

Reality and Existentialism in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

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House of Leaves, by Mark Z. Danielewski, is a novel first published in 2000 that has since developed notoriety in literary circles for its arguably unique experimentation with a multi-layered plot, varied visual typography, and multi-media format. Despite being widely read and influential over the past decade, little scholarly analysis has been done on *House of Leaves*. As *House of Leaves* could represent an entire new genre of literature, it is important that we understand its themes and the ways in which various writerly techniques function within the novel. Here, I analyze *House of Leaves* through an existential lens, specifically utilizing the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus to examine the psyche of one of the novel's main characters, Johnny Truant. In addition to primary sources by Danielewski, Sartre and Camus, I employ a 2002 analysis of *House of Leaves* by Katherine N. Hayles to aid my research. I conclude that Johnny's story, and *House of Leaves* as a whole, breaks down traditional notions of reality, but retains existential hope for individuals who are able to find a purpose in life, even if that "purpose" is necessarily subjective. My analysis presents an original take on *House of Leaves*, and contains wider implications for future novels that emulate its experimental style. Past analyses have focused on post-modern aspects of *House of Leaves*, but I analyze it through an existential lens. Beyond adding to the body of work on *House of Leaves*, my existential take on an otherwise post-modern text may prove influential to analyses of other "post-modern" novels in the future.

In his multi-media novel *House of Leaves*, Mark Z. Danielewski employs multiple layers of perception in order to blur the line between perception and reality, and even challenge the relevance of objective reality to the human experience. The text develops to spill its multi-layered fiction over into the "real" world, further blurring lines between reality and fiction and questioning the significance of the difference. Perhaps most indicative of this blurring is the character Johnny Truant, who resides somewhat close to the surface in the novel's onion-like composition. Johnny goes mad while exploring and compiling Zampano's work for the first edition of *House of Leaves*, perhaps on account of his past experiences; however, only by completing his project is he able to achieve relative sanity and affect the world around him. Johnny experiences something akin to Sartre and Camus' existential crisis, and is able to resolve this crisis in what makes for an optimistic outlook for the individual who is able to find something to live for. In Johnny's case, however, the something that he finds to live for is in fact a fiction, based upon another fiction, all within a larger fiction. Human experiences are shown to be poignantly personal and subjective, but also interconnected. In *House of Leaves*' conclusion, objective reality is indeterminate, but through subjective mediation individuals such as Johnny Truant are nonetheless able to find purpose and direction and, eventually, sanity.

The novel *House of Leaves* is centered on a film, *The Navidson Record*, about which the late Zampano has written an academic study. *The Navidson Record* is a documentary by Pulitzer Prize

winning journalist Will Navidson that follows his move into a new house with his long-time girlfriend, Karen Green, and the couples' two children. The documentary takes a quick turn from joyful to dark, however, when they realize that the house's dimensions are greater on the inside than the outside. The house's strangeness escalates quickly as a hallway with mercurial, indeterminate, and perhaps infinite dimensions is discovered within it. The remainder of *The Navidson Record* is dedicated to multiple "explorations" of this cavern, wherein much conflict occurs, including several encounters with a mysterious "beast" that is suggested to symbolize a variety of conceptual entities, from the mythological Minotaur to the human subconscious. Zampano's manuscript is essentially a thorough analysis of the film. A younger tattoo artist named Johnny Truant becomes circumstantially responsible for piecing together Zampano's fragmented manuscript, and is driven mad in the process. At the root of Johnny's internal conflict, and Zampano's consumed life, is *The Navidson Record*, which, in *House of Leaves*' introduction, Johnny states, "doesn't even exist."¹ However, the occurrences inside *The Navidson Record*, despite being fabricated and never filmed, are sufficient to rob Johnny of his former life and, over time, sanity. Moreover, as readers delve into the text, it may affect them similarly to the way in which it does Johnny. Johnny gives an ominous warning in his introduction: "you will not be the person you believed you once were [after reading the text]."²

Within *House of Leaves*' context, the extreme angst that Johnny feels and warns the reader of could be predicted by the ideas of certain 20th Century

existentialist thinkers. Existentialism is a literary and philosophical school that emphasizes the personal experiences of the individual and his or her unique psyche. The Danish thinker Kierkegaard is regarded as the father of existentialism, and developed its basic tenets; however, for purposes of this analysis the philosophies of the more contemporary writers Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus are more pertinent.

Sartre was a leader in philosophical and literary existentialism during the 20th Century. His philosophies have been influential and acclaimed, and can be seen in practice in literature like *House of Leaves*. Sartre laid out the basic tenets of his existentialism in his 1937 essay, *The Transcendence of the Ego*. In that essay, Sartre posits that consciousness may be broken into two categories, “unreflective” and “reflective.”³ Unreflective consciousness is initial consciousness of a physical referent, or, more simply, observation (consciousness) of an object (referent). Reflective consciousness represents any sort of reflection of said referent, in an attempt to understand, describe, or consider a thing from the past. So, if one looks at a table (the referent), for example, one is experiencing unreflective consciousness. However, once the table is out of view, any thoughts or feelings about it qualify as reflective consciousness. Based on the basic psychological principle that memory interprets subjectively rather than recording objectively, Sartre concluded that all reflective consciousness is inherently subjective. Thus, it distorts the realities of unreflective consciousness, which translates readily to anxiety. Self-consciousness is inherently reflective, meaning that the self-consciousness that all humans possess causes angst and unrest.

In *House of Leaves*, Danielewski may or may not purposely play into Sartre’s existential philosophies. However, by placing all realities in *House of Leaves* at the underside of several layers of mediation, he effectively destroys unreflective consciousness *inside the novel* for characters such as Johnny, as well as *outside the novel’s frame* for the reader who attempts an exploration of the text. Reflective consciousness becomes the sole source of reality, and this “reality” often lacks any real world referent. This inability to place a finger on reality is one underlying cause of Johnny’s anxiety and psychosis as he compiles Zampano’s manuscript.

Johnny’s past also contributes to his mental state, and only adds to the relevance of Sartre’s theory in the text – information regarding Johnny’s history is

somewhat sparse and unreliable, but we do know that his mother was committed to a mental institution after attempting to strangle Johnny when he was seven years old, and that his father died in a flying accident not long after, relegating Johnny to abuse in the foster-care system. One foster-parent, a retired military-man named Raymond, causes Johnny significant anxiety, and he often appears in Johnny’s dreams and footnotes. However, the angst that Johnny feels while recalling his past, along with the unreliability of the information on which he draws, together play directly into Sartre’s ideas regarding the anxiety of the reflective consciousness.

Most of what the reader understands about Johnny’s relationship with his mother, a woman named Pelafina, is garnered from a collection of letters that constitute *House of Leaves’* Appendix II-E. A footnote by the most recent (and rather mysterious) “editors” of the text during one of Johnny’s earlier psychotic rants explains:

Though Mr. Truant’s asides may often seem impenetrable, they are not without rhyme or reason. The reader who wishes to interpret Mr. Truant on his or her own may disregard this note. Those, however, who feel that they would profit from a better understanding of his past may wish to proceed ahead and read his father’s obituary [...] as well as those letters written by his institutionalized mother.⁴

The mere fact that the Editors leave it up to the reader whether or not they wish to learn about Johnny’s past is indicative of the shaky nature of interpretation and reality in the text. Readers may choose not to read Pelafina’s letters at all, they may skim them, or they may read them carefully - in any case, they will combine the information (if any) that they learn from the letters with their own personal experiences in order to interpret Johnny as a character. The line between fiction and reality is once again blurred. The fact that reflective analysis of Pelafina’s letters is the *most* reliable source of information about Johnny’s

past serves in the ongoing destruction of definitive truths in the text. The letters are all from Pelafina (none of Johnny's apparently-few responses are included), and the reader knows that she is afflicted by mental illness. In fact, Pelafina seems to become increasingly insane throughout her correspondence, much of which is devoted to paranoid rants about her asylum's director. At one point, convinced that her mail is being read, she sends Johnny a coded letter. Her concerns are clearly unfounded, the result of an unsound mind in the throes of paranoia and perhaps schizophrenia. Therefore, Pelafina's letters are inherently unreliable, although they remain the *most reliable* referent to make determinations about Johnny's past.

Moreover, the reader must also take information that Johnny provides personally, which may at first glance appear to be more reliable, with a grain of salt. Not only is Johnny engaging in the dangerous business that is reflective analysis when he shares memories, he is also an unreliable narrator. Near the beginning of Johnny's transcription of Zampano's manuscript, he adds a word – the word “water” – to a sentence, changing Karen's mundane statement about the heater not working to a statement about the water heater. He explains that events in his own life are influencing the way that Zampano's words are being recorded: “Is it just coincidence that this cold water predicament of mine also appears in this chapter? Not at all. Zampano only wrote ‘heater.’ The word ‘water’ back there—I added that.”⁵ This occurs early in the text, and from that point forward Johnny cannot be completely trusted by the reader. His unreliability is further cemented by the tall tales that he tells to girls at bars, in which he spins fantastical versions of his own life out of wishful thinking, a desire to forget, or perhaps merely for amusement. It is important to remember that since Johnny regularly lies to his acquaintances, there is no reason to assume that he is consistently truthful with the reader. As such, Johnny's accounts of his own life cannot be counted on to be reliable – the letters from his mother are indeed the most reliable source of information about his past, and analysis of his life is indeed painstakingly and paradoxically “reflective.”

This reflective analysis of character may inspire additional reflective analysis of self, which can cause anxiety to the reader who relates to Johnny. Johnny's broken family and experiences in foster care are not entirely uncommon situations for individuals in the real world. The potentiality exists for one with

similar experiences to experience an upwelling of emotion inspired by Johnny's unrest. More generally, the reality that Johnny's memories are shoddy and unreliable representations of facts weighs on the reader's mind as he or she realizes that he or she too possesses a dubious self-consciousness. These ideas harken back to Johnny's early warning to readers that Navidson's story would affect them as it affected Johnny. His ominous statement rings ever more true as additional layers of the fiction – specifically the layer inhabited by Johnny himself – also alters readers' perspectives, appealing to their emotions and cutting at their sense of reality.

The scene wherein the footnote quoted above appears perhaps best illustrates Johnny's feeble hold on reality, and its connection to his past. Johnny is loading a tray with ink at the tattoo shop where he works and is attacked, so to speak, by the beast that seems to exist both within Navidson's house and Johnny's subconscious. The text is rife with contradictions as Johnny struggles to escape frightening hallucinations: “I start to bleed [...] Except I'm not bleeding though I am breathing hard [...] I'm no longer alone. Impossible.”⁶ Johnny's apparent anxiety attack comes on suddenly, and it is impossible for the reader to gauge the reality of his situation. He first reports bleeding, then corrects himself; he ominously states that he has been joined in the hallway, then reaffirms that this is impossible, as no one has entered it. One possible explanation for Johnny's sudden psychosis is that his subconscious mind is attacking his mediated consciousness. Since Johnny's entire existence consists of subjective mediation, his grip on reality is feeble at best, and the potential for him to experience a psychotic episode is heightened.

As his paranoia builds, Johnny reports urinating and defecating in his pants. He sees “the eyes [...] full of blood,” and “the shape of a shape of a shape of a face,” both of which the reader takes to be the beast that Navidson and his companions have encountered in the cavernous hold of the house.⁷ How the beast made its way from the inside of Navidson's house to the tattoo parlor, however, is a mystery, especially since the two exist on separate physical planes within the text. The fact that the beast manifests within the film *The Navidson Record* as well as in Johnny's personal narration (two degrees of mediation apart from one another) sheds light on the way that Danielewski utilizes symbolism in the text. The beast is a dweller of dark spaces, from the cavern

in the house to Johnny's abyss of a subconscious. This connection implies the truth of one of the numerous theories that Zampano discusses about the house's chamber: that the cavern actually represents the subconscious mind, and thus that "all solutions [to the problem of the house's interior] are then necessarily personal."⁸ If this is the case, then the beast manifests as a dark image of each character's individual demons. It is interesting that Johnny, who is intimately knowledgeable of Zampano's manuscript, and thus the idea that the beast is only inside of characters' heads, nonetheless encounters the beast. It is difficult to say whether he would have actually found the beast in his subconscious at all had he not read about it in Zampano's analysis, but the implication that his experience is the direct result of reflective analysis of Zampano's work adds one more element of contradiction to the text as separate layers of fiction are simultaneously unified and pulled apart by the indiscernible forces of subjective realities.

N. Katherine Hayles makes further observations about Johnny's encounter with the beast in her piece, *Remediation in House of Leaves*. Hayles points out that, once escaping the storeroom, "a client in the shop later calls attention to the 'long bloody scratch' on the back of his [Johnny's] neck."⁹ However, she notes that other details that Johnny offered during the encounter, including soiling his pants, prove untrue, and, "the scratch that remains the only verifiable evidence of the encounter recalls the half-moon cuts his mother left on his neck when she tried to strangle him at age seven."¹⁰ The "dance between presence and absence" that permeates *House of Leaves* is extremely powerful at this juncture – as Hayles explains, it is unclear to the reader whether the scratch is an actual scar left by Pelafina's attack, a fresh wound incurred in the fray of Johnny's disorientation, or, despite seeming impossibility, a mark left by the beast.¹¹ One thing that Hayles does not explicitly state, however, is more certain: there is a direct connection between Johnny's history and experiences with his mother and the only physical mark left on him by the "beast."

As the scene continues, Johnny proceeds to spill black ink on himself, then anxiously explains, "I'm doused in black ink [...] and the floor is black, and – have you anticipated this or should I be more explicit? – jet on jet; for a blinding instant I have watched my hands vanish, in fact all of me has vanished, one hell of a disappearing act too, the already foreseen dissolution of the self, lost without

contrast, slipping into oblivion."¹² Hayles cites this quotation in order to discuss its immediate implication- Johnny's negation, absence, and all-encompassing subjectivity. In her analysis, the beast then comes to represent a signifier of absence and negation. When examined alongside Sartre's theory of the reflective consciousness, however, this negation may be, on a deeper level, the result of futile self-reflection on Johnny's part. As he attempts to define himself by looking inward and to the past, he implodes around a reality that never truly was, or that consists entirely of subjectivities. These ideas become clearer and manifest ever more literally as the section continues. When Johnny looks at his reflection in the ink tray, he sees, "I'm not gone, not quite. My face has been splattered with purple, as have my arms, granting contrast, and thus defining me, marking me, and at least for the moment, preserving me."¹³ Hayles insightfully points out that this purple matches the nail polish that his mother wore while strangling him, "marking him in a complex act of inscription that here merges with the purple and black ink to form an overdetermined double writing that operates simultaneously to negate and assert, obliterate and create, erase and mark."¹⁴ In other words, the ink that Johnny spills on his person both negates and affirms his existence: it simultaneously defines and destroys him. This paradox is a direct result of the existential theory discussed above. Johnny exists only through reflection, and he is destroyed by the very reflective consciousness that so defines him.

As Johnny gets more involved in his work with Zampano's manuscript, it becomes even more apparent that reflective mediation is both consuming and defining him. Johnny becomes increasingly paranoid and unhealthy as he continues to compile *House of Leaves*, and in his most dire period he shuts himself in his apartment behind numerous newly installed locks to escape from the world. During this time, Johnny comes to feel that his existence is contingent on Zampano's manuscript, and not the other way around. He writes that Zampano's manuscript is "inventing me, defining me, directing me until finally every association I can claim as my own [...] is relegated to nothing; forcing me to face the most terrible suspicion of all, that all of this has been made up [...]."¹⁵ Mediation has so broken down Johnny's identity that he comes to be defined by a thing that he is himself responsible for mediating: Zampano's analysis of *The Navidson Record*. His attempts at self-definition are futile because, by their

reflective nature, they serve to destroy him as quickly as they define him.

Johnny is consumed by his very self-definition, a paradox that is mirrored both within the full text of *House of Leaves* and by the novel as the reader in our “real” world finds it. When Navidson is stuck alone in the belly of his house, he reads a novel (tellingly entitled *House of Leaves*), but the darkness is such that Navidson must burn the pages of his novel in order to read it. The text is thus destroyed as it is digested; there is nothing left to refer back to once it is read, leaving reflective consciousness and analysis as Navidson’s only options if he wishes to recall the novel.

Additionally, the *House of Leaves* held by the reader (us), four layers of mediation apart from Navidson, is itself built of compounding premises that often do not stand the test of objective reality. At the core of the text are the film, *The Navidson Record*, and its inhabitants, neither of which truly exist. However, despite not *really existing* within or outside of the text, as Hayles notes in her analysis, “the lack of a real world referent does not result in mere absence.”¹⁶ At the bottom of the texts’ layered composition are the nonexistent film’s subjects, Navidson’s house on Ash Tree Lane and its impossible dimensions. As Mark Hansen notes in his analysis, *The Digital Topography of House of Leaves*, the House’s impossibility is all that makes the novel’s plot possible in the first place. And, as is discussed above, Johnny confirmed that neither the house nor the Navidsons in fact exist. However, they come into existence by being recorded by Navidson and his Hi 8 cameras - the film *The Navidson Record*, the literal mediation of the house and its subjects, is the only lens through which they exist- in other words, they exist solely through mediation, by being recorded in the past.

Moreover, the film *The Navidson Record* itself shares the Navidsons’ purely medial existence. Just as the Navidsons only exist through the lens of Hi 8 cameras, *The Navidson Record* exists only as a product of Zampano’s analysis. Again, it is brought into being only by its recording. As Hayles writes, in *House of Leaves*, “there is no reality independent of mediation.”¹⁷ Johnny is no exception to this rule, and exists within the text only through reflected mediation. The difference is that for Johnny this reflective mediation is internal, and brought to a head by his obsession with the text that mirrors his

consciousness, forcing him to confront the absurd “reality” that nothing is truly real.

Albert Camus wrote prolifically about just this crisis of “the Absurd,” furthering existential theory with his ideas. Camus defined the Absurd as the conflict between an inherent human desire to find meaning in the world and the inherent impossibility of doing so. Johnny’s Absurdist crisis is more specifically brought on by his desire to find *reality* in his existence, and his inability, due to Sartre’s reflective consciousness and endless mediation, to do so.

Camus’ main concern was the individual’s reaction to his or her encounter with the Absurd. In his most well known book, *The Stranger*, the main character ultimately gives up all hope for meaning and kills another man for no apparent reason. He is relegated to prison, where he expresses no remorse and is eventually executed. However, *The Stranger* represents only one plausible response to the Absurd, and Camus’ laid out three others in his slightly more optimistic essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus outlines three of the “most extreme” responses that a man could take once he discovers the absurdity of life.¹⁸ The first man in his discussion, Don Juan, lives passionately but noncommittally, moving from woman to woman in an attempt to collect as much “love,” by which Camus means sex, as possible in his short and absurd life.¹⁹ Don Juan is able to live without melancholy because while most men “don’t know or they hope,” Don Juan “knows and does not hope.”²⁰ He is fully aware of the uselessness and absurdity of life, and thus chooses to enjoy himself as much as possible through frivolous pursuits. A second man in Camus’ text becomes an actor, by which he “demonstrates to what degree appearing creates being.”²¹ The actor plays diverse and numerous roles, through which he can live diverse lives. Roles are to the actor what women are to Don Juan. A third man is known simply as “the conqueror.”²² He chooses to conquer in what he knows is a futile attempt at true control, relegating himself to the history books, where he will at least live on in some sense. If the third man can be compared to the first two, it is in the way that he wishes to control “many territories”- similarly to Don Juan’s many women and the actor’s many characters.²³ All three of the men understand the nature of the Absurd, and attempt to then make the best of their fleeting and futile time on Earth.

In *House of Leaves*, Johnny's impossible paradox between "obliteration and creation" by his past becomes an Absurdist struggle in its own right when he needs not only to discover a meaning, but also affirm his own existence.²⁴ Essentially, his identity is threatened by Sartre's reflective consciousness, which leads to Camus' absurd crisis. Johnny's response to his experiences does not fit into any of Camus' specific categories, per se, and Johnny does not explicitly understand the Absurd as Sartre's theoretical men do. However, as Camus stated in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the examples that he gives are extreme, and individuals in the real world as well as in literature do not usually fit them precisely. Johnny encounters the Absurd with his own unique approach, demonstrating at times characteristics of Camus' paradigmatic Absurd men, but ultimately overcoming the Absurd through the completion of the very project that initially brings on his crisis of the absurd: the binding of Zampano's words in the first edition of *House of Leaves*.

Although Johnny's story hardly begins at its start, we can gather from his introduction and other sources that before he began work on the piecing together of Zampano's manuscript, he was at a loss for purpose and meaning in life. Johnny explains in his introduction:

It was the end of '96. Nights were cold. I was getting over this woman named Clara English who had told me that she wanted to date someone at the top of the food chain. So I demonstrated my unflinching devotion to her memory by immediately developing a crush on this stripper who had Thumper tattooed right beneath her G-string [...] Suffice it say, Lude & I spent the last hours of the year alone, scouting for new bars, new faces, driving recklessly through the canyon, doing our best to talk the midnight heavens down with a

whole lot of bullshit. We never did. Talk them down, I mean.²⁵

Following this paragraph, a single sentence concludes the section of text: "Then the old man died."²⁶ Zampano's death, and Johnny's subsequent garnering of his manuscripts, is clearly a turning point in the young man's life. Beforehand, by his own description he was merely floating through life without purpose, escaping his own consciousness through substance abuse, and passing time with his friend Lude. His life appears frankly devoid of meaning. However, he is separated from Camus' characters because he does not feel, or at least does not explicitly articulate the feeling that the world is inherently meaningless – this costs him the relative happiness that Don Juan and the others procure, but it also allows him to be a dynamic character, and over time garner meaning and purpose in his own life.

Johnny's progression toward self-affirmation is gradual and preceded by periods of extreme negation, as is discussed above. Even as he struggles with the reflective consciousness' negation, however, he becomes self-aware of his Absurd struggle fairly early in his journey. This is most apparent in Johnny's discussions of Lude, who acts as his foil for most of the text. When Johnny begins to conceptualize and even "see" the beast that permeates Navidson's house and his consciousness, Johnny writes, "Lude didn't see it. He was blind [...] Lude would never feel how empty hallways long past midnight could slice inside of you, though I'm not so sure he wasn't sliced up just the same."²⁷ Before taking on his project, Johnny and Lude had similar attitudes and did everything together; but as soon as Johnny begins his work on the first edition of *House of Leaves* he develops an acute awareness of their condition that Lude utterly lacks. He becomes concerned with the lack of meaning in his life, and, increasingly over time, concerned with finding purpose to give meaning to his existence. Lude, who does not, is eventually killed in a drunken car accident, ostensibly a result of his characteristic debauchery and recklessness.

Johnny exhibits certain actions during this search that mirror those of Camus' Absurd men, most applicably the seducer, Don Juan. Johnny and Lude are both promiscuous, and often have sex with women who they barely know or have just met. On more than one occasion, Johnny speaks about not remembering a woman's name after having relations with her. Don

Juan, however, is said, “not to believe in the profound meaning of things,” while Johnny does desire some semblance of meaning.²⁸ He is smitten with Thumper, a stripper who should otherwise embody the emptiness of Johnny’s sex life. At one point, Johnny resolves to “see if it was possible to mean something to her, see if it was possible for her to mean something to me.”²⁹ Ultimately, Thumper cannot give Johnny “meaning,” because, as Don Juan understands, flippancy and promiscuity does not bring meaning, but rather the illusion of meaning or the numbing of one’s lack thereof. Thus, Johnny’s actions and situation brings him closer in comparison to Camus’ Absurd men, while his intent and yearning for meaning differentiates him from the archetypes.

Over time, Johnny is able to find (or create) at least some semblance of meaning in his life. After completing the first edition of *House of Leaves*, he travels throughout the United States without direction or purpose. However, at a Flagstaff bar he hears a band sing a song called, “Five and a Half Minute Hallway,” a direct reference to his work.³⁰ Johnny “couldn’t believe my eyes” when he is shown a copy of his work – the first edition of *House of Leaves*.³¹ The band tells him that the book will be sure to change his life. Johnny reflects on what he has just learned of the impact that his work has had on the world, and comments that “finally I fell into a sleep no longer disturbed by the past.”³² Not long after, Johnny comments, “I know it’s going to be okay. It’s going to be alright. It’s going to be alright.”³³ Having completed his work on *House of Leaves*, Johnny has impacted the lives of others and has even influenced other art – his existence, previously questioned at its core, is able to emanate outside of himself and perhaps even change the lives of others.

Thus, Johnny Truant himself, or at least his thoughts and feelings, are shared around the world. Even if his existence is merely a collection of reflected consciousness and mediation, it is mediated further, beyond his own tortured consciousness. In fact, Johnny’s person, and the influence that it comes to have, breaks into the plane of reality upon which the reader of Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* sits, provoking thought, debate, and analysis. Academic analysis of *House of Leaves* represents in a sense Danielewski’s final triumph over reality: we set out to analyze an anonymously edited novel, compiled by a fictional tattoo-artist’s assistant, by a fictional deceased blind man, and about a film, which even within the fiction apparently never existed. On each of

these levels, the *objective reality* of a stimulus has little to no bearing over its effect on the characters or even the reader.

Therefore, Johnny’s experience does not bring assurance or comfort regarding the nature of reality or “Truth” – but *House of Leaves* does not attempt to give answers to these questions – rather, it examines them, and ultimately demonstrates that regardless of objectivity (which does not exist in the novel) an individual may find self-affirmation and sanity through the creation of art. The art that one creates will inevitably be mediated, analyzed, and interpreted, perhaps to the point of obliteration, but at the bottom of the pile of reflective consciousness and mediation lies the individual, and, if not optimistic, that is good enough for Johnny.

Notes:

¹ Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), xix.

² *Ibid.*, xxii.

³ Jean Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2004), 8-9.

⁴ Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 72.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁹ Katherine N. Hayles, “Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*,” *American Literature—Duke University Press* 74, no. 4 (2002): 789.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 72.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Hayles, “Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*,” 790.

¹⁵ Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 326.

¹⁶ Hayles, “Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*,” 780.

¹⁷ Hayles, “Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*,” 779.

¹⁸ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Penguin 1975), 85.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

²² *Ibid.*, 79.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Hayles, "Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*," 779.

²⁵ Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, xii.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 49.

²⁸ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 69.

²⁹ Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 366.

³⁰ Ibid., 513.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 514.

³³ Ibid., 515.

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