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# Introduction: Becoming Familiar with *The Familiar*, or, The Imaginary Novel and the Imagination

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This essay is the introduction to the special issue of *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* on Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*. As a starting point for readers, it places the the five novels in the context of a longer literary history of multimodal writing. I argue that this alternative history undermines the realist monomodal paradigm that still persists in literature and literary criticism and challenges their normativity that has, for example, mainly excluded multimodal forms such as children's literature or comics. At the same time, I identify a corresponding narrative bias in considerations of multimodal literature, as I connect *The Familiar* to poetic models of meaning-making. I also argue that the imagination is a central concern of Danielewski's pentalogy, connecting plot elements such as VEM to readerly engagement and empathy. Finally, the introduction includes summaries of all the contributions to this special issue as well as a link to a bibliography of Danielewski criticism.

## 1. Imaginary Novels

Literary criticism, as Pierre Macherey describes it in *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966), always "aspires to indicate a possible alternative to the given" (17): it routinely deals with the difference between the actual and the potential, between what a work is and what it could or should be. This contrast can be drawn for very different reasons, but they all in one way or another challenge the notion of literal givenness that is most strongly constructed by the act of publication. Once a work is officially released, readers may never even get a glimpse of what it could have been or what it was until it changed into something else: the published version of, say, a novel trumps any preliminary draft, and while scholarly work on manuscripts can undoubtedly shed new light on the finished texts, it nevertheless must remain aware of the qualitative difference between process and result and the epistemological limits this imposes. At the same time, privileging the published work as a final given[1] usually extinguishes the procedural collaborative work done by various actors in the publication process, restoring all authority to the author while relegating editors, designers, underpaid research assistants, and other contributors to the paratext of the acknowledgments, if at all. Most often, this difference between what is and what could have been plays out in terms of form or content, and yet it may also pertain more fundamentally to *existence*. This may be an issue of revising canons to include texts that had been deemed insignificant earlier, such as the "rediscovery" of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Alice Walker, or a matter of attributing texts to canonical authors and thus investing them with relevance, such as when Zachary Turpin tracked down two major prose texts by Walt Whitman or when Adrian Wisnicki identified Thomas Pynchon as the author of dozens of technical texts for Boeing's internal newsletter. Yet the most intriguing and puzzling instances of such works are not the ones that were actually written or published at some point and had to be rescued from oblivion, but rather the ones that never were—imaginary works, if you will.

Such imaginary works may invite playful speculation, such as the collaborative novel *Yeats Is Dead!* (2002) that constructs a fun murder mystery around the manuscript of the even more inaccessible novel James Joyce wrote after *Finnegans Wake*. Occasionally, however, potential works are indeed actualized and assume a ghostly reality, such as

[1] Martin Eve discusses Jennifer Egan's *Emerald City* and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* as two examples of contemporary novels whose different editions display significant variances, and he shows that textual scholarship may just as profitably engage digital textual artefacts as manuscripts and other analog forms (see Eve, "Textual Scholarship," and *Close Reading*, respectively). Percival Everett's 2020 novel *Telephone* is worth mentioning in this regard, as it is a unique example of such variances being deliberate and part of the novel's aesthetics: it was published in three different versions that modify the same basic narrative at major points but also include numerous minor differences, and this was only revealed to readers once the book was on the market.

when David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* was published posthumously in 2011, edited and compiled by Michael Pietsch using Wallace's manuscript and numerous fragments. (Another case is Robert L. Fish writing the ending to *The Assassination Bureau, Ltd.*, a novel Jack London had abandoned in 1910, so that it could be published in 1963.) Based on these examples, it seems that this strange quality of in-betweenness is due to a lack of authorial control, and yet it is unnecessary to revive this particular authority as the unifying factor that validates and grants coherence to a work. Instead, it is the context of potentiality that makes such publications ambiguous and spectral, as we know that what they are is not all they are, and we are more aware of the fact that what they are is only one version of what they could have been. (This applies to any other work but is usually negated by the definiteness of actualization.)

Such potentiality not only invades the actual work in such cases of posthumous co-authorship or editorial intervention. It may also return to a work later on when it is, for example, restored to an unexcised state (such as Richard Wright's *Native Son*, 1940, or Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, 1957) or, more significantly, when a work is changed in such a way that its ontology genuinely shifts. This does not mean adding a few paragraphs here and there or merely illustrating the text by including pictures of what it describes; it means, for example, fundamentally changing the nature of the text by juxtaposing it with images that are more than illustrations, or transforming the aesthetics of the text itself to change the way it is read. The best example of a renewed actualization that maintains potentiality is the republication of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* by The Folio Society in 2012, which finally implemented Faulkner's idea to have the 14 different temporal levels in the first chapter visually set apart by different colors. This new version neither supplements nor supplants the conventional version, but it draws attention to the different novels *The Sound and The Fury* is and could be at the same time, to the difference it makes to imagine differently and to imagine difference.

This special issue of *Orbit* is haunted by imaginary novels to no small extent, but it is mainly about novels that are—not more real, as imaginary and real are not opposites at all—but let's say more readily available at the moment. The essays in this collection, the first of its kind, all engage with the most audacious project in American fiction in the twenty-first century so far: Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*. Originally announced as a set that would eventually encompass 27 novels, the series "has been paused"[2] in 2018, after the publication of the first "season" of five volumes,

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[2]  "It is with a heavy heart that I must report THE FAMILIAR has been paused." Instagram. Markzdanielewski. 2. February 2018. https://www.instagram.com/p/BetDoHnhp9y.

for commercial reasons by publisher Pantheon, although the advance had been on ten books instead of five.[3] For now, in 2022, *The Familiar* is a pentalogy of *One Rainy Day in May*, *Into the Forest*, *Honeysuckle & Pain*, *Hades*, and *Redwood*,[4] and it is a tragedy for world literature in general that readers will not have an excuse to use the term "icosaheptalogy"[5] more often. On a more serious note, though: the future of the series may be uncertain, and we may never get to read even a sixth volume, but its potentiality does inform the actuality of the novels that have been published. Even if the essays in this collection (and this introduction) consider these books for what they are, they cannot but also consider what they are in terms of what they could have been. Seriality is one of the fundamental aesthetic principles of *The Familiar*, and the series of five must be considered as part of the series of 27, regardless of how this seriality might have manifested itself (just like the lines on the spines of the five volumes do form the shape of a cat's tail even if we may always have to imagine the rest of the cat). The series is unfinished, but it is not incomplete.

## 2. Familiar but New: Some Contexts to *The Familiar*

All this may sound daunting to the reader unfamiliar with *The Familiar* or Danielewski's other works, and even if the readers of this special issue of *Orbit* probably come well-prepared in one way or another, I will risk their impatience by making this introduction live up to its name in order to provide newcomers with basic information and context that will hopefully at least serve to make these novels seem less intimidating (as no novel's reputation, deserved or not, should preclude its first-hand experience). For one thing, it is worth remembering that the project was once announced in very simple terms: "The story concerns a 12-year-old girl who finds a kitten" (Hazel).[6] This is both true and misleading, like saying that the story of *Moby-Dick* concerns a man who finds a whale, and yet this is the narrative kernel from which the imaginary multiverse of *The Familiar* develops, and it is the core motif to which readers getting lost in this multiplicity may return. To be sure, there is plenty to get lost in, and the pleasure of reading the novels lies in no small part in the myriad different ways in which they engage their readers beyond this modest premise, and how what is summarized so laconically in this quip becomes a story concerning literally everything. Similarly, the

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[3] https://www.barnesandnoble.com/blog/sci-fi-fantasy/whatever-happened-to-mark-z-danielewskis-the-familiar/.

[4] The essays in this special issue of *Orbit* will follow the convention of citing the pentalogy as one novel with different volumes, using the abbreviation *TF*v1 in reference to *One Rainy Day in May*, etc., followed by the respective page number(s).

[5] I would like to thank Iro Filippaki for her help in constructing this word.

[6] Hazel. "At Least This Explains All The Cat T-Shirts." 15. September 2010. http://forums.markzdanielewski.com/forum/the-familiar/the-familiar-aa/5860-at-least-this-explains-all-the-cat-t-shirts.

novels' temporal and spatial setting is indeed universal, but it is also specific: they take place mainly in and around Los Angeles from 10 May 2014—the first volume takes place on this single day—to 18 September 2014, and from this core they weave a web that includes numerous other places such as Singapore or historical events like the Armenian genocide in the early twentieth century.[7]

On the narrative level, there are nine different strands centered around different protagonists during these few months, and the number is only the first of many cat-related allusions and puns. If these are the nine lives that a cat proverbially has in English, then the kitten found in the first volume initially does not serve as a unifying motif that would readily offer a way of connecting all these narratives, and finding out just how they might be connected is one of the major interpretive challenges of the novels. These are not nested Matryoshka-doll narratives like in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004), but they are also not as radically fragmented as the twelve stories in Lance Olsen's *Calendar of Regrets* (2010). In fact, three of these stories form a narrative cluster from the beginning. Xanther Ibrahim, the girl who finds the mysterious kitten, is one of nine protagonists, but it is no exaggeration to call her *the* protagonist of *The Familiar* despite this multiplicity. Two other narrative strands are directly related to her, namely that of her mother Astair and her stepfather Anwar. The other six, however, initially seem disconnected from this cluster, and they connect with it at different pace and in different ways over the course of the whole pentalogy, either in a concrete sense of their central characters actually meeting or in an allusive sense of motifs and references crossing over (and finally, in a *cat*aclysmic event at the end of the fifth volume). These six other strands focus on Luther Perez, a Mexican-American gang member; Özgür Talat, a Turkish-American detective investigating a murder case and contemplating retirement; Shnorhk Zildjian, an Armenian-American musician and taxi driver; Jingjing, an ex-junkie in Singapore, who helps the elderly healer Tian Li; Isandòrno, an associate of the powerful "Mayor" in El Tajín, Mexico; and finally Cas or "The Wizard," a scientist on the run from her former colleague Recluse, and also the owner of an Orb, a mysterious device that enables "scrying," a special form of perception.

These nine narrative strands are distinctly marked by different colors in the top corner of the page (with a few notable exceptions), which on the first and last page of each section also shows a stamp that states the respective place, date, and time. (Xanther's color is pink, which is also used for the title and every instance of the word *familiar* in the text, so that every appearance of pink—the recurring three periods, the

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[7] This is one of several aspects Monika Schmitz-Evans comments on in her compelling reading of *The Familiar* as a kind of world literature—not in the simple sense of a global canon but as a work that both reflects upon and participates in the discourse of world literature.

thread of the book's binding, or the fractals in the book's gutter—suggests the presence of the familiar, the cat.) These sections are further distinguished by their visual and typographical design, with different fonts and arrangements of text for each chapter. For example, Astair's and Anwar's chapters are full of parentheses—appropriate for parents—that are round brackets in her case and a wild assortment of all sorts of brackets in his. The text in Cas's chapters is arranged around the round blank space that suggests the absence of her Orb, an object she misses like a drug when she is not using it. These various forms of visual distinction make each section uniquely recognizable, and this is paralleled by shifts in narrative perspective that can best be described as variations of free indirect discourse.

At the same time, the novels consist of more than these nine sections, and the other parts often strongly resist being integrated into the relative narrative coherence these nine strands offer. Those other parts recur structurally in all five novels but differ in content, and this is where the novels emulate most evidently the aesthetics of the TV series.[8] Opening each volume, initial images give way to blurbs and advertisements that refer to critical anthologies, e-books, or music. After more images and naming the publisher, the page orientation shifts from portrait to landscape, and the section titled "NEW THIS SEASON" presents a strange narrative framing in relation to "The Verse," the abstract sum of all "manifold universes" (*TF*v3, n.p.), and the discovery of a phenomenon designated by the acronym VEM that apparently allows for unique insight into this multiverse. Besides this greatest of abstractions, there are other, shorter narrative sections whose relation to the main part of the novels is not immediately evident, and which do not recur from volume to volume.

What does recur across all five volumes is the representation of a video called "Caged Hunt," which despite the visual framing of a digital video player is described textually. A page with five thematic key words is then followed by an image of a prehistoric artifact, which is part of the tale that follows. These dialogues, usually set thousands of years ago, are between two early humans who speak about their fear of an animal; they are all eventually revealed to be a kind of translation stored in a database. Only then does the title page of the novel announce "Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*," which is followed by the main body of the nine narratives already mentioned. These, however, are also occasionally interrupted by double page spreads with no evident relation to the section(s) that surround it, such as a recurring comic or entirely visual, photographic collages. Each novel concludes with the credits, including the names of those involved in the production of the work, the online sources of the images used, and a list of the

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8  See van de Ven, "On the Novel as a Television Series."

fonts used for each chapter. Finally, in perhaps the most obvious nod to TV seriality, there is a kind of preview at the end, although the scene previewed does not appear in the next novel (yet these tales are embedded more abstractly in the main narrative). There are many more details to this structure, some recurring, some unique, and the overall form is marked by variation rather than rigidity. The five novels are practically identical in length, and yet this does not translate into an identical blueprint whose actualizations are perfectly congruent. There are patterns, but they are fuzzy and shifting, recognizable but subject to play—not the mathematical purity of twelve-tone music but the controlled improvisation of jazz.

### 2.1  The Continuum of Multimodal Fiction

First-time readers of *The Familiar* will undoubtedly be struck by the visuality and materiality of the book first before they delve into the intricate text itself. Danielewski's novels have established themselves as the prime exemplars of a relatively small contemporary canon of multimodal fiction—"a body of literary texts that feature a multitude of semiotic modes in the communication and progression of their narratives" (Gibbons 420)—that finds one prominent beginning among others in the publication of his *House of Leaves* in 2000, but which actually has such a much richer and longer history. In fact, it is testament to the lasting power of the realist paradigm in literature and literary criticism, notably in classical narratology, that *monomodal* texts that do not feature any other semiotic modes still seem the norm rather than the exception (just like reliable narration is still the norm against which unreliable narration is defined, as if anyone knew what reliable narration really was in the first place). In other words, one can only speak of a rise of multimodal fiction in the wake of *House of Leaves* if one chooses to tell the history of fiction in a certain way that retains the realist paradigm of text as the singular semiotic mode of the novel even with regard to the decidedly anti-realist novels that define modernism and postmodernism, and if one reapplies this realist paradigm also to pre-realist fiction. An alternative history of fiction, however, could consider realism the aberration to the multimodal norm, a relatively brief but significant moment in literary history where the production of meaning was considered to be purely textual and where said text was denied any visual, material, medial, or haptic quality. This aberration displays a visual aesthetics that is nicely captured by the German term *Bleiwüste*, a desert of lead, which describes a page of uniform typography with no non-textual elements. This term is mostly used to critique a poorly designed page in a multimodal medium, but it also basically describes the unspoken norm of the literary text according to the realist paradigm, where "content" is everything and "form" is a property of content but not of the text itself.

The persistent realist paradigm of what a normal novel is supposed to be is only one reason why the publication of *House of Leaves* may for a while have seemed to literary critics like the beginning of a new, multimodal fiction in the English language instead of the catalyst it really was. Another reason is that literary criticism still held on to the high-cultural bias it allegedly kept shedding at least since Leslie Fiedler's exhortation in 1969 to close "the gap between elite and mass culture" (468). This bias rendered a long tradition of multimodal fiction invisible that provides not only the historical background but also highly relevant context for these twenty-first century novels, and its two main strands are children's literature and comic books, two immense fields of literary production where, again, monomodality is the aberration and not the norm. In this convergence, Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1969) takes its rightful place next to Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–67) as a groundbreaking *book*,[9] an object and medium that challenged the paradigms of the mediality of text and proffered a new one at the same time.[10] A literary criticism that needed to rename comics "graphic novels" in order to justify talking about them gladly accepted the high-cultural cachet of these "experimental" texts in the early 2000s, and yet even the tradition of visuality in canonical "literary" texts remained underdeveloped for too long. If *House of Leaves* in 2000 to many readers "seemed to break the mould of the book [and] challenged what a book was and is" (Bray and Gibbons 1), then earlier challenges to that monomodal model had apparently not received enough attention even as critics routinely described the various ways in which the anti-mimetic aesthetics of post-realist literature worked.

This is not to neglect the rich pre-realist tradition of frontispieces, illustrations, and other visual or material elements,[11] but modernism, postmodernism, and the various works that exist on the fringes or completely outside these aesthetic traditions provide ample examples of a multimodal tradition that continues in twenty-first-century fiction, with no significant gap that would justify speaking even of a revival.[12]

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[9] Jessica Pressman's *Bookishness: Loving Books in a Digital Age* (2020), Inge van de Ven's *Big Books in Times of Big Data* (2019), and the anthology *Book Presence in a Digital Age* (2018, edited by Kiene Brillenburg Wurth et al.) all give insightful and wide-ranging accounts of how this historical trajectory has been transformed in a time when the book object and print should have gone out of fashion but didn't.

[10] More recent publications such as *Un Livre* by Hervé Tuillet (2010) and *Battle Bunny* by Jon Scieszka and Mac Barnett (2013) suggest that children's literature still is the most radical site of multimodal experimentation, as these works explore mediality, materiality, and spatial form in ways that adult literature—a silly category anyway—has yet to emulate.

[11] See Quendler for a discussion of the visual aspect of textual beginnings in the American novel since 1790.

[12] A tradition that is just as long and significant but can only be hinted at here is that of the serial(ized) novel, which historically was as closely tied to economic and technological developments as it is today, changing parameters not-

To be sure, the media technologies of production and consumption enabled new forms of making and using works, and yet even this digital shift is not a rupture or revolution, and sufficient continuities persist to reject the construction of a digital/analog divide in this regard. (This should not be misconstrued as saying that such technological and medial aspects do not matter, because their importance is beyond doubt.) There are reasons why Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* was only produced in a full-color edition in 2012, the year that also saw the publication of Chris Ware's uniquely material comic *Building Stories*, and these reasons are not so much technological as commercial. Michael Ende's *Die unendliche Geschichte*, published in 1979, already used different font colors and elaborate graphical elements to make its own mediality part of its narrative, and it became an international popular success (and it is, by the way, also related to *The Familiar* due to its fundamental concern with the imagination). What these examples show is that it is less important what can be done with a book than how well it is expected to sell: if multimodal literature is subject to technological and medial conditions, then these conditions in turn are subject to economic conditions, and aesthetics is determined by the latter even more than the former. This includes Pantheon's decision to discontinue *The Familiar* as much as the decision to sell each volume at the price of $25.95, which is surprisingly low given that there are only very few monochrome pages in it; on the other end of that marketing spectrum, the Folio Society edition of *The Sound and the Fury* in 2012 was limited to 1,480 hand-numbered copies and sold at around $300 initially.

Faulkner's novel did not have a chance to become a multimodal modernist masterpiece when it was originally published, but others used multimodality to great effect. The two (only) volumes of Wyndham Lewis's *Blast!* magazine, published in 1914–15, are a combined modernist manifesto whose radicality heavily relies on its blend of typographical and visual qualities. *Ulysses*, the paradigmatic modernist novel, contains musical notes as well as—in some editions—that famous large period at the end of chapter 17, and even the use of dashes instead of inverted commas to indicate direct speech to some extent insists on the visuality of the text beyond its words and their meanings. Postmodernist novels abound with images or typographical deviations from the desert of lead: Kurt Vonnegut's drawings in *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) are metafictional devices; Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) is as much a collage as a narrative; the manicule in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) not just draws the reader's attention to a passage of importance but uses the middle finger to do it

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withstanding. See Lund for an extensive overview with regard to the U.S., as well as Gardner for a more recent, concise assessment.

(566); Raymond Federman's *Double or Nothing* (1971) plays with typography instead of images; and what seem to be illustrations in Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971) demand a radical reappraisal once a page of text has been smeared by ink splatter. The list goes on and on, and perhaps it is more useful to wonder which postmodernist work is *not* engaging in such multimodal aesthetics.

## 2.2 Alternative Multimodality: Poetry

This is part of the rich historical continuum of Danielewski's works in which their own unique multimodal strategies find models and resonances, and yet this is not at all the whole story. There are surely many other traditions and contexts worth considering here, and this introduction cannot hope to be anywhere close to exhaustive, but there is one highly important literary environment that tends to be neglected (though not entirely absent) in contemporary considerations of multimodality in general and of Danielewski's works in particular: poetry. A first and major benefit of connecting Danielewski's novels to this literary mode is that it presents a necessary challenge to the dominant conception of multimodality as a fundamentally *narrative* phenomenon, which is exemplified by the definition I already quoted. While Alison Gibbons repeatedly refers to poetry in her excellent introduction to the subject, her definition of "a body of literary texts that feature a multitude of semiotic modes in the communication and progression of their *narratives*" (420, my emphasis) suggests this bias toward narrativity in the critical discourse she outlines. Instead of considering multimodality as the proper object of narratology, however, I argue that it should not be considered a narrative technique by default in which any non-narrative aspect serves a narrative purpose after all but rather also as a particularly effective way of going *beyond* narration.

I discuss this tension between narrative and non-narrative elements in more detail elsewhere,[13] so I want to briefly outline the very fruitful context of the poetic literary tradition for a consideration of Danielewski's works, even if it will have to remain as superficial and suggestive as the comments on modernist and postmodernist fiction above. Despite a few readings of *Only Revolutions* as poetry,[14] most scholarly analyses of Danielewski's works so far have considered them in terms of prose, following along

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[13] See Pöhlmann, "Multimodality as a Limit of Narrative" for a discussion of *The Familiar* in this regard and "Multimodalität als Grenzgang des Narrativen" for a more extensive consideration of *House of Leaves*, *Only Revolutions*, and *The Familiar*.

[14] The most prominent of these is Brian McHale's, which also demonstrates the benefits of bringing different conceptualizations of poetry to bear on *Only Revolutions*. Julia Panko, in her excellent monograph *Out of Print: Mediating Information in the Novel and the Book* (2020), focuses especially on the chronomosaic and its non-narrative juxtapositions, and she explicitly draws on conceptual poetry to argue that "part of what is at stake in the uneasy genre status of such works is a self-conscious reevaluation of the limits, and the potential contributions, of the novel in an information culture distinguished by the obfuscations of scale" (114).

with the paratextual declaration on their covers that they are novels. Yet this label is mainly an invitation to question the properties and criteria of what qualifies as a novel, just like the suggestion to read them as poetry is an invitation to reflect on the difference between poetry and prose. Danielewski's novels, to different extents but without exception, also invite to a reformulation of T.S. Eliot's famous preface to Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936), in which he asserts: "To say that *Nightwood* will appeal primarily to readers of poetry does not mean that it is not a novel, but that it is so good a novel that only sensibilities trained on poetry can wholly appreciate it" (xviii). About a century later, one may well dispense with the smugness, the normative notion of properly trained sensibilities and complete appreciation, and the tacit suggestion that poetry is superior to prose so that a good novel might hope to read like a bad poem. Yet what remains is a core idea that these are different *modes* of reading, different things to *do* with a text, so that poetry and prose are not inherent qualities but really attitudes of reception. Needless to say, these modes of reading are contingent and subject to change over time and in different contexts, so that the rules of the language games of poetry and prose are continually renegotiated. Not every reading yields interesting results when these rules of engagement are changed, but Danielewski's novels actually lend themselves to such multiperspectivism as their complexity is based on genuinely different modes of reading instead of, say, narrative intricacy, an impenetrable style of writing, or just having, like Joyce in the interest of ensuring his immortality, "put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant" (Ellmann 521).

Again, this is not at all based on a stable, universal notion of what poetry and prose are or what it means to read a text as poetry or as prose, and I outline what I consider to be crucial differences that create new meanings with regard to Danielewski's novels not in any general sense but really on the basis of certain particularities. There is no neutral "reading as poetry" just like one never just reads as novel as a novel but always as a certain *kind* of novel before one even begins to specify it further along lines of genre or other criteria. The poetic reading I suggest is based on a certain *kind* of poetry already, and other readers may fruitfully bring their own poetic paradigms to bear on Danielewski's novels (and this also has the advantage of not having to define poetry in general).[15] The kind of poetry I mean is fundamentally modernist, based on Ezra Pound's

[15] Note that at least one definition of poetry worth considering is virtually all about its visual aspect: Terry Eagleton suggests in *How to Read a Poem* that "a poem is a fictional, verbally inventive moral statement in which it is the author, rather than the printer or word processor, who decides where the lines should end" (25). However, this definition could be condensed and radicalized even more to include just a visual aesthetics of a text with line breaks, as this is the most commonly recognized invitation to approach a text *as* poetry. Of course the existence of poems without line breaks attests to the fact that the label is even more arbitrary and contingent, like "literature" or "art," and yet this is only a

imagism but especially William Carlos Williams's objectivism as both were expanded, modified, and built on ever since, but also including predecessors and other family resemblances that do not come together to form anything as coherent as a "tradition." In this continuum, poetry is first and foremost a visual and textual object (though certainly not independent of speech and acoustics), "a small (or large) machine made of words" (Williams, "Introduction" 256) that is not an expression of subjectivity but rather a combination of interlocking parts that produce meanings—and due to its linguistic nature it is a *complex* machine where the same process might yield different outcomes.

Imagism is the most condensed site of the productive aspect of such interplay, where for example the juxtaposition of two lines, two images in Pound's *In a Station of the Metro* (1913), potentially creates a multiplicity of synthetic new images and meanings without even a conjunction to actually link the two phrases, the non-verbal and unpronounceable colon doing the ambiguous work of connecting and separating at the same time:

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
> Petals on a wet, black bough.

Most importantly, such juxtaposition is *not narrative*: this textual machine does its work without recourse to plot, characters, setting, or even a chain of events, and there is no speaker that could become a narrator. *This* is the mode of reading that is fundamentally different to that of prose: outside the conventions and expectations of narrative while considering other ways of meaning-making.[16] Most generally, these ways could be called *symbolic* in a sense that is strictly distinguished from narrative symbolism. Simply speaking, this refers to what happens when two things are placed next to each other and thereby generate meaning, and "thing" here includes textual signs as much as photographs or bookmarks.[17] These symbolic elements may or may not connect to
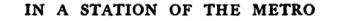
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notable exception to the fact that you can usually tell if a text is a poem by *looking at it* and not by reading it. In her study *Typographische Kultur* (2000), Susanne Wehde uses poetry as a prominent example to argue that such "typographic dispositifs" shape and precondition the reading process (cf. 125).

[16] Tony Hoagland's essay "Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment," published in 2006, is a commentary on the ambiguous poetic skepticism toward "organized narration" at the time that includes a more abstract, historical perspective on it. Hoagland argues that what he calls the narrated and associative modes in poetry, though not a binary opposition, "call upon fundamentally different resources in reader and writer. Narration (and its systematic relatives) implicitly honors Memory; the dissociative mode primarily values Invention." This is not just a reminder that poetry itself is not always non-narrative, but it also suggests that even this distinction refers less to the properties of a poem than to different approaches to it.

[17] This relates directly to Lev Manovich's seminal suggestion in "Database as Symbolic Form" (1999) that the digital age has seen a paradigm shift away from narrative as a privileged form of cultural expression toward a different way of ordering, storing, and transmitting information that is not sequential and does not privilege any of the items it contains.

narrative elements, and the distinction is certainly fuzzy enough to make it no binary opposition, but it is still worth noting that such symbolism is not merely a function of narrative and thus subordinate to it. Instead, in Danielewski's novels, the symbolic intersects with the narrative in a relation of oscillation rather than hierarchy, and the privileging of one is never more than momentary. (In the particular case of *The Familiar*, this also applies to the relation of image and text: it avoids the extremes of illustration and ekphrasis, of illuminating a textual foundation or describing a visual phenomenon, and instead explores the much more productive and complex relations between these two poles.)

There is another aspect to Pound's poem that makes it highly instructive with regard to a mode of reading beyond narrative, and it is a reminder that reading is a bodily, cognitive, visual, and material practice where signification is always tied to perception. While the "images" in the version quoted above are entirely textual in a way that glosses over the unique visuality of text, the first published version of the poem[18] in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* eschewed this conventional typography and added a distinctly visual aspect to its textual foundation:



IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition     of these faces     in the crowd :
Petals     on a wet, black   bough .

Ezra Pound

The blanks change the way this poetic machine works and how its parts relate to each other, and they make a difference even though, from a strictly semiotic perspective, they should not make a difference. They introduce segments, disruptions, literal blanks we need to fill, and their visual impact on the meaning-making is significant. It is really quite trivial to state this: claiming that the way words look affects their meaning is about as insightful as claiming that how something is said affects what is being said. Yet there is a normative assumption of a neutral visuality and materiality of text that is somehow not part of its mediality and does not have any impact on its semiotic

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[18] See Chilton and Gilbertson for a comparison of the two different published versions along with other variations in the draft stages.

qualities, and it is often manifest in narrative analysis. Poetry, then, is a reminder that words are *things*, that text has a medium as much as it *is* a medium, and that they make different meanings when they look differently. (My privileging of the visual over the auditory merits a critique of its own.)

Thus Danielewski's works need to be placed not only in the context of narrative fiction but also in that of non-narrative visual and material poetry, and the modes of reading the latter are highly relevant when it comes to making sense of these "novels" and their multimodality. For one thing, the models of imagism and objectivism indicate a poetic tradition of a combined visual, textual, and material meaning-making that goes back even further: its main proponent is certainly William Blake, with his unique and irresolvable fusion of image and text. Yet there is also Emily Dickinson, whose famous dashes are "among the most widely contested diacriticals in the modern literary canon," so significant in their unique visual qualities that her handwritten, "unprintable, idiosyncratic notations resist the systematization necessary to be translated into typeface" (Jung 1). In a very different manner, Walt Whitman incorporated the materiality of the *book*[19] and not the *text* of *Leaves of Grass* to ensure that any reader addressed by him could really assume that the deictic pronoun *you* refers to them and nobody else, here and now, as they read "So Long!" (1860): "Camerado, this is no book, / Who touches this touches a man" (II. 451).

Moving in the other temporal direction from that particular node of modernism, the next major poetic context in which the nexus of visuality, textuality and mediality prospered is concrete poetry, by which I mean especially the international phenomenon that started in the 1950s. While concrete poetry has its own long historical backgrounds, it thrived particularly at that time, and this flourishing is inextricably tied it is to its contemporary technological conditions of designing and printing that are integrated into form and content. Without reducing this diversity any more than that of modernism, it is safe to say that many concrete poems eschew narrativity for the sake of the symbolic in the sense mentioned above, often trading the temporality of the reading process for the simultaneity of other modes of visual perception. This is in some way a continuation and radicalization of objectivist premises and goals, and certainly of the modernist[20] attempt to attain the "space-logic" (229) Joseph Frank describes in "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" which forces the reader "to perceive the elements of the poem as juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in

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[19]  See Folsom for an extensive discussion of the materiality of Whitman's books.

[20]  See Perloff for a broad and precise discussion of concrete poetry as the *arrière-garde* of modernism, and more generally Willard Bohn's *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry, 1914–1928* for a groundbreaking discussion of these visual aspects *in* modernism itself.

time" (227). Concrete poetry offers perhaps the most obvious poetic framework in which to read Danielewski's works, and especially the numerous word-shapes in *The Familiar* seem like direct, updated descendants of these earlier compositions, such as the animal sections at the end of each volume.[21] Indeed, the "How many raindrops?" section that opens the first volume evokes a forerunner of concrete poetry in Guillaume Appolinaire's *calligramme* "Il Pleut" (1918). Furthermore, the first volume contains a self-reflexive allusion that directly addresses this different temporality of image and text, of seeing and reading: "'Image subitizes language', Anwar murmurs [switching back to the code]. 'But at what cost?'" (*TF*v1 380) The execution of a software code is only one way in which this transformation happens, and Anwar's words suggest that this is not a lossless conversion.

   The connection to concrete poetry is also relevant because it draws attention to a particular historicity that suddenly enters the picture of textuality (and this is just not a figure of speech): to today's readers in the third decade of the twenty-first century, the once radical, experimental concrete poetry of the mid-twentieth century must seem visually outdated, with the love for the typewriter and pre-digital printing techniques that deeply inform the visual aesthetics of so many of these poems.[22] (This is also evident in Federman's *Double or Nothing*, whose typographic play evokes at least in this reader bad memories of Microsoft WordArt from the days of Clippy, even though the aesthetics of the novel predates this style.) This is a particular kind of untranslatability and specificity of what Emmett Williams precisely describes as "a poetry far beyond paraphrase" (vi) in more than one sense of the term: if these poems could be separated from their particular visuality, like "In a Station of the Metro" has been in most reprints, then they could easily be lifted from their historical specificity and their visual period style. As it is, however, they cannot be distilled into "neutral" text, since they do not have any pure textual content that could be separated from what this text looks like. This is not merely a question of *poetic* form but really of materiality. These poems could at best be remade with new material, but this would be a replica and not a reprint (and

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[21] Danielewski's recent short stories, "Love is Not a Flame" (2019) and "There's a Place for You" (2020), can be seen as an expansion of these sections (and of the motif of naming animals that is prominent in *The Familiar*). Both stories juxtapose animal perspectives with human ones through a the visual arrangement of text, the former brightly colorful, the other monochrome, and like *The Familiar* they can be seen as a literary exploration of the philosophical issue of qualia that is summarizes most concisely in Thomas Nagel's famous question of "What is it like to be a bat?", as the title of his 1974 essay has it.

[22] Note, however, that concrete poetry moved on from this even as it became less visible; perhaps its most intricate manifestation long after its heyday is Christian Bök's *Crystallography*, published in 1994 and revised in 2003, which is as much an artifact of book and page design as it is a collection of poetry.

remarkably this restores at least a bit of a Benjaminian aura to works that are basically copies without originals).

This historical specificity of the visual aesthetics of text applies to Danielewski's works as well, although to differing degrees. While *House of Leaves* was typeset by Danielewski himself in QuarkXPress (cf. Kirschenbaum 203)[23] and reflects what this software was able to do at the time, the focus on typography rather than non-textual visuals results in a work that seems less tied to a specific visuality of text. This is still word processing and not image processing, and since the textual arrangements never become as pictorial as in Federman's *Double or Nothing*, they remain relatively (but not completely) unspecific. For example, the textual arrangements of *House of Leaves* do not look fundamentally different from those in William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* (1946–58), and even though the long poem's print quality is not as crisp and its font seems a little more dated, pages such as the one with tumbling lines (137) are not essentially distinct from the similar spatial typography in the novel. The same applies to the mainly text-based *Only Revolutions* and *The Fifty Year Sword*, despite their unique variations and historical/medial conditions. In contrast, however, *The Familiar* can best be described as having an InDesign aesthetic (though this may well not be the software actually or exclusively used), and this is where word processing has expanded to include image processing as well. In other words, this is where visuality no longer mainly means the visuality of text but really the visuality of the *image* in the widest sense of the term. This makes *The Familiar* seem much more a child of its time than the other novels, and the comparison to concrete poetry allows for a recognition and critical assessment of this specificity as part of its meaning-making process. For one thing, this particularity draws attention to the normative assumption about a "neutral" textuality whose visual aspects have no bearing on its semiotic qualities, as variation and deviance is a major way to point out said norms. In a related manner, readers of the first volume of *The Familiar* may only notice that the pages they read are actually ever so slightly colored in a beige tinge when the narrative is suddenly paused (*TF*v1 564) for the Narcon section that is printed on pure white paper. *The Familiar* knows how to defamiliarize.

## 3. Imagination Alive Imagine

There is much more to be said about the poetic modes of reading Danielewski's novels, just like other modes of reading, seeing, and using them should be explored. However, I want to take my introductory contextualizations of *The Familiar* to a final argument about the pentalogy's combined visuality and textuality, an argument that is once more

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[23] Kirschenbaum's *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing* is an excellent study of authorship in the age of digital writing tools, a worthy continuation of the Kittlerian project of literary studies as media studies.

rooted in poetry rather than narrative prose. I wrote above that the relation between image and text, the two dominant semiotic modes among others in the novels, is one of equality and oscillation,[24] where neither is merely a secondary, mimetic representation of the other, beyond ekphrasis and illustration. If this is a dialectic tension, then there is also synthesis, and I want to argue that the textual and visual practices in *The Familiar*, separate and linked as they are, actually fuse in the service of a more abstract phenomenon: the imagination. In other words, I want to show that *The Familiar* is a novel that, self-consciously through a combination of numerous different techniques, is *about* the imagination in ways that go far beyond the trivial meaning of this phrase with regard to imaginative literature in general. The pentalogy not only *is* imaginative in content (like any novel) but also reflects on the manifold work and nature of the imagination, perhaps similar to Wallace Stevens's poetry. One could say that this is not metafiction but metaimagination, but this term at best makes only metaphorical sense: if there is no metalanguage (cf. Lacan), then there is no metaimagination, no way of imagining the imagination from outside, but such reflection must necessarily occur within the very phenomenon that is its object and within its set of constraints and affordances—and our inability to imagine the outside of imagination, the unimaginable, attests to just how universal it is and must be. In sum, *The Familiar* addresses the internal segments and hierarchies of the imagination as well as the imagination as a whole, exploring its limits from within in the full knowledge that they remain as inaccessible as what is beyond.

In a way, Danielewski's major novels have been retracing major steps of Western literary history: *House of Leaves* riffs on postmodernist metafiction, *Only Revolutions* has the formal clarity of a modernism obsessed with creating order in and through art, and *The Familiar* picks up once again the Romantic concern with the imagination, though in a way that is neither epigonal nor nostalgic.[25] Its focus on the imagination manifests itself in at least three major, combined ways that I will briefly explore in the following. The first occurs on a narrative level as it elaborates on the ultimate, all-inclusive metanarrative level of VEM that connects all of Danielewski's works, although until *The Familiar* it was at best alluded to in cryptic footnotes or paratextual acknowledgments, where the acronym designated either the "VEM™ Corporation" (*House of Leaves* 374)

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[24]  Liliane Louvel argues that, along with translation and transaction, "[o]scillation is one of the modes that govern the relationships between text and image" (101), and the term and its various applications play a crucial role in her ground-breaking theoretical work.

[25]  One major difference that is generally important here is that it is not the *author's* imagination that is at stake here, and my discussion of the imagination in *The Familiar* is not about a literary experience of "assessing imaginative acts when they are self-consciously deployed" (46), as Charles Altieri has it in his remarkable study *Reckoning with the Imagination* (2015). I rather attribute "the action of imagination" (47) to the reader as they engage the text, and *The Familiar* comments on this action in various ways.

or its product.[26] The exact nature of VEM is still very much up for debate, just like the constituent words of the acronym itself. I would venture that VEM is a mode of accessing the entire reality of all "manifold universes," a transcendent site of the imagination that, as the Narcons state the first time they say something together, is "where the ontology of thought lives. [...] where the epistemology of living incarnates Judgment. [...] where the origin of eschatological limits finds every consequential thread" (*TF*v1 157). As the Narcon exposition section in the pause of the first volume suggests, these "Narrative construct[s]," which are "nothing but numbers. Zeros and ones" (*TF*v1 565), have limited access to this infinite resource, so that they in their different ontological orders may theoretically truly narrate anything and everything, including for example the prehistoric scenes that open each volume. Cas's Orb grants her a similar access, only to a much more restricted extent, "summoning to life within her Orb those early glimmers of VEM" (*TF*v1 569). She can only see the past, and there are only six confirmed so-called 'Clips' that show, among other things, Xanther and Cas herself. The most remarkable thing about these Clips is best exemplified by "Clip #4," which is the subject of a short story Danielewski published separately in 2012.

In this text, Realic S. Tarnen pursues this very Clip, which was apparently shot in Touland Ouse's kitchen and shows him watching a film projected on the wall that shows his daughter Audra drowning in the Pacific. The projected film is shot from an impossible perspective and in impossible conditions under water, but this is enhanced even further when Ouse describes his own Clip as just as impossible:

> "You tell me this instant! Because there—" and he pointed an accusatory finger at his blank if egg-shelling wall, as if he were pointing from the page you now read this on, as if he were pointing at you. "There, where it should have stood, had to have stood, to record your 'Clip 4,' to do all that panning and zooming, close-upping and such, there, right there, there never stood no one, and there sure never was no camera." (185)

Ouse's metafictional gesture points beyond the printed page and blurs the ontological boundaries between text and reader, and it indicates the revolutionary power of VEM that makes it, in the words of Cas's antagonist Recluse, an omnipotent weapon, "a weapon that no individual has a right to wield. It represents an imbalance of power grossly disproportionate to the way the world must create consensus" (*TF*v3 698). He

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[26] The connection goes much further than just a common paratextual reference, and especially *The Familiar* is the central node in this network, as it contains numerous cross-references to Danielewski's other works that are more concrete than the abstract aspect of the VEM universe. At the time of publication in 2017, the fifth volume even contained a reference to a work that had not yet been published, *The Little Blue Kite* (*TF*v5 761), and in turn the paratextual disclaimer in this children's book from 2019 ties it back to *The Familiar* and VEM.

furthermore describes VEM in contrast to art: "See, you and I are far greater than any artist. What we created isn't something to be experienced by others. What we created is the means through which to experience that which will always exceed art and us: here" (*TF*v5 470). The extent of this experiential power is "the majesty of infinite revelation" (*TF*v5 101), or the possibility of truly being able to perceive everything, for example the scene in Ouse's kitchen or the death of his daughter. The access to this metalevel radically questions the ontological and epistemological foundation of this world, and the complexity of this condition goes far beyond the linear ontological transgressions that occur for example when a character in a novel meets his author.

This difference is evident in that Cas's tenuous access to VEM does not grant her contact with the Narcons, and she does not gain full insight into the nature of her ontological metalepsis. In turn, the Narcons are aware of their own existence as software but are also explicitly limited in their programming to prevent them from asking what may lie beyond their own boundaries. VEM then describes the most fundamental or all-encompassing instance of this order, the software engine that makes possible and contains all possible executions of the program.[27] In a metaleptic tangle, *The Familiar* addresses how its own universe may have been created by its characters: Xanther's very first section in volume 1 opens with her question "How many raindrops?" (*TF*v1 49), which is later transformed or specified as a question of what computational power could simulate the complexity of a chaotic system such as a thunderstorm down to the last raindrop: "What kind of counting equals this sort of overwhelmingness?" (*TF*v1 61) Her father's demonstration of *Paradise Open* suggests this very power, and notably the animals in that game are precisely the ones that the "previews" at the end of each novel use as focalizers. If their consciousness is not only narrated but simulated, then this may well apply to every other character in the novel and to everything else included

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[27] Perhaps an appropriately visual and digital equivalent to this pure realm of possibility helps in understanding its sublime nature, even though it is based on a very personal experience of a terrifying, beautiful glimpse into infinity. When I first used a scanner to digitize an analog image (back in the last millennium), Corel Photo-Paint 5 suggested to me that, with enough proficiency and time, the user could manipulate this image to become a different image, which means that in an abstract sense, the blank space of the image editing software potentially contained every and any possible photograph anyone could ever take, and even those one could not really ever take. A blank canvas might hold any possible painting, and yet this was safely disconnected from reality; the blank new file of the graphics software suggested hyperreality instead, a different kind of imagination.

Jason Schneiderman's poem "Voxel" comments on this very realization, which surely came to any number of users: "[...] we too can see / everything that can ever // be photographed // or represented visually, // at least to the sighted, / then pixels mean // that we can predict / every thing that might // ever be seen by creating / an algorithm to generate // every permutation of every / image that could ever // be arranged out of pixels / and yes, the permutations // are so many as to be infinite / for all practical purposes [...]" (111). This does not describe VEM but the visual metaphors *The Familiar* uses to convey its nature.

The literary predecessor and correlate of all this is Jorge Luis Borges's "La Biblioteca de Babel" from 1941, with its library of all possible books containing all possible permutations of the letters in the alphabet.

in *The Familiar*—suggesting the whole novel is a self-conscious program executed on the VEM platform of the imagination, with both the reader's body and the book as the hardware it needs to run. Tellingly, the double page spreads in which Xanther's question is multiplied to look like falling rain are missing the colored corners that usually mark the narrative sections, and so they point toward a different ontological level outside of the simulated world. This is a plane that Xanther will increasingly gain access to as she transcends all sorts of boundaries, starting with one momentous transgression as she saves the cat from drowning: "half of her on the sidewalk, the other half in the gutter" (*TF*v1 503), Xanther unwittingly reaches from the narrative world into the materiality of the book, the gutter where the pink thread of the binding suggests the continuous presence of the cat just outside the reader's perception, a force that literally keeps the book together before it even enters its narrative world.

While VEM as a universal, imaginative engine seems like the most abstract framework imaginable, the novel also suggests that it has actually been *created* and is as much a part of the narrative world as it simulates it (again: there is no metaimagination). Anwar's genius friend Mefisto seems to deserve at least some credit for it, as he describes a secret project that also involved Cas by saying "Concerns seeing. Or perceiving" (*TF*v3 493), while asking Anwar about the ideal compression of information: "But even if we could compress everything into something manageable in a lifetime […] or even manageable in the blink of an eye: what would such knowledge look like?" (*TF*v3 485) Later on, they discuss God as an artist and conclude that such a creator would only produce one thing, "No product. Just the algorithm itself," and they describe their own existence in these terms: "'Here then is to living in the algorithm.' 'Or to just being the algorithm'" (*TF*v3 683). Mefisto's own programming language, "My Word Ode" (*TF*v3 491), could contain or be the VEM algorithm, since "Word Ode" is an anagram of the name that Xanther eventually gives to her cat, Redwood, and of the name of "Mister Doder Wo" (*TF*v1 254) that she uses to describe her epilepsy (and when she does, her alleged aphasia is purely textual, as she also asks "Door? Wed?" in yet another permutation that is visual, not auditory).

All this is paraphrased rather than described in terms of knowledge, seeing, perceiving, experiencing, of an algorithm that may produce any product, creativity itself—a version of Williams's "machine made of words" ("Introduction" 256). The one word and concept that is missing from the heart of all this circling around is "imagination," or at least until it finally and significantly appears in the *cat*astrophe at the end of *Redwood*, when across more than fifty pages (*TF*v5 570–625) "the bomb the imagination constructs" (*TF*v5 577–78) goes off. Its pink and black shock wave crosses from the narrative world to the visual text, from the materiality of the book

to the metanarrative plane of the Narcons: it is felt by the characters, it gives one of the Narcons a kind of acoustic blast trauma, it blurs the page numbers, it pushes the fractals from the gutter, and it transcends the narrative sections as much as the cat's cries did in volume one. This is the ultimate transgression of any boundary, and it is the explosive assertion of the power of an unfettered imagination that contains everything imaginable and thus allows for impossible perspectives, ontological paradoxes, and all sorts of violations of the parameters of "reality."[28] This is how, for example, Isandòrno can encounter a dawn vibrating "with colors he knows are there but will never see. Reds and greens if they could wed and not find brown. Blues and yellows if they could wed and not find green. Combinations impossible for his eye. Impossible for any eye" (*TF*v5 779). Similarly, in "Clip #4," Touland Ouse is not just pointing at the blank wall but at the reader, at the person imagining the perspective that is impossible to assume in the story itself, just like they were assuming the impossible perspective on Audra's drowning. *The Familiar* metaphorically manifests these feats of the imagination in concrete artifacts or phenomena, for example using the language of artistic representation in film or of simulation in video games, and yet its predominant use of visual tropes should not be taken to suggest that it is merely concerned with the visual imagination or that it considers the imagination to be visual, to be image-ination. Instead, the visual is merely the main way of imagining imagination in *The Familiar*, and it is an apt metaphor because it draws directly on the novel's form.

The imagination is not merely a narrative concern in *The Familiar*. As the novel conveys the imagination as the ultimate, universal potential, it explicitly invokes and draws on this potential through its own visual and textual multimodality (and this is the second major aspect of its focus on the imagination). This is where the complex tension between the two takes on its synthetic significance, as image and text conspire in *The Familiar* to engage the reader's imagination rather than preclude it. Let me explain this by a small detour that once more draws on the symbolic, non-narrative qualities of poetry. The entertainingly pugnacious website *Dispatches from the Poetry Wars*, when it was still active, occasionally published microreviews of usually no more than two sentences, and one of them is particularly memorable for its concise insight, unfair and cruel as it is to the actual artistic achievement. Brian Selznick's illustrated edition of Walt Whitman's *Live Oak, With Moss*, published in 2019, was summarily dispatched

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[28] This makes *The Familiar* a prime candidate for an analysis in terms of a post-classical narratology concerned with "unnatural narration" as developed in different ways by Jan Alber and Brian Richardson (see for example their edited volume *Unnatural Narratology: Extensions, Revisions, and Challenges*); however, *The Familiar* also would suggest that even this deliberate theoretical shift away from the realist/mimetic premises of narratology still leaves too much of them intact to really do justice to a work that is more concerned with what can be imagined instead of what can be narrated.

with these lines: "Yes, drawings by Brian Selznick—of a live oak, with moss! Because, as every poet knows, words alone always fail the imagination."[29] The bitter irony of this last sentence indicates the hierarchical relation words and images all too often have in works that combine the two, and it certainly critiques the contemporary cultural privileging of the visual over the textual that is captured most concisely in W.J.T. Mitchell's concept of the "pictorial turn" or the adage that "a picture is worth a thousand words." In such a hierarchy, an image shows what a text can only tell in its awkward kind of ekphrasis, and the image offers a more immediate form of access to "content" and a more accurate or authentic template for the imagination. Reversing the hierarchy as in the review above, the image is reduced to a mere illustration of the content of the text, a supplement it does not really need to do its work, and one that may even disrupt the purer imagination in response to words and their meaning. In this sense, one could revise the famous phrase Robert Frost never said—poetry is what is lost in translation—to state that poetry is what is lost in illustration, and that the concrete visuality of the image at best disturbs and at worst destroys the abstract imagination that only words can foster.[30]

All this does *not* apply to *The Familiar*, and I outline these hierarchical possibilities as a way of showing that the novel explicitly avoids them in order to achieve the synthesis of image and text that does not subordinate one to the other but actually subordinates *both* to the imagination. As such, *The Familiar* is a critical comment on both the contemporary cultural privileging of the visual *and* on the reactionary insistence on textual "literature" as the privileged site of the imagination that is superior to this visuality; it rather accepts that image and text engage the imagination differently but equally.[31] Not every text and image in the pentalogy may point to this more abstract realm beyond mimetic representation, yet there are numerous significant examples that suggest such a synthetic aesthetics directed at the imagination rather than visual or textual meaning-making.

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[29] https://wayback.archive-it.org/12142/20201105160144/https://www.dispatchespoetrywars.com/commentary/microreviews-vol-12/.

[30] What Frost actually said is this: "I like to say, guardedly, that I could define poetry this way: it is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation" (7). Note that he includes prose and verse in this "definition" of poetry. Chapter 7 of Mark Polizotti's *Sympathy for the Traitor* is an excellent translator's comment on this view of translation.

[31] This difference is most evident in the media-specific qualities highlighted by adaptation. For example, Stanley Kubrick's film version of *Lolita* cannot achieve the radical subjectivity of Vladimir Nabokov's novel, as it must necessarily *show* Dolores to the audience in a way that is not filtered through Humbert's mediation. Only a text allows for what Toni Morrison does in "Recitatif" (1984), "the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial" (*Playing* xi), as Percival Everett routinely does when revealing the protagonist to be Black dozens of pages into a narrative. (Paul Ardoin's essay on "narrative withholding" comments on this continuity.) While photography and film would have a much harder time avoiding these particular codes because of their predominantly visual quality, they get to do things with simultaneity and perspective that text can only dream of.

The first of these is the "Caged Hunt" video sequence at the beginning of each volume. As I mentioned, this is presented in the visual aesthetics of a video player embedded on a website, which once more signals the book's historical specificity in the age of YouTube. With a horizontal page orientation, readers see the familiar buttons and controls underneath in a rectangular frame, though of course they afford no interactivity and thus remain allusive (like the "buttons" printed in John Barth's *Coming Soon!!!* from 2001, which rather vapidly gestures toward a hypertextuality the text does not actually have). In the case of *The Familiar*, however, this representation of controls rather than the affordance of control ties in with the representation of the video itself. Given the visual framing of this section along with the representation of a distinctly audiovisual medium, and given that readers by then have seen actual photographs in the book before, it is surprising that the video itself is represented textually instead of visually. The initial title card may still seem like a textual part of the video, but the next "frames" quickly dispel that notion (and they are frames not in the strict filmic sense but really visual frames for text). Yet this text is not merely ekphrastic in that it seeks to describe the missing images; instead, it is narrative and represents the audiovisual content of the video, including speech, and the perspective is distinctly mediated by a narratorial presence. In other words, this is a self-conscious *simulation* of a video in text instead of an *emulation.* At the same time, this text is marked visually by redactions,[32] black bars making the words underneath not quite illegible, and it also contains an underlined phrase in a direct quotation to signal emphasis. Neither text nor image are privileged in this blend, and the effect is that the reader/viewer neither sees what is happening in the video nor reads a description of it. Instead, this fusion invites them to *imagine* what is not exactly represented in this doubly mediated way, and the dialectic movement of image and text finds its synthesis in the engagement of the imagination by both.

There are many other examples of this in *The Familiar*, such as when Xanther is putting up posters in *Into the Forest* to find out if the cat has an owner, and the book—as readers might expect in such a visual work—includes an image of that poster, only that it is not really an image. Instead, it looks like a digital file with missing links or redacted information, so that we are not shown what the cat looks like but are explicitly thrown back to having to imagine it:

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[32] Redactions and strikethroughs are merely the most obvious examples of a visual and pictorial manipulation of text that is a major way in which *The Familiar* aspires to simultaneity instead of linear succession, as layers of all different kinds overlap to challenge the notion that there is one basic textual reality in the book that is then manipulated in some way. Instead, this reality is already multiple in itself, as can be seen for example in the moments when Xanther suddenly understands Tian Li's Chinese and the English and Chinese phrases are superimposed (*TF*v5 414), or when Astair isn't quite able to remember the name of the artist who made the glass sculpture in her living room (*TF*v2 52), although the blurred words are recognizable enough once the reader learns what the name is.

**Figure 1:** *TF*v2 313.[33]

Similarly, we never get to actually see any of the Clips, and Cas's Orb never really *shows* anything but text to the reader (cf. *TF*v1 629–34). In a mainly textual novel, this absence of visual representation would not be worth commenting on, but in a visual/textual novel that heavily uses images and routinely draws on non-linguistic elements in its meaning-making, this absence is explicitly presented as such and thus takes on major significance as it signals a privileging of the imagination over representation.

Finally, *The Familiar* also directly appeals to the imagination by using its own materiality as a book to suspend representation in text and image. This is also the most immediate way in which the novels incorporate the aesthetics of the comic, whereas for the most part it eschews the particular multimodality of this form (and I would argue that the few double-page spreads that *are* comics serve to establish this contrast rather than a parallel). While image and text work differently in *The Familiar* than in a comic,

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[33] Excerpt(s) from THE FAMILIAR, VOLUME 2: INTO THE FOREST by Mark Z. Danielewski, copyright © 2015 by Mark Z. Danielewski. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved. This image is not included under the Creative Commons License for this article.

they do combine in an effect that is related to said form, and one that is virtually absent from text-based novels that do not consider the visuality of their medium as part of their meaning-making. The most extreme and effective manifestation of this effect in a comic is the page-turn reveal,[34] a narrative technique designed to create suspense by the reader's interaction with the medium, usually building up until the last panel on the bottom of the right-hand page (in Western works read from left to right) and making the page turn part of this suspense, a temporal delay that actively involves the reader by allowing them to literally reveal what comes next simply by using the medium. *The Familiar* does this as well in its own way, but only rarely by using an actual page turn (e.g. when Satya the lioness lunges for Xanther, *TF*v3 785). Instead, its practice of using the visuality of text to create suspense is much more dispersed, and it occurs hundreds of times on a microlevel rather than at singular moments that involve a big reveal.

In fact, one can go as far as saying that creating these moments of suspense is a principle of the novels' page design, which uses the reader's eye movement from the left page to the right (or back to the left after turning the page) for narrative pace (much like a comic uses the spatial arrangement of panels). The first season of *The Familiar* comes in at just under 5000 pages, but readers will rarely find any instance where the text on an individual page does not stop in some kind of grammatical or visual unit but simply keeps going from one page to the next. Most often, this is used to great narrative effect with regard to the conclusion of a chapter, which routinely involves a single word or phrase on its final page (such as when Anwar and Astair realize that their windows were not broken by a sonic boom from outside the house but rather from the inside, *TF*v5 766–76). Each of these gaps in the visual practice of reading creates a minor temporal delay, comparable to line breaks in poetry that invoke what Charles Olson referred to as "that hair of time suspended" (618). Each of them is a miniature version of the big gap of the page-turn reveal that engages the reader's imagination through suspense, not in an overly dramatic sense of putting them on the edge of their reading chairs but in the sense that each micropause invites them to imagine what comes next instead of accessing it in a linear, progressive way. *The Familiar* is literally a page-turner in that its visual design is geared toward making noticeable progress while reading, as the reading process is segmented so that it actually incorporates the material and literal manifestation of gaps that are purely conceptual and figurative in Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory.[35] These gaps are not actually filled by the

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[34] This technique is discussed and illustrated quite well in comic blogs such as these:
https://monkeysfightingrobots.co/i-dont-dare-turn-the-page-how-horror-works-within-the-comics-medium/.
https://theperiodicfable.wordpress.com/2015/02/06/comics-vocabulary-page-turn-reveal/.

[35] For example, Iser claims that "even in the simplest story there is bound to be some kind of blockage, if only for the

imaginative work of the reader, but they entice their imagination before the textual and visual representation sets in again, until the next gap. This process certainly takes place to very different extents over the course of the pentalogy, but the very strong and significant instances of it only draw attention to the presence of the numerous minor instances that are distributed throughout the whole work.

The third and final aspect of the focus on the imagination in *The Familiar* is contained in its paratextual framing, and it not only incorporates all of the aspects I mentioned so far but also bundles them together to suggest a common trajectory of significance. The copyright page of every volume includes the same disclaimer:

> This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the prod-uct of multiversal alterations too infinitesimal and costly to credibly account for here or the result of the author's imagination and so used fictitiously. Because Fiction's province is the imagination and thus concerned with the argument of empathy over representation, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales, no matter how familiar, should be considered coincidences born out of the readers' very keen and original mind.

(This disclaimer reappears in a modified way in *The Little Blue Kite*.) There is no reason to exaggerate the importance of this into something akin to an authorial micro-manifesto that is authoritative due to its paratextual placement, especially as Danielewski's works play like no others with the distinction between text and paratext in their meaning-making. I do not want to read this as a kind of overarching summary of Danielewski's whole aesthetics but as one more indication that the imagination is indeed the core concern of *The Familiar* and its manifold aesthetic strategies. The disclaimer first mentions the author's imagination but quickly moves on, and this suggests that *The Familiar* is not that Romantic after all, as it is not really interested in the singular, original imagination of an individual or in art as an act of individual creativity. Instead, in a Barthesian shift, the disclaimer moves from the Author-God to the readers, and the tongue-in-cheek reference to readers in the plural and their "very keen and original mind" in the singular suggests that this is also not simply a transference where the singular original genius is no longer the author but the reader. The word *coincidence* is important here, as it implies accidental rather than causal

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fact that no tale can ever be told in its entirety. Indeed, it is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism. Thus whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections—for filling in the gaps left by the text itself" (216). Yet for all his focus on the reading process, Iser neglects the cognitive apperception of textual visuality and privileges linguistic and narrative meaning-making on a different level.

connection, but it also suggests the co-incidence or confluence of the book and the readers' imagination, the co-constructive work they engage in together—not a machine but a cyborg whose complex processes will yield different outcomes. Most importantly, the disclaimer grounds this suggestion in the observation that "Fiction's province is the imagination and thus concerned with the argument of empathy over representation." The capitalization of Fiction suggests its importance, but the word that truly merits attention is "thus," as it raises questions that are aesthetic as much as ethical, political as much as individual. For one thing, the imagination is more fundamental than fiction here, and the latter is only one phenomenon among others that access it. Therefore, it is not so much fiction but the imagination that privileges empathy over representation. But what does this mean, and what does it suggest about the imaginative work of *The Familiar*?

These questions are addressed most obviously by discourses at the intersection of philosophy, psychology, and literary studies that consider the ethics of fiction with a particular focus on empathy, which is "usually understood as the capacity to apprehend others' mental states—especially emotions" (Schmetkamp and Vendrell Ferran 743). Its diversity of positions can neither be represented nor discussed here, but the most basic beginning is to distinguish them from a problematic argument that, as the only half-joking title of Annie Murphy Paul's 2013 article in *TIME* summarized it, "Reading Literature Makes Us Smarter and Nicer"—that reading fiction makes you a more empathic person, that it helps you develop a theory of mind, and that especially "deep reading" as opposed to any kind of "good-enough processing" (Elfenbein 23) enhances this effect.[36] This is the psychological or neurocognitive variety, based on somehow quantifiable empathy scores in tests, of a much older argument at the heart of literary humanism about the "value of reading" (Mousley 820)[37] for personal, cultural, and social refinement. Martha Nussbaum's philosophical arguments about narrative empathy continue this humanist tradition in a different discursive field as she connects the capability of imagining the perspective of another to ideals of global citizenship and social equality (cf. *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and the Public Life*, 1995, and *Love's Knowledge*, 1990). One problem with any such position is that, claims to the contrary notwithstanding, it reduces literature (and especially narrative fiction) to a complicated but essentially didactic tool in the interest of the good life, as if every novel

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[36] See especially the work of Maryanne Wolf, and also Mar, Oatley, and Peterson.

[37] Andy Mousley's essay "The New Literary Humanism: Towards a Critical Vocabulary" outlines some key principles that distinguish a more complex contemporary literary humanism from its traditional variety that relied especially on its construction of high culture, and how its highly problematic premises and conclusions have been modified to intersect with and build on other literary theories, looking for "resonating particulars" (829) instead of universals.

were ultimately a self-help book, and it buries particularity and difference underneath the categorical unity of "fiction." The bigger problem, however, is that there is little to no empirical evidence[38] to suggest this is more than wishful thinking, not least because empathy cannot be measured like someone's heart rate, and furthermore this is based on a conservative notion of the value of literature in connection with a narrative of cultural decline. It is worth remembering that Goebbels had a Ph.D. in literature, and that these approaches may all have their own version of confirmation bias where well-read people assert their normative powers over morality, culture, and society (and indeed over "literature" and the right ways of reading it).

Suzanne Keen's monograph *Empathy and the Novel* (2007) complicates these positions in which empathy necessarily leads to altruism, expands to turn into morality itself, or becomes synonymous with anything from politics to culture. Her nuanced discussion neither accepts the utopian desire of those would like to see narrative empathy as a remedy for the human condition nor the conclusions of those who simply deny that narrative empathy exists, and she is less interested in the moral use value of fiction than in "the responses of feeling brains to the word-wrought spaces and inhabitants of fictional worlds" (ix). Her interdisciplinary work suggests that the relation between empathy and fiction is a complicated one, and that it merits a sophisticated analysis of contexts, identities, and environments instead of universalizing claims (which for example have instrumentalized empathy as a way of demarcating the line between popular fiction and proper literature and cementing their hierarchy). Keen rightly questions the assumption that narrative empathy necessarily translates into real-world compassion or moral action, that "reading certain novels is good for people" (ix), but most importantly she contradicts the premise that the imagination is always a positive, progressive phenomenon with regard to individual and social development by historicizing different perspectives on the matter.

This is, finally, how *The Familiar* can best be connected to this discourse about empathy and fiction,[39] and Keen's study provides the appropriate complexity for an assessment of the cryptic statement in the disclaimer. In many ways, *The Familiar* is indeed concerned with the argument of empathy over representation because it enables and invites readers to identify with an other or to take a perspective that is not ours, so

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[38] Duncan, Bess-Montgomery, and Osinubi aim to provide precisely this evidence in their essay on Nussbaum by drawing on neurobiology and cognitive psychology, and yet they fail to address the methodological issues that might make both the data and their interpretation provided from these perspectives poor materials for the conclusions they would like to draw from them.

[39] Pierre-Louis Patoine's study *Corps/texte. Pour une théorie de la lecture empathique: Cooper, Danielewski, Frey, Palahniuk* (2015) has a chapter on *House of Leaves* that uses the notion of embodied cognition to explore the possibilities of an empathic reading of the novel.

that readers may find themselves rooting for Xanther or be surprised at first-person narration from the point of view of an animal. Yet this is only one aspect and perhaps only a function of the more important and more abstract way in which the imagination is engaged through empathy in the novel, and its formal and material aspects take it much further than that. Importantly, once again, these aspects do not only mean the *narrative* form, and *The Familiar* is first and foremost a reminder that the "argument of empathy over representation" not only concerns storytelling but any other imaginative form.[40] As a consequence, this empathy cannot only be that of identifying with a character[41] or being moved by a certain plot point, and it also cannot only be that of a narrative *form* causing affect in readers in one way or another. If *The Familiar* does not exactly contradict such a view of empathy and literature, then it clearly shows how normative and limited it is in its privileging of narrative over other symbolic forms. (The affective, imaginative power of images alone illustrates just how narrow this focus is, and also how much it relies on a certain idea of narrative textuality that is undoubtedly tied to a traditional notion of high culture and "literature.")

Thus *The Familiar* is a challenge to the premise of *narrative* empathy by insisting on an expansive notion of imagination that is neither limited to storytelling nor textuality. (After all, the sum of all possible universes is referred to as "The Verse," with the pun playfully suggesting the primacy of the poetic over the narrative.) Instead of a simple binary, *The Familiar* creates an imaginative coordinate system defined by axes of narrative/symbolic and linguistic/non-linguistic in which any number of different positions and vectors can be placed, and where (for example) not every visual element is non-narrative and not every textual element is. If this complicates the conditions of the imagination, then it also complicates its potential relation to empathy, and it moves us further away from a straightforward or linear congruence that mainly relies on narrative categories such as character, plot, or setting that allow for readerly identification. Yet what remains of empathy at all in this much more abstract realm of the imagination once it is removed from a particular *mode* of imagining (of another perspective, another world)? Can we imagine an empathy beyond human identification? In the strict sense

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[40] An equivalent theory of what could be called "poetic empathy" can be found in Muriel Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry* (1949), in which she addresses an "impoverishment of imagination [that] affects our society, our culture, deeply" (43). She argues that a poem constitutes a "reaching that makes a meeting-place. Facing and communicating, that will be our life, in the world and in poetry. Are we to teach this? All we can show to people is themselves; show them what passion they possess, and we will all have come to the poetry. This is the knowledge of communication, and it is the fear of it which has cut us down. Our lives may rest on this; and our lives are our images" (40).

[41] This, for example, remains a dominant focus of the otherwise commendably various philosophical approaches to the triad of empathy, fiction, and imagination curated by Susanne Schmidtkamp and Íngrid Vendrell Ferran for a special issue of *Topoi: An International Review of Philosophy* in 2020.

of empathy as the capacity to apprehend others' mental states, the answer is no, and yet *The Familiar* may well ask us to expand our notion of empathy beyond this narrow notion of connecting two mental states, toward empathizing with phenomena *one cannot empathize with*, not just across the human/non-human binary with regard to living things but really across the boundary of self and non-self in the widest possible gesture. The imagination exceeds empathy because it is not just about imagining a different perspective and identifying with someone else, important as that is; it is about being able to reflect on and radically reconfigure even the most basic aspects of human consciousness and to not only imagine the other but *otherness itself*. In other words, *The Familiar* demands that we imagine imagination before we imagine anything else, and at the same time it shows us that this is, once more, a purely immanent phenomenon that grants us no outside meta-perspective and yet provides us with an escape vector into infinity. As Williams puts it in *Paterson*: "It is the imagination / which cannot be fathomed. / It is through this hole / we escape" (210)—and escaping *ourselves*, finding *that* kind of directionless empathy to transgress *that* hard limit, is perhaps the more fundamental step before being able to find another.

Such an imagination, as *The Familiar* exemplifies and explores and demands, may have consequences and even uses—moral, social, political, cultural, whatever—but it is also fundamentally a personal experience of transcending the personal. Notably, this is not at all always positive, liberating, or progressive, and it can also be terrifying, ruinous, and idiotic. Through VEM (perhaps a "visual(ization) empathy module"), you can imagine one daughter develop metaleptic superpowers as much as you can imagine another daughter's death by drowning. The imagination is literally weaponized in the explosive Orbs, and Recluse has a point in referring to VEM in terms of violence, especially as it challenges social notions of truth and consensus (cf. *TF*v3 698). The difference between pattern recognition and pareidolia is not clear-cut, and subitization may well be construction instead of apperception. The imagination can take you to utopia as well as to QAnon, you can imagine universal equality as much as racial difference (the worst idea in the world), and your imagined community may give you a sense of belonging one day and demand that you die for it the next day.

Maybe this *is* genuine Romanticism after all: in *The Familiar*, the imagination is truly sublime, beautiful and horrific, a glimpse of an infinity we may and must access but can never fully control. This experience, for better or worse, is essential beyond the use values suggested by cultural literary humanism, as Northrop Frye suggests in the following passage from *The Educated Imagination*, and *The Familiar* both evokes it and reflects upon it by way of its uniquely intricate network of textual, visual, material, symbolic, and narrative modes:

Literature does not reflect life, but it doesn't escape or withdraw from life either: it swallows it. And the imagination won't stop until it's swallowed everything. No matter what direction we start off in, the signposts of literature always keep pointing the same way, to a world where nothing is outside the human imagination. If even time, the enemy of all living things, and to poets, at least, the most hated and feared of all tyrants, can be broken down by the imagination, anything can be. We come back to the limit of the imagination […], a universe entirely possessed and occupied by human life, a city of which the stars are suburbs. Nobody can believe in any such universe: literature is not religion, and it doesn't address itself to belief. But if we shut the vision of it completely out of our minds, or insist on its being limited in various ways, something goes dead inside us, perhaps the one thing that it's really important to keep alive. (33)

## 4. Preview

In many ways, this special issue is very much a product of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the initial call for contributions was published in August 2020 and the essays were written, edited, revised, and peer reviewed in a time that certainly did not provide the ideal conditions for such work at any point. As the editor, I am keenly aware of how optional this work has been for the people who did it, a labor of love among all the labor of necessity in a situation where priorities of all kinds were starkly redefined, and so I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the authors and the peer reviewers who all did their part—the former because they were a joy to work with and delivered pieces of outstanding quality, the latter because they did an important job that must be thankless of necessity due to its conditions of anonymity. As Pynchon has it in *Against the Day*: "as long as a person was willing to forgo credit, there were very few limits on the good it became possible to do" (976). The results of this collaboration, the essays collected in this special issue, explore crucial aspects of *The Familiar* from a multitude of perspectives. We hope that they will provide fresh and insightful approaches to experienced readers of Danielewski's works as much as ways of accessing *The Familiar* for those who just picked up the first volume and want to find out more about where this can take them. In alphabetical order, here is what the essays address:

Luka Bekavac, in "Becoming-Signiconic: Emergence and Territory in *The Familiar*," discusses the encyclopedic and universal ambitions of the pentalogy that require unique modes of representing and imagining the non-human and the radically Other. Bekavac argues that *The Familiar* explores the tension between its own necessary anthropocentrism and its desire to transgress its limits precisely through its *book* form,

as it demands new reading practices within the limitations of a medium that cannot make the simulational claims of interactive digital media. *The Familiar* uses its print format to represent its *struggle* of representing a truly alien entity, and thus finds in its own necessary failure the most effective aesthetic expression of its agenda.

Brian Davis, in "Danielewski's *The Familiar* and the Concept of the Bibliotrope," approaches the book form of the pentalogy from a different angle by adopting Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope as a tool for analyzing multimodal works that cannot be adequately grasped by these conventional narratological means. Davis uses *The Familiar* as a unique model in this theorization but connects it both to Danielewski's other works and related literary discourses that also incorporate material and visual aspects in their interpretive endeavors.

Ian Ezerin, in "The Worst of Both Worlds: The Familiar E-Books and Their Unhandy Limitations," turns to the digital versions of *The Familiar* that lack the media-specific properties of the books while also eschewing any of the potential media-specific properties that made the earlier "enhanced" e-books of Danielewski's works unique in their own right. Ezerin discusses this failure of intermedial adaptation within the larger context of a literary economy that prizes the use value of narrativity as well as practicality, considering the pressures of consumability and accessibility that make *The Familiar* seem a site of resistance to these demands in and of itself.

Corey Flack, in "Forget-me-not: Giving Voice to Memory in Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar* and Elsa Morante's *La Storia*," shifts the focus away from medium and form to content and intertextual connections. Using Elsa Morante's 1974 novel as a foil and drawing on Adriana Cavarero's philosophical concept of the "narratable self," Flack discusses Xanther's epilepsy along with the narration of memory in the novel and also links this to Shnorhk Zildjian's traumatic relation to the Armenian genocide. Unlike the characters in *La Storia*, Xanther does not meet a tragic end, and it is her struggle to name, understand, and protect the Other and acknowledge their unique existence that keeps her alive as well.

Aislinn C. McDougall, in ".Compostmodernism: Textual Machinery Through Typography and Materiality in Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*," considers the pentalogy in light of its categorization within the frameworks of literary periodization. She argues that *The Familiar* is a model example of contemporary .compostmodernism, as it blends modernist and postmodernist aesthetics that combine irony and interiority with twenty-first century digital connectedness and consciousness. Its textual machinery requires the reader to both physically and digitally engage with the book by supplementing their reading with online interactions that range from reference and

translation work to discussions with other readers, so that the book itself reaches into a digital sphere that is not merely a secondary supplement to it.

Julia Panko, in "Reading Novels, Reading Networks: Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*, Social Media, and the Digital Literary Sphere," focuses on a particularly salient aspect of this digital extension, as she analyzes both how social media networks are represented in the pentalogy and how the novels themselves embed themselves and draw on such networks. She argues that *The Familiar* dramatizes the perils of digital networks but also demonstrates how they allow vulnerable individuals to form protective communities. Furthermore, she describes how Danielewski's real-world socially networked communities have impacted the interpretation of his writing and created new ways of reading together.

Burak Sezer, in "The Empowering Paradox of '1 = 2.' Mark Z. Danielewski's Arithmopoetics," adds a distinctly mathematical perspective to this collection as he analyses *The Familiar* in exorithmetic, mesorithmetic, and endorithmetic terms to shows how numbers matter in *The Familiar* in three interrelated ways: outside of the story in the numerical structures of the volumes; inside the story as characters are often preoccupied with numbers and their literal and figurative implications; and finally as the way in which narratological recursions connect the exteriority of the volumes to the story itself, and vice versa.

But wait, there's more, and the alphabetical order goes by middle initials now. Mark Z. Danielewski has kindly provided the ninth contribution to this special issue: "'Questionable + Intelligence': *Inter + Legere.*" It is about the second season and a few other things, and it truly puts the "special" in "special issue." I would like to thank him for his generosity in giving us an original work for publication and even opening it up to collaboration.

Additionally, this issue also includes a bibliography of scholarly publications (excluding reviews but not review essays) on Mark Z. Danielewski's works, which was compiled with the help of Jehona Miftari, Linda Addae, and Simone Walser. This bibliography is intended as a resource for future Danielewski criticism, and as such it is a permanent work in progress that can be accessed here:

https://tu-dortmund.sciebo.de/s/r7APWdRyFj9oUPl

For one thing, it is surely incomplete when first published, and it probably must remain so, but I hope to fill in the gaps as best as I can with the help of those who read this issue. So, if your own publication is not included or you know of any other texts that should

be in there, please send an e-mail to sascha.poehlmann@tu-dortmund.de and I will update the list. Authors are very much invited to tell me about their new Danielewski-related publications so I can add them as soon as they're available. Finally, even though this special issue is complete, *Orbit* always welcomes future submissions on *The Familiar* and Danielewski's works more generally. We all hope that you may find this publication good company for your own.

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**Competing Interests**

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