

# Transformations

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### Movement in the Motif: Semblances and Affective Criticism

By Nick Lord

In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett describes how, under certain conditions, *objects*, motivated by an “energetic spark,” can appear as *things*, able to break free of their passivity and “make things happen” (5). This paper follows a similar line of thought, and turns its attention to the textual, narrative, and material design of the book in order to pose questions about how literature might stimulate bodily affects in the reader. Through an examination of Mark Z. Danielewski’s 2000 novel, *House of Leaves*, I suggest that an appeal to a theory of things can offer a way of opening up a practice of reading that shifts emphasis away from the book’s objectivity and towards its emergent thingness. Danielewski’s novel consists of a number of intertwining narrative levels that encourage the reader to navigate between them – a task that is further complicated by the novel’s gradual dissolution into textual chaos – and to make decisions as to which path to follow and for how long. The reading experience thus emulates the exploration of the mysterious, shifting labyrinth that opens up within the eponymous house. I read the novel’s labyrinthine motif as an example of a *semblance*, that is, a virtual, illusory site in which actual movement – in this case, the reader’s through the labyrinth – is suspended. This will allow me to explore how the book’s construction of labyrinthine textual and narrative spaces is able to invoke and manipulate affect in a way that is, I argue, crucial to an interpretative engagement with the novel’s plot.

*House of Leaves*’s plot emerges from the way in which its various narrative layers interact with each other. The novel is, for the most part, presented as a pseudo-academic text written by a blind, recently deceased man named Zampanò, and which provides a commentary on a peculiar and apocryphal film directed by Will Navidson, a Pulitzer-winning photographer. This documentary film begins in 1990, shortly after Navidson and his family return to their house in Charlottesville after attending a friend’s wedding in Seattle. Perplexed by the sudden appearance of a closet-sized space in one of the house’s bedrooms, Navidson measures the building, only to find that its interior dimensions exceed those of its exterior by a quarter of an inch. Before long, another impossible space disrupts the home: a long hallway opens up that, rather than extending far beyond the house’s limits as would be expected, leads down a staircase and into a vast, shifting labyrinth that opens up within the building. Navidson’s film details the exploration of this labyrinth, as well as the problems in his marriage to Karen Green, which are brought to light during his attempt to chart this uncanny architecture.

Zampanò’s manuscript is pieced together and, to a degree, cleaned up for us by Johnny Truant, a Los Angeles tattoo artist who stumbles upon the mass of writing and scribbling after he and his friend Lude search Zampanò’s apartment. Johnny’s voice, in the form of the introduction and footnotes he adds to the text, serves a variety of functions. First, Johnny often clarifies Zampanò’s references, such as providing a translation for the lines from Charles Baudelaire’s “*Sur Le Tasse en Prison d’Eugne Delacroix*” that serve as an epigraph to Chapter XI (246). Second, and importantly, in researching these references Johnny is unable to locate the books and articles that, according to

Zampanò, discuss Navidson's film. Similarly, when Johnny tries to contact the people who we are told appear in *What Some Have Thought*, he does not "[hear] back from any of the people quoted in this 'transcript' with the exception of Hofstadter who made it very clear he'd never heard of Will Navidson, Karen Green or the house and Paglia who scribbled on a postcard: 'Get lost, jerk'" (354 n328). Given the large amounts of time and effort that Johnny spends on his assumed editorial task, this lack of verification calls the very existence of the film into question.

As this brief summary of the novel's structure demonstrates, each of the narrative levels acts as a commentary on those hierarchically inferior to it: Zampanò's manuscript purports to be a scholarly examination of Navidson's film, and Johnny's footnotes are an attempt to untangle Zampanò's esoteric and questionable writing. Even further outside of these levels are the additions made by the anonymous Editors, who provide their own footnotes that correct Johnny's research or refer the reader to appended material. As Michael Hemmingson observes, the voices that emerge in these footnotes – Zampanò's pseudo-scholarly, Johnny's streetwise, and the Editors' authoritative – compete with each other, and together they "invite the reader into a labyrinth of critifictional playfulness" and to thus "determine which footnotes are misleading, which are clues, and which are the 'truth'" (276). This narrative nesting is complicated, however, by a number of disruptions to the novel's ontological hierarchy. For example, Pelafina, who has "grown increasingly suspicious of the staff" at Whalestoe (609), instructs Johnny to place in his next letter to her a "check mark in the lower right hand corner" so that she knows it has been sent from him and has not been tampered with. Such a check mark appears in the margin of page 97, which critic N. Katherine Hayles reads as "crash[ing] through the narratological structure that encapsulates Pelafina's letters within the higher ontological level of whomever arranges for the deceased woman's correspondence to be included in the manuscript (presumably Johnny) and the published book (presumably the editors)" (129).

Other instances of metalepsis – the transgression of boundaries between narrative levels that we would not necessarily expect to be permeable – occur in the novel: the beast in the tattoo parlour resonates with Pelafina's reference to Johnny's first foster father, "that nit-wit Raymond" who insisted on calling him "beast" (601), as well as the "great beast" that Holloway and his team hear growling and subsequently hunt while they explore the labyrinth (124). More problematic, perhaps, is Navidson's entry into a seemingly infinite chamber of the labyrinth, in which, surrounded by darkness and with no means of exit, he strikes a match and "turns his attention to the last possible activity, the only book in his possession, *House of Leaves*" (465). The novel's nested structure, then is not one in which the readerly flow is directed only from the higher levels towards the lower; rather, these metaleptic moments feed back into that flow, and the order of the levels distorts into the kind of system that Douglas Hofstadter terms a "Tangled Hierarchy" (18), further problematised by the absence of Navidson's film, which would be expected to serve as the bottom tier.

Not only does *House of Leaves*'s narrative structure ask the reader to move, abstractly, between its nested levels, but the arrangement of the words on the novel's pages encourages the eye to engage with the book's concrete materiality. Situating itself within a rich textual tradition – which might include Talmudic pages, medieval scholastic manuscripts, Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, concrete poetry, Derrida's *Glas*, and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* – *House of Leaves* is marked by its ostentatious use of typography, featuring pages that range from being densely packed with text, to being almost blank. Furthermore, there are variations in the *kinds* of text the novel uses: musical notation, Braille, and Morse code are all littered throughout the book. The colour versions of the book add to this spectacle by highlighting certain words; "house" and its foreign equivalents always appear in blue, for example, while struck-through text and the word "Minotaur" are printed in red. In addition to the physical separation of the pages that occurs between the text and its footnotes, the novel includes passages printed in the book's margins, or in stylised boxes that interrupt relatively orthodox stretches of linear prose.

The novel's ostentatious design means that, even before beginning to engage seriously with the

book's narrative, the reader is invited to peruse *House of Leaves*'s visual dimensions, and, by doing so, to gain a sense of its intricacy. Jesse Stommel, for example, in an article in *Hybrid Pedagogy*, writes that his "first encounter with the text was a series of glancing blows, a play between the words, the spaces between them, and the shapes the words and spaces make together on the page" (n.pag.). Indeed, he "barely got through [fifty] pages before [he] stopped doing what most would call 'reading' and began to do what most would call 'browsing'" (n.pag.). This is not an experience particular to Stommel: the Internet's expansive *MZD Forums* is host to a vast number of Danielewski-related threads, many of which detail the difficulties that both first-time and veteran readers of the novel have with their navigation of its pages. Stommel uses this readerly uncertainty as a call for the theorising of what he terms an "interactive criticism" (n.pag.), which, drawing from Laura Marks's work on the haptics of film and from Roland Barthes's exploration of readerly *jouissance*, he describes as a criticism that "considers not only the how our work engages a text but also how that text (sometimes forcibly) engages us" (n.pag.).

To think of *House of Leaves* this way, then, is to recognise in it that quality that allows it to be lifted out of the passivity of objectivity. In order to do this, however, it is productive to determine the ways in which books have been received and theorised as objects. Leah Price, for example, in *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain*, examines Victorian literary representations of the book in order to better understand the complex relationships in these fictions between "reading (doing something with words), handling (doing something with the object), and circulating (doing something to, or with, other persons by means of the book – whether cementing or severing relationships, whether by giving and receiving books or by withholding or rejecting them)" (5). In this analysis, the book retains its passivity, emerging as a book-as-object that is read, handled, and circulated – or indeed, as Price suggests, used "as a doorstep" (6) – by someone for a particular purpose, without its own agency asserting itself and feeding back into the process. Similarly, Walter Benjamin, in his 1931 essay "Unpacking My Library," meditates on the relationship that he, as a collector, has with the books in his collection. For Benjamin, the act of collecting books opens up "a dialectical tension between the poles of order and disorder," with order here manifesting as the publishing information that is recorded in the library's catalogue, while disorder is found in the "spring tide of memories which surges towards any collector as he contemplates his possessions" (60). The essay chronicles the memories he has of the circumstances of his acquisition of his books, and although Benjamin acknowledges that the relationship he has with them "does not emphasise their functional, utilitarian value" (60), the books nevertheless do not break free of their objectivity, remaining as nonassertive items around which Benjamin's subjectivity, in the form of his reflections, flows.

Nor is the reader's relationship to the book-as-thing strictly a matter for phenomenology. Although theorists who approach the act of reading from a phenomenological angle tend in some way to stress a dynamic process that operates between the reader and the literary text, and which must remain "virtual" (Iser 279), the distinction between subject and object is maintained because, in the words of phenomenologist Wolfgang Iser, "one must take into account not only the actual text, but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text" (279). The emphasis that such an approach places on the reader's response displaces any agency the text might have, so that in Iser's conception of the text as a patchwork of information separated by gaps and blanks, the thrill and "dynamism" of reading lies in the reader's ability to fill those gaps, which may lead "in unexpected directions," allowing the opportunity "to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections – for filling in the gaps left by the text itself" (284). Although Iser likens this process to a "living event" on the part of the text, he also makes sure to explain that this is only an *impression* of lifelikeness, and that any "entanglement" in the text that the reader may experience is something that "he himself has produced" (296).

To refocus criticism on *House of Leaves*'s thingness is to take part in a general movement away from the tradition in Western epistemology and ontology that Graham Harman calls "the long dictatorship of human beings in philosophy" (2). Against this legacy has emerged, as Harman puts it, "a ghostly cosmos in which humans, dogs, oak trees, and tobacco are on precisely the

same footing as glass bottles, pitchforks, windmills, comets, ice cubes, magnets, and atoms." This kind of ontological flattening – felt in different ways in, for example, Harman's object-oriented ontology, in Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory, and in Bennett's neovitalism – has opened up ways of focussing on things as they raise questions about non-human agency, and complicate or transform the relationship between subject and object. For theorist Bill Brown, thingness can only be glimpsed partially or obliquely and it offers an experience distinct from that which is extended to us by objects, along with what they "disclose about history, society, nature, or culture [and] above all, what they disclose about *us*" (4; emphasis in original). Rather, our relationship to things is not mediated by interpretive codes; echoing Heidegger's *Werkzeug* analysis in *Being and Time*, Brown writes that we "confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us," and so "[t]he story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation" (4). At the same time, thingness functions as an "index to a certain limit or liminality, [hovering] over the threshold between the nameable and the unnameable, the figurable and the unfigurable, the identifiable and the unidentifiable" (5).

We can see in *House of Leaves* how thingness works at the diegetic level. Apart from providing a commentary on the manuscript, Johnny's footnotes, in conjunction with sections D and E of Appendix II – which include, respectively, his father's obituary and letters from his mother Pelafina, who had been hospitalised at the Three Attic Whalestoe Institute after attempting to strangle the child Johnny – shed light on his own life. Pelafina's psychosis, indicated by the increasingly chaotic typography and paranoid content of her letters, parallels the fragility of Johnny's own sanity, which he considers might be connected to his relationship to the manuscript. The manuscript's thingness emerges here as it takes on a certain power in Johnny's life: after writing down a translation of a passage from Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* that deals with uncanniness, or that feeling of "not-being-at-home" that is experienced when "[e]veryday familiarity collapses" (233), Johnny writes that he "didn't feel himself" and wonders if "something about this passage may have actually affected him" (25 n33). Later that day, while working in the tattoo parlour, he becomes aware of a peculiar presence behind him that makes him "wanna puke" (26), and, somehow seeing behind him without turning, glimpses "some tremendous beast crouched off in the shadows, muscles a twitch from firing its great mass forward, ragged claws slowly extending, digging into the linoleum, even as its eyes are dilating, beyond the point of reason" (27). The subject-object relationship between Johnny and the manuscript changes here, as Johnny is confronted by the peculiar agency it begins to assert in his life. The Navidsons' house functions in a similar manner, creating a dynamic relationship between itself and the characters who explore it by twisting and turning in response to their physical actions and psychological turmoil. Not only does the book in this way thematise thingness, but the *book itself* has the capacity to emerge as a thing for the reader; as Stommel and the users of the *MZD Forums* attest, their ability to interact with *House of Leaves* as a book-object is problematised through its labyrinthine structure and physical arrangement.

A criticism that engages with *House of Leaves* as a thing, then, must consider this particular relationship that the book's thingness offers the reader, and in a way that acknowledges that such thingness tests the limits of language. My way into this problem is through a consideration of the *affective* relationship that opens up between *House of Leaves* and the reader. As Jonathan Flatley points out in his *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*, "[t]he vocabulary of affect can be confusing, in part because there are many terms – *affect*, *emotion*, *feeling*, *passion*, *mood* – and a long history of debate not only about which terms are the right ones and how to distinguish between them, but about what they mean in the first place" (11; emphasis in original). Accordingly, Flatley distinguishes between emotions, which are reducible to combinations of affects and associated ideas, "and vary from context to context, person to person" (12), and affects, which are irreducible. Sigmund Freud gestures towards this in his 1895 discussion of obsessions and phobias, both of which he notes are constituted of "an idea that forces itself upon the patient [and] an associated emotional state" ("Obsessions" 74). Although, as James Strachey indicates,

Freud renders the German *Affekt* as the French *état émotif* (72 n1) – and thus eschews the more direct translation into *affect* in favour of borrowing “a term from the psychiatric vocabulary of the time” (Green 5) – the illustrations he gives of doubt, remorse, and anger all lack the complexity that Flatley finds in the emotion of love, for example, which he identifies as enveloping the “basic affects” of joy and interest (16).

By 1915, Freud modifies this theory, and comes to identify affects as expressions of instincts that under certain conditions have been detached from ideas, and, unlike ideas, cannot be subject to the mechanism of repression (“Repression” 152). Jacques Lacan associates the repressed with the signifier (218), and so it follows that affect, as something that cannot be repressed, is therefore something that cannot be signified, and thus falls outside the realm of the symbolic. For Charles Shepherdson, this provides an opening for thinking about the difference between affect and emotion, the latter of which, he writes, “maintains a symbolic link” (83). Similar distinctions are also found in the works of non-psychoanalytic theorists as diverse as Fredric Jameson, who “wish[es] to redefine emotion as ‘named emotion,’” and so acknowledges that “[t]he new implication is that affect (or its plural) somehow eludes language and its naming of things (and feelings), whereas emotion is preeminently a phenomenon sorted out into an array of names” (29), and Brian Massumi, who defines emotion as “qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions” (*Parables* 28). The point here is that if affect indicates a sensation that somehow resists signification, it presents itself as a way for examining the unqualifiable change in the relationship between subject and object that thingness brings about. It is through this framework that I examine *House of Leaves* in what follows.

As I have outlined briefly, the design of *House of Leaves*'s pages is confusing, encouraging as it does the reader's eye to move across their surfaces, but the text, as an edited commentary on a film that details the exploration of a labyrinth, is itself labyrinthine. Apart from the use of footnotes, Zampanò's manuscript is arranged in quite a straightforward manner until Chapter IX. These early chapters focus on the Navidson's discovery of the labyrinth and their assembly of the team – consisting of Will's brother Tom, engineer Billy Reston, and a group of explorers led by the experienced Holloway Roberts – that will attempt to chart the mysterious space. It is in the ninth chapter, however, which coincides with the disastrous “Exploration #4,” in which Roberts's group becomes lost in the labyrinth, that typography begins to mirror topology. Before this, in Chapter VIII, Roberts and his crew descend into the labyrinth without cameras, while Navidson, stationed in the living room, is only able to monitor their progress through the use of radio. When the radio signal is lost, Navidson and Reston are alerted to trouble by the sound of a tapped-out SOS signal that resonates throughout the house. In Chapter IX, Zampanò does write of the explorers' movement through the labyrinth – based on information made available after their exit – but this is interspersed with long critical and theoretical discussions of labyrinths and space, drawing on the work of such thinkers as, among others, Derrida, Christian Norberg-Schulz, and Seneca. It is in this chapter that the book collapses into extreme typographic play, with some pages consisting of nothing but footnotes, while others run their footnotes in the margins, and those that appear on odd-numbered pages are placed upside down. At other times, footnotes appear within the main text, sometimes sideways and sometimes mirrored. The result here is a labyrinthine arrangement of text that provides a formal parallel to the characters' confusion as they attempt to navigate a labyrinthine space.

Additionally, these labyrinths – architectural, structural, and typographic – mirror the process of mediation and remediation that characterises relationships in the novel, and constitutes what Hayles calls its “mediation plot” (115). Hayles uses this term to refer to the way in which the characters' subjectivities are intimately connected to the media with which they express themselves, and so “[w]hen relationships are not mediated by inscription technologies they decay toward alienation, and when they are mediated, they progress toward intimacy” (114). The short film *Karen* dedicates to Will functions in this way, as it is only through this “filmic sonnet” that she is able to communicate her feelings to Will (*House* 368). Additionally, Natalie Hamilton reads

the film as Karen's entry into "her own labyrinth" of examination (6), figured in terms of the house's peculiar architecture, of both her self and her relationship with Will. The novel and the house thus emerge as sites for the negotiation of relationships that can only be explored and expressed through a labyrinthine process of representation.

So, what the book offers us is the spatial figure of the labyrinth, which is doubled at the levels of, to put it crudely, content and form. We can, therefore, think of the novel's persistent use of the labyrinth as a *motif*. To think of it this way not only helps us to describe the repetition of labyrinthine figures throughout the book, but it also resonates with Suzanne Langer's account of how "in the motifs of pure decoration – zigzags and S-curves, parallels and spirals and loops – we find the basic principles of expressiveness, forms that seem to 'have life' not because they represent anything living, but because they symbolize directly the *sense of life*, which underlies all our feelings" ("Principles" 71; emphasis in original). This has some important consequences for my reading of *House of Leaves* as a thing. Drawing from Friedrich Schiller's philosophy of aesthetics, Langer discusses the *Schein*, or *semblance*, which is the "direct aesthetic quality" of an object, and which may result in an "actual illusion" – like a shadow or a rainbow – or a "quasi-illusion" made by artistic emphasis (*Feeling* 50). In *House of Leaves*, the labyrinth motif that is repeated across both the levels of form and content function as a semblance, creating an illusory labyrinthine quality produced by the aesthetic, conceptual unity of the arrangements of the words on the pages, of the metaleptic switching that the novel's ontologies engender, and of the literary representation of the architectural labyrinth that the characters explore.

The vicarious, semiotic movement of the reader through this kind of virtual space is for Massumi suspended and frozen, as such a

design calls forth a certain vitality affect – the sense we would have, for example of moving our eyes down a branch of rustling leaves, and following that movement with our hands. But that life dynamic comes without the potential for it to be actually lived. It's the same lived relation when we "actually" see leaves, it's the same potential. But it's *purely* potential. We can't live it out. We can only live it *in* – *in* this form – implicitly. It's like the motif has taken the abstraction that is the leaf and made it appear more abstractly. So abstractly it can't go any further than *this* appearance. The body is capacitated, but the capacity has nowhere else to go. It's in suspense. (*Semblance* 43)

As both Langer and Massumi indicate, the suspension of potential and the freezing of movement that constitute semblances have the capacity to trigger certain "vitality affects." This is the term used by the psychologist Daniel Stern to describe those "qualities of feelings" that are "inextricably involved with all the vital processes of life, such as breathing, getting hungry, eliminating, falling asleep and emerging out of sleep, or feeling the coming and going of emotions" (54). Unlike categorical affects, which are static, and which include anger and sadness, vitality affects are those "elusive qualities that are better captured by dynamic, kinetic terms," and can be thought of as a "rush" (Stern 54). It is through the interconnecting stories that move across the levels of the narratives and across the pages in surprising and unorthodox ways that the recurrent figure of the labyrinth presents those qualities of anxiety, uncertainty, frustration, and so on that are associated with a real, physical labyrinth.

In the case of *House of Leaves*, it is the repetition of the labyrinthine form – or the conversion of a figure into a motif – that helps to activate what we might think of as the book's affective affordance, and in the persistence of this particular form we find the suspended potential for movement. A labyrinth is, after all, more than just a static design; it is a shape that is always connected to motion – whether that motion comes in the form of our bodies walking through a hedge maze, or of our eyes tracing, for example, the embellishments on the capital of a Greek column. And it is in this movement through such a semblance that we find what Stern calls the "activation contours" of vitality affects (56). The labyrinth is an exemplary form in this regard: it is

our task to find an uninterrupted pathway through the maze, and, when we do, we feel a rush of accomplishment, while if we find ourselves blocked at each turn we are overcome with surges of frustration. In *House of Leaves*, not only do our eyes move across the page, trying to find some Ariadne's thread through the chaotic typography that might help us "solve" the book, but we are also at once tasked with and prevented from tying the various levels of the narrative together – all of which are echoes of the labyrinths that the characters are trying to negotiate. To pay attention to the way *House of Leaves*'s meticulous design reveals the altered objectivity, as well as to our affective, readerly response to the labyrinthine semblance that is central to that design, is to move towards a type of criticism that emphasises its thingness.

As Massumi might say, the Navidsons' labyrinth cannot be lived *out* by the reader, but, thanks to the suspended potential for movement in the labyrinthine semblance, the reader can live it *in*, implicitly, by experiencing the vitality affects the form affords. *House of Leaves* is, perhaps, an extreme case of the persistence of a structural and thematic figure, but in that extremity lies its usefulness for demonstrating how the concept of thingness might be adapted and modified so that an affective, bodily criticism of literature might be established.

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