

# The Labyrinth under Ash Tree Lane. Dwelling in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

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## Abstract

Mark Z. Danielewski's 2000 novel *House of Leaves* revolves around a mysterious building that hides a seemingly infinite subterranean labyrinth of supernatural origin. Through various typographic techniques that creatively leverage on the space of the printed page as a complex visual device and textual artifices meant to create atmospheric effects, the author establishes what could be defined as a spatial condition. The reader's experience is thus not neutral, as it deeply engages the embodied and affective spheres. Through the analysis and discussion of these devices, this paper describes how, under specific circumstances, the spatial dimension embedded in literature can indeed become inhabitable, supporting the emergence of dwelling practices.

## Keywords

*House of Leaves*, Architecture, Dwelling, Visual dynamics, Typography, Atmosphere.

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## Introduction: dwelling in (through) books

How does a book allow us to dwell? How can a work of fiction – through its narrative and linguistic devices, but even by means of its visual and physical structure – create a condition that the reader may experience as *spatial*? How can a text – beyond the canonical metaphor – construct something resembling an *architecture*?

All these overlapping questions challenge one commonplace assumption: that a book is not an architectural object. While today there may be no general agreement on what an architecture *is*, few would claim that even the broadest acceptance could include books among its armamentaria. A text – fiction or non-fiction – can aptly *describe* an architectural space, deploying one of many well-honed methods that bring these conditions to visibility, even without using graphics representation<sup>1</sup>. Yet while the statute and mission of ekphrasis has long been that of providing a vivid re-evocation of a work of art (or architecture), there is a distance between the object of representation and its description that cannot be entirely bridged<sup>2</sup>.

Books, as technological devices, are something else. A printed page, perfected over centuries spanning several technological revolutions, is still today one of the most efficient means for human subjects to gather complex information, so much so that when it comes to reading even the most recent digital tools retain at least a part of that consolidated visual organization. There is indeed a “material engagement” that binds human subjects to the

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<sup>1</sup> On the use of phenomenographies as the description of lived spaces, see De Matteis *et al.* 2019.

<sup>2</sup> On the practice of ekphrasis and its limits see Mitchell 1994, 152.

printed page, which means that our mode of seeing, thinking and being has been deeply shaped by our use of such devices, not unlike the interaction with stone tools has influenced the evolution and abilities of our hands. Through the reliance on a source of knowledge and information that is stored in a material object, our cognition effectively happens «outside the head» (Malafouris 2013: 31). Alphabetic technology, as McLuhan defines it, has risen (from well before the age of print) to become a sophisticated information storage, but it has also sidelined the aural and corporeal strata of verbal experience, thus paving the way for the deeply visual-oriented style of cognition at the root of Western culture (McLuhan 1962: 24). In orality, a same word can be spoken, uttered, whispered, shouted, sung, declaimed, recited, stuttered, and be laden with many inflections that enrich its elementary meaning. Once translated into a precise and inflexible code such as the alphabet, all these further expressive contents are reduced, and even the most articulate contextual structure may fail in bringing the lived dimension of orality to life.

The printed page engages meaning into a linear and sequential geometry, and guarantees its efficiency by means of its rigid, nearly unchanging structure. We may have difficulty deciphering the flourished calligraphy in a 16<sup>th</sup> century letter, but find it far less troublesome to read a book printed in that age: despite continuous refinements and adjustments, today a page's basic organization is still largely the same. Our bond with literacy is so deep that according to some it even articulates our conception and perception of time, binding the linearity of writing with the unbreakable sequence of events grounding the Western temporal structure<sup>3</sup>. Here, the frail relationship between space and time – still strongly present in many non-Western cultures – may have been compromised by the primacy of the alphabetic techniques based on linearly arranged text.

A book can thus *speak* to us, eliciting an empathic and affective engagement (Ahern 2024; Denham 2024), but how this interaction occurs is usually not considered of a spatial nature, perhaps more of a temporal one. A romantic adagio (perhaps best epitomized in Michael Ende's *Die unendliche Geschichte*) conceptualizes a book as a world-in-itself, an almost-magical object capable of transporting the reader outside of common space and time in a dreamlike world of fantasy, all while comfortably remaining seated on a couch. And while every reader could confirm that this somehow

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<sup>3</sup> An interesting reflection in this sense is Ted Chiang's novella *Story of your Life*, which was adapted in the 2016 film *Arrival* by Denis Villeneuve.

does happen, I would like to consider here the possibility that, under specific circumstances, the experience of reading can indeed become spatial, construct a fully architectural condition, and eventually make us dwell not *in* but *through* the book<sup>4</sup>.

While the concepts of *dwelling* and *space* are quite central in architectural theory<sup>5</sup>, books as objects are not. There is a certain recent interest in literature as a medium for the description and understanding of architecture, especially in the pedagogic field<sup>6</sup>, and books on architecture – from the treatises of the Italian Renaissance to the celebrated volumes published in the 1920's by the Bauhaus – have evolved into a cultural genre of their own. But in the architectural world books are normally treated as attributes of specific spatial ensembles – libraries, classrooms, readings spaces, boudoirs – and not deemed capable of establishing a spatial experience of their own.

My attempt here will thus be that of understanding how the reading of a book can lead to the emergence of the situational condition that is prodromic to the experience of space. I here deliberately use the term *book* because of the relevance of the object itself, thus contemplating the effect that, beyond the merely textual sphere, the material engagement produces on the reader. The work of fiction that I will use as an exemplum, furthermore, is no ordinary one, rather one that from its very title places architecture and dwelling at its core: *House of Leaves*, the 2000 novel by Mark Z. Danielewski.

## Exploring the *House of Leaves*

*House of Leaves* is a rather peculiar book, and this quality has sparked broad interest of literary scholars and architects alike. At just over 700 pages, it is not as monumental as David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, but it definitely plays along it in the league of books that affirm their physical presence with a ponderous (and slightly intimidating) voluminosity. While for most other works of fiction the material details concerning the edition might prove trivial, and reading the printed version rather than the elec-

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<sup>4</sup> While the question of the spatial forms of literature has been widely addressed (see Mitchell 1980) as a counterpoint to its temporal structure, I centrally refer here to a phenomenal, lived rather than metaphorical acceptance of space; see De Matteis 2021.

<sup>5</sup> See, among many others, Joedicke 1985; Norberg-Schulz 1980; van de Ven 1980; Vesely 2004. For an overview of spatial theories in architecture see De Matteis 2021.

<sup>6</sup> See Havik 2014; Sioli and Jung 2018.

tronic one be just a matter of preference, it is not the case here<sup>7</sup>. The book's format (at 17,5 x 23 cm slightly larger than the typical pocket edition) and the graphic design of the cover do not give away much of the internal organization, which on the contrary appears very unusual from the first glance.

No two pages of *House of Leaves* are the same: each spread is differently composed, with many pages almost or entirely blank, others with overlapping text, the use of at least three different font faces and some coloured words and lines. Footnotes, text boxes, braille passages, text with diagonal or upside-down orientation complete the picture, in an unceasing invention of typographical stratagems. The immediate feeling one derives is that of an annotated printing draft, or of the piecing together of several different parts, as if other books had been cut and stitched together in a Frankenstein-esque collage of pages or fragments of pages.

The typographical variety, however, is not a simple pun or artistic performance, but rather a clear example of what Hayles (2002: 110) defines as «materialist strategy». Designed and typeset by Danielewski himself, who originally wrote the manuscript in pencil on plain paper (Dawson 2015: 293-294), the book's graphic organization supports the narrative stratification. *House of Leaves* is a «Chinese box» novel (Hamilton 2008: 11), with at least four *en abyme* plots that are both contained one within the other and intertwined (Hansen 2004: 620). The book's typesetting mirrors this articulation, with each of the voices presented with a distinct typeface and layout style. Two sets of footnotes (each a different sub-voice) follow the main text, sometimes taking up most of the page's space.

Even before delving into the novel's subplots, this complex narrative articulation and its supporting typographic structure influence the reader's experience. In this sense, *House of Leaves* is no ordinary book, since it requires an additional effort to be read, and each reader must choose

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<sup>7</sup> My first attempt to read *House of Leaves* was indeed on an electronic device, but after a few pages I started getting confused and could not understand why the text proved inconsistent and fragmentary. After viewing some photographs of the book's pages online, I purchased a regular book version (in particular: the Full-color, 2<sup>nd</sup> Pantheon Books Edition) and could finally truly engage with the novel. In this sense, Hayles writes: «The play between presence and absence is extended through the dynamic interplay between words and non-verbal signifying practices. The effects achieved by *House of Leaves* through this dynamic interplay are specific to the print book: they could not operate the same way in any other medium» (2002: 122).

her way through the pages (Aghoro 2012: 63)<sup>8</sup>. Again and again, the book must be turned at different angles in order to properly read the text; its considerable volume renders this action slightly uncomfortable and is best performed by holding the book on a horizontal surface rather than in one's hands. If reading a novel is a corporeal scheme we can normally perform in an automatic way and in nearly every postural condition – sitting, reclining, standing, lying, crouching – by just moving one's eyes and flipping pages with a single finger (Aarseth 1997: 2), *House of Leaves* tends to break this automatism, requiring the reader to crawl her way through every single page. There is a distinctive corporeal engagement, a call to presence that ordinary reading experiences do not entail, and which resonates with the constant sense of uncanny alertness pervading the events unfolding in *House of Leaves*. Our material attunement to the book as an object is so deep that as we use it, it becomes experientially transparent: we no longer “perceive” the book, which retreats to the background in favour of the text and narration it contains. This does not happen with *House of Leaves*.

Under many aspects, this novel is built like a labyrinth (Hamilton 2008: 5; Bida 2012). The tortuous intricacy of the various narrative levels breaks the linearity of the page's spatiality, forcing the reader to move back and forth within the book with startling frequency. As the footnotes containing the subplots run beneath the main body of text, they sometimes distract the reader, who may lose the thread of the principal narration, only reconnecting several pages later (Wishart 2007). It feels like running into a dead end, and instead of following the text along a single direction, twists and u-turns are necessary to keep the pace. Reading the main text – or the footnotes – only is not really an option, since the page layout's unpredictability continuously breaks the rhythm of narration, a result of a deliberate effort on the author's side (Downey 2007).

Labyrinthine is the super-dense, deliberately excessive system of references that pervades the book. Most are explicit and declared through a (largely invented) scholarly apparatus of footnotes commenting the ongoing narration with reference to real-world scientific literature<sup>9</sup>. Other references are more structural as they sustain the novel's cultural framework:

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<sup>8</sup> Danielewski's novel complies with the definition of *ergodic literature*, i.e. a text which requires a nontrivial effort to be traversed. The term was originally proposed in relation to cybertexts by Aarseth 1997.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the massive sequence of footnotes mentioning architectural texts and paradigmatic buildings in chapter IX.

most obviously the bond to Jorge Luis Borges, inspirer of the labyrinth structure (Hamilton 2008: 5), and to Dante, whose own katabatic journey serves as a precursor to this (and most other) voyages into the deep of the Earth (Dawson 2015: 284).

But there is one labyrinth at the very core of this book: it is the structure of the novel's actual protagonist, the house on Ash Tree Lane. As with every noteworthy maze, its articulation is not apparent at first glance, but unfolds as the explorer takes step after step into its dark recesses. The rather unremarkable house in a pleasant Virginia suburban area conceals its mysterious interior, and only allows visitors to enter the labyrinth on its own terms. What Will Navidson finds on his obsessive explorations into the depth of the house is an endless labyrinth, spiralling downward like Dante's *Inferno* and extending into darkness like Piranesi's *Carceri d'invenzione*. The cavernous spaces, evenly crafted in black stone, defy all laws of tectonics by being so vast as to appear boundaryless, and move and shift in unpredictable ways with ominous roaring sounds. They are dreadfully desolate, for no one inhabits them except the exploring parties, but are somehow "alive" in their movement and their ability of making objects disappear. They are more than just uncanny and frightful: even the professional explorers Navidson invites to the quest end up losing their mental stability inside the labyrinth, and more than one loses his life inside the house.

The reader participates in these explorations, developing a strong sense of disorientation and anxiety, anticipation and relief as the events unfold. Yet while the affective engagement with the characters and plot are a common cypher of narrative, the techniques this particular novel deploys to create its effects are not. Danielewski leverages on the visual dynamics of the book's typography to enforce a spatial sensation through bodily cues, and makes use of atmospheric generators that further increase the novel's uncanny allure.

## **The printed page as a phenomenal field**

In our dualism-ridden culture, *words* and *images* form a nearly irreconcilable dyad, perhaps best represented by the picture-caption assemblage. Here, the words serve as a description of the image, a fragile relationship that 20<sup>th</sup> century artists – from Magritte to Kosuth – have epistemologically challenged. The distance between the two elements is so strong that we have substantially forgotten that words – or rather letters – are primarily images in themselves: pictograms, the origin of alphabets, still show a di-

rect translation of one into the other, which centuries of symbolic-phonetic use has pushed into oblivion.

The cases where this ancestral bond deliberately emerges are relatively few, especially if compared to the nearly universal diffusion of consolidated typographical techniques: Danielewski's "liberated" pages are not an original invention, but have a rather small number of precedents scattered over the course of history. *Concrete* or *Visual Poetry*, as a minor genre, includes the work by poets whose compositions were graphically designed to form silhouettes of objects through the varying length of the stanzas. Descending from ancient *carmina figurata* and illuminated manuscripts meant to guide and inspire prayer, George Herbert's 17<sup>th</sup> century religious poems, for example, pair the changing rhythm entailed by the shorter or longer lines with a breath-like alternation in the poem's content. From this form of composition, that is at once textual and visual, emerges a «type of poetic effect [...] in which spoken pattern and spatial juxtaposition engage separately with the cognitive faculties of ear and eye to create two levels of significance within the same text» (Bradford 2011: 2).

More recent cases of the interplay between words and graphics can be found in Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* from 1918, where the French poet builds images through the compositions in a quasi-surrealist fashion, or the sound poems by Futurist authors such as Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's 1914 *Zang Tumb Tumb*. In this latter work – the recollection of the battle of Adrianople which the poet had witnessed two years earlier – the typographic devices are exploited to showcase the acceleration and clang of the battle, the shouting of soldiers and the movement of trains.

E.E. Cummings' verse, as a further token, is largely built around a deconstruction of the language's formal organization and grammar, breeding visual compositions that, while aniconic, often acquire a spatial dimension. In some of his collections of verse – for example the 1931 *W [Viva]* – the lines and stanzas lose any compactness, punctuation and regular spacing are jettisoned, words are literally torn apart over more lines, capital letters are arbitrarily used to generate emphasis, and proper spelling substituted with a wholly invented, phonetic mechanism<sup>10</sup>. Cummings does not strive for what we could properly call a visual aesthetics, but uses typography in a radical way to free verse from the rigid grid of the line-and-stanza structure.

Verse, with its reliance on prosody and auralty often overshadowing semantics, has long experimented with what Mitchell defines «visible

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<sup>10</sup> See Cummings 1991.



language», tracking the invention of this hybrid artform to William Blake (Mitchell 1994: 111). Fiction, on the other hand, has traditionally had far less chances of tinkering with the visual and spatial dimensions of writing and printing. The original meaning of “lyric” poetry, as a poetic form meant to be sung on the notes of a lyre rather than recited, indicates the preponderant aural-musical root of verse, which remains present and often discernible even in contemporary works. This liaison is absent or latent in prose, where narration generally takes the lead: while textual forms do present themselves with a multitude of styles, the visual, aural and spatial dimensions usually remain unaddressed. Other forms of complexity, primarily narrative ones, have been engendered by the novel form: one could think of the intricate non-linearism of Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela* or of *S. (The Ship of Theseus)* by Doug Dorst, with its unusual editorial format comprising spare pages, handwritten notes, etc.

Few novels before Danielewski’s have engaged with visual language: a classic precedent could be considered Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, where the author merges an idiosyncratic and deliberately fragmentary typography with occasional diagrams representing movement but also ideas, all with the intent of mirroring the book’s articulate use of the English language.

All the cases above showcase the implementation of “multimodal” techniques, which are extensively adopted in *House of Leaves*. The interplay of words, typography, pictures and other media, transform reading into a «multiliterate act», substantially altering the notion of «narrative discourse» (Hallet 2014: 151), and drawing all materials into a common process of meaning-making. Danielewski’s novel, however, exceeds in this the hermeneutic sphere, leveraging on multimodality to achieve the creation of fully spatial effects.

*House of Leaves* has been described as the analog representation of a hypertext, a then novel, dynamic and interactive literary form that readers were increasingly becoming familiar with in the historical period of the novel’s making (Pressman 2006). As Bolter notes (2001: 69), «picture writing» has characterized the World Wide Web since its earliest days, combining text with graphics, hyperlinks, tags and all other technical-textual devices that have by now been incorporated into everyday use. But in 2000, the cultural transformation purported by the onset and diffusion of the Web was still in its initial years, and Danielewski’s novel reflected in its anticipatory web-like complexity a shift in models of knowledge as it would unfold in subsequent years.

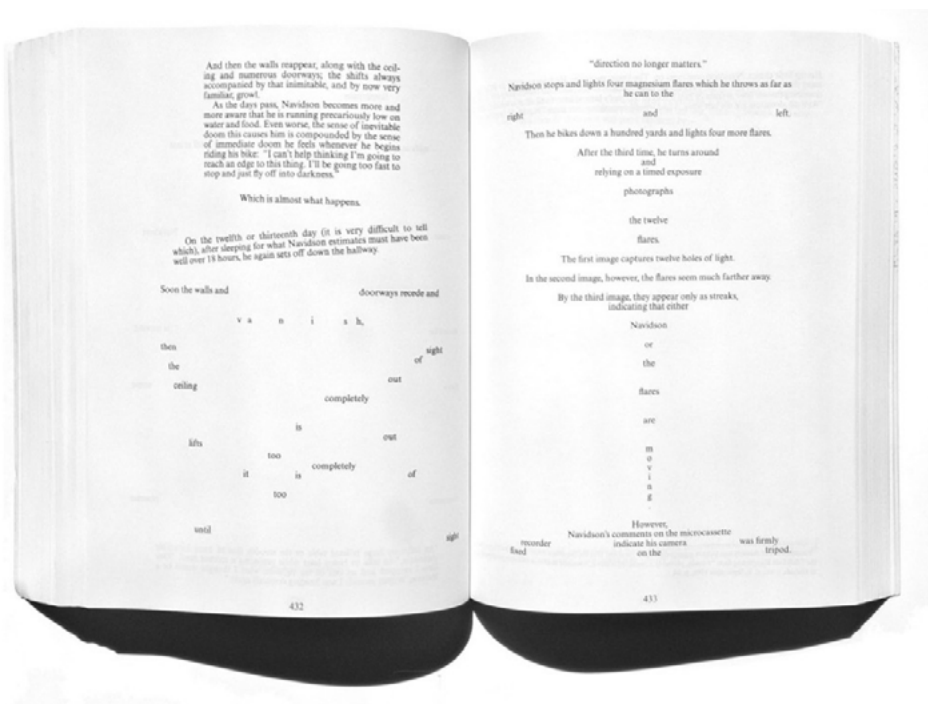


Figure 1. From *House of Leaves*, Chapter XX: spread 432-433.

In *House of Leaves*, Danielewski juxtaposes a multitude of typographical devices to produce a variety of effects, some of which are meant to enhance and support the complexity of the narration, while others are of a purely spatial nature. Chapter XX, which spans 68 uncanny pages, reports the fifth and final exploration Will Navidson undertakes into the bowels of his house: from the very beginning of the journey, the mysterious living labyrinth starts playing tricks on him, continuously shifting the slope of the ground and the width of the corridors, until it altogether disappears, letting him fall into what is an apparently infinite abyss. The pages of this chapter are perhaps the most startling section of book, with predominantly white spreads often occupied by isolated lines or blocks of text arranged in every possible direction, with varying size, spacing, line density etc., recounting through this visual artifice the senseless wandering inside the labyrinth<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> While it might be a coincidence, there is a certain analogy between the typographical strategies adopted by Danielewski in some sections of the book and a strain of videogames from the early 1980, most notably the 1983 title *Dungeons of Moria*. In an age before the widespread use of graphic processors, text symbols were used to represent the space of a dungeon – its walls, doors, pits, monsters etc. Wishart (2007) highlights how in Danielewski's pages typographical characters are at times indeed graphically used to indicate the presence of a "narrative" character.

The text's direction simulates the man's movement, its density the sense of spatial compression or expansion he encounters as the walls unpredictably shift as if in an arrhythmic breathing.

While Danielewski's hybrid textual-visual narrative is innovative in scope and intensity, its underlying tools are well known in the field of art. The spreads of *House of Leaves* exceed the standard configuration of the printed book, becoming picture planes variously occupied by typographic elements in a clear figure-ground relationship. Similarly to what we experience in ordinary objective or non-objective art, these elements are perceived as laden with an apparent sense of movement and weight. The visual field wherein these figures are encountered is further directly connected to a broader, resonant sensorium, hinged on a range of embodied dynamics. The optical stimuli thus activate the observing subject's body, prompting the spatialization of phenomena. In other words, while the printed text is not moving, it is perceived *as if* it were moving, all at the same time as the textual information is being acquired. The novel's page is no longer just a page: it becomes a phenomenal field.

The study of these visual dynamics, of how still pictures actually stir sensations of movement and weight, have by now accumulated a century of scientific insight. From its first inception in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century through the work of Max Wertheimer and Kurt Koffka, Gestalt psychology analysed visual dynamics and their relationship to the general field of perception. Two later books, György Kepes' 1944 *The Language of Vision* and Rudolph Arnheim's 1954 *Art and Visual Perception* proved crucial in popularizing this knowledge, establishing a practical grammar that described the dynamics of visual perception in the arts. More recently, the advances in the neurosciences, most notably through Semir Zeki's 1999 book *Inner Vision*, have granted an experimental-quantitative support confirming the insight of Gestalt psychology. What emerges from this scientific tradition is the spatial dimension of the visual perception of pictures, which can be also adopted as an interpretive model for Danielewski's work in *House of Leaves*. There is indeed a direct correlate between the flat picture plane and the spatial ensemble this is capable of creating: the typographical narrative in the novel, based on these artistic techniques, produces a condition that allows us to corporeally participate in the unfolding events. This is the first hint at the fact that a book so conceived allows us to experience it as a spatial device, and to dwell in its evoked spaces as if they were real.



Figure 2. From *House of Leaves*, Chapter XX: spread 464-465.

## An uncanny atmosphere

The spatial dimension of *House of Leaves* is not only evoked by the articulate visual construct of its pages. As with any horror tale, much of our sensation, the effects the novel produces across the reader's experience, descends from the presence of a lingering, uncanny atmosphere.

We cannot claim that this novel is intrinsically atmospheric, in the sense that other works of literature are. One could think of many other authors whose writing style and techniques infuse novels with that vague atmospheric sensation, lacking precise margins and points of anchorage yet undeniably present and vivid to the reader's mind. Atmospheres are often described by means of brief paint strokes, in a textual analogy of pictorial examples such as J.M.W. Turner's fog-shrouded marine panoramas. In these images, it is often hard to even make out the shape of ships and rocks, but the allure of Turner's art derives exactly from this lack of precise definition.

The use of an atmospheric paradigm in the study of literature has been advocated by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who writes

Toni Morrison once described the phenomenon with the apt paradox of "being touched as if from inside." She was interested [...] in an

experience familiar to everyone: that atmospheres and moods, as the slightest of encounters between our bodies and material surroundings, also affect our psyche; however, we are unable to explain the causality (or, in everyday life, control its workings). One cannot claim to understand this dynamic, much less account for it fully (2012: 4).

Gumbrecht's reference to the work of Toni Morrison is certainly no coincidence, for her novels' style revolves around a thin, evocative language, where images are not conjured in detail but rather sketched. What this form of writing can achieve exceeds the power of meaning, the «hermeneutic field» (Gumbrecht 2004: 28), and the idea of "touching" he borrows from Morrison calls into play the presence of the body. Literature has the ability of producing this presence:

That any form of communication implies such a production of presence, that any form of communication, through its material elements, will "touch" the bodies of the persons who are communicating in specific and varying ways may be a relatively trivial observation – but it is true nevertheless that this fact had been bracketed [...] by Western theory building ever since the Cartesian *cogito* made the ontology of human existence depend exclusively on the movements of the human mind (2004: 17).

Gumbrecht subsumes under what he defines «presence effects» much that has been otherwise discarded: aurality, where the sonic dimension of uttered words embodies an expressivity that remains latent on the printed page, and to which we may resonate even if we are unable of grasping their meaning; the synaesthetic dimension of embodied perception, and the evocative power it produces; and atmospheres, blurred presences endowed with an undeniable affective charge.

Danielewski's style in *House of Leaves* has generally not much space for vagueness. While the writing of the various intertwining plotlines substantially differs, the central narrative is structured as an exact, almost clinical description of the documentaries shot by Will Navidson. Danielewski provides us with frequent lists of objects, clutters the pages with endless bibliographies and annotations, as spares no technical detail with abundant sectorial jargon. We can find an example at the opening of Chapter XX, which describes the equipment the videographer brings on his exploration:

For recording the adventure, Navidson brought with him a 1962 H16 hand crank Bolex 16 mm camera along with 16mm, 25mm, 75mm Kern-Paillard lenses and a Bogen tripod. He also carried a Sony microcassette recorder, Panasonic Hi 8, ample batteries, and at least a dozen 120 minute Metal Evaporated (DLC) tapes, as well as a 35mm Nikon, flashes, and USA Bobby Lee camera strap. For film, he packed 3000 feet of 7298 16mm Kodak in one hundred foot loads, 20 rolls of 35mm, including some 36 frame Konica 3200 speed, plus 10 rolls of assorted black and white film. Unfortunately the thermal video camera he had arranged to rent fell through in the last minute (Danielewski 2000: 424).

Lists of items – especially of obscure professional photographic equipment from the 1980s – are usually the exact opposite of what might be considered atmospheric writing. Nevertheless, it is perhaps through this almost obsessive attitude at focusing on the detail, up to the quarter of an inch, that the reader is funnelled into a disorienting loop of unfamiliar words.

According to atmospheric theories in contemporary phenomenology, vagueness is a fundamental attribute of the lived dimension of space that considers the presence of affects as acting forces. Nevertheless, the *description* of atmospheres can take various forms: it can designate a situation in a vague way, or, on the opposite, designate a vague entity in a precise way (Griffero 2014: 7), which clearly is the road undertaken by the main plot line in *House of Leaves*.

There are precedents for this literary technique, which we can find, for example, in one of the genres that is most frequently and intensely descriptive: the detective story. Sherlock Holmes is the archetypal detective: always alert, his senses finely tuned to perceive even the tiniest minutiae that most observers miss, he operates only through his exceptional cognitive faculties, leaving no space for distorting affects. The method he employs is of a substantially medical nature: Holmes gathers clues as if they were the symptoms of an illness, connects the dots, and reconstructs the events as they have occurred<sup>12</sup>. The separation of parts, the analytical

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<sup>12</sup> The «evidential paradigm» based on the observation of clues has been famously described by Carlo Ginzburg. The connection between medical observation and Sherlock Holmes passes through the work of the Italian physician Giovanni Morelli, who applied the observation of symptoms to the study of paintings. Arthur Conan Doyle was an avid reader of Morelli's work, which was an inspiration for the invention of Holmes. See Ginzburg 1989: 96; De Matteis 2020: 23.

attitude are not normally conducive to the vague atmospheric effect: yet another process emerges here, the deictic sense of mystery towards which the situation continuously alludes. It is a different kind of evocative writing, not relying on blurred contours, vividness of imagery or musicality of language: a sense of disorientation arises from the reader's difficulty in understanding the situation, of finding her bearings in a labyrinthine constellation of apparently unconnected events.

In *House of Leaves*, the precision of descriptive language in the main plot line appears as if putting the reader in control of that space and of the events that there unfold, granting an illusion that whatever monster-Minotaur may be lurking in the labyrinth's darkness, it will eventually be discovered and defeated. Yet this expectation soon becomes frustrated by the enduring feeling of disorientation that the novel produces at multiple levels. The infernal space Navidson explores thus acts almost as a "labyrinth within a labyrinth", where the physical disorientation induced by the space itself occurs in the framework of a multi-level narrative. Downey so describes the novel's intricate structure:

On the level of form as well as of content [...] the text is labyrinthine. By taking an unsolvable maze as its core subject matter; by bringing together a multitude of actual and fictional academic sources and authorities; by ensuring that every element of the narration is mediated through one of several different forms of representation or technology; and by including clues that the various narrative levels may be linked, the book never permits either the reader or the characters to gain a stable footing, or to find a coherent centre of meaning. The text therefore performs as well as represents the experience of space as frighteningly disorientating (2007: 161).

Indeed, the overall atmosphere of the novel is that of a vast darkness. The subterranean world at the core of the narrative seems to irradiate its presence, layer after layer of narration, towards the outermost levels of the book. All characters – even those who never explore the fictional labyrinth – are affected by its lurking allure, feel the terrifying oncome of the creature that may or may not inhabit it, and are eventually driven to insanity. The haunting atmosphere of the house on Ash Tree Lane surrounds them all like the air they breathe, and even the novel's reader in the "real" world ends up resonating to the terror emerging from the *House of Leaves*.

## Conclusion: of houses, books and bodies

To close our argument, we should return to our initial question: how can a book become something resembling an architectural experience? How do we dwell through books? From what we have seen, we can rightfully claim that the experience of reading a novel and that of inhabiting a house do have something in common. Both are not neutral mental processes constrained inside our heads: they are spatial and engage us affectively, prompting our bodies to resonate with the emotional cues embedded in the text – and in this specific case, through its elaborate visual construct. While the spatial dimension of houses is something we take for granted, considering the practice of reading as a situated experience requires a certain revision of our common paradigms.

A comparison between two distinct understandings of what it means to *dwell* can perhaps help us clarify this conceptual hinge. Martin Heidegger, whose proposition of *Wohnen* was the first to take centre stage in philosophy, subordinates the practice of dwelling to that of building, identifying in the Old German word *buan* a shared root for the two concepts (1993: 348). The liaison is so archetypal that one cannot dwell without building, and to build is our primary way of being present in the world. What appears here is a primacy of praxis, of the deliberate modification and subjugation of the natural world to allow the settling, rooting, and dwelling of Man<sup>13</sup>.

But does dwelling always imply such a proactive attitude, the perennial drive to act upon the world to shape it according to our needs, building an inhabitable environment to resist the “onslaught of the desert”? Hermann Schmitz centres his own conception on a form of ecology of emotions, stating that «Dwelling is a culture of feelings in an enclosed space» (2023: 42). Building – setting up walls and enclosures, pacifying space – is a mere prerequisite of dwelling, which only takes place once the affects become regulated, tolerable to the inhabitant. While we may disagree with a conception of dwelling that is exclusively focuses on harmonious feelings – we know well that inhabiting space can be contentious, conflictual, unjust, and even terrifying, and often not just in an incidental way – Schmitz’s focus on emotions and on how they make our bodies resound does strike a chord.

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<sup>13</sup> For a criticism of the architectural implication of Heidegger’s dwelling paradigm see De Matteis 2023.



It is perhaps from here that a parallelism between books and houses can emerge: both enter our phenomenal fields through our embodied presence, albeit in different ways – books through the visual practice of reading, houses by means of a broader sensorium. Both are enclosed spaces: houses afford their inhabitants filtered emotions through the protection of their built walls, books are conceptually closed objects, as the printed page is a spatially defined field. Books, on the other hand, are equally public spaces in that they are available for anyone who reads them to engage in their spatial experience, a feature they have in common with the shared emotional dimension embedded in affective atmospheres. In reading *House of Leaves*, we voyeuristically observe the characters' exploration of the labyrinthine abyss and of their interior worlds, participating in their ordeal, but all while remaining safely protected behind the screen of the printed page: a spatial-affective situation that would well fit Kant's definition of the sublime as a «negative pleasure» (2009: 129).

To be present in space is not equivalent to dwelling: for this to happen, the enclosure must be populated by emotions that we have cultivated, or that – as in the case of a novel – someone else projects into this spatial ensemble. A book can modulate affects, design an atmosphere, engage the reader-observer in way that relate to what spaces do to us: in both cases, there is a lived body – our lived body – at the centre of it all, and it resounds with what it encounters along its way, be it the real world of architectural space, or the imaginary presentation of phenomena that fiction can afford us.

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