Layout as narrative tool in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

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Abstract

This thesis explores to what extent the experimental layout of Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves* (2000) fulfils a narrative function within the context of discussion on the novel and narrative culture. I combine an analysis of the layout with sketches to map the reading paths and an autoethnographic reading journal to analyse the effects of the layout on the reading experience. Drawing on the concepts of metamodernism, alienation, and *inszenierende Tyopgrafie*, I argue that the layout of *House of Leaves* goes beyond illustrating the labyrinthine space at the centre of the story. It fulfils a narrative function through its impact on the reader's experience of and engagement with the novel, as well as by shaping interpretations of the story.

Keywords: House of Leaves, literature, metamodernism, alienation, typography, narrative culture

And then the walls reappear, along with the ceiling and numerous doorways; the shifts always accompanied by that inimitable, and by now very familiar, growl.

As the days pass, Navidson becomes more and more aware that he is running precariously low on water and food. Even worse, the sense of inevitable doom this causes him is compounded by the sense of immediate doom he feels whenever he begins riding his bike: "I can't help thinking I'm going to reach an edge to this thing. I'll be going too fast to stop and just fly off into darkness."

Which is almost what happens.

On the twelfth or thirteenth day (it is very difficult to tell which), after sleeping for what Navidson estimates must have been well over 18 hours, he again sets off down the hallway.

Soon the walls and   doorways recede and

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                                                          out
ceiling
                                    completely

                              is
                                                          out
lifts
                        too
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            it   is   of
                        too

until   sight

For Alice

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'What are you reading?' This question is usually easy enough to answer either with the title if the book is known well enough ('Harry Potter.'), the name of the author provided they are reasonably well known ('Håkan Nesser's latest book.'), a vague reference to the genre ('It's a fantasy novel.'), or a brief synopsis ('It's about a cabaret artist who lives in Berlin and one day a communist kangaroo shows up and moves in with him. From then on, they fight fascism, capitalism, and bad weather, and occasionally commit anti-terror attacks.'). Yet, when I was reading *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski (2020) none of these options seemed to provide a satisfying answer to a seemingly straightforward question. When asked what I was reading, I would usually begin with an explanation of questionable coherence along the lines of 'It's a story about a house that is bigger on the inside and the space keeps changing which is discovered by a photographer who moves in with his family and then makes a documentary about it. But that might all be made up, because it is written as an analysis of this documentary by a dead blind man. And this other character, Johnny, finds the analysis and becomes obsessed with it, so there is that, too.' Eventually, I would hand over the book: 'And it's just really weird, in a good way – I think. Here, look!' And so, when opening the book and leafing through the pages, my interlocutor would see for themselves the 'weird' layout of the pages; the use of different fonts, the countless footnotes, passages of text that were flipped, tilted, or otherwise distorted, the use of the colours blue and read for specific text passages or words.

House of Leaves has been described as a horror novel, a postmodern take on a haunted house story, and even a love story (Wittmershaus, 2011; Wrethed, 2020; Sanakar & Alexander, 2021), and while the mystery of the changing space of the house, the questionable reliability of the characters, and the unsettling events in Johnny's life intrigued me, it was above all the layout that first sparked my curiosity and continued to fascinate me throughout the novel. While existing research on *House of Leaves* highlights aspects such as the role of space in the novel both in the sense of physical space and as a psychological representation, as well as the theme of the labyrinth and trauma (Hamilton, 2008; Boothroyd, 2015), a common observation is that the layout is a feature that stands out in the novel and mirrors the labyrinthine structure of the house at the centre of the story and creates fragmented reading paths for the readers to follow (Hayles, 2002; Hamilton, 2008; Aghoro, 2012; Boothroyd, 2015). But is the layout merely a fun element to engage the readers, a gimmick so to say, or does it have a more profound function? Based on my reflections while reading and existing academic discussions on the

novel, I developed my research question: *To what extent does the layout of* House of Leaves *by Mark Z. Danielewski (2000) fulfil a narrative function?*

There is some further debate on whether the novel can be classified as a modern (Huber, 2012) or postmodern (Hayles, 2002; Barrett, 2011) work of literature with others yet again going so far as to argue that *House of Leaves* can best be understood in the context of metamodernism (Toth, 2017; Medaglia, 2023). On the basis of this argument, I draw on metamodernism as a perspective to analyse the novel's oscillation between immersion and alienation as an aspect of the reading experience that is particularly influenced by the layout. I combine this perspective with an understanding of alienation that is based on Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* ('alienating effect') and Shklovsky *ostranenie* ('defamiliarization'). This allows me to explore how alienation – i.e., through interruptions to the text and reading flow created by the layout – can encourage both critical reflection as well as emotional engagement. Finally, the concept of *inszenierende Typografie* ('enacting' or 'staging typography') provides a basis for understanding the novel's layout features, how they relate to its content beyond the illustrative as well as the reading experience and narrative function in relation to the layout impacting readability and the reader's level of immersion.

To answer my research question within the context of the above referred to perspectives, I conduct an analysis of the layout that draws on the method of close reading but also incorporates foci on visual and spatial as well as typographical aspects. I complement this approach with an autoethnographic reading journal that focuses on the experience of reading *House of Leaves*. The combination of these two approaches aims at generating an in-depth understanding of the layout's narrative function by taking into account the effect of the layout on the reader and their reading experience, and *how* these impacts are achieved through the layout. I make use of sketches and illustrations both as a tool to analyse the novel's layout, and as a means to communicate certain aspects of my findings.

My research is thus situated within the context of academic debates on Danielewski's novel adding a particular focus on its layout's narrative function through which form and content become intertwined. It thereby also contributes with insights into how layout more broadly *can* be used as a tool within narrative culture to shape reading experiences and interpretations of literary texts.

I argue that the layout of *House of Leaves* impacts the reading experience: It illustrates the content and engages the reader by creating a labyrinthine experience for them that can be likened to the labyrinth the characters of the story have to navigate through. This experience depends on whether – and to what extent – the reader follows the reading path suggested by the

layout or instead follows other possible reading paths created by it. Through effects such as disruptions to the text and thus the reading flow, the layout at times results in a type of alienation that creates a critical distance of the reader to the text and allows them to reflect more profoundly on the content. Thus, the layout becomes intertwined with the content of the novel and actively shapes interpretations of the text and becomes a fundamental narrative tool within the context of the novel *House of Leaves*.

Literature Review and Theory

In the following section, I provide a background on *House of Leaves*. I summarise the story for context and review previous readings and analyses of the novel including several researchers' discussions on the labyrinth as a theme, their analysis of the novel's structure, and *House of Leaves* as a work of metamodern literary fiction. I explore what metamodernism as a theoretical lens entails and draw on its concept of oscillation in specific as a useful tool to understand the narrative function of the layout of Danielewski's novel. I, then, discuss the concept of alienation drawing on Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* and Viktor Shklovksy's *ostranenie* which relate to the metamodern aspects of *House of Leaves* in that the layout creates an oscillation between immersion and alienation (see *Analysis*). Finally, I discuss *inszenierende Typografie* ('staging' or 'enacting typography') as presented by Hans Peter Willberg and Friedrich Forssman (1997) since it provides helpful insights into the functioning of the layout of *House of Leaves* and how it differs from standard typography for literary works of fiction.

This review provides additional context and forms the basis of my own analysis to answer the question to what extent the layout of the novel fulfils a narrative function. As my method contains approaches that are rooted in my autoethnographic, and thus subjective, reading of *House of Leaves*, the discussion of others' analyses of the novel provides not only valuable insights into the narrative functioning of the layout but serves simultaneously as a reference point to contextualise and compare my autoethnographic findings against, and thus to situate them in a larger academic context, and to increase the validity and reliability of my research.

House of Leaves

House of Leaves, published in 2000 but supposedly written over the course of a decade (Wittmershaus, 2011), is the debut novel of American author Mark Z. Danielewski. The novel has been described as, among other things, horror (Sankar & Alexander, 2021), a postmodern take on the gothic haunted house trope (Wrethed, 2020), and as a love story (Wittmershaus, 2011). If you walk into Sci-Fi Bokhandeln in Malmö, you will find the *House of Leaves* in the shelves dedicated to horror novels, and if you look for it at the library of Kassel University, you will be directed to the books belonging to the art faculty.

The story itself is told by different voices. The main body of text is a scholarly critique of a documentary titled *The Navidson Record* – imagined and invented by the narrator and critic, Zampanò, about whom not much is known. *The Navidson Record* is the work of an equally

fictional prize-winning photographer, Will Navidson. Navidson sets out to document his and his family's move to a house in suburban Virginia as he attempts to reconnect with his family. Soon after their move, a mysterious room appears where there had been only a wall before which results in Navidson's discovery that the house is slightly bigger on the inside than when measured on the outside.

When a long and dark hallway appears, a team consisting of friends and acquaintances embark to explore and make sense of the shifting dimensions of the house. Events soon begin to spiral out of control, both regarding the exploration and Navidson's relationship with this partner, Karen. In his critique, Zampanò explores different themes such as echoes, architecture, representation, the labyrinth, and the Minotaur from Greek mythology.

In addition to the occasional footnotes containing annotations by Zampanò and comments by the unnamed editors, Zampanò's text is riddled with footnotes made by a character named Johnny Truant. By coincidence – or unfortunate serendipity – Johnny finds the manuscript *House of Leaves* written by the recently deceased Zampanò. He works his way through Zampanò's writing to create a publishable text and becomes increasingly obsessed with Zampanò's analysis of *The Navidson Record*. In his footnotes, Johnny not only provides comments on the text and translations of quotes written in i.e., German, Latin, French, or Spanish, but – more often than not – drifts off into the events of his own life which spiral out of control parallel to the events of *The Navidson Record* as related to the reader.

These plotlines are completed by several appendices which include material such as poems, snippets of text, and a collection of letters from Johnny's mother, Pelafina, to her son (*The Whalestoe Letters*) during her hospitalisation at a mental hospital and leading up to her death.

What stands out at first glance is the unusual formatting of the novel (see *Illustration 1*): The different voices are set apart by their typeface; while Johnny's annotations are set in a Courier typeface, Zampanò's text is formatted in Times New Roman, and a Bookman typeface marks the editors voice (Wittmershaus, 2011). The word *house* is printed in a blue colour, Johnny's footnotes frequently expand over several pages interrupting Zampanò's voice, and strange symbols appear in some of the chapters. Whereas the novel begins with a standard start-at-the-top-left-finish-at-the-bottom-right format, the text eventually begins to sprawl diagonally across the page, tilts, shifts, or turns upside-down in some passages so that the reader is forced to turn the book sideways or on its head to read the text.

I

I saw a film today, oh boy . . .

— The Beatles

While enthusiasts and detractors will continue to empty entire dictionaries attempting to describe or deride it, "authenticity" still remains the word most likely to stir a debate. In fact, this leading obsession—to validate or invalidate the reels and tapes—invariably brings up a collateral and more general concern: whether or not, with the advent of digital technology, image has forsaken its once unimpeachable hold on the truth.[1]

For the most part, skeptics call the whole effort a hoax but grudgingly admit *The Navidson Record* is a hoax of exceptional quality. Unfortunately out of those who accept its validity many tend to swear allegiance to tabloid-UFO sightings. Clearly it is not easy to appear credible when after vouching for the film's verity, the discourse suddenly switches to why Elvis is still alive and probably wintering in the Florida Keys.[2] One thing remains certain: any controversy surrounding Billy Meyer's film on flying saucers[3] has been supplanted by the house on Ash Tree Lane.

Though many continue to devote substantial time and energy to the antinomies of fact or fiction, representation or artifice, document or prank, as of late the more interesting material dwells exclusively on the interpretation of events within the film. This direction seems more promising, even if the house itself, like Melville's behemoth, remains resistant to summation.

Much like its subject, *The Navidson Record* itself is also uneasily contained—whether by category or lection. If finally catalogued as a gothic tale, contemporary urban folkmyth, or merely a ghost story, as some have called it, the documentary will still, sooner or later, slip the limits of any one of those genres. Too many important things in *The Navidson Record* jut out past the borders. Where one might expect horror, the supernatural, or traditional paroxysms of dread and fear, one discovers disturbing sadness, a sequence on radioactive isotopes, or even laughter over a *Simpsons* episode.

In the 17th century, England's greatest topographer of worlds satanic and divine warned that hell was nothing less than "Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace/ And rest can never dwell, hope never

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[1]A topic more carefully considered in Chapter IX.

[2]See Daniel Bowler's "Resurrection on Ash Tree Lane: Elvis, Christmas Past, and Other Non-Entities" published in *The House* (New York: Little Brown, 1995), p. 167-244 in which he examines the inherent contradiction of any claim alleging resurrection as well as the existence of that place.

[3]Or for that matter the Cottingley Fairies, Kirlian photography, Ted Serios' thoughtography or Alexander Gardner's photograph of the Union dead.

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she still cannot resist looking out the window every couple of minutes. The sound of a passing truck causes her to glance away. Even if there is no sound, the weight of a hundred seconds always turns her head.

Though clearly a matter of opinion, Karen's gaze seems just as lost as it is "surfeit with love and longing."[17] The reasons are in part answered when at last Navidson's car pulls into the driveway. Karen hardly attempts to contain her relief. She instantly leaps up from the mini candle factory and dashes from the room. Seconds later—no doubt thinking better of herself—she returns.

"Daisy, hold off using the scissors until I get back."

"Mommy!" Daisy shrills.

"You heard what I said. Chad keep an eye on your sister."

"Mommy!" Daisy squealing even louder.

"Daisy, mommy also wants you to look after your brother."

This seems to appease the little girl, and she actually settles down, smugly eyeing Chad even as she continues to snip wicks.

Strangely enough, by the time Karen reaches Navidson in the foyer, she has quite effectively masked all her eagerness to see him. Her indifference is highly instructive. In that peculiar contradiction that serves as connective tissue in so many relationships, it is possible to see that she loves Navidson almost as much as she has no room for him.

"Hey, the water heater's on the fritz," she manages to say.

"When did that happen?"

She accepts his brief kiss.

"I guess last night."[18]

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[17]Max C. Garten's "100 Looks" in *Vogue*, v. 185, October 1995, p. 248.

[18]I got up this morning to take a shower and guess what? No fucking hot water. A pretty evil discovery especially when you're depending on that watery wake-up call, me being massively dehydrated from a long night drunk my road-dog Lude and I winged our way onto last night. As I'm remembering it now, we somehow ended up at this joint on Pico, and soon thereafter found ourselves in conversation with some girls wearing black cowboy hats, supposedly lost in their own private-blend of brain-hatching euphoria—Thank you Herbal Ecstasy—prompting us to put a little Verbal Ecstasy on them which would, as it turned out, ultimately lead them giggling into the night.

I've forgotten now what we did exactly to get the whole thing rolling. I think Lude started giving one of them a trim, whipping out his scissors which he always has on hand, like old gunslingers I guess always had on hand their Colts—there he goes, snipping locks & bangs, doing a great fucking job too, but hey he's a pro, and all of it in the dark too, on a barstool, surrounded by dozens of who knows who, fingers & steel clicking away, tiny bits of hair spitting off into the surrounding turmoil, the girls all nervous until they see he really is the shit and then they're immediately chirping "me, next" & "do me" which is too easy to remark upon, so instead Lude & I remark upon something else which this time round is all about some insane adventure I supposedly had when I was a Pit Boxer. Mind you I'd never heard that term before nor had Lude. Lude just made it up and I went with it.

"Aw come on, they don't want to hear about that," I said with about as much reluctance as I could reasonably feign.

"No Hoss, you're wrong," Lude insisted. "You must."

"Very well," I said, starting then to recall for everyone how at the lonely age of nineteen I had climbed off a barge in Galveston.

By June—as the date on the Hi 8 tape indicates—the problem still remains unsolved. Tom, however, realizes he cannot afford to stay any longer and asks Reston to give him a lift to Charlottesville where he can catch a ride up to Dulles.

It is a bright summer morning when we watch Tom emerge from the house. He gives Karen a quick kiss good-bye and then kneels down to present Chad and Daisy with a set of neon yellow dart guns.

"Remember kids," he tells them sternly. "Don't shoot each other. Aim at the fragile, expensive stuff."

Navidson gives his brother a lasting hug.

"I'll miss you, man."

"You got a phone," Tom grins.

"It even rings," Navidson adds without missing a beat.

While there is no question the tone of this exchange is jocular and perhaps even slightly combative, what matters most here is unspoken. The way Tom's cheeks burn with a sudden flush of color. Or the way Navidson quickly tries to wipe emotion from his eyes. Certainly the long, lingering shot of Tom as he tosses his duffel bag in the back of Reston's van, waving the camera good-bye, reveals to us just how much affection Navidson feels for his brother.

Strangely enough, following Tom's departure, communication between Navidson and Karen begins to radically deteriorate.

An unusual quiet descends on the house.

Karen refuses to speak about the anomaly. She brews coffee, calls her mother in New York, brews more coffee, and keeps track of the real estate market in the classifieds.

Frustrated by her unwillingness to discuss the implications of their strange living quarters, Navidson retreats to the downstairs study, reviewing photographs, tapes, even—as a few stills reveal—compiling a list of possible experts, government agencies, newspapers, periodicals, and television shows they might want to approach.

At least both he and Karen agree on one thing: they want the children to stay out of the house. Unfortunately, since neither Chad nor Daisy has had a real opportunity to make any new friends in Virginia, they keep to themselves, romping around the backyard, shouting, screaming, stinging each other with darts until eventually they drift farther and farther out into the neighborhood for increasingly longer spates of time.

Neither Karen nor Navidson seems to notice.

The alienation of their children finally becomes apparent to both of them one evening in the middle of July.

Karen is upstairs, sitting on the bed playing with a deck of Tarot cards. Navidson is downstairs in his study examining several slides returned from the lab. News of Oliver North's annulled conviction plays on the TV. In the background, we can hear Chad and Daisy squealing about something, their voices peeling through the house, the strained music of their play threatening at any instant to turn into a brawl.

With superb cross-cutting, Navidson depicts how both he and Karen react to the next moment. Karen has drawn another card from the deck but instead of adding it to the cross slowly forming before her crossed legs, the occult image hangs unseen in the air, frozen between her two fingers, Karen's eyes already diverted, concentrating on a sound, a new sound, almost out of reach, but reaching her just the same. Navidson is

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taneously incorporate order and disorder, clarity and confusion, unity and multiplicity, artistry and chaos. They may be perceived as a path (a linear but circuitous passage to a goal) or as a pattern (a complete symmetrical design) . . . Our perception of labyrinths is thus intrinsically unstable: change your perspective and the labyrinth seems to change.[134]

Unfortunately the dichotomy between those who participate inside and those who view from the outside breaks down when considering the house, simply because no one ever sees that labyrinth in its entirety. Therefore comprehension of its intricacies must always be derived from within.

This not only applies to the house but to the film itself. From the outset of *The Navidson Record*, we are involved in a labyrinth, meandering from one celluloid cell to the next, trying to peek around the next edit in hopes of finding a solution, a centre, a sense of whole, only to discover another sequence, leading in a completely different direction, a continually devolving discourse, promising the possibility of discovery while all along dissolving into chaotic ambiguities too blurry to ever completely comprehend.[135]

In order to fully appreciate the way the ambages unwind, twist only to rewind, and then open up again, whether in Navidson's house or the film—*quae itinerum ambages occursusque ac recursus inexplicabiles*[136]—we should look to the etymological inheritance of a word like 'labyrinth'. The Latin *labor* is akin to the root *labi* meaning to slip or slide backwards[137] though the commonly perceived meaning suggests difficulty and work. Implicit in 'labyrinth' is a required effort to keep from slipping or falling; in other words stopping. We cannot relax within those walls, we have to struggle past them. Hugh of Saint Victor has gone so far as to suggest that the antithesis of labyrinth—that which contains work—is Noah's ark[138]—in other words that which contains rest. ✗

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[134]Penelope Reed Doob, *The Idea Of The Labyrinth: from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p.1 ✗

[135]At least, as Daniel Hortz lamented, "By granting all involved the right to wander (e.g. daydream, free associate, phantasize [sic] etc., etc.; see Gaston Bachelard) that which is discursive will inevitably re-appropriate the heterogeneity of the disparate and thus with such an unanticipated and unreconciled gesture bring about a re-assessment of self." ~~Or in other words, like the house, the film itself captures us and prohibits us at the same time as it frees us, to wander, and so first misleads us, inevitably, drawing us from the us, thus, only in the end to lead us, necessarily, for where else could we have really gone?, back again to the us and hence back to ourselves~~—See Daniel Hortz's *Understanding The Self: The Maze of You* (Boston: Garden Press, 1995), p. 261.[129]

[136]["Passages that wind, advance and retreat in a bewilderingly intricate manner." — Ed.] Pliny also wrote when describing the Egyptian maze: "*sed crebis foribus inditis ad fallendos occursus redeundumque in errores eosdem.*" ["Doors are let into the walls at frequent intervals to suggest deceptively the way ahead and to force the visitor to go back upon the very same tracks that he has already followed in his wanderings.—Ed.] ✗

[137]*Labi* is also probably cognate with "sleep."[134]

[138]See Chapter Six, footnote 82, Tom's Story as well as footnote 249. — Ed.

"I have no sense of anything other than myself," he mumbles.

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Illustration 1. The pages shown here provide examples of several layout features used in House of Leaves *including footnotes and the use of different fonts (Danielewski, 2000: 3, 12), the use of different colours – red for specific passages and blue for the word 'house' (Danielewski, 2000: pp. 56, 114), and tilted or upside-down text (Danielewski, 2000: pp. 471, 475).*

Labyrinth

The labyrinth appears as a central element in Danielewski's novel; as a theme within the content as well as echoed in the layout of the text (Hayles, 2002; Hamilton, 2008; Boothroyd, 2015). The labyrinthine narrative structure of *House of Leaves* has several implications. It functions as a representation of the disintegrating stability of physical space in the content of the novel and in parallel constitutes a break with conventions of narratological form as David Boothroyd (2015) points out.

Natalie Hamilton (2008) argues that the labyrinth functions as a symbol which represents both the psychological journey of the characters towards the Self as they are confronted with the spatial labyrinth of Navidson's house, and the journey of the reader toward the text as they work their way through the metafictional labyrinth of the text layout. This narrative structure impacts and complicates aspects of temporality and spatiality as 'the story's architecture is

envisioned not as a sequential narrative so much as alternative paths within the same immense labyrinth of fictional space-time' (Hayles, 2002: 785).

Paths through the narrative labyrinth

The alternative paths which Katherine Hayles refers to emerge from the fragmented structure of *House of Leaves* as texts within texts – not unlike a Chinese box. When separated into its individual parts, the narrative unfolds into the following sub-narratives (c.f., Hayles, 2002; Hamilton, 2008): At the centre of the novel's story is *The Navidson Record* which relates the events unfolding in Navidson's house on Ash Tree Lane mediated through Navidson's – and on one occasion his brother's (Tom) and Karen's – recordings and edits. The documentary itself includes various reflections on and interpretations of these events.

As the reader does not have first-hand access to the documentary, they only know of it through the analysis, interpretations, re-interpretations, and commentary of Zampanò. Zampanò's narrative in turn is mediated through Johnny's attempt to make sense of Zampanò's notes and writings as well as through his commentary which, on most occasions, transitions into accounts of Johnny's own life. It is on this narrative level that explicit doubts are cast on the authenticity of Zampanò's sources and the very existence of *The Navidson Record* and Navidson themselves.

Finally, the voice of the unnamed editors is added in the form of further footnotes as well as through additional material in the appendices alongside fragmented writings by Zampanò, and letters by Johnny's mother.

Natalie Hamilton (2008) and Nathalie Aghoro (2012) argue that Johnny's and the editors' footnotes and appendices create a labyrinth of reading paths (and dead ends) that echo the disorientation of the characters, confuse the reader, and make different approaches of reading and paths through the novel possible. Hence, it becomes the responsibility of the reader to actively engage with *House of Leaves* and piece together the fragmented components to 'create a mosaic in which the whole becomes more than its parts' (Huber, 2012: 125-126).

The possibility to follow different paths through the narrative labyrinth of the novel's layout signifies to Aghoro (2012) that the reading of the novel is necessarily a personal, subjective experience in which the reader is imbued with the active role of making the text somehow accessible. The implication of this feature is that the meanings that are created emerge as much from the reading experience as from the content of the book itself.

At a closer look, the paradoxical nature of certain of the novel's aspects is revealed (Aghoro, 2012): The dedication – 'This is not for you' (Danielewski, 2000: ix) – can be interpreted as an attempt to ward off potential readers (fictional and real) at the same time as it is an invitation in so far as it directly addresses the reader. This opening statement points towards another paradox that emerges from the reading experience of *House of Leaves*: The unfamiliar typography of the novel distracts and disorients as much as it pulls in the reader to immerse them in the story. As the reader is pulled out of their immersion through the disorientation caused and interruptions of the reading flow created by the layout, their attention is diverted form one narrative strand toward another path with the likely result of forgetting the original starting point until they return to it (Hamilton, 2008).

The mirroring of a labyrinth in the formal structure of the text and the sense of being lost due to the complexity of the layout and the convoluted voices that narrate the content lends itself to identification with the characters as much as it disrupts the reading and thereby draws attention to the very act of reading (Hayles, 2002; Hamilton, 2008).

Hamilton (2008: 14) describes there seemingly contradictory effects with the following words:

> … the terror experienced by the characters at all [narrative] levels of the novel is made more immediate for the reader because of the bizarre and unfamiliar typography of the book, which not only delays apprehension of the various plots through constant diversion but also makes the act of reading the novel and unfamiliar experience.

House of Leaves: A metamodern novel

Hayles (2002) as well as Laura Barrett (2011) identify *House of Leaves* as a haunted house tale with a postmodern twist due to its theme of representation and the connected realisation that there exists no reality independent of mediation. For Anneleen Masschelein (2003), the novel's postmodern characteristics can be found in the complexity of its plot combined with its experimental layout and self-reflexive elements that give it a metaliterary character: It becomes a work of literature that is aware of the existence of other literary works and of itself as one of them (Sutherland, 2013; c.f., Spanos, 1990).

Sebastian Huber (2012), however, suggests that it is possible to read *House of Leaves* from a modernist perspective due to elements typical of modernism such as an emphasis on spatiality rather than temporality, and Freudian psychoanalysis as a theme. Based on these various

analyses of *House of Leaves*, as well as Fred Botting's remark that the novel 'both registers and resists changes in contemporary modes of literary production, recording and reading' (Botting, 2015: 239) it becomes apparent that there exist some difficulties in attempts to classify *House of Leaves* as clearly modern or postmodern.

Others (Toth, 2017; Medaglia, 2023) have thus argued that while including elements of both modernism and postmodernism, *House of Leaves* is neither modern nor postmodern but a metamodern literary work. Metamodernism is a fairly new theoretical perspective the label of which has in recent years been applied to a growing collection of works of cultural expression including *Fight Club* and Umberto Ecco's *The Name of the Rose* (Stoev, 2022), Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the works of Quentin Tarantino and Sophia Coppola, Jonathan Franzen's *Mr. Difficult* (Toth, 2017) as well as Wes Anderson's *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (MacDowell, 2017), and Steven Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts* (Medaglia, 2023).

I argue that metamodernism – and its concept of oscillation between opposites or contradictions in particular – provides a well-suited lens through which the use of layout as a narrative tool in *House of Leaves* can be understood. Not only has the novel as a whole been attested metamodern characteristics, as discussed above, but its fluctuation between immersive and alienating effects on the reader, as well as its play with totality and fragmentation (see *Paths through the narrative labyrinth*; c.f., Hamilton, 2008; Huber, 2012) can be understood through metamodernism's take on oscillation.

Metamodernism: A new paradigm

Olena Hubernator (2023) argues that metamodernism is a new paradigm that is characterised by a search for authenticity and states of being that allow the fragmented self to become part of new configurations of meaning. Metamodernism arguably emerged around the turn of the millennium as a response of increasing global crises of social, ecological, economic, and (geo-)political nature as well as changes in the availability of digital technologies that are emblematic for the period since the 2000s (van den Akker & Vermeulen, 2017; Stoev, 2022). In this context, Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen (2017) treat metamodernism as a structure of feeling – or a sensitivity – which has become the dominant cultural logic of Western societies.

While conceding that the concept of *structures of feeling* is rather vague and somewhat confusing, they argue that it can be understood as something deeply embedded in a society, and in the lives of the people who are part of that society. It is the undercurrent of a specific time and place, shaping experiences and shared by everyone in this place at that time but difficult to

grasp and summarise. Van den Akker and Vermeulen suggest that it is possibly only in and through art that a structure of feeling becomes recognisable and can be communicated. They argue that to understand the contemporary structure of feeling of the capitalist West, we need a new vocabulary: that of metamodernism. Similarly, Lene Rachel Andersen (2019: 7) argues that metamodernism 'provides us with a framework for understanding ourselves and our societies in a much more complex way.'

Characteristic of metamodernism is that it includes, moves and negotiates between elements of both modernism and postmodernism as well as the opposing ideas and ideals that arise from this constellation such as the idea of a collective unconscious and an essential human nature against the assumption of constant change, enthusiasm as well as irony, hope and melancholy or cynicism, empathy against apathy, nostalgia versus futurism, totality which exists alongside fragmentation, authenticity and pastiche, and involvement against detachment (Kadagishvili, 2013) – just to name a few. The existence of and movement between these opposites does, however, not result in harmony or reconciliation. It does not combine the best of both but perpetually oscillates between the two (van den Akker & Vermeulen, 2017). Instead of creating anything new it only creates 'a gravitational cycle where whenever the magnetic force of attraction is lost, it returns to its starting point' (Cela, 2023).

For van den Akker and Vermeulen (2017) the *meta* in metamodernism signifies *with*, *among*, *between* and *after* simultaneously meaning that metamodernism is situated *among* residual as well as emerging structures of feeling, it comes *after* modernism and postmodernism, and at the same time, it is situated *between* them. It returns to modern elements and ideals but does so in a critical and self-aware manner that stems from its development out of postmodernism. It oscillates between conflicting positions which it identifies with as well as negates, overcomes as well as undermines based on a logic – or dynamic – of both-and-neither.

Metamodern literature

The characteristic oscillation can also be found in literary works that have been classified as metamodern (Cela, 2023). Xhoi Cela (2023) argues that this oscillation – in part created through fragmentation – stems not only from the text itself but is directly linked to the author as well as the reader and creates a constant movement characteristic of which is that not knowing where this movement leads signifies that one is on the right path. Thus, metamodern literature expands beyond its own boundaries by actively involving the reader who at times consciously engages

with the work of fiction, and at other times loses touch with the text and withdraws from it. Cela (2023) further explains that

> [i]f in his prose the author hesitates between the past and the present, if in modernism he would like to make this movement visible, then in metamodernism he seeks to make it incomprehensible, sentimental and magical. It transcends time, forcing the reader to move in the same direction as the movement, even if he refuses to do so.

This fluctuating movement does not only entail and create paradoxes but requires *as if* thinking, too, since the goal that it leads to is not an actual, albeit unknown, goal but possibly does not exist or is impossible to reach (Cela, 2023). For Cela (2023) this is symptomatic of contemporary society with its contradiction of people being encouraged to believe in and strive for a better future (which it is possible to link to modern optimism) while being perpetually reminded of the myriad of social, economic, political, and environmental crises (which make postmodern cynicism all too relatable), referred to by van den Akker and Vermeulen (2017). Hence, this contradiction results in a movement for the sake of movement; a movement toward the impossible or inevitable failure; a search for a truth that cannot be found. Yet, it also results in self-reflection (Cela, 2023).

Likewise, the paradoxes that Cela (2023) argues characterise metamodern literature, are dynamic. They are created by the metamodern simultaneous experience of – or oscillation between – both the possible and the impossible, irony and sincerity, hope and cynicism, fragmentation, and metanarrative (which it sees not as universal but as temporary experiments of a search for truth or meaning that involves thinking *as if* the truths entailed in metanarratives were true). It makes metamodernism a paradox in and of itself in that it is modern as well as postmodern while it cannot be either.

Hubernator (2023; c.f., Toth, 2017) identifies such as oscillating movement between totality and fragmentation, as discussed by Cela (2023), in *House of Leaves* since the fragmented parts of the novel form a whole that is arguably large than the sum of its individual parts. Complementary to this analysis is Francesca Medaglia's reading (2023). She explores *House of Leaves* as an ergodic text and focused above all on the role of the reader in the narrative. Medaglia argues that the novel expands beyond the text itself due to its de-structured – and thus non-linear nature. Through unconventional narrative tools such as a playful use of the text's structure and format to create metanarratives, complexity becomes an essential feature. If the reader wishes to fully enjoy the novel, they are required to actively engage with it and its

narrative tools, i.e., frequently turning the text around, or navigating several simultaneous narrative paths. Thus, the reading experience and interpretations of the novel depend on the reader's engagement with the reading paths it offers and its complex narrative elements, i.e., parallel plots, footnotes (Medaglia, 2023; see *Labyrinth*).

Alienation

Alienation – from society, a relationship, the self – features as an overarching – or underlying – theme in House of Leaves. Hayles (2002) uses the following quote from *House of Leaves* to illustrate the role of mediation in the closeness and estrangement of the characters of the novel: 'The diligence, discipline, and time-consuming research required to fashion this short – there are easily over a hundred edits – allowed Karen for the first time to see Navidson as something other than her own personal fears and projections' (Danielewski, 2002: 368 cited by Hayles, 2002: 784). She argues that when 'relationships are not mediated by inscription technologies,' and that 'they decay toward alienation, and when they are mediated, they progress toward intimacy' (Hayles, 2002: 784).

Yet, the theme of alienation is not exclusive to the content of the story itself. Beyond the experiences of the characters, alienation becomes part of the reader's reading experience. *House of Leaves* oscillates between drawing in the reader, immersing them in the story and evoking empathy with the characters, and generating a sense of detachment and defamiliarization by creating disruptions to the reading process through its layout. To understand the functioning of alienation in *House of Leaves* and its relation to the novel's layout, I draw on Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* and Viktor Shklovsky's *ostranenie*.

Both Brecht and Shklovsky developed theories of 'making strange' characters and events to theatre audiences which share certain similarities but pursue different aims (Bonasera, 2022). *Ostranenie* is usually translated to English as 'defamiliarization', while *Verfremdung* and *Verfremdungseffekt* have several English translations including 'alienation effect' (Brecht, n.d.; Sutherland, 2013; Parekar, 2019), 'defamiliarization' (Ungvári, 1979; Primavesi, 2022); distanciation (Sutherland, 2013), and estrangement (Ungvári, 1979). For the sake of clarity, I will use *ostranenie* and *Verfremdung(seffekt)* when referring to Brecht's and Shklovsky's theories in specific, and alienation when referring to processes of making strange more broadly, as well as when referring to the reader's experience of alienation in the case of *House of Leaves*.

But how does making strange work and what is the purpose? Shklovsky describes the process of defamiliarization as having the goal to recover 'the sensation of life…to make one

feel things, to make the stone stony' (Shklovsky cited by Bonasera, 2022: 97). To make any part of a story, whether object, event, or character, strange means to not call it by its name but to describe it as if it was encountered for the very first time (Bonasera, 2022). Through this treatment of the object, event, or character as if it was entirely unfamiliar, the perception of them is de-automatised, and the familiar becomes recognisable as it is made strange and unfamiliar.

Likewise, Tamás Ungvári (1979) argues – with reference to Hegel – that the familiar becomes recognisable only through a shift in perception by making the familiar unfamiliar. Similar to *ostranenie*, *Verfremdung* makes the familiar strange and thus recognisable by creating a sense of surprise, amazement, or curiosity about that which is otherwise evident or familiar (Bonasera, 2022). While Shklovsky's process of defamiliarization rests on dealing with the familiar as if it was entirely unfamiliar, the *Verfremdungseffekt* functions by emphasising fictionality or creating disruptions to immersion in the fictional world and its events (Kermani, 1999).

The aim of Brechtian *Verfremdung* is to create distance between the theatre audience and the play – or applied to literature, between the reader and the story they read – which enable critical reflection and demonstrates the possibility of socio-political change through devices such as emphasised fictionality, intentional disruptions, breaking the fourth wall, and non-linear developments of the story (Brecht, n.d.; Parekar, 2019; Bonasera, 2022). The purpose of *ostranenie* is to show things as they are and to encourage a more profound engagement with the world – both real and potentially fictional leading to enhanced immersion despite – or even because of – the familiar becoming strange (Echeverría et al., 2019; Berlina, 2020). Similarly, John Sutherland (2013: 134) argues:

> You turn the page – then something distracts you (the doorbell perhaps) – you come back to the book, and you cannot remember, for the life of you, what was on the page you have just turned over. At its best, literature 'strikes'; what you read is unforgettable, however loud the doorbell. Defamiliarization is essential to that unforgettability, both fundamental and, at the same time, fiendishly slippery.

While Brecht's theory of *Verfremdung* is rooted in theatre, the concept has since then spread to filmmaking and other cultural practices. It has been used to widely that some claim that it is no longer capable of producing any effect (Bonasera, 2022; Primavesi, 2022). Yet, Patrick Primavesi (2022) suggests that it is possible to adapt the concept of *Verfremdung* to the changed – and changing – contexts of cultural practices and expression to find new ways to make fiction

strange to the audience. Carmen Bonasera (2022) even suggests that *Verfremdung* – which is opposed to empathy and identification with the characters and thus, to uncritical immersion – can be achieved in the presence of these contradictory effects through a narrative that oscillates between evoking empathy and emotion (and thus bringing the audience or reader closer to the characters) and creating awareness and emotionally detached distance.

Making strange and thus alienating the reader can provoke both critical thinking (*Verfremdung*) and emotional engagement (*ostranenie*). While Brecht's *Verfremdung* disrupts immersion and aims to distance the audience (or the reader) from the story to encourage critical reflection, Shklovsky's *ostranenie* is interconnected with immersion in the sense that defamiliarization changes and guides perception and consequently enhances emotional connection with the world (real and fictional). As a result, the possibility emerges that immersion result in engagement on a deeper level through a disruption of habitual perceptions and challenges to preconceptions.

Inszenierende Typografie

Hamilton (2008) describes *House of Leaves* as experimental fiction based on the ways in which it makes use of colour, photos, visual elements, and layout. Below, I provide an overview of the novel's narrative structure and layout linking it to the concept of *inszenierende Typografie* ('staging' or 'enacting typography').

House of Leaves: Labyrinth and material object

Danielewski, who was responsible for the typography of his novel instead of a professional graphic designer, compares the layout of *House of Leaves* to filmmaking on which Eric Wittmershaus (2011) comments: 'And "House of Leaves" does move all over the place, using layouts designed for, among other things, moving the reader along at a rate that keeps pace with the action of the novel.' At the same time, the layout of the novel creates distractions and disruptions which, according to Wittmershaus (2011) create confusion and replicate a sensation of getting lost in a labyrinth.

The layout of *House of Leaves* not only serves to create a formal labyrinth to echo the content of the novel in its form (Hamilton, 2008), but it also highlights the book as an object and draws attention to its self-awareness of its materiality (Hayles, 2002). In this sense, the content of the novel interconnects with its physical characteristics, i.e., text that is written in reverse, text that is written upside down or sideways forcing the reader to turn the book. Its layout mimics

content, for instance, when the text on the pages decreases and appears increasingly squeezed together at the same time as Navidson squeezes himself through tighter and tighter spaces in the labyrinth of the house. These aspects contribute to create meaning within the context of the novel; this meaning, however, is not stable but, as Hayles (2002) argues, changes throughout the narrative in a way that is comparable to character development.

Books, in general, can be understood not just in relation to their content but in terms of their materiality which highlights the impact of typography and layout (Willberg & Forssman, 1997). A straightforward example would be the turning of a page: Turning the page of a book forces the reader to pause for the shortest of moments. The reading flow comes to a halt which creates anticipation of what awaits on the following page. An example of this is J.K. Rowling's decision to start a new chapter as Harry steps through the magical fire after Hermione solves Snape's riddle protecting the philosopher's stone in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (2015: 309-310). Up unto this point the reader, just like Harry, is likely to expect Snape standing in front of the Mirror of Erised. Without having to turn the page to continue reading, it would be all too easy for the reader's eyes to skip ahead to find out who is actually trying to steal the stone. But by ending the chapter at this precise instance, the reader discovers along with Harry that 'it wasn't Snape. It wasn't even Voldemort' (Rowling, 2015: 309) and has to turn the page to find out that '[i]t was Quirrell' (Rowling, 2015: 310). This seemingly small detail creates a pause in the reading flow without the possibility to glance at the sentences that follow which results in a moment of anticipation and suspense before the true identity of Voldemort's servant is revealed.

The reading experience is therefore not only influenced by the content and style of writing but by the existence of the book as a material object and by its typography and layout – of individual pages as well as across pages (Bateman et al., 2021) – which determines where the reading process will be paused and how readable and immersive or disruptive the text is. Through its experimental typography, Aghoro (2012) suggests that House of Leaves does not (exclusively) convey its content but continuously refers to the act of reading beyond the pages on which the plot takes place.

Commonly, the purpose of typography is to contribute to the readability of a text – i.e., through the choice of a fitting and easy to read font (Willberg & Forssman, 1997) – and the reader's ability to understand the content (Löser, 2016). Already before the actual reading process begins, typography influences how the reader perceives and interprets the book: Text is first perceived as an image which evokes a certain attitude toward it. Even during the reading, the eye does not move along each line over every word and letter but jumps from one fixation

point to another (Willberg & Forssman, 1997). Typography that serves readability allows for a fluent and immersive reading while disruptions and unclear or unfamiliar elements in the typography create interruptions and distractions as the reader's attention is diverted from the content of the text to deciphering its form.

Conventionally, the typographic form of a text is based on linear reading in which one thing is read after the other. The purpose of typography that uses linear reading as a guiding principle is to guarantee a reading experience with as few disruptions as possible (Willberg & Forssman, 1997). Hence, the reader is able to immerse themselves fully in the text. Through its impact on the reader's reading experience and interpretations, typography becomes part of the book's narrative (Löser, 2016).

Typography can therefore be seen as being for literature 'what musical performance is for the composition' (Robert Bringhurst cited by Löser, 2016: 13, own translation). This holds true in particular in the case of *inszenierende Typografie*.

While bearing some resemblance, *inszenierende Typografie* goes beyond the typography of literary forms such as concrete or visual poetry in which form the form as precisely as possible replicates – and thus merely illustrates – the content (Willberg & Forssman, 1997). *Inszeniernde Typografie* goes beyond the typographic illustration of the content of a text. It can support and add value to the text, express what goes beyond words, distract, disrupt, guide, draw focus or make strange (Löser, 2016). It can test the limits of communication and comprehension, put into scene the empty space of the page, interpret, and comment on the text. In so doing, it develops its own visual language that is not bound by the conventional expectation of generating perfect readability. It intentionally influences the reading and interpretation of a text and therefore takes on a narrative function, and often requires the reader's active engagement with the text. In this sense, the work of literature in question becomes akin to theatre in that *inszenierende Typografie* targets an audience that is 'willing to engage with the text in the same way that a theatre visitor would engage with a new production…' (Willberg & Forssman, 1997: 59, own translation).

Methodology

To understand to what extent the layout of Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves* (2000) intertwines form and content and thereby fulfils a narrative function, I am combining an analysis of the layout with an autoethnographic approach. The layout analysis draws on close reading while also taking into account spatial, visual and typographic elements of the page layout. I conduct the autoethnographic analysis through a reading journal. This reading journal aims at deepening the understanding of the layout's narrative function through an exploration of its effect on the subjective reading experience. By combining these two approaches, I seek to achieve a more complex and in-depth analysis through two complementary focal points. I focus on the technical aspects of the layout; that is to say, the features it includes, how it is structured, and related to that how this features result in what is observed through the second focal point: the personal reading experience which is based on overall impressions of the novel, as well as a sense of immersion or alienation (c.f., Andersen, 2019).

Given that reading experiences are inherently subjective, particularly in the case of *House of Leaves* as Aghoro (2012) suggests and given that I am focusing my research on one particular literary work only, my aim is not to provide generalisable conclusions on how layout *usually* functions in relation to narrative. Instead, my research offers an in-depth analysis of the narrative function of layout in *House of Leaves* which consequently provides insights into how layout *can* function as a narrative tool.

In the following section, I first discuss my approach to analysing the layout of *House of Leaves* itself. I then elaborate on how I made use of a reading journal to gain a more in-depth answer to my research question through understanding not only *how* the layout functions but also the effect it has on the reader's – in this case my own – experience when engaging with the novel.

Layout analysis

I approached the undertaking of analysing the layout of *House of Leaves* in the following way: I read the novel and while doing so took note of the content as well as of typographical and visual elements such as if and how the layout mirrors the content, how fonts are used, how text is arranged on the page, as well as of the symbols that are used. I had read the book one time before and therefore was familiar above all with the content, and at least aware of its particular

layout. However, I did not yet understand how it worked; what its purpose and effect might be. It was therefore important to me to approach the novel with an open mind.

Barry Brummet (2019) uses the metaphor of exploring a new territory with or without a map for approaches to closely reading a text. Using this metaphor, I had strolled through *House of Leaves* before beginning my research and thus knew to some extent what to expect without being able to give anyone precise directions on how to navigate its territory. I had a rough map (theory and method) which I could use as orientation aids, but the map contained many white areas that needed filling in by freely exploring the novel's labyrinth. That is to say, my approach was to the greatest extent inductive (c.f., Brummett, 2019).

While reading the novel, I added notes to the text to mark passages that stood out and layout elements that were particularly pronounced. I took notes on the relation between content and layout, and occasionally made sketches of the reading path(s) or illustrations of the layout to help me understand it, i.e., to clarify the relation to the content or to keep track of the connection between various footnotes.

My notes helped me observe, notice, and keep track of effects and features such as the density of uncommon layout features throughout the novel, the pace of the novel – both in relation to sentence structure as well as the layout and the breaks and disruption it creates in the text and reading flow – and readability in terms of layout elements such as the text being printed on several pages or blank spaces appearing so as to break up sentences or even words (c.f., Danielewski, 2000: 145, 443-458). I thus did not only – or even primarily – focus on what the text is saying but how it is saying it through its layout which includes its typography and visual elements such as shapes created by the text being formatted in specific ways as well as its spatial arrangement, and the structures, patterns and focus points that emerge (Connors, 2012; Álamo Felices, 2013; Bares et al., 2020; Duarte et al., 2020).

To further clarify my focus, it is useful to take a detour into the study of comics and graphic novels: Even before taking note of the actual content (here of a graphic novel, yet the same can apply to the text printed on a page of a novel), the first thing that immediately stands out is the page layout (Bateman et al., 2021). Ordinarily, this layout might not be particularly noteworthy in the case of a novel since it generally is intended to create a reading experience that is as immersive and thus as undisrupted as possible (Willberg & Forssman, 1997). Yet, when opening *House of Leaves* on almost any random page, what stands out immediately is its unusual layout. Bateman et al. (2021) argue that page composition plays an essential role in narration, pacing and other aspects that influence the experience of reading a graphic novel, and interpreting it. They break down page layout into text flow, image flow and page flow, that is the arrangement

and positioning of text and visual elements on a page as well as across several pages. In *House of Leaves*, too, these elements are present: The text is arranged in specific ways on the page, at times creating certain visual features or adding them in the form of i.e., text boxes and symbols. The arrangement of the text across pages, too, needs to be taken into consideration since for instance, the turning of a page creates breaks in the text and reading flow, and visual elements are at times only noticeable when viewing layout elements throughout a sequence of several pages.

Once I had read the novel, I created a table with an overview of the individual chapters, a table to provide an overview of the different fonts that are used in the novel, and a list of symbols that appear in the text and at times are used for the footnotes. The chapter overview, in which I summarised each chapter's overarching theme and layout features, served to create an overview of the narrative as a whole as well as to highlight and track the novel's layout features in a comprehensive manner to facilitate my interpretation of them.

Additionally, space is a prevalent theme in *House of Leaves*. The house and its labyrinthine antics not only intersect with the characters' psychological journeys but also bleed into and are mirrored by the layout. At times, it is hard to keep track of the many footnotes – some of which include further footnotes and/or lead back and forth across pages or even chapters. Space, in this context, therefore, not only takes on the characteristics resembling those of a literary character (c.f., Yuncu et al., 2022) and presents an essential element of the plot and its development alongside characters and actions (c.f., Reuschel & Hurni, 2011) but becomes relevant to mapping the layout structure.

While reading and trying to follow the footnotes as well as to make sense of the layout and its functions both in and of itself and in relation to content, I made sketches – where necessary and appropriate – that created a map of footnotes and tracked the textual representation of the labyrinth in the story, and the characters' movements conditioned by this particular space. At other times, I used sketches to illustrate the labyrinthine reading path(s) created through the layout and how it mirrored the novel's content to gain a more in-depth understanding of these aspects. Some of these sketches can be described as maps that trace footnotes, others visually illustrate the content of the story in relation to how it is mirrored in the layout. A selection of these sketches is included below to serve as examples of how I made use of them during the reading process.
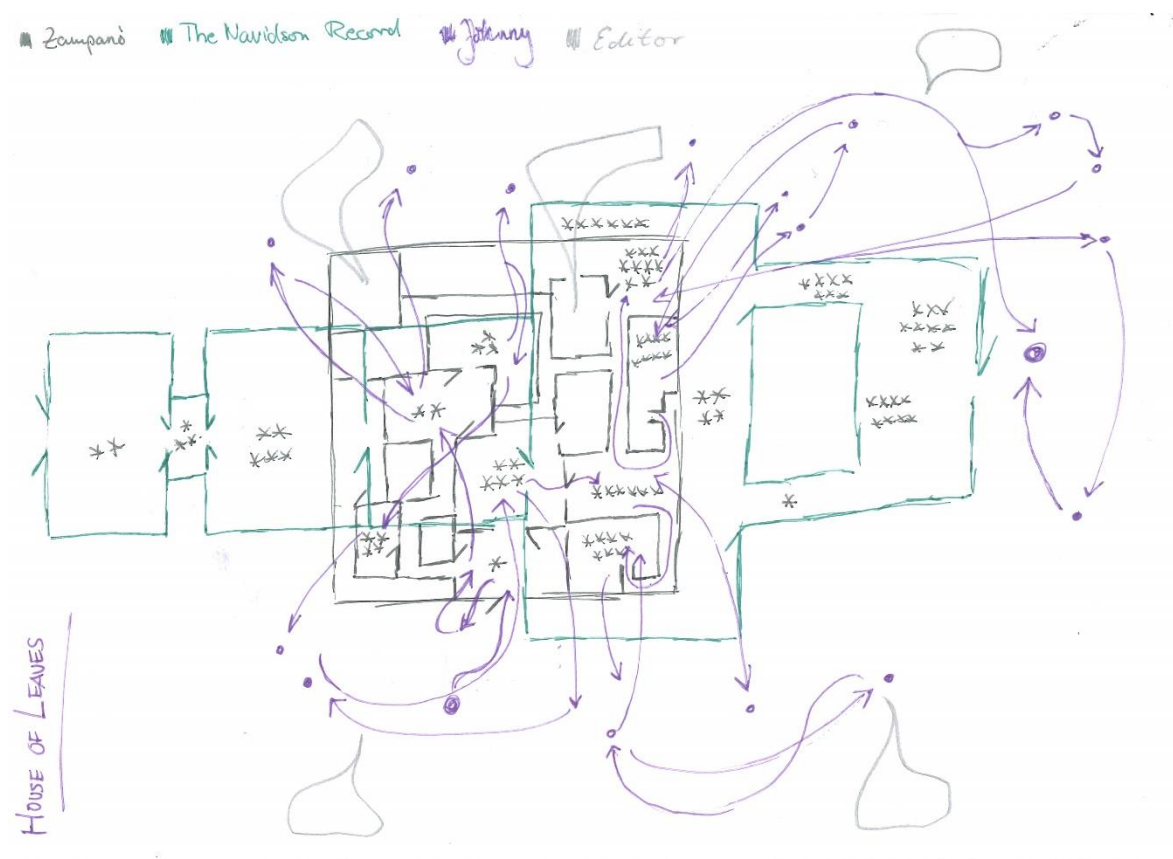
Illustration 2.

With *Illustration 2* I sought to represent the different narrative voices of *House of Leaves*. *The Navidson Record* (in green) here forms the basis for the story as it is the subject of Zampanò's writing. It is fairly linear in that it follows the events taking place in Navidson's house. However, it is Zampanò (represented in black) who gives an account of these event, and his account does not necessarily follow the same structure as *The Navidson Record* – he alludes to the ending of the documentary in the beginning of his analysis, for instance. Johnny's voice is added here in purple. He adds his commentary to Zampanò's writing. While Zampanò's writing consistently takes place in reference to *The Navidson Record* and relevant themes, Johnny not only adds commentary but drifts off into giving accounts on his own life before returning to Zampanò's writing which is indicated through the arrows and dots. Lastly, separate from the narrative strands of *The Navidson Record*, the house at its centre, and Johnny's life are the comments made by the unnamed editors which occasionally appear to clarify certain aspects and are therefore included here as speech bubbles.

"Within minutes Navidson and Reston are hoisting Wax up..." (p. 281

Illustration 3.

The numbers in *Illustration 3* indicate page numbers, the arrows the reading path, and wherever a loop appears it indicates that the book needs to be turned by the reader in order to

read the text. I made this sketch in an effort to better understand the reading path in connection to and the reader's engagement with the book as an object.
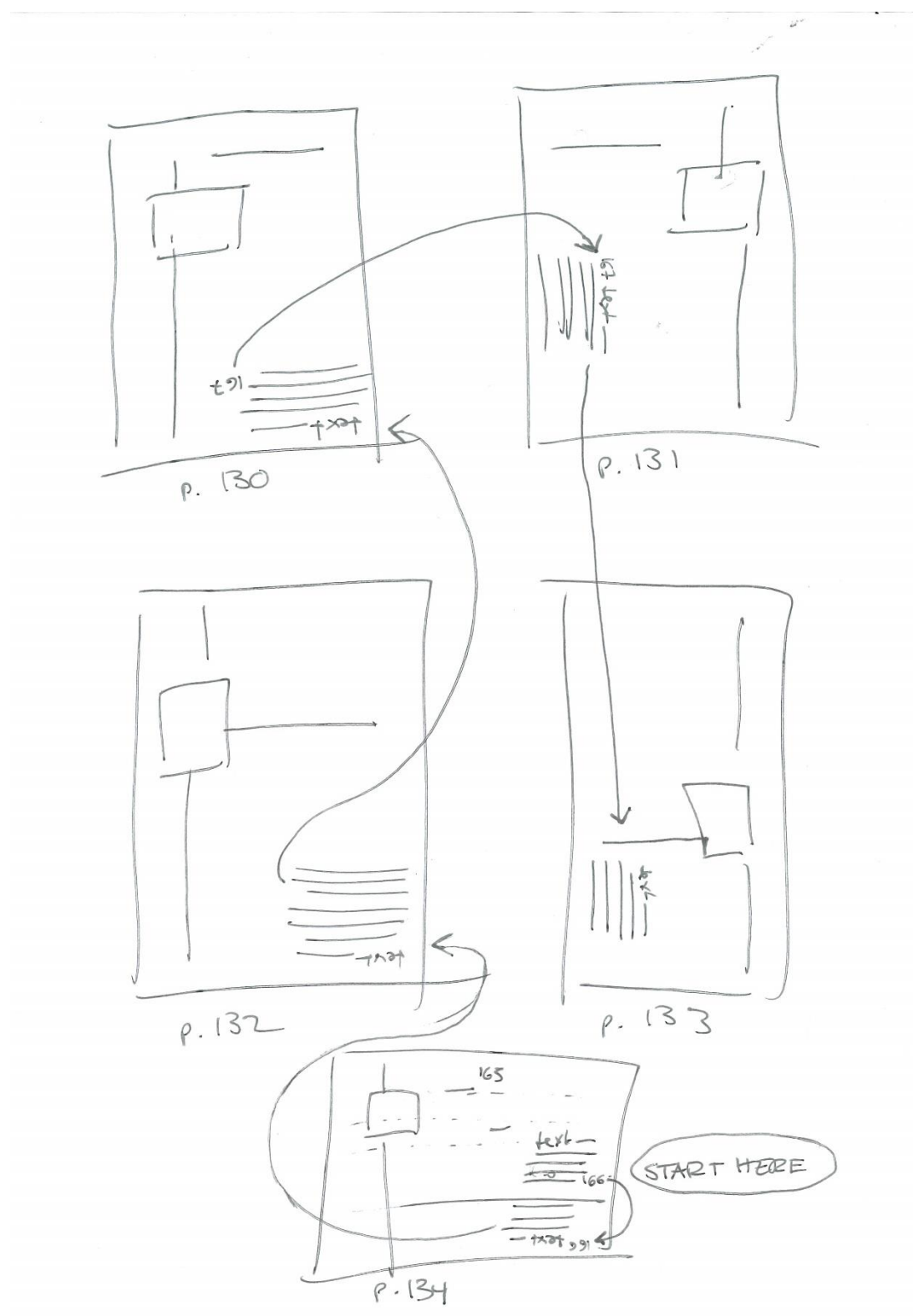

Illustration 4.

Similar to *Illustration 3*, *Illustration 4* served to help me understand the reading path(s) created through the book's layout. While also showing text composition and the need to, at times, turn the book, it follows the footnotes in the text. Sketches such as Illustration 4 helped me to gain an overview of how the footnotes were arranged and connected across pages.
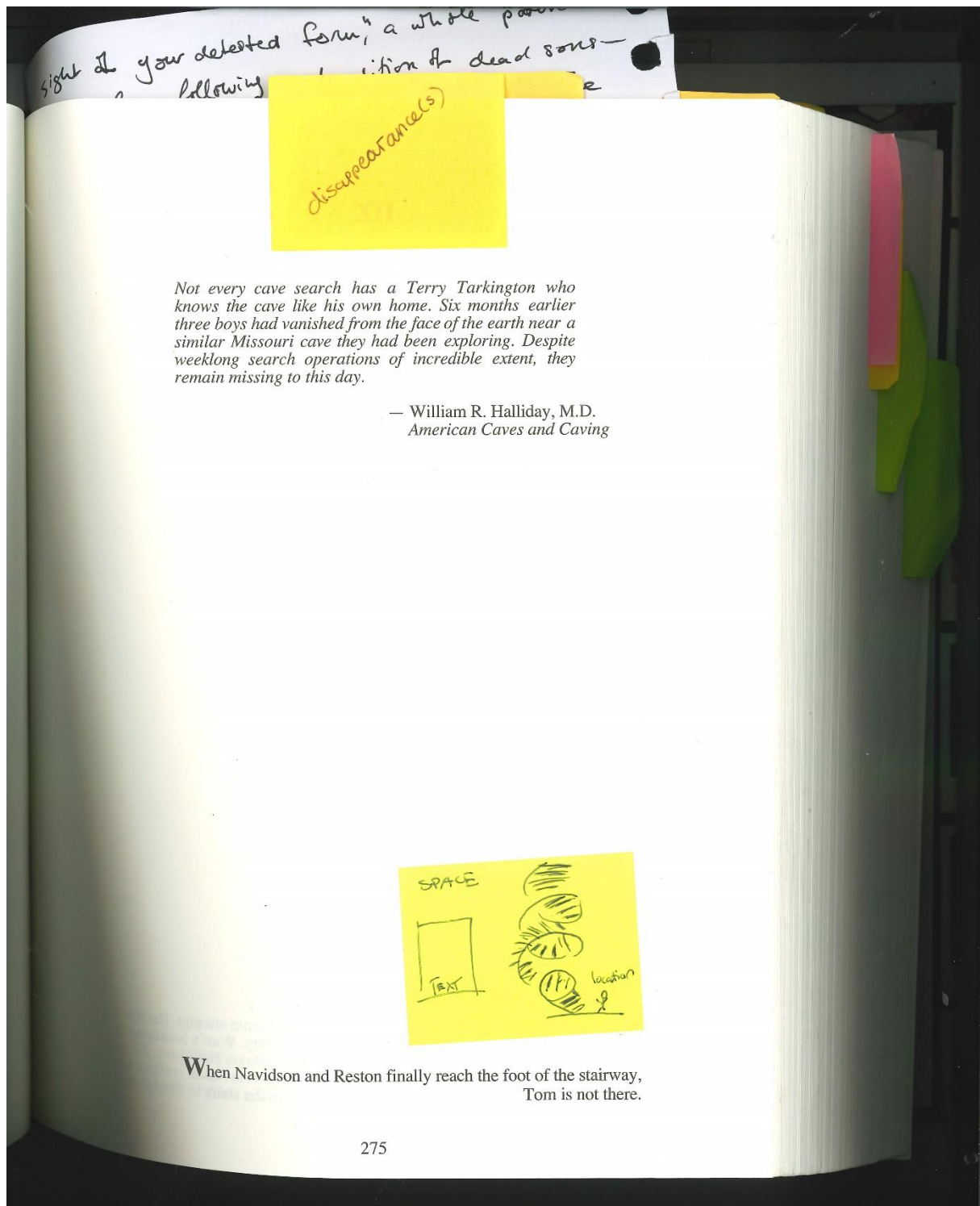

Illustration 5.

Occasionally, my sketches were as simple as a quick sketch on a post-it note. I drew the example shown in *Illustration 5* while I was analysing how the text arrangement on the page related to the content of the story.

Marie-Laure Ryan (2007) argues in relation to diagrams, that such representations of space or spatial presentations of narrative are useful when it cannot – or only with difficulty – be expressed in the linear form of a text, a list or similar. While Ryan treats these diagrams as a tool to represent large overarching narratives, I make use of sketches and illustrations not to outline the narrative as a whole but to deepen and communicate my understanding of particular details of the layout and its narrative function. During the reading process, they served me as visual aids to comprehend how form and content – layout and story – are intertwined, and to navigate the textual labyrinth. Following this process, I refined my sketches to turn them into clear communicative aids that are included in the analysis.

While being based on and referring to concrete elements of *House of Leaves*, the above discussed approach to analysing the layout of the novel is to some extent subjective in that it relies on the interpretation of layout structures and patterns (c.f., Bares et al., 2020; Duarte et al., 2020). The novel extends over a little more than 700 pages and contains many layout elements the entirety of which are impossible to discuss (in detail) here, hence, other people may – to some extent – focus on different aspects. Yet, while this adds a personal interpretative aspect to my research, my analysis nonetheless creates in-depth insights into the text's narrative through layout by highlighting and analysing details and elements that relate to the text as a whole and which can provide and understanding of the layout's narrative function (c.f., Schmertz, 2016; Duarte et al., 2020)

Reading journal

I complement the above discussed approach with a reading journal to understand not only the technical functions of the layout as a narrative tool but also its effect on the reading experience and interpretations of the novel. Akin to how autoethnographic research outlines (Ellis et al., 2011), I treated *House of Leaves* as a field study in which I participated as well as observed while taking notes in my reading journal to document my observations, impressions, thoughts, hypotheses, and questions.

Since I had read the book previously – which took me at least six months whereas I usually am a fast reader – I began by writing down what I remembered from reading the novel for the first time so that I would be able to compare it to the second reading experience, the two

differing in that I approached the book as a reader first, and as a reader and researcher the second time around. Yet, I found that the overall reading experience did not differ all too much apart from me paying more attention to certain details during my second reading.

After finishing a reading session, I recorded these thoughts, impressions, and observations regarding readability, focus, disruptions, immersion, layout, and reading pace. In my journal, I documented which chapter I was reading alongside the date(s) on which I was reading, and where I was while doing so since my setting could influence the reading experience through factors such as disruptive noises. I wrote down whether I found the reading immersive, intriguing, confusing or boring, if I struggled to focus on the book or if I forgot everything around me while reading. This aspect is reflected in part by the reading dates: At times, I read several chapters in one day. At other times, it took me longer to find back into the book, either because I was still processing my observations from the previous reading session, or because I found myself unable to focus on the novel and immerse myself sufficiently to continue reading.

For the reading of *House of Leaves*, I approached it as a reader with the aim to enjoy a goof story, rather than as a researcher with an analytical mindset. To note here is, however, that I read along different reading paths (which I expand on further in the analysis) to gain a deeper understanding of the role of the layout in creating these paths and in directing focus:

- I followed the indications of the novel. Concretely, this means that when a footnote appeared in the text, I immediately switched to the footnote. When an appendix was cited, I read the appendix before returning to the chapter. When footnote in a different chapter was referenced, I skipped ahead (or back) to the chapter in question to read the footnote, and then return to the initial chapter.
- I read Zampanò's text first ignoring all references and footnotes. When I reached the end of the chapter, I returned to its beginning and read Johnny's comments.

It was only in the next step that I abandoned my reader's point of view to fully take on the role of a researcher. Upon having read the last chapter of *House of Leaves* and having made my last note in my reading journal, I read through my journal entries and copied them from the notebook I had used as a journal to a document on my laptop. During this process, I identified relevant observations and removed notes that were drifting off topic. I then, read through these notes again and organised my findings thematically. This allowed me to gain an overview of the effects of the layout as a narrative tool in relation to my analysis of the layout itself as well as the literature I reviewed. This step was helpful and necessary to deepen my understanding of the effect of the layout in relation to the layout's narrative function as well as to respond to the

possibility that factors such as my mood on a particular day or outside disturbances influenced my impressions and observations of the necessarily subjective experience of reading *House of Leaves*.

Journaling, as Rose Richards (2019) points out, is a helpful tool to organise thoughts, keep track of observations and effectively describe phenomena. It is useful, too, for the researcher to distance themselves from the experience that is being investigated and which they are part of and look at it analytically. Keeping a reading journal allowed me to write whatever came to my mind without the pressure of immediately identifying what was relevant and what was not and writing well or academically. Following this process, I could then review my unfiltered and immediate impressions and reactions critically, filter and interpret them. One of the results of this process is a table that illustrates my sense of immersion and alienation throughout the novel, and which is included in the analysis.

On a larger scale, moving between the roles of a researcher and a reader (as someone who is actively engaged in the object of the research) has the purpose of understanding the layout and its narrative function from different perspectives which generates new, more in-depth insights both from an inside (reader) and outside (researcher) perspective (c.f., Richards, 2019; Kingsbury, 2022; Kudale & Kotte, 2024). Since reading experiences in general, and arguably that of *House of Leaves* in particular (Aghoro, 2012), are subjective and personal experiences, harnessing the potential to contribute particular insights to my research rather than seeking to eliminate the subjective element from it has the purpose of generating comprehensive and in-depth findings (Ellis et al., 2011; Kudale & Kotte, 2024).

I do not claim to arrive at generally valid and universally true conclusions. Instead, the layered account of my reading experience in the context of the reviewed literature, and alongside the previously discussed approach to analysing the layout of *House of Leaves* contributes to existing discussions on the novel as well as to investigations of layout as a narrative tool and can be used as a 'source of question and comparisons' (Ellis et al., 2011; c.f., Richards, 2019) in further research. However, this does not mean that this research is entirely subjective, either, since an essential part of it is to step back from personal experience to look at it critically and analytically (Richards, 2019).

Analysis

To answer my research question – *To what extent does the page layout of Mark Z. Danielewski's novel* House of Leaves *take on a narrative function?* – I have conducted an in-depth reading of the book which included aspects of visual analysis to understand the page layout, its relation to the content, and its narrative function. I have combined my analysis of the layout features and their function with an autoethnographic reading journal as well as illustrations to deepen my understanding of the effect on the reading experience that the layout characteristics result in. While this experience is necessarily subjective, especially in the case of *House of Leaves* due to its partially non-linear structure (Aghoro, 2012), this approach produces nonetheless valuable insights. I contextualise and analyse my findings through the concept of the labyrinth as discussed by, in particular, Hayles (2002) and Hamilton (2008), the metamodern concept of oscillation (Toth, 2017; Hubernator, 2023) with a focus on immersion and alienation based on Brecht's *Verfremdung* and Shklovsky's *ostranenie* (c.f., Ungvári, 1979; Kermani, 1999; Bonasera, 2022), and *inszenierende Typographie* (Willberg & Forsman, 1997; Löser, 2016).

I argue that the page layout of *House of Leaves* goes beyond illustrating the spatial and psychological labyrinth of the story. It actively shapes the experience of reading the novel by playing with the readability of the novel, disorienting the readers, and disrupting the reading flow and thereby creating an oscillation between immersion and alienation. Yet, the effect of the page layout goes even further: It not only influences the reading experience but also affects interpretations of the novel and thereby narrates parts of the story that are not written in words.

Below, I discuss the findings of my research. I discuss the book's labyrinthine structure and layout, the oscillation between immersion and alienation (as well as fragmentation and totality) that shapes the reading experience, and how its *inszenierende Typografie* ('staging' or 'enacting' typography) shapes the narrative qualities of the layout.

The book as labyrinth

Following the discovery of a dark hallway that appeared out of nowhere in the house Navidson and his partner, Karen, moved into early on in *House of Leaves*, Navidson enlists the help of friends and acquaintances to investigate it. As Navidson and his team explore the mysterious hallway that has appeared in Navidson's house, they soon realise that the space inside the house constantly shifts and changes: hallways extent and retract, rooms appear and disappear, floor and ceiling are turned upside down creating a disorienting labyrinth (Danielewski, 2000: 84-

86, 99.). The labyrinthine quality of the house is mimicked in the text layout of the novel. For Boothroyd (2015) this layout choice symbolises the disintegrating stability of space throughout the story and breaks with traditions of narratology. Hamilton (2008) argues that the labyrinth of the layout creates a journey through (and to) the book for the reader parallel to the psychological journey of the characters who lose themselves in the labyrinth of the house. Throughout this journey, according to Hamilton (2008) and Aghoro (2012), the reader is free to explore different paths through the story.

I argue that, as Boothroyd (2015) established, the layout of *House of Leaves* is directly linked to the shifting space of the house in the story. Yet, as the house's labyrinth is linked to the psychological state of the characters (Hamilton, 2008; c.f., Danielewski, 2000: 74-75, 165), it simultaneously illustrates a progression from (spatial) order and mental stability to an escalation both in terms of spatial chaos and descent into madness followed by a return to order/ stability which is reflected in the parallel escalation of the layout.

In the beginning, there are only a few short footnotes in Zampanò's text. And even though the first long footnote by Johnny appears in Chapter II (Danielewski, 2000: 12-16) in which he eventually drifts off into the events of his own life, it is not until Chapter V that the layout begins to progress towards a disorientating and labyrinthine structure, i.e., some of the numbers indicating the footnotes are replaced by astronomical symbols (Danielewski, 2000: 41, 42, 43, 44, 47). As the events of The Navidson Record escalate – Navidson and his team voyage into the dark and mysterious hallway that has appeared in those to soon experience first-hand its instable and shifting nature (Chapter VIII) – so does the layout. The beginning of the chapter features a morse code spelling out SOS, and throughout the text, the morse code is repeated in fragmented form, interrupting the text – often in the middle of a sentence (c.f., Danielewski, 2000: 97, 101).

In my reading experience, Chapter IX was the most disorienting chapter with footnotes indicated by ground-air emergency code symbols (Danielewski, 2000: 107, 109, 114, 115, 119, 122, 123, 143, 151) which occasionally reappear in several passages leading to the same footnotes, or at times a dead end (c.f., Danielewski, 2000: 107, 115 and 123, as well as 109, 114 and 488). A couple of footnotes can be found in the margins of pages 120 to 135 with the footnotes on the uneven pages being upside down, and the ones of the even pages being the right way around (see *Illustration 6)*, and a square decorates pages 119-145 much like an eventually widening hallway (see *Illustration 7*). These examples are among numerous layout features that represent the labyrinth of the house Navidson moves through, and – I argue – creating a labyrinth for the reader themselves to navigate.
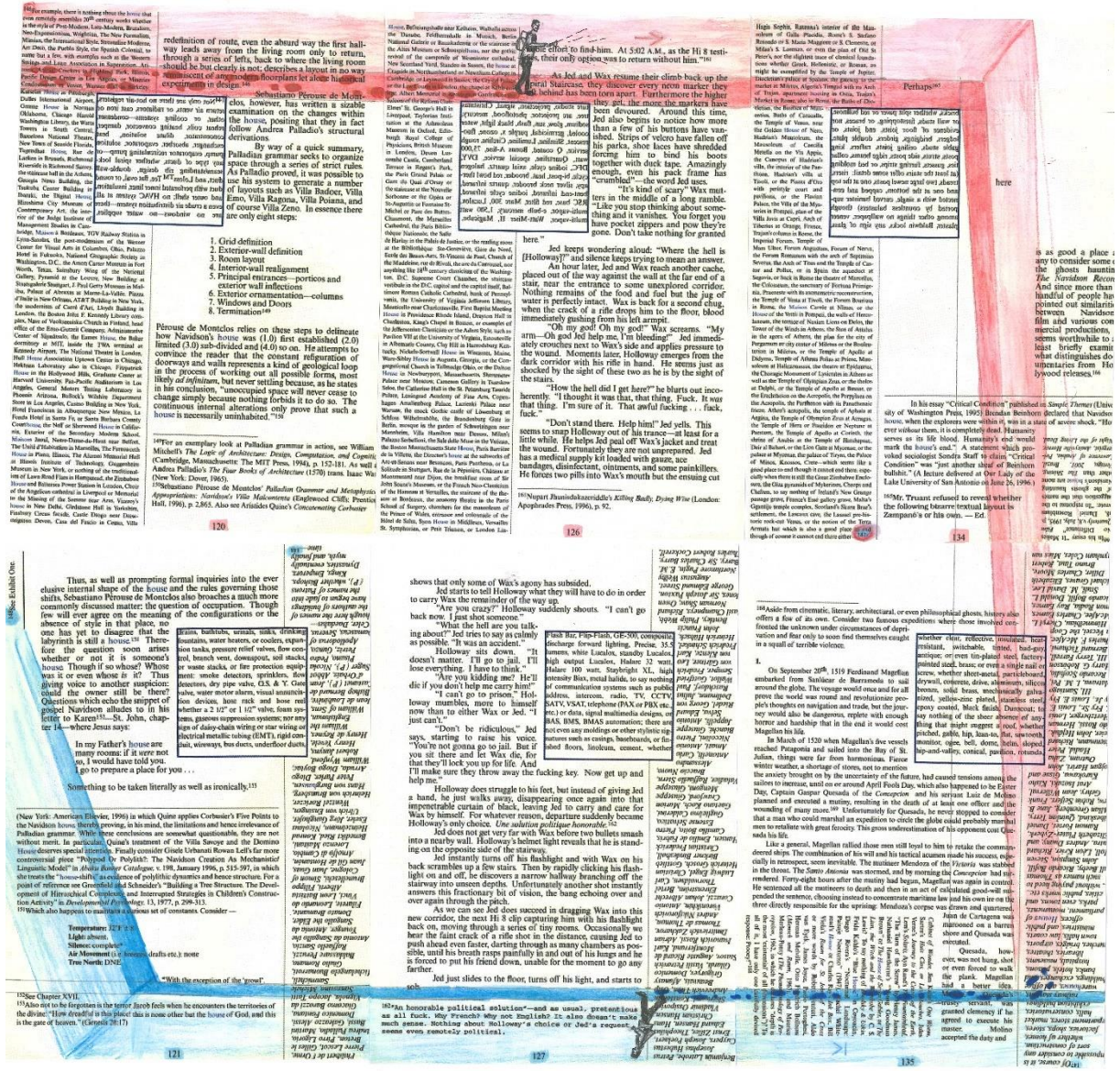
Illustration 6. Footnote 146 begins on page 120 on the left side of the page and continues on the left side of the evenly numbered pages until it ends on page 134 where it refers the reader to footnote 147. Footnote 147 begins on page 135 and leads the reader back to page 121 where it ends with a reference to footnote 148. It is placed on the right side of the oddly numbered pages. The text is upside-down. This illustration includes pages 120, 126, and 134 as well as pages 135, 127, and 121.

Illustration 6 represents both the connection between layout and content as well as the thereby created reading path and reader's experience. The text contained in the footnotes, being a list of references, does not add anything to the story itself. However, footnote 147 leads the reader from page 120 to page 134. On page 135, footnote 148 takes over which leads the reader, who know has to turn the book upside down, *back* to page 121. Through the turning of the book,

this layout feature embodies the shifting and disorienting spatial aspects of the space in which the story takes place. Having to flip back through the pages adds to the sense of disorientation which is thus shared by the reader and the characters. It furthermore embodies the action of walking in one direction to then turn around and retrace one's steps.
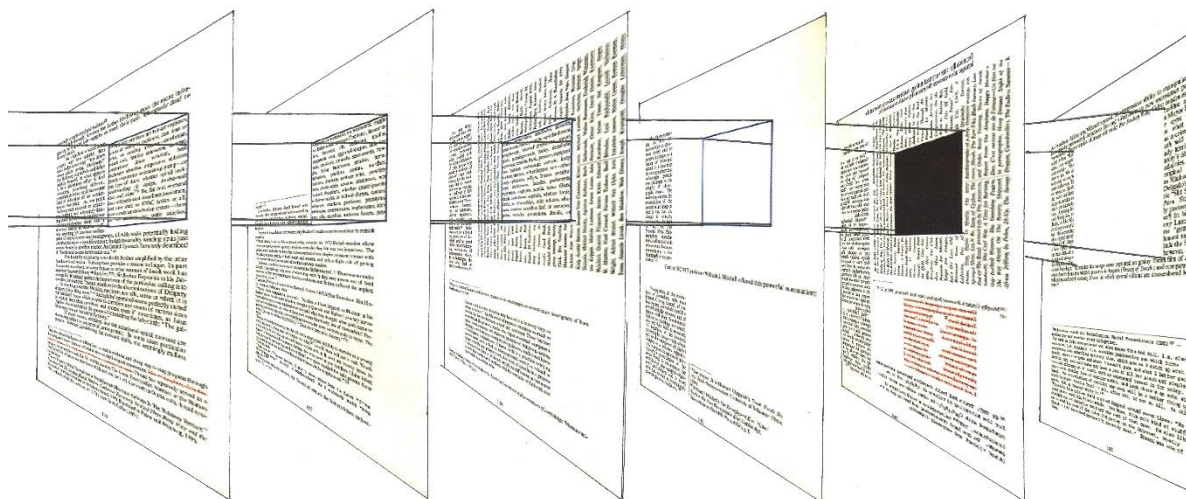

Illustration 7. Pages 119-145 break up the text through a box that is added to each page.

Some of the boxes added to pages 119-145 (see *Illustration 7*) contain text which – similar to footnotes 147 and 148 (see *Illustration 6*) does not add anything to the story itself. When visualising the sequence of pages in their entirety they form what can be interpreted as an eventually widening hallway – a spatial feature that appears in the story of *House of Leaves*. In addition to disrupting the reading flow, it thus highlights the connection between layout and content.

Chapter XII offers a particularly clear example of the way in which the layout is connected to the shifting space of the story world. The chapter begins with only a few lines on each page – either at the top or the bottom (where they are aligned right) (c.f., Danielewski, 2000: 275). Thus, when 'Navidson and Reston finally reach *the foot of the stairway*' (p. 275, emphasis added) or when 'the rope slaps *down on the floor*' (Danielewski, 2000: 278, emphasis added), the text is placed at the bottom of the page. The text on page 279, however, draws the reader's attention to the happenings upstairs with Tom having 'retracted this way back to the living room' and consequently, the text is placed at the top of the page (see *Illustration 8*). A similar

layout appears later in the novel (Danielewski, 2000: 426-432) as it mimics the ceiling – and the text – dropping (Danielewski, 2000: 427) and disappearing (Danielewski, 2000: 430) – along with the text, until eventually the reader has to turn the book upside-down and side-ways to read the text which creates a sense of disorientation befitting the disorientation that Navidson is experiencing in the story.

XII
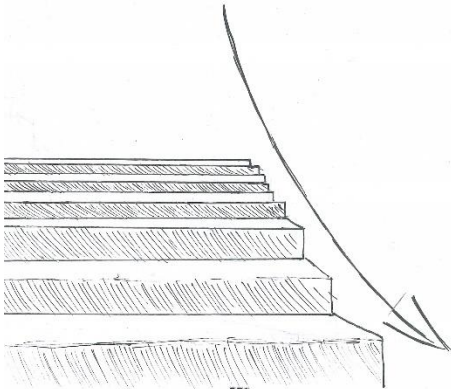
When Navidson and Reston finally reach the foot of the stairway, Tom is not there.

275

It is almost noon on the third day of the rescue attempt. Reston's gloves are torn; his hands are blistered and bleeding, Wax's breathing is shallow and inconsistent. Jed's body weighs heavily on Navidson. All of which, bad as it is, is made even more unbearable when Navidson realizes his brother has not come down the stairs to meet them.

276

"We'll manage Navy," Reston says, trying to console his friend. "I shouldn't be surprised," Navidson says gruffly. "This is Tom. This is what Tom does best. He lets you down."
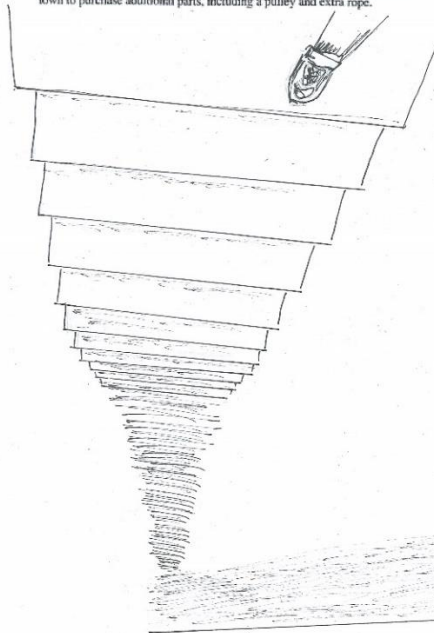
277
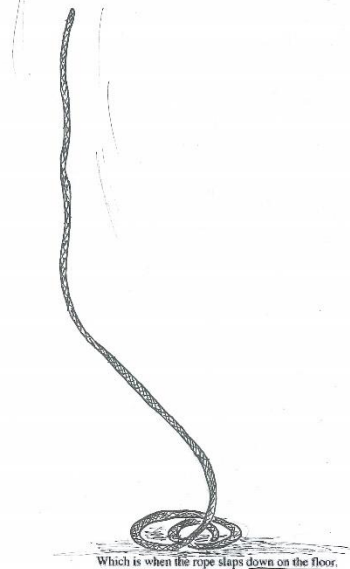
Which is when the rope slaps down on the floor.

278

33

After making his unsuccessful bid to reach the bottom of the Spiral Staircase, Tom had retraced his way back to the living room where he began to construct a light gurney out of scrap wood. Karen helped out by going to town to purchase additional parts, including a pulley and extra rope.

Navidson was wrong. Tom may not have gone down those stairs but the alternative he came up with was far better.

279

280
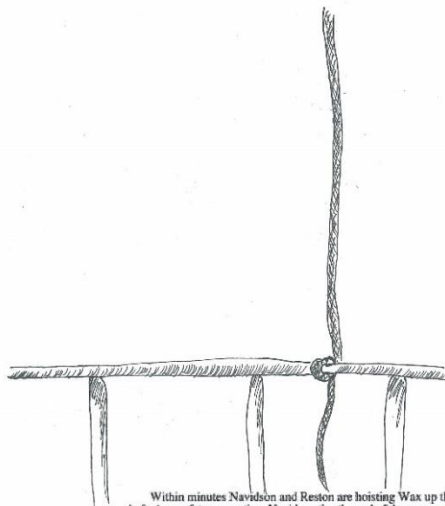
Within minutes Navidson and Reston are hoisting Wax up the 100ft shaft. As a safety precaution, Navidson ties the end of the rope around the bottom banister. Thus if something should happen, causing them to lose their hold on the rope, the stretcher would still stop short of hitting the bottom by several feet.

281

A few seconds later, a quarter clatters on the floor, indicating that Wax has safely reached the top and the stretcher can be re-lowered and readied for the next load.

282
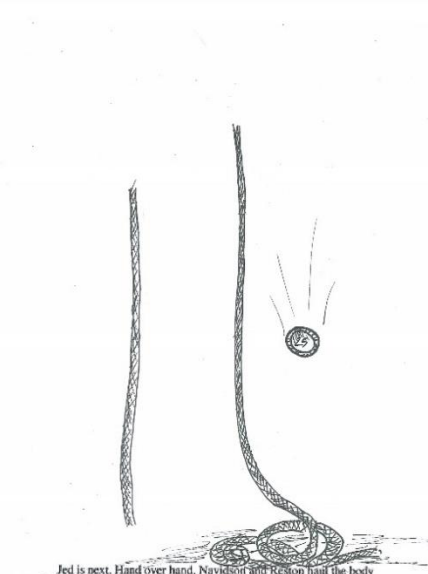
Jed is next. Hand over hand, Navidson and Reston haul the body upwards, the excess rope guthering in coils around their feet. As Tom does not operate a Hi 8 during this sequence, we can only imagine what his reaction was as he struggled to lift the corpse over the railing. Nonetheless, a minute later, a second quarter clatters on the floor. Reston goes next.
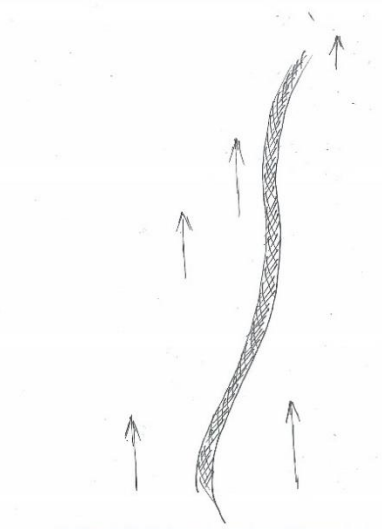
Navidson double-checks to make sure the end of the rope is still securely tied to the last banister and then begins hoisting his friend up the shaft.
"You are one heavy bastard," Navidson grunts.
Reston lights a green flare and gives Navidson a big toothy grin:
"Going up like the fourth of July."

At first everything seems to be proceeding smoothly. Slowly but surely, Navidson draws more and more slack rope down onto the floor, steadily lifting Reston up through the bore of those stairs. Then about half way up, something strange happens: the excess rope at Navidson's feet starts to vanish while the rope he holds begins to slip across his fingers and palms with enough speed to leave a burning gash. Navidson finally has to let go. Reston, however, does not fall. In fact, Reston's ascent only accelerates, marked by the burning green light he still holds in his hand.

But if Navidson is no longer holding onto the rope, what could possibly be pulling Reston to the
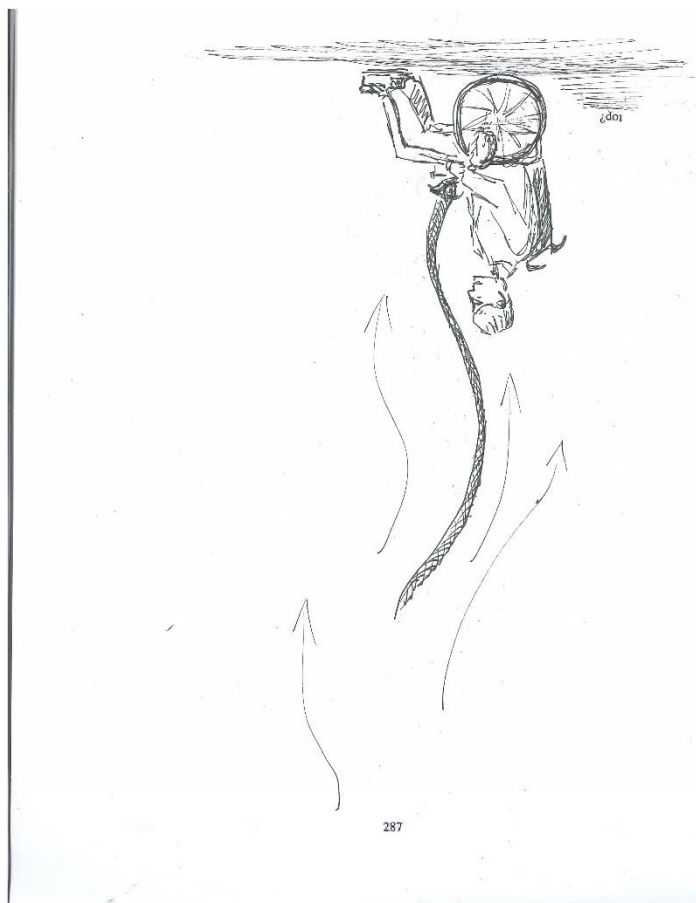
Illustration 8.

The illustration above shows that text which describes events taking place in the labyrinth of Navidson's house – at the bottom of the Spiral Staircase – is placed at the bottom of the page while descriptions of the happenings in the 'normal' part of the House, upstairs, its placed at the top. On page 287, the space of the house shifts. Reston, who should be hoisted up, is now falling. The top becomes the new bottom, and likewise up and down switch places in the layout since the text is not only placed at the top of the page but also upside-down.

This escalation and increasing mimicking of a labyrinthine architectural structure through the layout, follows a page containing nothing but a large black dot (Danielewski, 2000: 312) marking a turning point, or at least an interlude, during which the events of the story become less chaotic with Navidson and what is left from his team emerging from the house's labyrinth. And the layout, too, becomes more – albeit it not entirely – orderly again.

Chapter XX marks another change in layout that highlights both its labyrinthine structure and its link to the spatial labyrinth in the story. The chapter begins with a block of text in braille which at first may appear somewhat inefficient as the braille text is printed on the page rather than being textured, and even if it was, it would be too small to decipher. But a translation in

the footnotes indicates that these aspects are intended: 'The walls are endlessly bare. Nothing hangs on the, nothing defines them. They are without texture. Even to the keenest eye or most sentient fingertip, they remain unreadable. […]' (Danielewski, 2000: 423). This layout feature once more indicates that the layout fulfils a narrative function through which it not only illustrates the house's labyrinth but recreates it for the reader.

In the end of the novel, Navidson is followed into the labyrinth by his partner Karen, only for both of them to suddenly emerge from it and appear on their front lawn (Danielewski, 2000: 522-523). Similarly, Johnny's voice leaves the footnotes to form a chapter of its own in which Zampanò's voice is absent, followed by a disappearance of his commentary from the final two chapters. Thus, the characters of the story emerge from their physical and psychological labyrinths, and the reader, too, emerges from their own labyrinth as the layout takes on an ordinary character, that is to say without interruptions or flipped text passages, apart from the ground-air emergency code symbol for 'probably safe to land here' in the final chapter (Danielewski, 2000: 527). This feature indicates, I argue, that the layout fulfils an essential narrative function in that it narrates the story beyond words. I will further discuss this aspect later. In this case, the symbol tells the reader that all is well and perhaps even that 'they lived happily ever after' without it featuring as words in the written story.

In sum, what stands out regarding the experimental and unconventional layout choices of *House of Leaves* is that they appear in Zampanò's voice but not in Johnny's. As the developments of The Navidson Record – which are described and analysed by Zampanò – escalate or calm down, and the space changes to varying extents, so does the layout to create a labyrinth in which the reader experiences disorientation and confusion themselves, and from which they eventually emerge.

Yet, while this labyrinthine structure makes several reading paths technically possible (Hamilton, 2008; Aghoro, 2012), I argue – based on my reading experience as well as certain layout features – that the layout is meant to guide the reader along a specific path rather than to provide the freedom of exploration.

I began to consider the possibility that the readers are not meant to roam freely through the labyrinth on the pages when reading Chapter VI. While the rest of the novel combines Johnny's and Zampanò's voices through the use of footnotes in which Johnny comments on Zampanò's writing and/ or drifts off into anecdotes of his own life, this chapter differs in that Johnny's voice follows Zampanò's in the form of endnotes (Danielewski, 2000: 76-79). While footnotes interrupt the text and, at the same time, make it easy to read the commentary and annotations

they provide alongside the main text, finding this content as endnotes indicates that they should be read in the end, once the reading of the main text has been completed.

To further explore my theory, I tried out different ways of reading the novel (in terms of reading order) and recorded my impressions in my reading journal. At times, I read Zampanò's voice first while ignoring the footnotes – or at the very least Johnny's voice in the footnotes but reading those added by Zampanò himself. Upon reaching the end of the chapter, I would leaf back through the book to the chapter's beginning and read Johnny's voice only. At other times, I read the text as indicated by the layout: When a footnote appeared in Zampanò's voice, I would read the footnote, and then find my way back to where I had left off and continue reading Zampanò's voice. If there was a footnote to a footnote, or a reference to an appendix, I would read these first, before resuming Zampanò's (main) text.

Reading the two voices separately resulted in a more immersive reading, with less distractions and interruptions. Yet, as disorienting, and at times frustrating, it was for me to follow the path laid out by the layout, I soon realised that often it was better to do so since it made certain connections between different passages clearer – an aspect which I will come back to later – and all together created a different – often more exciting and intriguing – reading experience. This experience resulting from the reading path laid out by the layout of the novel captured the labyrinth and shifting space described in the story in a way that went beyond the written word. Particularly in Chapter IX, I got lost in the labyrinthine footnotes (*Illustration 9*) – both in the sense of a frustrating disorientation and an immersive forgetting of my surroundings and passing time as I attempted to figure out where each footnote led. In my journal I noted that '[r]eading this chapter is <u>less being told a story than an exploration</u> – if you follow the indicated path.'
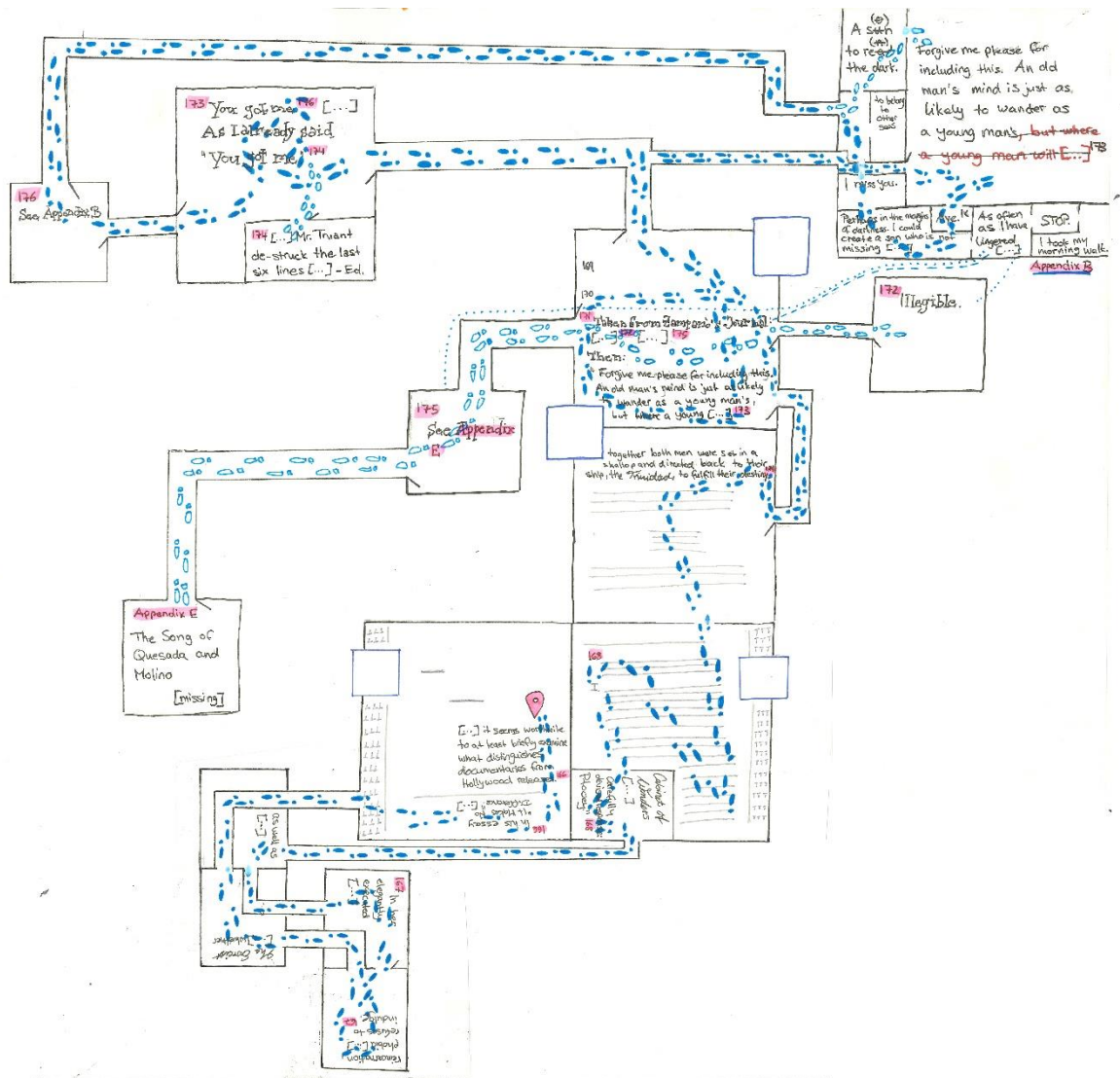
Illustration 9. This sketch showcases the reading paths laid out by the footnotes (containing further footnotes) beginning with footnote 166 on page 134 (Danielewski: 2000).

Based on my reading experience in combination with certain layout features such as the endnotes in Chapter VI, I argue that, while it is certainly possible to read the novel along certain paths, the layout of *House of Leaves* indicates a specific order in which the voices, passages, and story fragments should be read and thus takes on a narrative function.

This narrative function is further highlighted when taking a closer look at how the layout impacts the reading experience. I was halfway into Chapter V, when I began to have the impression that as much as the sentence structure and length of Johnny's voice – which is largely free of peculiar layout choices such as upside-down texts, broken up words, and frequent interruptions through footnotes – impacts the reading pace, the layout linked to Zampanò's voice does the same (c.f. Wittmershaus, 2011). It creates interruptions and pauses that slow

down the pace, or at other times speed it up, i.e., through a reduced amount of text on a page (c.f., Danielewski, 2000: 193-206). Between pages 442 and 460, Navidson moves through a narrowing hallway. The text layout, too, evokes the impression of being squeezed in an increasing narrow space as the amount of text (a few lines in the middle of the page) decreases, going so far as to split up words and spread them over several pages (see *Illustration 10*). Reading those pages themselves – turning one page after the other – is quick. But the broken-up sentences and words create interruptions in the reading flow as there is a small pause every time a page is turned (c.f., Willberg & Forssman, 1997) which creates the impression of progressing more slowly. In my journal, I noted that reading this passage was very much like squeezing yourself through a narrowing space with the interruptions and short pauses being much like the moment when you have to lift your hands of the ground and place them in another spot to push your body further down the passage.

Slowly but surely,

hand over hand,

Navidson

the ladder. But / pulls himself up.

Hours and hours, / later, presumably

with only brief / or climbing.

gulp of water or / stops to take a

high-calorie energy / have a bite of some

bar, Navidson / admits he will

he himself to a / probably have to

sleep. This idea, / rung and try to

However, as a / power is...

and pressing he / continues to push on.

for a little longer. His / tenacity is rewarded.

Thirty minutes later, / he reaches the last

rung. A few more / seconds and he is

standing inside a very

440

Erich Kästner in Ølberge Höhe-berge (Frankfurt, 1960, p. 95) comments on the force of vertical meanings:

The climbing of a mountain reflects

redemption. That is due to the force of

the word 'above', and the power of

the word 'up'. Even those who have

long ceased to believe in Heaven

and Hell, cannot exchange the words

'above' and 'below'.

An idea Escher beautifully subverts in Relativity of Stairs: disenchanting his audience of the gravity of the world, while at the same time enchanting them with the peculiar gravity of the self.

441

small   room   with

one   door   which

he   cautiously   opens.

442

On the other side, we find a narrow corridor sliding into darkness. "These walls are actually a relief," Navidson co

443

mments after he has been walking for a while. "I ne ver thought t his labyrinth would be a p leasant thin

444

g to return to." Excep t the fathe r he goes; t he smaller t he hallway

445

gets, unti l he has t o remove his pack and crou

446

ch. So on he i s on all fours p

447

ushing
his pac
k in fro
nt of hi

m. Another
hundred yar
ds and he h

448

449

as to crawl on hi
s belly. As we c

an see, the pain f
rom his already i

450

451

njured leg is excru
ciating. At one poi   nt, he is unable t
                                                         o move another i

452   453

nch. The jump cut   ave rested or slept
suggests he may h   When he begins

454   455

44

dragging himself forw
ard again, the pain has

still not diminished. E
ventually though, he e

456

457

merges inside a v
ery large room w

here everything about
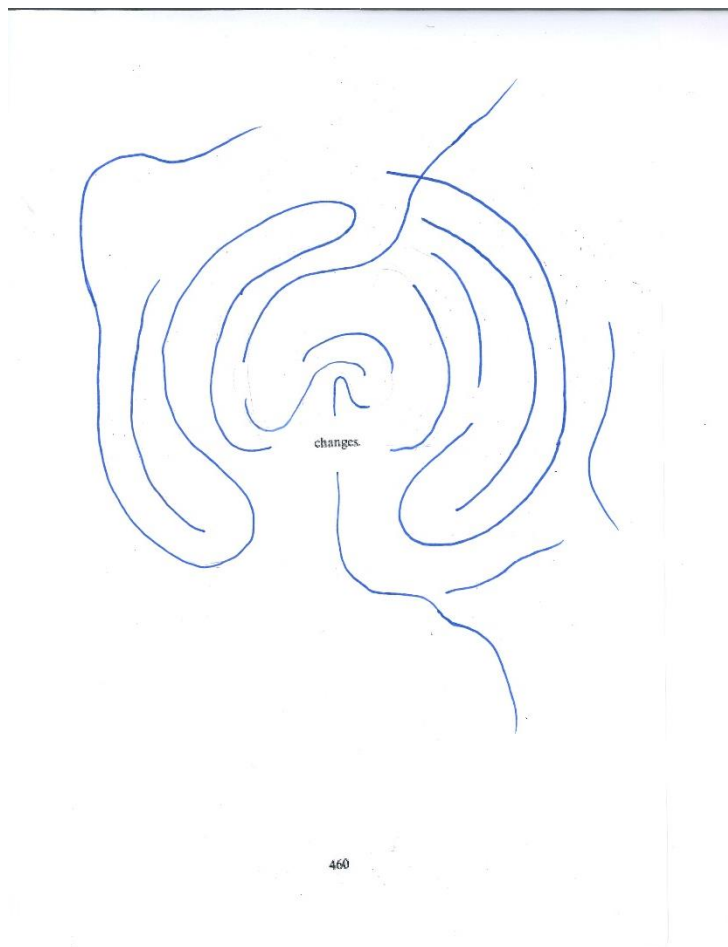
the house

suddenly

458

459

Illustration 10. Navidson squeezing himself through a narrowing space as the text is squeezed to occupy less and less space on the page, too.

Illustration 10 demonstrates how the layout mirrors Navidson's experience of forcing his body through an increasingly smaller space, until the space opens up again and changes alongside the layout. As discussed above, the layout goes beyond illustrating the story in that it influences the reading experience.

Similarly, on page 289, the word 'sinking' literally sinks down the page, and the sentence 'Or the stairway is stretching, expanding' stretches and expands (Danielewski, 2000: 291, 294-296) which simultaneously lengthens, or stretches, the reading of the word. And the chapter continues in this way: The text is at times at the bottom, at time at the top of the page; sometimes the right way around, then upside down, contained to one line or spaced out. It mimics the contents but goes beyond the illustrative as the reader reads the text differently than if it was formatted in a more ordinary manner.

Reading *House of Leaves*: Between immersion and alienation

Hamilton (2008) argues that the labyrinthine layout of *House of Leaves*, discussed above, pulls the reader out of their immersion in one of the story's narrative strands to steer them towards another thus creating a sense of disorientation. This sense of disorientation increases the reader's identification with the characters, yet at the same time the reading is disrupted which highlights to the reader the fact that they are reading a fictional story printed on paper (Hayles, 2002; Hamilton, 2008). I argue based on my reading experience which I recorded in my journal that the textual labyrinth of Danielewski's novel creates an oscillation between immersion and alienation.

Table 1 tracks my sense of immersion in and alienation from the story throughout the chapters as I recorded it in my reading journal. The colour blue marks notes in my journal referring to being immersed in the novel, i.e., not wanting to stop reading, forgetting my surroundings, a sense of identification with the characters. The colour red indicates feeling alienated from the story, i.e., being unable to focus on the novel, getting confused and disoriented due to the layout to the extent that it distracts me from the story itself.
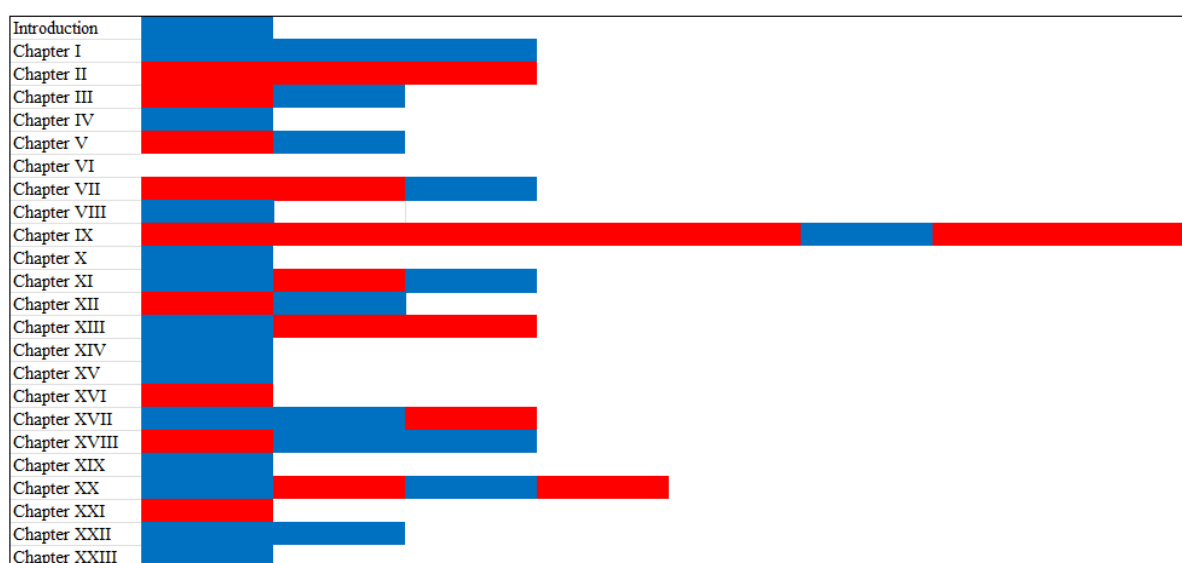

Table 1. Developed from my Reading Journal. Blue marks mentions of getting enjoying the novel and getting immersed in the story. Red marks mentions of getting confused, disoriented, struggling to focus, and being interrupted in the reading by the layout. The blank spaces for Chapter VII indicate that I made no comment in my reading journal on either feeling immersed in or alienated from the story while reading this chapter.

What this table show is that there is no continuous immersion or alienation, neither throughout the entire novel nor even for longer passages. Often the chapters themselves result in both a sense of alienation and an immersion. To note here is that Chapter IX contains frequent – if not constant – disruptions to the reading flow, and yet I immersed myself in the novel in a way: While I struggled to focus on the content itself, and would have been unable to summarise the events of the chapter once I had finished the chapter, I got immersed in the layout itself as I tried to follow every footnote to the point of obsession. I argue that this experience underlines the narrative function of the layout: In Chapter IX in particular, the written story becomes secondary while the layout takes over the narration. It simultaneously alienates the reader from the novel, highlighting its fictionality and the readers position as reader, and immerses them by making them part of the novel.

When I started reading House of Leaves for the second time, I was able to fully immerse myself in the story. Whereas I had been curious about the events that would happen throughout the story while reading it for the first time, this time I had the same sense of curiosity yet linked to whether I would uncover anything new. Up to a certain point, the beginning of the novel includes very little interruptions (through the layout). Particularly in the first few chapters there are only a few short footnotes and no other features that might interrupt the reading flow. Thus, there were moments when I lost myself in the story to the point that, i.e., when I was reading while on the bus, I stopped paying attention to where I was and completely forgot that I would need to get off at some point until I would remember with a start and experience a moment of panic thinking that I might have missed my stop.

There is an important difference between Johnny's and Zampanò's voice. While being part of the layout features that interrupt Zampanò's voice, Johnny's voice itself does not include interruptive layout features. Through this, as well as through the language Danielewski uses here, Johnny's voice is the part of the novel that reads the most like any other novel: Johnny describes people, conversations, and events in a language that is easy to read. Other than the fact that his voice is formatted as footnotes, it contains little layout-related distractions. The reading pace is affected by sentence structure and length. Zampanò's voice on the other hand is formatted as and contains elements of academic writing – it is after all written as an in-depth, well-researched albeit entirely made-up analysis of a documentary film – aside from its abundance of descriptive elements (of the events in The Navidson Record) which make immersion a little easier. Consequently, the way I read his voice differed from how I read Johnny's voice.

While I found it easier to relax my mind and just read Johnny's footnotes, even if that meant that my mind would wander off for the duration of a couple of sentences every now and then, I often read Zampanò's voice in a similar way that I would read an academic journal: Trying to focus on every sentence, remembering their content and finding connections; or skimming through the passages that did not interest me.

While not necessarily beneficial for immersing oneself in the story – in the ordinary sense – I wrote in my journal that 'I get the distinct impression that the layout which forces me to turn the book in all possible directions [in Chapter XII], creating a movement resembling a spiral shape, makes the reading immersive in its own way despite (or because of) the disruptions and decreased readability.' Similarly, I recorded that I particularly enjoyed reading Chapter XX in which the reading is somewhat equivalent to someone (Navidson, in this case) squeezing themselves through a narrow space; at times barely able to move forward, at times barely possible to decipher.

When reading Chapter V, I began to have the impression that as much as the sentence structure and length of Johnny's voice, the layout of House of Leaves determines the pace at which the rest of the novel is read: It creates interruptions and pauses that slow down the reading, and at other time speeds it up, i.e., through a limited amount of text on the page, or the lack of disruptions compared to the previous and/or following passages.

Through its layout, the materiality of *House of Leaves* – the book as an object (Hayles, 2002.) – is highlighted and used to at times alienated the reader from the story, and highlighting its fictionality, through disruptions to the reading flow and a sense of disorientation, and at other times immerse them further in the story as the layout and materiality of the book function together to i.e., determine the reading pace through breaks in the text which at times is spaced out across several pages (see *The book as labyrinth*) or to create a labyrinthine structure for the reader that mirrors the labyrinth the characters find themselves in. This textual labyrinth disorients and decreases readability which makes immersion more difficult (c.f., Willberg & Forssman, 1997), yet it results in increased identification with the characters, too, whose experience of disorientation, getting lost and finding their way out of the labyrinth (and to themselves, on a psychological level) is echoed.

I argue that – as indicated by the distinct passages that either immerse or create disruptions and distance that I identified through the use of my reading journal – *House of Leaves* does not either immerse or alienate the reader. Neither are both effects combined to create a new experience. Instead, they are expressed through an oscillation between these opposites. The layout does not allow full immersion through interruptions of the text and reading flow. Yet,

certain passages that create a disorienting and labyrinthine reading experience which reflects the experiences of the characters allow the reader to engage with and immerse themselves in the novel through this specific possibility of identification with the characters. Then again, some passages are (nearly) undisrupted and contain little to no layout elements that decrease readability therefore allowing the reader to fully immerse themselves in the story.

This effect is not merely rooted in fluctuations between passages in Zampanò's voice that either describe the events of *The Navidson Record* building the plot, illustrating the characters, making their actions tangible and creating suspense, or analyse them in a manner akin to academic writing. Neither does it rely on changes in Johnny's voice in terms of the sentence structure to influence the reading pace alone. Instead, the above-described effect is to a large extent achieved through the layout which makes use of the materiality of the book as an object, i.e., having to flip back and forth through the novel which interrupts the reading flow, breaking up text passages through page composition and footnotes, and having to turn the book upside down or sideways.

This oscillation allows for alienation and immersion to exist in the same novel, even if they are mutually exclusive in Brechtian theory on *Verfremdung* (c.f., Brecht, n.d.; Parekar, 2019). In metamodern fashion it does not seek to find a harmony between them or reconcile them to combine them into something new but includes both when neither can exist in the presence of the other by oscillating between them. It allows immersion, and increased engagement with the story at times through full immersion facilitated by an undisrupted reading (c.f., Willberg & Forssman, 1997; Löser, 2016). At other times, immersion is achieved through a process akin to Shklovsky's *ostranenie* (c.f., Echeverría et al., 2019; Berlina, 2020). Defamiliarization is achieved by the labyrinthine structure that disrupts and decreases readability but at the same time increases identification and empathy with the characters. It thus increases the reader's engagement with the story – not necessarily in a critical but in an emotional way. Alienation, on the other hand, is the result of further disruptions to the text and reading flow that drastically reduce readability and disorient the reader to the point that they become detached from the story. It distances the reader from the text by highlighting their role as the reader, the fictionality of the novel and achieves the necessary distance to critically reflect on the story including its layout.

At times, narrative strands are fragmented through the layout – creating a second oscillation between fragmentation and totality (c.f., Hubernator, 2023): Narrative strands and voices are fragmented, yet together they form a whole which is bigger than the sum of the individual parts and allows for multiple reading paths as well as – aided by the critical distance achieved through

alienation – interpretations as I will discuss in the next section based on the case of the Minotaur narrative strand.

Narrative beyond words: The *inszenierende Typographie* of *House of Leaves*

Throughout the novel, different fonts are used to indicate the different voices which is highlighted by a footnote early on in the first chapter. Footnote 5 explains that 'In an effort to limit confusion, Mr. Truant's footnotes will appear in Courier font while Zampanò's will appear in Times. […] – The Ediors' (Danielewski, 2000: 4). The use of different fonts is essential to the readability of the novel as the footnotes to Zampanò's text contain comments and annotations by himself as well as by Johnny and the Editors. Without the different fonts it would be exceedingly difficult and confusing to tell these voices apart. That in itself is a narrative function (Löser, 2016) and indicates that the layout is used with specific narrative intends in mind: to confuse, disorient but also guide, and make it possible to navigate the narrative strands.

The different fonts have been interpreted by readers of *House of Leaves* to hold particular meanings in addition to serving the purpose of increasing readability (Reddit, 2018; Hawthorne, 2010). While the meaning of and associations connected to fonts are more often than not personal and subjective, readers' attempts to interpret Danielewski's choice of fonts and the associations these interpretations are based on demonstrate that layout features such as font influence interpretations of *House of Leaves* and can thus be considered a narrative tool.

The voices of *House of Leaves* are formatted in the following fonts or typefaces:

1) Zampanò's analysis of The Navidson Record which arguably constitutes the main body of text is written in Times New Roman or a similar Times typeface (c.f., Danielewski, 2000: 4) which I interpret as reflecting the academic format of Zampanò's writing as all my university papers, including this thesis, as well as most other academic text that I have read are formatted in Times New Roman or a similar font.

2) Johnny's commentary on Zampanò's writing is set in a Courier typeface (c.f., Danielewski, 2000: 4). On the Internet, readers of House of Leaves have interpreted this choice of typeface as representing the much more informal voice of Johnny compared to Zampanò and have linked the typeface's name to Johnny's role as messenger between Zampanò and the reader (Reddit, 2018; Hawthorne, 2010).

3) The footnotes by the unknown Editors are typed in a Bookman typeface (cf., Danielewski, 2000: 4). It is somewhat similar to Times typefaces giving it, in my interpretation, a formal character which together with its name (Bookman) befits the Editor's role as editors.

Zampanò's writing includes two transcripts which are formatted in a font other than Times New Roman, likely since they are transcripts of additions to The Navidson Record by Navidson's brother, Tom, and Navidson's partner, Karen, and thus to set these texts apart from Navidson's own work.

4) The transcript of Tom's Story (Danielewski, 2000: 253-261) is set in American Typewriter which while similar to Johnny's Courier typeface as a monospace font, differs in that while letters in Courier all take up the same amount of space, the space the American Typewriter characters take up depends on their size. Apart from reminding me of how movie scripts tend to be formatted, this choice of font has prompted readers to speculate that this font reflects the shifting nature of space in the house (Reddit, 2018).

5) The transcript of Karen's 'What Some Have Thought' (Danielewski, 2000: 354-365) is formatted using Helvetica Neue or a similar font – which readers have claimed to be a neutral font which reflects Karen's attempts to maintain a façade that hides her fears and anxieties (Reddit, 2018).

6) When searching online for identifications of the fonts used in House of Leaves, the font used for the letters written by Jonny's mother, Pelafina (Appendix II – E. The Three Attic Whalestoe Institute Letters [Danielewski, 2000: 586-644]), most discussion forums and websites list this font as Dante (Reddit, 2018; Hawthorne, 2010). While Dante would make sense as a font as it alludes to Dante's inferno making it likely to symbolise Pelafina's madness, this claim ignores that the 'e's in the Whalestoe Letters are slanted making it more likely to be set in Kennerley or a similar typeface. The lines of letters such as the 'h' or the 'l' appear somewhat elongated. This and the slanted 'e' create an unevenness that it would be plausible to argue indicates Pelafina's madness and paranoia.

7) Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, Zampanò's House of Leaves includes a letter from Navidson to Karen (Danielewski, 2000: 389-393). While it seems at first glance that the letter (Navidson's voice) and Zampanò's voice are printed using the same font with the only difference that Navidson's voice is perhaps a size bigger, a closer look shows that while being the same typeface, the two voices are in fact formatted in different fonts (see *Table 2*).

Zampanò	Navidson
y	y
m	m
w	w

Table 2. Comparison of letters found in Zampanò's voice (Danielewski, 2000: 388) and Navidson's voice (Danielewski, 2000: 389).

By comparing the individual letters in Zampanò's and Navidson's voices, the small differences become evident. Taking the 'y' for instance, the top right serif is shorter in Zampanò's 'y' than in Navidson's. While all serifs in Zampanò's 'm' are the same, the last serif in Navidson's 'm' only extends to the right instead of to both sides and the arches of the letter are wider; and his 'w' lacks a serif in the middle where Zampanò's has one. In the case of the 'w' what stands out, too, is that the varying thickness of lines is more pronounced in Zampanò's 'w' than in Navidson's.

While less important in the cases of Tom, Karen, and Pelafina, the different typefaces are essential to the readability of Zampanò's, Jonny's, and the Editors' passages. Tom's and Karen's voices are integrated into The Navidson Record, that is, Zampanò's analysis thereof, and Pelafina's letters are neatly collected in the appendix. In the footnotes to Zampanò's text, however, we find annotations and comments by Zampanò himself as well as Johnny's commentaries and accounts, and the occasional remark by the Editors. Without the different fonts to indicate the various voices, it would here be exceedingly difficult and confusing to tell these voices apart.

According to Willberg and Forssman (1997), font fulfils two typographic functions: The chosen font has to suit the purpose of the book and the way in which it is meant to be read (an immersive novel, an informative pamphlet, or a well-structured academic article), and its appearance has to reflect the character of the book. They argue that typeface and content are not separate from each other but connected since there is no 'neutral' font. Thus, as previously indicated, font takes on a narrative function by improving readability through an easy-to-read formatting (c.f., Löser, 2016). In the case of *House of Leaves* this means not only that it is possible to decipher the text as such and read long passages without too much effort but also that it is possible to easily distinguish between the different narrative voices. Added to the font's

narrative function are the associations readers have with the various fonts which influences their interpretations of the novel and the characters' roles in the story.

In the previous section (*Reading House of Leaves: Between immersion and alienation*), I referred to the oscillation between immersion and alienation, as well as fragmentation and totality. I argue that this oscillation serves to intentionally direct the readers' focus. Readability is vital for an undisrupted reading and thus immersion, to keep the reader interested in reading the novel (Willberg & Forssman, 1997; Löser, 2016), yet disrupting the reading and alienating the reader from the story makes it possible to critically engage with the text, to become aware of one's position as reader and the fictionality of the story, and thus to reflect on the purpose of i.e., specific layout choices. One such instance is the fragmented story line of the Minotaur:

The Minotaur: Layout and interpretation

In Chapter XVII, Navidson returns to the house which still contains the mystery of the 5 ½ minute hallway, the Spiral Staircase, and the shifting corridors. But much more than the house itself, Zampanò discusses Navidson's reasons to return there, and the formatting is largely normal except for the occasional XXXX.

It is this chapter in which Navidson's letter appears. And it is perhaps here that the narrative function that goes far beyond the illustrative becomes most evident. There are a few aspects worth looking at closely in Navidson's letter:

1) Johnny's footnote following the letter (Danielewski, 2000: 393) which reads: Reminding me here, I mean that line about 'a code to decipher', how the greatest love letters are always encoded for the one and not the many.

2) The similarity of his voice's font to Zampanòs;

3) The inclusion of a Minotaur passage on page 391: '~~And I miss Hansen and Latigo and PFC Miserette, Benton and carl and Regio and 1st lieutenant Nacklebend and of course Zips~~…' while these passages are usually reserved for Zampanò's voice.

4) Two passages in Appendix B:

> Perhaps in the margins of darkness, *I could create a son who is not missing*; who lives beyond even my own imagination and invention; whose lusts, stupidities, and strengths carry him farther than even he or I can anticipate; who sees the world for what it is; and consequently bears the burden of everyone's tomorrow with unprecedented wisdom and honor because *he is one of the very*

> *few who has successfully interrogated his own nature.* […] *He will fulfil a promise I made years ago but failed to keep.*
> (Zampanò's voice in Danielewski, 2000: 543, emphasis added)

and:

> 'Forgive me please for including this. An old man's mind is just as likely to wander as a young man's~~, but where a young man will forgive the stray, an old man will cut it out. Youth always tries to fill the void, an old man learns to live with it. It took me twenty years to unlearn the fortunes found in a swerve. Perhaps this is no news to you but then I have killed many men and I have both legs and I don't think I ever quite equaled the bald gnome Error who comes from his cave with featherless ankles to feast on the mighty dead.'~~
> (Zampanò's voice in Danielewski, 2000: 546-547).

From the beginning on throughout the book several passages suggest that The Navidson Record does not exist, that Navidson, his documentary, and the house are entirely made up by Zampanò (Danielewski, 2000: xix-xxi, 3, 354) Considering that the Minotaur passages are reserved to Zampanò's voice and should not appear in transcripts or copies of material from The Navidson Record – were it real – underlines the fictionality of The Navidson Record even in the story world. Were it not for the layout, this detail would be missing from the novel which underlines its narrative function.

More than that, the choice to have the crossed-out passages that Zampanò wanted to remove from his work in red has precisely the opposite effect to Zampanò's intention: It highlights these passages and suggests that they are, in fact, relevant to understanding the story. Were the passages formatted in black and not struck through, the reader might pay less attention to them. Assumedly, they would not entertain the thought that there was a connection between these specific passages, and Navidson's letter would not seem peculiar at all.

Yet, taking this formatting choice into account, the layout reveals a particular possibility to interpret the novel – in particular, Zampanò's story. While my aim is not to produce an in-depth interpretation of *House of Leaves*, following this line of thought for a moment serves to show that the layout of the novel plays a vital role in regard to narration:

Danielewski as good as tells the reader that the letter is worth a closer look through Johnny's footnote on page 393. Looking at the letter, what stands out are the Minotaur passage and the

similarity between the fonts chosen for Zampanò and Navidson. As the former are usually reserved to Zampanò's voice, both aspects suggest a link between Zampanò and Navidson – additionally, it stands to assume that this link is intended by Zampanò given the above discussed fictionality of Navidson and his adventure.

Looking closely at the Minotaur reveals possible insights into Zampanò's story and motives. Zampanò presents the theory that the Minotaur at the centre of King Minos' labyrinth is no other than the king's deformed son, banished there by his father and turned monster in the imagination of the people who eventually set out to kill him (Danielewski, 2000: 109-111). Chapter IX (which extensively discusses the Minotaur) refers to Appendix B (which includes the above cited passages on pages 543, and 546-547) in a maze of footnotes. At the end of this maze, footnote 171 (Danielewski, 2000: 137) includes the quote from pages 546-547, however in black and not crossed-out; both here and in Appendix B, this comment of Zampanò's leads to footnote 173 (Danielewski, 2000: 137) in which Johnny comments on this particular quote and refers the reader to footnote 176 which leads to Appendix B (see *Illustration 11*, c.f., *Illustration 9*). In Appendix B, the above cited passage appears on page 543 – especially combined with the discussed theory of the Minotaur being Minos' son, and a poem on page 563 in Appendix F (see below) makes possible the interpretation that Zampanò once had a son who died or went missing.
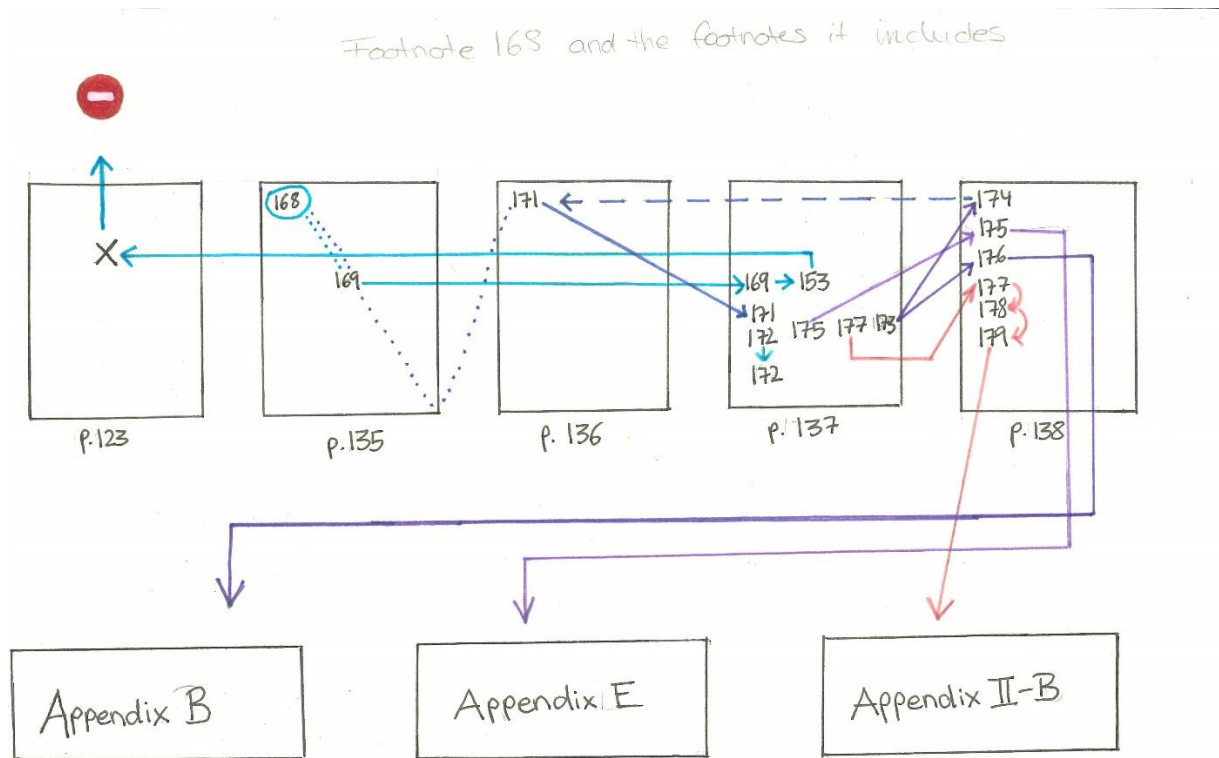
Illustration 11. Illustrated here are the reading paths created by the footnotes on pages 123-138 which includes the above referred to references to some of the novel's appendices. The reading paths are indicated through the use of different colours.

This interpretation combined with Navidson's fictionality, his letter and its similarities to Zampanò's voice, this interpretation can be extended to surmise that Navidson is Zampanò's imagined and invented son 'who is not missing' and 'who is one of the very few who has successfully interrogated his own nature' (Danielewski, 2000: 543) by disappearing into and emerging from the labyrinth of the house; he is Zampanò's Minotaur – embodying his trauma, fears, and regrets – at the centre of Zampanò's own psychological labyrinth.

The above referred to poem which is hidden in an appendix and only stands out through a careful reading of the entire novel including not only its context but also its layout, supports this interpretation. Considering the implied fictionality of *The Navidson Record*, it can be interpreted as hinting at Zampanò's motivation to write his analysis of the documentary: It is a journey through his very own psychological labyrinth of his grief.

The poem reads:

(Untitled Fragment)

> Little solace comes
> to those who grieve
> when thoughts keep drifting
> as walls keep shifting
> and this great blue world of ours
> seems a house of leaves
>
> moments before the wind. (Danielewski, 2000: 563)

It is highly doubtful that it would be possible to come to the same conclusions if the reader's attention was not drawn to the Minotaur passages, the particularities of Navidson's letters, and the above discussed passages in the Appendix through the layout of the novel. My argument, therefore, is that the layout of House of Leaves goes beyond illustrating the content and enriching the reading experience in that it narrates specific parts of the story that cannot be found written in words as such.

Conclusion

Throughout my thesis, I have argued that the layout of *House of Leaves* fulfils an essential narrative function in answer to my research question: *To what extent does the layout of* House of Leaves *by Mark Z. Danielewski (2000) fulfil a narrative function?*

Danielewski's debut novel *House of Leaves* – which has been described among other things as a haunted house tale, horror story, love story, and experimental fiction – combines several non-linear narrative strands which are distinguished through the use of different fonts. While much academic research of the novel focus on themes such as the labyrinth (c.f., Hayles, 2002; Hamilton, 2008) – both as a symbol and as a layout structure – and trauma (c.f., Boothroyd, 2015), my research is situated within the context of these debates by adding a particular focus on the layout's narrative function. From my findings, further insights can be drawn in regard to how layout – in a more general context – can be used as a narrative tool which shapes reading experiences and interpretations of literary texts thus adding to research on narrative culture.

My own research connects to previous research on *House of Leaves* by taking into consideration the theme of the labyrinth which is mirrored in the novel's layout structure by interweaving the different narrative voices through above all footnotes which to some extent create various reading paths (c.f., Hayles, 2002; Hamilton, 2008; Aghoro, 2012; Boothroyd, 2015). It further draws on the argument that Danielewski's novel can be classified as metamodern literature (c.f., Toth, 2017; Medaglia, 2023) by investigating the oscillation between alienation and immersion that is created through the layout.

House of Leaves heavily relies on the use of footnotes which often contain further footnotes and run back and forth through the novel. Alongside features such as the alignment of the text, the text being turned or tilted, the overall page composition and the text layout over several pages, the footnotes create a labyrinthine and disorienting reading experiences. As the layout recreates the space in which the characters move, it mirrors their experiences in the reader's experience of engaging with the novel thus leading to a stronger sense of identification with the characters and a more immersive engagement (c.f., Echeverría et al., 2019; Berlina, 2020) in addition to passages of undisrupted reading that allow the reader to immerse themselves in the novel in the ordinary sense.

At the same time, many of the layout elements impact the reading through decreased readability and disruptions to both text and reading flow, for instance by omitting letters or entire words, or by breaking up sentences and words across one or several pages as well as features such as titled and turned text elements that force the reader to turn the book sideways

or upside down. Thus, the role of the reader as reader is highlighted. It alienates the reader from the text and creates a distance between reader and story that allows and encourages the reader to critically reflect on the novel (c.f., Brecht, n.d.; Parekar, 2019). This critical distance makes possible more in-depth reflections on layout elements such as the very particular formatting of the Minotaur passages and their connections through the footnotes, or the use of different fonts beyond their function as indicators of different narrative voices. It thereby influences the reader's interpretation of the story. The reader's interpretation of the novel is further dependent on what they make of the symbols and shapes that can be found in or are created by the text and which carry meanings that are not always stated in the text itself.

I argue that these effects are only possible as there is no attempt to combine alienation and immersion or try to find a compromise or balance between them. Instead, the layout creates an oscillation between immersion and alienation. To note is, however, that the experience of reading *House of Leaves* depends on the reader's willingness to engage with the novel and its often-confusing layout (c.f., Willberg & Forssman, 1997; Löser, 2016) as well as on the reading paths that the reader follows (c.f., Aghoro, 2012).

The layout of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* thus goes beyond the illustrative. It influences the reading pace and experience, it creates different reading path, and creates the possibility of different interpretations of the story that depend on the reader's engagement with the novel and its layout, elements of which communicate aspects of the story that are not narrated by the text itself. The layout of the novel thereby becomes an essential narrative tool.

While this finding indicates a more general possibility to use layout as a narrative tool, my research is focused explicitly on the case of *House of Leaves*. There still remains an abundant potential to explore the facets and details of the novel itself and in how far it captures a metamodern structure of feeling. Likewise, how the use of layout in *House of Leaves* ties into broader narrative cultures, and how layout can be used in narration merits further research.

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