Post-Postmodern Multimodal Fiction:
Abrams and Dorst’s S. and Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*.

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Introduction

After the golden age of postmodernism, the 1990s heralded what could be described as “the late age of print” (Bolter 2). From the 90s onward, our means of communication have increased exponentially, especially through the use of digital technologies. These technologies have rapidly changed the world, including the world of literature. Claims about the death of the novel, “a critical commonplace since the mid-twentieth century” (Dawson 5) are stronger, and more relevant considering the increasing digitization of print media. In this recent millennium one can see “widespread shifts in the literary-historical conditions which determine the status and function of the novel in the public sphere” (Dawson 5). Among these conditions, Dawson mentions an increase in sales of, and increasing interest in literary nonfiction; competition from new media; advancements in technology which aid online publishing; and a proliferation of public opinion, which thrives due to digital technologies (5). Dawson concludes that there is a “perceived decline in the cultural authority of the novel” (5), which is echoed by The New Yorker critic James Wood, who claims that “the novel’s cultural centrality dims.” In the late age of print, where digital technologies are starting to replace the printed book, and literature is being digitized, we are beginning to change our perception of what a “book” is. While a hardcover copy of a novel still carries a certain prestige, the popularity of e-books shows that we no longer value written texts as “unchanging artifact[s]”, but increasingly appreciate the “impermanence and changeability of [digital] text” (Bolter 4). From the 1990s onward, several writers of literary fiction have started to write in reaction against this trend of devaluation of print literature. In this thesis I look at one specific genre of literary fiction that reacts against this devaluation: the genre of multimodal literature. Multimodal
literary fiction plays with trends of digital texts, and combines the changeability and interactivity of digital texts with the permanence and materiality of printed books.

Multimodality “denotes a type of novel that seems to have emerged visibly over the last twenty years and that is substantially different from the traditional novel which relies totally on the written word in printed form” (Hallet 129). Apart from writing, multimodal literary fiction uses various additional modes (manners of meaning-making) such as illustrations, typography, and layout to add meaning to a narrative. And while each novel can be said to be multimodal because it contains several modes such as the aforementioned typography and layout, it is the “quantity, the sheer number, the recurrent combination and the systematic use of all these elements and different languages, codes, and semiotic modes that constitute a novel’s multimodality” (Hallet 131).

There are several critics such as Hallet (2009), Nørgaard (2010), and Page (2009) who write about multimodal literature, but Alison Gibbons has combined all research on multimodal literary fiction into one list of “formal features that consistently appear in multimodal novels” (2010: 287). Gibbons lists eight features,¹ and because of the comprehensiveness of the list, this thesis will mainly use the features listed by Gibbons as a framework for discussing multimodal novels, and for discussing how these novels are a reaction against the digitization of literature. In this thesis I investigate two multimodal novels: *House of Leaves* (2000) by Mark Z. Danielewski, and *S.* (2013) by J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst. These novels both make systematic use of various modes to add additional meaning to their narrative, and are therefore useful

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¹ Gibbons does not include the use of illustrations in her list. Critics of multimodal literature agree that while illustrations are certainly an important mode, it is imperative that “multimodal literature” should not just be associated with graphic novels, children’s picture books and photo-stories (Hallet 2009, 132; Gibbons 2010a, 99).
in discussing how modern multimodal novels stand out in an era of digitization. Specifically, these novels are metafictive, and are experimental and innovative in their layout and typography. In their reaction against digitization, these two novels employ metafictive writing and typographical experimentation, which contribute significantly to their narrative.

*House of Leaves* (2000) was written by Mark Z. Danielewski, who was born in New York in 1966, and studied English Literature at Yale (Goodreads). The novel took ten years to write, and it is Danielewski’s first published novel. Apart from its cult-following, *House of Leaves* also received much critical acclaim. Danielewski wrote three other novels: *The Whalestoe Letters* were published in the same year as *House of Leaves*, and these letters are partially included in *House of Leaves’* later editions. *The Fifty Year Sword* and *Only Revolutions*, which were published in 2005 and 2006 respectively, share their experimental use of narrative and layout with *House of Leaves*. In multimodal studies, *House of Leaves* is often used as a textbook example of multimodal literary fiction. For my thesis, Danielewski’s masterpiece provides an excellent specimen of early twenty-first century multimodal fiction, and it provides the opportunity to compare and contrast with the much more recent S. (2013).

*House of Leaves* revolves around a movie called *The Navidson Record*. This movie is made by Will Navidson, and it features him, his partner Karen, and their children Chad and Daisy moving into a new house. Navidson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer, rigs the house with camcorders with the intention of producing a family home video; a video about a family adapting to a new life in a new environment. Shortly after, the Navidson family discovers something mysterious: the house appears to be bigger on the inside than on the outside. Several months after the family’s move to Ashtree Lane, Chad and Daisy discover a “dark, doorless hallway which has appeared
out of nowhere in the west wall [of the living room]” (House of Leaves² 57), in which
they find an enormous labyrinth of hallways, staircases and rooms. The events
unfolding in the movie are presented through an extensive commentary by an old man
named Zampanò. His commentary, called “The Navidson Record”;
³ analyzes the movie
in detail, and since we are unable to watch the film ourselves, we have to rely on
Zampanò’s description (and interpretation) of it. The commentary is annotated with a
plethora of footnotes, which refer to hundreds of scholars, magazines, books and other
(academic) sources which discuss the movie and all its intricacies. This means that there
are two levels of narrative, which, although mostly occupied with the same subject (the
House), are very different in style: The Navidson Record, as it is presented to us by
Zampanò, seems to be a haunted house horror story, while Zampanò’s annotated
narrative resembles an academic essay. The narrative is further complicated by Johnny
Truant, a young man who finds Zampanò’s manuscript after the old man’s death. He
becomes the primary editor of the manuscript, and adds his own narrative through
footnotes, which sometimes cover several pages (pages 323 through 327 for example).

S. was written by J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst, and was published in 2013.
Abrams, born in 1966, is primarily known for his work as a filmmaker and screenwriter,
specifically for the Star Trek movies (2009 and 2013) and the TV series Lost (2004-
2010). Abrams came up with the idea of S. when he found a novel on a bench in which
was written “to whomever finds this book please read it and take it somewhere and
leave it for someone else to read”. S. is Abrams’ first literary production, but Dorst has
written other novels before. Dorst published Alive in Necropolis in 2008: it was
nominated for various literary awards, and was chosen as one of Amazon.com’s Best

² Henceforth abbreviated as “HoL” in quotations.
³ This title will be italicized when referring to the movie, and written between quotation marks when
referring to Zampanò’s commentary.
Books of 2008. His short story collection *The Surf Guru* was published in 2011 (“Bio”). *S.* was published under a shroud of mystery: it was preceded by a spooky trailer, and, because of Abrams’ involvement and the mystery surrounding the novel, was quickly associated with Abrams’ series *Lost*. Since then, *S.* has received some mixed reviews, and is not (yet) as critically acclaimed as *House of Leaves*. Nevertheless, reviews often compare *S.* with *House of Leaves* because of the obvious similarities in their uses of unusual narration and layout. In these comparisons, *House of Leaves* is predominantly seen as superior in form, but also in storytelling. Therefore critics and reviewers usually agree that *S.* has been clearly influenced by *House of Leaves*. However, *S.* includes some stylistic choices that are clearly different from *House of Leaves*. Its inclusion of inserts is certainly innovative, and the fact that it uses the Internet to publish “alternative endings” is a significantly different approach than *House of Leaves*. *S.* is a very material and multimodal novel, and therefore an interesting second case study for this thesis.

One of *S.*’ striking features is that it is so carefully crafted. It comes in a black, fancy sleeve, with a paper seal that needs to be torn in order to take out the book. When removing the sleeve, what appears to be an old library book is found inside, complete with library sticker on the spine. The title of the “library book” is *Ship of Theseus* by V.M. Straka. On the title page the mystery increases, as there are handwritten comments framing the bibliographical information. It is soon obvious through the difference in handwriting that these comments are written by two different people, which is made clear even further by the difference in color of the comments (although this distinction becomes more difficult throughout the novel as more colors are used). These people are Jen and Eric: Jen is a senior college student of English literature, figuring out what she should do after graduation, and Eric is a former grad student who is obsessed with V.M. Straka. Eric accidentally leaves his copy of *Ship of Theseus* in the library and Jen, who
works in the library, finds it. She is fascinated by Eric’s notes in the novel, and adds her own observations and opinions to them. This incites a response from Eric, and the two begin passing the book to each other via several hiding places. They discuss the story written by Straka, and try to uncover the mystery of exactly who the mysterious author was (or is). This discussion between Jen and Eric concerning *Ship of Theseus* is purely presented through the margin notes in the book. The novel they discuss is Straka’s nineteenth and final novel, and it features a protagonist named S., who at the beginning of the novel finds himself in an unknown city without any knowledge of who he is or where he came from (“Something happened to my memory,” he says …. “Do you know your name? Where you live?” “No.” (S. 22)). He meets a mysterious woman named Sola, to whom he is immediately drawn, but he loses her when he is shanghaied by a group of sailors. He awakes on a ship, which takes him to strange places where he meets rebels, saves works of art and literature and is forced to join a mysterious group of assassins. This group urges him to kill members of another mysterious group, all the while searching for the woman Sola.

These two novels are prime examples of multimodal literary fiction. Additionally, they both provide much complicated, but extremely interesting and fascinating material, with many topics for discussion. First of all both *House of Leaves* and *S.* use metafictive writing to focus on their materiality. I will investigate how their narratives are structured, and how their use of metafiction differs from postmodern metafiction. Since multimodal novels use both typography and layout to add meaning to their narratives, I will investigate how the reader’s experience is guided by the typographical elements that can be found in *S.* and *House of Leaves*. Furthermore, I will investigate how readers interact with these multimodal novels. I will discuss the role of readers, and how their interpretations contribute to the construction of the narrative.
These discussions are placed in a post-postmodern context, since, while *House of Leaves* and *S.* certainly contain postmodern characteristics, there are several elements in the novels (such as a lack of irony and an emphasis on authenticity) which show that the modern multimodal literary novel cannot be classified as merely postmodern, but belongs to a new development in literary fiction.

The first chapter of this thesis presents a short history of the development of multimodality. This chapter also discusses the classification of novels such as *House of Leaves* and *S.* as possibly hypertextual. Since the modern multimodal novel can be seen as something different than the postmodern novel, this chapter also includes a brief part on (post-)postmodernity and its characteristics. Chapter two investigates the (post-postmodern) metafictive elements found in both novels. This includes the intricate narrative layering, multiple narrators and narrations, and stories within stories. To illustrate the complicated narrative, this chapter also presents a more detailed discussion on the plot and narrative layers of both novels. Chapter Three offers a detailed analysis of the distinctive features of typography found in the novels, such as the use of different typefaces and color which are found in *House of Leaves* and *S.* These features all add to the novels’ experimental layout, which contributes greatly to their innovative quality. In the final chapter of this thesis I turn to the readers of multimodal literary fiction. What is their role in the construction of meaning, and how do *House of Leaves* and *S.* in particular interact with their readers? Here I discuss how *House of Leaves* and *S.* invite their readers to go beyond the text itself in order to find extra information and interpretations. In addition, I investigate how these novels, through their multiple layers and possibility of ambiguous reading, explicitly invite their readers to come up with new meanings and interpretations.
In the conclusion of this thesis I present the claims and arguments I have made in my chapters concerning S. and *House of Leaves* as multimodal, post-postmodern novels. Here I demonstrate how in a post-postmodern age of digitization, novels such as *House of Leaves* and *S.* use metafictive elements and unusual textual and typographical layout to add meaning to their narrative, and I demonstrate how the novels emphasize the active role of their readers in co-creating meaning.
Chapter 1: Contextualizing the Multimodal Novel

“[S]omehow the analogue powers of these wonderful bundles of paper have been forgotten. Somewhere along the way, all its possibilities were denied” (Danielewski, *Bold Type*). Here, Danielewski discusses analog novels, and their value as opposed to digital literature. Danielewski’s own explicitly analog novel, *House of Leaves*, was published in 2000, a time when digital technologies were increasingly used in varying fields, including the field of literature. *House of Leaves* quickly gained a fan base after its publication, which was, ironically, mostly possible through the use of websites on the Internet. Danielewski made a website specifically for *House of Leaves* with a message board where users can discuss the main characters, footnotes, and other contents of the novel. There are also many websites discussing the contents of S., since this novel invites discussions about footnotes and narratives as well. For example, there are a number of codes hidden in the footnotes, and several readers have created websites and blogs to discuss and solve these codes. In an interview from 2013, Abrams says about S. that “[i]n this moment of e-mails, and texting, and everything moving into the cloud, in an intangible way, it’s intentionally tangible” (Abrams & Dorst). While Danielewski emphasizes the fact that print novels are being forgotten and perhaps replaced, and implies that this is a step in the wrong direction, Abrams created S. as “a celebration of the analog, of the physical object”, without condemning the digitization of novels in itself. Nevertheless S. and *House of Leaves* share many characteristics: they have an online following and extensive discussion boards. Additionally, they are both very innovative in their layout and typography, and they experiment with their style and narration.
Since this kind of literature is relatively new, there is still some disagreement with regard to the terms that are used by different critics in the field. Therefore it is important to be able to understand and distinguish between the terms that are used for texts such as S. and *House of Leaves*. An essential term used in twenty-first century multimodal novels is hypertext. Hypertext defines a text that “branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen … [T]his is a series of text chunks connected by links which offer the reader different pathways” (Landow qtd. in Chanen 165). Hypertext belongs to the area of digital literature, which often “blend[s] narrative, performance and game play, and often side-step[s] literary conventions requiring narrative arcs, consistency and some form of closure” (Pope). This kind of text is increasingly used on the internet, mainly because a computer offers the possibility of clicking links, zooming in and out on pieces of text, etc. (and on tablets and other touch screens it is even possible to swipe and tap on pages of text). A hypertext therefore appears to be something that is purely electronic, and seems unfit for print media. However, the term “non-electronic hypertext” has surfaced in literature as well (the earliest reference is from Jonathan Stade’s “Hypertext: the links we see” (1996)). And if we define hypertext in a broader sense – “a rhetorical form having multiple reading paths, chunked text, and a linking mechanism connecting the chunks” (Douglas qtd. in Hayles 795) – it is possible to imagine a hypertextual print novel where the reader has to “travel” from one chunk of text to another, flipping pages back and forth. *House of Leaves*, then, is an example of a non-electronic hypertext. Because of the many footnotes, footnotes on footnotes, appendices and “exhibits”, the reader is constantly moving from one page to another, with the possibility of getting stuck in an infinite loop of referencing. This form of hypertext can be found in S. as well (although to a lesser degree than in *House of Leaves*), because Jen and Eric often
They also refer to the objects that are inserted into the book, which means that the reader has to put the book away for a moment to read, for example, a letter written by Jen (§ 100-101), or a page from the University newspaper, inserted by Eric (§ 32-33).

The earliest forms of multimodality can be found in oral interaction, in particular in rhetoric. The basic idea is that a multimodal medium (such as a novel) uses multiple modes (such as typography and illustrations) to create meaning. The idea of using several meaning-making (semiotic) modes in communication has existed for centuries: in 50 BC, “delivery”, the use of gestures, tone of voice, and pronunciation, was already regarded as one of the five canons of rhetoric (Caplan XIX). This is similar to Pope’s idea that all forms of communication can be seen as multimodal: “for example, a conventional published poem will consist of text, typography, graphological layout.” Multimodality can also be found in older literary fiction, for instance in Tristram Shandy by Laurence Sterne (1759-1767). This novel places much emphasis on its materiality, for example by including two black pages as an epitaph for Yorick at the end of Book One. The typography here, or rather the lack thereof, carries meaning: the color black implies death, and mourning for Yorick. Furthermore, the narrative “is continually interrupted; the author repeatedly goes backward or leaps forward; whole ten-page passages are filled with whimsical discussions … Such digressions are unrelated to the basic narrative” (Shklovsky 32). Novels that use multimodality are also found in the twentieth century, in novels such as Vladimir Nabokov’s Pale Fire (1962) and Flann O’Brien’s The Third Policeman (1967). Both of these use multimodality to give multiple layers to their narratives: Pale Fire features fictional poet John Shade’s 999-line poem “Pale Fire”, which is richly annotated by
self-appointed editor Charles Kinbote. Additionally, the main narrative in *The Third Policeman* has footnotes by the fictional “de Selby”, who comments on the story, and adds an extra layer of narrative. A seemingly non-linear plot and multiple levels of narration are characteristic for multimodal literary fiction, as will be explained in detail in Chapter Two.

Even though it is clear that multimodality has been around for quite some time, “it is [only] since the 1990s that conceptualizing multimodality has enjoyed renewed critical interest” (Page 4). While meaning-making in social interaction is usually traced back to Michael Halliday’s discussions on social semiotics in the 1970s and 1980s, Kress and Van Leeuwen’s *Multimodal Discourse* (2001) is the contemporary theoretical basis for multimodality in communication. In their book they “present a view of communication that invites us to view all types of communication as involving more than one semiotic mode” (Nørgaard 142). Kress and Van Leeuwen argue that each “medium” contains several “modes”: for example a movie (medium) contains moving images, music, speech, etc. (modes). While their analysis is elaborate, their focus on written text is mostly limited to lifestyle magazines, and does not cover literary fiction. Since the 1990s marked the rise of the computer and digital technologies, early research on multimodal texts mainly concerns ways in which digital technologies are used to “play” with text and layout. Therefore multimodal research mostly focuses on digital media (for example electronic hypertext). Consequently, “multimodality in the literary narratives of innovative print media has been neglected [which] is regrettable since … the turn of the millennium has seen an increase in the inclusion of typography and illustration in fiction” (Gibbons, “Multitudes” 99). As will be demonstrated below with the use of Gibbons’ features of multimodal fiction, *House of Leaves* and *S.* can be
classified as Gibbons’ literary narratives of innovative print media, and therefore belong to the relatively new field of multimodal literary fiction.

While a novel can be called “multimodal” relatively quickly because even the inclusion of pictures could be said to add multimodality, there are several recurring features in multimodal novels which place them in the category of multimodal literary fiction. Gibbons outlines eight such features in her article “Narrative Worlds and Multimodal Figures in House of Leaves” (287-288). First of all multimodal novels contain unusual textual layouts and page design. This implies a deviation from other novels which commonly use very similar designs, usually consisting of pages with a block of text and set margins. House of Leaves clearly deviates from common layouts because the page design is very irregular. Especially Chapter 9 contains unusual layout: some pages hardly have any margins left (page 132), while other pages only include a few words, or even just one word (pages 195 and 198). In S. there is mostly unusual page design because of the narrative in the margins. Ship of Theseus has a fairly regular design, apart from the fact that it has many more footnotes than is expected in a literary novel. The margins of the pages are the most interesting layout-wise, since there another narrative takes place: the multi-colored comments written by Jen and Eric. A second multimodal feature is the use of varied typography, which means the use of different sized letters and fonts in order to add meaning to the words and sentences on a page. In House of Leaves the different narrators in the novel have been given different fonts “in an effort to limit confusion” (4). Johnny Truant’s elaborate footnotes are written in Courier, Zampanò’s writing is presented in Times, and the occasional comments by the Editors are printed in Bookman typeface (Brick). In S. there are different fonts as well. The main narrative by the fictional V.M. Straka is written in a different font than the footnotes, which is a deliberate choice by translator and editor.
F.X. Caldeira, Straka’s lifelong admirer. The comments by Jen and Eric are printed to look like handwriting, and their “font” can be clearly distinguished through Van Leeuwen’s (2006) features of typography as male and female handwriting. A third multimodal characteristic that is found in both novels is the use of color in both type and imagistic content. This means that the authors use the mode of color to add meaning to words and sentences. In *House of Leaves* this is very clear, since every instance of the word “house” is printed in blue letters, while there are also parts that are printed in red (see for example page 336). In S., color is used to tell the comments by Jen and Eric apart. They have made several “rounds” through the book, and the reader is able to tell comments from different times apart by looking at the color of the pens that Jen and Eric use. These three features – unusual textual layout, typography, and color – will be further discussed in Chapter Three.

A fourth feature that is common for multimodal novel is a frequent use of devices that draw attention to the text’s materiality. In the case of S. and *House of Leaves* this mainly concerns metafictive writing. Some of the characteristics of metafictive novels are “manifold or multistranded narratives, multiple narrators, nonlinear and nonsequential plots, narrators who address the reader or comment on their own narrations, narrative and illustrative framing devices, intertextualities and parodic appropriations” (Pantaleo 63). It is immediately clear that both *House of Leaves* and S. are metafictive novels. They include multiple narratives and narrators, have seemingly nonlinear plots in some of their narrative layers, and contain narrators who comment on their own narrations. It is important here to make a clear distinction between metafiction and multimodality, since there is much overlap in their characteristics. While Gibbons sees mixing of genres, typography, concrete realizations of text, use of footnotes, and metafictive writing as multimodal features, Patricia
Waugh places the first four features under the umbrella term of metafictive writing, which in turn is Gibbons’ fifth multimodal feature (Waugh 81, 97-99). While it is clear that these two different literary theories share much ground, I will continue by explaining the most important differences between the two to show that they cannot be conflated.

First of all, metafiction is a theory of literary criticism, while multimodality is in the first place a theory of communication. So while critics of metafiction busy themselves with discussing the tendency of “frame and frame-break, of technique and counter-technique, of construction and deconstruction of illusion” in literature (Waugh 14), multimodality focuses on semiotics and manners of meaning-making in all forms of communication. Multimodal literary fiction in particular concerns fiction with several distinct features such as typography and layout that add layers of meaning to a text. Metafiction’s focus on the materiality of fiction points to “the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality” (Alter X), and this problematic relationship emphasizes the materiality of literature. In short, metafictive writing includes several characteristics that can also be considered as separate multimodal features, such as typography and use of footnotes. The other way around however, metafictive writing is a distinct multimodal feature, and an important characteristic when investigating multimodal literary fiction. In the case of multimodal literature, *House of Leaves* and *S.* in particular, the feature of metafictive writing concerns mainly the “manifold or multistranded narratives, multiple narrators, nonlinear and nonsequential plots”, and the paradoxical identity of “narrators who address the reader or comment on their own narrations” (Pantaleo 63). These aspects will be further explored in Chapter Two.
This leaves three multimodal characteristics, which will not be discussed (in detail) in this thesis. The first of these characteristics is the concrete “realization” of text to create images, as in concrete poetry. This feature is used in *House of Leaves*, for example in Pelafina’s letter on page 632-633, which resembles a flaming torch (see fig. 1). Secondly, there is the feature of flip book sections, which cannot be found in either *S.* or *House of Leaves*. That is, if we define a flip book as a series of pictures on consecutive pages that, when flipped, together present a moving image. However, there are some pages in *House of Leaves* that could be called a sort of “flip book section”. For example, pages 194 through 205 contain only a few words, which accelerates the action, and which makes the reader rapidly flip through the pages to quicken the narrative. Finally, there is the mixing of genres. *House of Leaves* can be placed in different genres: some consider it to be a haunted house tale (Cottrell n.d.; Ruch 2000; Barone 2012; Sikes 2014) which would place it in the horror genre, while others, including Danielewski himself, have called it a love story (Wittmershaus 2000; Kleffel 2006; Carpenter 2012). *S.* mixes genres as well: the main narrative by V.M. Straka can be considered fantasy or science fiction (as Jen suggests on page 189) but could also belong to the genre of magic realism. The narrative in the margins is more of a mystery or detective story, or even a mystery-romance story.
I would argue that one feature is still missing from Gibbons’ list, namely the interaction with the reader and reader-response. In the nineteenth century, hermeneutic and phenomenological critics\(^4\) started “[examining] the ways in which readers engaged

\(^4\) The hermeneutic theories were developed by Schleiermacher, Heidegger and Gadamer, while the phenomenological theories were inspired by Edmund Husserl, and further developed by Roman Ingarden (Habib 154).
cognitively and historically with literary texts” (Habib 154). In the early twentieth century a reaction to this literary trend arose in the form of formalism, a theory which “[sees] the literary work as an object in its own right [and tends] to devote [its] attention to [the work’s] intrinsic nature, concentrating … on the interplay and relationships between the text’s essential verbal elements” (“Definition of Formalism”). Formalism focused completely on the book itself, which made the reader unimportant in the meaning-making process: all meaning had to derive from the book itself. This elicited a response in the latter half of the twentieth century in the form of reader-response theory. While this theory was “a renewal of a long and diversified tradition that had acknowledged the important role of the reader or audience in the overall structure of any given literary or rhetorical situation”, it was also a reaction against the formalism and New Criticism of the earlier decades of the twentieth century (Habib 154). Analyzing the readers’ response is important for multimodal novels exactly because their authors pay special attention to their readers’ interpretation. While most novels do leave room for interpretation and discussion, multimodal novels such as S. and House of Leaves go further, and invite their readers to venture beyond the confines of the book itself to contribute to the meaning of the novel’s narrative. This idea will be further discussed in Chapter Four.

The self-reflexive character of House of Leaves and S. would imply that they are postmodern novels. “Postmodern metafiction” is such a well-known phrase that it is difficult to see metafictive novels as anything else but postmodern. However, the novels also contain characteristics that indicate otherwise. For example, they seem to lack the irony that is so prevalent in postmodern metafiction (Elias 27). Instead they strive for authenticity, for example by printing Jen and Eric’s notes as if they are handwritten. Additionally, even though the novels appear fragmented and intricately
layered, they maintain a certain clear narrative. *House of Leaves* has a “static and foundational core” (Toth 190), and a “strong narrative core” (Graulund 383), and this is also the case for *S.*. *House of Leaves* is about “a house and a blind scholar and a photographer and a young miscreant” (Toth 190), and shifts in narrative layers are “clearly signposted through the use of font type” (Graulund 383). *S.* has this strong narrative core as well: Jen and Eric are literature enthusiasts discussing a mysterious novel, and *S.* has many adventures while looking for the love of his life and confronting the story’s villain. Additionally, there is some form of closure in the narratives, which is a-typical for postmodern novels. This makes *House of Leaves* and *S.* a new sort of novel in the sense that they are metafictive but not postmodern; rather, they could be called post-postmodern.
Chapter 2: Multimodal Metafiction

Multimodal novels often contain metafictive elements. Metafictive narratives often feature characters who are aware of their status as a fictional character, or characters who cross the boundaries between narrative levels (also called metalepsis). One genre of writing that often plays with the fourth wall is the genre of comic books, where characters often address the reader, or show awareness of the fact that they are fictional characters. In literary fiction, metafiction includes multiple narratives and narrators and a focus on the paradoxical identity of the novels’ characters (Waugh 91-92). Metafictive literature is not a new phenomenon. Postmodern author John Barth, for example, was inspired to write his tale-within-tale structured novels partly because he was fascinated with the tenth-century Persian epic, *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights* (69). The moment when the term “metafiction” was coined was at the point where fiction “had nowhere to go but inward, to focus on its own medium of expression” (Elias 16).

Metafiction is “fiction about fiction” (Bernd 1), or, more elaborately described by Patricia Waugh, “a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2). The term “metafiction” was coined in 1970 by William H. Gass in his article “Philosophy and the Form of Fiction”. Before that time, terms such as “antinovel” and “antifiction” were used to discuss the experimental texts that emerged in post-WWII American literature, which was still dominated by traditional literary realism (Bernd 1). Metafiction was a clear postmodern reaction, but nowadays it is claimed that metafiction has “just about shot its bolt”, because the irony that was often inherent in the metafiction of the twentieth century has
now been “co-opted” by “television and the Internet” (Elias 26-27). However, metafiction is still used in recent novels, and – as noted – is one of the characteristics of multimodal literature. The difference is that multimodal novels such as House of Leaves and S. do not employ metafictive writing ironically, but use non-ironically as a way to add meaning to their narrative.

*House of Leaves* contains a manifold of narratives, and the intricate layering of these narratives and narrators creates a complex system of narration. These narrative layers are all closely connected and intertwined. “The Navidson Record” is the academic analysis by Zampanò of the (fictional) movie by the same name, made by Will Navidson. There is also Zampanò’s story: not only has the blind man made up almost all academic references and possibly the movie itself, his “voice” is “presented through Johnny Truant’s introduction and in his notes on the primary text and the first set of footnotes” (Graulund 383). This means that, because of Johnny’s mediation, we are never sure if what we hear from Zampanò is genuine, or really written by Zampanò. The third narrative layer is Truant’s story: he discovers Zampanò’s manuscript, and becomes obsessed with editing it into a coherent whole. His narrative takes place in the second set of footnotes, and in the introduction to “The Navidson Record.” The fourth narrative is constructed through “the anonymous Editors of Truant’s manuscript [who] become increasingly meddlesome as the story progresses” (Graulund 383). Their voices are presented in a third set of footnotes, a foreword and in a disclaimer on the copyright page. Finally there is the narrative voice of Johnny’s mother Pelafina, who “gradually gains power over Truant’s discourse as the story progresses, to the point where she … overshadows even his obsession with the Navidson Record and Zampanò” (Graulund 383). Pelafina has her own narrative in the letters in Appendix II E. These five narrative voices are distinguishable by their own typefaces, a feature that is further discussed in
Chapter Three. The metafictive element that these different narratives add to the novel is that they distract from the linearity of the narrative, and draw attention to the fact that significant parts of the novel are in fact unrealistic. In *House of Leaves* this happens through the notes of Johnny, who is skeptic about Zampanò’s academic references and the existence of *The Navidson Record*. In his Introduction, Johnny writes “as I fast discovered, Zampanò’s entire project is about a film which doesn’t even exist. You can look …[but] you will never find *The Navidson Record* in theaters or video stores” (*HoL* XIX-XX). Johnny also tries to contact the many people who used to write and read for Zampanò. One of those readers, Alison Adrian Burns, enlightens Johnny about footnote 75. This footnote reads “See Liza Speen’s *Images of Dark*; Brassaï’s *Paris by Night* … as well as some of the photographs by Lucien Aigner” (*HoL* 64), followed by a list of hundreds of names. Alison explains that this list is “entirely random” and that she and Zampanò “just picked the names out of some books and magazines he had lying around” (*HoL* 67, see fig. 2). Apparently Zampanò’s academic references are not always accurate or even relevant, and this footnote by Johnny thus undermines the realism of Zampanò’s narrative. Since Zampanò’s narrative is mediated through Johnny, whose narrative is in turn mediated through the Editors, it is nearly impossible to directly interpret the events of *The Navidson Record*, since they have already been interpreted by several mediators. This is highly metafictive since it points to the novel as a fictional work. And while it complicates direct interpretation, it also implies an important role for the reader, which will be investigated further in Chapter Four.
Fig. 2. A seemingly random list of names in footnote 75.

A manifold of narratives can be found in S. as well: in this novel there are four narrative voices and narrative layers. The first narrative layer is the story of Ship of Theseus, which is written by V.M. Straka, and which features the mysterious S., who spends a large part of the novel looking for the love of his life, Sola. The second narrative layer takes place in the Translater’s Note and Foreword and in the footnotes by F.X. Caldeira. These footnotes are often encoded, and it can be argued that the encoding is an extra layer of narrative: after all, the codes tell a much different story about Straka than the Translater’s Note and Foreword alone. Caldeira’s cryptic writings
are an attempt to communicate with Straka, and with the help of Jen and Eric’s comments, the reader can use the codes to find out more about Caldeira and her apparent love for Straka. A fourth narrative layer unfolds in the margins of Ship of Theseus, where Jen and Eric write notes to each other, and fall in love. While the narratives by Straka and Caldeira are fairly sequential, the margin-notes by Jen and Eric are far from being either linear or sequential. Annotations on one page may be written at completely different times,\(^5\) and although these annotations often refer to what is already on the page, some notes discuss items and information that we as readers have no direct access to (yet). For example, on page 452 Eric writes “I’m so glad Filomela never opened that envelope”, to which Jen replies “Yeah. I have nightmares about his version”. Here they discuss the apparent “real” ending of Chapter 10 by Straka, which was given to Caldeira in an envelope which she never opened. This ending is not included in the novel, but was posted on the internet in February 2014.\(^6\) So while Jen and Eric are discussing Straka’s ending to Ship of Theseus in the fictional 2012, the ending was only available in “our world” in 2014 (fig. 3). And since it was posted on the blog of “Jen Heyward”, who is a fictional character, this blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality: in S. the characters have access to a piece of writing that is posted online about three months after S. is published, and it is supposedly distributed in our world by a fictional character.

The existence of an alternative ending to the novel also invites thinking about the relationship between fiction and reality: the novel we are reading contains an ending, which, logically, would be the real ending to us. However, the characters in the

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\(^5\) Jen finds Ship of Theseus somewhere in mid or late 2011, and if we assume that Jen and Eric are in Prague during the winter (“you didn’t tell me it would be this COLD.” (S. 417)), all notes were written in approximately 1.5 years.

\(^6\) It was posted on [http://jenheyward.tumblr.com/](http://jenheyward.tumblr.com/), and was linked to in a Twitter-message by Doug Dorst himself.
novel agree that what they are reading is not the real ending, and that the actual “real” ending apparently exists outside of the novel, in an old lady’s envelope. The ending of *Ship of Theseus* thus exists in two different realities. First there is the ending that is included in *Ship of Theseus*, the novel that Jen and Eric are reading. Then there is the ending that they agree is in possession of Caldeira – so it exists Jen and Eric’s (fictional) reality, and was posted online in *our* reality. Thus the line between fiction and reality is blurred. The novel bleeds into our reality, and since this supports the characters’ claim that alternative endings to *Ship of Theseus* exist, it casts doubt upon the novels fictionality. It is implied that Jen Heyward does not merely exist in the story world of S., but that she exists in our reality as well. If readers choose to accept the alternative ending she posted as the real ending, they consequently extend the narrative of S. to Jen’s blog post on the Internet.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Fig. 3.** A picture posted online in July 2014, featuring a translated page of Straka’s “real” ending to *Ship of Theseus.*
In *House of Leaves*, the names of the characters often imply something about their personality, or their place in the story. This is an example of the metafictive use of “obtrusive proper names” (Waugh 22). Johnny, for example, is named “Truant”, which means “one who is absent”, or “one who shirks duty”, which can be seen as foreshadowing for the progression of the story, in which Johnny increasingly detaches from his social life and the world around him. Since “Truant” is most likely not his real surname, it is striking that he chose this name for himself. Another character with a significant name is “Lude”, which is a homonym of “lewd” (obscene, vulgar). This fits with Lude’s character, who is described in Johnny’s introduction as a foul-mouthed, womanizing drunk. His name is also similar to the abbreviation of “Quaalude”, a sedating kind of recreational drug. This metafictive use of “obtrusive” proper names is used for comic or ironic effect in postmodern novels, such as the names of “Oedipa Maas” and “Pierce Inverarity” in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*. However, in *House of Leaves* the names are not used for comic effect, but to add to the personality of their bearers. This non-ironic use of obtrusive proper names can thus be seen as a post-postmodern element.

In Johnny’s narrative we also find the metafictive performance of impossible acts (Waugh 91). In Chapter 21 Johnny, who is on the brink of insanity and living like a homeless person, enters a bar to listen to some music, and when he hears one of the band’s lyrics, “I live at the end of a Five and a Half Minute Hallway” (512), he is intrigued by its reference to “The Navidson Record” and the House. Afterwards he

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7 On page 584 the Editors write that “At Mr. Truant’s request, we have omitted the last name of his father”, which would be unnecessary if Johnny’s real surname was “Truant”.
8 Although it is a clear reference to one of Pelafina’s letters, where she writes “JOHNNY IS TRUANT!” (631).
9 Additionally, Lude dies because of a DUI motorcycle accident (491-492).
strikes up a conversation with the band members, who show him “a big brick of tattered paper”, with the following on its title page:

![Image of House of Leaves title page]

Johnny is thus reading *House of Leaves* while he is also a character within the novel, which appears to be an impossible act. This problem is subverted by the addition of “First Edition”, while the book we are reading is a “Second Edition”.\(^\text{10}\) Furthermore, Johnny at one point confesses that he does not remember the two months prior to his encounter at the bar, which could mean that he had the novel published in that time without remembering it. There is another character in the novel who reads *House of Leaves*, namely Will Navidson, who exists in the core layer of narrative, the movie *The Navidson Record*. When Navidson is trapped in the House, with almost no hope of ever returning, Zampanò writes that Navidson “turns his attention to the last possible activity, the only book in his possession: *House of Leaves*” (465). There are several reasons why this fact stands out, the most obvious one being the fact that Navidson is reading a book about himself, including, we can assume, the ending to his adventures, which is an impossible feat. Another reason that this segment is strange, is that the exact number of pages of the novel is mentioned: 736. A quick check of the page numbers in a physical copy of *House of Leaves* shows that it has 709 pages, twenty-five pages of Introduction by Johnny, and one final page after the index, which brings us to a total of

\(^{10}\) The Copyright page in the 2000 edition of the novel shows “First Edition” in strike-through.
736 pages. The impossibility here is that Zampanò wrote “The Navidson Record”, including the part where Navidson reads *House of Leaves*, while Johnny wrote the Introduction after Zampanò’s death. Therefore it is not possible for Zampanò to have known the exact length of *House of Leaves*. These facts draw extra attention to the impossibility of Navidson reading the novel he features in. However, since it is strange that Johnny does not comment on this fact in the footnotes (while he does comment on other inconsistencies), it is possible that he, and not Zampanò, added *House of Leaves*’ page numbers to “The Navidson Record”, or maybe even added the whole part about Navidson reading *House of Leaves*. Johnny has admitted before that he changed parts of Zampanò’s narrative,\(^{11}\) so it is possible that he overstepped his role as editor again in this case by changing the amount of pages, or perhaps by including the whole part where Navidson reads *House of Leaves*. This only adds to the metafictive emphasis on multiple narrators, and the question of what is “real” and what is not.

In *S.*, some of the characters’ identities are problematic. In Chapter 8 *S.* describes how he sees himself and Sola: “In the stern – he could swear it, and does, and will ever – is Sola, steering expertly through the rapids. In the bow is *S.* himself. Younger, perhaps, arms muscled and bronzed, shoulders high and square, but he can tell: that man is me” (370). This implies that different versions exist of the protagonists, which is an impossible act. Another example of this is found on the final page of *Ship of Theseus*, where *S.* and Sola see themselves: looking through a spyglass *S.* sees two people standing on a ship, and while he “can’t see their faces … he tells Sola that the ship is one of theirs, and as for the identities of the two people at the wheel, well, both Sola and he will let their imaginations fill in their features” (456). This passage strongly

\(^{11}\) On page 16 he admits that “Zampanò only wrote “heater.” The word “water” back there – I added that.”
suggests that the characters see another version of themselves, which is of course impossible. There is also a reference to other metafictive works. When S. enters a tavern in Chapter 1, he sees “a young woman … reading a book – a large volume, as thick as *Don Quixote*”\(^{12}\) (16). However, the book that the young woman (Sola) is reading is not *Don Quixote*, it is *The Archer’s Tales* by Arquimedes de Sobreiro, but this book has some quite metafictive elements as well. While Eric initially notes that *The Archer’s Tales* is fictional and that “there’s no evidence at all that *The Archer’s Tales* (or Sobreiro) exist(ed) outside of [*Ship of Theseus*]” (21), Jen discovers an article which proves the opposite. In this article, reference is made of an “unidentified young novice” who survived a library fire, and managed to save one sack of books, but was “inconsolable at having failed to preserve a particular tome” (20a\(^{13}\)). This particular tome is referred to “once as *El Libro de S* (‘The Book of S’) and once as *Los Cuentos del Arquero* (‘Tales of the Archer’)” (20a). So in addition to proving that the novel in fact may have existed in Jen and Eric’s world, it also states that *The Archer’s Tales* is alternately called “the Book of S.” While the young novice claims that the book burned in the fire, *The Archer’s Tales* keeps recurring throughout *Ship of Theseus*. In Chapter 4, Stenfalk tells a story from a book that his father used to read to him, called *The Archer’s Tales*. According to Stenfalk, “it was full of the most wonderful stories” (150), which is similar to what is said about the book earlier: full of “fantastic, revelatory, subversive, comic, bawdy, and chilling tales” (20a). It could also be the book that S. reads when he is visiting The Lady on Obsidian Island (Chapter 7). This book’s cover and spine are adorned with the “S”-symbol, and it is filled with pages and pages of drawings of ships. S. notices that on each of these there are “lines and curves cleverly

\(^{12}\) *Don Quixote* happens to be one of the first examples of a metafictive, self-referential novel.  
\(^{13}\) This refers to the page from the *Toronto Review for History and the Humanities* inserted between page 20 and 21 of *S.*
concealed in the artist’s shading of the hull that – if you relax your eyes and don’t strain to see it – form the word SOBREIRO” (292). Sobreiro, as we read above, is the author of The Archer’s Tales. One possible theory is that S. is in fact Sobreiro, and that he wrote The Archer’s Tales himself. In the beginning of the story S. has no memory of his past, but he emerges from water. It is mentioned that Sobreiro was a sailor, which could mean that Sobreiro fell from his ship, nearly drowned, and emerged as S. in a strange city with his memories gone.

Because of the fact that the ship in Ship of Theseus has supernatural characteristics – the most important one being the fact that it does not seem to adhere to the regular rules of time passing\(^\text{14}\) – it is possible that the story of S. and Sola has been repeated endlessly before. It would also explain why S. can see (a younger version of) himself, and it explains the “S”-symbol that is inexplicably present in every place the characters happen to visit. There are many supporting arguments for this, one being Chapter 9, where S. is in the Winter City. There, S. finds an envelope with a letter that directs him to a building with a plaque set into its sidewalk. The plaque reads “From this building fell Arquimedes de Sobreiro, Teller of Tales” (387). When S. enters the building he hears two “voices of the past” (388):

\begin{quote}
Você não está seguro [you are not safe], a male voice says  
Ninguém é [no one is], a female voice says.
\end{quote}

Two pages later, S. and Sola are talking, and the following dialogue occurs:

“I think we’re safe,” S. says.

“No,” she says. “No one is.” (400)

These two parts of dialogue seem to echo each other, the first said in Portuguese and the second in English, and the fact that S. hears the Portuguese dialogue first, and is

\(^\text{14}\) “Explain to me, then, how time works. It’s slower on the ship than it is on land” (270).
part of the English dialogue later, suggests that “the voices of the past” are him and Sola, echoing similar conversation over and over. There are many more clues throughout the novel that hint at S. being Sobreiro, but that is beyond the scope of this thesis. For now it important to emphasize that S. is full of self-referential characteristics. Within S. there is Ship of Theseus, which features another book called The Archer’s Tales. Both Ship of Theseus and The Archer’s Tales are filled with strange adventures, and even seem to describe the same stories (S. visits the caves and The Winter City, which are described in The Archer’s Tales). This self-referencing and intricate confusion of characters and narratives are clear metafictive elements.

The metafictive elements in House of Leaves and S. add to their multimodality, by providing extra layers of meaning and interpretation through narrative layering. Both novels are complicated, and interpretation of events is often difficult because of the layers of mediation by the characters: we “watch” The Navidson Record through Zampanò’s analysis of it, which is in turn interpreted and edited by Johnny and the Editors. Metafictive writing is usually associated with postmodern literature, and at first glance the diffusion of narrative seems to confirm the novels’ postmodernity. However, despite the narrative diffusion the stories maintain a strong narrative core, and “through the process of mediation” they “[recover] an intensity of character and narrative” (Hayles 128), which is certainly not postmodern. Adding to this the fact that House of Leaves uses obtrusive proper names in a non-ironic way, it is clear that multimodal novels such as S. and House of Leaves are post-postmodern in their use of metafiction.
Chapter 3: The Semiotic Weight of Typography and Layout

Typography and layout are interesting ways to give additional meaning to a narrative. Most contemporary novels tend to adhere to a conventional typographical style, and simple layout. The pages in such novels all look approximately the same: black, regular letters with occasional italics for emphasis, forming a block of text with set margins and line height. The layout of novels is made to be easily mass-produced and mass-consumed. Therefore, “typography is an aspect of literary narratives that readers tend not to notice too much” (Nørgaard 116), and it is made in such a way as not to be noticed. However, recent research into typography as a semiotic mode has shown that typography certainly carries (extra) meaning: according to Stöckl, “typefaces [sic] may point to the nature of the document, carry emotional values or indicate the writer’s intended audience, and aspects of the layout may serve to reinforce the thematic structure of a given text and facilitate access to its information” (206). Indeed, a writer can choose to deviate from a standard typeface (Times New Roman or Palatino, for example), and opt for a somewhat more unconventional one exactly with the purpose of bringing an extra layer of meaning to a narrative. As Mackiewicz and Moeller suggest, typefaces have their own “personalities” and characteristics, so if writers want to use a friendly, informal typeface they could use Comic Sans or Bradley Hand, while for a more elegant or artistic approach, they could decide to use Script (308-310).

In novels, the use of different typefaces can indicate different narrators, and then the difference might only be to easily distinguish these narrators from each other. However, the author might deliberately choose a “friendly” typeface for a young, likeable narrator, and a “formal, elegant” typeface for an older, more sophisticated narrator. In that case, the typeface adds extra meaning to the narrative, since the reader infers traits of the narrator (friendly, elegant etc.) through the use of different typefaces.
Apart from different typefaces, there are also “distinctive features of typography” (Van Leeuwen 147). The features that Van Leeuwen distinguishes are weight, slope, expansion, curvature, connectivity, orientation and regularity (148-150). I have illustrated these features below, using the typefaces that Van Leeuwen mentions in his article:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>light(^{15})</th>
<th>and</th>
<th>bold</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weight</td>
<td>upright</td>
<td>and</td>
<td>sloping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slope</td>
<td>narrow</td>
<td>and</td>
<td>wide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expansion</td>
<td>ANGULAR</td>
<td>and</td>
<td>rounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curvature</td>
<td>connected</td>
<td>and</td>
<td>disconnected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connectivity</td>
<td>horizontal</td>
<td>and</td>
<td>vertical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>regular</td>
<td>and</td>
<td>irregular</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Van Leeuwen, these features give certain impressions to the reader that conventional typography would not have given them, and thereby they inherently carry meaning. Expansion, for example, distinguishes between condensed typefaces, which “are precise, economical [and] packing the page with content” and wide typefaces, which “spread themselves around, using space as if it is in unlimited supply” (148). Van Leeuwen continues to describe all features this way, marking them all as semiotic modes. Nørgaard also describes these seven features, but adds the feature of color (145). Gibbons sees this feature as a separate multimodal aspect (“Narrative Worlds” 287), but since in novels color is mostly limited to the color of words, I argue in my analysis

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\(^{15}\) While Van Leeuwen distinguishes between bold and regular for the feature of weight, I choose to follow Felici’s distinction between bold and light (41-42), to avoid confusion with the “regular” of regularity, and to have “light” and “bold” as the end points of the continuum and ‘regular’ situated in the middle” (Nørgaard, “The Semiotics” 145).
that color is also an important typographical feature, and can be shared under the multimodal aspect of typography. Regarding the use of colors, novels such as William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* and Michael Ende’s *The Neverending Story* have shown how publishers can choose (cheap) conventional layout over typographical innovation. Both authors intended parts of their novels to be printed in different colors in order to convey extra meaning. Ende wrote his novel in green and red to indicate when the story took place in the main character’s world or in the fantasy world of Fantastica, but in some paperback versions and certain translations, publishers choose the cheaper option of printing all text in black. Faulkner wanted to use “different colours of ink to mark the sometimes-confusing chronological shifts” in his novel, but only after his death did full-color editions of *The Sound and the Fury* appear (Flood).

While *House of Leaves* also exist in a black and white version, the color of words in *S.* and *House of Leaves* plays a vital role in constructing meaning, as will be illustrated later in this chapter.

In *House of Leaves*, the different narrators all have a different typeface (see fig. 4). The “Navidson Record” commentary is written in Times New Roman, which is often associated with academic writing, and “with newspapers and the linotype” (Pressman, “Networked Novel” 109-110). Johnny Truant’s narrative is written in Courier, which looks like it was written on a typewriter, and it “thematically identif[ies] him as the middleman, the “courier” of the manuscript” (Pressman, “Networked Novel” 110). The Editors’ notes are presented in Bookman. “Bookman” is reminiscent of “bookish”, and the implication that the Editors are “Bookmen” suggests their “authority and, presumably, neutrality toward the story” (Hawthorne). It is clear then, that the different typefaces in *House of Leaves* do more than just distinguish the narrative voices: they also imply traits of the narrators. Zampanò is an academic writer, Johnny
is the messenger who brings us, readers, the story of Zampanò, and the Editors are the bookish, authoritative voice throughout the novel.\textsuperscript{16} This use of typography is clearly multimodal, since the mode of typography is used, through the use of typefaces, to add extra meaning to the different narratives. Another layer of meaning is created upon close scrutiny of the novel, since some uses of the typefaces are inconsistent. For example, the typeface used on the cover page is certainly, although not entirely, similar to Pelafina’s typeface. This adds to the mystery surrounding the identity of the “true” author of \textit{House of Leaves} – could Johnny, Zampanò and Pelafina all be the same person? So while the fonts are used to distinguish between narrators, and add characteristics to those narrators by using typefaces that fit their personality, the sometimes seemingly inconsistent use of the fonts adds to the narrative. In the case of the cover page, it alludes to Pelafina’s highly brilliant yet unhinged state of mind: while her psyche is clearly deteriorating, she is also highly intelligent, and could have been able to construct the whole of the narrative, including Johnny, Zampanò, and even the Editors.

\textsuperscript{16} There are more examples of different typefaces used throughout the novel, but these three are the ones that have been definitely identified. Pelafina’s typeface is sometimes described as Dante typeface (Hawthorne 2010; Kilgore 2014), but there has been no definitive identification as of yet (although there have been many attempts to identify it by amateur typographers on forums.markzdanielewski.com).
Another way in which *House of Leaves* adds meaning to a narrative is through unusual textual layout and page design, which make the reader mirror the main characters’ actions. This is most obvious in Chapter 9 of the novel. Chapter 9, also called “The Labyrinth” is the most visually innovative chapter of the novel, and the most difficult to navigate for readers. The narrative is “subordinated to philosophical digressions, long lists of names that seem to be selected almost at random, and stories nested within stories vertiginous in their interconnections” (Hayles 791). Flipping through Chapter 9, one is presented with “footnotes that run backwards through the pages, footnotes printed on the sides as gloss, [and] notes written in reverse or upside down” (Chanen 167). Chapter 9, then, is the most obvious of the chapters in its unconventional textual layout. One of the most striking occurrences of unconventional layout in the chapter is the appearance of a blue-lined box (see fig. 5). This box contains footnote 144, which belongs to the part of Zampanò’s narrative in which he describes “the utter blankness found within” the House (*HoL* 119). The footnote itself lists everything that cannot be found within in the house (varying from radiators (119) to Corinthian capitals (138)), representing the House as a sort of negative space, a place of nothingness. This idea is strengthened on page 144, where the box is transformed into one black square of black emptiness. The blue-lined box occupies a prominent place on the pages, and invites different interpretations. Chanen describes it as “a tunnel [that] runs through several pages” (167), while Hayles sees it as “a window … compensat[ing] for the House’s viewless interior” (792). While it is true that the blue-lined box appears as a tunnel that even turns black on the final pages of its appearance, Hayles’ interpretation is supported by the fact that the words in the box are repeated on the other side of the page, but as a mirror image. These words are written in reverse, and the reader seems to be on the inside of a building, looking out through a window.
This interpretation also fits the contents of the novel, since footnote 144 portrays the empty interior of the house, and we as readers seem to be trapped within the house, looking out of both the page and the House through the blue-lined box. On page 144 (fig. 5), we see a black, blue-lined box in the middle of the page, text that runs vertically instead of horizontally, a footnote with crossed-out text, and hardly any margins on the page. These features make the text difficult to navigate, and transport the reader, who of course is reading about the labyrinth inside the house, into a *textual* labyrinth. By turning the book around as if turning around the corners of a labyrinth, the reader gets to experience what the main characters are experiencing, thus the textual layout and page design add meaning to the narrative.

Fig. 5. An example of unusual textual layout in *House of Leaves*. 
*House of Leaves* also uses colors to convey meaning throughout its narrative, and the most persistent use of color is found with every occurrence of the word “house”. Every time this word is used in the book, it is printed in blue. This occurs in all layers of the narrative, even the Index, and also happens when the word appears in translation (“haus” on page 24, “domus” on page 117, “maison” on page 120 etc.). To begin with, it is fascinating that the House receives equal importance on all levels of narrative through use of the same mode, even when these narratives are presumably written by different narrators. Furthermore, since the novel focuses on a movie, the blue-colored words could signify the blue screen of a movie backdrop. This is supported by Hayles, who adds that on this movie screen, “anything can be projected”, which she interprets as signifying the utter blankness of the House (792). In an interview with Wittmershaus, Danielewski “was kind enough to offer that [the coloring of the word “house”] has something to do with how blue is used in film”, and Wittmershaus interprets this, just like Hayles, as meaning that “Navidson’s house acts as a psychological ‘blue screen’” (Wittmershaus), an empty canvas on which it is possible to project anything.17 Furthermore, because of the novel’s hypertextual characteristics, the color also reminds the twenty-first century reader of hyperlinks on the Internet. Hansen supports this suggestion, by arguing that “the blue ink of the word “house” in the work’s title transforms this keyword into something like a portal to information located elsewhere, both within and beyond the novel’s frame” (598). Hansen refers to Internet hyperlinks, which are usually indicated in blue type, often also with underlining. The connection between the House and digital hyperlinks is aptly illustrated by Wishart:

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17 This claim is supported by Zampanò, who writes on page 165 that “some critics believe the house’s mutations reflect the psychology of anyone who enters it”.

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By clicking on the hyperlink you would open another avenue to explore – essentially, to travel further into the maze … Once taken, [a] path can lead to a wealth of further information (and a multitude of additional corridors to explore) or conversely it can lead to a dead end, either by taking you to irrelevant information or indeed a page that has changed in the time between the creation of the hyperlink and the action of clicking it. In this regard in particular it is identical to the house, where a doorway that leads to a particular room on one day will not lead there again in the future due to the ever-changing nature of the labyrinth. (18)

Brick writes that hypertext, “like Danielewski’s narrative and his mysterious house, relies upon an invisible architect who … writes the book, or in some way stands in the shadows of the house’s labyrinth. Readers take divergent paths, but the possibilities have been pre-established and are finite” (Brick). If we then compare the interpretations by Wishart and Brick to Landow’s definition of a hypertext – a series of pieces of text which the reader can traverse by choosing his own path (qtd. in Chanen 165) – it is clear that House of Leaves, apart from being a multimodal novel, is also a hypertext.

Moreover, the use of red in House of Leaves is significant because of its connection to The Minotaur. As can be seen on page 114 (fig. 6), the color is used throughout the novel, and often the red passages are also struck through. These passages all refer to the mythical beast that Zampanò wrote about, but then tried to erase from his notes. Hamilton writes: “No labyrinth is complete without a minotaur”, and although the labyrinthine house does not feature a physical beast, it certainly presents

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18 Of course Wishart is also referring to the hypertextual footnotes in the novel, which sometimes lead the reader to a dead end, or refer back to each other, leaving the reader stuck in a loop.
some psychological ones for the main characters (12). While Zampanò has tried to erase all evidence of The Minotaur, Johnny has recovered most of the notes:19 these notes are presented in red, and are struck through to indicate the attempted erasure by Zampanò. Everything written in red, then, is associated with The Minotaur, so when we are presented with a struck passage such as the one on page 114, we immediately try to connect the red words to the Minotaur. This happens even when there does not appear to be a direct connection,20 so it is possible for readers to come up with their own connections and interpretations for some of the red parts. The choice for red as opposed to another color might carry importance as well. Hagler attempts to connect the color to the blue “hyperlinks” discussed above, by stating that “Danielewski’s use of red to signify this particular link underscores its status as an active link”, and by arguing that “Johnny activates [the Minotaur-passages] by refusing to discard [them]” (5). However, on a regular, hyperlinked webpage, “activated” links (links that have been clicked on by the user), do not appear in red. One possible, but far-fetched, connection to the Internet can be found on Wikipedia.com, where red hyperlinks indicate non-existent or deleted pages. The Minotaur-passages in House of Leaves could then be seen as deleted pages – which is also supported by the strike-through. An additional interpretation can be found in the form of twentieth-century typewriters, which used ink ribbons with black and red ink in order to do bookkeeping, using red ink to indicate the negative amounts. In that case red refers to the negative, which can be applied to The Minotaur, since it resides in the heart of the House; in the heart of nothingness. And since The Minotaur does not exists, this emphasizes its status as negative space. In conclusion, 

19 Johnny writes: “Note: Struck passages indicate what Zampanò tried to get rid of, but which I, with a little bit of turpentine and a good old magnifying glass managed to resurrect” (HoL 111).
20 An example of this if found on page 114. Here the connection probably lies in the title of Hortz’s book title: Understanding the Self: The Maze of You. In footnote 135, Zampanò writes about being lost within oneself, and since all characters in the novel are in a way lost, and have to face their personal demons (or Minotaur), this passage is indirectly related to The Minotaur, and thus printed in red.
the color red invites multiple interpretations, but it is clear that it has negative connotations, since it certainly indicates the presence of The Minotaur, the monster that lurks within the House, and within all the novel’s characters.

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

This not only applies to the house but to the film itself. From the outset of *The Navigators Record*, we are involved in a labyrinth, meandering from one celluleid cell to the next, trying to peek around the next edit in hopes of finding a solution; a center, a sense of whole, only to discover another sequence, leading in a completely different direction, a continually devolving discourse, promising the possibility of discovery while all along dissolving into chaotic ambiguities too blurry to ever completely comprehend.1352

In order to fully appreciate the way the ambages unwind, twist only to rewind, and then open up again, whether in Navigators house or the film—**quae itinerum ambiges occurruntque ex rerum inexplicabilibus**136—...we should look to the etymological inheritance of a word like ‘labyrinth’. The Latin *labor* is akin to the root *labi* meaning to slip or slide backwards,137 though the commonly perceived meaning suggests difficulty and work. Implicit in ‘labyrinth’ is a required effort to keep from slipping or falling; in other words, stopping. We cannot relax within those walls, we have to struggle past them. Hugh of Saint Victor has gone so far as to suggest that the antithesis of ‘labyrinth’—that which contains work—is Noah’s ark.138—in other words that which contains rest.139

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137At least, as Daniel Hirtz lamented, “By granting all involved the right to wander (e.g. daydream, free associate, fantasize [etc.], etc.; see Gaston Bachelard) that which is discursive will inevitably re-appropriate the heterogeneity of the disparate and thus with such an unanticipated and unrecalled gesture bring about a reassessment of self.” To no other word, the house, the film itself exposes world problems at the same time as does its wander and so first stimuli are inevitable; driving us from the in thus only in the end to lead us, necessarily, for where else could we have really gone...back again to the un and hence back to ourselves. See Daniel Hirtz’s *Understanding The Self: The Music Of You* (Boston: Garden Press, 1993), p.261.
138“Passages that wind, advance and retreat in a bewilderingly intricate manner.” — Ed.) Flay also write when describing the Egyptian maze: “*red cretae foribus inlitis ad fallendas occurras rotundamque in averrae uadem*.” (“Doors are let into the walls at frequent intervals to suggest deceptively the way ahead and to force the visitor to go back upon the very same tracks that he has already followed in his wanderings.”—Ed.)
139Labi is also probably cognate with “sleep.”
139See Chapter Six, footnote 82, Tom’s Story as well as footnote 249. — Ed.

![Fig. 6. Examples of the use of colored ink (blue and red), and struck passages.](image-url)
The design and typography in *S.* are less experimental than in *House of Leaves,* but its use of different fonts and unusual page layout is certainly employed throughout the novel to carry significance that is not immediately apparent. The layout of *Ship of Theseus* is conventional in that its pages contain standard blocks of text with regular set margins: it is mostly the excessive use of footnotes that make it unusual. Additionally, the narrative by Jen and Eric comprises the most unconventional parts of *S.*’ layout (see fig. 7). The margins of *Ship of Theseus* are conveniently wide, and Jen and Eric fill them with observations, developments in their research, arrows, and drawings. These annotations make the page design interesting, but also confusing, since it is not immediately clear where the reader should start on each page. To ease the challenge, the reader is assisted by annotations in the text itself. An example of this is found on page 176 (fig. 7): the phrase “where the boundary used to be” is underlined, and while Jen’s note does not seem to discuss *Ship of Theseus* at all, she does talk about crossing boundaries: the physical boundaries of countries, but also a figurative and emotional boundary in her relationship with Eric. In this way the reader can navigate each page, skipping from one narrative to the other. The narrative is still complex, since there are usually four narrative voices distinguishable on one page, and focusing on the main narrative is difficult because it is easy to get distracted by the notes in the margins. However, the use of typographical devices such as underlining and the drawing of arrows helps in understanding what parts are being discussed by Jen and Eric.
Just as in *House of Leaves*, *S.* makes use of different typefaces. There are four different typefaces, indicating four different authors. First there is V.M. Straka, the author of *Ship of Theseus*, whose narrative has a certain typeface, while the footnotes at the bottom of the pages, written by editor F.X. Caldeira, are printed in another. This use of typography is not particularly multimodal, because there does not seem to be an extra meaning behind the typefaces. More interesting, typographically, are the notes by Jen and Eric, which seem to be hand-written, and have an authentic feel to them. The two narrative voices are “distinctive and immediately recognizable: [Eric] writes in small printed block capital letters, while [Jen] writes in a nice, easy to read cursive”

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21 Although I have tried to decipher the specific typefaces used in the novel, the closest I could get was that Straka’s typeface, supposedly set somewhere in the fifties, resembles “the style of that era of publishing” (Berg).
(Telander). In Jen’s handwriting we recognize Van Leeuwen’s “slope” and “curvature”. Her writing is rounded, which signifies the characteristics “‘smooth’, ‘soft’, ‘natural’, ‘organic’, ‘maternal’” (“Semiotics of Typography”, 149), and the slope of her handwriting signifies a personal touch (148). Eric’s writing is more angular, which signifies “‘abrasive’, ‘harsh’, ‘technical’, ‘masculine’” characteristics (149). The slope of his handwriting is also different from Jen’s, and while Jen’s feminine handwriting looks informal because of its curvature, Eric’s writing looks more formal because of his upright typeface (148).

The different colors used for Jen and Eric’s notes help the reader keep track of Jen and Eric’s timeline: it helps to see when their specific notes were written. The notes appear in several different colors, as if the characters used different writing utensils at different times. First there are the notes written in grey pencil: these are written by Eric on his first, or at least first critical reading. These are the notes that Jen initially responds to, as can be seen on the cover page. Here Eric has written “If found, please return to workroom B19, Main Library, Pollard State University”, to which Jen replies, in blue pen: “Hey – I found your stuff”, which implies that she indeed returned the book to workroom B19. Eric then tells her, in black fine writer pen, that she can finish the book if she wants, and when he teases Jen about her interpretation of Ship of Theseus, Jen writes notes throughout the novel in her blue pen, to which Eric again replies. Notes that are written later are in orange (Jen) and green (Eric), and even later on they are written in purple (Jen) and red (Eric). Throughout the story Jen and Eric keep learning more about Straka, Caldeira, and the novel, and their different stages of knowledge are distinguishable by looking at the color of their writing. The characters sometimes even reply to their own, older comments, indicating that their opinion on a matter has changed, or that they have learned something new about the other that they did not
know before (fig. 8). On page 423, Eric professes his love to Jen, and on the left bottom corner of the page, Eric writes in black pen “I love you in Prague. In a drafty apartment with lots of books … I definitely love you here.” This note, although it is written in black pen, is clearly written much later than the first black notes. Furthermore, on page 432 Jen marks the phrase “brewing a cup of tea”, and writes “thanks” in the margins, to which Eric replies “Není zač”, which is Czech for “you’re welcome”. Both these comments are written in black pen, and it implies that Eric made Jen a cup of tea, which further implies that they are in the same house, or, in this case, a “drafty apartment” in Prague. In this case the fact that both Jen and Eric’s notes are written in black (with presumably the same pen), implies that they are a couple, and are living together.

Fig. 8. Jen (orange) indicates that she now knows more about Eric than she did before.

The handwriting in S. is an attempt to create mimesis, “or, in multimodal terms … high modality in the sense that ‘what we see is what we would have seen if we had been there’” (Nørgaard 148, emphasis in the original). The use of handwriting adds to the authentic “feel” of the novel, and, using Nørgaard’s definition, helps to make the existence of fictional characters (in this case Jen and Eric) real to the readers (148).

While it is true that Jen and Eric’s notes look convincingly real, S.’s authors may have taken their desire for authenticity too far. This is best illustrated on page 447, where Jen marks the phrase “he freezes”, and writes “OK, seriously. It’s freezing in
here” (“here” being the Prague apartment). Eric answers “You just walked past the thermostat!”, to which Jen replies “SO DID YOU!” (fig. 9). While this passage is probably meant to illustrate the playful intimacy of Jen and Eric’s relationship, it actually creates a scene that is difficult to believe as a reader. In real life, this passage would present a comical scenario, with the two characters constantly passing the book to each other, while sitting in the same room and, presumably, not talking. Here is where the attempt at authenticity fails, and instead it becomes clear that this scenario, and this piece of narrative, is highly improbable. This could be seen as a postmodern trick: an ironic comment on intimate human interaction. However, I argue that this is not the case, but that it is merely a failed construction by the authors. The authors have clearly tried everything to make the novel feel intimate and personal, as they have said themselves in interviews (DuChateau 2013, Rothman 2013, Vineyard 2014). Several critics agree that contemporary art (and in this case literature) is headed in an ethical or sincere direction, often called “New Sincerity”, a movement against postmodern irony. This ethical direction can be sensed especially in S. through the sincere emphasis on authenticity and intimate communication. Postmodern “irony is out; sincerity is in” (Watercutter), and therefore I argue that the failed attempt by Dorst and Abrams is not a postmodern trick, but rather a post-postmodern attempt at sincerity or authenticity, which ultimately fails to convince.

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22 Thorn 2006; Watercutter 2010; Eve 2012; Fitzgerald 2012; Anderson n.d.; Kelly 2014
Typography is a very effective way of adding meaning to a narrative. In *House of Leaves* the use of different typefaces adds to our understanding of the main characters, while the textual layout traps the reader in a textual labyrinth, which makes it the reader mirror the actions of the main characters who are trapped in the House’s labyrinth. The use of colors invites many different interpretations, but mainly emphasizes the novel’s status as a hypertext. In *S.* the typographical features are less evident, but the handwritten typefaces of the narrative voices in the margins, and the use of different colors do add, to a certain extent, to the (post-postmodern) authentic feeling, and the sincerity of the novel.
Chapter 4: The Readers’ Response to Multimodal Novels

While the previous chapters dealt with specific characteristics that can be found within the multimodal novel, this chapter will discuss a feature that takes place outside of the novel: the readers’ responses to and interpretations of the text, as well as their participation with the text. Specific attention needs to be paid to readers of multimodal novels, since these novels encourage their readers to go beyond the text and the novel itself in order to find interpretations from other sources, or even find extra material that adds information and meaning to the narrative. Reader-response theory deals with the readers of texts: it discusses literary texts from the view of the reader of a particular work. According to Eagleton, in reader-response theory “the reader “concretizes” the literary work, which is in itself no more than a chain of organized black marks on a page. Without this continuous active participation on the reader’s part, there would be no literary work at all” (66). What Eagleton argues is that a text is incomplete without its readers, since they are the ones who give it meaning.

In this chapter I will use theories by reader-response critics Jauss, Iser and Fish to analyze the reader’s response to the multimodal S. and House of Leaves. Hans Robert Jauss, who developed his reader-response theories from the 1970s onward, believed a literary work should be situated within a historical horizon of expectations (Erwartungshorizont), which is “the context of cultural meanings within which [the work] was produced” (Eagleton 72). Additionally, Jauss describes an “informed reader”, who is aware of literary conventions and cultural significances. Another well-known reader-response critic is Wolfgang Iser. One of his main arguments in The Implied Reader (1974) is that a literary work has two poles. First there is the artistic pole, which is the text created by the author. The other pole is the aesthetic pole, and
this pole refers to “the realization accomplished by the reader” (Iser 274). Iser furthermore believes that “[t]he convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence … and [that] this convergence … must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader” (275). He thus argues that there exists a “virtual space” between text and reader where meaning is created. Rather than looking at individual readers’ meaning-making faculties, Stanley Fish focuses on “communities of readers” or “interpretative communities”, which are “made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for … constituting [the text’s] properties and assigning their intentions” (171). He believes that a text’s meaning emerges “within the context of the interpretive community (or communities) at hand” (Davis & Womack 88). Reader-response criticism thus deals with the readers of a text: with their interpretation of it, and with the way “the reader’s experience of a text creates meaning” (Habib 157). Multimodal novels such as House of Leaves and S. are very much occupied with the reader’s experience of a text. Not only does their unusual layout ask for an active participation of the reader, the novels’ convoluted plot and narrative layering are ambiguous in what they mean, and therefore the readers have to make interpretative choices in order to help construct the text’s meaning.

For House of Leaves, one way to see how readers respond to the novel is to look at book reviews, which can be found in abundance on the Internet. Apart from describing the plot and experimental nature of the novel, many reviewers also describe their personal experience with it, and their attachment to their physical copy of the novel. In a review assignment, an MIT-student writes that she “formed a personal relationship with the physical artifact itself”, and her description of the novel is based purely on her own experience, as she realizes that the narrative is “open to
interpretation, exploration, reconstruction and possibly even denial by the reader” (“A Brief Analysis” 1-2). The student describes herself as “a computer nerd [who] enjoys puzzles” (1), and this mind-set influences her reading, since her fascination with computers leads her to focus on the puzzles and the explorative character of the novel. Another reviewer writes about the way the reader influences the meaning of the narrative: “the reader must become a character too, either a believer or a doubter. You find what you bring. You find exactly what you bring, what meaning and what power, what effort for which puzzles” (Biancotti).

Although reviews usually do contain interpretations by their writers, a better place to look for discussions on meaning and interpretation is an online message board. On forums.markzdanielewski.com in particular, hundreds of users discuss the contents of House of Leaves, and provide their personal views and interpretations of the intricate plot. For example, there are several topics about who wrote “The Navidson Record,” topics with elaborate theories about the identity of the Minotaur, and even a topic with 214 posts discussing a quarter that falls for fifty minutes on page 305 in the novel. Most of these theories are well-argued, and while they often contradict each other, there is usually no way of deciding which one is correct, since the novel itself does not provide explicit answers, only clues. Because the novel does not answer certain questions (for example the identity of the “true” author of “The Navidson Record”), the readers have to come up with, and be satisfied with, their own answers. In the case of House of Leaves, two people can read the exact same novel, yet construct a different interpretation of events: while one of them may believe Zampanò wrote “The Navidson Record,” the other may believe that both Zampanò and Johnny are merely figments of Pelafina’s unhinged mind. Despite the variety of interpretations, Danielewski himself has said in an interview: “I have yet to hear an interpretation of House of Leaves that I
had not anticipated. I have yet to be surprised, but I’m hoping” (McCaffery and Gregory 106).

Reviewers such as Biancotti see House of Leaves’ narrative as being different for every reader, since all readers have a different cultural background, social knowledge, and different literary expectations. That a narrative is indeed different for each reader is illustrated by the manifold of interpretations found on the House of Leaves message board. The view that each reading is different because of different backgrounds is very similar to Jauss’ claim about an informed reader with a horizon of (literary) expectations. However, nowadays the informed reader is quite different from the one Jauss envisioned. Jauss saw the informed reader as a literary critic, an expert reader, while nowadays a reader can be anyone. In fact, online critics (those we as readers, researchers etc. have easy access to) are often anonymous. The Internet provides readers with the possibility to share interpretations, look for the answers to hidden codes, look up unknown phrases and definitions, and the possibility to discuss the contents of a novel with other readers. While Jauss would agree that any reader can become an informed critic, the Internet makes the road to becoming an informed reader much easier than it was in the 1970s.

According to Stanley Fish, communities of readers look for a core of agreement, but in readers of multimodal novels this core of agreement is problematic. In Is There a Text in this Class?, Fish argues that interpretations are not made within the text itself but outside of it: “while there is no core of agreement in the text, there is a core of agreement … concerning the ways of producing the text” (342, his emphasis). Because the text is “always a function of interpretation”, we can only reject certain interpretations because the core of agreement is located outside of the text (342). Belletto states that the “problem” with House of Leaves is that there appears to be no
core of agreement: there is “no real referent”, and it is thus impossible to “evaluate the interpretations within the novel” (113). Or as one user of the Danielewski message board describes it: “[Danielewski] opens an infinite amount of doors in a very lengthy text ... however, he gives the reader nothing” (RighteousEgo). While House of Leaves is multi-interpretative, and any well-argued interpretation can be accepted by forums.danielewski’s online community, there are also interpretations which the community simply considers to be too far-fetched. And so, while there is no core of agreement on what is the correct interpretation, there is at least some shared agreement about what is not a correct interpretation. Consequently, one could consider the message board to have an interpretative community, although it is not as homogenous as Fish suggests.

Similarly to House of Leaves, S. has received much online attention by avid readers. There are several websites devoted to unravelling the mysteries of S. On the blog Thoughts on “S” (whoisstraka.wordpress.com), user Mystimus (Brian Shipman) writes elaborate blog posts about S., and while the House of Leaves official message board mostly contains discussions between users, the blog posts on Thoughts on “S” often resemble small essays, and are mostly written by one person (although there is a comment-section where other users can add their views and interpretations). Some of these “essays” are in-depth analyses of the novel’s text, but others go way beyond the novel’s text. For example, in one blog post Shipman connects the fictional writer of The Archer’s Tales (Sobreiro), to the real-world 17th century scientist Robert Hooke, who discovered the existence of cells while looking at thin slices of bottle cork. We cannot know for sure if this connection was intended by S.’ authors, but it certainly

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23 In “The Partial Transcript of What Some Have Thought by Karen Green”, Byron Baleworth notes that the House “resists interpretation”, to which Karen replies “Does that mean it’s meaningless?” (HoL 356)

24 “Sobreiro” is the Portuguese word for “cork tree”.
adds meaning to the narrative, since Robert Hooke did pioneering work in the fields of horology (the study of time) and memory, both important themes in S. (Shipman). *Monkeys & Rabbit Holes* (monkeysandrabbitholes.blogspot.com) also features essay-like posts, and these posts focus mostly on references to other works, authors etc. For example, the owner of the website, Clare Fish, has created a list of all of Vévoda’s\(^{25}\) vintage wines mentioned in S., and has linked them to locations in Robert Ludlum novels, since the names of the wines contain place names that also feature in certain Ludlum-novels (C. Fish). While this connection seems far-fetched, Fish remarks that “Jason Bourne [is] a lot like our favorite amnesiac”, linking the Robert Ludlum character Jason Bourne to S., the main character in *Ship of Theseus*. This kind of reader-interpretation is a new trend: readers have unlimited access to information on the internet, and while proving a connection such as the one Fish makes would have taken days in a library twenty years ago, the same search can be done in about an hour on a modern computer. The Internet facilitates this kind of fixation with a novel, since readers can discuss their obsession with similarly obsessed readers from all over the world. Wolfgang Iser argued that “literature generates effects of meaning for the reader in a virtual space created between reader and text” (Albertson). However, in the 1970s Iser could not have envisioned the virtual space that the Internet now provides. Not only has the Internet made the virtual space between text and reader much bigger, but it has also changed it. Nowadays the virtual space is shared and social. The Internet is an unlimited hypertext, and while Iser’s virtual space was merely a vague concept, the virtual space of the Internet has become a virtual *reality*.

The way readers of multimodal novels use the Internet to find extra meaning or interpretation can be seen as a form of active reader participation. The connection

\(^{25}\) The villain in *S.*
between Vévoda’s wines and Robert Ludlum’s novels, for example, was not explicitly mentioned by S.’ authors (nor even particularly hinted at). However, both Abrams and Dorst, and Danielewskis ask their readers to participate in other ways. In *House of Leaves* this is done through the printing and footnotes: readers have to turn the book upside down or use a mirror to read some of the passages, and they have to flip back and forth to follow links through the footnotes. S. takes this participation a step further. Apart from the encoded messages within the text, there are also the inserts that appear throughout the novel. According to Hallet, “literary characters in multimodal novels are occupied (if not obsessed) with documentation … [they are] collectors of all sorts of documents like newspaper articles and clippings … letters written by themselves and others … and so forth” (136). This is clearly the case in S., where the inserts are a form of extra documentation. These documents contribute to the narrative, and the reader has to physically extract the items to read them: there are letters, newspaper articles, telegrams and napkins that have to be unfolded in order to be properly read, and the reader has to be constantly aware of the existence of the inserts, since they have a tendency to flutter from between their assigned pages. At the back of the book the reader finds a special insert: an “Eötvös wheel”, which can be used to decode hidden messages in the footnotes. Through this wheel, the reader is invited to participate in the narrative: without the wheel, a part of the narrative remains encoded, and is therefore “missing”. For example, there are the footnotes in Chapter 10 of the novel.26 If you find the coordinates of the locations mentioned in the footnotes (the coordinates are most easily found by searching the Internet), and match them on the Eötvös wheel, you get a series of letters that eventually form the phrase “I have loved you from the beginning I

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26 While the cipher in Chapter 10 requires the use of the wheel to decode the hidden message, extra materials are unnecessary for most of the ciphers, since they are easier to decode, or are decoded by Jen and Eric.
will love you to the end”, a clear message from Filomela to Straka. So the reader needs to notice and understand the clue in footnote 1 of the chapter, consult an atlas or the Internet to find coordinates, and use the Eötvös wheel to find one extra sentence that confirms Filomela’s love for Straka. This kind of reader participation is not only fairly new in literary fiction, but would also be much more difficult without the Internet. And what is striking about this is that readers are encouraged to use the computer and the Internet to find extra information and interpretations, while the experimental multimodal novel so clearly focuses on the fact that it is a novel, instead of a text on a digital screen.

Readers are important for a text, since the interpretation by readers has the power to change the text’s meaning. Some readers can read Jane Eyre as a feminist manifesto, while others might completely miss the feminist tones because they are Christians, and are more interested in the novel’s “deep religious knowledge and strong Christian principles” (Bolt) which strongly resonate with them. These particular readings do not require much effort on the reader’s part, however; they are likely to come quite naturally. Multimodal novels necessitate attention to the readers’ responses more so than other genres, since these novels are often experimental, and require the reader to “work” during their reading. Modern multimodal novels such as S. and House of Leaves invite the reader to go beyond the text itself to look for interpretations, and sometimes to search for and create their own meanings when the texts does not provide clear ones. This may occur in (online) communities of readers, which discuss the novels’ meanings and come to a core of agreement. The readers in these communities are very different from Jauss’ envisioned informed readers, but they inform themselves

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27 I found the solution of this code on http://sfiles22.blogspot.co.uk/2013/11/cipher-explanations.html
28 In this footnote “spinning wheel” and “locate” are printed in italics, urging the reader to use the Eötvös wheel to find the hidden message.
through research and discussion on the Internet. Thus novels such as *S.* and *House of Leaves* invite their readers to come up with wildly varying interpretations. The authors encourage readers to use the Internet to find extra information and come up with more interpretations, because they know that their readers are the ones to make meaning out of literature. As Roland Barthes stated as early as 1967: “a text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other … but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader” (6).
Conclusion

Most postmodern writers and theorists grew up in the 1940s and 1950s, and made their reactionary cry against modernism heard from the 1960s onward. Contemporary writers such as Mark Z. Danielewski, J.J. Abrams, and Doug Dorst grew up during this postmodern period. Nevertheless, their writing is no longer really postmodern, but can be considered to be a new literary movement, usually called “post-postmodern”. This movement coincides with the rise of digital technologies, starting in the 1990s. Post-postmodern authors respond to digitization by either adapting – for example by publishing their novels online – or by focusing on the book as a tangible object, a fascinating material item that needs to be held and examined, and that does not translate well into online or digital versions. 29 These kind of novels can be classified as multimodal literary fiction, in which authors use various semiotic modes to add meaning to their narrative. Allison Gibbons has compiled a list of multimodal features which can be used to classify novels as multimodal, and the novels examined in this thesis, House of Leaves by Mark Z. Danielewski, and S. by J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst, contain almost every feature in Gibbons’ list. In this thesis I have demonstrated how House of Leaves and S. are both complex novels, mainly because of their complicated narrative structure, and their manifold of narrators and narratives. While complex narrative is not a new phenomenon, the combination with an innovative and creative use of typography and layout makes that these novels use their multimodality to create new kinds of meaning. The novels invite the reader to interact with the novel; to turn

29 The e-book version of S. contains a note by the authors which comments upon the difference in experience between reading the physical version of the novel and the e-book one: “please know that the experience of looking at the digital reproductions of [the items in the novel] is decidedly different from that of reading and holding the physical book of S.; of flipping through the novel within it; of holding and examining the ephemeral clues throughout it” (Abrams & Dorst, from the Kindle-preview on Amazon.com).
the book around, or to take out extra material from between the pages. This makes them material novels, and emphasizes their status as a physical object.

Both *House of Leaves* and *S.* have multiple narrators, multiple levels of narration and self-reflective characteristics, which are features of multimodal writing. These features all allude to metafiction’s materiality, to the novel’s status as a concrete, physical object. Gibbons argues that metafictive writing is a multimodal feature, but she does not discuss its status in a post-postmodern era. Metafictive novels from the 20th century are often seen as a postmodern reaction against modernist literature. This new genre of writing had an inherent irony that was typical for the postmodern era. *House of Leaves* and *S.* use metafictive elements, which could make them postmodern novels. However, I argue that the novels are post-postmodern rather than postmodern. Exactly how metafiction has changed from its postmodern form into its 21st century equivalent is still open to debate. However, it is clear that the novels are not ironic in their metafictive writing, and therefore I argue that apart from the fact that their metafictive writing adds meaning to the narrative, multimodal *S.* and *House of Leaves* are post-postmodern in their non-ironic use of metafiction.

Typography, unusual textual layouts, and unusual page design are used in *House of Leaves* and *S.* to The first major aspect that I discuss in my third chapter is the use of typography. Especially in *S.*, typography is used in a way to make the narrative seem authentic, and the interaction sincere. The marginalia by Jen and Eric are written in a way that is meant to appear as authentic as possible. The characters’ written interactions feel “real”, and the fact that they sometimes make errors in their writing – which is all hand-written – adds to the authentic feel of the interaction. A second important multimodal aspect that is discussed in this chapter is the layout of the novels. The non-conventional choices made in the layout adds meaning to the narrative, for
example when the layout of *House of Leaves*’ ninth chapter traps the reader in a textual labyrinth, which, as I argue, mirrors the actions of the main characters, who are at that point trapped in the House’s labyrinth. Typography in the form of typefaces is also a multimodal feature, and in the novels different colors and typefaces are mostly used to distinguish between narrators. However, as I have shown especially for *House of Leaves*, the sort of typeface that is used also reflects the personality of the narrator it is assigned to.

A multimodal feature that Gibbons does not mention, but which is very important for multimodal novels, is paying attention to the readers’ responses. Iser sees the text partly as a “realization accomplished by the reader” (274), and nowadays the idea of the readers as co-creators of a text is more relevant than ever. With *House of Leaves* we are able to witness a huge amount of participation in meaning-making by readers, which is made possible through the use of computers and the Internet. By reading blogs, message boards, and reviews by “amateur-critics”, I have demonstrated that interpretation by readers can go in many directions: it ranges from readers discussing in detail the significance of the different typefaces and colors used in the novel, to readers believing that Johnny’s mother Pelafina wrote the complete *House of Leaves*. The same goes for *S.*, where some readers interpret the main character S. as a Robert Ludlum-character, while others are mostly occupied with writing complete essays on the similarities between S. and Hesse’s philosophical “Glass Bead Game” (Shipman). Since novels such as *S.*, and especially *House of Leaves*, stimulate ambiguous readings and encourage multiple interpretations, Fish’s interpretive communities are crucial in attempting to construct the texts’ meaning. I have shown in this chapter that *S.* and *House of Leaves* challenge their readers, and invite them to look beyond the book itself for interpretations and meaning. Thereby it appears as that
readers of multimodal literature are key figures, since they are invited by the novel to actively participate in the construction of the text’s meaning.

In this thesis I argue that in an age of digitization, post-postmodern multimodal novels such as *House of Leaves* and *S.* refocus on the book as an object, using metafictive elements, unusual textual and typographical layout, while eliciting readerly involvement to help construct the meaning of the narrative. These novels focus on their materiality in order to stand out in an era where it may feel as if print novels are slowly becoming outdated. The multimodal novel, which clearly focuses on the fact that it is to be held, to be examined, and to be cherished, has what Pressman calls an “aesthetic of bookishness”, referring to the book’s material status in an increasingly digital age. Pressman continues: “Works that adopt an aesthetic of bookishness respond to their contemporary, digital moment by showing how literature retains a central role in our emergent technoculture as a space for aesthetic expression and cultural critique” (“The Aesthetic”). Critics such as Paul Martin Eve argue that contemporary metafictive literature belongs to New Sincerity, a movement that “reflects a nostalgia for an authentic past and ... belief rather than irony” (Buckland 2). Taking this in consideration, Pressman’s notions of aesthetic expression and cultural critique might then also refer to the return to authenticity and nostalgia in favor of the irony that is or has been so prevalent in postmodern literature. In conclusion, while *House of Leaves* and *S.* certainly have some postmodern characteristics (discontinuous narratives, self-reflexivity, blending of genres), their emphasis on authentic storytelling and their lack of irony in favor of sincerity might indicate a new genre development. Hopefully this means that the modern multimodal “bookish,” sincere novel is the kind of novel we will continue to see in post-postmodern literary fiction.
Bibliography


Reviews about S. or House of Leaves:


Blog- and forum-posts about S. or House of Leaves:


Online interviews with the authors:


**Images**

**Figure 3:** jenheyward. “Screenshot of Jen Heyward’s blog.” *For What It’s Worth...* Tumblr, 24 Feb. 2014. Web. 21 Nov. 2014.

**Figure 7:** “Friday Book Design Blog: S, by JJ Abrams and Doug Dorst photo.” Photograph. *The Independent*. Independent.co.uk, 1 Nov. 2013. Web. 3 Nov. 2014.

**Figures 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6:** these images from *House of Leaves* were obtained from the PDF-version I downloaded on 15 September 2015 from: https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B4me4PbBMmOWlpiTXZUcHY0eFlk/.