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Danielewski's *The Familiar* and the Concept of the Bibliotrope

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Introducing the concept of the *bibliotrope*, this article offers a multimodal retooling of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope that seeks to incorporate the entire expressive apparatus of the multimodal novel into its framework. Whereas the conventional notion of the chronotope is defined by the ways temporal and spatial indices come together as an expressive unity to demarcate the physical parameters and generic functions and other recurrent elements in works of fiction, the *bibliotrope* incorporates the ways in which combinations of recurrent and highly stylized visual and textual configurations represent physical and social environments as well as the thoughts and actions of characters. The concept is applied to Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*, which I take to be an exemplary bibliotropic text. I frame my analysis of bibliotropes in Danielewski's pentalogy within the broader context of Danielewski's signature multimodal poetics, highlighting some of its most salient features, and provide a case study of the character Isandòrno's bibliotrope. I conclude by outlining some potential research questions for further analysis of bibliotropes in *The Familiar* and beyond.

From Chronotope to Bibliotrope

In Mikhail Bakhtin's "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," he analyzes the importance of various "chronotopes" to the history and development of the European novel. Adapted from the field of physics, Bakhtin's *literary* concept of the chronotope defines the way that temporal and spatial indices come together as an expressive unity to demarcate the physical parameters and generic functions of motifs and other recurrent elements in works of fiction. For instance, Bakhtin argues that when a novel predominantly features the chronotope of the road, it will raise distinct implications for the social values of that novel that are different from other novels that predominantly feature different chronotopes, such as the castle, the rural town, or the parlor. In addition to having distinct time-space locations, chronotopes have recognizable points of entry and departure. That is, a novel's protagonist will not typically remain on the road, in the castle, or at the parlor indefinitely; they will visit or traverse such places for the duration of time needed to identify or accomplish an objective or goal. It is within the temporal-spatial logic of a fictional narrative's chronotope where characters "encounter" previously unknown characters, information, or dilemmas that in turn advance a narrative's plot. For Bakhtin, fictional genres, especially the novel, are defined by their chronotopes, by the spatial and temporal logics that structure the social dynamics and narrative progressions of their projected worlds. Furthermore, an analysis of any fictional narrative's salient chronotopes will highlight a relationship between that narrative and the social reality it seeks to represent and evaluate.[1]

As a narratological concept, Bakhtin's chronotope can be useful for thinking about the social dynamics of fictional narratives and how certain cultural norms tend to shape the parameters of human behavior and social interactions. However, when specifically applied to multimodal novels—novels that "feature a multitude of semiotic modes in the communication and progression of their narratives"[2]—the chronotope becomes quite limited, for Bakhtin's conceptualization of the chronotope is primarily concerned with the story or represented world of realist fiction (the *what* of narrative), whereas multimodal novels are invested in the *how* and the *what* of both verbal and *nonverbal* modes of expression. In short, the majority of novels from the Western literary tradition are designed to make us "forget the presence of the medium" of the book, whereas contemporary multimodal novels (say, post-2000) tend to draw the reader's attention to the book-object's expressive possibilities as a multi-sensory technology, laying bare its status as a manufactured object of accumulated materials that have

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[1] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 243–58.

[2] Alison Gibbons, "Multimodal Literature and Experimentation," 421.

undergone varying processes of manipulation, remediation, and digitization.[3] Since the chronotope is primarily concerned with the social implications of recurring temporal-spatial dynamics in fictional worlds, applying Bakhtin's concept to the discourse of multimodal literature may seem like a category error, but like many narratological tools, it is the concept's capaciousness that makes it so resourceful in different contexts. What I propose then is a kind of *multimodal update* of the chronotope, a retooling of Bakhtin's concept for the fiction of new media.

If there is one contemporary novelist who is best known for his experimentation with new media and digital technology, it is Mark Z. Danielewski. In Danielewski's five-volume series *The Familiar* (2015–17)—my "tutor text," as David Herman would put it,[4] for supporting this article's main set of ideas—chronotopic spaces and the fictional characters that populate them are not only physically demarcated in the represented world, they are presented in palpably different linguistic, narrative, and bibliographic styles on the physical pages of the book (i.e., different languages, vernaculars, genres, modes, typography, page design, ink weights, punctuation, and so on). As such, the study of chronotopes in highly multimodal contexts such as *The Familiar* requires further analysis of what we might call *bibliotropes*—that is, recurrent and highly stylized textual-visual configurations that represent or symbolize social and physical environments, as well as the thoughts and actions of characters.[5] My concept of the bibliotrope takes into consideration Augusto de Campo's notion of "concrete poetry" as the "tension between things-words in time-space,"[6] as well as Brian McHale's notion of "concrete prose" as prose that is shaped to either imitate "objects or processes in the real world" or "metaphorical or allegorical" concepts that foreground the ontological differences between "the world projected by the words" and "the physical reality of inkshapes on paper".[7] However, while these perspectives on visual or "concrete" literature inform my thinking about the bibliotrope, what I am proposing is a twenty-first century rethinking of Bakhtin's chronotope that seeks to incorporate the entire expressive apparatus of the multimodal novel into its framework. What follows is a theorization of the concept of the bibliotrope, a sort of working towards, so to speak, that uses Danielewski's *The Familiar* to illustrate its salient features.

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[3] Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation*, 272–273.

[4] David Herman, *Story Logic*, 213.

[5] I want to be clear that my conceptual move from the chronotope to the bibliotrope is also an expansion of the concept's signification that is meant to include not only Bakhtin's particular notion of time-space, but elements of characterization and mental space as well.

[6] Augusto de Campo, quoted in Joe Bray, "Concrete Poetry and Prose," 299.

[7] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 184.

Danielewski's Multimodal Poetics

Determining the narrative import and social value of the salient chronotopes in *The Familiar*, such as *the streets* of Los Angeles, generally requires that we combine or oscillate between four different modes (or levels or channels) of representation:

(1) the level of the represented world (i.e., the story or storyworld; what happens and to whom on the streets of LA)
(2) the level of linguistic representation (i.e., verbal discourse; how characters and the events on the streets are represented in stylistic literary terms)
(3) the level of visual representation (i.e., nonverbal/nonnarrative communication; how characters and the streets are visualized on the physical pages of the book)
(4) the material level of the book object (i.e., the book medium; how the material resources and physical dimensionality of the codex novel are foregrounded and/or incorporated into any of the other levels)

A chronotopic analysis of a novel written by, say, Defoe, Fielding, or Balzac—some of the authors that concern Bakhtin—would have us only consider the first and second levels, though primarily the first. But with *The Familiar*, all four levels are active and affect the reader's perception and experience of the novel in different ways and to greater or lesser degrees. In some instances, for example, the storyworld of *The Familiar* and the reader's immersion in it takes precedence (1st level), but in others, the use of literary, visual, and/or bibliographic forms are so overt that the book's elaborate textual machinery becomes the primary locus of our attention (levels 2, 3, and/or 4). Furthermore, there are many instances where it is quite difficult to determine which level or mode is primary because they are entangled with one another to form a kind of expressive unity. For example, it is unclear whether the more typographically experimental sections of the rainstorm at the beginning of *One Rainy Day in May* (*TF*v1 49–69) is presented solely from an authorial point of view or if it's meant to visually represent Xanther's conscious, sensory experience of this rainstorm. Disentangling precisely who is telling from who is seeing or what any single character might be experiencing at any given point in relation to what the reader is presented with on the page is often a difficult if not impossible task. This is one of the primary effects of Danielewski's experimental typography and use of nonverbal elements, of obscuring and entangling representational boundaries. The punctuation and linguistic markers that would typically distinguish narration and exposition from, say, focalization or free indirect discourse, are often absent or fuzzy, especially when text is primarily used in the service of visual rather than verbal expression.

As this brief example suggests, Danielewski remediates the literary technique of free indirect discourse into the domain of visual literature, inviting comparisons to how graphic novelists, visual writers, and cinematographers represent subjectivity and consciousness in their works. Bibliotropic patterns are thus not merely self-reflective, even though they function in the service of what Werner Wolf calls "metareference," a "transmedial form of usually non-accidental self-reference" located at a "metalevel" that extends from the aesthetic object "to the entire system of the media" in question.[8] Bibliotropic patterns are also representational. They resemble the various forms of "graphic mimesis" that Glyn White identifies in the works of Christine Brook-Rose and Samuel Beckett, among many others.[9] However, Danielewski does not privilege the verbal mode or establish a hierarchy among the different communicative modes he employs. Nor does he necessarily always prioritize narrative in his use of bibliotropic devices. As Sascha Pöhlmann correctly observes, *The Familiar* is "aesthetically situated" on the "fuzzy border between narrative and non-narrative meaning production," which serves "to create a productive tension between the narrative form of the novel with non-narrative symbolic practices."[10] Indeed, Danielewski's use of the visual mode is sometimes less motivated by narrative purposes than it is with producing certain moods, affects, and symbolic correspondences across the novels. Furthermore, Danielewski's exploitation of the material affordances of the book medium is not only concerned with "metareference," for he incorporates the material and tactile affordances of the medium into *The Familiar*'s narrative as well. In short, representational modes and levels are simply different, not better or worse, constituted by different affordances that can be leveraged to produce different effects.

Apart from the concept of the *bibliotrope*, most of the observations made thus far are not particularly new, nor are the techniques I have begun to outline only found in Danielewski's *The Familiar.* In Danielewski's first two novels, *House of Leaves* and *Only Revolutions,* central protagonists are represented in distinctly different narrative styles, linguistic registers, and bibliographic forms. Danielewski is known as the novelist who shapes his fictional characters with specific biblio-characterological markings, who constructs metacognitive maps at one level and narratives of relationality at another. His artistic practice is dedicated to building meaningful relationships among the history of literary-aesthetic forms and the attributes of individual characters, resulting in an intertextual complex of literary-textual personalities.

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[8] Werner Wolf, "Metareference Across Media," 31.

[9] Glyn White, *Reading the Graphic Surface*, 91.

[10] Sascha Pöhlmann, "Multimodality as a Limit of Narrative in Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*."

As a complex bookish-narrative technique, what I'm calling the *bibliotrope* is a pairing of each character with specific literary and bibliographic forms reminiscent of the archaic meaning of *character*: "a distinctive mark impressed, engraved, or otherwise made on a surface," or "a member of a set of symbols used in writing or printing to represent linguistic elements."[11] Danielewski's bibliotropes are designed to imbue fictional characters and their specific worlds with memorable textual markings and referential frames, as well as distinct personalities and moods—they serve mnemonic and affective purposes just as the time-spaces of chronotopes do. However, because each bibliotropic pattern in *The Familiar* incorporates different narrative styles, genres, modes, and languages, they activate different kinds of interpretive strategies, further distinguishing this concept from that of the chronotope. Moreover, because several characters in *The Familiar* speak broken English or so-called non-standard forms of English such as Chicano English, as well as English-based creole languages like Singlish, readers are situated in social and linguistic contexts that may be highly unfamiliar to them. Readers unfamiliar with Chicano English or Singlish, for example, and the cultures wherein these languages are spoken, will likely have difficulty understanding Luther and Jinjing's chapters. The more a particular storyworld's socio-cultural schemata or temporal-spatial logic departs from a particular reader's everyday experience and knowledge base, that reader's application of his or her general knowledge as a default for constructing and interpreting such a storyworld becomes less effective and more at the mercy of the text in question.[12] But once readers become more familiar with Luther and Jinjing's bibliotropic patterns, as well as the bibliotropic patterns of the rest of *The Familiar*'s central cast of characters, including how each character's storyline is woven into *The Familiar*'s larger narrative whole, each character's narrative and symbolic import to the series, I would argue, becomes much more coherent.[13]

Now, we begin with a brief sketch of Bakhtin's chronotope for a couple reasons. For one, it is conceptually linked to the bibliotrope by its shared emphasis on physical parameters, textual demarcation, and the norms of social interaction. But also because Danielewski's novels are often regarded as defying generic categories and thus eluding narratological categorization. To this last claim, there is obviously some truth, for Danielewski is a "genre poacher," a writer who disregards the boundaries between high

[11] *Oxford English Dictionary*, "character".

[12] See Marie-Laure Ryan's *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* for more on Ryan's "principal of minimal departure," especially 48–60.

[13] Fans of *The Familiar* have claimed that the novel could have gone on longer than it did had Pantheon did a better job marketing the novel. There may be some truth to that, but from my own experience, most people found *TF*v1 so incomprehensible they were disinclined to read any further, regardless of the fact they had already purchased later volumes.

and low culture and who employs the narrative styles of hard-boiled detective fiction and horror as readily as those of, say, free-verse and free indirect discourse.[14] Indeed, Danielewski's books are what I have elsewhere called "literary compendiums"—texts that explicitly recapitulate whole slews of inherited literary forms and techniques for distinctly new material and expressive purposes.[15] And yet, while Danielewski's literary repertoire is expansive, his novels, no matter how strange and experimental, are pretty conventional or *familiar* once viewed through the lens of the chronotope, as well as through the more visual and bookish-specific concept of the bibliotrope.

In *House of Leaves* much of the narrative's plot unfolds within the Navidson family's home on Ash Tree Lane. The predominant chronotope in *House of Leaves* is undoubtedly the haunted house, the most common chronotope employed in horror fiction, which the novel exemplifies. While the characters of Zampanò and Johnny Truant do not occupy the Navidson's home, they too are nonetheless constrained to their own respective haunted domiciles where they research and write about Will Navidson's documentary film. The material book object, with its elaborate typography and hypertextual narrative, is even designed to represent the Escheresque impossibilities of a haunted house. Imitating the haunted house's contraptions, the novel seeks to corner and confound its readers just as the haunted house does to the novel's characters. While there are many ways to interpret the meaning of this haunted house, most critics agree that the house represents the supposed threats, fears, and anxieties brought on by digital technology to contemporary print culture, reading practices, epistemology, and subjectivity.[16] Danielewski's other major works also develop according to recognizable chronotopes. The narration of *The Fifty Year Sword*, while technically occurring within the walls of an orphanage, is a campfire story, and in contradistinction to the centripetal forces of the haunted house in *House of Leaves*, Sam and Hailey's respective journeys in *Only Revolutions* unfold across the centrifugal expanse of America's open roads—*Only Revolutions* is a road novel. When we set aside the elaborate textual showmanship that is Danielewski's hallmark, we can observe how his novels are organized according to familiar chronotopes, often associated with genre fiction.

But arguably more than any other contemporary fiction writer, Danielewski is invested in expanding the book object's traditional repertoire of expressive resources to enrich the book's material, formal, narrative, aesthetic, and tactile possibilities. It is rather apropos then that *The Familiar* shares its title with one of the central tenets of

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[14] Josh Lukin and Joe Moffett, "Introduction: Genre Poaching in Contemporary Literature," 1–3.

[15] Brian Davis, *Books as Archives*.

[16] For example, see Hayles 2002, Hansen 2004, Pressman 2006, and Chanen 2007.

Russian Formalism, that of "defamiliarization," Victor Shklovsky's notion about the primacy of art to make the "familiar seem strange." As Shklovsky puts it, "The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged."[17] The concept and technique of the bibliotrope, with its multiple interactive channels of representation and how bibliotropes can multiply within single or even across multiple books to form larger, more complex bibliotropic constellations, exemplifies the prolonged and difficult process of (de)familiarization. Of course, the process of (de)familiarization in *The Familiar* is substantially delayed and intensified by its serialization—five volumes published over the span of three years— and by the sheer physicality and scope of each volume: each book weighs approximately five pounds and consists of 880 pages. And while the quote from Shklovsky could just as well serve as a blurb for any of Danielewski's books, I would argue that with *The Familiar* Danielewski creates a literary *experiment*—in the scientific sense of the word.[18] That is, *The Familiar* is Danielewski's attempt to more fully test his hypothesis on the supposed capacity of visual literature—what he calls "the signiconic"[19]—to offer readers an aesthetically rich experience that neither non-visual literature nor non-bookish media can provide. As Danielewski himself puts it when discussing his larger artistic project in an interview with Kari Driscoll and Inge van de Ven: "How much difference does it make.... this melding of a literary form with a visual form? And what does it reveal? .... Is this just a fringe, experimental voyage or is there actually something substantial here that's taking root, that is making sense of the visual culture we inhabit as well as the

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[17] Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," 12.

[18] A key question that motivates Danielewski's literary experiment is to what extent employing different forms, styles, genres, registers, and modes for different characters with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds can significantly affect the reader's experience, identification, relationship, and knowledge of those characters and their worlds. In other words, how does the *representation* of character impact our perception of, as well as our proximity and attachment to, such characters? How do readers build mental models of characters and worlds represented in different languages, styles, registers, modes, and genres? What roles do genre and narrative style play in how readers experience fictional narratives, and what difference, if any, does Danielewski's bookish aesthetic make to that experience? These are some of the key questions, I would argue, motivating Danielewski's literary project, and while I believe a more rigorous empirical study with many participants would likely provide the most systematic means of addressing them, until that opportunity arises, we must rely on individual observations.

[19] In a lecture titled "A Colored Word" that Danielewski gave at Ohio State University in 2019, he provides the following definition of "signiconic," a term he uses to define his approach to writing: "Rather than engage those textual faculties of the mind remediating the pictorial or those visual faculties remediating language, the signiconic 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."

literary culture"?[20] In the following, I want to limn the contours of these aesthetic aims in *The Familiar* by drawing on the concept and technique of the bibliotrope.

The Familiar's Bookish Network

Like Danielewski's earlier books, *The Familiar* extends the material affordances and narrative conventions of non-bookish media into the domain of the codex novel to stretch the aesthetic and rhetorical possibilities of the book-object. Whereas *House of Leaves* is concerned with the grammar and authenticity of film in the digital age, *Only Revolutions* with the musicality of language and the charting of historical data, and *The Fifty Year Sword* with collaborative storytelling, *The Familiar* is Danielewski's bookish take on serial television. While promoting the book between 2015 and 2017, Danielewski proclaimed that *The Familiar* was going to consist of 27 volumes, that each volume was meant to represent one "episode," and that five volumes were equivalent to one "season" in TV parlance. The "show" would go on for five seasons, including two encore episodes. With a publication trajectory estimated to span approximately 15 years, *The Familiar* was poised to be the most ambitious serial novel in U.S. history (and perhaps still is). Unfortunately, readership numbers never reached the desired count to justify ongoing publication costs, so Pantheon Books, Danielewski's longtime publisher, "paused" the series at the end of season one. As Evan Van Tassell recently put it, *The Familiar* "may be the first set of novels to ever be canceled for bad ratings at the end of its first season."[21] But while *The Familiar*, now generally acknowledged as a pentalogy, is a mostly incomplete narrative relative to the project's anticipated length, readers still have a whopping 4,400 pages to attend to—enough material to keep MZD aficionados busy for many years to come.[22]

It will be obvious to many readers that *The Familiar*'s main organizational principle is the network, a strategy of narrative fiction that has its roots in the modernist writings of Sherwood Anderson and John Dos Passos and that has more recently become a popular style of contemporary filmmaking and serial television. Notable examples from television include *The Wire* (2002–08), *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–09), *Game of*

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[20] Kari Driscoll and Inge van de Ven, "Book Presence and Feline Absence: A Conversation with Mark Z. Danielewski," 148–149.

[21] Evan Van Tassell, "Codex as Cultural Interface: Danielewski's *The Familiar*," a talk delivered on 21 May 2021 at the annual conference of The International Society or the Study of Narrative.

[22] It is important to note that this concept of the bibliotrope is as relevant to the first volume as it is to the fifth because it characterizes Danielewski's bookish literary practice in general rather than any topic internal to his novels. And while one could argue that literary form *is* a theme of *The Familiar*, what interests me here is less the old structuralist concern of *form as content* than how Danielewski exploits the entire media system of the codex novel to challenge readers' assumptions about what books are and what they can do that other storytelling media cannot.

Thrones (2011–19), and *The Walking Dead* (2010-present)—all of which are referenced in *The Familiar*. Contemporary network narratives draw attention to how subjectivity, knowledge, memory, and social circumstances more generally are increasingly configured in the twenty-first century through distributed networks of people and artifacts across national and regional boundaries and in different social and institutional spaces, with particular attention to how seemingly random or unexpected events can commence the development of complex social entanglements. Network narratives in the modernist tradition sought to overcome the fragmentation and alienation of the modern world by emphasizing the social and historical ties that bind us as individuals and into communities. Network narratives in more postmodernist and hypertextual contexts, whether print-bound or electronic, typically deemphasize human agency in their ideological attempts to critique hierarchical modes of epistemology, ontology, politics, and representation.

The Familiar explores many of these familiar topoi of the network, but Danielewski's books require more active participation from their readers than these earlier literary examples do, as well as that of television, which typically places spectators in a passive viewing position. With *The Familiar*, readers are required to trace and untangle the networks that exist among what Rita Felski would call (à la Bruno Latour) its "actants," that is, every *thing*—human and nonhuman, subject, and object—that is thrusted into networks of relation, in order to discern much of what is happening at different levels of analysis.[23] *The Familiar* demands a significant amount of patience and collaboration from its readers in its promotion of what Inge van de Ven refers to as "slow reading," how the novel's "monumentality" and serialization acts as a counterforce to the 24/7 culture of "binge-viewing" and "on-demand" consumption.[24] This "slowing down" effect that van de Ven argues *The Familiar* produces provides readers with the opportunity to closely observe the different networks that constitute its narrative world and bibliotropic patterns. Moreover, as we become more familiar with how *The Familiar* constructs its various literary and social networks, both local and global, we are invited to consider how our own individual circumstances are tied to and significantly affected by socio-economic configurations and political-historical processes brought on by globalization and digitization.

At the macro scale, *The Familiar*'s network brings together nine different characters (including each character's most immediate circle of friends, colleagues, or allies), most of whom live in Los Angeles or are connected to someone who does through one

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[23] Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment*.

[24] Inge van de Ven, "The Serial Novel in an Age of Binging: How to Read Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*," 102.

or two degrees of separation. In her review of volume one, Lindsay Thomas states that each character "narrates his or her own chapters,"[25] but the novel actually appears to be mediated by a computational apparatus of some kind, perhaps artificial intelligence, accompanied by interjectional commentary from three of the novel's nine Narcons.[26] From a narratological perspective, the representation of each of the nine characters is functionally equivalent to different instances of limited third-person narration. That is, each character is focalized differently to capture their unique linguistic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, their idiosyncratic patterns of thought, emotion, perception, and speech. Each character is also represented in different narrative styles, often associated with different literary periods and popular genres. Each volume is discreetly divided into 30 chapters, with each chapter focalizing any one of the nine central characters at a time. At the beginning and ending of each chapter there are color-coded time-date-location stamps that function as chronotopic indices and character identifiers, for each character's chapters are stamped in a specific color. Furthermore, each character is presented in a unique bibliotropic style that activates different kinds of reading strategies, which in turn elicit different moods and affects similarly to how *mise-en-scène* and cinematography (e.g., lighting, staging, costume, and framing) function in film, television, photography, and graphic narratives. As readers move through *The Familiar*, they must maneuver, encode, and contrast the bibliotropic patterns and spaces of individual characters. The repetition of this readerly activity, in theory, allows readers to become more *familiar* with the novel's oscillating network of characters and plots, as well as establish modes of alignment, opposition, and conflict in response to different characters and plots. Just as with serial television where viewers must become attuned to the editing technique of cross-cutting and how multiple narrative threads fit into a larger network and narrative whole, readers of *The Familiar* must become attuned to the novel's frequent shifts in bibliotropic style and how certain motifs, characters, or events act as intermediaries that tie the novel's plots together. While such attunement may be relatively easy for regular viewers of long form TV, adopting those interpretive strategies to a five-volume novel is not going to be intuitive for most readers. After all, literature and television are very different storytelling mediums with their own set of narrative conventions. In other words, it is not at all obvious how one should read a serial novel *as if* it were a remediation of a serial TV show.

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[25] Lindsay Thomas, "Why We Read Novels," 387.

[26] The truth is, what or who narrates *The Familiar*, and what exactly the Narcons are, is not explained in the first five volumes. And in volume five, the commentary of TF Narcon⁹ in one of Xanther's chapters suggests that it (she?) *is* Xanther (*TF*v5 432, 805). It's not clear what we are supposed to make of these comments, but we are invited to speculate on the possibility that *The Familiar* is maybe a simulation or a multiverse of some kind, which could perhaps further explain Xanther's visions throughout the novel of another world.

To the extent there is a central character, it is Xanther Ibrahim—an inquisitive twelve-year-old girl who after rescuing a small cat from drowning seems to gradually acquire magical powers. It is unclear what the origins of this cat are and how it is a conduit of magical powers, but Redwood, the name Xanther gives to the cat at the end of volume five (*TF*v5 831), nonetheless acts as one of the novel's centripetal forces bringing characters from outside of the Ibrahim family (which primarily include Xanther, Anwar and Astair) together. Most directly these characters include Jingjing and Tian Li (an old healing woman from Singapore), the previous "owners" of the cat, and Shnorhk, an Armenian-born taxi driver and musician who happens to transport Jingjing and Tian Li to the Ibrahim's home in volume five. Cas, aka The Wizard, the computer programmer with connections to the American intelligence community who are at war with a man named Alvin (aka Recluse), is also connected to Anwar through a mutual colleague named Mefisto (aka Sorcerer) who possesses one of a handful of "Orbs" (which Recluse wants). Orbs are intelligent devices that allow its handlers, if used just right, to see or "scry" video "clips" from the past, present, and future. There's also Isandòrno, a mysterious hitman who works for The Mayor (a Mexican cartel don who traffics drugs and exotic animals for sport hunting).[27] The Mayor's primary American contact is Teyo, a partner of Luther's, whose LA-based Chicano gang is responsible for selling The Mayor's drugs (which may include a new experimental drug called "synsnap"). Finally there is Özgür ("Oz"), a Turkish American Los Angeles detective on the cusp of retirement who's being drawn into this drug trafficking plot by intelligence officers (Polanski and Warlock) who are collaborating with Cas and who have placed informants (Cynthia and her kid sister Cricket) inside Teyo's circle.

While these plot summaries obviously oversimplify matters, one can still observe how *The Familiar* develops multiple storylines that over time come to intersect. One can also observe how *The Familiar* draws on an expansive repertoire of narrative styles and genres, from fantasy and science fiction to romance, action, and crime fiction, to construct networks of relationality and symbolic patterns. So while many of the links that attach *The Familiar*'s network together can be observed in things like verbal references, allusions, color associations, and the "six degrees" of separation motif, readers familiar with network narratives and the conventional scripts and generic frames Danielewski employs will be better equipped to connect the dots.

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[27] To my knowledge, *The Familiar* never discloses how the cat gets from Singapore to Los Angeles. However, we do know that one of the four crates of animals that travels from Africa to Mexico discussed in Isandòrno's narrative may have come from Asia, and that the *fourth* crate—there were only supposed to be *three*—may have contained the cat in it.

Isandòrno's Bibliotrope: The Cage

To recognize how each of *The Familiar*'s nine focalized characters, including their respective storylines and socio-cultural conditions, are composites of highly stylized textual-visual configurations with clearly demarcated temporal-spatial indices is to think in terms of *bibliotropes.* The various devices that support the construction of a character's bibliotropic identity function in the service of things like characterization, narratorial formatting, sociolinguistic indexing, chronotopic indexing, graphic representation, symbolic patterning, cross referencing, intertextuality, metareference, and textual worldbuilding more generally.

As bibliotropes in *The Familiar* have clearly demarcated material-textual and temporal-spatial parameters and are comprised of motifs and devices drawn from different narrative styles and genres, their unifying aesthetic structures resemble what narratologists, psychologists, and linguists variously refer to as *schemata* and *frames.* According to John Frow, a "schema" (which he frequently uses synonymously with "frame" and "genre") is "a pattern underlying a surface phenomenon which allows us to understand that phenomenon," or "what allows us to infer the whole from the part, the kind of thing [a thing] is from the representation of a few of its scattered features."[28] While Frow's definition sounds a lot like the definition of metonymy, schemata are essentially mental models of organized generic knowledge accumulated over time and stored in our memory that we can readily draw on to help us understand new phenomena, in this case new texts, especially when they are ambiguous or underspecified.[29] When we read and interpret new or *unfamiliar* texts we draw on our broader understanding and expectations of what literature is and how it works gathered from prior reading experiences to make sense of them.[30] Bibliotropes in *The Familiar* clearly draw from *familiar* schemata, i.e., generic patterns and topoi from TV, film, comics, literature, and videogames, but as unique, combinatory assemblages of *bookish* literary forms, bibliotropes also generate new *multimodal* schemata that readers must learn to recognize, process, and differentiate in order to interpret and assign meaning to them. This is in part why *The Familiar* needs to be so long—it takes a significant amount of time to successfully integrate a complex web of new schemata into one's knowledge base.

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[28] John Frow, *Genre*, 83–4.

[29] For more on schemata, scripts, and frames, see Herman 2002, Frow 2006, Fillmore and Baker 2009, and Alexander and Emmott 2014.

[30] Jonathan Culler calls this process "literary competence." See Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 113–130.

Consider the character of Isandòrno. If we apply a frames or schematic approach to Isandòrno's storyworld, we can observe how his chapters in *The Familiar* evoke or activate what we could call the "Hitman" frame or schema. Any fictional narrative that employs a Hitman frame must represent some character (character A) who is hired by another character (character B) to secretly murder some other character (character C) for some personal or financial gain. Another formulation of the Hitman frame would be to say that character A is the Perpetrator, character B is the Client, and character C is the Victim, making in this case Isandòrno the Perpetrator, The Mayor the Client, and the Victims all the people Isandòrno has murdered for The Mayor. Danielewski constructs this Hitman frame slowly and somewhat covertly as to reflect the mysterious and unknowable qualities of Isandòrno's character. Over time, Danielewski provides us with subtle clues that suggest Isandòrno may be a hitman, but this fact is not explicitly represented until volume five. For instance, the epigraphs at the beginning of each of Isandòrno's chapters are sayings from different "victims," but we don't know who these victims are, if they represent the "last words" of Isandòrno's victims, or if they come from some extra-diegetic source, like a TV show, film, or videogame, as *The Familiar*'s epigraphs typically to.[31] Isandòrno carries a gun, is usually preoccupied with mission-oriented goals, speaks very little, and seems to take pleasure philosophizing about death—all predominant features of the typical Hitman's identity—but the language used in Isandòrno's chapters really only obliquely corresponds with the Hitman frame.[32] We know that whenever The Mayor "sends him to see" someone (*TF*v1 304), Isandòrno "always obeys" (*TF*v4 179). And we know that Isandòrno travels a lot—from El Tajín to Veracruz, then on to Chiapas, Mexico City, and finally to Nuevo Laredo to carry out The Mayor's orders to "Close The Ranch" (*TF*v5 769)—but we don't know what he is doing along these travels for the most part. Once Isandòrno travels to The Ranch at the end of volume five, however, we realize that "close" means "eliminate," and that The Ranch is a stand-in for all of the people who live there. Thus, it is not until the end of season one where readers see Isandòrno's cold-blooded killer instincts in action and the Hitman frame becomes explicit. What's more, Isandòrno executes not only the men at the ranch, he kills the women and children too, all of whom knew Isandòrno well enough to call him Tío, the Spanish word for "uncle," but also used as a term of endearment for addressing men in rural communities.[33]

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[31] It has been proposed by fans on the subreddit for *The Familiar* that all the victim's quotes come from the videogame *I am Alive*, a postapocalyptic survivalist game, though I cannot confirm if this is true, for I have never played the game.

[32] Notable examples from cinema include Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samouraï* (1968), Luc Besson's *Léon: The Professional* (1994), Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Amores Perros* (2000), Joel and Ethan Cohen's *No Country for Old Men* (2007), and the *John Wick* movies (2014-present)

[33] It has been proposed that Isandòrno's character is best understood not through the "Hitman" schema but through the "mysterious stranger" trope of the generic Western. While Isandòrno is no doubt mostly a stranger to us, someone

While Isandòrno appears to be indebted to The Mayor for reasons we never know (*TF*v2 169), he is both physically and spiritually incapacitated by his "mother's curse" (*TF*v2 167–68). While Isandòrno's full potential as a hitman is concealed until the end of season one, readers learn of Isandòrno's "curse" early on, and thus it arguably functions as a more primary schema for understanding Isandòrno's predicament than the hitman schema. The precise nature of this curse, like so much about Isandòrno, is ambiguous, but we know that the curse "keeps [Isandòrno] from crossing any border" (*TF*v2 167). So while Isandòrno is nomadic, he is confined to Mexico. From Isandòrno's focalization readers learn that when he was growing up his mother told him "stories about where he was *not* from and where he could *never* go," as well as "all the things he *must* do if he did *not* want to go sooner" (*TF*v1 305, my emphasis). It is never explained why Isandòrno's mother wishes to prohibit him from ever leaving Mexico, nor why he should fear doing so, but through repeated tellings of these fearful stories Isandòrno internalizes and acts on this prohibition, regularly performing superstitious rituals to protect himself. Isandòrno "spits three times over his shoulder if the sun should ever hit his eye directly," he "never steps directly on the edge of a shadow," he never says the number nine "unless he taps out nine by fingers to thumb," and he always makes sure his bullets are made of "silver" and "gold" (*TF*v1 305–06). But while Isandòrno formally heeds his mother's curse, he doesn't actually "believe" in it (*TF*v1 308). As a "practitioner of superstition without being superstitious" (*TF*v1 316), Isandòrno is aware of the gap between his ideological mask and his social reality, but he insists upon wearing the mask as a way to rationalize his cruelty. Registering a 00.02% empathy level with TF-Narcon[9] (*TF*v1 569), Isandòrno's temperament makes him an effective hitman, but Danielewski asks his readers to also interpret Isandòrno as a "victim" of repressive social circumstances. Danielewski reverses the script of the conventional Hitman frame by transforming the Perpetrator into a Victim.

The time when Isandòrno *almost* "cross[ed] into Guatemala," when he *almost* "stepped beyond" his mother's "oath" (*TF*v2 164, 168), the language and symbolism of "cages" is put into stark relief and comes to explicitly define Isandòrno's identity (and of course, a "curse" is a kind of cage as well). When asked by a merchant if it is "fear" that keeps him from leaving Mexico, Isandòrno reflects on his "mother's curse" and "The Mayor's cage" (*TF*v2 168). When daydreaming of places like Honduras and Panama, Isandòrno says he could never know such places "from within his cage" (*TF*v2 166). For Isandòrno, the human body is a "cage" (*TF*v1 319), human affection

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who cannot seem to integrate into civilization and who is largely unknowable, the mysterious stranger of Westerns, such as Clint Eastwood's character in Sergio Leone's *Dollars Trilogy*, does not kill innocent people, especially women and children, and so the ethics of the "mysterious stranger" does not correspond to Isandòrno's character as a hitman.

is a "cage" (*TF*v5 224), and more generally to live a life is to inhabit a sequence of lonely and desolate "cages" (*TF*v2 168, *TF*v4 175, *TF*v5 224). Moreover, The Mayor not only regards his own family as a "cage" (*TF*v4 371), but he poaches and keeps exotic animals "caged" in private "zoos all over Mexico" (*TF*v2 381)—one of which is The Ranch. Here, we can observe a parallel between Isandòrno and the animals The Mayor purchases for sport hunting, as well as a parallel between the fate of these animals and those who Isandòrno is paid to kill.[34] In this context, life itself is a commodity that can be bought, sold, and extinguished through an exploitative business model. As might be expected, Isandòrno is aware of these parallels and implications, which in part explains his uncharacteristic sympathy for animals, as well as his belief that the only way to escape an "old cage" is by entering a "new cage" (*TF*v5 224). In short, if Isandòrno's indebtedness to The Mayor as his personal hitman is Isandòrno's "cage," then what is preventing Isandòrno from escaping his cage is his mother's "curse." What Isandòrno needs, then, is a countervailing force to lift the curse and free him from his cage. This force, I would argue, is Xanther (and her magical cat, Redwood).[35]

Now, much of what I have discussed thus far concerns how Isandòrno is represented linguistically and at the level of *The Familiar*'s represented storyworld (levels 2 and 1 mentioned above, respectively). These elements, which serve narrative, symbolic, and characterological purposes, are accompanied by an array of multimodal and bookish elements (levels 3 and 4). Combined, these different levels of representation and modes of communication encompass Isandòrno's bibliotropic characteristics.

Like all *The Familiar*'s characters, Isandòrno's chapters are physically demarcated by color-coded, time-date-location stamps printed on the upper-outer corners of the first and last pages of each chapter. These stamps serve multiple purposes. As information tabs they act as chronotopic indices that inform readers of approximately where in time and space Isandòrno is located at the time of his narration. Because these stamps, which are present throughout *The Familiar*, exist on an extra-narratorial plane—their data is quasi-paratextual and non-narrative—they are functionally

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[34] It's worth noting that in each volume's "New This Season" previews there is a partial transcript of a home video called "Caged Hunt" recorded by the three Americans that pay to "hunt" at The Mayor's Ranch. Part One shows the men preparing in Texas, in Part Two they kill the hyena, in Part Three the baby elephant, in Part Four the baby giraffe, and then in Part Five when they encounter "the fourth crate," they are all killed by whatever is inside. It's worth noting further that one of the central instabilities in Isandòrno's storyline is the unexpected arrival of this "fourth crate" (*TF*v1 611–15). While this instability is never resolved by the end of volume five, readers are invited to draw parallels between this escaped animal and Isandòrno's current predicament, as well as speculate whether this fourth crate has some relationship to Xanther and her magical cat (*TF*v5 229–59).

[35] For examples, see *TF*v1 618, *TF*v2 174, 381–87, *TF*v4 186, 402, and *TF*v5 769.

equivalent to a rudimentary global positioning system (GPS). They provide readers approximate worldwide navigational readings, presumably based on the reception of signals from an array of orbiting satellites which, if we were to interpret as being part of *The Familiar*'s universe, are integral components of VEM and/or the Narcon system, which exist beyond the fourth dimension of time (*TF*v1 563–77). Since these stamps are also color-coded (e.g., Isandòrno's stamps are yellow) and have a haptic quality to them (i.e., their design mimics the index notches of reference books), they are multimodal and multisensory signifiers that act as referential and mnemonic devices. Readers are trained to associate Isandòrno with yellow, including, one might venture to argue, some of the color yellow's popular symbolic connotations (e.g., neutrality, gold, the desert), although it is more likely the case that what Danielewski is attempting to achieve with his color-coding is a form of symbolic synesthesia whereby readers learn to associate the verbal reference of specific colors throughout the series with their corresponding characters, a kind of shorthand or multimodal metonymy that highlights relational ties or patterns within *The Familiar*'s network (e.g., when Xanther or Luther says "yellow," we think of Isandòrno). Moreover, if one wishes to read only Isandòrno's narrative, to perform, say, an Isandòrno reading of *The Familiar*, one can choose to strictly follow the yellow stamps across each volume as if they were trailheads or signposts. Reading each volume front to back, in other words, is not the only way to traverse *The Familiar*'s hypertextual network. Just as with *House of Leaves* and *Only Revolutions*, readers may choose to follow a single character's narrative trajectory or devise an alternative reading path of their own making.

Isandòrno's chapters are also typographically distinct, as are all of the central characters in *The Familiar*. Beginning with his first novel *House of Leaves*, Danielewski has meticulously explored the material and expressive resources of typography and topography, specifically how the visual figuration of the word and the spatialization of the page can represent or imitate the physical and cognitive dimensions of his storyworlds. Danielewski continues this practice in all his major books, each one arguably outdoing the previous in complexity and innovation, a practice that culminates in the bibliotropic aesthetic of *The Familiar*. While the typographic style employed in Isandòrno's chapters is not as irregular or expressionistic as, say, Xanther or Cas's chapters are, Isandòrno's pages are still deliberately stylized to reflect Isandòrno's temporal-spatial environment and psycho-social reality.

The texts to Isandòrno's pages are formatted to yield extremely narrow dimensions, the narrowest in fact of all *The Familiar*'s different page designs. With large top, left and right margins that are symmetrical and nearly the same size as the text's dimension,

and a bottom margin that is so large that on some pages the entire bottom half of the page is blank, Isandòrno's pages necessarily display vastly more white, empty, or blank space than text. But why? How does this blankness reflect certain aspects of Isandòrno's character, his social and physical environments, his life as a hitman?

Similar to Eugen Gomringer's famous concrete poem "Silencio" (1953), the use of white space in Isandòrno's chapters, combined with his narrow focus (on his kills and his "curse") and his mysterious nature, is Danielewski's way of representing, through the absence of words, the relative silence and unknowability of Isandòrno's existence. Danielewski does something similar throughout *House of Leaves*, especially in chapters X, XII, and XX, where readers journey through the mysterious and endlessly shapeshifting staircases, halls, and tunnels of the house on Ash Tree Lane. In *House of Leaves*, white space represents a sense of infinite possibilities, but it also represents the emptiness and blankness of the house, how it seems to change in response to the psychology and actions of those who enter it. The white space in Isandòrno's chapters similarly captures the ambiguous and unpredictable quality of his narrative. Again, Isandòrno's role as a hitman is hinted at but not fully revealed until volume five. Moreover, we do not know what Isandòrno's background is, if he has any living relatives, if he is ex-military, how he became so skilled with a gun, if he always lacked empathy, who his parents *really* were, how he got mixed up with the Mayor, and so on. Compared to the rest of the central cast of *The Familiar*, Isandòrno is relatively blank, just like his pages.[36]

Assigning such narrow text dimensions to Isandòrno's pages also means that he has the smallest words-to-page ratio in *The Familiar*. And since Isandòrno also mostly occupies the periphery of *The Familiar*'s narrative, he is necessarily given the least amount of "screen" time. One would imagine that such blankness would mean that Isandòrno's chapters would be relatively quick reads; however, Isandòrno's mysterious temperament combined with the silence created by the white space can have the reverse effect. Readers are invited to slow down and linger on the obscurity of Isandòrno's narrative and to contemplate the momentary effects of silence and emptiness created by the white space. The absence of text on Isandòrno's pages reflects his own desertion, abandonment, and alienation, as well as the vast and arid landscape of the Mexican desert. Danielewski not only makes semantic use of white space, he uses it to elicit an emotional response from his readers as well. And here, a perhaps less

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[36] Here I also want to note how the font used for Isandòrno is Visage, a noun in English that refers to the form or expression of a human individual's face. Because we do not know what Isandòrno looks like, his inscriptions serve as a stand in for his face, further illustrating how Danielewski gives his characters literary-textual personalities in addition to the more traditional human-like characteristics of literary fiction.

obvious interpretation of Isandòrno's blank or empty pages can be made by drawing on the association between absence and death in the elegiac poetic tradition. Knowing that Isandòrno is responsible for tens if not hundreds or even thousands of deaths, Danielewski invites us to interpret the absence of text on Isandòrno's pages as the absence of life. This reading may seem like a stretch, but since Danielewski always imbues his characters with distinct and memorable textual markings, this empty or "dead" space could be viewed as the "concrete" graveyard of Isandòrno's victims, a sort of visual landscaping of the page, whereby the absence of text conjures the absence of life. Furthermore, this bibliotropic reading allows us to make the point that Isandòrno is constrained or "caged" at virtually every level of analysis—typographical, topographical, psychological, characterological, and narratological. While this strict confinement does not necessarily increase our sympathy for Isandòrno, the blankness of his pages invites us to imagine all the unknowable and unnamable things Isandòrno has done, as well as recognize our limited knowledge of not only Isandòrno's character, but of every character in *The Familiar*. White, empty, blank, dead, or negative space provides readers with the opportunity to world-build and speculate about the content of narrative gaps, as well as draw possible connections between Isandòrno's narrative and the other narrative threads in *The Familiar*'s network.

The tiny boxes or box-shaped text that Isandòrno's narrow margins in effect produce are thus "concrete" visualizations of Isandòrno's alienation and confinement. More specifically, the shape of Isandòrno's typography, from the small box-shaped text to the spaces created between the lines of text, visually represents the "cage" motif that is so crucial to understanding Isandòrno's otherwise very mysterious character. While the hitman schema operates rather obliquely in the first few volumes, only becoming more explicit in volume five, the cage motif, both visually and metaphorically, is there from the beginning and comes to define Isandòrno's bibliotrope: Isandòrno is caged from the world, but so are we from Isandòrno.

It is strange to think of Isandòrno as a prisoner, but all of the characters in *The Familiar* are prisoners in some sense, caged by their unique circumstances and limitations, always on the verge of crossing over into something new and unfamiliar brought on by the networked relations of contemporary life. The "cage" motif therefore not only defines the contours of Isandòrno's bibliotrope, it spans across the series' nine different storylines to function as a central node in *The Familiar*'s bibliotropic network. Moreover, the language and imagery of not only cages but of all sorts of enclosers and confining spaces are regularly foregrounded. Though this constellation of cage-like metaphors and motifs becomes increasingly prominent and thus more familiar to readers as the series progresses, each character's cage is uniquely tied to their own

circumstances. Nonetheless, I would argue that the kaleidoscopic figure of the cage draws attention to *The Familiar*'s exploration of the familiar/unfamiliar opposition and its different manifestations across the series.

This manifestation is most perhaps most noticeable in Xanther's storyline. For example, early in the series Xanther draws a comparison between her fear and anxiety brought on by her epilepsy and the agitated feelings of "some caged animal" (*TF*v1 52). Later on she locates her sense of fear and wonder, which she often struggles to freely express, within "the cage of herself" (*TF*v4 309). In both cases, something unfamiliar is locked in or trying to escape but cannot, usually a feeling in search of a verbal articulation. Soon after Xanther rescues her kitten, animal cages, school lockers, windows and doors of all sorts—things that confine or enclose things, thresholds that can either permit or forbid things from moving and interacting with other things—begin to inexplicably unlock and open in her presence. This strange, recurrent phenomenon, which seems to be one of the unifying forces of Xanther's magical cat, is often *graphically* illustrated instead of being described solely through the medium of language. Danielewski's choice to concretize Xanther's perceptual experience and shifting identity brought on by the presence of the cat, especially in scenes where cage-like objects or spaces are present and open up,[37] further demonstrates how the bibliotrope is used an expressive device to transcend the limitations of language and the conventions of the novel, as well as works to create relational ties and correspondences across *The Familiar*'s networked narrative. Although the nine central characters have very little interaction with one another by the end of volume five (outside of Xanther, Astair, and Anwar of course), we can assume that Xanther's magical cat is the key that unlocks all of the character's "cages" to bring them together.[38]

Finally, "the cage" serves as a conceptual schema for how Danielewski explores the materiality and physical form of the multimodal codex novel. In his interview with Driscoll and van de Ven, Danielewski states that *The Familiar* explores how "narratives are told," including "the vessels or cages" "that hold them," especially "the cage of what the book is, the novel is."[39] Explicitly building on the metaphor of the codex novel as a cage, Danielewski states that "the cage provides us with something, it captures something and then it releases something," but "what is contained that can be

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[37] For additional examples of the cage motif in Xanther's chapters see *TF*v2 241, 353–377, 578–594, *TF*v3 788–841, and *TF*v5 437, 806.

[38] See Luther (*TF*v5 483), Shnorhk (*TF*v4 73–78), Astair (*TF*v2 418, 421), and Anwar's chapters (*TF*v1 89) for additional instantiations of the cage motif.

[39] Kari Driscoll and Inge van de Ven, "Book Presence and Feline Absence: A Conversation with Mark Z. Danielewski," 152.

shared, that can be transported, that can be freed for the reader?" Danielewski asks.[40] "I think that is my ultimate relationship with the reader," Danielewski admits, "to take this huge narrative cage, and ultimately free that narrative within themselves."[41] Danielewski's language becomes rather abstract when he discusses his conception of what the novel is and can do, likening the book-object to a cage or vessel of some kind. For Danielewski, the codex is much more than a commodity or container that transmits fictional stories to consumers. Perhaps inspired by the magical origins and ritualistic nature of prehistoric art, Danielewski attributes magical powers to his books. Like Xanther's magical cat, *The Familiar* would seem to possess the power to emancipate its readers from *their* cages, too. As Isandòrno puts it, the only way to escape an "old cage" is to enter a "new cage," for "where there are two cages there is suddenly a way between the cages," an "in-between where things can slip" (*TF*v5 224). *The Familiar* sets itself up, then, as being some kind of magical portal that can transport its readers to some new or unfamiliar place, releasing them from whatever might be caging them. If the codex novel is a kind of cage, as Danielewski states, then I would argue that it is his bibliotropic poetics that makes this transformative "uncaging" possible for readers.

Conclusion: Reading for the Bibliotrope

Danielewski attempts to incorporate and unify as many genres, styles, and modes of representation that the multimodal novel can handle into *The Familiar*. This pentalogy of several thousand pages is by far his most ambitious and experimental work to date, if not the most complex exploration of remediation by any novelist in our new media age. While Danielewski's bibliotropic approach to writing is present in his earlier works, it reaches its full maturity in *The Familiar*. Examining *The Familiar* as a bibliotropic text in the way that I have outlined the concept hopefully provides critics with a multimodal framework for synthesizing each character's narrative and nonnarrative elements into a coherent and unifying expressive whole, similarly to how Bakhtin's chronotope does for analyzing the social and generic functions of temporal-spatial indices. While my case study is primarily limited to Isandòrno's bibliotrope, the cage motif that is so predominant therein extends beyond those chapters and functions as one of the networked narrative's primary symbols and thematic devices. What is needed to further enrich our understanding of *The Familiar* and its bibliotropic poetics is a more in-depth and comparative analysis of each character's bibliotrope that would further highlight how and to what affect Danielewski synthesizes a wide range of storytelling and artistic

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[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid, 152–53.

devices and technologies to create each character's bibliotrope. Furthermore, given the range of ethnicities and languages represented in *The Familiar*, we should also consider to what extent Danielewski relies on certain American-centric stereotypes in these representations beyond the conventions of narrative and genre, and how such stereotypes reinforce certain kinds of reading practices. For instance, to what extent does Danielewski draw associations or rely on assumptions between ethnicity or class and narrative style, or between gender and genre? Is there any way of discerning how Danielewski potentially incorporates different types of identity, such as race and gender, into his bibliotropic representations? Considering such questions would allow us to further understand Danielewski's multimodal poetics, especially its incorporation of things like class, gender, and race. In other words, is there a politics or ideology to these different bibliotropes? Finally, since Danielewski's unique bibliotropic style has been adopted by several contemporary writers, the work that scholars and critics of contemporary literature do, especially in the growing field of multimodal narrative studies, could benefit from thinking about these works as bibliotropic texts as well.[42]

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[42] Here, I'm primarily thinking of works like Bill Bly's *We Descend* (1997–2021), Warren Lehrer's *A Life in Books* (2013), J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst's *S.* (2013), Zachary Dodson's *Bats of the Republic* (2015), Lance Olsen's *Theories of Forgetting* (2014), Matthew McIntosh's *theMystery.doc* (2017), and Rian Hughes's *XX* (2020), but surely the larger multimodal "turn" in contemporary literature and publishing has much to owe to Danielewski's enormous success with *House of Leaves*.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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