

Challenging Narrative Hierarchies:

Embedded Narrative Structure in David Mitchell's
Cloud Atlas and Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

by

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	3
Acknowledgements	5
Abstract	7
Chapter One: Terminology, Theory, and Method	9
Introduction	9
Narrative and Parts of Narrative	10
Embedding and Levels	13
Cultural and Historical Contexts of Embedding	20
Here is the Document: Embedding and Authority	24
Unreliability and Ambiguity	26
Functions of Embedded Narrative	30
Chapter Two: Storytelling and the Battle for Belief in <i>Cloud Atlas</i>	33
Introduction	33
<i>Cloud Atlas</i> : An Overview	33
Each in Its Own Language	37
Irreconcilable Embedding	43

Musical Models	47
The Circuitry of Power	53
Like Clouds Cross Skies	55
The Virtual Past	59
Chapter Three: Collapsing Levels and Burning Books in <i>House of Leaves</i>	66
Introduction	66
<i>House of Leaves</i> : An Overview	67
Narrative and Ontological Levels	71
Parts and Whole	74
No Sacred Text Here	77
Designating, Describing, Recreating	87
For All It Really Is	91
What's Real or Isn't Real Doesn't Matter	94
Solutions Are Necessarily Personal	100
Conclusion: Having the Last Word	106
Works Cited	117

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Abstract

Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* both feature highly complex structures of narrative embedding. This thesis examines the use of narrative levels in these two novels, considering how the purposes and effects of embedding change and how attention to the structure of this literary device transforms readings of these texts. *Cloud Atlas* features six distinct and seemingly stand-alone embedded narratives. The relationship between them is complicated both by competing structural models and by clashes of continuity between fact and fiction. Mitchell's novel draws attention to the role of storytelling in the creation of history and human identity. *House of Leaves* embeds an invented film within a novel masquerading as film criticism, with edits and commentary provided by a further narrator. The disparate parts, narratorial unreliability, and multiple acts of remediation serve to undermine the elaborate narrative hierarchy Danielewski creates. This instability foregrounds the subjectivity of the relationship between reader and text and the embedding narrator functions as a model for the active reader who both interprets and recreates. In both novels the differently styled narratives and structures of embedding facilitate an exploration of the permutations of fact and fiction and, by transgressing the norms of this literary device, they bring into focus the assumptions that exist around it.

Chapter One: Terminology, Theory, and Method

Introduction

Narrative embedding is used widely and to a variety of ends. While all uses of this literary device have their points of interest, some instances are so extreme that they seem to demand critical attention. Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, recent novels from either side of the Atlantic, both feature highly complex structures of embedding. *Cloud Atlas* contains six distinct and seemingly stand-alone genre narratives embedded in the style of Russian dolls. *House of Leaves* embeds an invented film within a novel masquerading as film criticism, with edits and commentary provided by a further narrator. In both, multiple narratives allow for very different styles to be used within a single text. Mitchell and Danielewski also use the hierarchical structure of embedding to explore the permutations of fact and fiction.

This thesis will examine the narrative levels in these two novels and discuss how the purposes and effects of this literary device change under the pressure of such extreme use. This is not merely a case of increased impact: the complex hierarchies create quite different effects from a simpler structure. Attention to the use of embedding transforms readings of these texts. The first chapter will establish the terminology to be used throughout the rest of the thesis and outline various functions of embedding. The second and third chapters will examine *Cloud Atlas* and *House of Leaves* respectively, plotting out for each the structures of embedding and its relationship with the narrative discourse, the story, and the meaning of the texts. Finally, I will consider how the challenges posed by the complexities of embedding might inform the theoretical material introduced in the first chapter and discuss the relevance

of embedding, highlighted by both of the two novels, in terms of the power dynamics in the narrative hierarchy.

Although the subject of this thesis is the use of narrative embedding in *House of Leaves* and *Cloud Atlas*, it is necessary before considering the complexities of these specific works to establish what narrative embedding *is* and what functions it serves in other texts. This chapter will tackle these questions, first defining embedding and important related terms and then discussing a number of different functions of embedding. Where appropriate, Henry James's novella, *The Turn of the Screw*, will be used as an example. It provides a relatively simple embedded structure with which to illustrate the concepts and arguments discussed in this chapter. In addition, *The Turn of the Screw* is a well-known text that provides a wealth of criticism on which to draw in order to unpack the critical history of embedding.

Narrative and Parts of Narrative

Since embedded narrative is a particular type of narrative, let us begin with a definition of the term narrative. Most simply, a narrative consists of the representation of one or more events by a narrator.¹ This definition follows Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan in assuming that a narrative requires a narrator (2): narrative is a communication, and thus must be communicated *by someone*, or at least by some mediating channel of communication. Although a narrative is a representation of events, it is not necessary that the events pre-exist their representation. It is an assumption of non-fiction narrative that events precede their telling, but fictional narratives merely provide the illusion that this is the case. Because fiction does not typically refer to the real world, its events are, in a sense, created *by* the

¹ This definition is derived from those of Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, in *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (2), and H. Porter Abbott, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (12).

representation. These two aspects of the narrative — narrative discourse and story — are inseparable. For this reason, H. Porter Abbott questions whether narrative fiction actually constitutes representation, since before the narrative there are no events. However, he argues that representation remains a more appropriate term than presentation precisely because story “*seems to pre-exist*” discourse (*Narrative* 13–14).

Although the terms story and discourse are widely used to discuss the parts of narrative described above, it is worth making a few comments about the exact manner in which they will be used here. The story/discourse pairing has its origins in the Russian Formalist distinction between *fabula* and *sjuzet*, and arrives in English through the French translations, *histoire* and *discours*, provided by Tzvetan Todorov (Abbott, “Story, plot, and narration” 41). Story is a chronological sequence of events, abstracted from their representation in the narrative discourse. Narrative discourse refers to the manner of representation: the communication itself. This pairing is crucial to the function of time and sequence in narrative. The discourse often depicts events in an order other than that in which they happened, but the story, by definition, consists of the events *in the order in which they occurred*.² Likewise, the time taken to relate events in the discourse can be vastly different from the time taken for the events to occur: a narrator may sum up a year in a sentence, for example, or take pages to describe a single moment, but the time *in the story* is not affected by this.

Story in this sense refers to all of the events related or implied in the narrative, and should not be confused with the related concept of a basic story structure, consisting only of

² In fiction, this is of course the order in which the events *are indicated to have occurred*, since there are no real events. This distinction should be assumed throughout, but will be left unstated, except where pertinent to the discussion at hand.

the events that are supposedly crucial to a narrative. This story structure, which can be realised and recognised in innumerable different narratives — all versions of the same structure — is something crucially different to the abstraction of story from discourse. It is worth saying a few words about the problems with this idea of an essential story structure as there are equivalent problems with certain approaches to embedded narratives. Formalist and Structuralist projects seeking to extract from narratives an essential structure have been criticised for being both reductive and presumptive: reductive, because they concentrate on what makes narratives the same rather than what sets them apart from one another, deliberately ignoring parts of texts which they deem unimportant; presumptive, because the architects of such readings assume the reliable identification of what is important and what is not, bringing to bear their own biases and preconceptions. Since the narrative does not naturally divide into essential and non-essential parts, choices will always need to be made in such a reduction, and the end product will be something other than the original text. That is not to say that there is no place for approaches to fiction that seek to simplify texts or concentrate on their common features. There are valid reasons to be interested in the common structures of narrative — both in terms of the story and the discourse — and there are also useful purposes for simplification.³ However, *interpretation* of a text solely through such reduction is fundamentally flawed in that it involves the study of what is essentially a different text.

In order to avoid these issues, the term story as used here will be purely an analytical device for identifying the narrated events, and their chronological — rather than narrative — order. Where some criticism has ignored the discourse in favour of the story, this chapter will

³ I will, for example, use plot summaries as a way to briefly outline the story events of *Cloud Atlas* and *House of Leaves* and to contextualize their narrative structures.

show how vital it is that the discourse takes centre stage. Story will by no means be ignored. However, because it constitutes the only part of the text to which the reader has direct access, the discourse ought to be the primary object of study.

Embedding and Levels

Narrative embedding exists where one narrative is subordinated to another narrative. Narrative embedding thus requires a text with at least two narratives, the *embedded* and the *embedding*. Except in cases where multiple persons narrate as a “we”,⁴ more than one narrator in a text means that text consists of more than one narrative. However, one narrator does not necessarily mean only one narrative, since a single narrator can engage in multiple *acts* of narration over time. Where the creation of two narratives is separated by a particularly long period of time, it may even be useful to consider a single character as two distinct narrators.⁵ However, it may be difficult in many cases to delineate exactly where one narrative becomes two narratives with a single narrator. The criterion of time is problematic, since time is continuous rather than discrete. Rather than attempting to argue for an exact division here, let us allow that certain texts contain sections that may be considered either as narratives in their own right or as portions of a larger narrative.

Where a work consists of two or more narratives, the exact relationship between narratives can vary. Narratives have an order of precedence in terms of their arrangement within the text: one narrative discourse is presented to the reader before the other. It may also be possible to order these narratives in terms of story time. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* provides a

⁴ Such circumstances are relatively uncommon and, I think, best treated as instances of a single narrator representing, or speaking on behalf of, a group, rather than an actual instance of multiple narrators.

⁵ It should be noted that “creation” here refers to the fictionalised creation of the narrative by the narrator, not the actual creation of the text by the author.

useful example of the ability to order narratives in terms of the story, as the various diarists, correspondents, and news-writers who at turns narrate the novel are as far as possible presented in story order and bear explicit references to the date. What is of importance for embedding, however, is the narrative hierarchy — a relationship of subordination between narratives (Rimmon-Kenan 91). It must be stressed that subordination in this sense indicates dependency rather than inferiority. The governing principle of the relationship is mediacy. Narrative B is subordinate to Narrative A if Narrative B is mediated by Narrative A — that is, when the discourse of B is represented as an event on the story level of A. B is subordinate because it depends on A for its transmission and is thus, logically speaking, further removed from the reader. *The Turn of the Screw*, for example, consists of one narrative — the governess's manuscript — mediated by another — the narrative “frame”.⁶ Where this subordination relationship exists, we can say that one narrative is embedded in the other narrative or that the other narrative embeds it. Where a text consists of three rather than two narratives, it is possible for a narrative to be both embedded and embedding: for example, if Narrative A embeds Narrative B, which in turn embeds Narrative C. I will refer to this pattern of embedding, regardless of the number of narratives involved, as *vertical* embedding. Alternatively, Narrative A could embed B *and* C — *horizontal* embedding. It is also possible for A and B to be on the same level, but for one of them to embed C. With more narratives, the possible permutations increase.

It is worth saying a word at this point about the limits of embedding. I will follow Paisley Livingston in suggesting that the embedding relationship requires the embedded narrative to be “displayed” (233). That is to say: it is not sufficient that one narrative refers to

⁶ I use the word “frame” here for ease of understanding, despite reservations about the term, which I will discuss further on.

or describes another — the latter narrative must be present and observable in the text.⁷ Livingston offers a somewhat broader view of embedding, applied to works of art in general and not just narratives, and therefore allows for a distinction between partial and total embedding. The idea that part of a narrative can be embedded — or that an embedded narrative can be part of another text — will be useful when dealing with embedded narratives that are also, for the purposes of characters' interactions with them, texts in their own right.

With all this potential complexity of embedding to contend with, it is vital to have a clear terminology in order to adequately describe it. Moreover, there are dangers other than imprecision that can arise from terminology. In particular, the common usage of “frame” to refer to an embedding narrative, although it can be a useful way of talking about embedding, imports false assumptions into the theoretical framework. This common, and admittedly convenient, label carries with it unfortunate connotations of separateness and expendability. It implies that a portion of the text is merely narrative packaging for the central narrative. Just as story cannot be separated from discourse without selective simplification — and hence alteration of meaning — an embedded narrative cannot be parted from its embedding narrative without changing the text being studied. Peter Brooks addresses this container fallacy in his essay on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, “An Unreadable Report”. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow's tales are said to be distinctive in that “to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale” (Conrad 18). Brooks reads this statement as a warning that

⁷ Livingston's article refers to “nesting” rather than “embedding”. I have retained my terminology here for the sake of consistency.

the structure of “framed narration” used in *Heart of Darkness* will not in this instance give a neat pattern of nested boxes, bracketed core structures, nuts within shells. (256)

In Conrad’s novel, the idea of the embedded narrative as the nut within a shell is undermined by the inability of the narrative to be contained. The darkness of the Congo becomes the darkness of the Thames, and the story is, Brooks suggests, endlessly repeated, denying the possibility of a “primary narrative” (261). But this problem is not particular to *Heart of Darkness*. The frame is never, and can never be, *just* a frame. Embedded and embedding narratives always act upon each other. Therefore, where possible, I will avoid referring to frames or framed narratives and instead use terms of embedding.

Where more than two narratives exist in a single text, particularly if they are vertically embedded, it will be easier and more precise to speak in terms of numbered narrative levels. In a simple two-narrative relationship of embedding, the embedding narrative would be the first narrative level, and the embedded narrative the second. In this I follow Gérard Genette’s formulation:

[A]ny event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing the narrative is placed. (228)

An embedded narrative is not just a narrative in itself, but also an event within another narrative, and is therefore at a higher diegetic, or narrative, level. Although many Genettian narratologists, such as Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, characterise subordinate narratives as being below, I will prefer Genette’s original model, which sees embedded narratives as stacking on top of, rather than hanging suspended from, their embedding counterparts. In *The Turn of the Screw*, the first narrative level is that which relates the fireside storytelling sessions; the

governess's manuscript forms the second narrative level. A narrative embedded within an already embedded narrative, then, is at the third narrative level.

Unfortunately, this concept of narrative levels yields an incomplete picture of the relationship between narratives. Although there are two narrative levels in *The Turn of the Screw*, both are generally supposed to represent the same fictional world — albeit different parts of it, and at different times. The text can thus be regarded as comprising two *narrative* levels, but only a single *ontological* level. Just as narrative levels indicate narrative subordination, ontological levels indicate the subordination of worlds or realities. A subordinate world is one which is fictional: it is subordinated to the real world because it has no independent existence beyond what is described or imagined in the real world. The story events of *The Turn of the Screw* — indeed, of any fictional narrative — take place in a subordinate world. At this simplest level there is hardly a need for complicated terminology: there is reality, and there is fiction. Narrative embedding, however, can complicate the issue. If an embedded narrative is represented as fictional within the context of the embedding narrative, then there are three different worlds to contend with: the real world of the reader, the world of the fiction, and a further fictional world presented within the first fiction — fictional events and events so fictional that even fictional characters regard them as fiction. The two different fictional worlds here can be referred to as the first and second ontological levels of the text.

Although ontological levels are related to narrative levels, ontology is anchored in story rather than discourse. Narrative levels track discourses embedded within discourses, whereas ontological levels track stories embedded within stories. Depending on the type of narrator, a single narrative may consist of one or multiple ontological levels. In first-person,

or homodiegetic, narrative, the narrator is a part of the story world, and the first ontological level thus coincides with the story events represented at the first narrative level. In heterodiegetic narrative, however, the narrator is at the first ontological level and the story events are at the second.⁸ If a single heterodiegetic narrator describes action at multiple ontological levels — for instance, paraphrasing a fictional text within the world of the story rather than embedding its content directly — there can be more than two ontological levels to a single narrative level. Where there is a second narrative level, the events *it* represents can be part of the same ontological level or a second ontological level. The former situation occurs if the events represented are supposed to take place in the same world as those depicted at the first narrative level, the latter if the events would be considered fictional by the first narrator. Depending on the types of narrator in each case, there may be up to three different ontological levels.

Two narrative levels, each with a homodiegetic narrator (e.g. *The Turn of the Screw*):

	Narrative Level	Ontological Level
Narrative discourse	1st	1st
Story		
Narrative discourse	2nd	
Story		

⁸ It should be noted that the distinction between heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narration is not always clear cut. Genette argues that homodiegesis is a matter of degree (245). However, his account is not ontologically-based. I will consider that — although in practice it will not always be possible to determine one way or the other — the two states are theoretically absolute: a narrator either does or does not belong to the story world of his or her narrative.

Two narrative levels, each with a heterodiegetic narrator:

	Narrative Level	Ontological Level
Narrative discourse	1st	1st
Story		2nd
Narrative discourse	2nd	
Story		

Certain critical claims about *The Turn of the Screw* provide a useful illustration of ontological levels. Readers and critics have, for the most part, treated the events represented in the novella's two narratives as belonging to the same fictional world: the governess who narrates her own experiences at the second narrative level was known personally to Douglas, a character represented at the first narrative level. Much of the debate around *The Turn of the Screw* has centred on the *reliability* of the governess's account, which will be explored in more depth in the second part of this chapter. However, any false representation on the narrator's part is a separate issue, relating to the supposed truth value of the assertions made by the governess within the context of the world she, Douglas, and the unnamed first-level narrator all occupy. The novella, then, is usually accepted as comprising a single ontological level. Edwin Fussell, however, contends that *The Turn of the Screw*'s second narrative level is actually a work of fiction, meaning the governess who authored this embedded text is distinct from the governess who is the narrator of, and a character in, that text:

[The governess] is a writer; she is a novelist; she has written a novel; her novel is called (by James) *The Turn of the Screw*, and his novel of the same title is about it. (119)

According to this reading, each of the novella's two narrative levels represents events at a different ontological level:

Narrator	Part of narrative	Narrative Level	Ontological Level
Unnamed first narrator	Narrative discourse	1st	1st
	Story		
Governess	Narrative discourse	2nd	2nd
	Story		

I will not engage on the issue of whether this is a reasonable reading of the text. For the purposes of this chapter, what is important is the way in which Fussell's argument illustrates the distinction between ontological and narrative levels.

Cultural and Historical Contexts of Embedding

Identifying and describing embedded narrative structures is not an end in itself. Having established the terms to use in discussing embedded narratives, some consideration must be given to their purposes and effects. The focus of the rest of this chapter will be on attempts to explain the function of embedding, beginning with accounts of the historical context of embedding and then moving into more modern criticism — in particular, the variety of critical responses to the use of embedding in *The Turn of the Screw*.

A number of critics have linked narrative embedding with the oral storytelling tradition. Embedding a narrative within an introductory frame is thought to have been important, particularly in medieval texts, as a way of bridging the gap between a culture of oral and communal storytelling and the more isolated experience of reading a text. Bonnie

Irwin calls this a “continuity of reception between the act of listening and that of reading” (35). According to this approach the first narrative level functions in a similar way to the performance aspect of the storyteller's role, and is perhaps to some extent a substitute for it. There would seem to be some historical evidence for this. Certainly, a great number of embedded narratives have as their first level story an oral storytelling situation. *The Canterbury Tales* takes this form, as does *The Thousand and One Nights*. Even *The Turn of the Screw*, written much later, represents a fireside telling of tales. This explanation, however, is problematic in that it ignores the use of embedding as a device *in* oral narratives. Lee Haring points out that embedded narratives were common in oral storytelling in independent traditions in India, parts of Africa, and Ireland (229–230). This does not entirely eliminate the argument that embedded narratives were used as a bridge between oral and written narrative: imitation of the forms common in spoken tales may well have been useful in early texts. However, this is a different kind of claim from explaining the frame itself as an imitation of, or replacement for, the performance situation of traditional storytelling. If arguing merely that framing is a device lifted from such traditional tales, one must still ask why this device was initially used in oral narrative.

Some critics studying texts from the Middle Ages and earlier have suggested that the practice of embedding is significant because of its usefulness in packaging and transmitting narratives, both oral and written. In fact, the term “frame tale”, or “frame narrative”, is sometimes used to describe

a fictional narrative (usually prose but not necessarily so) composed primarily for the purpose of presenting other narratives. A frame tale depicts a series of oral storytelling events in which one or more characters in the frame tale are also narrators of the interpolated tales. (Irwin 28)

This is, of course, a fairly limited subset of embedded narratives according to the definition set out in this chapter. Irwin stresses that the category excludes not only “collections of tales that do not have a primarily narrative frame”, but also “more complex narratives that would retain much of their significance without the inclusion of the interpolated tales” (*Ibid.* 29). She is dealing, then, only with the type of “frame” that seems best suited to the reductive approach discussed earlier.

The ability of narratives to be exchanged between texts and embedded in different first-level narratives is central to the “frame tale” concept. Both Gittes and Irwin are interested in embedding as a form of narrative packaging, operating in a modular system where “an interpolated tale can stand alone or reappear in a different frame, albeit with a different connotation” (*Ibid.* 28). There is a lot riding on Irwin's qualifier, though: even though Irwin and Gittes argue for the frame tale as a modular form, it

has an impact on the stories it encompasses extending far beyond that of mere gathering and juxtaposition. The frame tale provides a context for reading, listening, and, of course, interpreting the interior tales. (*Ibid.*)

Though the parts may be in some sense interchangeable, their meaning is not fixed at the level of the individual narrative part. Narratives which might, *in another instance*, stand alone or form part of another text nevertheless contribute meaning to the work as a whole — a point obscured by focusing on the modularity of the structure. Even where embedded narratives *have* historically been transplanted from one text to another, the end product in each case constitutes a different work. Moreover, if a different frame tale can result in a change of meaning, however subtle, for an embedded narrative, it seems important to ask what the nature of the change is and how it is produced.

David Herman makes the claim “that framed narratives function as both models for and vehicles of shared thinking, or socially distributed cognition” (358). The text, in this view, is a system for *generating* meaning or knowledge rather than simply a vessel. The addition of narrative levels adds additional components to the system: a new discourse-story relationship, another narrator and potentially another narratee, and in some cases a whole new world, or ontological level. The addition of elements such as these to the system not only adds to the volume of information, but also the number of component relationships. Furthermore, Herman argues, embedding describes the historical consciousness of the present. An embedded narrative represents a link with the past, and the relaying of knowledge from one mind to another. Although it is common to talk of an embedded narrative as being “inside” that which embeds it, with one narrative acting as a kind of box for the other, Herman instead characterises the relationship between levels as a chain leading from the past to the present.⁹

Although the ideas discussed thus far — transition from oral to written literature, the ability to package stories in a modular way, and Herman's value-added concept of embedding — may provide some explanation for the rise of the embedded narrative, they are also incomplete accounts. While they address the historical and cultural circumstances, they do not tackle the meaning or intention of the device within individual works of literature. Looking at texts that are hundreds of years old, preceding any formal records of authorship, or at least significant information about the author, it may be appropriate to consider embedded narration in terms of cultural rather than artistic significance. When approaching

⁹ Although Herman looks at embedded narratives as representing the past, this is not always the case, although it is common. The defining feature of the embedding relationship is not time but mediation.

examples of narrative embedding in contemporary works attributable to known authors, the hermeneutic angle is of primary concern.

Here is the Document: Embedding and Authority

Part of embedding's purpose may lie in the authority embedding lends — or at least can lend — to the embedded narrative. The embedding narrative is an opportunity to vouch for the authenticity of the narrative it embeds. The first narrative level rarely just presents the second: more commonly, it provides context for the embedded narrative, attributes it to a specific person, and establishes its credentials. In this regard, narrative embedding is arguably of particular use “to writers dealing with the supernatural” (Jones 112). One technique is especially prevalent in Gothic works: the introduction of a second-level narrative as an allegedly factual document. Embedding's popularity in the genre may perhaps be attributed to tales of the supernatural inducing more terror if there is an aid to the suspension of disbelief. This “found text” device is present in *The Turn of the Screw*. *Frankenstein* is also an embedded narrative — doubly so, in fact: the first narrative level consists of Robert Walton's letters, which embed Frankenstein's narrative, which in turn embeds a third level narrated by the Monster. *The Castle of Otranto*, usually credited as the starting point of the Gothic genre, first appeared under a pseudonym, with a preface “supposedly written by William Marshall, who has found and translated the original Italian text of Onuphrio Muralto” (Garrett 46). Although this preface is revealed in the preface to the second edition to be a ruse, its presence in the original made the central narrative of *Otranto* into a found text similar to the governess's narrative in *The Turn of the Screw*. *Dracula*, although not strictly speaking an example of embedded narrative, uses the epistolary form in a similar manner: the novel is

composed of a patchwork of documents — mostly letters and journal entries — ascribed to various different authors, creating the impression of a series of corroborating sources.

In *The Turn of the Screw*, Douglas not only provides background information on the governess and her tale, but also gives a character reference: “She was the most agreeable woman I'd ever known in her position; she'd have been worthy of any whatever” (James 117). Douglas confers authority on her narrative not by virtue of being a participant in, or witness to, the events she relates — either of which would make him an insider to the narrative, and potentially render him suspect. Rather, he vouches for the document indirectly by vouching for its author. The written nature of the embedded narrative may also be a factor here:

“The skeptic may scoff at the ghosts, the haunting, the sorcery: but James answers — here is the 'document'.” In this way the tale achieves an air of authenticity. (Jones 112–113)

Yet this is a fragile kind of authority to confer. It is dependent on the perceived reliability of the character or narrator at the first narrative level. Douglas, for instance, undermines his credibility somewhat — and, by extension, the governess's — by revealing his romantic connection with her. “I liked her extremely”, he admits, “and am glad to this day to think she liked me too” (James 117). If the reader is in any doubt about Douglas's meaning, his audience certainly is not:

...Mrs Griffin spoke. 'Well, if I don't know who she was in love with I know who *he* was.'

'She was ten years older,' said her husband.

'*Raison de plus* — at that age! But it's rather nice, his long reticence.' (*Ibid.* 118)

Though his voice adds weight to her testimony, the nature of his relationship with the governess calls into question Douglas's neutrality and his judgement where the governess is concerned.

Unreliability and Ambiguity

Embedding narratives introduce and often vouch for the narratives they embed. However, they also separate the reader from the embedded narratives. Early commentators on *The Turn of the Screw* tended to ignore, or at least gloss over, its first narrative level. If the first narrator was considered at all, it was as a kind of stand-in for the author himself. This cast the first-level narrative as a kind of author's note, rather than a true part of the work:

[B]ecause the frame is introductory and therefore somehow external to, somehow less fictional than, the story the governess tells, [critics and readers have assumed that] James must be speaking *in propria* persona. (Taylor 718)

Early criticism also tended to read *The Turn of the Screw* straightforwardly as a story about two “demon-spirits” (James liii) attempting to possess a pair of young children and “never questioned the governess’ integrity” (Booth 266). That is to say, they assumed that the governess was sanely attempting to protect her charges against a supernatural threat. While it may be coincidence, there does appear to be some correlation between critical interest in the narrative levels of James's novella and scepticism about the Governess’s reliability as a narrator.

Narratorial reliability, or unreliability, is a function of distance between the narrator and the author, or at least the implied author. Wayne Booth, coiner of the term “unreliable narrator”, calls

a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), [and] *unreliable* when he does not. (158–159)

Booth notes that unreliability does not necessarily, or even commonly, equate to lying —

narrators are usually unreliable because they are mistaken rather than dishonest. What is crucial, however, is the difference in values, opinions, or perceptions between the implied author and the narrator. The obvious argument to make here is that, with narrative fiction as with narrative non-fiction, second-hand information is typically seen as less reliable than something received directly from the source. Mediated narratives are by no means *always* unreliable, but a particular narrative's mediacy or immediacy is one of a number of factors on which readers will base their interpretation of reliability.

Yet mediacy seems less of an issue when, as Jones points out, the author or the narrator can say "here is the document". Although the governess's narrative is presented as a copy of a copy, there is no reason to suspect that the text itself has been altered along the way. In fact, it is stressed that the instance of the governess's narrative that forms part of the discourse is taken from the "exact transcript" the first narrator has of the governess's original account (James 119). Perhaps the challenge that embedding presents to the authority of the embedded narrative, then, is about not just mediation, but also alternative points of view. Consider Herman's claims about the number of minds represented increasing the amount of knowledge generated by a text. An additional narrator supplies a fresh voice, and potentially a very different perspective. Most crucially, the presence of multiple narrators provides a context in which to challenge the views of any single narrator, diminishing their authority. Even the attempts to legitimise the embedded narrative can erode its authority. When Jones makes his point about the document being presented as a challenge to naysayers, he notes that "James has disassociated himself from the events recorded by the governess" (112). Although as an advocate of the governess's sanity Jones would like to suggest that the manuscript as a document constitutes proof, his remark calls attention to its role as a disclaimer. This

perfectly illustrates the double movement of reliability in embedded narrative: a kind of authority is passed on to the second-level narrator, but the first-level narrator who grants it remains at arm's length from the embedded narrative, and even as the tale gains credibility, the reader is given the framework to challenge it.

William Goetz has suggested viewing the first-level narrative in *Turn of the Screw* as a kind of instruction manual for reading the text. In this regard, his argument is similar to that put forward by Peter Brooks on *Heart of Darkness*, since Brooks takes another largely overlooked narrative “frame” and suggests that it is central to the meaning of the whole text. Goetz’s reading plays on the relationship between oral and written narrative:

[T]he main function of the opening section is to present an oral situation which explains and motivates the written text that follows. This function conforms to a long novelistic tradition and does not seem to provide any special reason for questioning the authority of the text that Douglas will read. The pertinent question these pages raise is not the reliability of this text in particular so much as the difference between oral stories and written texts in general. (72)

Goetz suggests a number of purposes for embedding the governess's tale within an oral storytelling narrative. Firstly, like Jones, he sees it as a way of “setting the mood [and] molding the generic expectations of *us*, the literary audience” (*Ibid.*). However, at the same time, he is aware of the distancing between the real reader and the audience described in the first-level narrative, effected by Douglas’s dismissal of so many questions that inappropriately pre-empt the text he is preparing to read. Most important to Goetz, however, is the fact that the embedding narrative is “asymmetrical: it does not return at the end” (73). This, he argues, represents the problem of authority in *The Turn of the Screw*, and, more generally, in written narrative:

The “frame” shows us through its incompleteness that there is no easy recourse to an author, whether implied or real, just as for the governess herself there is to be no recourse to the master, her employer.

(Ibid.)

The governess is given sole authority by the master — whom Goetz sees as “a surrogate for the author” — and thus neither she, nor Douglas and his audience, nor the reader can appeal to a more reliable source.

Attempts *have* nevertheless been made to appeal to the “higher authority” of James and his intentions. Because the text itself provides too much ammunition to each side of the argument over the reliability of the governess, numerous critics have attempted to find a final answer in the author’s extra-textual writings. Jose Antonio Alvarez Amores points out that, while both sides of the continuing debate “have collected data in support of their respective hypotheses from the notebooks and from the preface”, this approach has yielded little. As with the “clues” in the governess’s narrative, and in the narrative which embeds it, the notes of the author provide not clarity, but additional ambiguity — a new battleground for the ongoing argument. Owing to this failure, a number of critics, among them Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Kevin Murphy, Louis D. Rubin, Philip M. Weinstein, and Alvarez Amores, have taken up the position that James actually intended “to write a genuinely ambiguous work” (Alvarez Amores). This acceptance of the unresolved ambiguity in James’s novella points towards a similar general position with regard to the role of narrative embedding. One is not forced to choose between presentation of a document as a conferral of narratorial authority, and narrative embedding as a subversion of that same authority — the two can coexist, permanently in tension. As Goetz’s argues, one can confer authority on another, but to do so is necessarily to abdicate that authority for oneself.

Functions of Embedded Narrative

Up to this point, we have been engaging with the function of narrative embedding in terms of the embedding (first-level) narrative's effect on the embedded (second-level) narrative. This, however, is only one side of the equation. It also bears asking what the purpose or function of the embedded narrative is for the narrative that embeds it.

Rimmon-Kenan describes three different classes of function performed, either individually or in combination, by embedded narratives: actional, explicative, and thematic. Embedded narratives with an actional function “maintain or advance the action of the [lower-level] narrative by the sheer fact of being narrated” (Rimmon-Kenan 92). Notably, while the act of narration within the story of the first-level narrative is crucial to this function, the actual second-level narrative may not be. Explicative second-level narratives provide information that is meaningful at the first narrative level; thus, for them “it is the story narrated and not the narration itself that is of primary importance” (*Ibid.*). The thematic function establishes a relationship “of analogy, i.e. similarity and contrast”, between the narrative levels (*Ibid.*). One notable use of the thematic function is in the *mise en abyme*, in which the analogy “verges on identity”, as the embedded narrative mirrors or reproduces in miniature the embedding narrative or the work as a whole (*Ibid.* 93). There is some variation in the use of the term *mise en abyme*, but I will follow Brian McHale's criteria:

First, there must be a demonstrable relation of analogy between the part *en abyme* and the whole, or some substantial and salient aspect of that whole. ...In addition, the candidate must meet the criterion of “secondariness”: ...[i]t must constitute, or belong to, a secondary world, ontologically subordinated to the primary one. (“Cognition *En Abyme*” 176–177)

McHale also makes some suggestions about the function of the *mise en abyme*. He argues that the embedded mirror image can serve as a model for the text as a whole and, by duplicating the structure at a more manageable scale, “render difficult form salient and legible, and the whole text more navigable” (*Ibid.* 180). They can also, he suggests, be “manuals” that explain to the reader certain elements of a text or how to engage with it. Perhaps most interestingly, McHale argues that a *mise en abyme* can function as a metaphorical “map” of some structure or relationship in the real world.

However, embedded narrative — and particularly the *mise en abyme* — can also work to challenge or undermine not merely the themes or arguments of the first-level narrative, but its ontology. Although they can have many other functions, embedded narratives “are often described as devices of self-reflexivity” because they are thought to draw attention to the artifice or illusion of narrative or of the text (Livingston 242). *Mise en abyme* often epitomises this self-reflexive function, playing with logical impossibility by placing the text within itself or by duplicating beyond comprehensibility:

Understood in the purist sense, as a figure of self-embedding, *mise en abyme* evokes infinite regress...

Understood in a more relaxed sense, *mise en abyme* proliferates uncontrollably, turning every text into a network of analogies where everything is mirrored, and finally no distinction is possible between the original and its double... (McHale, “Cognition *En Abyme*” 177)

This is a postmodernist view of embedding reminiscent of an Escher drawing. Yet even here, possibilities of meaning are varied. Infinite regress may be literary playfulness; it may be intended to distance the reader from the narrative or to engage the reader critically; it may have a very specific thematic role in a given text.

At a simple level, embedding packages one or more narratives within another narrative. The embedding, or first-level, narrative contains one or more distinct narratives at the second level, which in turn can contain third-level narratives, and so on. However, these narrative parts are only extricable and modular in terms of their creation, not their interpretation. To replace one embedded narrative with another is to change the text. To interpret an embedded narrative without considering the context of the narrative that embeds it, or to interpret a first-level narrative without considering the importance of narratives embedded within it, is ultimately to interpret a different work. It is important, then, to consider the effect a text's narrative hierarchy has on the meaning of the work as a whole. Embedded narratives can drive the action of the narrative that embeds them, and sometimes help to explain it. They can echo the themes at the first level, but they can also challenge or complicate them. Likewise, an embedding narrative contextualises the embedded narrative, guiding the reader's expectations. A first-level narrator can support or confer authority on the second-level narrator, but can also undermine them. Indeed, sometimes an embedding narrative may do both, and can help maintain tension between competing interpretations, as in *The Turn of the Screw*. What embedding most certainly does not do is *simply* package a narrative. Regardless of brevity or seeming innocuousness, every narrative level is active, and affects the meaning of the other levels.

Chapter Two: Storytelling and the Battle for Belief in *Cloud Atlas*

Introduction

Let us turn now to the first of the two texts that will be the focus of this thesis: David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. In some respects, *Cloud Atlas* bears a strong similarity to Mitchell's earlier novel *Ghostwritten*. Both are novels made up of a number of seemingly self-contained narrative parts. Yet *Cloud Atlas* differs crucially in the relationship between the parts, introducing an unconventional embedded structure. This chapter will focus on the complexities of *Cloud Atlas*'s narrative hierarchy with the aim of demonstrating the way in which the novel's structure affects a reading of the text as a whole. It will be important first of all to apply the theoretical approach outlined in the first chapter to *Cloud Atlas*. At the same time, it will be useful to provide an outline of both the story of the novel and the order in which the story events are depicted in the narrative discourse. Once a working narratological model of the text has been laid out, it will be possible to focus on the interpretational challenges it presents to the reader. Some consideration will then be given to the tension between *Cloud Atlas*'s narrative and ontological hierarchies and the ways in which clashes between these hierarchies might subvert certain conventional assumptions about narrative and story. This will lead, finally, into a discussion of *Cloud Atlas*'s meaning. I will argue that the novel's overall focus is on interrogating the role of storytelling in history and human identity.

Cloud Atlas: An Overview

In order to briefly précis the events described in the narrative without immediate concern for its complex structure, let us begin with an overview of *Cloud Atlas*'s story. It

should be noted that the following ignores any questions about multiple ontological levels — although some of the narratives in *Cloud Atlas* are revealed to be fictional works, this issue, and its consequences, will be dealt with later in the chapter. What is important at this stage is to provide a basic outline of the fictional events and the time-frames in which they are described as occurring.

Cloud Atlas's story begins in the mid nineteenth century,¹⁰ in the Chatham Islands. Adam Ewing, a notary public sailing home to San Francisco, makes the acquaintance of Dr Henry Goose, a confidence artist who slowly poisons him under the guise of medical treatment, and Autua, a young Moriori sailor. Ewing helps Autua to find employment on the ship after he stows away, and Autua repays the favour by saving him from Goose's machinations. *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing* is later published by Ewing's son Jackson.

In 1931, Robert Frobisher, disowned son of a wealthy English family, flees debt and disgrace to become the amanuensis of reclusive composer Vyvyan Ayr. At Ayr's home in Belgium, Frobisher finds an opportunity to develop his music while also looting antique books, including *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing*, to pay his creditors. Frobisher becomes involved sexually with Ayr's wife, but later falls in love with Ayr's daughter Eva. As his master's confidence grows, however, Frobisher becomes increasingly disempowered and finds himself exploited by his hosts. After embarrassing himself with Eva, Frobisher leaves to finish his own magnum opus, and finally commits suicide. His time in Belgium is recounted in the letters sent by Frobisher to his friend, and former lover, Rufus Sixsmith.

¹⁰ Adam Ewing notes the date and month of his entries, but not the year. Coming across this narrative in the next, Robert Frobisher suggests, given that “[m]ention is made of the [San Francisco] gold rush, ...we are in 1849 or 1850” (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* 64).

The mid-nineteen-seventies find Rufus Sixsmith employed as an atomic engineer in Buenas Yervas, California. Sixsmith writes a damning safety report on a new nuclear reactor, but the report is buried. After initially cooperating with the cover-up, he confides in young journalist Luisa Rey. Sixsmith is murdered, but Luisa manages to find his report, along with Frobisher's *Letters from Zedelghem*, and, despite multiple attempts on her own life, goes public with the story.

Around the turn of the century, aging vanity publisher Timothy Cavendish strikes it rich when one of his clients murders an uncomplimentary critic, making his book a runaway success. Unhappy with their meagre share of the book's profits, the author's family threaten Cavendish, and he flees London, carrying little with him but the manuscript for a novel—*Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery*. However, the “hotel” his brother sets him up in turns out to be a retirement home, in which he finds himself trapped. Eventually Cavendish and some new friends manage to escape, and Cavendish is able to publish his memoir, which is subsequently adapted for film.

Approximately one hundred years afterwards, in the East Asian corpocratic state of Nea So Copros,¹¹ a huge consumer class is served by cloned human workers called “fabricants”. The fabricant Sonmi~451 begins to “ascend”, gaining awareness above her station, and is moved to a university to be studied. Here she becomes involved with Hae-Joo Im, an agent of the underground organisation “Union”. After discovering that old fabricants do not retire to Hawaii, but are instead secretly slaughtered for food and bio-matter, Sonmi is inspired to write her fabricant rights tract, *Declarations*. She is then arrested, tried, and

¹¹ In *Sloosha's Crossin'*, Meronym indicates that Nea So Copros is a new name for Korea (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* 291).

questioned for the government's archives. Her last request is to finish watching the *Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish*, a classic film she had been forced to leave in order to evade capture by the authorities.

An unspecified period of time later, a catastrophic event has wiped out all but a few pockets of humanity. Aside from a community of “Prescients”, who retain advanced technology from before “the Fall”, humankind has reverted to a primitive state. “Hawi” is home to one of the most civilized tribes remaining: the Valleysmen, worshippers of the Goddess Sonmi. However, an invasion by a savage neighbouring tribe leaves this civilised people dead or enslaved, except for one young man, Zachry, who escapes to another island with the help of the Prescient Meronym. Meronym leaves him with an “orison” containing a holographic recording of Sonmi~451.

The story above is represented through six major narratives. The term “major narrative”, for the purposes of this chapter, refers to any narrative longer than a page. While this is admittedly an imperfect distinction, it is nevertheless a useful one. The intention is not to disregard the text's shorter narratives — a number of these will be discussed throughout the chapter — but to provide a more readily comprehensible picture of the overarching narrative structure. *Cloud Atlas*'s major narratives are embedded vertically: one within another, within another, and so on, so that each narrative constitutes a distinct level. Whereas in *The Turn of the Screw* the reader is presented with the first narrative level and then the second, *Cloud Atlas*'s discourse begins with the sixth narrative level, and works its way back to the first, one level at a time. At each level, the narrative is truncated before it attains closure. In one case,

the narrative is actually cut off in the middle of a sentence (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* 39).¹² After the first-level narrative — the only one presented as a single piece — the order is reversed, and each major narrative is completed in turn.

The following table presents the major narratives of *Cloud Atlas* in discourse order, along with the approximate time periods in which they take place and their narrative level:

Major Narrative	Part	Time Period	Narrative Level
<i>The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing</i>	First half	c.1850	6
<i>Letters from Zedelghem</i>	First half	1931	5
<i>Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery</i>	First half	c.1975	4
<i>The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish</i>	First half	c.2000	3
<i>An Orison of Sonmi~451</i>	First half	c.2100	2
<i>Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After</i>	Whole text	Unknown (> 2100)	1
<i>An Orison of Sonmi~451</i>	Second half	c.2100	2
<i>The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish</i>	Second half	c.2000	3
<i>Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery</i>	Second half	c.1975	4
<i>Letters from Zedelghem</i>	Second half	1931	5
<i>The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing</i>	Second half	c.1850 – c.1851	6

Each in Its Own Language

As indicated in the table and the story précis, *Cloud Atlas* makes a number of abrupt jumps through time. Each of the major narratives represents events occurring at a remove of one or more generations from any of the others, with almost no crossover between them in

¹² Unless otherwise indicated, all further page references in this chapter are for *Cloud Atlas*.

terms of setting or characters. Rupert Sixsmith crosses the narrative divide between *Half-Lives – The First Luisa Rey Mystery* and *Letters from Zedelghem*, but is almost a non-presence in the latter, interacting with Frobisher more or less only as a narratee. Even Sonmi~451, deified by the tribe of Zachry, the first-level narrator, exists in *Sloosha's Crossin'* only as a recording in a futuristic found text, not as a flesh-and-blood character.

What is more, each of the narratives has not only a different narrator, but also a distinctly different style. *The Pacific Journal* and *Letters from Zedelghem* are, unsurprisingly, both homodiegetic epistolary narratives. Yet even these two are worlds apart in terms of the characterisation of their narrators. Frobisher is an upper-class rogue writing to a close friend, and this is reflected in his tone: he is regularly arrogant or pretentious in his opinions, but his style is conversational, and his sentences are clipped and often unrestricted by proper grammar:

Woke in my Imperial Western suite, Tam Brewer's collectors nearly knocking my door down and much commotion from corridor. Hadn't even waited until I'd shaved – breathtaking vulgarity of these ruffians. (43)

Ewing, in contrast, is an earnest and morally upright professional who writes either for himself or for posterity. His prose, as a consequence, is serious and eloquent, rather than flippant and familiar. *Half-Lives* employs a heterodiegetic narrator with a number of focalising characters. *The Ghastly Ordeal* returns to homodiegetic narration. Unlike *Letters from Zedelghem* and *The Pacific Journal*, however, the narration here is subsequent — narrated as a single piece at the end of the action — rather than interpolated. *An Orison of Sonmi~451* is structured as an interview, so its primary narratee is also a secondary narrator:

Usually, I start by asking interviewees to recall their very earliest memories. You look uncertain.

I have no earliest memories, Archivist. Every day of my life in Papa Song's was as uniform as the fries we vended.

Then would you please describe that world.

It was a sealed dome about eighty metres across... (187)

The language of Sonmi's narrative is also distinctive, with numerous new coinages reflecting the centrality of consumer culture to life in Neo So Copros: "ford" for car (191), "kodak" for photograph (212), et cetera. Brands have supplanted common nouns, and even the brands are no longer respected with capitalisation — Sandrine Sorlin argues that "everything has been de-sacralized, or rather, only one thing is sacred: business" (77). Finally, *Sloosha's Crossin'* is presented as an instance of oral storytelling:

Old Georgie's path an' mine crossed more times'n I'm comfy mem'ryin', an' after I'm died, no sayin' what that fangy devil won't try an' do to me ... so gimme some mutton an' I'll tell you 'bout our first meetin'. (249)

Even more than *An Orison of Sonmi~451*, this narrative is made distinctive by its language — particularly the heavy use of literary dialect.¹³ Sorlin writes: "English seems to have regressed just as humanity has" (76).

The major narratives of *Cloud Atlas* are peculiar not just in their differences between them, but also in their length and even treatment. With even the shortest running for more than 70 pages, each major narrative is of sufficient size and detail to prompt a number of reviewers to call them works in their own right. Jeff Turrentine of *The Washington Post* claims that "[w]hat appears at first glance to be a novel is in fact six novellas"; Peter Keough

¹³ Pronunciation spelling.

labels them “mini-novels”. Bearing in mind the arguments of the previous chapter, however, it would be inappropriate to *treat* these narratives as isolated works. Although its parts may *appear* to stand independently, *Cloud Atlas* is not a collection of short stories or novellas; it is a novel, a single unitary narrative. Nevertheless, the relative equality of the major narratives in terms of size is interesting, as is the critical reaction to it. There is little chance of calling any of the narratives a mere frame. The temporal distance between characters and events also feeds into this, as do the stylistic differences of the major narratives. No part of *Cloud Atlas* attracts that false label “dispensable” in the way that shorter embedding narratives sometimes have.

Furthermore, Mitchell's novel works against this kind of reductivism by denying the reader a steady spatiality according to which something can *be* “outside” the “main” part of the text. Part of the logic of ignoring a frame depends on its perceived externality to what is considered to be the main story: the frame is something that packages the text but is not crucial to its meaning. As argued in the first chapter, this is a flawed approach to critical reading. In *The Turn of the Screw*, the first narrative *is* clearly exterior to the governess's narrative — although it still remains crucial to the novella as a whole. Because of its reversed structure, *Cloud Atlas* suggests two competing models of where the inside and the outside of the text lie. On one hand, there is the order presented in the narrative discourse — which is essentially the inside and the outside of *Cloud Atlas* as a physical book. Here, *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing* is the alpha and omega, enclosing all of the other narratives. On the other hand, there is the hierarchy of narrative embedding, in which all of the other narratives are subordinated to, or contained within, *Sloosha's Crossin'*. The tension between these two

models, which is alluded to within the text itself, frustrates any attempt to clearly identify — let alone discard — narrative frames.

The manner in which the embedded structure is revealed also works against reductive readings of embedding that view frames as chaff to be discarded. Each major narrative begins without external introduction, and is only later introduced in the narrative that embeds it. Because the sixth narrative level comes first, then the fifth, and so on, each narrative is initially experienced by the reader without their knowing that it is embedded. Not only do the narrative levels appear in the reverse of the normal order, with each new narrative in the first half of the novel a kind of “zooming out”, but the fact that the previous narrative has receded away from the reader is not even apparent until some way through the next one, when the necessary information on embedding is provided. The reader is thus repeatedly forced to re-contextualise past narratives as subsequent ones present them in new ways. In *The Turn of the Screw*, the embedded narrative is immediately preceded by a description of its recitation, which is an action in the story: “Douglas... had begun to read with a fine clearness that was like a rendering to the ear of the beauty of his author's hand” (James 122). In *Cloud Atlas*, however, the reader is only informed that *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing* is an embedded text after he or she has already read half of it: it is not until more than twenty pages into the following narrative that Robert Frobisher finds “the edited journal of a voyage from Sydney to California by a notary of San Francisco named Adam Ewing” (64). Similarly, in *Half-Lives*, it is not until chapter 17 that “Dr Rufus Sixsmith reads a sheaf of letters written to him nearly half a century ago by his friend Robert Frobisher” (112) — although in this case the reader should at least recognise Sixsmith's name from the outset, and thus realise that there is some connection with the *Letters*. The eleven pages of *The Ghastly Ordeal* before Cavendish

receives “a package ... containing a MS titled *Half-Lives*” (157–158) seem short in comparison. In *An Orison of Sonmi~451*, it is not until a couple of pages before the end of the first part that Hae-Joo shows Sonmi “one of the greatest movies ever made by any director, from any age”: *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish* (243). The deification of Sonmi notwithstanding, *Sloosha's Crossin'* only introduces the recording of Sonmi about twenty-five pages in, when Zachry rifles through Meronym's belongings and finds her egg-like “orison”.¹⁴

In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks puts forward the concept of reading in “*anticipation of retrospection*” (23). That is: a reader is concerned not just with what they are reading at any given moment, but also with fitting what they are currently reading into an understanding of the text as a whole. In fiction — and, indeed, in some non-fiction — an event is not just something that happens, but something that causes other events, something which may become meaningful, or more meaningful, in the context of the ending, when the text as a whole is known. Readers can anticipate cause and effect and attempt to decipher clues. In instances of narrative embedding, they may reasonably anticipate a closed embedded structure: that an embedded narrative will be completed and the discourse will return to the first level. This is not always the case, of course. Just as a story event may have unexpected effects, or fail to have the effects expected, and just as a clue may turn out to be a red herring, the reader's expectations of embedding may be subverted by the text. *The Turn of the Screw*, for example, has an open structure of embedding, and never returns to the first narrative level.

¹⁴ Zachry's interaction with the orison makes a “ghost-girl” appear. Based on Zachry's description of her narrative — “she was talkin' in Old'un tongue, an' not p'formin' none, jus' answerin' questions what a man's hushly voice asked” (277) — it seems reasonable to assume that this recording is *An Orison of Sonmi~451*.

By throwing the reader into new narratives without warning or context, *Cloud Atlas* goes further still — this is not subversion of expectations so much as it is a complete surprise, at least initially. These abrupt changes do, however, encourage the reader to read in anticipation of making sense of the connection between the narratives. The shock of each sudden shift to a new narrative may be alienating, but it also challenges the reader to attune themselves to possible clues — whatever can help them understand how the text as a whole fits together. After a few shifts, a pattern is observable: each narrative is broken off before conclusion and a new narrative, set forward in time, begins. Then, as the second half of the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly reasonable to expect that each major narrative will be concluded in turn. One may also anticipate that, by the end, the connections between the narratives will have become clear. However, these connections raise a new set of issues for the articulation of the novel's structure.

Irreconcilable Embedding

Problematically, *Cloud Atlas* seems to have parts that are irreconcilable as embedded narratives within the first narrative level. The narratee in *Sloosha's Crossin'*, according to the narrative logic of the embedding described, hears Zachry's tale and is then presented with the orison, giving access in turn to Sonmi's narrative,¹⁵ which implicitly presents *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish*, and, in turn, *Half-Lives*, *Letters from Zedelghem*, and *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing*. Obviously this is a complex and multi-layered narrative structure, and some of the challenges it presents have been discussed already. The particular

¹⁵ Actually, even at this level, things are fraught. There is a change in narrator at the very end of *Sloosha's Crossin'*, starting with the line “Zachry my old pa was a wyrd buggah” (324). So it is unclear whether Zachry's story is familiar to Zachry's offspring's narratee or if it has just been retold. Nevertheless, *this* narratee is implicitly given the orison.

problem here, however, is narrative *access*. How are all of these narratives supposed to be presented as part of an act of oral storytelling?

Issues arise with *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish* because there appear to be two different texts — different, although closely related — that bear this name: a written memoir and a film adaptation of that memoir. The latter, to which the reader has no direct access, is introduced in *An Orison of Sonmi~451*; the former is the narrative which appears within the book *Cloud Atlas* — first preceding, and later following, Sonmi's narrative. This disconnect occurs because Sonmi does not actually *read* Cavendish's memoir; she introduces it as a “film from the early twenty-first century” (243) — meaning Cavendish's hopes for such an adaptation have been realised:

I shall find a hungry ghostwriter to turn these notes you've been reading into a film script of my own.
(403)

The question, then, is how the lower-level narrators and narratees are supposed to have access to *The Ghastly Ordeal* and to the higher-level narratives embedded within Cavendish's narrative. If Sonmi is watching the film version, then the *book* of *The Ghastly Ordeal* is *not* in fact an embedded text within *An Orison of Sonmi~451*. The textual version of *The Ghastly Ordeal* could perhaps be intended to stand for the film version. However, the problem of access to the higher-level narratives apparently embedded within Cavendish's narrative would remain unless one hypothesizes that the full text of *Half-Lives*, all of the *Letters*, and *The Pacific Journal* are all embedded within the film. Such a reading is neither plausible, nor supported by evidence in the text.

Questions of how multiple narratives in different media can be embedded within a supposedly oral communication may be able to be resolved by reconsidering the text in terms of Meronym's "orison". This device can be used to view holographic recordings:

So hungrysome was my curio, I held it again, an' the egg vibed warm till a ghost-girl flickered'n'appeared there! Yay, a ghost-girl, right 'bove the egg, as truesome as I'm sittin' here, her head'n'neck was jus' floatin' there, like 'flection in moonwater an' she was *talkin'*!

...Fin'ly I cogged the ghost-girl weren't talkin' to me an' cudn't see me. (276–277)

It can also be used for communication:

Suddenwise the ghost-girl vanished back into that egg an' a man took her place. A ghost-Prescient he was, this-un *could* see me an' fiercesome he speaked at me. *Who are you, boy, an' where is Meronym?* (277)

Essentially, the orison seems to be a kind of portable computer. If one considers the novel's embedded narratives to represent an interaction with the orison, which one might reasonably expect to be able to display written texts as well as holographic recordings, and which could, theoretically, access the written version of *The Ghastly Ordeal* in lieu of the film, then the narrative embedding in *Cloud Atlas* need not be resolved logically into an act of oral storytelling. Rather than a telescopic hierarchy, this kind of reading sees the orison as a kind of hypertext artifact, and positions all the major narratives except for *Sloosha's Crossin'* on a single narrative level, all embedded directly within *Sloosha's Crossin'*. This idea of non-linear reading is important in the context of *House of Leaves*, a hypertext novel in print form, and will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Another potential solution to the problem is to recast embedding in different terms. Marie-Laure Ryan does this when she suggests the usefulness of computer programming terminology to narratology:

The phenomenon of embedding could also be described through the computer-inspired metaphor of stacking and the accompanying operations of pushing and popping: every time the text enters a new level, it “pushes” a story on a stack of narratives awaiting completion; every time a story is completed, it is “popped,” and attention returns to the previous level. All the levels of the stack must be cognitively accessible to the reader — otherwise she could not form a global representation of the narrative or adequately assess the function of the current level — but only the top level is narratively active, in the sense that it must be brought to a satisfactory closure before discourse can return to the representation of the preceding level. (121)

Ryan is here looking at embedded narrative in terms of a spatial relationship — “the top level” — as well as the temporal dimension — “the current level” — introduced by stacking, pushing, and popping. However, what seems to be really important in this computer-inspired schema is not which level is the top, but rather which is on top *now*. That is: “top” is defined not in terms of a constant spatial or hierarchical relationship with the other parts of the text, but rather in terms of a relationship with the reader. The narrative facing the reader at any given moment is always the “top” narrative in this sense, regardless of subordination relations.

Whether one of the above approaches can be systematically applied to *Cloud Atlas* is a fairly complex issue. In spite of its non-traditional structure, there are definite cues to the reader suggesting that *Cloud Atlas* should be understood as a narrative hierarchy. The presence of each major narrative is acknowledged in the narrative that follows — the written narratives have readers in other narratives, and so on. However, aspects of the novel's structure seem continually to resist at the very least a simple account of embedding. Each major narrative is presented without any initial cues indicating mediation. This issue has been approached thus far as a complicating factor in interpreting the embedded structure —

something that serves to *hide* the embedding or delay revelation of it. Yet it is also possible that this lack of introduction to the embedding or mediation is meant to signal that such a relationship does not exist. The major narratives might also be thought of merely as a single narrative level, comparable to Mitchell's earlier novel *Ghostwritten*. *Ghostwritten* features nine homodiegetic narrators, with each narrative subtly interwoven into another through causal connections in the story, with seemingly minor events in one driving the primary action in another. For *Cloud Atlas*, such a reading would mean that the reference to each narrative indicates a connection between them, but not a relationship of embedding. While this would eliminate some of the problems identified with the supposed narrative hierarchy of the novel, it also diminishes the importance of the relationships between the major narratives and yields a less integrated view of the text as a whole. No one model manages to capture *Cloud Atlas*'s structure in an entirely satisfactory way. Throughout this chapter, we will see how *Cloud Atlas* challenges the reader by presenting competing structural models by which it can be interpreted.

Musical Models

In this single novel, Mitchell presents six major narratives, each belonging to a different genre or style, and each recounting events at a sizeable temporal remove from the others. Furthermore, because of the way the novel's discourse is structured, the cues that indicate narrative embedding are initially withheld from the reader. Mitchell's work is presented as a single novel, and thus one expects a certain unity. However, the reader is initially presented with a series of beginnings of narratives, the connections between which are not readily apparent. Because of this, part of the challenge — and part of the pleasure — of reading *Cloud Atlas* is in finding patterns and establishing relationships between the

novel's disparate parts. Mitchell leaves clues throughout the text suggesting interpretations of its structure. Mitchell has elsewhere noted that he frequently uses music as a metaphor for writing, so it is unsurprising to find that three of the most notable clues appear in *Letters from Zedelghem* as titles for pieces of music: *The Matruschyka Doll Variations*, *Cloud Atlas Sextet*, and *Eternal Recurrence*.

Vyvyan Ayrs's composition "*The Matruschyka Doll Variations*" (52) suggests a comparison between the text and a set of Russian dolls. On the face of it, this illustrates the layout of the novel rather well: each narrative breaks in half to reveal another level within. The image is repeated further on, in *An Orison of Sonmi-451*, when Sonmi and Hae-Joo pass a hawker of grotesque carnival attractions, such as "Madame Matryoshka and Her Pregnant Embryo" (353). Isaac Sachs, the scientist who finally delivers Sixsmith's safety report on the reactor to Luisa Rey, also contributes to *Cloud Atlas*'s affair with the Russian dolls. Moments before his death he jots the following "model of time" in his notebook:

an infinite matrioshka doll of painted moments, each 'shell' (the present) encased inside a next of 'shells' (previous presents) I call the actual past but which we *perceive* as the virtual past. The doll of 'now' likewise encases a nest of presents yet to be, which I call the actual future but which we *perceive* as the virtual future. (409)

The image of the Russian dolls is supposed to mirror the containment of a number of like things — in this case, narratives — within one another. If we consider the physical book, *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing* appears to be the exterior narrative: it is at the beginning and the end of the novel. Opening up this first narrative "doll", one is presented with *Letters from Zedelghem*, and so on, until the doll in the centre, *Sloosha's Crossin'*, which is the only one

not to contain another. Certainly, this is the model suggested by Sachs: the present in his version being “encased” in “previous presents” and likewise encasing “presents yet to be”.

Unfortunately, closer observation reveals a problem with the Russian doll analogy. *Cloud Atlas* offers two competing spatial models; two versions of externality. In terms of the physical layout of the book — the order of the narrative discourse — *The Pacific Journal* is on the outside. To use Sachs's terminology: Ewing's narrative “encases” the other narratives. However, in terms of narrative embedding — the logic of subordination, or mediacy — *The Pacific Journal* is contained within *Letters from Zedelghem*, and so on. This would make *Sloosha's Crossin'* not the small doll in the centre, but the largest doll that contains all of the others. The matryoshka model could be applied to both ways of looking at the text, but either way it fails to take into account what is really interesting, which is the duality of the structure. *Cloud Atlas* maintains a tension between these two models, embedding and encasing, which is never resolved. What is more, the analogy between embedded narratives and Russian dolls is not new — Brian McHale refers to Russian dolls in explaining recursive structures in narrative (*Postmodernist Fiction* 112), and indeed can be used to describe any number of texts that have multiple narratives with closed vertical embedding.

The dolls, then, are not a perfect metaphor for the text, and cannot alone make complete sense of its structural oddities. Nevertheless, this model is one way in which the text explains itself, and certain aspects of the model are useful in understanding how *Cloud Atlas* works. The term matryoshka, literally translated as “little matron” (*OED Online*), is suggestive not only of embedding, but also of a passage through time — specifically, a movement between generations. “Madame Matryoshka and Her Pregnant Embryo” is an apt, if somewhat graphic, illustration of this. The embedding of generations may also account for

Cloud Atlas's abrupt shifts in time. Although they represent a progression through generations, as a model of time the dolls are not continuous, but discrete. Even in Sachs's "infinite matrioshka doll of painted moments" the unit of time is atomic. Although his model is infinite, Sachs does not talk of the present as the meeting point between a continuous past and a continuous future. Rather, he characterizes time as consisting of "previous presents" and "presents yet to be". The matryoshka model does, therefore, provide some explanation both for the embedding — or encasing — structure and the discontinuous periods of story time that the narratives relate. Yet it does not by any means yield a complete understanding of the text's structure.

The second musical model in the *Letters* comes in Frobisher's own magnum opus, eventually entitled *Cloud Atlas Sextet*:

Spent the fortnight gone in the music room, reworking my year's fragments into a 'sextet for overlapping soloists': piano, clarinet, 'cello, flute, oboe and violin, each in its own language of key, scale and colour. In the 1st set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the 2nd, each interruption is recontinued, in order. Revolutionary or gimmicky? Shan't know until it's finished... (463)

Since, by this late stage, the book's structure is clear to the reader, the similarity with the sextet is obvious even without the two sharing a title. Moreover, Frobisher's music comes much closer to modeling the book than the Russian Dolls do. Not only does it explicitly divide into six parts, but the different instruments, "each in its own language of key, scale and colour", are also suggestive of the various voices and genres in the novel. This *mise en abyme* composition also handily describes the interruptive nature of the successive parts,

since *Cloud Atlas*'s narratives' first halves are broken off in this way also.¹⁶ Notably, though, *Cloud Atlas Sextet* as a model for the text does not deal at all with the subordination relationships between the major narratives. Unlike the narratives — and the Russian dolls — the soloists are not embedded. Although the soloists are overlapping, which is suggestive of the links between the major narratives, there is no hierarchy of instruments. As such, *Cloud Atlas Sextet* suggests a very different way of approaching the novel from *The Matryoshka Doll Variations*. The latter treats *Cloud Atlas*, in spite of its inverted structure, as essentially a vertically embedded series of narratives; the former looks away from conventional embedding and perhaps points towards the alternative structural readings discussed earlier: the hypertext or stacking approaches to *Cloud Atlas*'s constituent narratives. Each of the suggested models has its merits and its problems. However, it may be that the very purpose here is to highlight the interpretive decision the reader makes — the manner in which they construct the story as they read the discourse.

The *Letters* also introduce another piece of music which describes one of the central themes of the novel: Frobisher's master, Vyvyan Ayrs, plans "a final, symphonic major work, to be named *Eternal Recurrence* in honour of his beloved Nietzsche" (84). It might be supposed that the concept of eternal recurrence or eternal return also provides a kind of structural model for the text. The eternal return in the work of Nietzsche involves the repetition of all time. History as a whole plays out over and over again, so each "individual

¹⁶ The frustration of the reader at the unfinished tales is mirrored by that of the surrogate readers within the text — similar to the second-person protagonist(s) in Italo Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller*, from which David Mitchell took inspiration (Turrentine). Frobisher laments that a "half-read book is a half-finished love affair" (65), and Sonmi's "last request" is to see the remainder of *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish* (365), the film she and Hae-Joo "abandoned" in their flight from the authorities (329).

[should] live in such a way as he would be willing to have the life he has chosen recur again and again eternally” (Chessick 52). As Frobisher puts it in his final letter:

Nietzsche’s gramophone record. When it ends, the Old One plays it again, for an eternity of eternities.

Time cannot permeate this sabbatical. We do not stay dead long. Once my Luger lets me go, my birth, next time around, will be upon me in a heartbeat. In thirteen years from now we’ll meet again at Gresham, ten years later I’ll be back in this same room, holding this same gun, composing this same letter, my resolution as perfect as my many-headed sextet. Such elegant certainties comfort me. (490)

As will be discussed shortly, there are thematic concerns that recur throughout the major narratives, and there is also a strong suggestion that various main characters from the different narratives are reincarnations of the same soul. One might also point to the circularity of the novel’s structure as tying in with the idea of the eternal return. It is hardly worthwhile to argue that *Cloud Atlas* is circular by virtue of its closed embedded structure,¹⁷ since a great many embedded narratives are “circular” in this regard. What is interesting, however, is the particular narrative that is returned to: not, as would usually be the case with closed narrative embedding, the latest, but the earliest, chronologically speaking. This narrative return is mirrored in the overarching story, with human society advancing into the high-tech future of *An Orison of Sonmi-451* and then all but destroying itself, leaving behind the primitive societies of *Sloosha’s Crossin’*. The history of the Maori and the Moriori and the enslavement of Zachry’s people by the Kona are very similar in terms of their power dynamic: in each case, a pacific and civilised people is dominated or destroyed by a barbarous and warlike one. Ewing’s narrative even returns the novel finally to Hawaii: “Boerhaave could not be in Heaven nor Autua in Hell so we must be in Honolulu” (525).

¹⁷ Returning to the narrative it begins with.

Although Ayr's fondness for Nietzsche suggests a connection with the German philosopher, *Cloud Atlas's* presentation of recurrence is a far cry from the concept described in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The recurrence of events, or even souls, over the course of history does not agree with this idea at all. Mitchell's use of recurrence in *Cloud Atlas* seems to focus more on ideas about history repeating itself than on a strict interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy. The novel pushes this case both through repetition of thematic concerns and through the spiritual continuity afforded by reincarnation.

The Circuitry of Power

Although they are temporally displaced from one another, and have widely different settings and genres, *Cloud Atlas's* major narratives do hang together thematically. Of prime importance throughout the novel are the themes of power and predation — two of Mitchell's favourites.¹⁸ Each of *Cloud Atlas's* major narratives is concerned with one or more power imbalances. In *Sloosha's Crossin'* and *The Pacific Journal* — as discussed above — it is the subjugation of one race or tribe by another. *An Orison of Sonmi-451* involves a variation on this: the fabricants are an underclass essentially enslaved by the higher classes. Even *The Ghastly Ordeal* has one group subjected to the apparently unjust and authoritarian rule of another: Cavendish characterises the dominance of Aurora House's nurses and other staff over the elderly residents as “tyranny” (379), and makes numerous comparisons between the retirement home and prison. *Half-Lives*, similarly, deals with corruption and the abuse of power by corporations.

¹⁸ “[Leigh Wilson]: Are you aware of a particular theme or motif that you would recognize as running through your work, something that you might consider as characterizing your work?”

[David Mitchell]: Predation; causality; how the mind works; history; language; the circuitry of power; eschatology; escapism; memory... ; love.” (Tew, Tolan and Wilson 97)

Mitchell also considers these dynamics in relationships between individuals. Ewing's narrative features both his own deception and exploitation at the hands of Henry Goose, and the isolation and degradation of the young sailor Raphael, on whom "the unnatural crimes of Sodom were visited ... by [first mate] Boerhaave & his "garter-snakes" (518), prompting the guilt-ridden young sailor to take his own life. In *Letters from Zedelghem*, the focus is firmly on the smaller scale of power in personal relationships: the apparent fine balance between declining master Ayrs and rising protégé Frobisher is upset as the former uses his social and musical standing to take advantage of his talented amanuensis, plagiarising parts of the protagonist's music. The conflict here is a struggle for creative dominance, but it is also connected with sexual politics: first Ayrs's wife Jocasta uses her physical relationship with Frobisher to convince him to stay at Zedelghem, and then Ayrs uses this relationship to blackmail him, threatening to make it known that "Frobisher forced himself on purblind Vyvyan Ayrs's wife" (474).

The major narratives, divided as they are by time, genre and the rest, nonetheless show a degree of cohesion in their themes. Mitchell uses the different styles and settings to explore variations on a few of his fundamental concerns. However, while there is thematic unity here, it is a loose continuity, not a clear pattern, and does not amount to a concrete structural system that would explain the relationship of the narrative parts.

Like Clouds Cross Skies

Recurrence shows up once again in the novel's reincarnation motif.¹⁹ Mitchell ties his protagonists together through a distinctive shared birthmark that “resembles a comet” (85). Robert Frobisher and Luisa Rey both have it, and it is implied that Cavendish does too. Although he resists identifying himself with Rey and Frobisher — noting sarcastically that a previous lover called *his* birthmark “Timbo’s Turd” (373) — the reader is trusted to see past his scepticism, and realise that a single mark might be seen by different eyes as either “Turd” or “comet”. Despite birthmarks being “genomed out” of fabricants, Sonmi-451 carries the imperfection also, as does Meronym in *Sloosha’s Crossin’*. In fact, of all the major narratives, only *The Pacific Journal* lacks a reference to the comet birthmark.

The idea that this mark signifies the reincarnation of a single soul is cemented in *Half-Lives*. When Frobisher's letters to Sixsmith make their way into Luisa Rey’s hands, she is disturbed by

the dizzying vividness of the images of places and people that the letters have unlocked. Images so vivid she can only call them memories. The pragmatic journalist’s daughter would, and did, explain away these ‘memories’ ...but a detail in one letter freezes this explanation in its tracks. Robert Frobisher mentions a comet-shaped birthmark between his shoulder-blade and collar-bone. (121–122)

That Rey’s birthmark, in the same spot, is also “undeniably shaped like a comet” pulls her up short in spite of her cynicism. The centrality of reincarnation to the structure of the novel is emphasised in *Sloosha’s Crossin’*. For Zachry's tribe, there is an important association of souls with clouds: “Souls cross the skies o' time, Abbess'd say, like clouds crossin' skies o'the

¹⁹ Although, as already noted, this is not the eternal return of the kind Nietzsche refers to in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

world” (318). Zachry repeats this same idea as he describes his flight from the island that had been his entire world:

I watched clouds awobbly from the floor o' that kayak. Souls cross ages like clouds cross skies, an' tho' a cloud's shape nor hue nor size don't stay the same it's still a cloud an' so is a soul. Who can say where the cloud's blowed from or who the soul'll be 'morrow? Only Sonmi the east an' the west an' the compass an' the atlas, yay, only the atlas o' clouds. (324)

This idea of clouds as a metaphor for souls provides yet another model of the text: as a whole, *Cloud Atlas* may be read as a map of one soul's path through “the skies o' time” — that is, history.

The device of reincarnation unites characters otherwise only tangentially linked by the acts of narration and reading. It provides a fictive spiritual continuity and an overarching plot thread which pulls multiple narratives into one. Reincarnation also makes sense of the temporal distance between the major narratives. If one accepts that the series of main characters constitute one soul, repeatedly reincarnated, then each new episode *must* be generations later in order to accommodate the soul being reborn in a new guise. Reincarnation can't be played out unless characters are given time to die. What is more, the close association between clouds and souls in the first-level narrative provides an explanation for the novel's title. Reincarnation as a unifying force in the novel is, however, more complicated than it may initially seem. Since some of the embedded texts are represented as fictional in relation to the narratives that embed them, the novel is made up of a number of ontological levels.

The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing, Letters from Zedelghem, and Half-Lives – The First Luisa Rey Mystery have a relatively unproblematic relationship. *The Pacific Journal* is simply a found text in the *Letters*:

Poking through an alcove of books in my room I came across a curious dismembered volume, and I want you to track down a complete copy for me. It begins on the 99th page, its covers are gone, its binding unstitched. From what little I can glean, it's the edited journal of a voyage from Sydney to California by a notary of San Francisco named Adam Ewing. Mention is made of the gold rush, so I suppose we are in 1849 or 1850. The journal seems to be published posthumously, by Ewing's son (?). (64)²⁰

Frobisher does suggest that there is “[s]omething shifty about the journal's authenticity” — that it “seems too structured for a genuine diary, and its language doesn't quite ring true...” (*Ibid.*). However, Frobisher's suspicions are uncorroborated and inconclusive. So, even though concerns are raised about *The Pacific Journal*'s status as a non-fiction text, it will be useful to seek out a more concrete example. The reader is given no reason to doubt the authenticity of the *Letters from Zedelghem*, embedded within *Half-Lives*:

In his hotel room at the Bon Voyage, Dr Rufus Sixsmith reads a sheaf of letters written to him nearly half a century ago by his friend Robert Frobisher. (112)

The heterodiegetic narrator of *Half-Lives* has access to thoughts of the various focalisers, and often allows the reader vital information that the focalising character does not possess — as is the case in the lead-up to Isaac Sachs's death:

²⁰ The son in question, Jackson Ewing, has by this stage already contributed a footnote to *The Pacific Journal* (21). The younger Ewing arguably constitutes an intermediate narrative level between his father and Robert Frobisher. However, the presence of an additional narrative level here does not affect the ontological hierarchy. See the earlier note about major narratives.

Isaac Sachs looks down on a brilliant New England morning. Labyrinthine suburbs of ivory mansionettes and silk lawns inset with turquoise swimming-pools. The executive-jet window is cool against his face. Six feet directly beneath his seat is a suitcase in the baggage hold containing enough C-4 to turn an airplane into a meteor. (408)

However, there is no suggestion that Frobisher's letters to Rupert Sixsmith are anything but the real thing. There is, however, a definite ontological split between *Half-Lives* and *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish*. The former's title declares it a 'Mystery' — implying from the outset what is made even more obvious in its narrative style. Cavendish makes the text's status explicit when he first encounters it:

...a MS titled *Half-lives* – lousy name for a work of fiction – and subtitled *The First Luisa Rey Mystery*. Lousier and lousier. Its lady author [is] dubiously named Hilary V. Hush... (157–158)

Half-Lives is clearly identified in *The Ghastly Ordeal* as a novel, so it forms a new ontological level.

The ontological status of *The Ghastly Ordeal* within *An Orison of Sonmi ~ 451*, however, is not made so clear. Sonmi refers to it as a “picaresque” (243), suggesting that *she* at least understands it as fiction. However, as discussed earlier, there is no clear indication that Sonmi has actually read the possibly-fictional autobiography: in her narrative only the film adaptation is mentioned. The manner in which medium complicates embedding is also of interest with regard to the status of *An Orison of Sonmi~451* within *Sloosha's Crossin'* since, even though it is uncontroversially non-fiction, it is represented as a video recording of an interview, rather than a written text (187).²¹ For the moment, what is important to note is that

²¹ The issue of cross-medial embedding will be explored in more depth when discussing *House of Leaves* in the next chapter.

between the six parts of *Cloud Atlas* there are at least two ontological levels, and more likely three or more.

The Virtual Past

Reviewer Peter Keough calls the “acknowledged fiction” of *Half-Lives* “an illusion that gives the other illusions reality”. Certainly, *Half-Lives* throws the other major narratives into relief. However, the issue is not simply of one fictional narrative in the middle of a number of non-fiction ones. Just as any factual narrative embedded in a novel is fundamentally still a part of the fiction, the difference in ontological level between *Half-Lives* and *The Ghastly Ordeal* extends also to the former’s embedded narratives: *Letters from Zedelghem* and *The Pacific Journal*. Thus, in the story world of *The Ghastly Ordeal*, Luisa Rey is a fictional character, as are Sixsmith, Frobisher, and Ewing. Nor is this necessarily the clean ontological divide that Keough suggests. He may be correct that “the other [narratives] maintain the pretense of being first-person accounts of actual events”, but he does not mention the context provided in the embedding narratives. In fact, considering Frobisher’s suspicions, one must admit the possibility that *The Pacific Journal* is actually two ontological levels removed from *The Ghastly Ordeal*, and probably another level removed from *Sloosha’s Crossin’* and *An Orison of Sonmi-451*. The presence of multiple ontological levels in a single text is not in itself problematic. It does, however, complicate certain aspects of the work’s continuity — in particular, Mitchell’s use of reincarnation. Problems arise from the tension between continuity of events and differentiation of ontological level.

It is not necessary to evaluate factual objections to the idea of reincarnation in the real world, as this remains the discussion of a fictional text. However, for one character to be the

reincarnation of another requires logically that those characters belong to the same ontological level. It is reasonable, then, to believe that Luisa Rey can house the same soul as Robert Frobisher. However, the reader is seemingly invited to follow the connection on to Tim Cavendish. According to the normal understanding of fictional ontology, this is ludicrous. Cavendish cannot be Luisa Rey reborn because, in Cavendish's world, Luisa Rey does not really exist; she is a character in a work of fiction. It is difficult to argue that Mitchell might simply have overlooked this problem, since the *Letters* have Frobisher make fun of an acquaintance for mistaking Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's character Sherlock Holmes for a real person (466). This indicates either that the suggestions of reincarnation are a red herring or that Mitchell's novel is dabbling in metalepsis: "the violation of narrative levels" (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 120).²² As the former reading seems very unsatisfying, given the key role the birthmark has in linking the various parts of the novel together, let us turn to the latter. One of the classic examples of metalepsis is Julio Cortázar's short story "Continuity of Parks". Brian McHale summarises it as follows:

a man reads a novel in which a killer, approaching through a park, enters a house in order to murder his lover's husband — the man reading the novel! The "continuity" in this text is the paradoxical continuity between the nested narrative and the primary narrative, violating and foregrounding the hierarchy of ontological levels. (*Postmodernist Fiction* 120)

In *Cloud Atlas*, an analogous "paradoxical continuity" hinges on the reincarnation of Luisa Rey as Timothy Cavendish, when the two occupy different ontological levels — Rey being a character in a novel Cavendish is reading, just as the murderer in Cortázar's text is a character

²² The term metalepsis comes from Gérard Genette and refers to "taking hold of (telling) by changing level" (234–235). Metalepsis overlaps partially with what Douglas Hofstadter calls "Strange Loops". Strange Loops occur, Hofstadter explains, "whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started" (10).

in the novel being read by the protagonist. The example in “Continuity of Parks” is more immediately obvious, because the metalepsis is so central to the action of the story, and is thus more jarring. The same basic violation of ontological boundaries, though, is occurring in both instances, and indeed, happens potentially at a number of removes in *Cloud Atlas*. If one accepts that the problematic reincarnations of *Cloud Atlas* are examples of metalepsis, there still remains the question of why. What is the function of this violation of levels in the text? McHale characterizes metalepsis as just one of a number of devices used by postmodernist texts “to foreground the ontological dimensions of the Chinese box of fiction” (*Ibid.* 114).²³

However, there is an alternative to the metaleptic and red-herring readings. The ontological instability here depends on the assumption that the chain of reincarnation depicted in *Cloud Atlas* is meant to be taken at face value. Reincarnation ceases to be an ontological problem if it is not an actual event within the story, but merely an idea or belief entertained by its characters. Ted Gioia, in his feature “Conceptual Fiction”, suggests that *Cloud Atlas* may be built on the idea “that the defining stories of our lives are *not* rooted in reality... but in other stories” (2). This approach to the text is well worth exploring, since, at the first narrative level, reincarnation is indicated as playing a key role in the spiritual life of Zachry's tribe:

Sonmi helped sick'uns, fixed busted luck, an' when a truesome 'n'civ'lized Valleysman died she'd take his soul an' lead it back into a womb somewhere in the Valleys. Time was we mem'ried our gone lifes, times was we cudn't, times was Sonmi telled Abbess who was who in a dreamin', times was she din't ... but we knew we'd always be reborned as Valleysmen, an' so death weren't so scarysome for us, nay.

(255)

²³ Chinese boxes are analogous to Russian dolls.

This setting is clearly an ideal one to give rise to further narratives that involve reincarnation. Such narratives may or may not reflect reality, but they certainly reflect the culture, and the other narratives, out of which they grow. Although Meronym — Prescient visitor to Hawi and the latest possessor of the comet birthmark, with Sonmi~451 preceding her — insists to Zachry that she “ain't here to play Lady Sonmi ev'ry time sumthin' bad happ'ns” (281), there is nevertheless more than a hint of the goddess incarnate about her in Zachry's narrative, as Zachry's son comments in his short epilogue:

Zachry my old pa was a wyrd buggah, I won't naysay it now he's died. O, most o' Pa's yarnin's was jus' musey duck-fartin' an' in his loonsome old age he even b'liefed Meronym the Prescient was his presh b'loved Sonmi, yay, he 'sisted it, he said he knowed it all by birthmarks an' comets'n'all. (324)

She hails from an unknown land, and carries with her mysterious and powerful technology. It is perfectly reasonable to think that Zachry might connect Meronym, his own saviour, with the goddess of his people. The comet birthmark is a symbolic device which allows him to make such a connection. It also potentially offers a way of placing his old tribe in a meaningful historical continuum — to see them as part of a chain of civilisation reaching back into the past. There are shades of David Herman's “Value-Added Narrative” here,²⁴ since the embedded narratives each connect with a different time period that can enrich the cultural experience at the level of the narrator and characters of *Sloosha's Crossin'*.

In *Half-Lives*, Isaac Sachs, a scientist helping Luisa Rey, jots some interesting thoughts on history just moments before his death:

...the workings of the *actual* past + the *virtual* past may be illustrated by an event well known to collective history such as the sinking of the *Titanic*. The disaster as it *actually* occurred descends into

²⁴ See the discussion of Herman's arguments regarding embedding in chapter one.

obscurity as its eyewitnesses die off, documents perish + the wreck of the ship dissolves in its Atlantic grave. Yet a *virtual* sinking of the *Titanic*, created from reworked memories, papers, hearsay, fiction – in short, belief – grows ever 'truer'. The actual past is brittle, ever-dimming + ever more problematic to access + reconstruct: in contrast, the virtual past is malleable, ever-brightening + ever more difficult to circumvent/expose as fraudulent. (408)

What is being played with here is not new — in fact, Mitchell has Sachs preempt some of the ideas of French theorist Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*. But this passage does suggest a useful way of looking at *Cloud Atlas*. According to the theory Sachs espouses, the past as people actually experience it — “the *virtual* past” — is not fact, but narrative. History is a story told by human beings, and it is an incredibly powerful story.

During her interview, Sonmi~451 claims that the pivotal events of her narrative — including her ascension, her involvement with the rebel organisation Union, and even the very existence of that organisation — were elaborately staged by the Unanimity regime

[t]o generate a show trial... To make every last pureblood in Nea So Copros mistrustful of every last fabricant. To manufacture consent for the Fabricant Containment Act being presented to the Juche. To discredit Abolitionism. The whole conspiracy was a resounding success. (364)

An Orison of Sonmi~451 thus looks one step beyond the “virtual past” of narrative history, showing how this narrative need not be applied after the fact. Like the past, the present can be forged through narrative — and those in power have the greatest control over what is told. Consider also Adam Ewing's final journal entry:

Scholars discern motions in history & formulate these motions into rules that govern the rises & falls of civilizations. My belief runs contrary, however. To wit: history admits no rules; only outcomes.

What precipitates outcomes? Vicious acts & virtuous acts.

What precipitates acts? Belief.

Belief is both prize & battlefield, within the mind & in the mind's mirror, the world. If we *believe* humanity is a ladder of tribes, a colosseum of confrontation, exploitation & bestiality, such a humanity is surely brought into being... (527–528)

Ewing here eschews models of history which see events as driven by grand patterns. For better or worse, he argues, events spring from cause and effect on a human level — “drop[s] in a limitless ocean”, he admits in the novel's final moment, but “what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?” (529) Every little bit counts, then. One might read into this a more faithful nod to Nietzsche: if every person acts in the perfect way that eternal recurrence is supposed to drive them to, the tide *can* turn.²⁵

What does that mean for the interpretation of *Cloud Atlas*'s structure? With these final words of Ewing's, Mitchell seems to encourage the reader to look away from the novel's structural intricacies, to look rather at the individual characters and actions of each narrative. However, there is also a broader picture here. What is perhaps most interesting about Ewing's theory is the emphasis placed on belief. Belief is “both prize & battlefield” because it motivates human actions, but it is also created by the victors. Those in positions of power wield influence over the writing or telling of the past, and this narrative of history is crucial in shaping beliefs. The process of writing history, far from neutral recording, becomes an act of creation. Not only does history create the past in the same way that fictional narrative creates a fictional world, it also plays a key role in creating the future. Zachry notes well that “[y]ou can't go trustin' folks what lassoop words so skillsome as [Napes]” (271). For good or ill,

²⁵ It is hardly surprising that Nietzschean philosophy would be espoused by a book found at Zedelghem, since Frobisher refers to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as “Ayr's Bible” (63).

words have immense power. What these passages, as well as Goia's comments, point to is a *meta-narrative* approach to the text: a reading which considers *Cloud Atlas* to be a novel *about storytelling*. Narrative embedding provides the platform for exploring storytelling, as Mitchell vertically embeds a range of genres and types of narrative, exploring their stylistic difference as well as their genesis and transmission. Reincarnation in *Cloud Atlas* is not a story event. Nor is it an agenda. Like embedding, it is a structural device, tying narratives together, but also highlighting the active role of narrative in the representation and shaping of human history.

Chapter Three: Collapsing Levels and Burning Books in *House of Leaves*

Introduction

The previous chapter looked at *Cloud Atlas*'s embedded narrative structure and then considered the wider implications of this structure for a reading of the text. This chapter will apply the same method to Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. In a text of such complexity, it is easy to lose sight of the story; so once again it will be prudent to begin with an overview of the novel's story in order to contextualize the discussion of levels. The next step will be to outline the structure of embedding in *House of Leaves* and its narrative and ontological levels. After these points of reference have been established, it will be possible to talk about the manner in which the narrative parts relate to the whole and to approach some of the interpretative challenges that Danielewski's novel poses. Since the degree and type of unreliability in the novel's narration create substantial issues for mediation, reliability will be an important focal point. *House of Leaves* also attempts to incorporate, or at least simulate, a number of different media, often through the use of unconventional typography and layout. Both the remediation and the formatting have implications for the representation of narrative and ontological levels in the work. Finally, some consideration will be given to N. Katherine Hayles's claim that *House of Leaves* foregrounds the subjectivity of the relationship between reader and text, and what this means for a structural approach to the novel's labyrinthine levels.

House of Leaves: An Overview

The following is a brief précis of the story events in *House of Leaves*. At this stage, no consideration will be given either to the structure of narrative embedding in the text or to questions of fictionality or ontological level.

In April 1990, acclaimed photojournalist Will Navidson moves with his family — partner Karen Green and their children, Daisy and Chad — to a new house in Virginia, and Navidson attempts to film a documentary about the domestic transition. The purpose of his recording changes, however, as the family returns from a trip away to find that the master bedroom has a walk-in closet that had not previously existed. Measuring and poring over building plans to explain the change, Navidson discovers that the house is a quarter of an inch wider on the inside than on the outside. He calls in extra help: first his brother Tom, and then his old friend Billy Reston. However, their attempts to measure the building using increasingly advanced tools yield only a more exact measurement of the unbelievable discrepancy: 5/16". Meanwhile, Karen and a friend build a bookshelf in the new space — just in time for the house to expand once more around it.

An entirely new hallway now appears in one of the walls of the house: a long dark corridor which by rights should extend beyond the limits of the house, but does not. Navidson's footage of this phenomenon is later circulated as "The Five and a Half Minute Hallway". Karen is opposed to entering the hallway, and Tom builds a door to block it off. Eventually, however, Navidson makes an impulsive entrance at night, recorded as "Exploration A". The area beyond the door is cold, dark, and immense; the hallway leads to a series of maze-like passages, eventually opening up into a cavernous area, the size of which

is impossible for Navidson to determine. Hearing a growling sound, he turns back, but his return trip is made difficult by shifts in the layout of the maze.

Navidson keeps this solo mission secret from Karen, and grudgingly turns over operations to Billy Reston, who calls in experienced explorers Holloway Roberts, Jed Leeder, and Kirby “Wax” Hook. “Exploration #1”, conducted by the latter trio, lasts an hour and essentially replicates “Exploration A”. The following day they enter again for “Exploration #2”, this time taking over eight hours and collecting samples and measurements. They also discover, in the cavernous area they dub the Great Hall, a huge set of stairs leading downward far beyond sight. In “Exploration #3”, Holloway, Jed, and Wax travel for seven hours down the Spiral Staircase, seeing no sign of the bottom, before making an eleven-hour trip back. Communicating with the team and watching their recordings, Navidson becomes increasingly frustrated by his lack of involvement.

“Exploration #4” is planned to span five or more days in order to tackle the depth of the Spiral Staircase. On the fourth day, they reach the bottom of the stairs and begin to explore a new maze of rooms and hallways. Despite becoming disoriented, the team gets back to the stairs and makes camp for a fourth night. The ascent is more difficult than anticipated, however, and made worse by the markers and supply caches left on their way down the stairs having seemingly been attacked. Convinced that some kind of creature is responsible for the damaged supplies and the growling sound heard within the house, Holloway insists on investigating, while Jed and Wax, concerned by their low provisions and the risk of becoming lost, turn back. They wait at the stairs until morning on the seventh day before deciding to continue back without Holloway. Markers and supplies further up have been damaged even more savagely, and a strange process of disintegration affects their

clothes and equipment as well. As Jed and Wax stop at one of the caches, a confused Holloway appears suddenly and shoots Wax. Panicked by the accident, Holloway first flees and then starts firing again. Jed escapes with Wax, but becomes lost and cannot find a way back to the stairs.

Meanwhile, prompted by the team's seven-day absence and hearing what seems to be an SOS signal through the walls of the house, Navidson, Tom, and Reston mount a rescue mission. Leaving Tom at the top of the stairs to maintain a communication link with the outside, Navidson and Reston descend. The dimensions of the house have changed, and their trip down takes a mere twenty minutes. More than a day later, at the end of the ninth day of “Exploration #4”, they finally find Jed and Wax — only for Holloway to reappear and shoot Jed, then disappear once more. Eventually, alone and terrified of the creature he believes to be stalking him, Holloway commits suicide. Tom builds a makeshift gurney and a pulley system and transports Wax, Jed, and Reston up the stairs, but another change in the house's dimensions leaves Navidson stranded at the bottom of what is now an even longer staircase. Wax survives; Jed does not. The hallway shortens to only about ten feet deep, with no access to the Great Hall or the Spiral Staircase. Yet, several days after the return of the others, Navidson mysteriously walks out. Finally, the whole house begins to distort and collapse inwards. Tom is killed helping Chad and Daisy escape. The house settles again, but Navidson and Karen split up, leaving it abandoned for several months. Navidson goes to work editing the footage of the house and analysing samples, while Karen creates two short films of her own about Navidson and the house.

Navidson makes one last trip into the house: “Exploration #5”. As well as recording and survival equipment and two weeks' provisions, Navidson takes a bicycle with a trailer.

Inside, Navidson explores the various hallways before the Great Hall and ends up cycling downhill no matter which direction he faces. After days on the bike, covering huge distances, he finds a door leading to a set of stairs at a strange angle. As he follows these gravity-distorting stairs, the area behind him seems to be swallowed up by the abyss. After climbing up the ladder and through shrinking passages, Navidson comes to a large room with strange windows and doorways. As he climbs out of an open window, the room behind him vanishes and Navidson finds himself on a small dark surface that seems to be falling through nothing.

After Navidson enters the house, Karen moves back in to wait for him, and eventually hears his voice through the walls, opens the door to the dark hallway, and enters to find him and bring him back. Although permanently scarred and broken, Navidson survives, and he and Karen marry.

In April 1993, the documentary film of these events, *The Navidson Record*, is released, achieving a degree of popularity, and generating much speculation as to whether or not it is a hoax. Later, the old, blind, and reclusive Zampanò writes a critical text devoted to the film. His work, also called *The Navidson Record*, considers the film's aesthetic and cultural value, as well as discussing the phenomena it purports to document. In January 1997, Zampanò dies.

Lude, another tenant in Zampanò's Los Angeles apartment building, notices the old man is missing, and finds his body, as well as the manuscript of his unpublished book. Lude's friend Johnny Truant takes the manuscript home and proceeds to read and edit it, adding footnotes about the book itself, Zampanò, and events in his own life.

Truant is working in a tattoo parlour and uses much of his leisure time to drink, take drugs, and pick up women. Although most of his relationships with women are fleeting, he is infatuated with a stripper he calls Thumper, who becomes his friend and confidante. Over time, the book's hold on him begins to strain his sanity. He becomes increasingly isolated, paranoid, and delusional, barricading himself in his apartment, whose measurements he obsessively checks. In March of 1998, Truant sets out across the country, hoping to find out more about the genesis of *The Navidson Record*. Finding nothing in Virginia, he instead seeks out his own roots, revisiting his old family home and the mental institution where his mother was confined. While he is away, Lude is killed in a motorcycle accident. Returning to Los Angeles in October of the same year, still troubled and confused, Truant has a violent confrontation with the boyfriend of a woman he slept with. In his addled state, Truant thinks he may have killed him, and he leaves the city again soon afterward. At some point over the next year, the first edition of *House of Leaves* — the culmination of Truant's work on Zampanò's manuscript — is released on the internet.

Narrative and Ontological Levels

Although they warrant some attention, the comments provided by “The Editors” of *House of Leaves*, like those of Jackson Ewing in *Cloud Atlas*, shall not be classified as a major narrative. That makes Johnny Truant the first-level narrator and Zampanò the second-level narrator. Zampanò's opus is hereafter referred to as *The Navidson Record* (book) in order to distinguish it from *The Navidson Record* (film). Since this book, although styled as an academic work, is actually fiction, the author of the text must technically be distinct from its narrator. For simplicity's sake, I will refer to both author and narrator as Zampanò. In most

cases, it should be apparent which of the two is referred to, but where a distinction needs to be made, I will refer explicitly to “Zampanò (auth.)” or “Zampanò (narr.)”.

Embedded in *The Navidson Record* (book) is the film of the same name, which arguably constitutes a third narrative level. However, being a film rather than a written narrative, it is not represented directly in the novel: for the most part, the reader has access only to lengthy descriptions of the film in Zampanò's narrative, although Zampanò does provide written transcripts of parts of the film. For the moment, let us set aside the question of the film's status as a documentary, and label Will Navidson the author²⁶ of the text embedded in Zampanò's narrative.²⁷ Parts of this text — *The Navidson Record* (film) — are represented directly, but not the whole. However, I will refer to the whole as a third narrative level. Within *The Navidson Record* (film), there is another book called *House of Leaves*, which Navidson reads during his final expedition into the house. To avoid confusion between the text *House of Leaves*, which is the subject of this chapter, and the *House of Leaves* that Navidson reads, the latter will be referred to throughout as *House of Leaves* (mise en abyme). Since *House of Leaves* (mise en abyme) is not directly represented, merely described, it cannot be considered an actual embedded narrative. Nevertheless, it may be useful to consider this as something akin to a fourth narrative level.

House of Leaves also contains a number of other narratives and non-narrative parts, some of which are not so easily classified in terms of the novel's structure of embedding.

²⁶ “Narrator” would not be strictly correct here, for the reasons discussed in the previous paragraph regarding the two Zampanòs. It is also an arguable point whether a film can be said to *have* a narrator in the sense applied to written narratives.

²⁷ His wife Karen, as the creator of her own shorter documentaries, “What Some Have Thought” and “A Brief History Of Who I Love” — the latter of which forms part of *The Navidson Record* (film) — falls into the same category.

After the conclusion of *The Navidson Record* (book), Truant introduces “a series of plates [Zampanò] planned to include”, but which were left unfinished (Danielewski, *House of Leaves* 529).²⁸ The absent materials described include architectural photography and diagrams, images of shadow puppets, timelines, tables of scientific data, transcripts of further segments of *The Navidson Record* (film), and medical records relating to Karen's mental health. In addition, Truant includes some other writings of Zampanò's: “a selection of journal entries, poems and even a letter to the editor” (537). This appendix also contains material directly related to *The Navidson Record* (book): an outline of the sections of the film and a timeline of its staggered releases, as well as several photographs of what appear to be sections of Zampanò's manuscript.²⁹

The other appendices are stranger still. “Appendix II”, ostensibly added for the second edition of the text, consists of several rough sketches of the house, thirty Polaroid photographs, mostly of houses,³⁰ more poems,³¹ two photographed collages, the obituary of Johnny Truant's father, “The Whalestoe Letters”, which are a series of letters sent to Truant by his institutionalized mother, and several pages of unexplained quotations. Appendix III is introduced by The Editors simply as “Contrary evidence” (657). It consists of a photograph

²⁸ Unless otherwise indicated, all further page references in this chapter are for *House of Leaves*.

²⁹ Some of the notes visible in these photographs, however, do not exist in the reproduction of the work as a whole. This will be discussed in more depth in the next section.

³⁰ Although this is not confirmed, it seems likely that these are supposed to be the “stack of Polaroids” that Truant acquires on his journey across the United States: “Someone else's memories. Virginia or not Virginia but anywhere homes, lined up in a row” (498).

³¹ This collection, “The Pelican Poems”, have no specified author, but are presumably Truant's work: the dates on them seem to correspond with his travels in Europe, and his mother, in one of her letters, mentions him “tramping over the continent for four months with only a backpack, a *Pelican pen* and a few hundred dollars” (638 — emphasis added).

of a book used as a secondary source in *The Navidson Record* (book),³² three artworks in different media depicting the house on Ash Tree Lane, and a single still-frame apparently taken from “Exploration #4”. After the appendices comes an oddly thorough Index, listing not only references to names, places, artworks, etc, but a huge variety of words, from “abandon” and “abdominal” through to “zonules” and “zoom”. Then, after the Credits, there is the unexplained poem “Yggdrasil”, which implicitly links the House on Ash Tree Lane with the giant ash tree of Norse legend. This strange collection of additional materials raises questions about what is and is not a part of the work at hand, as well as about the relationship of the parts to the whole.

Parts and Whole

First made available online, having its origins in an earlier short story, published as a physical book with a wealth of seemingly egregious additions, and also in multiple versions, *House of Leaves* has no clear boundaries and frustrates attempts at summary. Is it possible to say exactly where it begins and ends? What is the relationship of the parts — not only the multiple narrative levels, but also the appendices and other paratextual features — to the novel as a whole? *House of Leaves* eschews not only reductive simplification, but also the idea of its unity as a novel.

Like *Cloud Atlas*, *House of Leaves* emphasizes story as well as discourse at each narrative level. Each level of the novel introduces not only a layer of mediation, but also new characters and plot elements. Zampanò's discussion of *The Navidson Record* (film) adds background to the experiences of the house, but it also adds a wealth of critical story:

³² Truant claims in his introduction that this book is not real: “Gavin Young's Shots In The Dark doesn't exist nor does The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft, Volume XXVIII” (xx).

fictional — and sometimes real — commentators clashing over the film's authenticity, artistic merit, and meaning. Johnny Truant then goes further, writing his own life into the margins of *The Navidson Record* (book). As in *Cloud Atlas*, no opportunity is given for an account which seeks to extract the essence of the story from a single narrative level: layers of story events are built into each level of discourse and even the appendices are rich with content. The narrative levels do not indicate mere successive re-tellings or re-packagings of a core story, but rather build outwards, sometimes at strange angles, making the text as a whole far more than just its central story.

What *Cloud Atlas* has, but *House of Leaves* lacks, is a clear and unifying design principle. Although the relationship between narratives in Mitchell's novel challenges the reader, it is obvious that there *is* a structure to their relationship. *House of Leaves*, comparatively, seems chaotic. New pieces of the puzzle keep appearing, even after what seems to be the final page. Danielewski's inclusion of the additional material from Truant and Zampanò raises questions about where the limits of the text actually are. This uncertainty is exacerbated by the novel's multiple versions. *House of Leaves* apparently began life with “Redwood”, a short story Danielewski wrote for his father and then destroyed after his father rejected it, only to have it painstakingly reassembled by his sister (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 103–104). However, *House of Leaves* itself has multiple versions, from its original release over the internet to the first edition of the print book which alleges that it is the second edition.³³ Further complicating matters, this first/second edition was itself released in four different versions: black and white, blue, red, and full colour. With no clear overarching structure or design of the sort that unites the major narratives of *Cloud Atlas* so elegantly, the

³³ Presumably a reference to the online version as the first edition. The title page indicates it is the “Second Edition”, and the copyright page shows “~~First Edition~~” (iii-iv).

many parts and versions of *House of Leaves* signal irreducibility, but also a failure of containment.

Certainly, Truant has strong concerns about the notion of containing or restricting the text. He expresses a need to “[r]e-inter [*The Navidson Record* (book)] in a binding tomb. Make it only a book” (327). Truant’s struggle to “finish what Zampanò himself failed to finish” means both to complete the book and to destroy it. The reference to “a binding tomb” plays on the duality of meaning here: “binding” refers to the construction of a physical book as well as to restriction, and “tomb” is similar, both in sound and appearance, to “tome”. In fact, “kill” may be a better term than “destroy”, since Truant describes Zampanò’s book as “bloodless and still but not at all dead” (326). His desire to complete and thereby contain the book is motivated by a crisis of ontology. While Truant is “its source, the one who feeds it, nurses it back to health”, he also expresses a concern that

this terrible sense of relatedness to Zampanò’s work implies something that just can’t be, namely that this thing has created me; not me unto it, but now it unto me... (326)

Whatever the exact relationship between Johnny Truant and *The Navidson Record* (book), there is certainly a great deal of Truant in *House of Leaves*. Besides his personal narration in the margins, much of Appendix II also deals with Truant’s past — not in any obvious way connected with Zampanò or his manuscript. Despite its importance to Truant, this material is very much on the fringes of the text. It is introduced by the Editors almost as an afterthought — something optional for readers “who feel they would profit from a better understanding of [Truant’s] past” (72). Appendix II, because of its concentration on Truant’s background, moves the focus of the text further towards its troubled narrator. Yet even as it does this, it remains on the periphery of the text, and thus also draws attention to the lack of boundaries,

to the narratological grey area that exists on the fringes of the text proper: the paratext. The foregrounding of traditionally ignored elements of the print novel is part of a wider concern with the mechanics and meaning of representation and print communication. But self-reflexivity is not the only end here. By emphasizing paratextual features such as footnotes and appendices, *House of Leaves* challenges the reader to consider whether and where borders *can* be drawn around a text. Magnifying its margins, and dramatizing its own creation and revision, Danielewski's novel insistently identifies itself as a work in progress, an incomplete stage of evolution — rejecting the idea of completion or organic wholeness. This lack of a totalizing or exhaustive whole means many parts of the novel sit uneasily, neither wholly inside nor wholly outside.

No Sacred Text Here

The first chapter drew attention to the relationship between narrative embedding and unreliability in narration. At that point, what was in question was whether an embedded, and therefore mediated, narrative is intrinsically less reliable than an unmediated narrative. Now, in analyzing *House of Leaves*, it is necessary to ask the complementary question of how the unreliability of a narrator might affect a reading of embedded narratives — that is, narratives mediated by this unreliable narrator.

Unreliability in *House of Leaves* is pervasive. At every level, doubt is cast on the story being told. The opening lines of Zampanò's *The Navidson Record* indicate both the widespread uncertainty about the film's veracity and the importance of such a truth-claim in general:

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

For the most part, skeptics call the whole effort a hoax but grudgingly admit *The Navidson Record* is a hoax of exceptional quality. (3)

Zampanò makes numerous references to the argument about whether *The Navidson Record* (film) is a genuine documentary or a hoax. At one point he references Sonny Beauregard's estimate of the cost of special effects on the film as being far beyond Navidson's means: “the best argument for fact is the absolute unaffordability of fiction” (149). Most of the time, however, he neatly sidesteps the whole issue:

Though many continue to devote substantial time and energy to the antinomies of fact or fiction, representation or artifice, document or prank, as of late the more interesting material dwells exclusively on the interpretation of the events within the film. This direction seems more promising... (3)

This decision paves the way for Zampanò to, on the one hand, describe the events of the *The Navidson Record* (film) as if they were unquestionably true, and, on the other hand, approach the film as a work of fiction for the purposes of hermeneutic analysis.

Although the disputed authenticity of *The Navidson Record* (film) is an early indication of how fraught questions of reliability and truth will be in *House of Leaves*, the unreliability of interest in this chapter is that of the lower level narrators: Zampanò and Johnny Truant. While Zampanò raises questions about the reliability of Navidson's film as a

documentary, the note accompanying his manuscript suggests the falsity of the entire enterprise:

They say truth stands the test of time. I can think of no greater comfort than knowing this document failed such a test. (xix)

Indeed, although *The Navidson Record* (book) repeatedly “implies that [the film] exists”, Johnny Truant, its editor, is unable to find any reference to it elsewhere, and assures the reader that

...no matter how long you search you will never find The Navidson Record in theaters or video stores. Furthermore, most of what is said by famous people has been made up. (xix–xx)

Commentary on the film by Ken Burns, for example, is refuted by Truant's footnote: “not only has Ken Burns never made any such comment, he's also never heard of The Navidson Record let alone Zampanò” (206). Likewise the various interviewees in Karen Green's *What Some Have Thought*, including Anne Rice, Stephen King, Stanley Kubrik, Hunter S. Thompson, and Jacques Derrida:

To date, I haven't heard back from any of the people quoted in this “transcript” with the exception of Hofstadter who made it very clear he'd never heard of Will Navidson, Karen Green or the house and Paglia who scribbled on a postcard: “Get lost, jerk.” (345)

Ostensibly a work of academic criticism, *The Navidson Record* (book) is undermined in this capacity by the failure of its network of references to legitimise it. The multitude of sources quoted within the text suggests that the structure of embedding in *House of Leaves* may be geared towards authenticating the embedded narratives. However, Johnny Truant's

embedding narrative instead provides a platform from which to challenge the authority — the reality, even — of Zampanò's narrative.

Yet it is not only the failure to verify Zampanò's references to other sources that outs *The Navidson Record* (book) as fiction. Truant also reveals that, although writing in detail about a film, the old man “was blind as a bat” (xxi). Thus, he was “incapable of performing the job of mediation he has allegedly performed” (Hansen 601). This sensory disconnect underscores the credibility gap for *The Navidson Record* (book), but it also provides a different perspective on the facade of non-fiction: humour. Truant refers to the contrast between Zampanò's blindness and his in-depth discussion of light, vision, photography, and film as “his biggest joke” (xx) and “Zampanò's greatest ironic gesture” (xxi). There is also an important parodic element to the criticism *House of Leaves* presents. This is particularly noticeable in Karen Green's *What Some Have Thought*: Karen engages with various famous writers, artists, and academics about the film, and in particular the significance of the house, but in many cases the discussion breaks down with the interviewee propositioning Karen. It is unclear, however, if the critical material in the novel in general can be viewed with the same sense of parody at all levels. Zampanò (narr.) seems to take his sources seriously; Danielewski is surely in on the joke; the perspective of Zampanò (auth.), however, is harder to determine.³⁴

Clearly, though, Zampanò was writing a novel of sorts. Truant notes the use of long sections describing the action of the film, which do not read like an academic text:

³⁴ While one would ordinarily expect parody to have been intended by the author, the issue is more complicated for subordinate author such as Zampanò, since it is always possible such a figure is intended by the *real* author as the butt of the joke.

Yesterday I managed to get Maus Fife-Harris on the phone. She's a UC Irvine PhD candidate in Comp Lit who apparently always objected to the large chunks of narrative Zampanò kept asking her to write down. "I told him all those passages were inappropriate for a critical work..." (55)

Of course, the "inappropriate" passages make perfect sense if one knows the reader cannot possibly have seen the film in question. Even as it imitates criticism, *The Navidson Record* (book) flouts academic style for its ends as a novel. "[W]hen it came to undermining his own work," Truant points out, "the old man was superbly capable" (xx). The implied non-fiction status of the text is never more than a façade. For the reader of *House of Leaves*, in fact, it is a claim disproved from the very beginning, in Truant's introduction. As in *The Navidson Record* (book), which opens with discussion of the authenticity of *The Navidson Record* (film), *House of Leaves* lays out its ontological structure from the outset.

At the same time, however, both Truant in the introduction and Zampanò in the first chapter suggest a subversion of such ontological classifications. Zampanò, as already noted, argues that "the more interesting material dwells exclusively on the interpretation of the events within [*The Navidson Record* (film)]", and not on arguments of fact versus fiction (3). Even more crucial is Truant's assertion that

it makes no difference that the documentary at the heart of this book is fiction. Zampanò knew from the get go that what's real or isn't real doesn't matter here. The consequences are the same. (xx)

While the presence of different ontological levels is clearly acknowledged here, their substance is denied. Zampanò (narr.), as already discussed, takes little interest in whether *The Navidson Record* (film) is fact or fiction, and instead concentrates on the meaning of the film and of the house; to Johnny Truant, questions of fact and fiction often seem to have no

importance at all. This devaluing of truth is a crucial issue for *House of Leaves*, and one which will be returned to in the final section of this chapter.

Zampanò's *text* might be said to be unreliable, since it is a novel masquerading as non-fiction — although it is arguable whether one can attribute this to dishonesty as opposed to literary posturing. There is, however, still some question as to whether Zampanò is an unreliable *narrator*. Here it is important to remember the distinction between Zampanò (auth.) and Zampanò (narr.): the two are no more synonymous than Henry James and the first-level narrator of *The Turn of the Screw*.³⁵ Zampanò (narr.) cannot be considered unreliable simply because his narrative is fictional. Wayne Booth's original formulation of narratorial reliability hinges on whether a narrator “speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work” (158). What is important here is whether the work itself supports an alternative viewpoint to that of the narrator. The reliability of Zampanò as a narrator must therefore be judged according to the internal cues in *The Navidson Record* (book). Johnny Truant's research is sufficient to identify *The Navidson Record* (book) as a work of fiction, but has no bearing on its narrator's reliability. If there is no particular reason to treat Zampanò as an unreliable *narrator* then it must be assumed that Zampanò's narrative presents an accurate picture of the ontological level it refers to.

There is, however, much that points to Johnny Truant's unreliability as a narrator. Although the existence of the Editors gives an outside context from which to challenge Truant's reliability, this is hardly required, since Truant contradicts himself at various points throughout the text. It may be unfair to cite his storytelling in bars — for instance, spinning a

³⁵ As noted in Chapter One, narrators often do get conflated with their authors, but this can be very problematic for a critical reading.

yarn at Lude's prompting “about some insane adventure [he] supposedly had when [he] was a Pit Boxer” — since Truant is upfront with the reader about this, even if he does not offer his audience the same disclaimer: “I’d never heard that term [pit boxer] before... Lude just made it up and I went with it.” (12) More obviously, though, a series of diary-like dated entries outlining Truant's recovery, helped by kind friends and pharmaceuticals, is bluntly undercut:

Are you fucking kidding me? Did you really think any of that was true? September 2 thru September 28? I just made all that up. Right out of thin air. Wrote it in two hours. (509)

Although the initial version of events is revised, even the admission of the lies falls under suspicion. If the first version is false, might not the revision be false also? The threat to the reader's trust in the narrator might not be so great if this was an isolated incident, but there are many such deceptive turns in his narrative — though few so blatant. Granted, some are attributable to Truant's attempts to articulate his own perceptions at the time — not narrative deception so much as a way to communicate the confusion experienced by the narrator. Take this passage, for example:

Suddenly the slash of light on my hands looks sharp enough to cut me. Real sharp. Move and it will cut me. I do move and guess what? I start to bleed. The laceration isn't deep but important stuff has been struck, leaking over the table and floor. Lost.

I don't have long.

Except I'm not bleeding though I am breathing hard. Real hard... (70)

Truant's claim that he is bleeding is very quickly revised in this case, and the present tense narration helps to establish this as merely his recounting of his own mistaken perceptions at the time — and the subsequent realization of his error. Yet while Truant may be off the hook

in terms of deliberately misleading the reader here, something in his perception of the world is clearly very wrong. The structure and content of the subsequent staccato sentences suggest that Truant is not at all of sound mind:

There's that awful taste again, sharp as rust, wrapping around my tongue.

Worse, I'm no longer alone.

Impossible.

Not impossible.

This time it's human.

Maybe not.

Extremely long fingers.

A sucking sound too. Sucking on teeth, teeth already torn from the gums.

I don't know how I know this... (70–71)

This only becomes more pronounced as the novel goes on. Truant's altercation with “Gdansk Man”, the boyfriend of Kyrie — one of the many women Truant sleeps with over the course of the novel — becomes very difficult to unravel. Different versions of the story appear on different pages; he notes himself that his “memory's in flakes.” (497) In the first version, Truant responds to Gdansk Man's punches by throwing a bottle at him, and follows this up with a flurry of his own punches, until “Gdansk Man dies.” (*Ibid.*) He also talks about raping and killing Kyrie. Yet, several pages later, the story appears to have changed:

I throw the bottle away, pick up Gdansk Man and whatever I say, something to do with Lude, something to do with her, he mumbles apologies... Kyrie takes his keys, slips behind the wheel and retreats into the bellowing of the day, their departure echoing in my head... (516)

The narrator's mental instability is just as much, if not more, of a threat to his reliability than his outright lies. The indications against Truant's sanity give the reader every reason to

suppose that his version of events does not conform to Booth's "norms of the work". Even the Editors note that Truant's narrative asides "seem impenetrable" — although they go on to argue that his narrative is "not without rhyme or reason" (72).

Yet there is a something perhaps more concerning than either the lies or the misperceptions within his own narrative: Truant openly admits to making alterations to *The Navidson Record* (book). A water heater in the Navidsons' house stops working, and Truant notes that he too is lacking in hot water — only to reveal later that

Zampanò only wrote "heater." The word "water" back there — I added that.

Now there's an admission, eh?

Hey, not fair, you cry.

Hey, hey, fuck you, I say. (16)

Not only is Truant reporting his own narrative unreliably, he is also — not just possibly but definitely — taking liberties with Zampanò's embedded narrative. In doing so, he usefully demonstrates the significance of embedded narrative's subordinate status: an embedded narrative depends on its *embedding* narrative for delivery, and anything embedded is at the mercy of the lower-level narrator. Usually, the embedding narrative gives no suggestion of changes to the embedded narrative. Sometimes, as in *The Turn of the Screw*, pains are taken to insist on the exactness of the transmission. The absence of any suggestion to the contrary enables the reader to take such matters on trust. However, when reason is given *not* to trust, the whole structure of embedding is called into question. This is, it seems, part of Danielewski's aim:

[T]here is no sacred text here. That notion of authenticity of originality is constantly refuted. The novel doesn't allow the reader to ever say, "Oh, I see: this is the authentic, original text, exactly how it

looked, what it always had to say.” ...Pretty soon you begin to notice that at every level in the novel some act of interpretation is going on. (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 121)

Mediation here is anything but passive — a world away from the idea of narrative embedding as merely a way of packaging one tale within another. To mediate is, whether consciously or unconsciously, to interpret and to alter. Danielewski compares this with memory in relation to events, because, like narrative, “memory never puts us in touch with anything directly; it's always interpretive, reductive, a complicated compression of information.” (*Ibid.*) Mark Hansen views *House of Leaves* as “insistently stag[ing] the futility of any effort to anchor the events it recounts into a stable recorded form” (602). The novel does not merely employ an unreliable narrator, it dramatizes the unreliability of narrative in general.

House of Leaves shares some ground with *Cloud Atlas* here. I argued in the previous chapter that one of the primary concerns of Mitchell's novel is the narrativity of history. The past is perceived, it suggests, as a narrative, and control of this narrative yields control over the past, and thereby control over the future. The essential problem it exposes is the past's inaccessibility: the past can only be accessed indirectly, so it is impossible to verify historical narratives against actual events — they can only be compared to other narratives. *House of Leaves* does not contain the same specific commentary on history, but takes a similar approach to narrative more generally, highlighting the impossibility of direct transmission. It emphasizes that the content of narrative is always mediated, that story has no existence separate from discourse. All communications are necessarily indirect, filtered through language, narrative structures, and media. The power of the mediating — lower-level — narrator is essentially unlimited. Thus, narrative transmission is always rendered imperfect or suspect to some degree. In the case of *House of Leaves*, Johnny Truant's apparent state of

mind and the liberties he takes with regard to the content of the embedded narrative severely damage the relationship of trust with the reader and undermine the narrative structure at higher levels.

Designating, Describing, Recreating

Transmission in *House of Leaves* is fraught not just because of Johnny Truant's unreliability as a narrator. The novel goes out of its way to problematize narrative transmission. Many aspects of *House of Leaves* display an interest in media and forms of recording or communication — from its story content to its peculiar layout, formatting, and additional materials — and many of the challenges posed by the novel involve the interaction between media and meaning. Of particular interest is the remediation of *The Navidson Record* (film). Issues of media and recording are pervasive throughout the content of the novel. N. Katherine Hayles notes that the novel's

inscription technologies include film, video, photography, tattoos, typewriters, telegraphy, handwriting, and digital computers. The inscription surfaces are no less varied, as Johnny Truant observes about Zampanò's notes, which include writings on “old napkin, the tattered edges of an envelope, once even on the back of a postage stamp...” (780–781)

More important than the references to these various surfaces and methods of inscription, however, is the sense that they are actually being represented in the text as media. Thus, the concept of remediation, “the representation of one medium in another” (Bolter and Grusin 45), is important to the communicative challenges of Danielewski's novel.

It is worth considering the emphasis Johnny Truant places on the contrast between Zampanò's blindness and his detailed discussions of a very visual medium. Describing Navidson's first serious foray into the house, Exploration A, Zampanò writes:

Something should be said here about Navidson's hand. Out of all the footage he personally shoots, there rarely exists a shake, tremble, jerk, or even a case of poor framing. His camera, no matter the circumstances, manages to view the world — even this world — with a remarkable steadiness as well as a highly refined aesthetic sensibility. (64)

Notably, Zampanò is concerned not only with describing what happens in the film, but also with the film itself as an artifact, and by extension its specific qualities *as a film*. Remediation is thus portrayed as more than translation into a new medium. *The Navidson Record* (book) invokes not just the content of *The Navidson Record* (film), but also the nuances of its delivery — the discourse of the film as well as its story.

The Navidson Record (book) attempts to capture the medium of film in a number of different ways. As discussed above, there are Zampanò's descriptive passages relating the movie's action, interspersed with commentary on the cinematographic features. At times, however, the reader is instead given transcripts of dialogue: “Tom's Story” uses this format, as does Karen's *What Some Have Thought*. As far as presenting the film as a film, the transcripts have the advantage of not being overtly filtered through the mediating narrator. Thus, they would appear to give a more direct account. Given the point made in the previous section about Johnny Truant's modifications to *The Navidson Record* (book), however, this may well be a false appearance. But even leaving this aside, the choices about what is and is not described in such transcripts are themselves a form of mediation and alteration. The covertness of narration in this case also restricts the ability to describe what is going on

besides the dialogue: although transcripts note actions as well as spoken words, they do not necessarily capture what the audience sees in the same way that a third-party description can. The use of these complementary methods shows an attempt to overcome the difficulties involved in translation between media.

A similar process can be seen in the rendering of certain notable features of Zampanò's manuscript, particularly the page layout and the erased text: many of the concrete layout and formatting features of the text can be read as attempts to transmit not only the content of the manuscript, but also its nature as a medium. A manuscript would usually be thought of as synonymous with the published version of the book in terms of narrative and to be in essentially the same medium. *The Navidson Record* (book) is more complicated: "layered, crossed out, amended; handwritten, typed; legible, illegible..." (xvii) Truant makes it clear that the imperfections should be considered part of the text, and thus he attempts to render them through use of unconventional typography and page layout.

The fonts applied to the different narrators are, according to the Editors, "an effort to limit confusion", and we need not consider them in terms of the remediation of Zampanò's manuscript. Let us consider as separate issues the use of coloured text and the parts of the novel which are under erasure.³⁶ The latter category includes not just the red struck text, but also the portions of missing text denoted by square brackets, indicating fire damage to Zampanò's manuscript, or capital Xs, indicating text blotted out with ink or other substances.

³⁶ The word *house*, even in other languages, is printed in blue throughout the text, and the word *minotaur*, as well as the struck text, is printed in red — except for instances on page iv and page 518, where struck text is in purple. Not all versions of *House of Leaves* actually contain all of the colour material. In addition to the full colour version, there are also versions in black and white only, as well as ones that include *either* the blue or the red inking, but not both.

The various types of erasure in *House of Leaves* are explicitly attributed either to Truant or Zampanò, but their use also raises questions about what is and is not part of the narrative. Most specifically, one may ask whether, by preserving the struck text, Truant is faithfully transmitting Zampanò's narrative, or whether the restoration of text erased by Zampanò is actually a kind of violation of the mediated narrative. The spacing and orientation of the text of *The Navidson Record* (book) also needs to be considered. First of all, between pages 119 and 145, a long footnote is contained in a box that appears on both sides of each leaf of the novel, with reversed type on the left-hand pages to simulate a kind of transparency. This portion of the novel also features text around the box oriented sideways or upside down. Second, the body text of *The Navidson Record* (book), in this section and in others, uses highly unconventional spacing reminiscent of concrete poetry: the paragraphing at turns widens, narrows and fragments, reflecting the action in *The Navidson Record* (film) and the characters' perception of the spaces within the House.

By remediating concrete aspects of Zampanò's manuscript as formatting features, Truant both preserves and recreates the original text. Writing a transcript of a segment of film involves decisions about what to include and what to leave out, and the representation of physical characteristics of a text is no different. Even the very decision to represent the various quirks of the manuscript is potentially contentious, taking what might be considered "off the record" — the text Zampanò intentionally erased, for example — and returning it to the canon. Again, the novel draws attention to the power imbalance in narrative mediation between narrators of different levels: as the first-level narrator, Johnny Truant has complete power over the embedded narratives. And the movement from mediation to remediation only makes narrative transmission more fraught, because perfect representation of another medium

is never possible. The House on Ash Tree Lane, Mark Hansen argues, is on one level a symbol of this inevitable failure. He notes that, when the building first changes, Navidson's fixed video cameras fail to record it: "the motion sensors were never triggered" (28). Deeper into the house, the problem of representation becomes even more obvious. Hansen cites Holloway Roberts: "It's impossible to photograph what we saw" (86).

For All It Really Is

Although remediation in *House of Leaves* involves an attempt to capture medium as part of narrative, medium can never be fully transmitted in this way. Indeed, despite its engagement with different media and attempts to convey these in a text, what *House of Leaves* does perhaps most of all is identify itself *as a book*. By highlighting its book nature, "it extends the claims of the print book by showing what print can be in a digital age" (Hayles 781) — advocating for the potential of the printed book as a medium, even as it considers so many other means of recording or communication. Talking about the unconventional typographic features of *House of Leaves*, Mark Danielewski argues that

Books have had this capacity all along. ...Somewhere along the way, all [their] possibilities were denied.

I'd like to see that perception change.

I'd like to see the book reintroduced for all it really is. ("A Conversation")

Danielewski has also claimed that he "didn't write *House of Leaves* on a word processor. In fact, [he] wrote the entire thing in pencil" ("Haunted House" 117). Nevertheless, Hayles sees his novel as a way of approaching the idea of the computer within the print form:

The computer has often been proclaimed the ultimate medium because it can incorporate every other medium within itself. As if learning about omnivorous appetite from the computer, *House of Leaves*, in

a frenzy of remediation, attempts to eat all the other media... *House of Leaves* recuperates the traditions of the print book... but the price it pays is a metamorphosis so profound that it becomes a new kind of form and artifact. (781)

We have already considered, in the discussion of *Cloud Atlas*, Meronym's "orison", a portable computer of sorts, as a kind of "ultimate medium" with the power to incorporate texts in various different formats. I argued that it could offer an alternative structural understanding of the relationship between *Cloud Atlas*'s major narratives, trading the traditional, textual, model of narrative embedding for a kind of hypertext linking between narratives. This may not in itself provide a satisfying account of *Cloud Atlas*'s structure, but it does give an example of how a printed text might incorporate the "omnivorous appetite" of a computer for different media. *Cloud Atlas* and *House of Leaves* use a number of the same formal techniques to remediate different narratives. In both novels, font is used to differentiate between narrators. They also both use a transcript form at times to represent film: "Tom's Story" and *What Some Have Thought* in Danielewski's text and *An Orison of Sonmi~451* in Mitchell's.³⁷ Perfect remediation proves impossible, of course — as we have already discussed — and Mark Hansen argues that *House of Leaves* demonstrates "the failure of print and the novel as *recording technologies*" (618).

There is a contradiction, or at least a tension, here. On the one hand *House of Leaves* seems to be a hypertext novel in print, taking after the computer in its "omnivorous appetite" and ability to mimic other media such as film. On the other hand, though, it *is* a book, and looks not towards the possibilities of other media so much as the potential within the printed page. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin suggest that this kind of tension is inherent in

³⁷ Although *An Orison of Sonmi~451* isn't a cinematic release, it is portrayed in *Sloosha's Crossin'* as an audio-visual recording.

remediation. They talk of remediation operating according to “two logics” — that of “immediacy” and that of “hypermediacy” (21). The former emphasizes the transparency of media; the latter embraces awareness of media. In the case of *House of Leaves*, a similar tension seems to be played more broadly as a struggle between innovation and conservatism. *House of Leaves* does not abandon tradition to embrace the new, but anchors its exploration of new media in the format of the book and pursues conventional narrative ends in a novel fashion.

For all its postmodernist game-playing, academic posturing, and extensive use of the visual potential of the book, *House of Leaves* also engages the reader at a more basic level. The narrative about Navidson's exploration of the House on Ash Tree Lane is no less affecting for all the knowledge that it is a quasi-academic retelling in written form of the events depicted in a documentary film of dubious authenticity — nor even for the knowledge that the film itself is a mere construct in a novel masquerading as film criticism, and presented by a further narrator who has made his own additions to the text. Navidson and the House make for a gripping read, as do Truant's exploits. Like *Cloud Atlas*, Danielewski's novel uses an intellectually challenging framework, but within it presents narratives that are in themselves much more accessible than the whole of the work. *House of Leaves* exposes its conventions, but it is also committed to making use of them. The complex construction and undermining of narrative and ontological structure in *House of Leaves* can be viewed in terms of traditional uses of embedding in Gothic texts. The likes of *The Turn of the Screw* or *The Castle of Otranto* use a first-level narrator to introduce a found text that is claimed to be non-fiction, thus enabling the reader's willing suspension of disbelief about the reality of the events narrated by the second-level narrator. The unstable structure of embedding in *House of*

Leaves is similar to classic Gothic found text introductions in that it provides an aid to suspension of disbelief in order to provoke fear and unease in the reader. But although part of this is managed through the mere confusion of collapse, a new element of tension is introduced, which one might call the ontological uncanny — the creeping sense that reality has somehow been undermined or compromised.

What's Real or Isn't Real Doesn't Matter

Truant's unreliability as a narrator, Zampanò's cocktails of fact and fiction, and the hoax accusations aimed at Navidson: all of these factors work to undermine the complex narrative and ontological structure of Danielewski's novel. *House of Leaves* creates a complicated hierarchy of levels, but then subverts its own logical architecture in order to challenge the divide between fiction and reality.

N. Katherine Hayles sees *House of Leaves* as playing out a classic postmodernist problem: that “representation is short-circuited by the realization that there is no reality independent of mediation” (779). This manifests itself in the novel both as a concern with the authenticity and truth-value of representations of events, and, on the flip side, as a fear that fiction might not be distinguishable from fact. The structural concern here is echoed in the content. Hence Truant's feeling of dependence on Zampanò's manuscript, and also his struggle to “[m]ake it only a book” (327), which suggests a fight against the same violation of ontology that exists in the novel's structure. If Truant cannot contain Zampanò's text, what does that say about the real reader's relationship with *House of Leaves*? If Truant's position in the novel's ontological hierarchy is challenged,

[b]y implication, it also destabilizes our ontological superiority, as readers in the real world, to Johnny and Zampanò as characters in a fiction. (Hayles 801)

What the novel plays on here is the idea that if the rules of ontology break down within the novel, they might also be able to break down between the novel and reality.

This subversion of narrative and ontological levels also raises the possibility that Zampanò (auth.), all of whose words come mediated through Johnny Truant, might be a fictional character invented *by* Truant, and that, by extension, Truant is also the author of *The Navidson Record* (book) and creator of Will Navidson et al.³⁸ In other words, there is a suggestion that Truant may be the *fictional* author of *House of Leaves* as a whole — or at least, of far more than the comments clearly attributed to him.³⁹ Even according to the normal logic of embedding, Truant's modifications to the *The Navidson Record* (book) make him a source as well as a reader and transmitter of the narrative. Feeding into this theory is the implied discovery, by Truant,

that within the phrase “The Minotaur” is the anagram “O Im he Truant.” (*Ibid.* 798)

One may chalk this up to coincidence or over-reading — whether on the part of Hayles or Truant. However, there are also other clues that point to this kind of reading. One problematic issue in *House of Leaves* is the attribution of the iconic formatting and layout features: which narrator is responsible for these? One might argue that features of this kind are not strictly attributable to *any* narrator — that they exist on a different narrative plane with the author and the reader. However, *House of Leaves* seems to discourage such an approach, as the

³⁸ Clearly Zampanò (auth.) *is* ultimately a fictional character. The question here relates to whether he is considered fictional on the ontological level to which Truant belongs.

³⁹ Since *House of Leaves* is internally referenced as a physical text (513), it can be considered to have a fictional author in addition to its real author, who is, of course, Mark Danielewski.

question is engaged directly in a note from the Editors: “Mr. Truant refused to reveal whether the following bizarre textual layout is Zampanò's or his own” (134). As elsewhere in *House of Leaves*, an aspect of the text which would traditionally be considered irrelevant from an interpretative standpoint is foregrounded and charged with meaning. It should be acknowledged that it is not entirely clear which aspect, or aspects, of the layout the Editors are referring to here. Although the note could refer to the boxed and marginal comments written sideways, backwards, or upside-down, these features begin several pages earlier, so they are not “following” the note; what is more likely referred to is the increasing use of white space between paragraphs and paragraph fragments in the body text, culminating in the concrete prose of pages 194 to 245. Although at least some of the layout appears in the photographs of the manuscript in the appendices, suggesting that it is introduced by Zampanò (auth.), the manuscript is a mixture of typed and handwritten text on a variety of often makeshift pages. The digital rendering of the layout and formatting thus involves adaptation or recreation in a different form. The ambiguity surrounding the source of these features calls into question the levels of embedded narrative: textual layout and formatting necessarily exist at the surface of narrative and as such cannot be mediated or transmitted, only replicated or simulated by an embedding narrator. Thus, to bring attention to them is to collapse the illusion of narrative and ontological depth into the reality of textual surface. The idea of “a single dominant voice creating all the others” allows this issue to be bypassed (Danielewski, “Haunted House” 115).

It is not necessary to cast Truant in this role of the singular fictional author. Hayles suggests that, since Truant's mother, Pelafina, “can speak about Zampanò ...she may be the

writer who creates both the old man's narrative and her son's commentary" (802).⁴⁰ Pelafina as fictional author might explain the presence of the "check mark" on page 97 of *House of Leaves* — like the one she asks her son, in her September 19, 1985 letter, to place in his reply to her (609).

Breaking the boundary of the page, the check mark crashes through the narratological structure that encapsulates Pelafina's letters within the higher ontological level of whomever arranges for the deceased woman's correspondence to be included in the manuscript... (Hayles 802)⁴¹

However, Hayles argues, the check mark not only destabilizes the narrative and ontological levels of the novel, but, by reaching out into the margins of the physical text, also enters into the zone of the real reader. The collapse of narrative levels, then, is not just within *House of Leaves* — the novel threatens to collapse into the real world, just as Truant is concerned *The Navidson Record* (book) will push out beyond its covers.

The subversion of narrative levels is perhaps most powerfully conveyed through the book Will Navidson reads on his last expedition into the House on Ash Tree Lane: *House of Leaves* (mise en abyme). There is, it should be noted, no clear indication that this text is supposed to be Danielewski's — or even Truant's — *House of Leaves*. Perhaps the most rational explanation is that Truant takes the name for his text *from* the book that Navidson is described as reading. However, we do know *House of Leaves* (mise en abyme), like the real

⁴⁰ Hayles refers to the appearance of the sentence "My dear Zampano who did you lose?", in code, in Pelafina's letter from April 5, 1986 (Danielewski 615). The code is explained in a letter dated April 27, 1987: "use the first letter of each word to build subsequent words and phrases" (619).

⁴¹ Note that Hayles uses a different schema of ontological levels to mine. In her schema, lower levels are subordinate to higher levels.

book, “is 736 pages long” (467).⁴² Combined with the lack of any detail about *House of Leaves* (mise en abyme) that actually contradicts a metaleptic conclusion, the reader does seem to be pointed in this direction — Zampanò even suggests the possibility that “the words in [*House of Leaves* (mise en abyme)] have been arranged in such a way as to make them practically impossible to read” (467). What is more, the burning of the text by Navidson is echoed in the burn marks Truant finds that have erased portions of Zampanò's manuscript (323). In a novel which clearly loves to challenge narrative and ontological levels, the practical impossibility of Navidson's reading a book that contains him only makes this account more tantalizing.

Although Hayles notes *House of Leaves*'s postmodernist concern about representation and reality, she also sees the novel as posing a solution to the problem. Rather than dwelling on the impossibility of transmission, Hayles suggests, *House of Leaves* shifts focus away from representation and onto presentation — the novel treats “the subject as a palimpsest, emerging not behind but through the inscriptions that bring the book into being” (779). To record here is to create. Hayles argues further that *House of Leaves*, by insisting on the primacy of the representation, as opposed to what is represented, ends up casting recording as a force for good:

When relationships are not mediated by inscription technologies they decay toward alienation, and when they are mediated, they progress toward intimacy. (783)

Mark Hansen makes the similar point that “Karen and Navidson communicate best ... through Hi-8 video diaries” and their respective documentary films (614). Navidson's editing

⁴² Although *House of Leaves* does not have pages numbered up to 736, that is the total number of its pages when i-xxiii are taken into account.

of “Tom's Story”, and Karen's work on “A Brief History of Who I Love”, then, are perhaps not merely proofs of love, but actions that *create* love — restoring, or building anew, the relationships in question. Even more than this, however, *House of Leaves* “emphasizes that people within the represented world... exist only because they have been recorded” (Hayles 785). So recording is perhaps the ultimate act of love: life-giving. This emphasizes the literal, as opposed to the apparent, relationship between story and discourse: the discourse *creates* the story — it does not communicate a story that pre-exists it. On this view, the collapse of narrative and ontological levels changes from a destabilizing force — a postmodernist threat to the ability of the text to represent anything — to a means of bringing story and character into focus. It is not the meaning that collapses but the distance. The events of *The Navidson Record* (film) are not made less arresting either by the acknowledged possibility that the film is a hoax, or by the certainty that it is a fiction. While higher narrative levels are theoretically mediated by lower level narrators, the reader's experience of the text does not necessarily include this dependency, because it is not inherent in the text itself — it is a logic applied from the outside in an attempt to comprehend the *fictional* genesis of the work.

The connection of mediation with intimacy in *House of Leaves* allows us to read the collapse of narrative and ontological levels in terms of the reader's interaction with the novel. At a logical level, the hierarchy of narrative embedding builds layers of separation between the reader and Will Navidson, Karen Green, Billy Reston, et al — in contrast with Johnny Truant, the first-level narrator. In practice, however, this separation is often not a part of the experience of the text: in reading, narrative levels seem here to operate much more like Marie-Laure Ryan's “computer-inspired metaphor of stacking” discussed in the previous chapter (121). What is important at any given moment is the narrative level being read or

engaged with *at that moment* — the logical dependencies on lower narrative levels are not necessarily taken into account at that time.

Solutions Are Necessarily Personal

For all that *House of Leaves* reaches back into the past — retelling, rewriting, remediating — it is also a novel constantly situated in the present, concerned with immediacy of experience. Its focus is not confined to writing or recording, to the condition of the author — it is also a novel about the power of the reader, the constant recreation of the text that is inherent in the act of reading, and the *experience* of reading. The novel's title can be taken to refer both to the House on Ash Tree Lane and to the text, a metaphorical house made up of paper “leaves”. Indeed, the house itself stands to some degree for the text, and both house and text are to a great extent products of experience. Discussing the difficulties of navigating the house, Zampanò notes that

Due to the wall-shifts and extraordinary size, any way out remains singular and applicable only to those on that path at that particular time. All solutions [to the labyrinth] are necessarily personal. (115)

Reading is likewise personal: although the words on the page do not shift, their meaning is subject to change over time or due to psychological and cultural influences.

The unconventional typography and layout of *House of Leaves* is deeply connected to both the narrative and the house itself. Hayles identifies the typography in chapter 10 as mimetic, reflecting the story through the concrete formatting elements on the page:

When the rope holding the gurney stretches as the stairway suddenly begins expanding, for example, the text also stretches, taking three pages to inscribe the word “snaps”... (796)

The layout of the text is here used as another method of communicating the action. At the other extreme,

in chapter 9, reading speed slows down enormously as the reader struggles with seemingly endless lists, separate narrative threads in different page positions, type that runs in many directions, and proliferating footnotes... (*Ibid.*)

Hayles identifies these digressions and divergences with the progress of Exploration #4, which itself loses direction and eventually becomes fractured as Jed and Wax abandon Holloway to his mad hunt. The complex and divergent strings of text also encode something of the house itself, creating a narrative labyrinth to mirror the physical labyrinth in which the characters are lost. Hayles also notes Danielewski's suggestion that the formatting mirrors "the emotional pacing of the narrative" (*Ibid.*), causing the reader to turn the pages faster during action-oriented passages, as the number of words per page drops drastically. The same phenomenon also operates in reverse, as the sudden changes in the House's size and layout play into the hands of narrative imperative, making journeys shorter or longer according to the needs of the plot, so "the time of reading no longer takes place in an ontological realm separate from the narrative but itself is used as a resource for literary effects" (*Ibid.* 797). Narrative levels in the novel seem to expand and contract in a similar vein to narrative time, at one moment gearing the reader towards intense emotional investment in characters, and at the next creating critical distance and ontological barriers to such engagement. In this context, *House of Leaves* might be seen as representing the collapse of the *logic* of narrative levels in the face of the *experience* of the narrative.

With regard to *The Navidson Record* (book), Jared Wells has noted that Johnny Truant acts as a surrogate for the actual reader (8). By embedding Zampanò's narrative,

Truant reads it for us, as well as to us — and, like any reading, Truant's is imperfect, both impeded and enhanced by personal bias. It both is and is not the text itself: as established earlier in the chapter, not only does Truant add his own commentary to the manuscript — he also modifies the body of the manuscript himself. Zampanò (narr.), at the next narrative level, also acts as a reader-surrogate — or rather, since the text he relates is a film, a watcher-surrogate. In fact, Zampanò sits even more firmly in the reader or watcher role, because his experience of *The Navidson Record* (film) replaces, or at least stands in for, the actual reader's. Whereas the reader can follow alongside Truant's reading — barring the odd modification to Zampanò's original text — there is no chance of direct access to the film Zampanò describes. There are only the readings and interpretations of Zampanò and the critics he cites. In this regard then, the reader's relationship with Truant is special, because Truant's reading is made transparent — not completely so, but enough for the action of reading itself to be brought into focus.

Hansen argues that Truant's version of Zampanò's manuscript represents

a copy with a difference, which is to say, a single embodied reading of a “text” that doesn't exist in any other form, or at least that can't be passed on in such a form. (618–619)

He also cites Truant's encounter with a band who have read *House of Leaves* online and written songs referencing it, noting in particular that the pages of the drummer's printed copy are filled with the band's notes and musings — “even some pretty stunning personal riffs about the lives of the musicians themselves” (Danielewski 514). Here, then, Truant's role as active reader is shown to be replicated by *his* fictional readers, and, it is implied, by his real readers as well.

Beyond signifying the author's loss of authority over his text and the merging of the author and reader functions, this passage attests to Truant's simultaneous recognition of the singularity of his own "reading" and of every other act of reading that might concretize his text. (Hansen 620)

Wells argues that, because of the House on Ash Tree Lane's spatial instability, "[t]he singular journeys of individuals into the house thus mirror within the text the singular and... unrepeatable act of navigating or reading any text (21–22). This singularity is powerfully represented in the practical problems of lighting and vision in Navidson's reading of *House of Leaves* (mise en abyme):

With only 24 matches plus the matchbook cover... Navidson had a total of five minutes and forty-four seconds of light.

The book, however, is 736 pages long. Even if Navidson can average a page a minute, he will still come up 104 pages short (he had already read 26 pages). To overcome this obstacle, he tears out the first page, which of course consists of two pages of text, and rolls it into a tight stick, thus creating a torch which... will burn for about two minutes and provide him with just enough time to read the next two pages. (467)

This scene is the ultimate unrepeatable reading, since the text itself is consumed in the process. The original burns away, but, phoenix-like, is reborn — though not without alteration — in the reading that Navidson is creating for himself. That his action of reading is so irrevocable speaks to the uniqueness not only of a particular reader, but of a particular reading experience even the same reader cannot recreate in exactly the same way.

The novel resists fixity or finality of meaning as another form of containment. Instead of a monolithic single interpretation, *House of Leaves* embraces multiplicity of meaning: readings, re-readings, different versions, additions. Earlier, we considered its failure in terms

of organic unity, but what it does appear to have is a form of organic growth, constantly expanding and replicating — “copying with a difference” (Hansen 619) — through new readings. Accepting that experience can never be represented in an entirely faithful manner, Hansen says, *House of Leaves* recasts representation as experience generation:

the novel in its post-orthographic form operates as a kind of machine for producing what we might call “reality *affects*” in the reader. (*Ibid.* 621)

Experience has always been a key part of the novelistic tradition insofar as novels present the experience of a different person, a different place, a different culture, or a different world. However, *House of Leaves* attempts to convey the experience of media, which focuses it on the gap between text and reading, highlighting the divergent possible readings as opposed to the unity of the text.

Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* is a multi-level narrative structure. Its narrative embedding, like that of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, reflects the process of re-telling, and the novel makes clear its interest in the implications of this kind of transmission. *House of Leaves* not only demonstrates the failure of faithful transmission — whether or not remediation is involved — but embraces the deviations, modifications and imperfections of the flawed copy, even to the point of effacing the original or canonical text. Through its complex embedded structure, its proliferation of materials not clearly either internal or external to the text, and its various versions, the novel emphasizes that it is not complete or final, but somehow alive, continually growing, expanding, and mutating. Given the implications of its title, along with the points raised by Danielewski and Hayles about the relationship between reading time, textual layout, and the architecture of the House, there is a strong element of self-reflexivity about *House of Leaves*: it is to some extent a novel about

novels. More specific than that, though, it is a novel about the act of reading. Acknowledging the impossibility of faithful representation in narrative, *House of Leaves* instead looks to presentation, or, rather, *creation*. This shifts the emphasis away from the text — of which *House of Leaves* is so reluctant to define the limits — and onto individual readings, each essentially unrepeatable, but each adding to the text's network of meaning, expanding its scope. Although *House of Leaves* ultimately undermines its narrative hierarchy through Navidson's mise en abyme reading material, Truant's unstable relationship with Zampanò's manuscript, and Pelafina's impossible knowledge of Zampanò, the structure of embedding remains crucial. Not only does embedding provide the framework to present the central action of re-telling, but the very collapse of the narrative and ontological levels underpins the novel's use of the ontological uncanny, the feeling that the text might be bleeding into the real world. This in turn is part of the emphasis on the experience of the reader, which once again makes use of the embedded structure to establish a surrogate reader and demonstrate the concept of the singular and unrepeatable reading within the text itself.

Conclusion: Having the Last Word

Both *Cloud Atlas* and *House of Leaves* are keenly interested in the nature of narrative. In the previous two chapters I have referred to the former as a novel about storytelling and the latter as a novel about novels. Mitchell and Danielewski use their respective texts, and in particular the complexities of embedding within them, to explore the workings and assumptions of fiction. As such, it is worth giving some attention to the challenges they have posed for the interpretive framework laid out in the first chapter and what they can tell us about the analytical tools used. Most importantly, however, *Cloud Atlas* and *House of Leaves* explore the power dynamics of narrative, in which embedding plays a central role. For both, the key question in determining this balance of power is who has the last word.

I began this thesis with a general discussion of the theoretical and terminological issues of narrative embedding. Having now discussed *Cloud Atlas* and *House of Leaves* in terms of embedding, and given that neither text perfectly fits the standard model of embedded narrative, I would like to consider the particular challenges that these novels pose and what these challenges tell us about the approach taken. The most obvious problem presented by *House of Leaves* is its innovative use of the print form. Danielewski's novel consists of far more than just words on a page, and thus challenges the concept of narrative as something purely verbal. One of the questions raised in the third chapter was whether it is possible to attribute the formatting features of the text to a particular narrator — and thus a particular narrative level. It is assumed that simple text can be packaged in a number of different ways — distributed over more or fewer pages, written by hand or printed, et cetera — while maintaining its integrity or essence. This is not the case for the visually-loaded pages of *House of Leaves*. The appendix photograph indicates to the reader how much is lost or

changed in this remediation of *The Navidson Record* (book). What the problems of remediation in *House of Leaves* highlight is the impossibility of that perfect transmission that is the ideal on which narrative embedding logically rests. Through this, and its proliferation of versions, additions, and mediating narrators, *House of Leaves* shakes the foundational assumptions of accurate transmission, and calls into question the relationship between embedded and embedding narratives.

While Danielewski's novel pushes the boundaries of the medium and challenges the reader's assumptions about the logic of embedding, *Cloud Atlas*'s structure defies structural categorization altogether. With its inverted ordering and tangential introduction of narrative, Mitchell's novel seems fundamentally unclear as to whether it even *has* a hierarchy of embedding or whether it is simply a series of related narratives on one level. Throughout the second chapter of this thesis, we returned again and again to the tension between different structural readings of the text: is *Cloud Atlas* truly the embedded matryoshka doll it so often suggests, or merely a "sextet for overlapping soloists" (463)? I have argued that there are virtues in both readings and that each partly informs an understanding of the novel as a whole. Though applied specifically to *Cloud Atlas*, this position has wider implications: it denies the existence of a simple binary between embedded and non-embedded narratives. To conclude that Mitchell's novel is both embedded and not is also to acknowledge that it is neither. Both structures are interpreted rather than inherent.

The problem can be traced back to the definition of embedding: one narrative being subordinated to — that is, mediated by — another narrative. I referred in the first chapter to narrative levels as a hierarchy of discourses and ontological levels as a hierarchy of story worlds. However, although the embedding relationship exists between units at the level of

discourse, the actual links are made at the level of story. The reader of *The Turn of the Screw* knows that the governess's tale is an embedded narrative, rather than a second narrative on the same level, because of cues presented in the first narrative. Although the cues appear in the discourse, they are interpreted as elements of the story, which in turn form a link with the narrative that follows. *House of Leaves* is a little more complicated in this regard, since it incorporates visual cues as well as verbal ones: the bulk of Johnny Truant's embedding narrative attached as footnotes to *The Navidson Record* (book). *Cloud Atlas* gives the reader some cues, but then defies the conventional ordering of embedding by introducing the embedded narratives before those that embed them. In the case of Mitchell's novel the reader has less evidence on which to assume that there is a relationship of embedding, making the role of the reader more obvious. However, this process of interpretation underpins *any* reading of embedded narrative.

Both novels feature parts that are not easily classified in terms of a hierarchy of levels. Any account of this hierarchy must therefore involve decisions about what to include and what to exclude. In the chapters on *Cloud Atlas* and *House of Leaves*, I chose to treat “minor narratives” — for instance, the notes from *House of Leaves*'s Editors and from Jackson Ewing on his father's *Pacific Journal* — as too brief to warrant inclusion in the hierarchy of levels within their respective texts. This decision was one born out of pragmatics rather than logical necessity: to include the likes of Jackson Ewing in the numbered levels would have made it more difficult to explicate the structure of *Cloud Atlas*. Yet, except in the scale of their narratives, Jackson Ewing and the Editors are not so different to Johnny Truant. Like Truant, they are commenting on other narratives after the fact, and, like Truant, we can therefore regard them as embedding those narratives. *An Orison of Sonmi~451* provides a slightly more

challenging example since its additional voice is that of the archivist interviewing Sonmi, making this part of *Cloud Atlas* a dialogue rather than coming from a single narrator. Although there is no relationship of embedding established between the dual narrators, it seems reasonable to suggest that, as in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, there is a fictional persona who may or may not be deemed a narrator, but who nevertheless mediates and organizes the other narratives.⁴³ This mediating role may be played by the archivist who co-narrates or by another personage. In either case, this could be characterized as an additional narrative level, even if the organizer is not a narrator per se. To these editors and presenters of narratives we could add the fictional authors of embedded works where these diverge from their narrators: Zampanò (auth.), for instance, or the author of *Half-Lives*, Hilary V. Hush. Under Edwin Fussell's account, *The Turn of the Screw*'s governess-author may also be considered here.

Trying to pin down the status of these minor narrators and narrative organizers can be troublesome. They do not fit neatly within a hierarchy of narrative levels. Such a structure can accommodate them, but at a cost to its neatness and the ease with which it can be grasped. The troublesome issue is that these characters introduce additional layers of mediation without necessarily *narrating*.⁴⁴ Some editors, organisers and presenters of narrative may fall into the category of narrators and others not — yet all deserve some recognition in the narrative hierarchy. *House of Leaves* and *Cloud Atlas*, by foregrounding these elements of narrative, also bring into focus those structures which are imposed on texts by readers rather than existing within the texts themselves. The term “narrator” refers to a

⁴³ In *Dracula*, a number of different narratives are presented at the same level, which is somewhat different from the dual narrators of *An Orison*. However, they have the relationship with the organising or mediating consciousness in common.

⁴⁴ If our primary concern was to identify and label all such mediating forces within a text, it would perhaps be better to speak in terms of “mediation levels” rather than “narrative levels”.

concept which is neither discrete nor inherent in fiction. It is a way of interpreting a narrative. While it is a powerful convention both for readers and writers — and one which we should be loath to abandon — it is important nonetheless to have an awareness of the limits of such a tool to describe narrative.

Since both novels are engaged in the subversion of their respective ontological hierarchies, it is also worth examining the assumptions made about ontological levels. Although *The Navidson Record* (book) is a work of fiction, many of its sources are not fabrications, but real-world non-fiction texts. Even some of the fictional references come not out of thin air, but from other literary works — for instance, the discussion of the modern word-for-word rewrite of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (Danielewski 42), which is an uncredited borrowing from a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Ménard, Author of *Don Quixote*”. In other words, the story world to which *The Navidson Record* refers partially overlaps with both the real world and the world of the Borges short story. A similar overlap between worlds or ontologies can be seen in the relationship between *Cloud Atlas* and some of David Mitchell's other novels. *Ghostwritten*, Mitchell's first novel, introduces Luisa Rey as a minor character, some years after her exploits in *Half-lives*. Likewise, Vyvyan Ayrs's daughter Eva returns for a supporting role in *Black Swan Green*.⁴⁵ Can one assume, then, that these novels share a common ontology? Given the ontological hierarchy in *Cloud Atlas*, such an assumption implies that *Ghostwritten* and *Black Swan Green* contain lower ontological levels not actually described within those texts. But whereas in *Cloud Atlas* the narrative and ontological complexities are a part of the structure of the text, in *Black Swan Green* or *Ghostwritten* they would be little more than a distraction. Such a reading of these novels

⁴⁵ Of course, this re-use of characters between texts is by no means original to Mitchell. However, the device's relationship with the narrative and ontological structure of *Cloud Atlas* is worth exploring.

would be complicated, but it is doubtful that it would be enriching or meaningful. One need not be concerned with the logical necessity of the joint ontology: we have already discussed the ability of fiction to defy logic. I argued in the second chapter that *Cloud Atlas* undermines its ontological hierarchy when it implies that characters throughout its various narratives are reincarnations of the same soul. Logic, however, is applied from the outside in an attempt to make a narrative intelligible. Ontological levels — even while being subverted — are a useful tool in understanding *Cloud Atlas*, and in particular its interest in the power of storytelling.

Major narratives, narrative and ontological levels, and even narrators are constructs. They aid greatly in making sense of fictional text, but are ultimately descriptive categorizations and not fundamental ones. Their value lies in how they can be used to meaningfully interpret narrative. For *Cloud Atlas* and *House of Leaves*, the strength of reading in terms of an embedded hierarchy is in the way it complements the novels' other themes and concerns. Mitchell has made it clear that he is interested in power relationships. In *Cloud Atlas*, he goes beyond showcasing imbalances of power within the story and looks also at the power relationships at work in storytelling — specifically, the ability of the person telling a story to create a new reality and to influence others through their words. If *Cloud Atlas* is a novel about the power of narrative, and in particular the role of the author or narrator, *House of Leaves* examines the other side of the equation: the importance of the reader to a narrative. In Danielewski's text, the embedding narrator is used in part to stand for the role of the active reader. Both texts are interested in the question of where power resides in narrative. Furthermore, in both texts, authority takes precedence over authenticity. Those in positions of authority — social, political, even academic — have authorship over the most

widespread narratives, and their story comes to replace fact. In other words, power trumps truth.

Narrative embedding is the battlefield for these power struggles. Although the old adage that “might makes right” comes to mind, there is also a temporal element at work here. Having the last word — or, at least, the *latest* word, since finality is forever out of reach — becomes the crucial factor. N. Katherine Hayles discusses subjectivity in *House of Leaves* in terms of a palimpsest (779). This idea is a useful one in describing embedding as well: each new narrator inks their words on the same space and thus overwrites, to a greater or lesser extent, the words of those before them. While I have argued that the subordination relationship does not imply overall superiority, we have also seen, particularly through Johnny Truant's editing of *The Navidson Record* (book), that mediation grants power over the mediated narrative: to mediate is, in a sense, to conquer. Being a hierarchical structure, narrative embedding contains a natural power imbalance in favour of the narrator at the lowest level: this narrator is closest to the reader and anything mediated by them is subject to their whim. This logically inherent power relationship is, by convention, ignored or glossed over — so much so that *The Turn of the Screw*'s absolute insistence that the embedded narrative of the governess has been copied perfectly from the original sounds rather like too much protestation:

Let me say here distinctly, to have done with it, that this narrative, from an exact transcript of my own made much later, is what I shall presently give. Poor Douglas, before his death — when it was in sight — committed to me the manuscript that reached him on the third of these days and that, on the same spot, with immense effect, he began to read to our hushed little circle on the night of the fourth. (119)

In most cases, it is taken for granted that an embedded narrative is transmitted without alteration. One may look for the embedding narrator to contextualize the higher-level narrative, but the expectation is that, unless a text gives us special reason to doubt, the embedded narrative will be a perfect copy.⁴⁶ *Cloud Atlas* and *House of Leaves* both employ complex and convoluted narrative structures, drawing attention to embedding as a device and putting pressure on the assumptions made about it. *House of Leaves* goes further than *Cloud Atlas*, however, with Truant actively attacking the assumption of faithful mediation by admitting that he has modified Zampanò's manuscript to suit his own purposes. By breaking the oft-unspoken relationship of trust between reader and mediating narrator, Truant highlights problems that are inherent in embedding. Yet what can we really make of Truant's manipulation of the higher-level text? One might claim that the relationship of trust is broken — yet his very admission of deception both destroys and recreates trust. Yes, Johnny Truant is unreliable; however, he is reliably unreliable: we can believe him when he *admits* his lies.

Cloud Atlas suggests that history is not the recording of events, but the creation of a narrative. Thus, it is the creator who decides what is true and what is false; what is included and what is excluded. *House of Leaves* retorts that the text is empowered by the reader, and that readers create interpretations that reflect not only the text but also their experiences, their ideas, and their prejudices: a reading must always stand between the text and its reader, and in some cases, a reading can even displace the actual text. In place of *The Navidson Record* (film) there is Zampanò's book of the same name. Zampanò is in turn displaced by Truant, and Truant's place usurped by his own readership. Even as we see the narrator or author conquered in *House of Leaves* by the reader, this shift is simulated in terms of embedding.

⁴⁶ Similar convention holds for unreliable narrators, who must somehow signal themselves as such.

The first-level narrator, Truant, plays the role of reader: he reads the book *for* us, as well as *to* us. Its ontological status notwithstanding, Zampanò plays a similar role with regard to *The Navidson Record* (film). Truant and Zampanò are surrogates or stand-ins for the reader, and, in this context, to stand in for is to stand between — to mediate. Zampanò stands between the film and Johnny Truant, Truant in turn between Zampanò's text and the reader of *House of Leaves*. In establishing this link between reading and embedding, *House of Leaves* also implies the reader's own position of power with regard to the novel — both this novel specifically and fiction in general. Yet for all the opportunity readers have to interpret, the field of interpretation, even of rewriting, has its restrictions. The readings a text can spawn are not without limits. To read may be to re-create, but this creation requires, or at least implies, something that pre-exists it — namely the text. As Truant's mental state deteriorates, his friend Lude advises: “Get rid of it Hoss, it's killing you” (324). But Truant fears that the dependence of Zampanò's opus on him has “turned around”, that “without it [he] would perish” (326). Defined as a surrogate reader, Truant requires the text in order to exist. While interpretation is not wholly dictated by the text, the text always plays a part. The palimpsest retains traces of earlier inscriptions.

Cloud Atlas and *House of Leaves* may not agree on where the power lies in narrative, but the importance of the struggle is clear. Truant's relationship with Zampanò's manuscript is a struggle for self-definition and perhaps even for his life. Likewise, in Mitchell's novel, Frobisher tells Sixsmith that “*Cloud Atlas Sextet* holds my life, *is* my life, now I'm a spent firework” (489). Sonmi-451 embraces her own destruction in order to propagate her words in the form of the *Declarations*:

Media have flooded Nea So Copros with my Catechisms. Every schoolchild in Nea So Copros knows my twelve 'blasphemies' now. ...My ideas have been reproduced a billionfold. (364–365)

Sonmi~451 and Robert Frobisher both see themselves living on in the texts they have created — Sonmi in her *Declarations*, Frobisher in *Cloud Atlas Sextet* — and, indeed, both are represented in later narratives. Frobisher's music survives him and is listened to by Luisa Rey (425), and Sonmi becomes a goddess to the Valleysmen. Zampanò exists as a ghostly presence, entering *House of Leaves* only posthumously, through Truant's restoration of *The Navidson Record* (book) — and Truant himself finds himself vitally connected to his work on Zampanò's manuscript. Adam Ewing holds that “[b]elief is both prize & battlefield, within the mind & in the mind's mirror, the world” (528). Narrative may be illusion, but it is a powerful illusion.

By delaying the contextualisation of its constituent narratives and providing ambiguous embedding cues, *Cloud Atlas* places additional pressure on the conventions that govern the interpretation of narrative embedding. This foregrounds the fact that fiction's narrative structures are as much a product of interpretation as the fictional worlds they present. *House of Leaves* creates a hierarchy of narrative and ontological levels which it repeatedly undermines: fact and fiction are blended and levels looped together. Just as the physical architecture of the House on Ash Tree Lane is subverted, turning a home into something dark and alien, so the novel uses the collapse of its narrative architecture to produce a textual labyrinth and an uncanny ontological effect. In both cases, the attention given to embedding also exposes certain logical dynamics of the embedding relationship — particularly, the authority wielded by the first-level narrator. *House of Leaves* phrases the problem in terms of unreliability and remediation. *Cloud Atlas* suggests this as just one aspect

of the way in which narrative — and thus the presentation of events — is dominated by the author or narrator. Both signal the problem of access: that perfect transmission is impossible and that the narrative presents rather than represents.

The liberties taken by Johnny Truant in his editing of *The Navidson Record* (book) point towards breaking the narratorial monopoly on power through essentially the same means as it is maintained: narrating. By actively interpreting, modifying, and expanding the text, the reader can become, like Truant, a reader-writer, and thus seize control for themselves. *Cloud Atlas* makes much of the inaccessibility of the past and the ability of those in power to define history according to their own requirements. Mitchell's novel does not embrace the same dynamic of re-interpretation and re-writing that Danielewski's does. However, it too suggests that narrative is the solution as well as the problem. As much as *Cloud Atlas* cautions mistrust for the skilful spinning of tales, it also embraces fresh stories as a way to combat the prevailing narratives: fighting back by writing back. All of the novel's major narratives are rebel narratives: they give voice not to those in power, but to outcasts; underdogs; the oppressed. Power may be in the hands of whomever has the last word, but there is always the opportunity for a new last word. Whether it is Sonmi's subversive tracts being replicated in the face of the prevailing regime's narrative of the past and present, Truant seizing control of *The Navidson Record* (book), or whether it is any diarist, novelist, letter-writer, or even a reader commenting in the margins, the last word is not a fixed point but a constant stream of new information and new points of view. "Seneca's warning to Nero", quoted by Sonmi in her interview with the archivist, sums it up well: "No matter how many of us you kill, you will never kill your successor" (365).

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