

***House of Leaves* and Trauma: A Postmodern Depiction of Time and Space**

by

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Introduction and Literature Review:

House of Leaves by Mark Danielewski is a uniquely structured narrative detailing at its core, a family living in a haunted house. The novel is a prime example of a postmodern narrative, which is known today as a work developed after the 1950's that deals with temporal disjunction, knowledge as discourse, language, communication, and cybernetics (Lyotard 3). *House of Leaves* operates as a postmodern novel through its use of multiple narrators in an attempt to convey a nonlinear narrative that deals with language as a theoretical tool which, when merged with scientific principles, is able to communicate what traditional narratives cannot. The narrative received by the reader is the story of the Navidson family and their time spent living in a house on Ash Tree Lane in a small suburb in Virginia. This narrative was documented by the film "The Navidson Record" which was then transcribed and analyzed by the blind writer Zampanó, who titled his paper with the same name as the film. Zampanó's critical analysis was found by a young man named Johnny Truant not long after Zampanó died. Truant edited and compiled the analysis into one coherent document, adding his own footnotes to the critique as clarification of the writing and documentation of his own experience while handling the manuscript. Truant acts as the main character through which the reader accesses the novel. Truant's finished manuscript was passed along to an editor, who made final edits and footnotes for further clarification before the manuscript was sent to print, eventually reaching the reader as the book "House of Leaves." All of the aforementioned steps are part of the fiction, but the use of multiple narrators has been noted by scholars to legitimize the narratives and allow for easier access to an otherwise impossible novel to grasp.

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Written in the year 2000, I believe that it is best to analyze the novel *House of Leaves* through a postmodern lens. In particular, the scholarship of David Harvey and Jean-François Lyotard accurately capture the inner workings of this particular novel. The multiple narrators within the novel allow for the theories of these thinkers to operate freely. Lyotard asserts that to legitimate a fictional narrative all that must occur is one person must have heard the narrative in order to be a legitimate transmitter for said narrative (20). At the same time, Harvey asserts that reading a narrative, when read as a form of social formation, puts you in the same spatio-temporal sphere as said narrative as well as others reading said narrative at that moment in time (Harvey qtd. in Davidson 71). These two theories work in conjunction to help the reader construct a chain of narrators that shift the spatio-temporal positioning of the reader as they progress through the novel; maintaining a legitimated narrative that is never questioned by the audience, fictional or otherwise. The two main narratives that exist within the novel are the narrative of Johnny Truant and the narrative of Will Navidson. The majority of scholarly research regarding *House of Leaves* focuses on Johnny Truant's experience, or the textual experience of the novel as a whole. As Johnny functions as the one that transmits the narratives of other characters to the reader, his position is such that he is the most accessible character within the multi-narrative structure that composes the novel. Johnny Truant finds a manuscript written by a blind old man named Zampanó. This manuscript, titled "The Navidson Record" is actually a critical analysis of a purportedly real film of the same name. The manuscript not only analyzes the film, but recreates it in textual form, adding commentary and criticism throughout. Johnny Truant edits and compiles this manuscript, adding his own footnotes that either clarify Zampanó's text or discuss either his experiences while editing and compiling the manuscript. At

times Johnny's footnotes detail the traumatic experiences of his past. The film itself, as detailed in Zampanó's paper, is a documentary made by the photojournalist Will Navidson detailing his time living in his recently purchased house on Ash Tree Lane with his wife, Karen, and their two young children, Chad and Daisy. The family finds itself in a strange predicament when a mysterious closet appears. The closet morphs into a hallway between two bedrooms, then a hallway that extends out of the house into the yard. The mystery of this hallway is that the outside of the house never changes, it is only the interior that is shifting. Navidson wants to explore this phenomenon, hoping to fully understand the mystery that has suddenly manifested in his house and interrupted what was supposed to be a peaceful time with his family, setting off a chain reaction that leads to a deep exploration of what comes to be known as the labyrinth that manifests beneath the house.

The multi-narrative structure has been reviewed by scholars, in particular Jessica Pressman, who argues that the novel itself functions as a hypertext. In her paper "*House of Leaves: Reading the Networked Novel*" she states "the novel is structured as a hypertext, a system of interconnected narratives woven together through hundreds of footnotes" (107). This is fully in keeping with Harvey's idea regarding the formation of new spatio-temporal spheres via simultaneous reading as a byproduct of the internet. The novel's structure physically mirrors the construct of the internet granting the reader the ability to constantly shift between various spheres of space and time depending on which narrator they read. This argument plays into the arguments of Michael Dawson, who argues that *House of Leaves* uses the repetitive structure of the novel to show traumatic neurosis in the character of Johnny Truant, leading him on an introspective journey which Dawson frames as a katabasis in keeping with the religious motifs

present in other, older, trauma narratives, in particular Dante's *Inferno* (Dawson "Nothing..." 284) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Dawson "The Horror..." 5). The focus on Johnny Truant leads Dawson to the conclusion that there is no redemption in this character's narrative arc (289). In the following argument, I read the structure of the novel, in conjunction with the postmodern theories of Lyotard and Harvey to show how it clearly displays the repetitiveness of trauma. My reading differs from previous papers which have focused on Johnny Truant, rather than his more metaphoric counterpart, Will Navidson. I contend that Navidson's journey, when viewed through, not the lens of katabasis, but rather through the psychoanalytic investigation of trauma, as detailed by Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk in his work *The Body Keeps the Score*, reveals that the themes of echoes within the novel reflect the traumatic repetitions experienced by a sufferer of PTSD.

It is worth noting that the memory of a person suffering from PTSD operates within the same parameters of time and space that information does in postmodern theory. According to Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, the construct of linear time has been compressed in postmodern life due to the advent of the computer age, allowing instantaneous transmission of knowledge and information (4). This notion, in conjunction with David Harvey's notion that "each distinctive mode of production or social formation will, in short embody a distinctive bundle of time and space" (Harvey qtd. in Davidson 71), means that linking two or more people through a social formation, like a novel or the internet, links the people into the same temporal "sphere" regardless of what time-zone they occupy (Lyotard 22). In this sense, two areas normally independent in both time and space become one due to the linkage caused by computational technology. The mind of a PTSD sufferer works in much the same

way. In *The Body Keeps Score*, Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk reveals that during a flashback, the patient ceases to occupy the time and space they normally inhabit, instead linking to another “sphere” all together. Essentially they are both living in their body in the present and reliving the trauma that took place in the past, similar to how two people can connect using computers. In the remainder of this text I plan to show how the literal, symbolic, and thematic echoes that Will Navidson encounters lead him from enacting traumatic repetitions of past horrors that he has experienced, to a psychic journey through his subconscious as represented by the labyrinth in the house on Ash Tree Lane, until his encounter with the unsymbolized nature of his trauma at the heart of the labyrinth provides him with the opportunity to utilize language in order to escape the trauma of his past. This reading is made possible by reading the narrative regarding Will Navidson through a postmodern lens. Navidson’s journey is told by multiple narrators, many of whom occupy a different temporal sphere. These distinct temporal spheres allow for the development of literal and thematic echoes that are transmitted through the narrative before returning back to Navidson in a direct mirror of traumatic repetitions that are carried out by sufferers of PTSD (Kihlstrom qtd. Van Der Kolk 183).

There exists scholarly discourse regarding Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, which primarily focuses on Johnny Truant and his relationship to trauma. Johnny Truant lost his father at a young age (584-585), his mother tried to kill him (629-630), and he grew up with an abusive foster father after his mother was committed to a psychiatric institution (324-325). As Johnny provides the initial lens through which the reader experiences the novel, this scholarly focus on his character is understandable. His story is the most accessible, the most readily translated into real world experience. Yet there is a rich layer of symbolic interpretation within the film “The

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Navidson Record,” primarily focused on the character of Will Navidson. It is this story within the story, and the secondary main character, that I would like to explore in my paper through the aforementioned postmodern lens. This will provide clear evidence that the thematic and symbolic echoes present in the novel are a representation of traumatic repetition within the psyche of a sufferer of PTSD. These echoes then return to the sufferer, in this case Will Navidson, and are only resolved once the trauma that has been experienced is symbolized through language, as exemplified by Navidson during his final journey into the labyrinth.

Time, Recuristivity and Echoes:

It is this chain of characters that each receive the story that legitimates the novel as a form of narrative knowledge. Lyotard’s theory on postmodernism contends that narrative knowledge and scientific knowledge are legitimated in different ways. The only thing that is needed to legitimate narrative knowledge is the sender of the narrative must have heard the narrative before telling it (22). This extensive chain of receiving and transmitting the story is what makes the novel a legitimate form of narrative knowledge. Through these recursive elements, these narratives that speak over, through, and concurrently with others, thus creating a reality effect, or the sense that what the reader receives is real and credible. The legitimation of the narrative through these recursive instances allows for the appearance of echoes, both literal and symbolic, within the novel. Throughout the novel, these echoes leave the sender and travel outward only to return in an altered state. In this section, I argue that this sending of a signal only for it to return in an altered state represents how a traumatic event continues to enact itself through traumatic repetitions, either mental or physical, within the mind of someone suffering

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from PTSD. I view such a reflection within Danielewski's work by way of Lyotard's postmodern theories regarding time, legitimation, and recursive instances, in addition to the creative representations of echoes within the novel itself. It is my belief that the multiple simultaneous narratives depict the transmission of a signal from a primary source which travels outward only to return in an altered state. This altered state can take the form of degradation, or an alteration from the initial form. The multiple narratives allow for the representation of the temporal enigma that occurs during a traumatic flashback when viewed through the postmodern lens representing space and time. These signifiers, coupled with the echoes in the novel, reflect the traumatic repetitions that subconsciously are enacted in the physical world and the constant return of the repressed trauma as long as it remains buried in the unconscious.

From the moment that the novel begins, Danielewski is playing with time and space. The introduction is written by Johnny Truant, one of the main narrators of the novel and the main entry point for the reader into the convoluted text. An "Introduction" is placed at the beginning of a novel to set up any relevant background information the text needs, while providing a framework for the reader to rely on when beginning to read. Usually, an introduction can be a non-fiction work by another author or the work's translator. An introduction often provides information on the period of time during which the work was written and might also include a brief account of important or relevant events in the writer's life. There are also introductions that are part of the novel themselves. Dawson provides one of the best examples, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. While not labeled as such, the opening scene on the boat in the Thames River in England provides the context the reader needs to understand the following story, setting up what is known as a "Frame Narrative," as the introduction and conclusion act as the frame of

the larger narrative within. Danielewski's introduction operates the same way as Conrad's. It is a fictional piece that is part of the larger novel that provides necessary background information for the reader to understand the following chapters. This information includes what we are reading, where it came from, why there are footnotes, and perhaps most importantly it provides a rough outline of when these events took place. More than that, it sets up the narrative frame that is the lens through which the reader must interpret the work.

Johnny Truant is the medium through which the narrative is told, with the introduction setting up the relationship between reader and narrator, as well as establishing the facts of the narrative's setting. Truant writes in the intro "It was the end of '96" (xii). This statement places the timing of the events right at the beginning of the dot-com bubble, when computers were becoming more of a necessity than a luxury. Many literary scholars have conducted detailed analysis on the connections between *House of Leaves* and the proliferation of the internet. The date is relevant for another reason entirely. At the end of the introduction the reader finds another date, the way one might date and sign a letter, or perhaps a journal entry. It reads, "Johnny Truant/October 31, 1998/Hollywood, CA" (xxiii) providing a set of temporal bookends which detail the parameters of the linear timeline of the narrative. The dates serve as beginning and end points for the chronology of the novel. The introduction reveals the story of how Johnny found Zampanó's manuscript of "The Navidson Record," a critical analysis of a movie of the same name. He obtains it after Zampanó's death, as he had no family, and it was going to be thrown into the trash. A note dated the day of Zampanó's death reads "January 5, 1997" (xix). Through the course of the book Danielewski's writing leads the reader to believe that the events documented in the text take place over a long period of time. In reality, the main events of

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Johnny's story take place over the course of two years, as detailed in the footnotes of "The Navidson Record," not counting flashbacks to his past and a slight epilogue set in August of 1999. The truth of the chronology of *House of Leaves* is that time flows at varying rates in this novel, as will later be seen within "The Navidson Record" itself. This is in keeping with David Harvey's theory that time and space in the postmodern age cannot be understood outside the context of the eroding boundaries between people due to the hyper-connectivity that technology brings (Davidson 71-72).

If we view the narratives of the novel as one large example of social interaction, either between the characters within the novel, or between the author and the reader, then the novel represents its own self-contained portion of time and space. The instability of space, as seen by the format of the text, and of time as evidenced by the temporal loop constructed between the beginning and end of the novel as well as between many of the footnotes within the text, embodies the postmodern notion that traditional boundaries are deteriorating in the information age. Other scholars have noted that it is necessary that we view the novel *House of Leaves* in terms of the expanding technology of the information age. Jessica Pressman, author of the article "*House of Leaves: Reading the Networked Novel*" argues that "The novel is structured as a hypertext, a system of interconnected narratives woven together through hundreds of footnotes" (107). This hypertext directly mirrors the hypertext system that connects computers together via the internet, meaning one narrative is "linked" to another narrative via a footnote which leads the reader to a different temporal sphere. The linked nature of these footnotes operates the same way that a hyperlink, or "link" in colloquial terms, connects one webpage to another. The instantaneous communication that occurs as a result of computers and later the

internet allows one time to exist simultaneously in two separate spaces, in the same way that a traumatic flashback or repetitive action brings a past event directly into the present. This simultaneous existence seen by the date October 31, 1998 in the introduction and that same date being left out of a series of journal entries at the end of the novel. The date still exists in the end of the novel, it is simply skipped over due to its simultaneous existence at the beginning of the novel. The physical structure of the novel, specifically the footnotes that link various passages together, provide a concrete linkage between multiple narratives. The appearance of said footnotes make it clear that Johnny Truant's narrative takes place at the same time as Will Navidson's, as they often appear on the same page or are linked by a designated marker. It is this physical structure that provides a visual echo of these simultaneous narratives. This physical echo in the novel is a reflection of psychic repetitions that often occur in patients suffering from PTSD. With the onset of psychoanalysis in the late 1800's scientists were able to document that sufferers from traumatic events often subconsciously reenact the event that caused the initial trauma (181). It is my belief that Danielewski's novel recreates the physical structure of a hypertext in order to reflect the psychic, and subconscious, repetitions that link the mind of a sufferer with the traumatic event of the past. I believe that the simultaneous narratives in the novel reflect the lasting effects of trauma on the individual. The traumatic event has essentially trapped them in the past, causing them to live two simultaneous narratives at once. The first being their life in the present, the second being the repetitions of the traumatic event of the past.

The framing strategy that Danielewski uses in his novel *House of Leaves* is not unique. It is shown in other narratives, many of which have nothing to do with trauma. Yet it is important to note that the use of a framing device while discussing trauma is not without precedent. Joseph

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Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has such a framing device that is used to articulate the repetition of trauma that occurs on a psychic level, in keeping with the Freudian description of traumatic neurosis (Dawson "The Horror..." 2).

The *House of Leaves* introduction is similar to Dawson's noted traumatic repetition in *Heart of Darkness*, in that it is used to show repetitive patterns that reflect the traumatic repetitions undertaken by sufferers of PTSD. The difference between the introduction to *Heart of Darkness* and the introduction to *House of Leaves*, is that we do not find out the chronological positioning of the narratives within *House of Leaves* until the very end of the novel, as only the introduction and later footnotes by Truant are dated. This chronological positioning, I believe, is indicative of the instantaneous nature of communication within the postmodern era. In turn, this instantaneous communication provides a precedent for temporal spheres positioned in the novel in such a way that the chronology of the narratives is non-linear. I believe that this in turn reflects the non-linear nature of traumatic memory, in the sense that flashbacks and traumatic repetitions pull the sufferer out of the present moment into a temporal sphere that is a part of the past, disrupting the normally linear nature of time as human beings experience it. What is more, the frame narrative in *House of Leaves* is unconventional. Traditional frame narratives would end the novel with words from Johnny Truant. This would have the introduction and conclusion transmitted through the main mediator between the narrative and the reader, ending the novel in a circular fashion. Instead, the introduction is a footnote written by Truant, allowing the novel to end with the conclusion of "The Navidson Record" rather than words from a character twice removed from the primary narrative. The effect of the temporal framing is similar to its effect in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, as the traumatic repetitions are made readily apparent. I argue that

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Danielewski's use of multiple legitimated narratives, as opposed to the sole narrative used in *Heart of Darkness*, enables Danielewski to show how these repetitions continue long after the initial event. *Heart of Darkness* only shows these repetitions within the context of Captain Marlow's journey through the Congo. In other words, the repetitions are shown within the context of the initial traumatic event, each event is experienced and recounted by Captain Marlow (Dawson "The Horror..." 6). By contrast, Danielewski is able to show how trauma and traumatic repetitions continue beyond the initial event, as evidenced by the traumatic narratives of not only Will Navidson, who was traumatized by the labyrinth, but also through the characters that directly surround Navidson, such as his wife Karen, and the narrative of Johnny Truant, who suffered an abusive childhood and a psychotic break triggered by "The Navidson Record" bringing repressed memories to light. Through Truant the reader also learns the story of his mother, who was locked away in a mental institution after trying to kill Johnny, an indicator that trauma not only repeats itself in terms of the individual, but also that it can be passed down as generational trauma.

When the reader engages with "The Navidson Record" they are engaging with the text in its most complete form. We know this because in the introduction to the novel, Truant states that Zampanó kept "The Navidson Record" stored in a trunk. There was no clear cohesion to the work, parts of which were written on scrap paper, or napkins. Other parts had been lost to time, decay, or had never existed at all (Danielewski xvii). The manifestation of this completed form, footnotes and all, is the product of Johnny Truants repeated entering and engaging with the text in order to carefully present the best possible rendition of "The Navidson Record" to the imagined future reader. It is my belief that this act of shaping the text reflects the actions of an

author, shaping the text in order to craft the narrative they want. Not only does it reflect the actions of an author, but extrapolated outward once more, I believe these repeated actions come to reflect the nature of traumatic repetition. They are compulsive acts repeatedly undertaken in a subconscious attempt to ease the burden of suffering carried by the traumatized individual. Not only does Truant's repeated engagement with the text shape "The Navidson Record" that the reader eventually views; it is also a repeated entering and exiting of a separate temporal sphere as defined by Lyotard in his text *The Postmodern Condition* (22).

While scholars have argued that the engagement with texts via instantaneous communication creates a separate temporal sphere between the shared readership of the text, it is also true that a lone reader engaging with a single text in any format is entering a separate temporal sphere that they occupy with the author of said text. I believe that because of the nature of temporality when engaging with a text, Truant's repeated engagement with "The Navidson Record," and the subsequent entering and reentering of one particular temporal sphere is a reflection of an individual's repeated engagement with a traumatic event through flashbacks. It has been noted that the act of remembering trauma activates the same portions of the brain, with the same intensity, that were active when the initial trauma was induced (Van Der Kolk 69). This biochemical reaction, coupled with the actual memories that are experienced during a flashback, allow us, in my own opinion, to state that suffers of PTSD engage with a separate temporal dimension when remembering a traumatic instance. It is this act of remembering that is reflected in Truant's repeated engagement with "The Navidson Record." Furthermore, I believe Truant's reconstruction of "The Navidson Record" speaks to the nature of therapeutic remedies for PTSD. The main goal of talk therapy, as noted in the book *The Body Keeps the Score*, is to help

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individuals reconstruct a complete narrative timeline of the traumatic event which fosters better understanding (183-184). I believe that while Truant is not recreating his own traumatic narrative, he is recreating Davidson's. It is the fact that he is recreating someone's traumatic narrative that, in my opinion, leads him on his own psychic journey and reveals the portions of his psyche, and by extension the trauma, that he repressed.

I believe it worth while to read Danielewski's *House of Leaves* within the context of Freud's notion of the uncanny. The repetitions present within the novel allow the image of the house to be infused with the notion of the uncanny, where the familiar is made frightening or unsettling (Freud qtd. in Norton 833). The more the reader sees the repeated images of the house and subsequently the labyrinth, the more comfortable with them the reader becomes. Like echoes, these repetitions then degrade and morph, creating the desire to move closer to and simultaneously away from these images. Thomas Davidson notes this, saying, "events that previously would have occurred in linear sequence (predominantly due to technological and geographical limitations) can now occur simultaneously" (73). Instead of a linear chronology, time is reconstructed into individual pockets where those who are engaged with the information exist simultaneously with others accessing the same information. Others outside of said pocket exist in a different temporal sphere. Bessel Van Der Kolk notes that "being traumatized means continuing to organize your life as if the trauma were still going on—unchanged and immutable—as every new encounter or event is contaminated by the past" (53). If we relate this to the theory of postmodernism, specifically its ideas regarding time and space, we can see that traumatic memories acts like information. When the traumatized individual repeatedly engages with the packet of "information" or the memory of the trauma they enter into the same temporal

sphere as the trauma. The individual no longer lives life in a linear narrative, instead being repeatedly pulled into a separate temporal sphere. The non-linear presentation of the narrative, and the multiple narratives occurring simultaneously, is reflective of this blurring of boundaries between different spaces and times.

Echoes are instances where sound has enough space to travel away from the sender, strike a surface, and return to the sender. The text uses the concept of echoes to destabilize the narrative, contributing to the uncanny within the text, while simultaneously utilizing these echoes to legitimize narratives within the novel before the narrative is passed to the reader. These echoes set up the thematic reoccurrence of echoes within the context of “The Navidson Record,” allowing the narrative chain to smoothly transition between characters while still maintaining the repetitive nature of the lasting effects of trauma. There are two telling quotes that emerge in the brief narrative of the introduction. One comes from Lude, Johnny’s friend who takes him to see the apartment where Zampanó died which leads to the discovery of “The Navidson Record.” Johnny recounts his time with Lude as they walk into the apartment complex, “He had been recounting to me, in many ways dwelling upon, what had happened following the old man’s death. ‘Two things, Hoss,’ Lude muttered as the gate glided open. ‘not that they make much difference’” (xv). At face value, this quote seems like an offhand comment made by a secondary character. Even with the quote that follows a few pages later, it might not seem like much of anything. However, it is the beginning of a thematic development where the real and the unreal begin to blur together (Dawson “Nothing...” 287). Throughout the novel there is a metaphorical representation of the unconscious coming forth into conscious thought, evidenced by the repeated actions characters take, the echoes of Navidson’s story in Johnny’s, and the physical

echoes that characters encounter when exploring the labyrinth. Lude has two facts to provide Johnny regarding the scene they are walking into. Yet, these facts have no bearing on the remainder of the novel. It is even possible that Lude never said those exact words, as Johnny's mental state has been compromised by his own trauma. But even these words reflect the deeper unconscious attempting to permeate through to the conscious portion of Johnny Truant's psyche. Lude's words echo Johnny's, whose words are actually a retelling of knowledge Zampanó possessed: "What's real or isn't real doesn't matter here. The consequences are the same" (xx). The temporal nature of these quotes is imbalanced. Johnny writes Lude's words long after hearing them, echoing his own words later in the introduction, which in turn are an echo of Zampanó's thoughts that Johnny comes to understand only after reading "The Navidson Record", which he finds almost immediately upon entering Zampanó's apartment with Lude.

"The Navidson Record" is a critical analysis of a film of the same title, created by renowned photojournalist Will Navidson. The film details the exploration of a shifting labyrinth beneath Will's newly purchased home. The exploration is conducted by Will Navidson himself, his wife Karen, his brother Tom, a friend named Billy Reston, and a hired team of explorers. The events of the film are transmitted to the reader through the textual analysis also titled "The Navidson Record," which is punctuated with footnotes by Zampanó, who wrote the original analysis, and Johnny, who edited and compiled it, as well as the notes from the editor who finalized the publication before sending it out into the world. Already there is a chain of characters transmitting the story to the reader, destabilizing the received message as each "retelling" provides a new opportunity for distortion, much like an actual echo. This chain is followed by the reader, starting with the narrative of Johnny Truant until the narrative of Will

Navidson is reached. As the narrative chain is followed things get increasingly symbolic, with Navidson's multiple journeys into the labyrinth representing the psychic repetitions undertaken by a sufferer of PTSD, culminating in a meeting of his own subconscious at the center of the labyrinth. The apparent lack of meaning only manifests on the level of Truant's narrative. I argue that the narrative that follows Will Navidson is a symbolic representation of trauma and the effects of psychic repetitions. As such, said narrative by its very nature must contain meaning, even if the echoes of unreality reverberate within it.

While these echoes provide opportunity for distortion, they actually serve to legitimize the novel in its entirety, even while they destabilize the process of storytelling. There is an entire chapter designated to discussing echoes. This chapter details the importance of the idea as the reader moves further into the novel, as well as linking the sonic concept to space. Echoes are naturally occurring sonic repetitions that occur in natural or man-made spaces where there is enough distance, roughly 50 feet, for the sound to bounce around the aforementioned chamber. The dual history is stressed by Zampanó in "The Navidson Record" when he says, "Generally speaking, echo has two coextensive histories: the mythological one and the scientific one.⁴⁶ Each provides a slightly different perspective on the inherent meaning of recurrence, especially when that repetition is imperfect" (41). The myth of Echo, like many Greek myths, is a tragedy. The nymph Echo was punished by Hera for helping Zeus, cursed to only be able to repeat the last words of others. She falls in love with Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection. Narcissus watched himself and Echo watched Narcissus, until nothing but her voice remained. However, the description of her voice changes in the quality of the tone of voice, tinging it with sorrow or anger depending on the version of the myth you encounter. Zampanó goes on to note

“echoes also reveal emptiness. Since objects always muffle or impede acoustic reflection, only empty places can create echoes of lasting clarity. Ironically, hollowness only increases the eerie quality of otherness inherent in any echo. Delay and fragmented repetition create a sense of another inhabiting a necessarily deserted place. Strange then how something so uncanny and outside of the self, even ghostly as some have suggested, can at the same time also contain a resilient comfort: the assurance that even if it is imaginary and at best the product of a wall, there is still something else out there, something to stake out in the face of nothingness” (46).

The indirect repetition of an echo is a direct parallel to our current understanding of trauma. Initially, researchers believed traumatic repetitions mimicked the experienced trauma exactly, either in memory or in physical repetitions of the event (Dawson “Nothing...” 287). We now know that this is not the case. The reenactment of trauma does not mirror the event exactly, nor do memories of trauma perfectly represent the event that took place. The representation is altered, changed, even degraded over time. The mind blocks things out, allows others to remain, and the memories can even change over time. The instability of traumatic memory is exemplified in the degradation of an echo. This degradation can be seen in the signifying chain that transmits the story to the reader. Each “telling” of the story legitimates the story to the listener. However, each subsequent retelling of the story, while legitimating to the new listener, is degrading as something is inherently lost in each repetition or echo that takes place. The words are spoken, but they return in a different form, as they do in reality (Dominic LaCapra qtd. in Dawson “The Horror...” 3-4). Even though all echoes suffer from degradation when compared to the original, they are not without use. Echoes mean there is space to move ahead, a path forward or a path back.

While the corridors of the labyrinth beneath the House on Ash Tree lane start out as nothing more than hallways, ones whose back walls are visible from the door in the living room,

they gradually evolve into longer passages, with more and more hallways branching off each subsequent path. As a former war correspondent, Navidson is not one to run from something as dangerous and frankly mysterious as this newly formed Labyrinth so, armed with only his cameras, he ventures into the maze alone. During this first exploration of the Labyrinth, Navidson becomes lost. He did not fully understand what he was getting into when entering the labyrinth, believing it to be nothing more than a hallway. How could he know how the labyrinth shifts and changes, even as one is inside it? He learns this the hard way. What saves him, allows him to locate where he is in relation to other things, other people, are echoes of his own voice and later the voice of his daughter, Daisy (68). This use of echo as a form of orientation reflects the larger structure of the novel. As the reader progresses, the way they locate themselves during the reading is based upon which character is transmitting the story. In other words, the reader locates themselves based upon which “echo” of the story they are hearing. Interestingly, the echoes that Navidson follows could also lead him in the opposite direction, into the deepest part of the labyrinth. In relation to trauma, the echoes leading deeper into the labyrinth could represent the fragmented associations a sufferer of PTSD would have in relation to the traumatic event they experienced. It has been documented that “the imprints of traumatic experiences are organized not as coherent logical narratives but in fragmented and emotional traces: images, sounds, and physical sensations” (Van Der Kolk 178). In other words, trauma is retained in echoes of the actual event. These repeating echoes, and the overall theme of echoes within the novel, highlight the importance of one’s response to these echoes and the decision to eventually journey into the labyrinth. As I will argue in later passages, the trauma Navidson experienced when in Sudan leads him to the very center of the labyrinth. This trauma and his experience

within the labyrinth eventually lead him out of an endless maze. The trauma provides not only a way forward, but through the culmination of his journey into the labyrinth, his experience brings him out again.

Will Navidson is a Pulitzer Prize winning photojournalist who photographed subjects in war torn countries around the world. This is important to note as, in the terms of postmodern theory, photography acts as a visual and symbolic window into a separate spatial and temporal sphere, the same way that a text can operate. The photos and videos that Navidson takes set up the primary narrative transmission, without which there would be no legitimating the following narratives as told by other characters; nor would the repetitions that operate as a representation of the psychic repetitions caused by trauma be visible to the reader. As noted above, before settling in the house on Ash Tree Lane, Navidson was a war photographer, entering dangerous areas to document events taking place. While working he undoubtedly encountered many situations that traumatized others, or that were potentially traumatizing to Navidson himself. His primary encounter with trauma, the one that I contend affected him and his life for years to come, occurred when he photographed a starving young Sudanese girl who was unable to move even though a vulture stalked her (368). This photograph is significant unto itself, compared to the larger film that acts as the subject of analysis in Zampanó's paper. This is because the photograph of the young Sudanese girl references a real photograph, and by extension a real event that took place outside the novel in the 1990s. Throughout the novel, Navidson brings up a mysterious woman named Delial, usually when he is experiencing some form of stress. Each time Navidson references a mysterious woman Delial, a woman that not even Navidson's wife Karen, knows the true identity of, the reader learns more about the emotional significance that

this woman has for Navidson. In a surprising moment, Karen is the one to reveal Delial's true identity to the world when she shows the photograph of the young Sudanese girl that Navidson took and reveals written on the back the lone word "Delial" (368). This repeated image acts as an echo, one that, in the context of Karen Navidson's video places the reader directly in the spatio-temporal sphere of the young Sudanese girl. Not only is the reader placed in the sphere of this tragic and very real scene, but they are also placed within the same sphere that Navidson occupied when he encountered this trauma. I believe this echo provides the reader with direct access to the narrative that shapes all of Navidson's future actions. It simultaneously legitimates the reader as one who has received this portion of the story, further linking them to the chain of characters transmitting what ultimately comes to be the entirety of the novel *House of Leaves*. I believe this addition to the chain of characters through which the narrative is transmitted, as well as the chain itself, reflect the ever-expanding chain of people that are effected by the traumatic repetitions of people suffering from PTSD. In her paper "Exploring the Architecture of Narrative in *House of Leaves*," Caroline Hagood argues that the novel is not a static work of art, rather it changes with each reading. I contend that Navidson's photograph of Delial operates the same way. The photograph provides a window for Navidson back to the time of the initial trauma, where he stopped to take a prize-winning photograph and as a result could not get the young girl the medical attention she needed. Repeated engagement with the photograph will inevitably cause distortions in the memory of the event, distortions that can be sparked by questioning things like the framing of the shot, or the positioning of the cameraman. I believe that these symbolic distortions, the changing nature of the narrative depicted in the photograph, reveals the changes that can take place in the memory of a sufferer from PTSD.

Talk therapy is an important part of the healing process and is nothing more than a revisiting of the trauma, much in the same way that the photograph causes Navidson to revisit his trauma. Through this talk therapy, the patient and the analyst attempt to recreate a narrative, one that substitutes symbolically the need for action (Van Der Kolk 184). Fortunately for Navidson, he does not need to substitute symbolic language for any action. Rather, he enters the purely symbolic world of the labyrinth and overcomes his trauma through a direct encounter with his subconscious

In the novel everything we know about “The Navidson Record” comes from an analysis and transcript of a film that Navidson made using cameras set up in the house on Ash Tree Lane and others carried by people during explorations of the Labyrinth. Zampanó, the blind man who wrote “The Navidson Record” notes, “Undeniably Navidson’s experience as a photojournalist gives him an advantage over the rest when focusing on something that is as terrifying as it is threatening. But, of course, there is more at work here than just the courage to stand and focus. There is also the courage to face and shape the subject in an extremely original manner” (64). Cathy Caruth notes that trauma reveals “a fundamental enigma concerning the psyche’s relation to reality” (Qtd. in Dawson “Nothing...” 287). I believe part of this enigma is revealed in Navidson’s camera work. The camera is the medium through which Navidson encountered the initial trauma. Yet at no point does he abandon his work as a journalist, and even when he retires, he is still filming his family. Freud’s psychoanalytic studies revealed post World War I, and even before, that patients lacking memory of traumatic events “reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without knowing, of course, that he is repeating, and in the end, we understand that this is his way of remembering” (Kihlstrom via Van Der Kolk 183).

While his time as a photographer in the Middle East is referenced throughout the novel, it is not until the end that we get a clear picture of the trauma that Navidson endured:

“In the photograph, the vulture sits behind Delial, frame left, slightly out of focus, primary feathers beginning to feel the air as it prepares for flight. Near the centre, in crisp focus, squats Delial, bone dangling in her tawny almost inhuman fingers, her lips a crawl of insects, her eyes swollen with sand. Illness and hunger are on her but Death is still a few paces behind, perched on a rocky mound, talons fully extended, black eyes focused on Famine’s daughter” (420).

Such an image is impossible to escape, even when only shown through writing. Although repressed, Navidson’s experience capturing the image of this young girl never leaves him, only manifesting as intrusive thoughts at times (391). The absence of a memory of the events thus turns into repeated action. We see in the beginning of the novel Navidson preparing to make a documentary of his new life at home with his family. Only after the labyrinth is discovered does this photographic practice return to something akin to war reporting. The lack of processing of the trauma leads to a repetition of the trauma, creating problems in his marriage and health and eventually leading him on a dangerous journey. It is worth noting that within the quote, death and famine are personified, their words capitalized. These two specters that haunt Delial will come to be the ghosts that haunt Navidson and the others as they journey into the Labyrinth beneath the house. Even the specters that haunt the young girl in the photograph reappear in Navidson’s life. As long as his memory is repressed, the repetitions are inescapable.

I believe that Navidson’s continued photo work also represents the courage he has to face his trauma. This belief is further solidified by Navidson’s willing descent into the Labyrinth, which functions as a metaphorical representation of the unconscious. The enigma that is revealed is the paradoxical desire to approach the trauma, hidden somewhere in the

subconscious, counteracted by the natural fear of reliving the traumatic event. It is important to note the language of the above quotations, namely “courage to face and *shape* the subject in an extremely original manner” (emphasis added)(64). Dawson frames the approach of trauma through the character of Johnny Truant in terms of the mythic descent into the underworld. While Truant’s “fall” does account for his metaphorical descent, it removes all agency from Truant in terms of approaching one’s own trauma as a part of the psychological recovery process. In fact, Dawson himself notes that Truant fails to achieve any redemptive anabasis (Dawson “Nothing...” 289). While Dawson’s argument is sound, I believe that he is looking at the wrong character when discussing trauma in the novel *House of Leaves*. Johnny Truant’s story is the third narrator in a long chain of narrators emanating from Will Navidson’s initial story. As such, his journey and approach towards his own trauma, are an echo of the original story transmitted by the primary narrator, Will Navidson. As a result, we should not be looking at Truant’s narrative at all. Rather, we should read into the approach of trauma through the character and story of Will Navidson. I believe Navidson’s willing, and repeated, descent into the labyrinth to be a reflection of the agency of the traumatized individual. The trauma of an individual, and the imperfect memory of it, must be re-contextualized by the individual in order for healing to begin, taking the form of a coherent narrative rather than a fragment (Van Der Kolk 195-196). To re-contextualize said trauma, the memory must first be willingly be approached by the traumatized individual. It is this willing approach of the trauma that contrasts the trauma narrative of Johnny Truant, who seems to stumble and at times fall down into his own personal underworld. Navidson, on the other hand, resolutely faces the unknown and actively engages with and shapes his own psychic understanding of his past and present. He not only displays and utilizes his own

agency, he reclaims this descent into his mind from the mythic sphere, shifting to a descent that is based upon a psychological and scientific understanding of trauma and the subsequent healing process that occurs through the re-contextualizing of memory.

As we have already established, the narrative chain creates a series of narratives echoing out of the story of Will Navidson. Navidson's journey undoubtedly inhabits the symbolic and metaphoric realm. The only evidence we need is the labyrinth beneath house that acts as a symbolic representation of his psyche that he gradually descends deeper and deeper into. If the primary narrative operates on the symbolic level, as we echo outward through the signifying chain, the narratives would become less symbolic as they move towards the reader. This would mean that Truant's narrative inhabits, not an unsymbolic plane for that is impossible, but rather a less purely symbolic one more akin to the real world. This would place Navidson's narrative as the ideal response to trauma, and Truant's response, flaws and all, as the natural human reaction to traumatic events. In this light, Truant's lack of redemption, his inability to return from his metaphoric descent, is all the more tragic as it becomes clear this is the story told more often than not.

Navidson speaks to himself and his camera, quite often as the narrative progresses. It is through this that the reader comes to know Navidson's thoughts and feelings. This process is something that the reader witnesses during his first exploration of the labyrinth,

"I better be able to find my way back,' he finally whispers, which though probably muttered in jest suddenly catches him off guard. Navidson swiftly turns around. Much to his horror he can no longer see the arch let alone the wall. He has walked beyond the range of light...Even worse, his panicked turn and the subsequent absence of any landmarks has made it impossible for him to remember which direction he came from" (67).

House of Leaves and Trauma: A Postmodern Depiction of Time and Space

Descending into a metaphoric underworld results in the same consequences. Disorientation and lack of understanding lead to fear, which can lead to panic. Navidson has entered a point where all traditional tools used for orientation have failed him, as shown when his wife buys a compass for a project and finds that “the compass refuses to settle on any one direction inside the house” (90). Further evidence is shown during later explorations, Holloway Roberts, an explorer that Navidson and his wife hire, discovers that some of the gear he brings into the labyrinth, specifically an altimeter, refuse to work (94). Navidson walks through the halls of the labyrinth through a large archway into a vast empty space reminiscent of gothic cathedrals, except the space is virtually empty. The archway and massive scale give the impression of grandiosity, of importance, rather like a cathedral, or other place of worship (64). It is my belief that Danielewski is using the language of a place of religious significance to point to the isolation that occurs during the psychic approach towards repressed or traumatic memories. It is a realm completely isolated from all others, where no communication occurs except between Navidson and his camera. While this may seem contradictory at first, it is my belief that the inclusion of Navidson’s camera and the discussions Navidson has with it are in keeping with the chain of narrators that have been discussed. These films create their own spatio-temporal dimensions that the viewers can inhabit, thereby receiving the necessary narrative to then transmit said narrative to the next signifier in the chain. We find out that there are a few supplementary films that accompany “The Navidson Record” the most important to this discussion being, “The Last Interview,” an interview conducted with Will Navidson after the final production of the film “The Navidson Record” (95-96). These supplementary films reveal that the chain of legitimated narrators continues ad infinitum, both deeper into the narrative and further out beyond the reader.

The use of film to create individual spheres of narrative extends beyond Navidson to include narratives that he receives when creating the film that becomes “The Navidson Record” further reinforcing the importance of the character chain in the creation of narratives. The novel utilizes the separation of characters from one another, or the individual journeys undertaken into the labyrinth alone, to provide them with an opportunity to talk to the cameras they carry with them. This act frames each speaker as their own individual storyteller. As the teller of their own narrative, they are naturally qualified to transmit this story, which is then provided to the viewers of these films who are legitimized through the process of receiving these narratives, in keeping with the postmodern theory of Lyotard. Through this, Danielewski sets up the multiple narratives from multiple narrators within in the novel, while ensuring that all are legitimate narratives within the context of postmodern theory. We see this with Will Navidson on his first journey into the labyrinth, and again on subsequent ventures that he makes later in the novel. We also get a protracted view of these discussions in what is known as “The Holloway Tape” which comes from the camera of one Holloway Roberts, who led an expedition into the labyrinth, bringing along his team of Jed Leeder and Kirby “Wax” Hook, both young climbing guides who have worked with Holloway before (81). The team was hired by Navidson at Karen’s insistence, as she did not want her husband exploring the labyrinth himself. This is the team that carries out the journeys that compose “Exploration #2,” “Exploration #3,” and “Exploration #4.” After two explorations to understand what they might face in the labyrinth, Holloway decides to arm himself with a rifle for “Exploration #4.” This final exploration of the Holloway team extends deep into the labyrinth without finding anything remarkable beyond the large staircase that occupies the grand chamber that Navidson discovered on his first venture into the labyrinth. The

team spends some time exploring this staircase. As they go, Holloway's behavior becomes increasingly erratic the further into the labyrinth the three men descend, until finally Jed and Wax decide to turn back without their leader (124-125). The two men begin the return journey to the house on their own, retracing their steps up the massive spiral staircase. The men stop at a small cache of supplies they left for their return journey on the stairs, taking advantage of the opportunity for a rest. Wax is drinking water when "the crack of a rifle drops him to the floor, blood gushing from his left armpit" (126). In the ensuing chaos, Jed tries to bandage Wax's wound, while Holloway, who has emerged from one of the many hallways leading off the staircase, rants about how he is going to lose everything and go to jail if he returns with his team to the house on Ash Tree Lane. He opts instead to abandon his men and walks off into the labyrinth (126). However, this is not the last we see of Holloway Roberts. Will Navidson finds his pack and camcorder in the labyrinth as he struggles to return home after venturing into the maze with Reston and his brother Tom to rescue the Holloway team (153 and 322-323). What comes to be known as "The Holloway Tape" is a depiction of Holloway's last moments in the labyrinth, moments filled with panicked breathing, a repeated mantra, and finally an attempted suicide that leaves Holloway alive just long enough to bleed to death. "The Holloway Tape," and all tapes from the explorers of the labyrinth provide the details of what happened in the House on Ash Tree Lane. They allow Navidson to compile them into the completed "Navidson Record" and Zampanó to transcribe and elaborate up the aforementioned film. Navidson was also the one to compile and edit all of the footage that was taken from the initial voyages into the house (8 and 418) the footage that would eventually become "The Navidson Record." It is also implied that other characters in the novel watch the exploration footage, or at least The Holloway

Tape (323). When viewed through the lens of Lyotard's postmodern theory, these films allow for the legitimation of narratives that Navidson has not lived through and cannot transmit himself. When Navidson watches the tapes, he positions himself as the referent of the narrative that he lived through, and that others lived through. In accordance with Lyotard, as the referent, Navidson and the other viewers of these tapes are watching films whose "narratives' reference may seem to belong to the past, but in reality it is always contemporaneous with the act of recitation" (Lyotard 22). If we take Lyotard's statement as true, then we can say that Navidson places himself in the same temporal sphere as when the narrative occurred. This connects to studies done on trauma, as flashbacks place the sufferer in the same mental state as when the trauma occurred (Van Der Kolk 53).

The novel *House of Leaves* interestingly takes this postmodern notion of time in further than just the idea of Navidson watching the footage from the House on Ash Tree Lane. We then have Zampanó watching the edited footage that Navidson has compiled, placing him in the same temporal sphere as the explorers during their voyages, and possibly the same sphere as Navidson during his watching of the films as he edits the footage (418). The reader is at the very least within the same sphere as Karen Navidson, after she finds Will's film and cameras in the house a month after his final descent into the belly of the labyrinth (417). Then we have Johnny Truant reading the "Navidson Record" placing him in the same sphere as Zampanó, who is in the same sphere as Navidson, who is in the same sphere as himself and the other explorers of the House. After Johnny comes the editor that Johnny entrusts his manuscript to. This unnamed editor follows the same chain of characters, this time starting in Johnny's temporal sphere, all the way down to the explorers of the labyrinth who speak to their cameras, unknowingly having a

discussion with someone in a future time. Finally, the novel passes from this unnamed editor to the reader, who is now the recipient of this narrative and can transition to different temporal states depending on which narrator he or she is reading at a given time. If postmodern theory positions the reader or viewer of a work in the same spatio-temporal sphere as that work, it stands that this sphere can be projected further from the novel ad infinitum as each subsequent reader projects the narrative to new recipients of the narrative. The initial reader has been legitimated as a signifier by way of simply receiving the narrative of the novel. Naturally, it is impossible to repeat the entirety of a novel through verbal communication, or even a critical analysis of much longer length. The narrative that would be received beyond the initial reader would be a degradation of the primary text. It would be an echo, a fragment, of what it once was. Yet the signifier receiving this echo would be just as valid in transmitting this shadow of the narrative, as Lyotard states the only necessity for narrative legitimation is receiving said narrative from a legitimized source (22). These echoes come to be representative of the fragmentary nature of memory and the elusiveness of truth when dealing with individuals suffering from traumatic experiences.

The constant return of echoes becomes a representation of the psychic repetitions of trauma, be they subconscious reenactments or the incessant reliving of the event in the form of a flashback. Danielewski represents these psychic repetitions through the use of visual, textual, and auditory repetitions. While other scholars have focused on Johnny Truant as the main character undergoing a traumatic narrative, I believe that the character of Will Navidson depicts the psychic echoes representative of trauma in both literal and metaphoric demonstrations throughout the novel. The best example of this comes from Navidson's first journey into the

labyrinth that he finds beneath the house on Ash Tree Lane, where he has recently moved with his wife and two young children. The appearance of the labyrinth is an anomaly that does not appear immediately within the house on Ash Tree Lane. Instead, the house first manifests as a short hallways and closets that appear in various points of the house (Danielewski 28 and 57). These spaces eventually manifest in the form of a door in the living room of the house, positioned on a wall that, if walked through, would lead to the yard of the house. Instead, this door opens to a long hallway, the start of the ever-shifting labyrinth that comes to haunt the Navidson's house. It is my belief that these doors and hallways represent the repressed traumatic event beginning to break through to the conscious mind from the unconscious. This physical representation of the subconscious would naturally start small and be resisted by those experiencing it in the same way that Will and Karen Navidson resist the appearance of these anomalies, even as Will Navidson is simultaneously drawn to them (57). Eventually there is a point where the subconscious messages cannot be ignored and must be faced head on, as represented by Navidson's repeated journeys into the labyrinth. Pushed by a combination of marital strife and his own innate curiosity regarding this newly manifested phenomenon, Will Navidson makes his first exploratory journey into the labyrinth. He discovers a maze of lightless rooms, all of various sizes, culminating in a large cathedral like space with a grand arching entrance (64-65). It is in this overwhelmingly large room that Navidson realizes he has not marked his trail in any way. The eerie continuity that the rooms possess leaves no distinctive landmarks to navigate from, nor has Navidson brought any equipment other than a flashlight and his camera. Fortunately, Navidson is no stranger to dangerous situations. He reacts with the only tool he has,

“Hey!’ he shouts, spawning a multitude of a’s, then rotates forty-five degrees and yells ‘Balls!’ a long moment of silence follows before he hears the faint halls racing back through the dark. After several more such turns, he discovers a loud ‘easy’ returns a z with the least amount of delay. This is the direction he decides on, and within less than a minute the beam from his flashlight finds something more than darkness” (67).

Here we clearly see Danielewski's use of echoes at work. It is my belief that this scene posits Will Navidson as one who is lost in the metaphorical maze of his own subconscious. We see him attempt to locate himself through language. The language sent out only returns to Navidson in the form of an echo, an a degraded one at that, with “hey” returning as “a multitude of a’s” and “a loud ‘easy’ returns a z” (67). The projection of language outward within the space of the labyrinth, I believe, represents the subconscious reenactment of the trauma, either emotional or physical. When these repetitions are projected outward, they inevitably return to the sender in an altered form, as evidenced by the echoes that Navidson hears when calling out to the void. The physical and emotional reenactments are nothing more than a subconscious attempt to recall the trauma, to symbolize what cannot be symbolized through conscious thought our language (Freud qtd. in Van Der Kolk 183). However, because this experience is subconscious, it can only be “seen” or “experienced” by the sender as the distorted echoes that return from external sources.

These echoes and subsequent deteriorations exist in the labyrinth and are mirrored in the larger scope of “The Navidson Record” as a complete project, rather than a moment within the film. Before “The Navidson Record” was released as a completed project, there was the release of what came to be known as the documentaries trailer, called “The Five and a Half Minute Hallway” and the subsequent follow up “Exploration #4” which were both later incorporated into the larger film. These films appeared and were distributed as “VHS copies were passed around by hand, a series of progressively degenerating dubs of a home video” (5). Karen Navidson was

the one to initially edit the footage into the short piece that came to be known as “Exploration #4,” which she distributed to “professors, scientists, my therapist, village poets, even some of the famous people Navy knew” (354), all because Will Navidson shipped her the footage he had taken and remained in Virginia at the house on Ash Tree Lane (353). These films, echoes of the larger film “The Navidson Record,” deteriorate as they are copied and passed along in a clear reflection of the deteriorating sonic echoes that Navidson experiences while inside the labyrinth. I believe these deteriorating echoes that take the physical form of these films and sonic echoes are symbolic representations of the deteriorating echoes cast out by a sufferer of PTSD in the form of psychic repetitions. These repetitions are distorted through their engagement with other people and the environment surrounding the sufferer, the same way any physical echo would be.

It is clear that Navidson's psychic repetitions, even when confined within the symbolic landscape of the labyrinth, resonate outward to other people in his life both close to and far removed from him. These echoes then return to Navidson, again in the form of a film. It is my belief that Navidson's decision to enter the labyrinth even though his wife begged him not to, his inability to put down his camera to invest completely in his family, and the frequent thoughts of Delial, the Sudanese girl who died after Navidson took her photograph, are subconscious manifestations of the trauma he endured while on assignment in Sudan. Other scholars have discussed the importance of trauma within the context of the novel *House of Leaves*, regarding its importance in the depiction of the burden of trauma on the individual who experienced it.

Naturally, the weight of trauma weighs most heavily on the one who experienced the traumatic event, however, *House of Leaves* takes this notion further. Coupled with the symbolic and physical echoes within the text, I contend that Danielewski's work shows the repercussions

that trauma has not only on the suffering individual, but how the unconscious repetitions enacted by the traumatized individual reverberate to affect others. These reverberations then return to the traumatized individual in distorted or altered forms, revealing the trauma that can only be remembered through reenactment until it has been approached and symbolized through language. The evidence for these reverberations returning to Will Navidson lie within the more mundane parts of “The Navidson Record,” the parts that deal with Will's relationship with his wife, Karen. From the start of the novel, Karen does not trust that Will has left behind the adventuring days from his life as a photographer. Provided with an ultimatum made by his wife, either his career or his family (10), Will Navidson purchases the house on Ash Tree Lane with every intent to settle down. However, he is unable to completely let go of his career, instead setting up a series of cameras throughout the house to "create a record of how Karen and I bought a small house in the country and moved into it with our children" (8). I believe that this statement, positioned so early in the novel, reveals how Navidson believed he was free from the influence of the trauma he had experienced in that he has removed himself completely from anything resembling his old life as a photojournalist. He has moved to a suburb to be with his family, revealing a choice to step away from the dangerous life that he used to live, indicating that he believes himself to have some sort of control over his situation, at the very least unconsciously. Simultaneously, it reveals how his subconscious still remembers the trauma, as he is holding onto the one thing that is most indicative and related to his trauma regarding the photograph of the young Sudanese girl, which is his camera. Even while attempting to step away from his trauma, Navidson continues to view things almost exclusively through the lens of a camera, be it film or video. This reenactment of the trauma as a method of remembering is veiled by Navidson's desire to “create a record” of his

time with his wife and children. Navidson is able to shift the burden of responsibility onto this desire to create something that will last, only to have the record that he creates return to him as an echo that will eventually lead him to reconcile with his subconscious and the trauma within.

What is striking about this is that the entire project of "The Navidson Record" would not exist were it not for the psychic repetitions that Will Navidson felt compelled to carry out. The project is born of a traumatic repetition and reveals the cyclical nature of traumatic memory, where one instance of repetition returns as a distorted echo which sparks another repetition, ad infinitum. In this case, the traumatic repetition leads from the start of the project to Navidson entering and exploring the labyrinth, breaking a promise he made to his wife in doing so. Navidson's first in depth exploration, and subsequent use of language in an attempt to locate himself within the labyrinth, detailed in the above quote from *House of Leaves*, I believe can also be viewed in the light of the echoes or repetitions enacted by trauma. The reasons for this are stated above, so I will instead focus here on the effect the outward projection of this trauma has on others, and how the altered form of said echoes returns to haunt Navidson. After the appearance of the hallway and Karen's extraction of Will's promise not to explore the mysterious space, a rift appears between the formerly happy couple. This rift is depicted by Zampanó, the writer of the critical analysis through which the reader receives the narrative of "The Navidson Record," as "a lack of physical intimacy and emotional understanding" (62) that leads both Karen and Will to "privately voiced ultimatums" (62). Karen closes herself off from Navidson out of fear of losing him, which in turn causes Navidson to resent adhering to his promise not to explore the mysterious hallway that has manifested itself in his house. It is my belief that Karen's closing off of herself stems directly from Will's inability to completely give up

photojournalism, even in this supposedly new stage of life he is supposed to be enjoying with his family. Karen sees this inability to relinquish his career, which I believe is actually a psychic repetition of the traumatic event he experienced in Senegal with Delial, and recognizes that he will want to explore and document this new phenomena regardless of the danger that might be present. This is a clear example of unconscious traumatic repetition echoing out from Navidson, rebounding off the people in his life and returning to him in an altered form. In this case, the altered form is the strained emotional and physical intimacy and communication between him and his wife. It is important to note that this returning echo allows Navidson to engage with further traumatic repetitions guilt free, as he is able to pin the blame for it on his wife's behavior, as evidenced by his saying "If she keeps up this cold front, you bet I'm going in there" (63). Navidson's unresolved trauma causes him to act like a petulant child denied a sweet. This may also point to echoes of Navidson's traumatic childhood, one where his father was an alcoholic who disappeared for weeks at a time and his mother disappeared after her husband died, hoping to become an actress at the cost of abandoning Will and his brother Tom (22). Upon inspection, Navidson may suffer from an unresolved Oedipal complex, which leads to his fragile and often tumultuous relationship with his wife Karen. However, Navidson's relationship with his mother and his wife inevitably only point back to one place and one singular focus, the young girl in Senegal and the labyrinth underneath the house on Ash Tre Lane.

The young girl that Will Navidson named Delial returns as the strongest echo within the entire novel *House of Leaves*. Other scholars have been quick to point out the use of multiple legitimated narrators as the transmitters of the overall narrative within Danielewski's novel. However, one signifier is left out of the discussion. Karen Navidson created a film titled "A

Brief History of Who I Love” which details her relationship with renowned photojournalist Will Navidson through a collection of videos and photographs that Will had shot from the time he was a boy through his adult years (366–367). It is within this collection of images that we learn that Will Navidson also served a combat tour in South East Asia, “dressed in battle fatigues, sitting on an ammunition crate with howitzer shell casings stacked on a nearby trunk marked ‘VALUABLES.’ An open window to the right is obviously not enough to clear the air. Navidson is alone, head down, fingertips a blur as he sobs into his hands over an experience we will never share but perhaps can imagine” (367). This photograph that Karen reveals in her documentary suggests a possible explanation for Will’s decision to become a photojournalist in war torn countries, along with his affinity for dangerous situations. These traits are manifested as psychic repetitions of unresolved trauma from the horrors of war. The quote speaks to a fundamental aspect of unresolved trauma. As I have stated before, the resolution of trauma is best accomplished through the symbolic representation of said trauma through language. This symbolism takes the place of action, eliminating the unconscious need to repeat the traumatic event (184). What is noted about Navidson’s experience is that his is one “we will never share but perhaps can imagine” (367). It is my belief that the photograph takes the place of the symbolic representation of trauma that is meant to be occupied by language. What this means is that the reader, and the hypothetical viewer of the image, can imagine what horrible tragedy Navidson experienced. However, because Navidson did not symbolize the trauma with his own language, the event remains unresolved, buried in his subconscious where it manifests as the traumatic repetitions that are his intense desire to be in the midst of dangerous situations. This particular photograph, I believe, also mirrors Navidson’s future as a photojournalist. In keeping

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with Harvey's theory on postmodernism, the photograph would place the viewer in the same spatio-temporal sphere as the subject, and in this case the photographer. The photograph of Navidson was taken by "a famous though now deceased photojournalist" (367). I believe that the photograph of Will Navidson as a young soldier mirrors the photograph that Navidson himself takes of the young Sudanese girl during his time documenting the war in the middle east. Navidson goes from the one suffering the horrors of war while his experience is captured on film, to the person capturing the horror inflicted on another. This indirect repetition of his experience as a soldier ignites new trauma, sparking the compulsive need to document his, and other peoples experience, with his camera.

The last scene of Karen Navidson's film "A Brief History of Who I Love" is perhaps the most revealing. It is a clip of film, recorded and narrated by Karen: "In her filmic sonnet, Karen includes a shot of Navidson's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph. As she explains in a voice-over: 'The print comes from Navy's personal collection.' The same one hanging in their home and one of the first things Navidson placed in their car the night they fled" (368). This small clip of film eventually "zooms in tighter and tighter on the lower right hand corner...six faintly penciled in block letters cradled in quotes—'Delial'" (368). The first thing of note is the relationship of the photograph of Delial to the reader. Following Lyotard's theory regarding narrative signifiers, the reader is positioned so that they view the young girl at a distance of no less than five distinct narratives. I believe that this distance between the reader and Delial represents the echo-like nature of trauma as subconscious repetitions emanate from the sufferer. These echoes, like the echoes that Navidson encountered during his first exploration into the labyrinth, return to Navidson in an altered state. The altered version of the past trauma in this

case is the revealing of who Delial is to the world. Navidson was plagued by thoughts of Delial for a long time after the event took place. He hung his prize-winning photograph in his new home, and even suffering an intrusive image of Delial in his mind when he was trying to escape the labyrinth after the botched rescue of Holloway Roberts and his team (323). But all this time, the knowledge of who Delial was remained a secret. Others knew of Delial, but no one but Will Navidson knew her true identity. I believe that the return of the traumatic repetitions that have been outlined over the course of this paper, culminate in the distorted return to Will Navidson in the form of the revealed identity of Delial. In fact, the distortion goes one step further, as the editors of the text relate that Navidson's photograph of Delial is "clearly based on Kevin Carter's 1994 Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of a vulture preying on a tiny Sudanese girl who collapsed on her way to a feeding center" (368). Not only is Delial's identity revealed, but there is a true event linked to the traumatic instance that Navidson went through. Kevin Carter, the photojournalist died by suicide, "on July 27, 1994 Carter killed himself" (368). I believe that this clearly exemplifies the distortion of traumatic repetition, seen here as the echoes of Navidson's story pass up through the signifying chain to the editor, the last signifier before the tale reaches the reader.

I believe that through these distortions, the culmination of which comes at the almost exact center of the novel, reveal the psychic shift that takes place within Navidson that allows him to confront the trauma within his own subconscious and integrate it within himself. It should be noted that the culmination of the distortions of the echoes emanating from Navidson mirrors traditional crisis narratives, particularly autobiographical works by male writers, in particular the confessions of both Rousseau and St. Augustine. I mention this only because the

climax in these historic narratives resolves itself with a shift in consciousness leading to the resolution and completion of the work. The same can be said for *House of Leaves*. With the reveal of Delial's identity, and the echo distorted to the point that she becomes not a character but a real person, while Navidson is distorted to a photojournalist who commits suicide; it is inevitable that the following half of the novel will return these distortions to the character of Navidson, the primary signifier in order to shift his thinking and conclude the novel. Zampanó notes that "Navidson never photographed scenery, but he also never photographed the threat of death without interposing someone else between himself and it" (422). After the failed rescue of Holloway Roberts and his team, everyone abandons the house on Ash Tree Lane. There is a freak occurrence where the labyrinth shifts to consume large portions of the house, nearly consuming everyone inside. Will, Karen, the two children, and Will's friend Billy Reston, who had been helping explore and document the findings within the house, all escape. Will's brother Tom is not so lucky. He is swallowed by the labyrinth after heroically rescuing his niece Daisy, and is presumed dead. Navidson was climbing into the house when his brother died in an attempt to save him, but even here we can see the barrier between Will and the danger during the film, this time manifesting itself as the wall of the house (345-346).

It is after this that everyone splits up. Karen takes the kids back to New York and begins work on her project "A Brief History of Who I Love," while Navidson stays in Virginia with Billy Reston. After Delial's identity is revealed and subsequently distorted, Navidson writes to Karen in New York, part letter part will, detailing his intent to return to the house and the guilt he feels over the photograph he took and the subsequent death of Delial (389-393). I believe that the reason these letters do nothing to resolve Navidson's trauma is that the trauma was only

partially detailed in his writing to Karen. He discusses the guilt he feels for capturing the image of this girl her subsequent death. He does not detail how he came upon the young girl, why he was in that particular area, what he did to set up the shot, nor what he did after the shot was taken. The symbolism is incomplete, leaving the trauma still alive in his mind, now more conscious than not. It is not enough to prevent the traumatic repetitions from playing out, and so Navidson returns to the house that claimed the life of his brother, and almost claimed his own life on more than one occasion.

It is in this final repetition that Will Navidson is able to confront what lies within his unconscious, the necessary step to overcoming the unconscious traumatic repetitions that have plagued him throughout the course of the novel. He packed food and supplies onto a small trailer, hitched the trailer to a bike, and began his journey, quickly finding himself out of his depth. The hallway he finds himself in sends him “moving along a surface that always tilts downward no matter which direction” Navidson orients himself (425). During the period that he is within the confines of the labyrinth, which lasts over a month (417), Navidson periodically documents his journey through what comes to be known as “Exploration #5.” Between pages 425 and 490, the format of the book shifts dramatically, transitioning from a traditionally formatted text, with footnotes residing beneath the primary narrative, to the structure of something more akin to poetry; words make shapes across the page, like archways, or they tilt like the floor of the labyrinth is said to. It is my belief that this shift in formatting is reflective of the cognitive dissonance that arises through the mental approach of the trauma. To approach such a thing is a difficult task, which is reflected in the difficulty the reader has following the words on the page as they attempt to track Navidson’s progress. The format also draws out the

reading over more than sixty pages a narrative that most likely would not have occupied more than ten had it been properly formatted. I believe this reflects the length of time the process of approaching and understanding the traumatic event buried in one's unconscious would take, in addition to the inherent difficulty of such a task. To me it is clear that the shifting nature of the labyrinth, detailed within the aforementioned pages, reflects the shifting nature of the human psyche. Navidson ventures inward with no explicit goal, and finds himself running a gauntlet of shifting passages, shrinking hallways, and ever expansive chambers. There seems to be little to no rhyme or reason to the appearance of these difficulties, reflecting the mental shifts and deviations that occur when the mind is attempting to avoid something. These repressed memories can take years, sometimes decades to manifest as conscious thought, during which time the mind is fighting to protect itself from something it already knows (Van Der Kolk 192).

The culmination of Navidson's harrowing journey results in what the reader, and Navidson, believe to be "a window, and furthermore an *open* window" (464). Zampanó's narrative notes that "Doorways offer passage but window offer vision. Here at last is a chance to behold something beyond..a chance to reach a place of perspective and perhaps make some sense of the whole" (192). Zampanó's text is positioned on an angle, starting in the top left corner and moving down towards the middle of the book, forming a triangle of text. I believe this inherently alters the perspective of the reader, an echo of the distorted perspective that Navidson has while journeying through the labyrinth. I think this is an attempt to convey that the journey does not offer perspective, rather perspective comes at the end of the journey. Or rather, one hopes perspective will come. Upon stepping through the window, Navidson confronts a sight that does not surprise him, but surprises the reader. He is confronted with the immense void at

the center of the labyrinth. What's more, the window he climbed through disappears, leaving him no way to return whence he came. He is forced to confront "darkness below, above, and of course darkness beyond" (464). If the labyrinth represents Navidson's subconscious, one would imagine something significant to be there. If not repressed trauma, surely there would be another thing buried within Will Navidson's mind. To me, this indicates that the meeting of the traumatic event within the subconscious is not important.

Before Navidson's final journey into the labyrinth, Zampanó's text hints at the limited possibility of a positive reunion with Delial at the center of the labyrinth. In an interview with the fictional journalist Sandy Beale of *The New Criticism*, a fictional newspaper or journal, Beale says: "If *The Navidson Record* had been a Hollywood creation, Delial would have appeared at the heart of the house...dark fields would have given way to Elysian fields, the perfect setting for a musical number with a brightly costumed Delial front and center, drinking Shirley Temples, swinging on the arms of Tom and Jed" (395). Beale's interview shows his clear contempt for such a cheerful ending. Regardless of this individual's personal feelings towards such a cheerful ending, it's positioning regarding the events of "Exploration #5" echo the events that the reader will fully encounter later on in the novel. In fact, one of the footnotes, footnote 374, quotes directly from Navidson during his time in the labyrinth documented in "Exploration #5" positioning the reader directly within the aforementioned exploration as per David Harvey's theories regarding postmodern thought. The footnote reads "During Exploration #5 Navidson had no illusion about what he would find there. While staring into those infernal halls, we can hear him mutter: 'Lazarus is dead again.'" (395). Lazarus refers to the biblical story of Lazarus who died and was resurrected by Jesus Christ. I believe that what is important here is not the

relationship to the theological, although those connections are undoubtedly present throughout the novel and would require an entirely different paper to properly address. Rather, what is important is Navidson's acknowledgement of the one who has been resurrected has died again, in conjunction with the positioning of the reader the footnote achieves through Harvey's postmodern theory. I believe that here we see Navidson acknowledge that Delia had died and will not come back, even though she was resurrected again and again through Navidson's photograph and the constant reference to her in the novel itself. This is received as an echo in the form of a footnote that positions the reader with "Exploration #5" and provides a view into what Navidson will reckon with as the reader continues to progress through the novel. In particular what he will reckon with in his own subconscious which turns out not to be Delia but rather the lack of symbolic representation for the multitude of experiences that he has been through. The reader arrives at "Exploration #5" armed with knowledge of what they will find at the end of the journey. However, the shifting format, in conjunction with the anxiety of Navidson's journey, act in such a way as to disrupt this knowledge. It is my belief that this foreknowledge is intentionally positioned and then disrupted by the structure and content of the text. The echo that reveals to the reader that Delia should be at the center of the labyrinth, but is not at the center of the labyrinth, is disrupted by Navidson's journey, by "Exploration #5" itself. The echo returns disrupted, leading to not Navidson's surprise, but the reader's, at what is found in the center of the labyrinth: nothing.

Scholar Nick Lord has pointed out that the void at the center of the labyrinth represents a "realm that holds those concepts that defy symbolization" (471), as opposed to things in that are symbolized and as such have tangible form, like the house or the labyrinth. Symbolism in

literature comes exclusively through language. I believe that this unsymbolized void simply has not been symbolized through language in order to give it tangible form. Furthermore, this symbolic vacancy is indicative of the unsymbolized nature of the traumatic instances residing at the very depths of Navidson's subconscious, as evidenced by how Delial should be at the center but is not. Navidson's encounter with Delial has never been properly symbolized through language and as a result, the center of the labyrinth remains empty.

It is worth noting that traumatic repetitions and echoes, distorted or not, brought Navidson to the edge of this unsymbolized void. These repetitions are an integral part of the journey to the unsymbolized portion of the unconscious. Upon recognizing the unsymbolized nature of the void, Navidson turns to the one extraneous item that he brought with him on his journey, a book titled *House of Leaves* (465). In his reading of the novel we see two things. First, the narrative chain comes full circle, with Navidson becoming the reader in a recursive loop that mirrors the repetitive nature of traumatic memory and repetitive action. Second, we see him attempt to engage with symbolic language. I believe that he reads, and reads *House of Leaves* in particular, as an attempt to find the symbolic language necessary to represent the traumatic experiences that he underwent as a young man and as a photojournalist. It is only upon locating this symbolic language that Navidson can liberate himself from the echo chamber, which is all a large empty space is, and live his life free from the repetitions and echoes that haunted his existence. I believe that his attempt at symbolizing his trauma was successful as soon the void fills with light (488). I believe that this represents the filling of the void with light and in turn the dispelling of the horrors of war that haunted Navidson, unsymbolized and therefore unacknowledged. His secrets were kept in the dark and only through actualizing them

through narrative language could he free himself from the need for repetitive action and engage fully in his life.

Conclusion:

In short, scholarly research has positioned the novel *House of Leaves* by Mark Danielewski, as a piece of postmodern literature that functions as a simulacra of the internet, one that can be used to show the repetitive nature of trauma and the psychic repetitions and subconscious journey of Johnny Truant. This is done through the postmodern theories of Lyotard and Harvey, who argue that narratives are legitimated through the receiving of said narrative before the narrative is transmitted again and that the viewing of a text, photograph, or film places the viewer in the same spatio-temporal sphere as the narrative or subject that is being viewed. I have argued above that while these other arguments are valid, they neglect a significant portion of the novel by providing limited discourse on the narrative of Will Navidson. I have shown above that Navidson's journey through the labyrinth beneath the house on Ash Tree Lane is a direct result of traumatic repetitions caused by his military service and his job as a photojournalist in war torn nations. The engagement with the labyrinth reveals the echoes of his past that reverberate through his life, and the text itself, which manifest in the film that Karen Navidson makes titled "A Brief History of Who I Love," the repeated discourse on Delial, his inability to relinquish his photography career, and his troubled relationship with his family. These repetitions lead Navidson on multiple journeys into the labyrinth, each for a different reason, yet ultimately each journey brings him closer to reconciling with the traumatic events that he has experienced and buried in his unconscious. I argue that the transmission of the

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narrative of the house on Ash Tree Lane through multiple characters points of view is what allows for the creation and subsequent return of the distorted echoes to Will Navidson, without which he would not have any motive to make the film “The Navidson Record,” nor would he be motivated to explore the labyrinth. Without viewing Navidson’s story in conjunction with a postmodern reading of the legitimation of the multiple narratives it is impossible to view Navidson’s journey as a mirror of traumatic repetition within the human psyche. As a result, the arguments made by Lyotard and Harvey are critical to this theoretical understanding of Danielewski’s novel. Will Navidson's final descent into the labyrinth beneath his home leaves him trapped, exploring this inescapable maze for over a month. During this final journey, I argue that Navidson encounters the unsymbolized portion of his psyche, represented by the void that lies at the center of the labyrinth. This void is the repressed, and therefore unsymbolized, trauma that he is constantly enacting through unconscious repetitions. These repetitions are shown through Navidson’s venturing into the dangers of the labyrinth, filming and photographing everything as he goes. The main repetitive action that Navidson can not let go of is his need to document everything with his camera, an action he carries with him in his family life and into the depths of the labyrinth. These photographs and film clips, along with the films recorded by other explorers, both in and out of the labyrinth, are what allow the narrative to pass through multiple characters before reaching the reader which in turn allows for the development and inevitable distortion of these repeated themes and events, all of which mirror the effects of unsymbolized trauma within the psyche of someone who suffers from PTSD. I believe that by engaging at last with the novel he brought with him on his final descent into the labyrinth, the novel *House of Leaves*, Navidson finds the language he needs to symbolize the trauma he has experienced by

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receiving the echo of his story through the text of the novel, a reflection of how fiction serves as a mirror to the world around us and can provide unexpected insight into problems we may experience. This final echo allows him to symbolize his trauma, filling the symbolic void at the heart of the labyrinth and allowing him to escape back into the world.

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