he could complete it, his material was seized for political reasons. Danielewski says, 'My father had invested a lot of money in the film, and he lost everything overnight. This story left its mark on our family: I grew up with a film I had never seen.' (2) This sheds a very different light on the blind Zampanò, writing about a non-existent film. Like Chad in the novel, Mark Danielewski also has a sister, Annie, better known by her stage name of Poe – a tribute to her favourite author, none other than Edgar Allen Poe. In 2000, the year *House of Leaves* was published, she released the CD *Haunted*, an attempt to exorcise the spectres of her youth. The CD, which was used in the soundtrack of *Blair Witch 2: the Book of Shadows*, the sequel to *The*

*Blair Witch Project*, includes many samples of her father's voice (from cassettes she found after his death). Some of the tracks have the same titles as short films discussed in *The Navidson Record* – *5 1/2 Minute Hallway*, *Exploration B* – and another track is actually called *House of Leaves*. In *5 1/2 Minute Hallway*, Poe sings to her dead father 'I live at the end of a five and a half minute hallway / And as far as I can see you are still miles from me in your doorway'. Armed with this information, one is inclined to see *House of Leaves* as a confrontation with an *unheimlich* youth, scarred by – among other things – the divorce of Danielewski's parents.

Where does this confrontation ultimately lead? The mysterious passageway that appears in the house exerts an inexorable pull on Will Navidson, despite all the ominous signs that issue from it. The house is enticing; it opens a path to the unknown. It tests his power to suppress temptation. And the house punishes. It produces paranoia that drives men to murder and suicide. One curious explorer vanishes, another is crushed to death. The house violates the laws of nature. Samples from the walls, collected during the expeditions, reveal on analysis that parts of the house are billions of years old, older than the earth itself and perhaps older than our solar system. Navidson's explanation, which he includes in a farewell letter to his wife just before his final expedition into the unfathomable void of the house, is not at all bad. The house does not house the devil, as so often in this genre. No, the house is . . . God!

And so begins a very different kind of journey from the earlier explorations with their grim aura of danger. It is a homecoming, a surrender, a fearless descent into the unknown, like that of Kris, the astronaut in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, who does not return to earth at the *moment suprême* but decides instead to surrender to the unknown planet he is investigating – a planet which brings memories to life and thus provides happiness, even if it is only substitute happiness. Just as we see Kris happy in his father's arms in the final frames of *Solaris*, so too *The Navidson Record* ends with the image of Navidson, miraculously returned from his final journey. Marked by the events of the novel, but forgiven by his wife, he hesitantly resumes family life. He has visited God and God has returned him, domesticated – though missing an eye, an ear and a hand, and with a crushed hip. Happiness has its price. Dulled senses and reduced mobility work wonders. Danielewski's own story was different. His parents remained divorced, and his mother heard the news of his father's death on her answering machine. You can hear the message on Poe's CD.

1. The original Dutch reads: 'Weet je wat raar is en ook fijn? / om in een heel oud huis te zijn. / Met plekje's die nog niemand kent / en waar jijzelf de baas van bent. / Boven een ladder zie je dan / ineens een luik dat open kan. / Daar is de zolder: je bent vlak / onder de pannen van het dak. / En op die zolder is geruis / geritsel van het oude huis. / Dat zijn die dikke balken daar: / kunnen die praten met elkaar?'

2. Jeroen van Bergeijk, 'Mark Z. Danielewski en de gebroken mens', *VPRO-gids*, 9 June 2001. Quoted in Dutch as follows: 'Mijn vader had veel geld in de film geïnvesteerd en van de ene op de andere dag was hij alles kwijt. Dit verhaal heeft zijn sporen nagelaten in het gezin: ik ben opgegroeid met een film die ik nooit heb gezien.'

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