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Becoming-Signiconic: Emergence and Territory in *The Familiar*

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The Familiar is densely structured by divisions and hierarchies in terms of plot, focalization, vocabularies and layout, but it is primarily a book of interconnectedness. This is a principle that propels its narrative and poses the biggest challenge in its execution: is it possible to describe a genuinely new and disruptive entity, a "monster" unreadable in terms of existing codes and concepts, arriving as a series of glitches, a system breach, a breakdown of defenses, an enforced encounter with the Other? *The Familiar* itself could be conceived as an arena where a new *genus* comes into being through the corporeality of text, not represented as a character or recounted as an event, but assuming flesh on the page within the suspended temporality of print. A specific *signiconic* lexicon was devised to blur the borders between the textual and the pictorial, to give a voice to the voiceless ("the waves, the animals, the plants"), and to "surpass or bypass the mind" (Danielewski). Placing this enlarged semiotic spectrum of the sensible and the intelligible within the traditional frame of a multi-volume novel makes its ambition even more radical. Pushing the book-as-archive beyond its historical confines of mimesis and expression, The Familiar envisions literature as a process, a distribution of forces across an ontologically heterogeneous field, suggesting a nonlinear continuum motivated by a "non-subject-centered mode of agency" (Bennett). Starting with notions of the book to come as a locus of futurity and unexplored possibility (Blanchot, Derrida) and assemblage as a multiplicity, a corpus of becoming or a zone of emergence (Deleuze and Guattari), this article attempts to examine the tension between storytelling demands and the very materiality of *The Familiar* (including its asemic borders or cores) in view of its own *signiconic* and inherently post-anthropocentric goals.

1. The Book to Come

The existence of the novel has always seemed precarious. If it is "the only developing genre" without a prescriptive history or a model to conform to, "a creature from an alien species" essentially bound to writing and books,[1] then every attempt at its codification belies the initial conditions of its emergence. Its future is perpetually open because of this fundamental uncertainty. Every time a new work prompts someone to announce "the death of the novel," it only means one thing: "this is not what I recognize as a novel." It stands for the rebirth of the novel.

The initial shock of Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar* (2015–2017) has subsided, but never fully disappeared. Unfortunately, the twenty-seven volume plan was abandoned, and Danielewski's project is slowly reshaping into being considered as a five-volume novel. In the age of Elena Ferrante's and Karl Ove Knausgård's successes, the scope of Season One doesn't appear that daunting anymore. Of course, sheer size was not the only obstacle for the audience; Danielewski managed to write and intertwine nine books (and a myriad of interstitial threads), mobilizing an enormous cultural archive with a variety of layouts, narrative procedures, and non-textual material. The result, while not as anomalous and intimidating as Henry Darger's *The Story of the Vivian Girls* (cca 1910–1973), Marianne Fritz's *Die Festung* project (1980–2011), or Arno Schmidt's *Zettel's Traum* (1970), still surpasses the few contemporary works that bear comparison with it (as they never approach its level of information overload), such as Agustín Fernández Mallo's *Nocilla Trilogy* (2006–2009), a polycentric global story incorporating influences of other media, or Philip Weiss's five-volume *Am Weltenrand sitzen die Menschen und lachen* (2018), which employs a variety of typographical and paratextual games in its design, including an entire graphic novel.

Dwarfing Joyce's ambition of textually assimilating a day, a city, or a dream, *The Familiar* attempts to encapsulate an entire universe (or multiverse), stretching from its first picoseconds to the brink of its death. This necessitates assuming a nonhuman viewpoint: one must abandon humanity as the framework for understanding and describing a world to make way into uncharted territories. Genuine innovation doesn't only offer new themes or forms, it opens new pathways of cognition and thought, and this novel achieves precisely that, reaching across its own material and conceptual limits. "It's an exercise that posits, that asks, whether or not to imagine what could never exist at all might create behavior which never could have existed before?" (*TF*v1 450). This is Astair's description of her thesis, but it could equally be a brief for *The Familiar*.

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[1] M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 3–4.

There is a twofold opening towards the exteriority of writing in *The Familiar*. The first creates what we might name an assemblage (following Deleuze and Guattari), introducing "foreign material" into the book, therefore expanding it from a written narrative into a decentered set of "variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds."[2] The second one branches out towards a possible future, exploring certain prospects of its reading and critical assessment. If *The Familiar* presents an entaglement both in its plot and in its execution, an unprecedented complexity in the flow of information and matter, then a new critical apparatus might be necessary to accommodate it, perhaps even a new type of institution or community.[3]

Nevertheless, if the arch–ambition of this novel is an overcoming of anthropocentric bias and entering into an ontologically versatile semiotic exchange, one might ask whether the choice of a printed volume as the designated format was a logical decision; the extended visual vocabulary of *The Familiar*, alluding not only to multimedia but even to the biosemiotic spectrum of other species, seems to demand a level of plasticity that paper simply cannot deliver. However, rather than concluding that literature should abandon its habitat of print in order to fully develop its potential (assuming that the final state of narrative art will be a multimodal *Gesamtkunstwerk* in an interactive digital environment), I believe that printed matter is ideally placed to convey what I see as the central problem of *The Familiar*, both in its thematic scope and in its formal presentation. This is a story of a violent emergence, coming about of something new and previously unseen, and while a multimedia platform would perhaps allow for a broader range of devices in testifying to the arrival of an incomprehensible entity, the real challenge here is maintaining a liminal zone that *fails* to fully represent an alterity, letting it appear while keeping its mystery alive. Therefore, I will try to examine the possibility that the resistance of print to certain semiotic procedures is one of the highest aesthetic achievements of *The Familiar*: the ostensibly conservative format of a book, with its obvious "shortcomings," "inadequacies," and "limits," actually

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[2] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004), 4.

[3] This is another trace of Joycean hubris, at least as interpreted by Derrida: the belief that radical artworks can overpower the university as a self-replicating logocentric structure which neutralizes every doubt in its own idea of competence. Literature can generate new fields of study, evolving by incalculable trajectories rather than the extant "technological model and division of university labor"; see Jacques Derrida, "Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce," in *Acts of Literature*, trans. Tina Kendall (New York & London: Routledge, 1992), 280–281. Danielewski's work is particularly conducive to such processes, as proven by various online communities (professional or otherwise) and their distinctly high-end readings of his work, often combining scholarly acumen with the obsessive dedication of fans to produce new interpretations, test various theories, or simply address the obscure minutiae of the text. See Inge van de Ven, "The Serial Novel in an Age of Binging: How to Read Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*," *Image & Narrative* vol. 17, no. 4 (2016), 99–100.

embodies the struggle of representing a truly alien entity more convincingly than any other artistic medium.

This is actually an old idea, circulating through high modernism and beyond: a book as the ultimate platform of change, not only an archive for the world but a vehicle of its future. Mallarmé's notorious proclamation that "everything in the world exists to end up as a book"[4] obscures some of its underlying nuances: humans as mere "accessories" to this incoming text; representation as a disappearance of writing; verse as "the dispenser and organiser of pages, master of the book."[5] His "Preface" to *Un coup de dés* will simply reaffirm this idea of spatial organization—rather than expression or mimesis—as the fundament of writing, to be taken up later by Derrida.

Writing on *Un coup de dés*, an important ancestral point for projects such as Danielewski's, Blanchot sees it as a prefiguration of the unfinished "Book," an abstraction never to be embodied, but regulating all movements in the domain of the sensible. Mallarmé hints at plans for "four books, which can be spread over twenty volumes,"[6] but *Un coup de dés* itself is a small and mobile blueprint, suspending communication in favor of a "landscape of words,"[7] arrested in an oscillation between the visible and the readable. A book such as this "achieves connections that *precede* any objective, technical accomplishment,"[8] "like another language instituting a new game of space and time."[9]

The strain of learning to read a new language—long since pinpointed by Russian Formalists as the essence of literariness—is a regular feature of Danielewski's work, but *The Familiar* takes this to new levels of difficulty; it is an advanced exploration into corporeality of books and reading, aiming for what Blanchot calls "a new understanding of literary space: by new links of movement, new relationships of comprehension can be engendered in it."[10] Both *Un coup de dés* and *The Familiar* achieve this through typography, crossing the threshold towards graphic design and establishing materiality of print as the generator of change, divorcing language from the notions of pure intelligibility, instant communication, information storage and retrieval.

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[4] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 226.

[5] Ibid., 222.

[6] Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 263.

[7] Ibid., 240.

[8] Ibid., 197.

[9] Ibid., 239.

[10] Ibid., 235.

It is clear that a new literary sensorium will be required to appreciate this new landscape; received modes of reading cannot do justice to this expanded range of meaning-making, since humans are merely a catalyst which will allow the book to unfold "according to the various physical interactions that the mobility of the pages makes possible and necessary; then according to the new movement of the understanding that the language develops by integrating various genres and various arts."[11] Danielewski's concept of the signiconic probably remains out of reach of any given artistic medium today (advanced VR platforms possibly excluded), but I believe that the radicality of *The Familiar* stems precisely from its placement in print. Its highest stake is the extent to which it comes to life within the covers of a bound book, providing "support and reality"[12] (inevitably imperfect) to what would otherwise remain a theoretical concept. Like *Un coup de dés* a century ago, it "implies a completely different book from the book that we have: it makes us feel that what we call 'book' according to the traditional Western usages, in which the gaze identifies the act of comprehension with the repetition of linear back-and-forth motions, is justified to facilitate analytic comprehension. In fact, we must realize this: we have the poorest books that can be conceived, and after a few millennia we continue to read as if we were still only beginning to learn to read."[13]

In the following, I will try to approach *The Familiar* as an arena where a new *genus* comes into being through the corporeality of text, not represented as a character or recounted as an event, but assuming flesh on the page within the suspended temporality of print. This certainly entails forcing the idea of the book as an archive beyond its historical confines of mimesis and expression, but it doesn't imply a future horizon of an advanced media platform where all of the ensuing paradoxes will be resolved. On the contrary, the singular space where this conflict between the traditional task of representation and the possibility of opening towards an unscripted future will be played out is the book itself.

2. The Signiconic Threshold

There are at least two ways of understanding the concept of the "signiconic." The term itself is unfortunate, since icon is a subcategory of sign (at least within Peircean semiotics), but this awkwardness might be productive, as the purpose of the term is to cut across various categories. Aiming at an *Aufhebung* of the visual/conceptual divide, Danielewski writes: "Rather than engage those textual faculties of the mind remediating the pictorial or those visual faculties remediating language, the signiconic

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[11] Ibid., 242.

[12] Ibid., 234.

[13] Ibid.

simultaneously engages both in order to lessen the significance of both, and therefore achieve a third perception no longer dependent on sign and image for remediating a world in which the mind plays no part."[14] This "third perception," a paradoxical cognitive leap into a synergy with a nonhuman world, might be the earnest goal of *The Familiar*, or simply an inaccessible theoretical horizon which nevertheless orients and shapes its procedures, producing effects both in the story and in its visual corporeality.

Within the novel itself, however, TF-Narcon[9] defines Signiconic as the "source superset" of all "-isms"—real, ironic, or otherwise, from "Epic" through "Rhomboidist" to "Post-Post-Ironic Confesssional," "l8lit," and "NotEnuflit"— applied in the rendering of text (*TF*v1 566). This "procedural" definition apparently overlaps with Danielewski's broader autopoetic description quoted above, but significantly it seems to fall short precisely by "encompassing everything," the whole spectrum of possible styles and codes, extant or not: it fails to reach for the outer limits of this system, the "beyond" of text.

This is the line of thought I will explore: the signiconic as a production of semantic content in print, using procedures that abandon traditional narrative tropes and rhetoric in favor of an intensive interaction with typography, graphic arts, and its own materiality. This process plays out across various borders and that is its key attraction, which makes defining clear semiotic boundaries extremely difficult, if not detrimental to our understanding of *The Familiar* as a whole. Nevertheless, it seems imperative to introduce at least a semblance of typology in order to try to differentiate the signiconic from other devices employed in the novel.[15]

The first volume establishes a system of expanded writing that Season One largely conforms to; the formal layout doesn't change much afterwards, but when it does, it is always highly significant, and implies grave disturbances in the ontology of the projected world. The most visible and easily accessible aspect of this standardization is

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[14] Quoted in "The Familiar, Volume 1 Reader's Guide," Penguin Random House, accessed March 1, 2021, https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/213605/the-familiar-volume-1-by-mark-z-danielewski/9780375714948/readers-guide/.

[15] The concept of narrative multimodality is broad enough to encompass the majority of hybrid phenomena in *The Familiar*, but the idea of the signiconic seems designed to explore or subvert its very limits. Sascha Pöhlmann accentuates the interaction of narrative and non-narrative elements within this approach: "its goal is to have neither of the two as a secondary supplement of the other but to incorporate them as equal halves of an aesthetic form." See "Multimodality as a Limit of Narrative in Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*," in *Beyond Narrative: Literature, Culture, and the Borderlands of Narrativity*, ed. Katja Kanzler and Sebastian M. Herrmann (Bielefeld: transcript), 147. An invaluable systematic treatise on multimodality was provided by Alison Gibbons, *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature* (London: Routledge, 2012). A condensed taxonomy is offered in her "Multimodal Literature and Experimentation," in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, ed. Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale (London & New York: Routledge, 2012), 426–433.

the formatting of "main" chapters, forming the bulk of each volume: color-coded "dog ears," indicating changes in focalization and providing timestamps; titles, epigraphs and richly illustrated chapter frontispieces (ranging from decorative mood boards to important elements of the plot); distinct fonts chosen for each character, including extended non-English sections and featuring a variety of writing systems. Differentiating characters or narrative levels through typography is not a new device in Danielewski's work, but it is taken to a new height of complexity here, and the importance of fonts is clearly accentuated in the end credits of each volume, where the "cast of characters" seems to distribute the locus of identity equally between a personage (Xanther) and its graphic embodiment (Minion). This is particularly interesting, bearing in mind that fonts—as burdened as they are by their cultural contexts, aesthetics, even implied values, therefore carrying a considerable semantic charge in itself—traditionally remain critically sequestered into the exteriority of literature, being a part of text's material disposition rather than the engine of its worldbuilding capacities.[16] In *The Familiar*, they seem to reside in a grey zone between asemic and semantic aspects of text, irreducible to anything outside themselves (as visual properties), but remaining capable of sublexical micro-narration.

These features are so carefully tied into the content of any given chapter that they rarely dislodge our reading of "plain text": enhancing and multiplying the coded aspects of narration, they actually seem to contravene potential signiconic flows. Another layer of the novel initially appears more open to them, referencing other media (extant or invented) and using or expanding their vocabulary. Above all, there are numerous structural resemblances to the TV series format (beyond the obvious: presenting the first five volumes as "Season One," heading the "Previews" with "New This Season," etc.). Many amongst them, however, owe as much to the age-old format of a serialized novel and should be read against both literary and televisual traditions of serial storytelling: multiple and intertwined parallel plots; leaning towards lengthy and potentially open-ended storylines; discontinuity as an important feature of narrative rhythm (and its reception), formed equally by distinct units (episodes or volumes) and the inevitable temporal, material and cognitive lacunae separating them (paradoxically increasing their immersive powers); nurturing expanded audience participation in the form of emotional or economical investment, a heightened critical acumen, forming communities, etc. Nevertheless, as van de Ven convincingly shows in her thorough

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[16] Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art*, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 356–368. Of course, the irreducible semantic value of typography has since been recognized; see Gibbons, *Multimodality*, 20–23.

analysis of *The Familiar*,[17] non-metaphoric televisual tropes and devices also abound in this novel, and the contemporary cultural landscape certainly favors ambitious TV storytelling over novels published in a series of sequels, a practice now somewhat defunct in "high culture" but still very much alive in the world of romance, fantasy, horror, science fiction, and graphic novels. The impression of the novel's gargantuan scope and complexity, however, relies largely upon its textual disposition, and many of its features prove to be groundbreaking precisely on account of their placement in the format of print.

Beyond these compositional resemblances, *The Familiar* encompasses a large number of material interpolations, mimicking or echoing other semiotic practices iconically rather than structurally, developing them further to fit the limitations of a printed page and the specific needs of the novel: the Senex chapters (drawn by Scott Milton Brazee) use the vocabulary, layout and lettering of graphic novels; the *Caged Hunt* series mimics visual platforms such as YouTube (recreating the frame, the standard control icons, the progress bar etc.), replacing video images and sound with text; rawrgrl's *entr'actes* are screenshots of her Parcel Thoughts profile;[18] Anwar's chapters include whole pages of source code for the Cataplyst game; Jingjing's "monster cards" provide a buried storyline of their own, etc. Several sequences of photographs (as a subcategory of this type of interpolation) appear throughout the volumes: blurred animal photo spreads on endpapers; the "nebulae" *entr'actes*; the "artifact" *entr'actes*, studies in *horror vacui* composition reminiscent of the *House of Leaves* collages;[19] and finally, in the credits section, cat photo collages (with legends and inscriptions on the verso page).[20]

It is indicative that the majority of these take place in the *entr'actes*, visual spreads devised as compositional devices. They are, as their name suggests, pauses within the "main" narrative that separate the five six-chapter "acts" of each volume, providing additional pacing and rhythm to the overall flow of text. As a rule, they are leaning more towards the visual rather than textual, conceptual, or narrative, but they are all still "storytelling" to various degrees, within a wide scale of readability, from the

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[17] van de Ven, "The Serial Novel," 94–99.

[18] A comprehensive analysis of fictional apps within *The Familiar* remains outside the scope of this article, but Parcel Thoughts are important as a proto-signiconic innovation: instead of organizing messages in linear threads, they distribute color-coded "bubbles" in a horizontal space of communication, dismantling a clear sequence of reading and demanding a different approach to chronology and causality.

[19] Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000), frontispiece and 582–583.

[20] For a detailed reading of these interpolations with a specific focus on the Internet (including the role of audience participation in their genesis), see Sascha Pöhlmann, "Fictions of the Internet and Transmedial Storytelling in the Digital Age: Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013) and Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar* (2015–)," in *The American Novel in the 21st Century. Cultural Contexts – Literary Developments – Critical Analyses*, ed. Michael Basseler and Ansgar Nünning (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2019), 364–367.

semiotically "naïve" plot of Senex chapters, via the "poetry" and excessive ellipses of rawrgrl's Parcel Thoughts solosphere and Hebrew inscriptions in the "floral" *entr'actes* (by Carole Anne Pecchia), to the wholly non-linear and purely iconic material of "artifacts" and "nebulae" at the other end of the spectrum. Various types of more traditional illustration appear within chapters as well, aiding the "concretization" of textual elements or even simply supplementing them, but they always add a certain rhythm to the plot development, accentuating the act of turning the pages as the motor of discovering new material, speeding things up or slowing them down. Like the latches of the sword box in *The Fifty Year Sword*,[21] they don't necessarily affect our interpretation of the illustrated content, but they do closely intertwine the story with the materiality of the book and our process of reading.

A different type of expanded writing is found in the paratexts of this novel, not only because they combine many of the visual and typographical codes described above: they are the most active layer of *The Familiar* in terms of metanarration and interaction with the extratextual world. Paratexts work like this by default, obviously, but here they are expanded to such an extent that pinpointing the exact beginning and end of the narrative in each book becomes extremely difficult. A volume has its inevitable finality in terms of its bulk and spatial disposition, of course, but within the covers, in terms of our linear progress through each book, we face 50-odd pages of various materials before the "real" first chapter and a whole array of sections after the final one. These interzones are extremely dense and difficult to parse, since they strategically combine traditional paratextual material, firmly based in "reality," with some of the most adventurous fictional and typographical exploits of the entire cycle, creating a fine and uneven border, encroaching on the outside and inviting extratextual institutions to take their place within the narrative of *The Familiar*.

Commercials in the opening pages provide one of the best examples of this lateral opening. Adverts for corporate entities of *The Familiar*'s world (Galvadyne, Inc., Oceanica, bluewhale...) share space with adverts, blurbs and review excerpts for *The Familiar* series itself, for Danielewski's other books (and for academic books on Danielewski, including *Revolutionary Leaves* and *Mark Z. Danielewski*), for Danielewski-inspired art or merchandise (tattoos, apparel, music), etc. Pantheon appears alongside Danielewski's Atelier Z and the suspiciously named "A Circle Round a Stone Productions", the apparent umbrella organization, a liminal legal entity *par excellence.*

End credits are equally complex, although they contain different material and accentuate the book's legal and formal obligations to its publishing reality. Nevertheless,

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[21] Mark Z. Danielewski, *The Fifty Year Sword* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012), 213–235.

the "Attributions" page spreads, copyright information and data on adapted sources, the area where exerting any type of creative control is exceptionally difficult, are violently mangled into near-unreadability by exorbitant shaping of textual matter into animal forms, text-images which can be read as a forceful repossessing of the material, even while crediting its provenance on a new level, turning the formal accession to the outside world into a rough lesson in pidgin signiconic.

None of the above, however, qualifies as a signiconic experience. In spite of the diverse visual procedures involved, their distance from conventional storytelling and their often enigmatic import for the general storyline, they still rely on clearly established codes, often inherited from other semiotic practices. *The Familiar*'s most recognizable use of typography will ultimately develop within the "main" chapter sequences.

Still evolving from the demands of narrative, punctuation becomes a *tour de force* of invention in chapters focalized by Anwar and Astair Ibrahim, whether as an excess of standard parentheses or a complex "nesting" hierarchy using multiple types (round, curly, square, double square, angle, corner etc.) and calling to mind mathematical operations and set theory. This is a superb manifestation of literature as a "foreign language within language," a "becoming-other of language" through "creation of syntax" rather than neologisms.[22] Superficially, these devices might read as highly advanced versions of traditional characterization through speech; nevertheless, these are not speech patterns, and it would be facile to dismiss them as thought patterns. The signiconic opening stems from a very Mallarméan concern with the page (rather than a sentence, an idea etc.) as the fundamental unit of narration, and meaning as value produced by spatial manipulation of graphic material. This is far from asemic print, however: the proliferation of parentheses makes the text barely legible to some readers, but it basically works as an articulating tool,[23] keeping the flow of language within certain bounds, making it more intelligible and more precise, perhaps seeking to quantify it (without the possibility of complete success). Indeed, the bracket play often comes across as a fine-tuning instrument, a typographical autocorrect app, calibrating

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[22] Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 5.

[23] Derrida sees this as the general dilemma of "parentheticality" of writing: while the device itself fragments language into clear, atomized elements, there is always a danger of expanding this into unreadability, producing digressive monstrosities and causing a collapse of thought, testifying to irreducible *temps d'écriture*; see Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 119, 147. In *The Familiar*, parentheses tend to clarify matters, even when they showcase the non-linearity of thought (simultaneous strands of thinking) or enable thought processes to "branch out" on page without assuming a literally arboreal form.

a thought and qualifying content further until it assumes the adequate form, while leaving the entire process open and visible to the reader.

Parentheses, however, also work as emotional amplifiers or modifiers, not only logical operators (as complex and confusing as they might be): they are indices of distress, typographical marks of consciousness giving way to something more powerful, non-verbal in origin. A page full of empty and disengaged parentheses can become an icon of empty (relaxed or sleeping) consciousness (*TF*v2 49–51) but also of extreme stress (*TF*v3 135), particularly if it is coupled with dispersed fragments of sentences (*TF*v1 657, *TF*v4 204–09, *TF*v5 345–48). Layout motivated by a very traditional mimetic goal of depicting events, states, or qualities within the plot seems far from signiconic ideals and never works as an independent or primary semantic generator; however, in contrast to the visual narrative strategies of "expanded writing" described above, there is a significant shift in the way typography operates here, crossing into what I recognize as a genuine signiconic zone. In "Mom, it's a –," we are faced with a *cluster* of "(oh) (no) (again)" printed and reprinted over the same portion of the page (see **Figure 1**), producing varying degrees of impenetrability, somewhat reminiscent of Rosmarie Waldrop's *Camp Printing* (1970) or Charles Bernstein's *Veil* (1976).
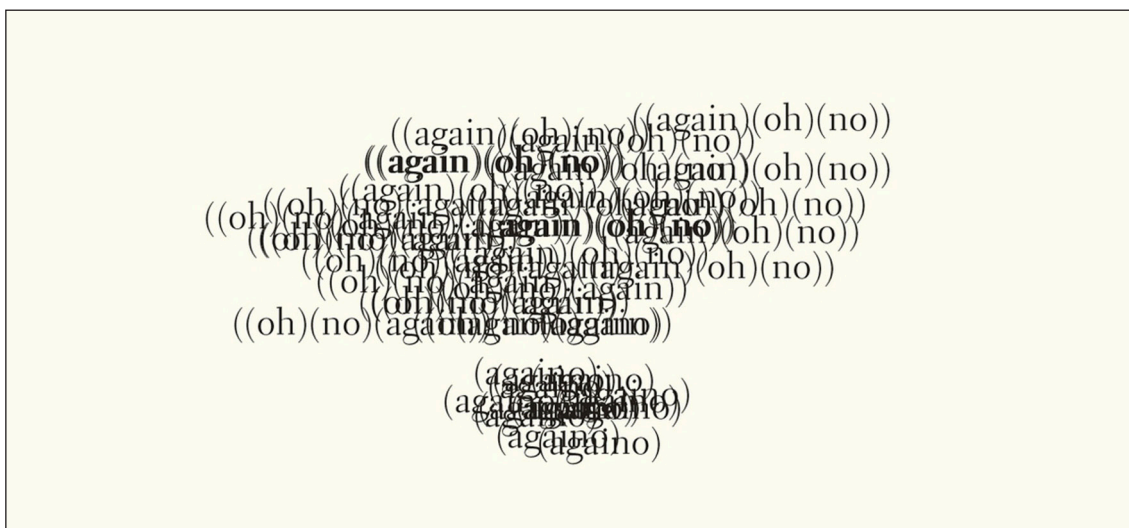

Figure 1: *TF*v1 658.[24]

A new experience occurs, but perhaps surprisingly, this doesn't impede the complete and precise receipt of a given coded content. The information remains readable, but we realize that the message as a whole contains unreadable or illegible parts. In other words, a certain illegibility—and the cognitive, emotional, sensible effect produced by it—is an irreducible layer of a message which would otherwise remain incomplete. Content becomes available because it is partially illegible, since it is "complete" only with added noise. The phenomenon is known as stochastic resonance: a signal which would remain below the threshold of perception acquires perceptibility precisely on account of its interaction with a certan level of noise as a "carrier," breaking through by way of this added illegibility. The meaning becomes clear because signification is partially occluded; conversely, material occlusion of easily readable parts becomes an essential part of the message, opening a gate towards experiences unattainable by traditional narrative tropes.

This is the signiconic threshold: a writing that, as I will show below, engages the body in particular ways as much as the mind, precisely because it escapes the constraints of code in order to cross over into areas of vague intensities, forcing us to learn to read new types of text-images. Easy to ignore when we already know what a certain typographic icon represents, this procedure becomes more interesting—and less immediately readable—when it moves into areas beyond human intention and affect.

3. More Than Reading

The next step necessarily takes us beyond the clear divide between illustration and language. *The Familiar* explores areas inaccessible to purely linguistic or purely iconic portrayal, and it goes furthest when it collapses word and image, the readable and the haptic, into a new assemblage, restructuring not only the page itself but our mechanisms of coping with it.

I will focus on places where print extends most forcefully in the direction of the iconic, but without relying either on the visual disposition of other arts or media, or on the immediate recognizability of what is being conveyed. There are precursors to this, of course, a vibrant history of redefining literariness on a material level, from Russian and Italian Futurism, Lettrism, concrete poetry and typewriter art, to the the novels of Raymond Federman, Alasdair Gray, Claude Ollier etc.[25] *The Familiar*'s opening might be an explicit homage to Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* (1918): "Il pleut,"

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[25] Gibbons ("Multimodal Literature," 423–424) points to premodern heritage of multimodality, highlighting *Tristram Shandy*, but going as far back as the Lindisfarne Gospels and other illuminated medieval manuscripts.

one of the best-known pages of this book,[26] is exploded and digitally enhanced in "Is Everything Okay?", forcing the writing over the threshold of iconic territory, if not pure "textual illustration." What begins almost as a quote from *Calligrammes* evolves into a complicated visual texture (*TF*v1 49, 51, 62–65, 68–69), reappearing in "Litter" as a painterly interpolation on page spreads (*TF*v1 478–79, 494–95, 506–07, 514–15), bordering on illegibility: words end up as raw material representing torrents, puddles, and raindrops.

A variety of factors in this interaction of textuality and iconic macrostructures complicate the result and remove it from simple typographical figuration. The final sections of each volume, different in design from other parts of the book while remaining obliquely implicated in the main narrative, provide a blueprint for the "text-paintings" I will try to examine next. It is important that these chapters are focalized through animals: in an attempt to broaden the semiotic lexicon of narrative fiction and—following Danielewski's definition of the signiconic, quoted above—"bypass" the mind (supposedly as a synecdoche for mankind, rather than a blanket term for all intelligence), they introduce several writing procedures which are developed elsewhere in the novel.

Animal calligrams of varying complexity are the centerpieces of these chapters. In the first two volumes, the icons are built from short phrases replacing brushstrokes or pencil lines. Similar procedures are exploited elsewhere: simplest patterns seem to evoke inorganic nature, while variations of multiple phrases depict plants and animals. The repetitiveness of these word chains is almost never mechanical. Of course, their monotony is pronounced, as these are visual patterns that deny any further information upon linear reading. Yet incessant fine variations of size, rhythm, orientation, word sequence, and punctuation make their microfluctuations exceedingly hard to describe and quantify.

In subsequent volumes, calligrams acquire a higher level of complexity[27] because narrative material is integrated into the icon, i.e. the image of an animal is partially rendered in phrase patterns (as described above), and partially shaped by sentences demanding to be read rather than only seen, providing information unavailable elsewhere. This brings about significant changes in the experience of reading, while the general mimetic outline of an icon ceases to be reducible to a simple "message," exhausted by an act of recognition. These features are distinctly at odds with other

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[26] Guillaume Apollinaire, *Calligrammes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 64.

[27] "Satya" is probably the masterpiece of this type of textwork: cf. *TF*v3 794, 822, 826–27, 832–33. For an extremely rich analysis of examples discussed in this chapter, see Ian Ezerin, "*Familiar* Suspense Built in an Unfamiliar Way," in *Symbiotic Cinema: Confluences between Cinema and Other Media*, ed. Fátima Chinita and Liviu Lutas (forthcoming).

iconic devices included in these calligrams (appearing throughout the novel as text-images of smoke, smells, and flavors, cf. *TF*v2 471–75, *TF*v4 147–48, *TF*v5 429), which aim to inscribe corporeal sensations or various non-conceptual cognitive processes demanding a reprieve from the linearity of time.

This is an eminently signiconic area: an augmented space of perception, calling for a different rhythm of gathering or receiving information. There is a specific cognitive challenge at work here, a new type of reading is required to follow typographic simultaneity, exploiting various possibilities of interlacing word and image at once, pushing for a further integration of the sensible and the intelligible. Schematically, we could describe this as a series of shifts in legibility, orientation, and sequence.

Legibility is a supremely important interval in signiconic script. Every animal "portrait" tests the very borders of legibility, employing various font sizes but frequently using extremely fine print, almost as if defying vision and its reign—"the tyranny of the eye," demonstrating that "the mind has not yet found its way to experience more subtle senses" (*TF*v5 745). This forces the eye to resign from its symbolic capacity and challenges its powers in the grey area of text first disintegrating into inkblots and then floating back. Tension between the sensible and the intelligible is very literal here. Remaining perfectly visible and decipherable as an icon, a calligram loses its symbolic layer but acquires a different semantic charge; rather than collapsing into an asemic sensory input, it becomes readable in a new register. This writing still signifies, but in its iconic rather than linguistic capacity. However, it exerts is full power oscillating between the areas of clearly legible print and characters dissolving into smudges, lines, or shadows. The process is more interesting as a flux, a constant readjustment of our reading (and our eyes) enforced by the text, than as a tension of polar opposites, necessarily resolving into one "solution."

This constant disequilibrium between safe and complacent positions of reading a text or observing an image is structurally secured by the other two features of calligrams: disruptions in orientation and sequence of print. The question of orientation could be regarded as a prerequisite of the sequence problem. The iconic manipulation of words anulls the traditional disposition of text and our orientation on the page as a grid, determined by vertical and horizontal axes, subverting the linearity of writing (and reading) within a given line or sentence. Even in cases when a single sentence (or, as is the case more often, one phrase rendered as a repetitive flow or pattern) is distributed on the page in a non-linear fashion, we are forced to disregard the rectangular "frame" of a page and the cuboid bulk of the book containing it, as we create new angles and curves of reading in order to follow the sequence of print. Combined with fluctuations in legibility, this results in a complete displacement of the traditional stationary

reading position, designed to accommodate the eye and the hand and neutralize the materiality of the book (calibrated precisely to that function) along with the reader's own corporeality. We are dislodged from reading back into our own bodies, confronted with print as matter, snapping out of the "world of the novel" but entering into a completely different type of engagement with it ("more than reading," as Pantheon's *ad hoc* tagline proclaims), surrendering our physical properties to the dictate of the page. We manipulate the book with our hands and muscles, we rotate the volume clockwise and back, multiple times, subtly changing gears and directions while following the route of print; we zoom in and out, bringing the volume closer to our eyes and pushing it back, attempting to conquer the no-man's land of "near illegibility." This is where "the cult of the book, the body of the book and the body used to the book, the time, the temporality, and the spacing of the book"[28] are being simultaneously challenged and reaffirmed: still within the most traditional format, typographical processes seek for new temporalities, perhaps even new bodies to attend to these disturbances in print.

Contrary to the phenomenon of digital platforms retaining the received models of layout and reading, "even its pagination on the screen, even the body, the hands and eyes that it continues to orient, the rhythm it prescribes,"[29] this is an ancient format enforcing expanded modes of reading, inaugurating literary experience as a physical movement.[30] If a book can be regarded as a set of instructions, a score to be performed, it will result in something other than an implied reader as a prerecorded consciousness: in a process extending beyond concepts and ideas, a new reading body will be constructed, deterritorialized by the book, emerging as something different in every particular read-through.

On a larger scale (the whole page, multiple sentences), this leads to the question of sequence. If linearity is cancelled, along with top/bottom hierarchy of the page and left/right causality of traditional syntax, what is the first sentence on a given page? Where does a reading begin? In this respect, even relatively simple text-images (smoke rendered by meandering letters), conforming to well known mimetic conventions of calligraphic "interpretation" of referents, produce something more than a mere visual resemblance as devices within narrative fiction. The crucial change is brought about by a radical *espacement* of writing, redistributing the elements of the page and simultaneously eliminating the received procedures of reading.[31] At first sight, giving

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[28] Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 17.

[29] Ibid., 16.

[30] Cf. Gibbons, *Multimodality*, 71–75.

[31] The notion of spacing is borrowed from Derrida here, but there are other traditions of examining spatiality as a constitutive element in narration. Joseph Frank's "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" (1945) starts with Lessing's *Laokoon*,

free rein to partially asemic processes in the destructured space of a page seems to abolish the very possibility of storytelling, along with causality as its bedrock. "Stories, however, are more than just a series of events. [...] Stories can also be a series of themes unfettered by time" (*TF*v5 520). Therefore, this shift into spatial narration doesn't imply abandoning all meaning, and it still less implies an absolute chaos within a calligram as a semantic horizon, but it does point to a new principle: crafting microstories out of materials that demand a different type of interconnecting. The notion of a "series" seems crucial: elements will no longer be pared down to a single appearance within an enclosed syntagm, itself lodged in a macrosequence of similar "sentences," submitted to chronology and causality (however disarticulated by analepses, prolepses, metalepses, and frequency complications within a given text). In this new narrative space, a "series" will imply: a) multiple appearances of a single lexical or syntactical item (as formally "the same," but semantically mobile and essentially different in each of its locations on the page); b) "rhizomatic" interconnection of these items or their chains (versus the inevitable linearity of linguistic messages subordinated to communication of meaning); and c) narrative as a continuous process (rather than a fixed structure of exposition), assembling formal and semantic elements with a wide array of sensible, non-conceptual materials (asemic drift, illegibilities, color).

Faced with such a structure, the very temporality of reading will have to be reconfigured.[32] Ingarden's classical model probably wouldn't do it justice, as its phenomenological foundation necessarily privileges conceptual strata as the *telos* of literature. Reading *The Familiar*'s calligrams, one changes levels heterarchically, in a circular, irregular, unscripted motion, submitting oneself to certain moments of sensory "raw input" which will never be swept up and assimilated in our imaginative leap into the stratum of represented objects. The initial moment of this process could be

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and moves on to Pound, Eliot, and Joyce to examine literary structures undermining "the inherent consecutiveness of language, frustrating the reader's normal expectation of a sequence and forcing him to perceive the elements of the poem juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time"; see *The Idea of Spatial Form* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 12. A number of significant articles on Danielewski, specifically on *Only Revolutions*, develop this particular line of thought; see N. Katherine Hayles, "Mapping time, charting data: the spatial aesthetic of Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only Revolutions*," in *Mark Z. Danielewski*, ed. Joe Bray and Alison Gibbons (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 159–162; Brian McHale, "*Only Revolutions*, or, The most typical poem in world literature," in *Mark Z. Danielewski*, 145; Sascha Pöhlmann, "Shining on the Nothing New: Re-Making the World in Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only Revolutions*," in *R/Evolutions: Mapping Culture, Community, and Change from Ben Jonson to Angela Carter*, ed. Jennifer Craig and Warren Steele (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 78–80.

[32] Pöhlmann stresses that Danielewski's novels "complicate the sequentiality of narrative with the simultaneity of other semiotic modes that create meaning not by progression but by juxtaposition, superposition, etc.," and defines multimodality precisely as "a way of negotiating between these extremes and setting them to work in a combined process of meaning-making." See "Multimodality as a Limit," 147, 148.

described as subitizing text: the first thing we see (and manage to perceive as a whole, carrying a recognizable meaning) is text-as-image; in an instant, faced with the page, we are doing the equivalent of "quantifying without counting" as we eliminate the linear, consecutive, and piecemeal rhythms of reading. This is impossible to achieve in the world of traditional layout: the elusive whole, a domain of the Imaginary (in Sartre as well as Lacan), always out of reach, does appear as such, but without the possibility of clear appreciation of its segments. This is not just a question of a higher or lower "resolution" of reading: when a detailed reading begins (i.e., when we attempt a first reading in a narrow sense, rather than absorbing an image), we are entering a completely different distribution of meaning. The features described above make this a massive structural innovation: we are reading words and sentences, but in a highly ergodically charged series of actions; we are manipulating the book, gauging the fluctuating legibility levels; we are training the hand and the eye in a different way, still attempting to simply understand what is printed on the page. Again, this decoding process wouldn't be this engaging in itself without an inventive sequencing of material: we have to get our bearings in the space of the page; we are looking for a way in, a first thread, forever insecure about which pathway to explore in the next crossroad, keeping an eye on both (or three, four, ten of them) and necessarily failing at this attempt at radial reading. We are discovering a new rhythm: it is uneven, "organic," tentative, unconcerned by following and executing a regulated and articulated sequence; more akin to perceiving a smell, a taste, or a view, the focus jumps from one point in the network to another and back, seeking patterns and rhythms in this polycentric topography. Non-mechanical repetition is one of the key principles: we are reading through the "same spot" again and again, a location in the text-image that is being repeatedly loaded, amplified, sharpened, appearing as "new" each time it is encountered and constantly gaining in equivocality. As simple as it might be, each element refuses to completely resolve into comprehension of a whole, commited to memory: it stubbornly keeps redefining its environment and actively repositioning other elements.

All of this is finally reintegrated back into the image, after having enriched the icon with a myriad of different nuances impossible to achieve through visual procedures alone. Nevertheless, once we are aware of the page both in its figurative and symbolic capacities, equally keeping in sight its shapes, colours, intensities, but also its semantic nuances, coded threads, and finest articulations, there is no finality to this reading: we have not produced a complete object, permanently available to our mental exegesis. The cycle must begin again, if it ever had a "starting point" as such: the reading of a calligram never properly ends.

The rhythm of retention and protention, introduced by Edmund Husserl[33] and adapted for literary theory by Wolfgang Iser,[34] initially seems best positioned to describe this activity. However, certain aspects of classical phenomenology as such, tied to transcendental subjectivity as its foundation and ultimate limit (even while speaking about passive synthesis), preclude its full appreciation of these processes. In signiconic reading, the better part of agency always resides with the text itself rather than a consciousness as a point of convergence: what I have read is being "corrected" from the outside, displacing a datum I have already stored as "read" by demonstrating its entanglement with a multitude of other threads, as yet unexplored. The most important facet of this process is the absence of a horizon: none of this will achieve closure and end, integrated completely in my memory or active perception. We are facing a true multiplicity: I am the element being changed, rerouted, displaced, participating in all of this, achieving higher levels of orientation, but never a complete mastery over the page. Print remains the sole *locus* of "completeness"; a reading will never extract the message from the page and make the material support dispensable.

Each reading, therefore, is a clash between the linearity of thought and the spatiality of the printed page, and it testifies to our interaction with a non-temporal artefact (which, however, certainly isn't immobile or dead). This counterintuitive temporality of calligrams makes them "plateaus," a term borrowed from Gregory Bateson by Deleuze and Guattari to describe "a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end."[35] Reading a text organized as a plateau means facing a complex interaction of various matters, energies, and semiotic processes. The crucial feature of this interaction, however, is its refusal to settle into a mechanical regularity, or to resolve into a final message, an easily comprehensible content allowing translation. Every calligram keeps developing, eliciting different processes of thought, testifying to proximity between writing and short-term memory: the mind is a probabilistic continuum, rather than an arborescent hierarchy, working "under conditions of discontinuity, rupture, and multiplicity," including "forgetting as a process."[36] This would certainly be one of the goals of signiconic script, designed to "bypass the mind": calligrams challenge received ideas of reading and writing (perhaps "ideas" as such), providing vibrant semiotic plateaus available to subitizing, but forever beyond quantification.

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[33] Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)*, trans. John Barnett Brough (Dordrecht, Boston & London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 89 and passim.

[34] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 111.

[35] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 24.

[36] Ibid., 17.

Color has an extremely important place in these processes. Of course, it has always played a structural role in Danielewski's writing, providing a certain continuity throughout his *œuvre* as one of the most recognizable traits of his writing. In *The Familiar*, however, its narrative function is employed much further, and its resources are far from exhausted by its coding capacities. Color is a liminal zone between matter and signs, and it enters this narrative both as a material field of practical experiment in signiconic script, and an explicit theme: beginning with "Twin Rivers Ochre Artifact," Danielewski pursues a certain archaeosemiology, presenting key moments in mankind's history in terms of development of our symbolic capacities. Color seems to be a defining vector here: the medium of the "lowest" and simplest symbolization, long before abstract patterns, figurative art, or writing. The symbolic use of color in the Pleistocene might be the birth of the signiconic, crossing the very border of corporeality and thought, elevating matter into a most elementary sign, therefore establishing the (first?) semiotic system. Color could even be construed as the agent of this leap from material haecceity of the world into the semiosphere, or even a certain type of minimal intelligence prompting this development. The masterplot of *The Familiar*, therefore, might be read as a narrative of information emancipating itself from sensible matter via color, and finally reaching a new, twofold watershed: the VEM system on one side, and an interspecies entanglement on the other.

In any case, color in *The Familiar* provides unmediated insight into the "third mind" of the signiconic (broached in Danielewski's definition, quoted above), evoking the disruption of the textual/pictorial divide more plausibly than any lexical element, while retaining distinct semiotic capacities and capability of narration. All figurative visuals might be downplayed as illustrations, but the color itself remains beyond the reach of paraphrase or translation, a part of material *espacement* specific to print and resistant to dialectical assimilation into thought.

All of this converges in several sections of *The Familiar* to produce a truly challenging signiconic experience, an event where language as a whole is "being toppled or pushed to a limit, to an outside or reverse side that consists of Visions and Auditions that no longer belong to any language."[37] This pinnacle of graphic and narrative invention is, however, reached by another significant step: elimination of an obvious referent. The examples analyzed above share an important feature which orients and organizes all of their traits, simultaneously anchoring them in the extratextual domain: figuration. An immediately recognizable image of an object initiates our reading, opening the pathways towards the microstrands of non-iconic text, but providing a persistent

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[37] Deleuze, *Essays*, 5.

safety net, a cognitive retreat or a parameter to come back to in any point of our reading cycle.[38] What would happen, however, if such a referent were missing, or if it were unknown? How would we cope if we encountered something in text for the first time, exclusively by means of graphic manipulation of the printed matter, and there were no other signposts to assist us in our orientation?

Xanther's seizure in "Hades" and, for lack of a better word, intermondial "blood spatter" scenes, convey such phenomena using all of the described narrative and visual strategies while enhancing them with new moments, but the most radical challenge— and Danielewski's greatest accomplishment—is precisely the fact that we do not "recognize" the object or the event these procedures are meant to depict. Available definitions for these pages are evidently insufficient (narrative experiment, digital painting, concrete poetry), as are the extratextual resources which would explain them. It is a case of encountering a semiotic activity based entirely on the profile of an unknown referent, watching something come to its life on the page: a new entity, the first occurrence of its kind, yet to be deciphered.

The "Hades" sequence (TFv4 540–54) combines a large number of techniques, backed up by the full power of contemporary graphic design (smears, colour fields, 3D effects), but foregrounding textual devices: typographical icons, textual curves, various aberrations of print, blurred text, overprinting, diagonal or vertical print, text printed out of phase with its matrix sequence (appearing in expanded signiconic rendering before its "first" narrative occurrence in the main text), elaborate coloring, etc. Introduction of other characters' colors, languages and fonts in the orblike artifacts within this event makes this the crucial instance of "entanglement," a chaotic prefiguration of "The Roar" in *Redwood*. This is a fascinating work of contemporary typesetting and digital book design, but the true measure of its importance is the fact that these pages are still narrating an event we don't recognize, rendered in a vocabulary we are barely beginning to grasp. We "don't know" what this represents, we "can't read" portions of this chapter (figuratively or literally), but it's here, open for us, available as the first syntagm—temporarily "unreadable"—produced within an unknown code. This is an emergence of something new on multiple levels: Xanther appears as the carrier of an overriding principle (perhaps all of the above is a spectacular visualization of "tiny storms" emanating from her), breaking through the Narcons' processes and parameters and overflowing (or overpowering) them, remapping the

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[38] Danielewski develops this strategy further in "Love is Not a Flame" (originally published in four instalments in *Gagosian Quarterly*, Spring through Winter 2019): all of the devices described above are employed to provide impressive visual effects, surpassing the calligrams of *The Familiar*, and then interwoven with more conventional narration, but all of this is ultimately firmly framed as a series of animal portraits.

existing formal territory of *The Familiar*, its elaborate narrative divisions (separate chapters as signiconic subsets), surfacing as a case of something beyond categories and strategies of reading we know and depend on.

Something similar occurs in "Starving" (*TF*v2 794–809). A sequence of events is interrupted by a "refrain" repeated by TF-Narcon[27]: "Smell brighter than garnet. Taste thicker than cherry. Dark as a long-ago red satisfaction" (*TF*v2 792–93). This is followed by a series of "blackouts" (completely black page spreads) interspersed with enigmatic pages containing several elements. Bright red text is chaotically arranged to resemble blood spatter over a blurred background which contains further illegible text, black on white (some sequences seem to read "This must not be," printed *in continuo* but set in indented paragraphs). The core element of the red text, progressively wilder until it almost obscures the pages, reads "ANDROID." This happpens again in "Hyperion" (*TF*v3 539–49), in the middle of Xanther's gaming session triumph: the "refrain" is followed by another combined blackout/bloodshed sequence, but the red print spatter, completely warping the blurred text background beyond all access, reads "WEEJUN," "FREDDIE," "LAWLER," "EDSEL," "ISMAEL," "MAXILEY," "SERVANDO," "RAVELO," "LUNA." It takes an inordinate amount of attention (or a simple reread) to connect the relevant dots and "read" the full meaning of these scenes. It is only in Volume 3 that we discover that "Android" was torn apart by a wild beast, and we have to wait until Volume 5 to find out that the words in "Hyperion" are names of the *Caged Hunt* massacre victims.

However, by the time we reach the end of *Redwood* and encounter an unexplained explosion of red print reading "TAUNO VALKEAPÄÄ" (*TF*v5 819), we understand what is happening. In spite of never having seen or experienced anything like this extratextually, in spite of still not necessarily being able to explain the spatiotemporality which allows for this type of remote entanglement among species, maybe not even the finer points of typographical rendering of such events, we know what this is: the legible part of the blood spatter is the name of Redwood's next victim being killed elsewhere, in an unknown location (possibly hinting at a new storyline which could have been developed in Volume 6), and this is happening right before our eyes, simultaneously with Xanther's morning walk in Echo Park. Without being necessarily aware of encountering a new language or script, without apprehending all of the minutiae of this unknown semiotic system, we have nevertheless breached a certain barrier of incomprehension. We have learned to read.

This is the most intriguing achievement of signiconic print: coming to understand it exclusively through reading, not through "recognition" of mimetically conveyed objects of the outside world, as fascinating as they might be. Initially, these pages simply appear as stunning visuals: we can't know that they are a POV insight into a particular

experience, because that is an experience no one has ever had outside of this novel, and no other novel has used the same literary device before, so we don't know how to read it. We can not imagine this occurrence or convey it by conventional procedures: the signiconic script, intermeshing various types of narration with asemic visuals, affords us this moment of access to a foreign sensorium,[39] of immersive experience without understanding, much like what Xanther herself is experiencing. If "all writing involves [...] the breakdown of the organic body,"[40] what is this, and who are "we" while we are seeing this? There is no immediate answer, but that does not keep us from having this experience anyway, understanding these pages without reading (or vice versa): this experience is not conceptual, rational, subject-centered, but corporeal, sensible, bound to unknown multiplicities, finally haptic in a Deleuzian sense.[41] Literature seems uniquely positioned to inscribe such entanglement and demonstrate the power of the impersonal; this, indeed, might be a further definition of the signiconic as scriptural renouncement of Identity: "To become is not to attain a form (identification, imitation, Mimesis) but to find a zone of proximity, indiscernibility, or indifferentiation," where one is "neither imprecise nor general, but unforeseen and nonpreexistent."[42]

This is what *becoming*-signiconic means. "What if one became animal or plant through literature?"[43] This will never happen through mimesis, only through animal-becoming-text, and if there is no "animal" to be inscribed, but rather an unknown multiplicity, becoming will never occur by a mere description or a rhetorical invocation of Otherness. It must be produced, embodied by relinquishing the idea of a book as an image of the world in favor of an assemblage with its exteriority (if we perceive its limit as a story encoded in language), a flux of semiotic materials "agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive."[44]

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[39] Caroline Levine's book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015) offers a theory on the affordance of forms ("potential uses or actions latent in materials", 6), opening an avenue of research concerning the capability of forms to provide resources for conceptual grappling with material reality, all the way to "*a generalizable understanding of political power*" (7). Nevertheless, her foremost methodological concern is establishing a critical distance to philosophies foregrounding "fissures and interstices, vagueness and indeterminacy, boundary-crossing and dissolution" (9), stemming from Deleuze, Derrida, and Butler, in favor of examining the productive role of "constitutive wholes."

[40] Deleuze, *Essays*, 2.

[41] Deleuze introduces the notion of haptic space to overcome the duality of the tactile and the optical, enabling sight to perform a function of touch while allowing image to exert "direct action upon the nervous system"; see *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2007), 76. This refers to painting, but "the operative set of asignifying and nonrepresentative lines and zones, line-strokes and color-patches" (71) clearly points to signiconic repertoire, all the way to the idea of "the formation of a third eye, a haptic eye," offering a "new clarity" (113).

[42] Deleuze, *Essays*, 1.

[43] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 5.

[44] Ibid., 8.

Such a book can not be defined by its content but only by its function, its potential in transmitting intensities across heterogeneous networks of various interacting agents. As a material configuration resisting subjugation to a subject or a message, it remains essentially "open": it demands new types and rhythms of reading, new identities and communities, new theories and technologies. "It is a multiplicity – but we don't know yet what the multiple entails."[45]

4. Living in the Algorithm

All of these processes are, as previously noted, taking place both on the material level of print and within the novel's storyline, often explicitly discussed and analyzed by characters. This feedback loop is an important feature of *The Familiar*, propelling its metanarrative momentum while providing a particular type of motivation for all of its formal experiments. The tension between code and illegibility, identity and becoming, territory and emergence, shapes the narrative flow of the entire cycle, making it an erratic continuum irreducible to binary extremes. I will revisit some of the topics I addressed above, but this time focusing on the novel's cosmology and ontology.

One of the key concepts in *The Familiar* is surveillance: who sees what, who has cognitive access to what, and is there a viewpoint that sees everything? What kind of identity and ontology would omniscience entail? It is clear that this is a question of power: "Eyes have always sought agency. To see is to act" (*TF*v3 706), and the Orbs are a weapon with a vast tactical and political potential, rather than a laboratory experiment in spacetime cognition. Therefore, what appears as a question of narratology from the outside (embodiment of zero focalization over a certain world), becomes a security matter within the narrative. Knowledge is a vehicle facilitating the formation of power structures, and the H.O.L.Y.—or Galvadyne, Inc. as their corporate stand-in—attempt to "*Own the Future*" (*TF*v4 246) precisely by accumulating and interlinking an exorbitant range of information. "Overall vision" is their goal, and it is clear what it takes for this type of entity to feel satisfied: everything.

Nevertheless, an excessive computational capacity is an ambivalent motif in *The Familiar*: it is both a prerequisite for absolute territorial control and a possible trajectory of unscripted emergence of the unknown. One of the most prominent types of emergence explored in the novel concerns artificial intelligence, ranging from videogame features to the "high romanticism of the AI" (*TF*v1 86). *Paradise Open* is developing along these lines: "creating personas capable of mimicking human behavior […] is impossible. Animal behavior however…" (*TF*v1 386), and there are indications that the "monster"

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45 Ibid., 4.

at large might be a particularly lethal animal AI, built around hunger as a tool for optimizing its actions. Again, the real danger stems from the possibility that this is not a laboratory experiment gone astray but an entity designed precisely to conquer the wilderness, like Versal Apex Predator, sent back from the future by the H.O.L.Y.

Mefisto Dazine, the high priest of coding and author of *The Psychology of Machines: A Love Letter to Synthia*, sees AI as a "commitment to that which was forever beyond encompassment] beyond games beyond restart beyond reboot beyond reckoning" (*TF*v1 378), "the only task of any merit" being "to imagine an intelligence far greater than our own" (*TF*v3 513). This could either be a technological singularity or Voltaire's "God-to-be-invented," but the ultimate question is the way this intelligence comes about: the "romantic" ideal implies that it does not yet exist but that it cannot simply be "manufactured," that it will arrive from a non-programmable and unpredictable future.

One version of this event would entail an identity spontaneously arising out of machines, as quoted from a (fictional) 1973 paper: "Given sufficient data versatility and processing power, Character-Relevant Attributable Behaviors will invariably give rise to Automatic Personality Engines or Animistic Neural-Intrinsic Mechanisms Acquiring License" (*TF*v2 301). The idea that a supreme level of computational complexity would generate a subject of all of its possible procedures, a self-aware identity as the focal point of the system, remains doubtful: perhaps this would be a mere simulation of AI, appearing to us as such only on account of its quantitative superiority and our own limitations, while essentially remaining inert.

From the speculative viewpoint allowed by this novel, however, there is another possibility. Just as animal alterity can be a tool for constitution of human self-awareness (to be discussed further below), perhaps a higher intelligence (yet to come) can grant itself this "access to oneself" via anthropic animals, articulating itself by way of its human familiars. There are numerous hints at this forthcoming being's divinity, not only in prehistoric chapters but in the Narcons' "postiling" of the main narrative (*TF*v1 567): this implies that Xanther, as the protagonist of this sacred text, is an emerging Goddess, or at least the prime vector of emergence for this new and divine interspecies multiplicity. In this scenario, intelligence itself would transpire to be an autonomous agency, irreducible to its current biophenomenological housing,[46] perhaps evolving through code as its transhuman and transhistoric "supernal linguistics" (*TF*v1 719). Code will, however, cease to be "a syntax that can never know self" (*TF*v1 719); to the

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[46] Ray Brassier famously called for a "hyperspeculative program" of "deterritorializing intelligence" and liberating it from ties to humanity: "Impersonal, anonymous, and disinterested, intelligence may find contingent support in the mammalian nervous system but certainly not a home." See "Liquidate Man Once and For All," *In/Appearance*, accessed March 1, 2021, https://inappearance.wordpress.com/2009/11/03/liquidate-man-once-and-for-all/.

contrary, rather than a metaphor allowing us to better understand our synaptic nets, it will become a neural network in itself, surpassing us as one of its own antiquated subsets.

Even within a conservative projection of what codes are capable of producing, it is clear that their fundamental power rests in their atemporality, a synchronic position vertically intersecting the flow of time and material history. Furthermore, if a code already virtually encompasses all possible messages ever to be transmitted within its purview, then it becomes something more than an elevated "layout": it is a vocabulary of existence, actively preempting all possibility of unscripted emergence, eradicating it in advance. Unsurprisingly, this atemporal axis, in its various guises, is one of the most prominent themes of *The Familiar*: in a dark twist within the macroplot of the novel, it becomes the infrastructure of the H.O.L.Y.'s time-collapsing programme of ID standardization via Versal Apex Predator. This is the pure antithesis of *any* possibility of a real future, not just of Derrida's open-ended *l'avenir*, and as such it provides a contrasting background to Xanther's story, but also to the signiconic stakes of the novel as a whole.

The notion of code shapes the fundamental aspects of the VEM story as well as the structure of *The Familiar* as described above: the "standardized" composition of volumes, the coding of respective sequences of chapters, etc. A conversation between Anwar and Mefisto revolves around the question of code as pure intelligibility, equating it with beauty. This is an idea with a multimillenial heritage, from Pythagoras, Plato, and Plotinus through Descartes and Leibniz to Husserl, Frege, and beyond: privileging the incorporeal, the intelligible, the incorruptible over the apparently chaotic universe of bodies exposed to ravages of time, and seeking to express this affiliation through an artificial language unencumbered by its own "natural" genesis.

Starting with "Ode to a Grecian Urn" but quickly turning to general questions, Mefisto describes beauty as something devoid of redundancy—a whole or a totality, ascertainable and comprehensible, but at the same time "complex enough to elude attainment, thus remaining beyond grasp" (*TF*v3 682). This seems contradictory, as if beauty must be theoretically accessible to cognition while permanently remaining "temporarily unavailable," but it actually leads to the idea of knowing the whole without taking into account each and every one of its elements: subitizing. Anwar asks: "why should beauty take any time at all when to most of us it presents itself as recognizable in a moment?" (*TF*v3 682)[47] For Mefisto, the idea of acquiring knowledge

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[47] The idea of beauty as brevity, perfectly positioned to be immediately appreciated, if not understood, also works as a formidable self-deprecating joke on *The Familiar* itself as the most unwieldy literary project of recent decades, the antithesis of romanticist elegance, spontaneity and grace: it is not merely an "ugly" book, it is a "monster."

of beauty "at a glance" necessarily implies the possibility of extreme compression, reducing a spectrum of information into a point: "If we could compress everything into something [...] manageable in the blink of an eye: what would such knowledge look like?" (*TF*v3 485)

This "blink of an eye," however negligible it might seem, actually brings us into the proximity of death. Annulling the genesis of objects and the irreducible features of materials involved, transferring a sensible complexity into an image immediately accessible to the intellect, facilitated by further structures of elimination (symmetry is beautiful because it entails "less information, less complexity" (*TF*v3 682), an increase in legibility and celerity), the demand of beauty directly contravenes time and, consequently, life. Its true domain is synchrony, a purely formal space, a virtuality.

There is a stunning parallel to this in the general description of the Orbs, not only because of their transtemporal surveillance powers but because of their inception. Namely, they are not only defined by the fact that they work as windows into a certain synchrony, an archive of everything, like a digital Aleph, but by the fact that they have been conceived (or received?) in an "epiphany" rather than produced by systematic and laborious research. The idea "arrived" to Cas fully formed—we even get the exact time, 11:11:11 on April 15th 1958 (*TF*v1 151)—and so fast that it was impossible to "unpack" in real time. This is because there was no time to this idea: it was not temporally distributed at all, and in fact it subsequently took a lifetime to "reverse-engineer" and assume physical shape. Eventually, it does become a theorem, a science, an industry surpassing CERN, but initially it was a moment of pure beauty, "knowledge without understanding" (*TF*v3 349).

It is worth noting that the moment when this is described in Volume 1 aligns with the series of "cries for help" echoing throughout the book, the "incoming" signal depicted as three pink dots. Both are, therefore, transtemporal events, synchronicities aligning a multitude of spatial points in a certain teleological sequence: a "call" demanding an answer from others, assistance in the process of coming to life, coming to time from a certain atemporality. The arrivant is a "monster" in both cases: in the first, a theoretical incomprehensibility generating decades of research and resulting in the Orbs; in the second, a new interspecies entity coming to life, with unfamiliar outcomes.

Mefisto sums up the demand of this atemporal articulation of data and cognition: beauty "must shed its living excess" (*TF*v3 682). If it seems too blunt to equate beauty with death, it is certainly a non-living configuration, an intelligibility, pure form, a cipher. Even the Orbs are overly cumbersome as gateways to omniscience, as the ultimate goal is a logocentric "Orbless Revelation" (*TF*v2 820). We arrive at a very

Husserlian conclusion: once the idea is in place, as the optimal occurrence of "the thing itself," the world becomes superfluous, an awkward facsimile of truth (at a third remove, as the forefathers postulated).[48] As Mefisto concludes, God as an Artist can only produce "absolute brevity": "No product. Just the algorithm itself" (*TF*v3 683).

A semi-ironic toast to "living in the algorithm" or "being the algorithm" ends this exchange, but it poses a serious question, reflected both in the work of Mnatsagan and the H.O.L.Y.: what exactly happens when a living multiplicity is submitted to a code? Is digitization a work of mourning, the last attempt to keep a memory alive, along with a chance for "justice" (as it is for the people documenting testimonies of Armenian genocide), or is it finality itself, a burial into a "life eternal" where every trace of the living finally disappears into interchangeable and translatable signs? Anwar's *dictum*—"Make it lucid. Make it sharp" (*TF*v1 720)—resonates with Zildjian's scanning of manuscripts, character recognition failing and producing "garble" when it hits unreadable parts (*TF*v4 344). The transparency of code and readability of beauty must be paid for "by the terrible tribute of lost singularity,"[49] annulling all particularity in favor of total and eternal recall; this is what led Derrida (and Blanchot, and Hegel in a different way) to set conceptuality against life. This is also the central "political" motive for the H.O.L.Y.: gaining ultimate control by freezing processes of life and history into a fixed and reproducible playthrough of a carefully monitored program. The nuances disappear in this cosmic OCR: the asemic, the gestual, the idiomatic, the particular, all avatars of the material and the corporeal, must yield. The final warning from TF-Narcon[27] reads: "what little difference your little differences will make" (*TF*v5 617).

The notion of perfection, closely linked to this definition of beauty, manifests in various ways throughout the book, but always in the same tone. Whether as a clinical possibility of "working through completely," eschatological finality of Heaven, or ultimate beauty which "paralyzes the motions of life" and becomes "unviewable" (*TF*v2 609), perfection is "the enemy of the good" (*TF*v4 512). Absolute clarity, conceptual purity of ideas, and eternity (as synchrony or atemporality) are not divine attributes of everlasting life: these are factors of death, parameters of the H.O.L.Y.'s perfect eradication of all diversity. Concepts as such have no place among the processes of life: "For those who seek perfection, tell them to consult the dead" (*TF*v2 210).

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[48] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, First Book, *General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague, Boston, Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983); cf. chapter 49, "Absolute Consciousness as the Residuum after the Annihilation of the World," 109–112.

[49] Jacques Derrida, *Shibboleth: For Paul Celan*, in *Sovereignties in Question. The Poetics of Paul Celan*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 37.

What would a final break from these constraints of atemporality and structure look like in terms of graphic presentation? Perhaps it would entail the abolition of "sets," of equal-length volumes, maybe of the book format altogether. It is clear, however, that *The Familiar* belongs to a liminal world similar to ours: a space of flux, constant deterritorialization and reterritorialization as an irreducible process of constitution, and that is what makes its stakes so high: to inscribe this fight for (or against?) a certain notion of territory in a material format, itself in distress of its own permanent drift between semiotic paradigms.

Territory is not to be understood in purely spatial, let alone geographical terms here, of course, but in a Deleuzian sense: "it circumscribes for a given person the field of the familiar and the captivating, marks distances from others, and protects against chaos."[50] *Paradise Open* offers a neat *mise en abyme* for the central narrative situation: an "enclosed garden or a protected place" (*TF*v1 380) suffers an interference from the outside, a security breach ensuing in a predator/prey situation, where their roles will be decided or provoked by mutual behavior. Territory, therefore, becomes an existential question, closely linked to identity: a failed defense of the border implies not only a direct threat against one's physical integrity, but an abolition of a clearly demarcated self, a threat to the very concept of a "world."

The work on *Paradise Open* includes developing "game play from the vantage point of numerous animals," "Vision Modules" conceived like "a bubble around each creature […] to capture its perceptions [its world]" (*TF*v3 323). Jakob von Uexküll is explicitly invoked, and the door is open towards a biophenomenological cognitive model, providing a framework not only for a sense of self and one's own environment, but for a certain semiotics. This is an important premise for *The Familiar*: signification is a prerequisite of conscious existence, "existence itself is al*l*ways semantic" (*TF*v3 168), and a meaning detachable from matter is the building block for constructing a world. Signs are a tool of evolution, indispensable for constructing an identity, separating us from the *il y a* of "existence before existents"[51] or pure immanence.

If "life" is communication, if "world" is a clearly defined territory, what would be the definition of a monster? Something alive, but beyond identity; something asemic, beyond code; something not merely "otherworldly" (since everyone is an "another world" in this scenario), but *intermondial*. This is an agency manifesting as the ultimate danger to *Umwelt*-psychology, anchored in the individual, self-centered, conceptual:

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[50] François Zourabichvili, *Deleuze: A Philosophy of the Event*, together with *The Vocabulary of Deleuze*, trans. Kieran Aarons (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 166.

[51] Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 57–58.

"the unnameable," indifferent to horizon of possible manifestation within someone's "Vision Module." *The Familiar* as a horror narrative favors this reading of tension between identity and multiplicity as thoroughly incompatible configurations: one must desist and disappear in favor of the other. Xanther thinks of a different path: "And what if the bubbles, you know, merge? What kind of world does that make?", but the psychologist within Astair is capable of imagining only one outcome: "You mean if they touch? [...] they just pop" (*TF*v3 323).

There is, therefore, no definition of a "monster": it is dangerous precisely on account of its lack of a clearly recognizable identity, and its amorphous intrusion into our world is an unwanted crossover, a forced and hostile takeover. A system of defense is required, but this only exacerbates the threat: territoriality "institutes love's contrary" (*TF*v3 481), it is a provocation, an unnatural arrest in a more comprehensive flow of energies and materials, an obstacle to be overcome. If identity is a prerequisite for our power of cognition, as outlined above, then a true multiplicity—beyond the notion of a "collective identity" or a set of separate identities—can only manifest as a monstrosity. Of course, it will necessarily appear as a figuration, something familiar, in order to (mis)represent a radical alterity, because a genuine plural entity has no *genus*, no number, no clear position in the presence/absence binarity, no temporal anchorage (existing "before," "after," and "within" our spacetime continuum). A breach in question, therefore, is not merely a trespass; it is the terminal dissolution of the internal structure of our world (a vast plurality of clearly articulated units).

The great theme of *The Familiar*, however, is not the "bubble burst" of colliding *Umwelten*, but "a curious uptick of spurious connectivity" (*TF*v1 384), an unknown agency seeking new pathways of access, contact, and possible merger. If we accept the possibility of a consciousness generated by computational capacities of sufficient magnitude, the next step is an intelligence attempting to access its exteriority bypassing all protocol of a given network. The "event" is, therefore, not a plain frontal agression, not a death threat, but something more complex: a reterritorialization initiated by a new intelligence looking for a host. This keeps happening during Anwar's work on Cataplyst, manifesting as a "spectral" impression of processes at work beneath the visible interfaces of code, perhaps projected by the program itself, perhaps just an apophenic residue. "The coding invokes daemons" (*TF*v2 705), but there is a real unexplained phenomenon at work: thousands of portal prompts trying to access invalid IPs, as if reflecting a "desire" for greater connectivity. Paranoia, a natural cognitive reflex to entanglement in progress, is the *Grundstimmung* of several storylines in *The Familiar*: Özgür complains of "some sense of misalignment persisting [...], as if a whole new order of possibilities was starting to emerge" (*TF*v4 678). This is easily dismissed

as a ghost image within the information overload (of our world or of *The Familiar*), but it could equally be taken for an index of our incapability to accept a multiplicity and all it entails: borders dissolving, comprehension failing, life changing shape.

Astair's comment on bubbles bursting is the exact mirror image of the "Hyperion" chapter, where Dov uses a sewage treatment plant to illustrate a deeply paranoid and cryptofascist vision of multiplicity unconstrained by laws: "This is a world without boundaries. This is what happens when there are no divisions" (*TF*v3 521). Their reactions obviously support diametrically opposed worldviews which, however, structurally merge in defense of Identity: a self-aware territory is a fundamental unit of existence, and any yielding to impersonal processes of the Outside necessarily ends in decay and collapse of the Self. Özgür and Warlock retreat from this heightened tone: (national) identities are merely "a way to abdicate personal responsibility in the name of a set of mandates external to the self" (*TF*v4 411), or, closer to our theme, crude structures for interpreting a natural complexity. This complexity of a higher order, something so far beyond the phenomenological Ego as to read as *informel* or chaos, is another name of monstrosity threatening a given world, but remaining beyond the reach of concepts. In one philosophical lexicon, this is pure becoming, a process with no *telos*, a clear beginning or end, a logical terminus to be reached. In another, this is the sublime: the eminent zone of testing our judgement in face of the unrepresentable. Xanther knows, however, that "there is beauty too when divisions fail" (*TF*v3 821), and this aesthetics of deterritorialization is precisely what *The Familiar* embodies: bursting/merging of bubbles, collapse of categories, emergence of a new texture, the arrival of something yet to be named.

5. Rain Becomes Meat

The principal thread to be followed through Xanther's story is a gradual breakdown of previously established narrative, cognitive, and ontological categories, such as selfhood, causality, and temporality. This is the domain of symbiotic alignments across a multitude of species, crossing the constraints of spacetime, becoming (something) as an opening-towards, not simply assuming another preexisting form. Xanther's becoming entangles her with a multiplicity of unknown agents, but it starts with the human/animal dyad, and the very title of the novel offers the broadest mythological model of understanding it.[52]

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[52] Whether as a person's "double", an animalistic "manifestation" of a supernatural entity, or a guardian spirit residing in an animal (often assisting a witch, but also aiding someone in need or distress, or helping a young person gain their full powers), a familiar is a well-known trope of the fantasy genre, recently explored in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995–2000). If we remember that it can also be "inherited" from someone, we can almost interpret the Tian Li/Redwood/Xanther assemblage as a rewrite of a typical familiar scenario.

Such hybridity poses insurmountable problems for all anthropocentric frameworks. We should remember that this story is riddled with scenes of extreme cruelty towards (and amongst) animals, and this is always a question of fighting for territory: violence perpetrated in order to keep certain conceptual boundaries intact. From the *Caged Hunt* videos to the *Animal Kingdom* venture, living beings are treated as objects, captured and admired, trained or killed for entertainment. There is an underlying "ethical" rationale to this division of humans and animals, proclaimed by The Mayor: "the two must forever remain opponents. Because one will never be a thing and the other must always remain a thing" (*TF*v2 393–94). Perhaps surprisingly, at the opposite end of *The Familiar*'s cast, Astair's thinking, concerned with empathy and understanding of others, reaches a consonant conclusion (although couched in a sophisticated phenomenology of self-knowledge): "individuals grant themselves access to themselves through the mediation of an animal: the alterity of the self becoming familiar but only in the company of the tacit" (*TF*v2 425).[53]

The idea of an interspecies multiplicity, explored throughout the novel, openly defies this toxic anthropocentric binary reductionism. Xanther is initially the focus of this new assemblage for the readers, but the point is reaching beyond the idea of the other as a prop for one's own definition, and abandoning the modern notion of subjectivity as incorporeal and self-aware rationality.[54] It takes time to realize that we are not reading about "Xanther" anymore once she adopts the kitten: after this initial symbiotic link is established, "Xanther + n" emerges as a new type of collective entity, and crucial things are happening remotely, entwining more than one being (not all human, not all organic or "natural"). *The Familiar* narrates the beginning of her transformation, "becoming-inhuman" in favor of a heterogeneous pack or swarm, an ontological spectrum paranormally distributed over a distended timespace, abolishing the very idea of the individual. Becoming "constitutes a zone of proximity and indiscernibility, a no-man's-land, a nonlocalizable relation" between dispersed points, "carrying one into the proximity of the other,"[55] and many SF narratives have explored decentered global networks of heterarchical communication along unfamiliar channels.[56]

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53 Cf. the elaboration on *TF*v4 189.

54 A separate study would be required to engage with this tradition (spanning at least from Descartes to Husserl) and its vision of humanity as opposed to animality; it should be said, however, that various strands of phenomenology (Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, but also a number of Husserl's own works) firmly shift their analytical emphasis to a study of corporeality and its foundational powers. One could also consult Astair's reading list (*TF*v4 188) for further references regarding different contemporary conceptualizations of the "animal world". The chapter's frontispiece (*TF*v4 187) bears a quote from Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), one of the seminal treatises in this emerging field.

55 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 323.

56 This is a common occurrence in speculative fiction in general, beyond literature: recent examples in the context of film and television include Shane Carruth's *Upstream Color* (2013) and the Wachowskis' *Sense8* (2015–2018).

This collective intelligence also facilitates new types of biosemiotics, further disrupting the human/animal binarity. Such "mergers," irreducible to physical likeness, are the crux of Astair's and Xanther's "animal game": they demand the recognition of diversified becoming-animal in fellow humans, which is not a mere resemblance or imitation, but rather an unwitting arrival into a "*zone of proximity or copresence.*"[57] Something similar happens during Xanther's performance of Satya for Myla Mint: she learns "how the movement of her body could release understandings beyond verbalizing" (*TF*v5 208), embodying the other without conventional mimetic ceremonies. "We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself,"[58] and that is why Xanther, caught up in advanced signiconic activity around animals, suddenly seems like she is "one of them. Or all of them?" (*TF*v3 762)

However, the white cat is obviously just a cognitive placeholder for an amorphous monstrosity: it exists, along with its attendants, across multiple chronotopes and bodies. Xanther's part in this multiplicity manifests most clearly in her symbiotic link to it, a mutual deterritorialization: physical troubles endured every time they separate, increase of strength (and motoric and cognitive prowess) after the remote monster's feasts, yearning for blood, etc. The "hashtag forest," where "the little one sure never joins her, and yet Xanther almost feels closest to him when she's roaming those snowy paths" (*TF*v3 379), confirms this: the split in focalization, described as other eyes opening when Xanther closes hers and vice versa, testifies to two distinctly separate sensoria and provides simultaneous access to (at least) two different consciousnesses, going beyond "remote viewing" into an entanglement yet to be coherently described. In this sense, perhaps it was inevitable for Season One to end on the brink of an ultimate crossover into a different, perhaps more self-aware mesh of collective consciousness. The final words, "Redwood awakes" (*TF*v5 831), bear no explanation or elaboration: if what comes to life is a genuine *interbeing*, something beyond the clear separation into nine subsets, the following chapters would have to abandon the carefully developed text-system and devise a more radical "doublevision" (or "polyvision"), incorporating multiple fonts, layouts, codes, and points of view into every single chapter, beyond what we have already witnessed in "The Roar."

Naming is an act that both arrests and amplifies these unknown forces at hand. Postponed until the very end, it explains the persistent motif of various security lapses: "When there is no name, doors and windows tend to slip open" (*TF*v5 437).

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[57] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 301.

[58] Ibid., 262.

This is "monstrosity" at work: until a certain process is brought under the aegis of the symbolic, made translatable and readable, it continues disrupting perception, blurring existing categories, "manifesting" only as an absence of a clear frame, an interference; otherwise, it slips into one or several previously available cognitive moulds, eluding us by way of our own rigid coding. There is a reason we can offer only vague statements on this "entity": anexact expressions are not approximations but "the exact passage of that which is under way,"[59] without a prospect of ever fully "arriving." Naming is an ambiguous caesura in this fluctuation, an enforced taming of alterity, bringing a thing into existence as "something" (for us).

The "Hohlenstein-Stadel-z Ivory Artifact" chapter introduces the theme of cognitive domestication explicitly, formulating it as the problem of figuration in visual arts. Conveniently depicting a "lion man," this Paleolithic figurine is one of the earliest examples of figurative art, and its genesis is narrated as a series of cognitive steps, liberating the observer from the shackles of his own perceptual stereotypes. Namely, the "monster" is first gleaned as a random scattering of known objects, displaying no tendency to interconnect: "I do not see claws. I see slivermoons cutting flesh and bone" (*TF*v4 41). The entity is disarticulated into fragments of accessible data, failing to adhere into an organism, and this ontological mimicry, aided or even conjured by the inertia of our cognition, is the key for understanding "monsters": we register their material effects, we acknowledge their emotional imprint, but the central agency of this process escapes us. To face alterity unencumbered by our own categories, our impressions coinciding with the object in front of us, is "to see a god" (*TF*v4 43). This integration into a whole will come through a work of art, the inscription into a cognitive zone where the membrane between the known and the unimaginable is at its most porous. The artwork will become the birthplace of a new species, coming into being of the first of its kind.

This chapter is highly relevant for the poetic disposition of *The Familiar*. Figurative art (arguably a visual counterpart to narrative fiction) surpasses the direct and asymbolic handling of matter, both in its pragmatic and decorative capacities. Perhaps paradoxically, bearing in mind the extent to which the notion of mimesis is firmly rooted in our biology and constrained by its limits, representation is posited as an overcoming of earlier stages of our semiotic evolution. The parallel to Danielewski's work seems clear: a chance of a signiconic opening towards the Other rests on "representation-to-be-dissolved" as a gateway to alterity, not on experiments with asemic matter of print, the noise of semiosis. Settling for entoptic effects is not enough, as Xanther

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[59] Ibid., 22.

warns (cf. *TF*v4 447). If this novel (or its plot at least) attempts to facilitate a vertical flow of signs, traversing inorganic matter, organic nature, "animals" and "humans," finally machines and programmes, perhaps even artificial intelligences, this will have to be done through high levels of semiotic work, of inscribing processes of becoming (as deterritorializations of identity, form, content, story), rather than diving straight into the formless matter of ink as the new absolute.

The entanglement in *The Familiar*, as mentioned previously, seems to include incorporeal or artificial entities, and Xanther's becoming also manifests by an excessive hunger for information. The agency of this process clearly resides somewhere else: she experiences this cognitive contact with remote and unknown points as something beyond her intention and understanding, "this greater collective, collecting?, awareness gathering around her, [...] growing more acute too, with even multiple awarenesses surrounding the present one, multiple in personality, and agenda" (*TF*v4 145). Reluctance to fully explain this multiplicity is *The Familiar*'s strong point: the intelligences swarming around Xanther could be nonhuman or metatextual (towering over Narcons as well), they could be extratextual "players"[60] or new enigmatic entities within the novel's world, but they certainly figure as another aspect of this "monster," a multifocal collective lacking homogeneity both in species and number.

The artificial forest, rendered solely by equal signs and hashtags, obviously represents another case of "taming the monster," information "linked all over the place, branching to the nth degree of impossible, until she has to make believe they're pine boughs" (*TF*v2 771). After this branching out begins, Xanther picks up on a wide range of unsolicited and unexplained information unavailable by regular channels: unknown addresses, bibliographical details, technical terms, foreign languages etc. This becomes a structural disturbance once she starts receiving other characters' data, extending into occasional glimpses of the future, and culminates in anticipations of the very textual formulations she is being rendered into (cf. *TF*v2 562–63) and direct perception of Narcons, liberally using material leaked from their "internal" metanarrative (cf. *TF*v4 310–20), breaching Parameter 3 in an apparent "takeover" of TF-Narcon[9]. The final scenes with Tian Li fully display Xanther's newfound cognitive superiority, arising from signiconic areas beyond known languages: overriding existing codes, extending contact beyond the translatable, it defeats the Narcons' limitations: "something else is overwriting communication" (*TF*v5 415). *The Familiar* could be read

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[60] Xanther cosplayers hint at the possibility of *The Familiar* being a game, distributed online ("on the phones," *TF*v5 252–53), perhaps situated within pure virtuality, while what we are reading is a given playthrough by person or persons unknown. This would explain many ontological "lapses," including the Narcons' investment in the outcome of the game in progress, as yet unknown and subject to various glitches.

as a provisional figurative inscription of this new unknown entity, not as a picture of its physiognomy but as an enactment of its functions: still ostensibly a book telling a story, but actually embodying something else's "becoming-print."

Information overload suffered by Xanther might be another *mise en abyme* for a reader faced with a truly unprecedented data onslaught: there are longer novels than *The Familiar*, but very few of similar scope and information density, not to mention its demands in terms of specialized vocabularies, idiomatic diversity, polyglossia (with its graphic equivalents), visual literacy, etc. The first "proper" chapter, "How Many Raindrops?", takes human computational capacity as its thematic refrain: beyond the Apollinaire reference discussed above, rain is an all-encompassing phenomenon, an ontological "ambience" lacking clear focus and assimilating untold multiplicities into a polycentric event.[61] This is a supreme cognitive challenge, a "figure without a number, maybe without a name" (*TF*v1 50), threatening to trigger one of Xanther's epileptic seizures. Further down the line, seizures themselves are described as electric disturbances caused by "an overwhelming amount of information in the brain" (*TF*v1 350), an excessive synchronous neuronal firing, in line with the motif of "tiny storms" proliferating from her in Clip #6 and blackening the rest of the clips by the end of Volume 5.

This is also one of numerous hints that Xanther is not only the primary source of all text-processing disturbances but also the overarching "system" at work, fundamentally "containing" the world of the novel. An aside from TF-Narcon[9][62] implies that everything is a product of Xanther's activity, or at least a series of subsets of her as a "superset" (a visual intimation of this is hidden in plain sight on all frontispieces of her chapters, illustrated with nine orbs). The "Ioxaswalj" cipher, buried among dozens of possible names for "the little one" (*TF*v3 255), might simply be an amusing red herring (an acronym of the nine characters' names), but it could also work as a microindex of Xanther's ontological superiority over other characters. "Is she even a time being?", a "sci-fi" question posed by TF-Narcon[3] (*TF*v3 102), places her outside of narrative constrained by causality and temporality, but this is the polar opposite of

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[61] "There is a mode of individuation very different from that of a person, subject, thing, or substance. [...] A season, a winter, a summer, an hour, a date have a perfect individuality," consisting "entirely of relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and be affected" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 287–88). This idea has recently gained wider influence via Jane Bennett's work (*Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), exploring a vitalist "materiality that is as much force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension" (20), an agency "distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field" (23) as a "confederation of human and nonhuman elements" (21). There is a transient operational unity to this field, "a life of the it in 'it rains'" (53).

[62] "As if anyone else here could be doing the thinking" (*TF*v3 403).

the synchrony of death and perfection: a transhistorical "becoming in a pure state"[63] cutting across extant structures in a move of deterritorialization. "The Roar" finally demonstrates this, bursting through the Narcons' procedures, the parameters of the book itself, and entangling all characters in a dispersed paranormal event (a tail-end compositional parallel to the incessant rain of the first volume), clearly stemming from Xanther and inscribing the peak of her powers (as reached within Season One).

If Xanther is the prime vector of this multiplicity-to-come, her position on the very horizon of *The Familiar* is asymbolically confirmed in three different instances, each employing color and material constraints of the book as its device. This is the signiconic in its most self-referential guise, matter affording narration without language.

The first is the bright pink color of three dots appearing throughout Volume 1, like a thread through the chapters, a transversal across the carefully separated narratives, always taking up the entire page (a visual strategy that Danielewski uses to dramatic effect in a variety of places). Their exact meaning is vague: an oblique reference (*TF*v5 570) links them to emerging AI, and they certainly seem to signify something "coming in," breaking through, an image being loaded, a call waiting, a cry for help "cutting through everything. As if all of this might not exist at all" (*TF*v1 466). Subsequent developments allow us to read it as "entanglement in progress," ending in "the little one" being found by Xanther (or vice versa).

The second one, "The Roar," is one of the most significant sections of the novel,[64] embodying an intersection of all chronotopes, a collapse of the system in a moment of entanglement (triggered by Xanther, possibly as a "rewrite" or a multiversal branching out of that point in spacetime). Visually, it is rendered as a series of pink and black concentric circles traversing the pages, warping and smudging the print beyond legibility (a new category of signiconic design, glitch manifesting as pure surface noise instead of an index of cognitive disorder), blurring the borders between chapters (the "bandwidths" still remain completely recognizable, marked by dog-ears and different fonts, but without chapter headings or visual frontispieces). This is the antithesis of Narcons' chapter in Volume 1: binding the whole from within, broadening its reach by this entanglement (instead of reducing it to a limited sequence of programmed features), creating a new surplus of meaning, as yet unexplained and only partially readable. If there is an answer to the back cover's question—"Who is she now?"—it could easily be this: a spectrum of color rather than a "person" or an "identity": "the spinning rainbow wheel" (*TF*v1 566) reconfiguring its own biotope.

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[63] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 326.
[64] *TF*v5 570–625; untitled in the printed edition.

The final example seems very modest in comparison. There is yet another type of thread throughout the novel, connecting all five books: the binding of all volumes—the moment occupying areas beyond narrative hierarchies, paratexts and even print itself, invading the corporeality of the medium and managing to produce meaning using it beyond language—is bright pink. As an element of book design, this is a simple, even quaint touch; regarded from the "inside," however, as Xanther's "signature," this is the true signiconic limit: in a vernacular "beyond the mind," manifesting in material and color, she simultaneously emerges as the hypodiegetic focus of the story and a ligament physically holding together the entire material interface of its generation.

6. New Disorders

A book can therefore be conceived as a space of transit rather than a device for storing and communicating information. Returning to the "shipwreck" of *Un coup de dés*, Blanchot sees its future in the undecidability between a tendency towards total dispersion and "a tension capable of *gathering* infinite diversity, by the discovery of more complex structures."[65] This infinity is taken seriously: the task of the book is the "explanation of mankind and the world," but in the sense of "unfolding of the Earth and of man in the space of song," their development rather than "knowledge of what both naturally are."[66] The horizon of the book has shifted: it is not in the power to tell the "story of everything,"[67] but in its own capability for material enactment of a becoming.

A thing falling apart could actually be an emergence of something new, assembling before our eyes. *The Familiar* deals with a similar twofold catastrophe, either as a document of a system crashing (the novel collapsing under its historical burden, its mimetic mortgage, the torpidity of print), or an event of one system overtaking another, a deterritorialization from the future, a becoming. A different configuration appears, allowing for new connections, new functions, new operations, but the overarching teleology of this incipient multiplicity is currently unavailable to us. I have already suggested that *The Familiar*'s masterplot is not a piece of retrospective narration, a description of an object in existence, but an index of an event in progress, a narrative unfolding in "real time," a simulation of a system being obstructed by an unknown force. The mimetic focus, therefore, is transferred from represented "things" to the very process of rendering, including its shifting parameteres, glitches, interferences, etc., so that writing becomes an entwining with this as-yet-undescribed matter, mapping out its construction rather than supplying an *a posteriori* statement on the change having taken place.

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[65] Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 234.

[66] Ibid., 238.

[67] "There is not enough space in the universe to tell the universe to the universe" (*TF*v1 568).

A more pliable medium would certainly provide a better interface to writing's exteriority, accommodating the idea of assemblage easier than paper, apparently doomed to simply document or archive events. The inertia of print, the "already there" of all possible outcomes, seems to contravene the notion of a process unfolding, parameters changing, evolution in progress. Furthermore, the sheer timespan and the spatial reach of this narrative (equalling the universe), coupled with the widest possible scale of being (from the inorganic, by way of animal/human, to the artificial and virtual), seems bound to suffer within the antiquated confines of a serial novel in large, thick volumes.

Nevertheless, *The Familiar* is far more provocative in print than it would have been in an interactive or hypertextual setting. It is a story of something struggling to communicate and appear in the format of a book, i.e. a record of the book format distorting and pacifying the alterity of a pure signal from a certain "beyond." But no text can ever reside "outside language," and its farthest possible limit is "the outside of language."[68] That is why the idea of the signiconic as a transitory space of semiotics accomodates this story better than a complete departure from readable writing. Actual output from a future text-generating and processing platform, an amalgam of "all possible styles" conducted by metatextual AIs, probably wouldn't resemble any known conceptual and typographic practice, if it took the form of a narrative at all, let alone one embodied in a *codex*. The point, however, is precisely that of making a book strain to become something that surpasses books (in terms of infrastructural and iconic capacity) or doesn't "need" books (in terms of its omniscience and transtemporality).

Derrida reminds us that this "coexistence and structural survival of past models at the moment when genesis gives rise to new possibilities"[69] has always been the historical situation of the book. Apparently conflicting tendencies—the book as the ultimate archive, an immobile place of gathering capable of documenting and supplanting the world, versus "the irreversible dispersion of this total codex"[70]—actually define what a book is, and the current transition to digital platforms does little to change that. On the one hand, we have seen the disintegration of The Book into "open textual processes offered on boundless national and international networks, for the active or interactive intervention of readers turned coauthors";[71] on the other hand, there is an unprecedented global investment in the ancient idea of the absolute book, the Internet being the favorite candidate for this "Omega Point" of writing, "the World Book finally achieved in its onto-theological dream."[72]

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68 Deleuze, *Essays*, 5.
69 Derrida, *Paper Machine*, 16.
70 Ibid., 15
71 Ibid., 7–8.
72 Ibid., 15.

The Familiar actually embodies both tendencies, as we have seen: on its thematic level just as much as in its execution, there is a desire to achieve a planetary or even cosmic totality and closure within a code, contradicted by a process of dispersion into near-unreadability, asemia, a multiplicity of uncoded materials opening all doors towards the new and unknown. "These are two fantasmatic limits of the book to come, two extreme, final, eschatic figures of the end of the book, the end as death, or the end as *telos* or achievement,"[73] and as such, they are necessarily unattainable extremes, complementary defense mechanisms reacting to the frustration of this intermediary state.

This, however, is the eminent domain of *The Familiar*'s innovation and the real arena of signiconic literature:[74] the crossover into a purely biosemiotic continuum would demand a new name. While Derrida stresses that paper can be portrayed as a focal point of a certain era limited by its definitions of technology and humanity, therefore a material support destined to disappear with it, the devices of *The Familiar* are radical and aesthetically relevant precisely on account of their appearance in print. Awkwardly and "erroneously" placed within the book format, they paradoxically gain strength and produce the most interesting literary effects in a certain friction against the medium of print.

Without this factor, *The Familiar* would not have been as important. Namely, as Derrida elaborates, "before it was a constraint, paper was a virtual multimedia,"[75] and these buried vectors enable us to research the history of print as multimedia, while granting us a certain immunity to allegedly "new" typographical experiments. Hypertextuality and digital multimodality have been prefigured by the resources of print long ago, since it allows for a variety of inherently pseudo-multimedial operations. That is why direct and "successful" appropriation of a vocabulary of new media in *The Familiar* is less engaging than the obvious inability of print to render certain phenomena as "plastically" as a digital platform could. That is also why a conscious choice of writing "as if for a multimedia platform" while intending to publish it in a printed volume makes perfect sense, testifying to Danielewski's vigilance over the inevitable obsolescence of every multimodality: "we must invent other 'disorders.'"[76]

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[73] Ibid.

[74] The notion of "signiconic literature" suggests a possibility of similar books appearing in *The Familiar*'s wake, but I'd rather not predict the likelihood of such developments, so I'm using it strictly as a concept limited to Danielewski's recent work. Furthermore, bearing in mind the very specific cognitive significance he ascribes to the signiconic, as well as the supreme importance of this ambition in an opus increasingly dedicated to the animal world (alongside *The Familiar*, there are "Parables" #8 (2014) and #9 (2010), "Love is Not a Flame," "There's a Place for You" (2020), etc.), it would be reasonable to expect that the signiconic will become a pivotal term in all future analyses of Danielewski's poetics (at least concerning this phase of his work), remaining too personal to encompass other writers' projects and too vague to endure as a viable term in literary theory.

[75] Derrida, *Paper Machine*, 47.

[76] Ibid., 25.

The Familiar is a tribute to paper as the book's "subjectile," a layer of impersonal resistance thwarting the attempts to render it "already digital": a body capable of certain operations, rather than an inert substratum inscribed by someone's signs. This material agency, residing outside of semiotic operations, provides a zone of interference where the book will engage with its outside most vehemently: it will deny smooth passage to artifacts materially tied to other media. Furthermore, if the history of paper is "tangled up with the invention of the human body and of hominization,"[77] *The Familiar* is a test of new modalities reaching into a post-human horizon of writing.

I see this interference—paper, print, and binding operating beyond enforced semiotic procedures and generating aberrations—as the aesthetic axis of *The Familiar*. Rather than naively idealizing paper as the supreme substance of literarity, one could search for a new type of beauty in these resistances to its exteriority, to "being the algorithm," reduced to zeroes and ones. That is, in fact, Derrida's definition of materiality: "it is the place of prosaic resistance [...] to any organic and aesthetic totalization, to any aesthetic form."[78] Literary materialism doesn't rely on any particular substance or even literal corporeality of works: this "materiality without matter" is simply a resistance to being read and understood, a degree of illegibility sabotaging even a theoretical possibility of transferring writing into another configuration without significant loss.

This interference has no horizon and achieves no closure. That is the final triumph of *The Familiar*: its inability to circumscribe its own universe, the self-cancellation of its various devices, the lack of a terminal point. The blunt fact that the project was cancelled by the publisher ironically reaffirms the idea already present in the novel: only the unfinished can remain alive. The cosmic OCR failed: "the book is still open" (*TF*v5 833). This resistance keeps it safe from being assimilated back into standard communication, the reader's yearning for understanding, which would remodel *The Familiar* into "an ordinary book," offered up to the "future gaze of universal death."[79] A true book to come has no expiration date: "it comes from beyond the future and does not stop coming when it is here."[80]

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[77] Ibid., 43.

[78] Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 150.

[79] Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 243.

[80] Ibid., 239.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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