

Seasoning the Novel: Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*

Thomas Mantzaris and Katerina Marazi

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece &
The International Faculty of The University of Sheffield, Greece.

Abstract

The present article examines Mark Z. Danielewski's book series *The Familiar* (2015-) by drawing upon the affordances of TV series and the practices of multimodal literature that the author has adopted in the creation of his novels. The scale of the project and the breadth of experimentation with verbal and non-verbal elements on the surface of the pages leads to a reconsideration of literary production not only in terms of the final outcome, but also in terms of the process employed. The launching of Danielewski's ambitious 27-volume enterprise coincides with a moment in TV production that features a turn towards fewer episodes per season, signaling an alteration in TV practices that, together with other factors such as the pursuance of audience engagement and the literacy skills that the terrain of the novels requires, have led *The Familiar* to a pause.

Keywords: Danielewski, TV series, multimodal fiction, literacy, audience.

<https://doi.org/10.26262/exna.v0i3.7199>

In *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), Brian McHale notes “the functional invisibility of space in prose fiction” suggesting that, contrary to verse, prose is primarily “identified by its *spacelessness*” (181; emphasis in original). Forty years following McHale's statement, the beginning of 2017 witnessed the publication of *4321*, Paul Auster's first novel in seven years. In October of the same year, Mark Z. Danielewski published *The Familiar, Volume 5: Redwood*, the fifth volume within two years of his pronounced 27-volume book series.¹ In their hardcopy format, both novels constitute material statements in themselves (each amounts to nearly 900 pages), yet they harbor different visions for the present and the future of American literary production. While Auster adheres to his tradition of representing the narrative verbally, with the notable exception of six sections in the novel that feature blank pages,² Danielewski employs a range of verbal and non-verbal modes of representation, remaining loyal to his own signature style since the seminal *House of Leaves*. In this article, we examine the ways in which the first five volumes of Danielewski's *The Familiar* radically depart from the convention of “spacelessness” in fiction, and push the formal boundaries of the novel while remaining faithful to the print book medium.

¹ The announcement in the webpage of Knopf Doubleday has sparked the interest of readers, by offering the architecture of the daring enterprise, while also providing a (tentative) publication timeline: “The novel will be published in 27 volumes, with one new installment coming every three months.” The complete press announcement can be accessed here: <http://knopfdoubleday.com/2011/11/21/mark-z-danielewskis-the-familiar-coming-in-27-volumes-from-pantheon/>.

² While the reader is conditioned to verbal text conventionally inscribed and arranged on the pages of Auster's *4321*, the encounter of sections 3.2 (311-12), 4.2 (407-08), 5.2 (531-32), 6.2 (663-64), 7.2 (811-12) and 7.3 (813-14) transforms the reading experience while revealing the potential of blank pages to represent narrative content.

In an interview with NPR's Arun Rath, Danielewski sheds light on the writing process of *The Familiar*, by revealing how the project has assumed a life of its own, determining its structural properties and pace of unfolding:

[it] began to awaken in a way that surprised me. And I thought, it could be two books, could be three. But as the organization of the characters, the voices of the characters, the life of the characters began to possess me, then it acquired a certain pace. It acquired a certain direction, a certain arc. I began to see that it was a much much larger work, and probably impossible to conceive had it not been for the sudden efflorescence of great television.

In light of what Danielewski notes on his project, the first five volumes of which have been marketed as "Season 1," it is interesting to observe that the launching of *The Familiar* arrives at a moment when the scale of long-running TV series has started to wane. While there is no denying that there are long-running TV series such as *Homeland* (2011- present), *Grey's Anatomy* (2005- present), *Supernatural* (2005-present), *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019), and many more, these TV series generally conform to the 22-24 episodes per season formula. What we have begun to witness, however, is a turn towards TV series that consist of fewer episodes within a single season, ranging from 3 episodes per season (BBC *Sherlock*), 13 episodes per season (*Luke Cage*, *Daredevil*, *Jessica Jones*, *The Handmaid's Tale*), 10 episodes (*Game of Thrones*, *Castle Rock*, *YOU*) to 8 episodes per season (*Sharp Objects*, *Russian Doll*, *Stranger Things*). It appears that the timing of the scale of the project of *The Familiar* is delayed in comparison to what we are currently noticing in the arena of television series. This certainly raises critical questions, such as whether the viewers of the aforementioned TV series or the general audience hold the literacy skills that may be necessary to fully engage and appreciate the terrain of *The Familiar*.

With experiments in television such as the "Bandersnatch" episode of the TV series *Black Mirror*, characterized as "an interactive 'choose your own adventure' film," (The Verge) we are currently witnessing an interactive TV format whose "nature as a puzzle encourages more active fan engagement than most projects" (The Verge). The marketing, crowd-sourcing and streaming benefits such a tactic provides to Netflix aside, this type of narrative provides viewers with two options towards plot development at any given time that resemble hypertext video games of the 1980s such as *Zork*. At the same time however, it also evidences that TV and film viewers are acquiring "new" literacy and interactive skills for television and film content. In addition, if we also factor in the trend of binge-watching, the question that arises is to what degree and to what extent do such viewers need to readjust these literacy skills in order to tackle a project with the scale of *The Familiar*?

The terrain to which *The Familiar* belongs requires a specific type of engaged reader, ideally, one who is open to sharpening and honing one's critical thinking skills in order to spatially navigate the multimodal surface of the print medium. The drawback with a multimodal project in print media is that it does not offer the same form of immediacy as television and film. This is also evident in matters relating to

audience feedback either in the form of reviews, exchange of opinions on forums, social media posts and even viral online petitions. In spite of the fact that Danielewski has openly invited reader feedback, it is questionable how and whether this feedback can assist in forming the upcoming books of the project. This occurs due to each reader's individual reading pace but also their devotion and commitment to finishing the reading of each volume in a specific period of time. This makes us wonder whether the expectation of swift feedback resonates, at least in principle, with the promotion of slow reading practices. Could the scale of *The Familiar* perhaps benefit from a transmedia storytelling mentality in its future volumes?³ For instance, it is not necessary for a viewer to engage interactively in order to see or understand the "Bandersnatch" episode. The same cannot be said however, of *The Familiar*. The question of whether the novel "harbor[s] a potential counterforce to binge-watching" as van de Ven suggests (102), remains open.

The critical reception of Danielewski's grand project has been mixed. Tom LeClair in *The New York Times* notes that "the possibly grandiose audacity and heterogeneity of "The Familiar" tantalize," but he asserts that he is "definitely in for Volume 2" and that the project's "range and variety could well compete with high-end television series." Michael Schaub's sharply critical review in *The Guardian* — evident in the title "What the font is going on"? — describes *The Familiar* as "a sprawling mess of a book," "impenetrable," "read[ing] less like a novel than an art project put together by a college sophomore after his third joint." Jason Sheehan wonders whether *The Familiar* will "kill the novel" while the *Publishers Weekly* notes that Danielewski's "interest is clearly not in storytelling, but in faux profundity." At the same time, Jeff Somers has created "A Guide to Surviving *the Familiar*" that appears on the *Barnes & Noble* website, coaching the average reader into Danielewski's breadth of experimentation. Paradoxically, while deconstructing the expectations of a conventional reading experience, the guide inescapably forges new ones. It is evident that this book series extends beyond a simple reading experience. It becomes a cultural experience, where readers are prompted to pre- and post-production engagements.

On February 2, 2018, Danielewski officially announced a pause in his ambitious project on his Facebook account:

³ Tyler Weaver defines transmedia storytelling as the "crafting of stories that unfold across multiple media platforms, in which each piece interacts with the others to deepen the whole - but is capable of standing on its own - giving the audience the choice as to how deep into the experience they go" (*Using* 8). Henry Jenkins has also written about transmedia storytelling and cross-media distribution in his *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006). Other notable publications that focus on areas of transmedia studies include: *Storyworlds Across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology* (2014) edited by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon, *Make Ours Marvel: Media Convergence and a Comics Universe* (2018) edited by Matt Yockey, and *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies* (2019) edited by Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato. Though Tyler Weaver may not provide an academic account for transmedia storytelling, as a writer and transmedia producer he provides insights into a creator's perspective on the matter of transmedia on a practical level rather than solely on a theoretical one. Christy Dena, another academic contributing to the field of transmedia studies, in her essay "Transmedia Adaptation: Revisiting the No-Adaptation Rule" (2019) cites both academics and transmedia practitioners thus indicating the relevance and insight of both towards better understanding theories and practices in the field.

There's no denying the intense readership that showed up for this endeavor: bright, ambitious, inspiring, inquisitive, compassionate, rare, energetic, involved, brave, funny too, and most of all beautifully aware. Unfortunately, I must agree with Pantheon that for now the number of readers is not sufficient to justify the cost of continuing.

Does this development lead to the perception of *The Familiar* as a failed experiment, or does Danielewski's project indicate a widening of literary possibilities for fiction, regardless of whether it is ultimately completed? This too resembles what is observed in the case of certain TV series that are cancelled due to low ratings, such as Joss Whedon's *Firefly*. Some may consider the cancellation of this TV series – and other cases – as a failure because the project was not completed. The TV show *Firefly* however, still has a strong cult following that would very much like to see the show revived thus indicating that the matter of “failure” is relevant to the perspective.⁴ Bradley J. Fest in his article “The Megatext and Neoliberalism” which also focuses on *The Familiar* notes that “[j]ust as ambitious serial television often struggles to get renewed for subsequent seasons due to low ratings, whether or not *The Familiar* can ever be completed has more to do with the market – the book's circulations, sales, and popularity – than it does with Danielewski's ability, patience, or dedication” (8). However, can or should this be the main criterion for establishing the value of a similar project of the print medium? The budget required for a TV series is far greater than that for a print book series, thus making the decision to cancel a series if the ratings are low often appears “easy.” Book sales are not always an indication of the book's literary value, popularity, or impact. Film and TV adaptations may in fact boost sales or raise people's awareness of the book such as the case of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. What should be noted in the case of *The Familiar* is that, contrary to most (conventional) novels, the distinctive multimodality of Danielewski's work can be significantly undermined by a process of adaptation.

When it comes to the relationship between film adaptations and their source material, Peter Krämer in his *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars* (2005) argues that film adaptations exhibit a “mutually beneficial relationship result[ing] in increased sales both of the cinema tickets and of books (in a similar fashion, ticket sales and soundtrack as well as singles' sales were also mutually reinforcing)” (10). Linda Hutcheon further attests to this in her *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006). Drawing on other scholars such as Seger (*Art of Adaptation*) and Bolter and Grusin (*Remediation*), she explains that books will reach a certain number of readers while films and TV series will reach an even wider audience hence “[n]ot only will audiences already familiar with the ‘franchise’ be attracted to the new ‘repurposing’ (Bolter and Grusin 45), but new consumers will also be created” (5). Adam Rowe writing for *Forbes* magazine in an article titled “Report: Film

⁴ Debbie Day in her editorial titled “Fans vote Firefly the TV revival they most want to see” (2018) on the *Rotten Tomatoes* website demonstrates that fans and cult followings feel the need to extend their engagement in the world established by, in this case, TV series. Some of the other series that were voted for were canceled, hence demonstrating that fans exhibit this tendency for completed series as well.

Adaptations of Books Earn 53% more at the Worldwide Box Office” (2018) further notes that not only do film adaptations of well-known books earn more but also films and series such as *The Handmaid's Tale* can boost book sales as well. The case of *The Familiar* however, though resembling TV series in many respects, is not an adaptation. Hence, the pause in its publication resembles that of a TV series awaiting to see if the series will be renewed for the following season. This pause in publication plans provides us with the critical space to reflect on this grand enterprise, explore its intricate nature, and understand the dynamic impact of Danielewski's endeavor to serialize the novel. Fest expresses concern that “Danielewski's novel would accumulate to such immense size simply because it could, that it would weakly bow to the transforming forces of the literary market, responding to yet more shocks of perpetual neoliberal crisis – here the fate of the publishing industry – with sheer size and quantity” (8). While this is a valid concern and ought to be examined further in future research, the experimentation, techniques and strategies that affect literacy skills and reader expectations should also be taken into consideration alongside the context in which the book series is produced.⁵ To this end, the present article seeks to contribute to the emerging critical scholarship on *The Familiar*, and to the already established literary criticism on the body of Danielewski's work.

The scale of *The Familiar* becomes evident not only in the totality of the enterprise which could amount to almost 24,000 words — each volume comprises of exactly 880 pages — but also in the intricate storyworld the reader encounters. There are nine storylines spanning across diverse areas such as Los Angeles, Mexico, and Singapore, which initially appear to be distinct but intersect in multiple ways. At the center of *The Familiar* is Xanther, an epileptic twelve-year-old girl in Los Angeles that suffers from seizures and never ceases to ask questions about everything around her. Anwan, her stepfather, is a video-game programmer whose thoughts often appear in brackets, echoing his profession and relating to coding. A similar technique is employed in the representation of Xanther's mother, Astair, whose over-analytical mind is projected on the page via the extensive use of punctuation marks; her thoughts are nested in abundant parentheses. Along with this storyline, the reader encounters a violent gang-member, Luther; an Armenian taxi driver, Shnorhk; an experienced detective named Özgür; a drug addict in Singapore, Jingjing; a computer scientist, Cas; and a mysterious figure in Mexico, Isandòrno. *The Familiar, Volume 1: A Rainy Day in May* introduces these storylines, while also establishing several design patterns that run across the volumes, in relation to font, page layout, color, and the structure of each volume. Fest has described *The Familiar* as an example of a “megatext,” that is as an “unreadably large yet concrete aesthetic and rhetorical object that require[s] incredibly nontrivial temporal effort to traverse” (2). Indeed, the reader's initial exposure to the landscape of *The Familiar* requires a significant degree of investment

⁵ Fest further argues that megatexts and this tendency for accumulation is a dominating mode in contemporary cultural production, one that resides “at the intersection of informatics and economics” and that enables us to ponder not only about the shape of “knowledge production and network aesthetics in the twenty-first century, but about commodification, corporatization, globalization, and climate change” (5).

in terms of time and intellectual vigor but, once established, the design patterns draw less attention to themselves and slowly recede to the background of the reading experience. As the opaqueness of the form “begins to vanish” according to Danielewski (Driscoll and van de Ven, “Book” 154), the design of the page surface emerges as an element of familiarity that serves the reader’s entry to each storyline, and contributes to the acceleration of the reading pace.

Danielewski remains loyal to the conventions of fierce experimentation with typography and the use of color that have established his position in the American literary landscape.⁶ From the cult figure of the ground-breaking *House of Leaves* (2000) and the innovative *Only Revolutions* (2006) to the canonized author of *The Familiar* (2015-), Danielewski has undergone a major transition without abandoning his writing conventions. In his essay “The Trouble with Language is Language,” Danielewski comments on the “autocracy” of language and the need to escape its confines: “[p]art of the strategy to destabilize the lexical hold on the reader is to invite alternate pathways.” Hence, he employs a diversity of fonts in *The Familiar*, assigning a specific font to each of the nine central characters. This typographic element remains invariably consistent across the five volumes, providing the reader with a familiar point of reference across the volumes but also within each volume through the index provided at the end. Since each chapter is presented from the viewpoint of a particular character, the reader shifts between font styles, making the latter an essential part of the character’s identity.⁷ Moreover, this creates the possibility for an alternate reading path, that of following the sections that are centered on a particular character throughout the volume. Finally, the font allocation facilitates the reader’s return to a previous chapter of the specific storyline. By employing a range of font styles, Danielewski not only codes the diverse storylines in terms of their arrangement in the space of the print book medium, but also provides a typographic tag that enables the reader’s navigation towards specific reading paths.

Danielewski utilizes the surface of the page differently in each storyline, drawing attention to the effect of the page layout on the verbal text. In Anwar’s chapters, the text appears closer to the outer margins of the page, leaving a significant amount of blank space in the gutter. Conversely, Astair’s chapters feature text that is projected very close to the book gutter, leaving the outer margins vacant. The verbal text centered on Isandørno’s storyline is arranged in the form of textual boxes that appear in the center of the page with minimal spacing between the lines, emulating the technique of vignetting in photography. Özgür’s sections inhabit the only upper part of the page, leaving the bottom invariably blank; the text appears in bold typeface, reaching both towards the gutter and the outer margin of the page in a tight formation. In Shnorhk’s chapters, the text is arranged in two textual boxes that are placed

⁶ Reminiscent of this is the color-coding employed in the Marvel/Netflix television series *The Defenders* (2017) where the colors red, blue, yellow and green feature prominently in the marketing and promotional posters of the series. Moreover, in the scenes of the respective superhero characters colors are associated with Daredevil, Jessica Jones, Luke Cage and Iron Fist.

⁷ The telling of a story from a character’s perspective is not new: George R. R. Martin also employs this technique in each of his chapters of the book series *Game of Thrones: A Song of Fire and Ice*, though unlike Danielewski, Martin does not present any design or typographical elements to his work.

diagonally in each page, forcing the reader to re-locate their vision up and down, as if taking steps. While Luther's chapters seem the most conventionally arranged on the page, Jingjing's sections feature wide spacing between the lines of text and rare capitalization that produces a different effect. In Cas's sections, the text is arranged so as to appear alongside the (partial) shape of an orb that inhabits different parts of each page spread. Finally, Xanther's chapters feature a constantly shifting page layout, ranging from conventionally arranged text to very few words on the page that accelerate the reading pace. Rather than adhering to the spacelessness typically associated with fiction, Danielewski appears to utilize the surface of the page differently in each storyline of *The Familiar*, exhibiting the potential of blank space to convey as well as to represent narrative content. In essence, Danielewski's strategy of "dispersing" the verbal text results in a widening of the conventional prose canvas, affording further possibilities for the representation of the novel's storyworld. In this manner, the capacity of the surface of each page for design and other non-verbal elements is enhanced. In addition, this creates the potential for displaying the verbal text differently upon the page surface (through varying font styles and sizes), and also allows the possibility for interaction between verbal and non-verbal elements to emerge. By dispersing the verbal text, Danielewski highlights the capacity of the book page to accommodate further narrative content.

In her study entitled *Visual Devices in Contemporary Prose Fiction: Gaps, Gestures, Images* (2016), Simon Barton identifies four types of intentional textual gaps: "[t]extual gaps as extended or additional blank space, textual gaps representing missing content, textual (un)gaps as blocks of monotone color, [and] textual gaps as physical holes in the page" (30). The textual gaps of *The Familiar* fall under two of the above categories; textual gaps as extended or additional blank space and textual (un)gaps as blocks of monotone color. Textual gaps as extended or additional blank space appear in the surface of several pages of each volume, and contribute significantly to the pace of the reading experience owing (partially) to the snippets of text that appear in those pages. Blocks of monotone color appear in the pages of *The Familiar* when a character's efforts to develop a software code result in a system crash.⁸ In particular, Anwar's experience is displayed on the pages of the novel in the form of rectangular boxes filled with black ink.⁹ The block of black color in the book pages emulates the computer screen that Anwar views, creating a direct connection between what both the character and the reader view. This is reminiscent of practices in TV where the camera cuts to the person or object a character sees — thus we as viewers momentarily adopt the point of view of that character — before the camera cuts back to the initial character and adopts a narrative standpoint.

⁸ Petros Minoudis, Petros Moustopoulos, and Odysseas Filippidis have provided valuable insights into the sophistication of the programming language C++ that Anwar appears to have created.

⁹ See *TF2* 115-16, 121, 300, 302, 304-05 and *TF4* 109-10. Blocks of monotone black color appear in other parts of Danielewski's book series, serving a different function. In this case, the thin rectangular black strips are placed on top of the verbal text and conceal it (see *TF1* 566-570, *TF4* 247, 251, 805, and *TF5* 359).

Another element that needs to be considered in the exploration of Danielewski's book series is the use of color, which permeates *The Familiar* in multiple forms and has a range of functions. First, the word "familiar" appears in pink ink throughout *The Familiar*, winking at Danielewski's projection of the word "house" in blue ink in *House of Leaves*.¹⁰ It is worth noting that when Anwar's house acquires disturbing qualities in the end of *The Familiar, Volume 1: A Rainy Day in May*, the word "house" appears again in blue ink (729), signaling a sense of continuity and dialogue between Danielewski's works. Second, the first page of each chapter is in full color, and so are the two-page entr'actes that periodically appear in the volumes.¹¹ Third, entire pages appear in full color sporadically in the volumes. Fourth, the opening section of each volume (roughly forty pages) features extensive use of color. Finally, each chapter is dog-eared with a colored timestamp that corresponds to the particular storyline, providing information regarding the temporal and spatial setting, emulating location markers that appear in embedded form or as intertitles in TV series.

Apart from English, *The Familiar* features a plurality of languages such as Armenian, Mandarin/Cantonese, Russian, German, Arabic, Spanish, Turkish, and Hebrew.¹² A translation of the excerpts is often provided immediately after the original text, but it is not rare for the translation to appear on the next page, teasing the reader into formulating assumptions pertaining to the meaning of those passages. In this respect, experiencing the narrative entails honing the reader's skills through periodic deferral and semantic obscurity. If the reader is fluent in any or all of the languages that appear in *The Familiar*, then a significant part of the verbal narrative is repeated (faithfully?).¹³ For the average reader though, the presence of multiple languages challenges literary conventions, instills the narrative with a degree of authenticity, and renders the reader considerably dependent on the translations provided. While Danielewski's use of multiple languages can be considered an attempt "to reflect the diverse, heterogeneous realities of the transnational cultural conversation made possible through globalization" (Fest, "Megatext" 9), it also reveals the complexities of this conversation even within the context of globalization. Functioning as a double-edged sword, the different languages in *The Familiar* disempower the reader by making sections of the text inaccessible, while empowering

¹⁰ Although this may be considered the most notable example of color use in type, Danielewski also uses color in the form in which the verbal text is displayed on the page in a few other instances: see *TF2* 510 (blue), *TF3* 165 (purple), and *TF4* 112 (blue, green, and purple).

¹¹ Each volume comprises five entr'actes that share similar thematic areas across the volumes; an image of outer space, a geometrical pattern, screenshots of a mobile phone chatting application, a sketched nature-related theme in brownish background, and scenes of a comic-book that take place in Venice.

¹² It is significant to note that not all of these languages appear in every volume. Together with English, *The Familiar, Volume 1: A Rainy Day in May* features seven languages, whereas the subsequent four volumes feature eight languages. Mandarin/Cantonese, Hebrew, Armenian, Turkish, and Russian appear in all volumes, German appears only in volume 1 while, conversely, Spanish and Arabic are only absent in volume 1.

¹³ Certain outcomes of this research are indebted to the contributions of Shiu'an Ma who offered her assistance with Mandarin/Cantonese, and Mohamad Jabdounkelali who offered his assistance with Arabic. In addition, Alexandra Kasapidou and Eirini Kazantzani provided insights into the Japanese and Russian sections of the novel, respectively.

or prompting one to seek the unfolding of the narrative and to anchor its meaning to the other elements of the multimodal landscape Danielewski has created.

Danielewski's comments on the relation between language and human experience ("The Trouble") allude to the multiplicity of languages, cultures, and geographical locations in *The Familiar*: "the power latent in [language's] capacity to express takes lifetimes to learn, and that doesn't even include the languages of other countries, or certain fields of study requiring numeric or musical notation, plus the vocabularies of specialized professions and the argot of countless groups" ("The Trouble"). In the same essay, Danielewski uses the example of orbiting telescopes and the human drive to create tools in order to interpret data that transcend biological dispositions. These tools, with language being one of them, "grant the unseen position and even utility, hence moving viscerally beyond our intrinsic and culturally acquired needs to encounter more magnanimously a place that has little do with us but where we are still granted an instance of perspective" (Danielewski, "The Trouble"). In being operative across cultures, languages, and geographical locations, *The Familiar* can be thought to offer perspectives that exceed a reader's social dispositions.

The use of multiple languages without the provision of overt translation can be considered reminiscent, to a certain degree, of practices in films and TV series that include scenes with languages that are not English; what may distance the viewer is the lack of respective subtitles that will enable them to follow along and be privy to the information that is being exchanged. The lack of such subtitles may be a mere technical matter – in other words, said subtitles have simply not been provided, or their absence is intentional because the audience is not meant at that point of the film or episode to know what is being said, thus adding to the suspense or identification with the respective character of the scene who may also not understand the language spoken by the other characters.

The narrative complexity of *The Familiar, Volume 1: A Rainy Day in May* is reinforced by the fact that the 880 pages describe a single day, May 10, 2014. In light of this, the inaugural volume of the book series is reminiscent of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which also depicts the events of a single day. The subsequent volumes treat narrative time differently, opting for the description of thirty-four days (*TF2*), seventy-four days (*TF3*), twenty-four days (*TF4*), and two days (*TF5*). Danielewski's representation of time operates as a pyramid structure, with *TF1* and *TF5* focusing on one and two days, respectively, while *TF3* covers the wider temporal area. *TF2* and *TF4* seem to pave the path for the culmination and the winding down respectively, showing how narrative pace can be manipulated. Every volume resumes either on the day in which the previous volume has ended or on the following one, but it is significant to note that the totality of 4,400 pages describes a period of slightly over four months. Further to this, although it may be possible to read each volume of *The Familiar* even in one day, it seems hardly possible for the reader to retain the level of

multimodal competence required in order to process and decode the ever-demanding landscape of the novel.¹⁴

As a result, it is more probable that the reader retains parts of the whole fictional world. This however, is far from problematic, as it invites further exploration and can be considered to contribute to the perspective of Danielewski's book series as a cult object. In their collected volume entitled *Cult Television* (2004), editors Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta E. Pearson employ Umberto Eco's perspective on the cult object in order to cast light on their understanding of popular television series such as *The X-Files*, *The Avengers*, and *Doctor Who*. In *Travels in Hyperreality* (1987), the Italian semiotician and philosopher argues:

The [cult object] must be loved, obviously, but this is not enough. It must provide a completely furnished world so that fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the fan's private sectarian world, a world about which one can make up quizzes and play trivia games so that the adepts of the sect recognize through each other a shared expertise. . . . I think that in order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship with the whole. (198; ellipsis ours)

In a way, the reader of *The Familiar* is not unlike a viewer of a TV series; both may choose to experience either the book or the TV series in its entirety. In addition, though the viewing experience of any one episode, number of episodes or even an entire season in some cases may not take as much time as the reading experience of *The Familiar*, this does not indicate the time a reader or viewer may generally devote to examining or discussing the series through social media, forums, or cultural events such as Comic-Cons. In fact, *The Familiar* does prompt readers to understand the world that is created by following up on an array of intertextual references that exist in either the content or form of the book series. What Danielewski has created is reminiscent of the collaborative work of films and TV series that fans tend to explore through behind-the-scenes videos, documentaries such as "the making of" and various interviews of production personnel.

Danielewski has not created the landscape of *The Familiar* all by himself, but rather collaborates with a handful of individuals under the name Atelier Z. In addition, the author provides an inventory of material he has obtained and used in these novels through crowdsourcing, which frequently involves Flickr or Instagram images. Moreover, crowdsourcing becomes a means for engaging the audience, and for establishing pillars of hype. By employing material from unknown individuals into the body of *The Familiar*, Danielewski creates the impression of a dialogue with his

¹⁴ In contrast, films and TV series also considered multimodal media offer themselves for multiple viewings due to their duration, which is relatively short (for films this is usually on average two and a half hours whereas for TV episodes this may range from twenty minutes to an hour). As a result, viewers have the time and the fresh mental competence each time they decide to see the film or episode again to pay attention to other features they may have not noticed upon a first viewing. What is more, this type of viewing contributes to reviews and analyses online being posted much quicker, thus perhaps eliminating the need for a second or third viewing.

readers that involves not only commentary on the published work but also their active participation in the formulation of the novel's terrain. As an invited guest to *Talks at Google*, Danielewski notes that "very much like a television series, it [the project] requires a great deal of people, so if you turn to the back of any of the volumes, you'll see a long list of credits."¹⁵ The scale and intricateness of the project render the role of the American author to resemble that of a producer (in the likes of TV) that guides a constellation of artistic forces towards an envisaged arc.¹⁶ This type of collaboration on a book series or even awareness of such collaboration is lacking from the print medium in contrast to that of film and television or even the comic book medium. However, given the dynamic stance the audience tends to demonstrate towards films and TV series through petitions that react to casting choices, plot-lines and even the ending of a series,¹⁷ perhaps greater awareness and insight ought to be given so that at the very least audiences can begin to appreciate the time, creativity and energy that goes into the production of any such work.

The initial publication plans for "one new installment coming every three months" (Knopf Doubleday announcement) has not been followed, as the subsequent volumes have been released after a period of five (*TF2*) or eight months (*TF3*, *TF4*, and *TF5*). Although the relatively fixed and tight schedule triggers a set of expectations on the part of the audience and builds a supporting structure for an ongoing discussion on the book series, it does not come without risk. In her article entitled "The Serial Novel in an Age of Binging: How to Read Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*," Inge van de Ven notes that "Danielewski has understood the power of anticipation and speculation, and operationalizes these responses in the narrative rhythms and forms of *The Familiar*" (97). This is no accident, given that Danielewski's work is conspicuously conceptual,¹⁸ but it also enables us to realize how the particular framing of the narrative content in a fixed number of pages bears a strong resemblance to the intended uniformity in the duration of each episode in a TV series. However, Danielewski not only employs some of the affordances of TV in *The Familiar* but also certain significant challenges such as that of sustaining momentum.

As this article is being completed, the publication of the children's book *The Little Blue Kite* indicates the author's interest in exploring different territories, while Danielewski's release of three episodes/teleplays for an envisioned series based on

¹⁵ The attributions do not appear in the regular form of a list, but rather the lines of text are placed upon the page spread so as to formulate the sketched face of an animal in a form that is associated with the practices of concrete poetry, with two areas of solid black ink serving as its eyes.

¹⁶ Then again, the collaborative nature of the project in question is also reminiscent of how writer, artist, inker, letterer worked and in some cases still work today on comic books and graphic novels. Here, of course, the main contribution may go to the individual whose name is more prominent given the contribution to the story or series and perhaps the popularity of the individual – not always representative of what other collaborators have offered (see the Stan Lee – Steve Ditko case).

¹⁷ A recent instance was the latest online fan petition requesting the entire 8th season of the HBO TV series *Game of Thrones* be reshot as fans were unsatisfied with the ending, character development, cinematography, etc. This of course raises other questions mainly in the field of audience reception studies that are worth examining in future research.

¹⁸ The most prominent example of this is *Only Revolutions*, a novel that features 360 pages, 360 words in 36 lines on each page, echoing the double perspective of the story, as revealed by the two main characters.

House of Leaves demonstrates the author's eagerness to continue exploring the potential of TV in his creative endeavors.¹⁹ Up to date, there is no indication with respect to the continuation of *The Familiar*. However, even this aspect of the book series — unpleasant as it may be for the author and readers alike — reveals a significant aspect of the enterprise, that of transforming an individual act of reading experience into a collective process of co-producing and co-reflecting on the narrative. Van de Ven suggests that *The Familiar* “seeks to reinvent the literary novel as a social experience” and that this is enabled through “collective intelligence, shared waiting, and crowdsourced contents” (99). Approaching *The Familiar* as a social or collective experience leads us to reconsider conventions of literary production and reading practices as well as inviting us to explore the nature and operations of these newly formed “imagined” communities, to echo Benedict Anderson's concept. Danielewski may have suggested that “literature is capable of being a subject that people want to catch up on or discuss, whether at a coffee shop or a watercooler” (Bosnan 2011), but is this enough to see the project through to its end?

Regardless of whether *The Familiar* will continue for “Season 2,” its wide-ranging experimentation in relation to typography, page layout, and color, in addition to its distinct process of production and the ways in which it has been informed by conventions and practices pertaining to TV production, has opened up further possibilities for the print novel. Danielewski's book series demonstrates significant potential for fiction yet to be explored while the integration of an array of media forms and practices in *The Familiar* re-locates the print book medium at the center of creative experimentation and twenty-first century cultural production.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. 1983. Verso, 2006.
- Atwood, Margaret. *A Handmaid's Tale*. Vintage, 2018.
- Auster, Paul. *4321*. Faber & Faber, 2017.
- Barton, Simon. *Visual Devices in Contemporary Prose Fiction: Gaps, Gestures, Images*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Bolter, Jay David, and Richard Arthur Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. The MIT Press, 2000.
- Bosnan, Julie. “Periodic Novel, Coming Soon.” *The New York Times*, 20 Nov. 2011, mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/periodic-novel-coming-soon/. Accessed 18 Nov. 2018.
- Damiani, Jesse. “Black Mirror: Bandersnatch could Become Netflix's Secret Marketing Weapon.” *The Verge*, 2 Jan. 2019, www.theverge.com/2019/1/2/18165182/black-mirror-bandersnatch-netflix-interactive-strategy-marketing. Accessed 2 June 2019.

¹⁹ Danielewski announced this development on his Instagram account on November 27, 2019. The announcement on the website of the platform, Patreon, reveals: “and here's where the experiment part comes in: if there is no production opportunity *but* enough interest here, Danielewski will continue on with Season One. And if we get that far, why not a Season Two”? Please see: <https://www.patreon.com/markzdanielewski>.

- Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*. Doubleday, 2001.
- . "House of Leaves: The Series." *Patreon*, 27 Nov. 2019, www.patreon.com/markzdanielewski. Accessed 27 Nov. 2019.
- . "Mark Z. Danielewski: 'The Familiar.'" *Talks at Google*, 11 Aug. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=mw0bGiVDTMI&t=1959s. Accessed 17 Nov. 2018.
- . *The Familiar, Volume 1: One Rainy Day in May*. Pantheon, 2015.
- . *The Familiar, Volume 2: Into the Forrest*. Pantheon, 2015.
- . *The Familiar, Volume 3: Honeysuckle & Pain*. Pantheon, 2016.
- . *The Familiar, Volume 4: Hades*. Pantheon, 2017.
- . *The Familiar, Volume 5: Redwood*. Pantheon, 2017.
- . *The Little Blue Kite*. Pantheon, 2019.
- . *Only Revolutions*. Pantheon, 2006.
- . "The Trouble with Language is Language." *Read it Forward*, 5 Nov. 2019, www.readitforward.com/authors/writing-unconventional-books/. Accessed 5 Nov. 2019.
- Day, Debbie. "Fans Vote Firefly the TV Revival they want Most to See." *Rotten Tomatoes*, 26 Sep. 2018, editorial.rottentomatoes.com/article/tv-reboots-revivals-spin-offs-fans-want-to-see/. Accessed 1 Nov. 2019.
- Dena, Christy. "Transmedia Adaptation: Revisiting the No-Adaptation Rule." *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, edited by Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, Taylor and Francis, 2019, pp. 195-206.
- Driscoll, Kári, and Inge van de Ven. "Book Presence and Feline Absence: A Conversation with Mark. Z. Danielewski." *Book Presence in a Digital Age*, edited by Kiene Brillenburg Wurth et al., Bloomsbury, 2018, pp. 145-160.
- Eco, Umberto. *Travels in Hyperreality*. Picador, 1987.
- Fest, Bradley J. "The Megatext and Neoliberalism." *Academia.edu*, 13 May 2016, www.academia.edu/25230755/The_Megatext_and_Neoliberalism. Accessed 30 Oct. 2019.
- Freeman, Matthew and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, editors. *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*. Routledge, 2019.
- Gwenllian-Jones, Sara, and Roberta E. Pearson, editors. *Cult Television*. U of Minnesota P, 2004.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. Routledge, 2006.
- Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York UP, 2006.
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. 1922. Penguin, 2000.
- Krämer, Peter. *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars*. Wallflower, 2005.
- LeClair, Tom. "'The Familiar,' by Mark Z. Danielewski." *The New York Times*, 22 May 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/05/24/books/review/the-familiar-by-mark-z-danielewski.html. Accessed 18 Nov. 2018.
- "Mark Z. Danielewski's The Familiar: Coming in 27 Volumes from Pantheon." *Knopf Doubleday*, 21 Nov. 2011, knopfdoubleday.com/2011/11/21/mark-z-

- danielewskis-the-familiar-coming-in-27-volumes-from-pantheon/. Accessed 27 May 2019.
- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. Routledge, 1987.
- Rowe, Adam. "Report: Film Adaptations of Books Earn 53% More at the Worldwide Box Office." *Forbes*, 11 Jul. 2018, www.forbes.com/sites/adamrowe1/2018/07/11/why-book-based-films-earn-53-more-at-the-worldwide-box-office/. Accessed 1 Nov. 2019.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure and Jan-Noël Thon, editors. *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*. U of Nebraska P, 2014.
- Schaub, Michael. "What the Font is Going On?" *The Guardian*, 12 May 2015, www.theguardian.com/books/2015/may/12/the-familiar-mark-z-danielewski-review. Accessed 18 Nov. 2018.
- Seger, Linda. *The Art of Adaptation: Turning Fact and Fiction into Film*. Henry Holt & Company, 1992.
- Sheehan, Jason. "Will 'The Familiar' Kill The Novel? No, But It Comes Close." *NPR*, 16 May 2015, www.npr.org/2015/05/11/405945011/will-the-familiar-kill-the-novel-no-but-it-comes-close?t=1559762695517. Accessed 18 Nov. 2018.
- Van de Ven, Inge. "The Serial Novel in an Age of Binging: How to Read Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*." *Image [&] Narrative*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2016, pp. 91-103.
- Weaver, Tyler. *Using Comics to Construct your Transmedia Storyworld*. Focal P, 2013.
- Yockey, Matt, editor. *Make Ours Marvel: Media Convergence and a Comics Universe*. U of Texas P, 2018.