

House of Leaves: The Deconstruction Theory

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ARTC 5342: Postmodernism + Typography

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10.21.2017

*“We all create stories to protect ourselves”
—Johnny Truant¹*

“I am not what I used to be”² is perhaps the most eloquent direct link between deconstructionist theories and Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*. At first glance deconstruction might seem synonymous with demolition but as a critical art theory it doesn’t seek to destroy; rather it strives to disrupt, dislocate and deviate.³ Doing just that, *House of Leaves* creates a world where the past is affected by the further past in a story, about a story about a documentary, about a family in a [house](#) that’s bigger on the inside. Yes, it *is* as complicated as it sounds. The story deviates, both in content and form, from the standard writing formula and requires nontrivial effort on the part of the reader. However, it is *not* as off-putting as it sounds. Utilizing deconstructionist elements in typesetting and pacing, typeface and color usage, and the overall experience design, Danielewski sucks the reader in, relinquishing control, and in doing so shifts ownership of the outcome from the author to the reader, hereafter known as the participant.

Traditional literature presents a straightforward story requiring very little of the reader. It’s a “kind of private property owned by the author” that leaves the reader to seek out the author’s intent.⁴ On the other hand, ergodic literature like *House of Leaves* shares multi-layered plot lines, complex text and intertwined narratives inviting the reader’s participation. The meaning comes “from aesthetic treatment as much as from content.”⁵ Twenty years prior to Danielewski’s debut students at Cranbrook Academy designed a special issue of *Visible Language* magazine (Fig 1) where they expanded negative space in text and placed footnotes in the body of the page believing the work should be “felt” instead of read.^{6,7} In the same way, secondary narratives appear in footnotes at the bottom of the page but sometimes span several pages, only to be interrupted by the original storyline, enticing the reader back to the story about the [house](#) on Ash Tree Lane. As the expedition goes further into the [house](#) the page progressively gains more negative space (Fig 2), few to single words on a page quicken the turn, creating an urgent pace, invoking an emotional response in the participant as though they may also be in danger (Fig 3). Other times the layout necessitates a complete rotation of the book causing the participant to slow down alongside the character (Fig 4). “Every derangement of the page space deftly mimes the current derangement of the [house](#)-space in the narrative.”⁸

While not as overtly deconstructive as Danielewski’s typesetting, the four typefaces appearing throughout serve to quickly discern the presented narrative, while speaking to the personality and reliability of the narrators themselves. Zampano, the documentarian of the film, appears in Times which combined with extensive, largely fictitious footnotes lend him academic integrity, however mocking it may be. Truant relays the stories through Courier, which by no accident was originally named Messenger, with letters from his mentally-ill mother appearing in the flowery typeface, Dante. The final voice of the editors comes to life in Bookman, implying their credibility as it is intended to do in this academic work.⁹

1. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 20.
2. *House of Leaves*, 602.
3. Poyner, *No More Rules.*, 48.
4. Armstrong, *Graphic Design Theory*, 109.
5. *Ibid.*, 112.
6. “Deconstructed Typography,” *Design History*.
7. Reynolds, “Strong Island Project.”
8. Poole, “Gothic Scholar.”
9. Hawthorne, “Font Functions.”
Figures appear in Appendix, 4.

The use of color disrupts and draws attention to recurrent themes. The word [house](#) always appears, no matter the language, in the exact same shade of Chroma key blue used for cinematography blue screens (Fig 5); thus, allowing the participant to layer their own fears and experiences in the storyline.¹⁰ “Footnotes” listing all the typical structural components lacking inside the [house](#)’s mysterious cavern appear, with no margin, for twenty-four pages inside a blue bordered box in the middle of the main text. On the backside, the same words appear reversed as though the participant is in the hall trying to gain their bearings. The note ends with “[Picture that in your dreams](#)” (Fig 6); the red text struck through suggests Zampano’s writing process and are only used when referencing the minotaur or something he finds uncomfortable.

The typesetting, type and color choices throughout *House of Leaves* entangle the participant, but it’s the content from the multiple narratives down to the supposed editorial front and back matter, that cause the participant to grapple with reality. In an interview on “The Cult” Danielewski states that “books aren’t CDs they’re instruments” meaning that the story isn’t meant to be read and felt in the same way each time.¹¹ Every participant, like a musician, interprets things based on their feelings and perceptions. This belief in his approach is what separates his work, though deviant and disruptive, from that of designers like David Carson who take “deconstruction to such a level that it makes his work inaccessible.”¹² (Fig 7) Danielewski uses Zampano’s numerous references of real works and entities mixed with just as many, if not more, completely fabricated citations, as well as, Johnny’s ever-increasing mental instability to erode their narration credibility, causing the participant to “constantly question what is real and what is not real within the narrative.”¹³ The overall experience of participating with the characters in such a shifting narrative and space makes it impossible to experience the [house](#) the same way twice or in the same way another participant experiences it.

In the end, Danielewski’s story combined disjointed typesetting, pacing, color, and typeface to create a disruptive multi-layered experience “to form visuals that tell a story, vague enough to leave much up to the interpretation of the reader.”¹⁴ His experimentation draws the participant in, handing them the full weight of darkness, sight, isolation, fear, loneliness, love and madness with no clear answer. Where he may be the originator of this literary disruption, his use of deconstructive elements gave authority and ultimate ownership of the text over to the free will of the participant.¹⁵

10. Carpenter, “Post-Mortem.”
 11. Carpenter, “The Brash Boy.”
 12. Reynolds, “Strong Island Project.”
 13. “House of Leaves Summary.”
 14. Reynolds, “Strong Island Project.”
 15. Armstrong, 114.

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Reynolds, Josh. "Strong Island Project | 06—Research: Deconstruction in Graphic Design." *Medium*. 07 Dec. 2015, <https://medium.com/@reynoldsjosh/research-deconstruction-in-graphic-design-6180ec2f1b58>

Image Citations

Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*. USA: Pantheon Books, 2000.

Reynolds, Josh. "Strong Island Project | 06—Research: Deconstruction in Graphic Design." *Medium*. 07 Dec. 2015, <https://medium.com/@reynoldsjosh/research-deconstruction-in-graphic-design-6180ec2f1b58>

Appendix
Supporting Evidence.

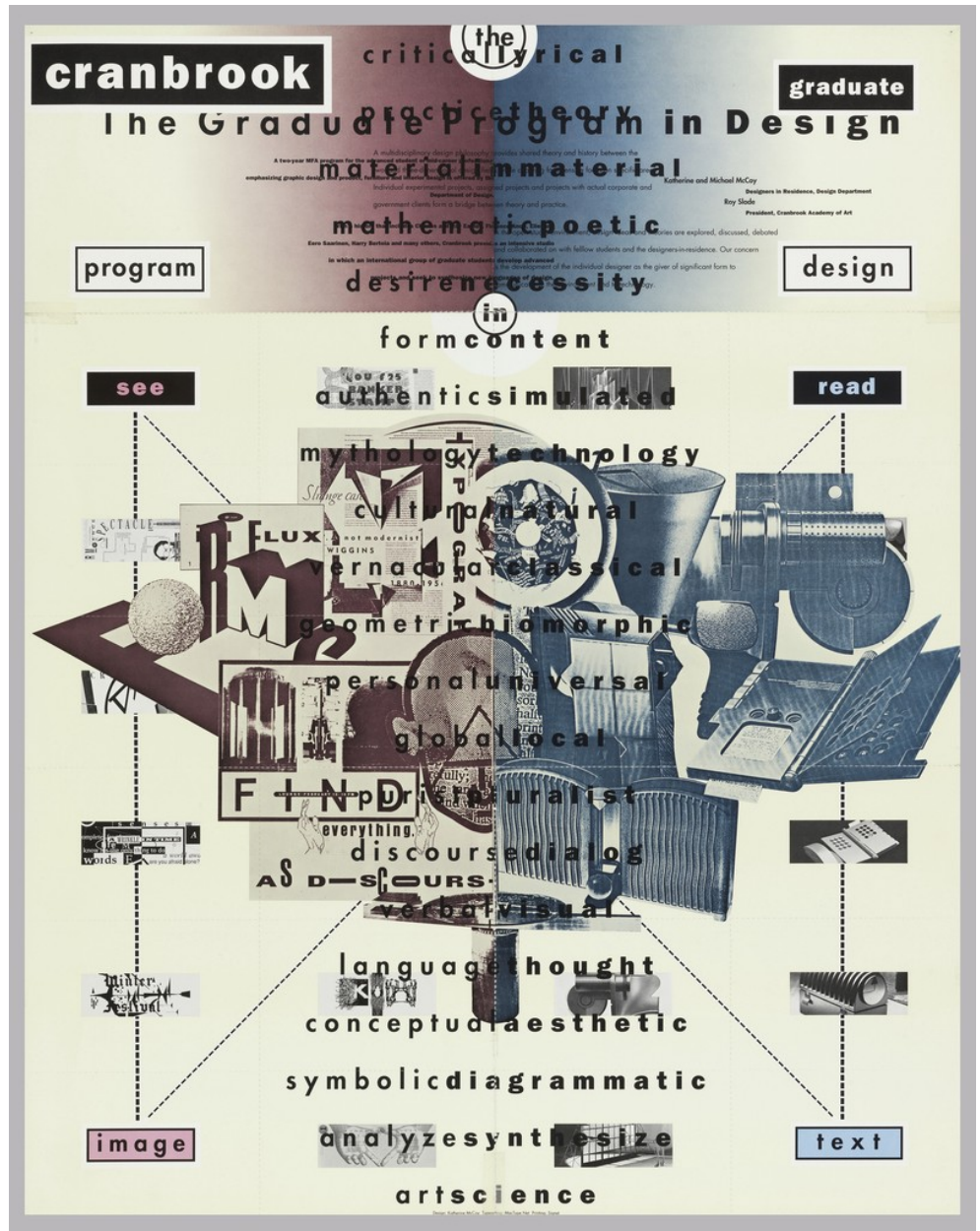


Figure 1. *Visible Language*. 1978. Publication. Type/setting shows similarity to Danielewski's elements.

Using 16mm motion picture (colour and B/W) and 35mm stills, Navidson for the first time begins to capture the size and sense of that place. Author Denise Lowery writes the following evocative impression of how Navidson photographs the Anteroom:

The hot red flame spits out light, catching on Tom, entwining in the spokes of Reston's wheelchair, casting Shape Changers and Dragons on a nearby wall. But even this watery dance succeeds in only illuminating a tiny portion of a corner. Navidson, Tom and Reston continue forward beneath those gables of gloom and walls buttressed with shadow, lighting more flares, penetrating this world with their halogen lamps, until finally what seemed undefinable comes forth out of the shimmering blank, implacable and now nothing less than obvious and undeniable—as if there never could have been a question about the shape, there never could have been a moment when only the imagination succeeded in prodding those inky folds, coming up with its own sense, something far more perverse and contorted and heavy with things much stranger and colder than even this brief shadow play performed in the irregular burn of sulfur—mythic and inhuman, flickering, shifting, and finally dying around the men's continuous progress.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁹See chapter ten of Denise Lowery's *Sketches: The Process of Entry* (Fayetteville, Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 1996).

Figure 2. *House of Leaves*. 2000. Publication. Negative space around the type mirrors the content of the house.

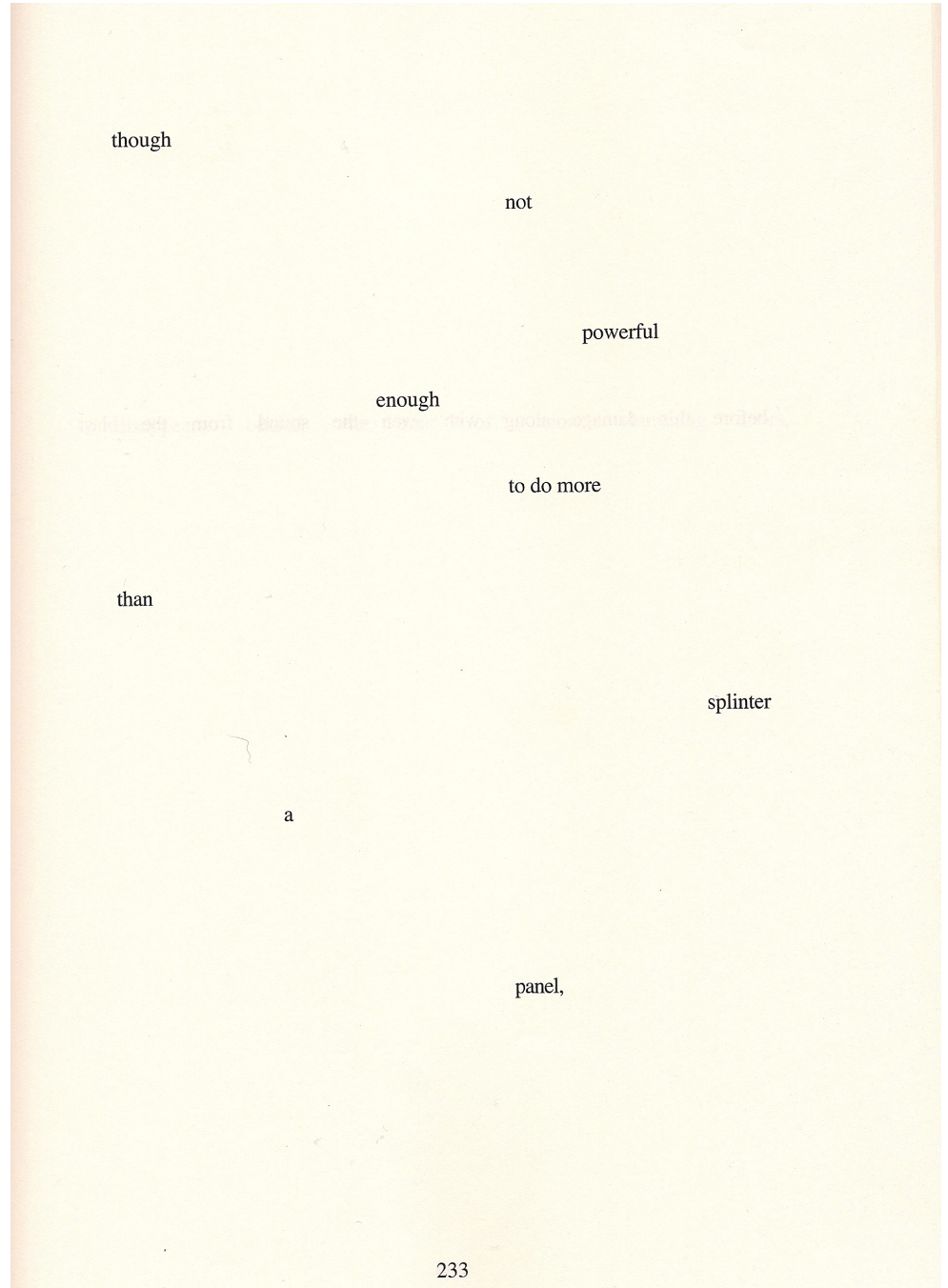


Figure 3. *House of Leaves*. 2000. Publication. Fast paced typesetting creates urgency for the participant.

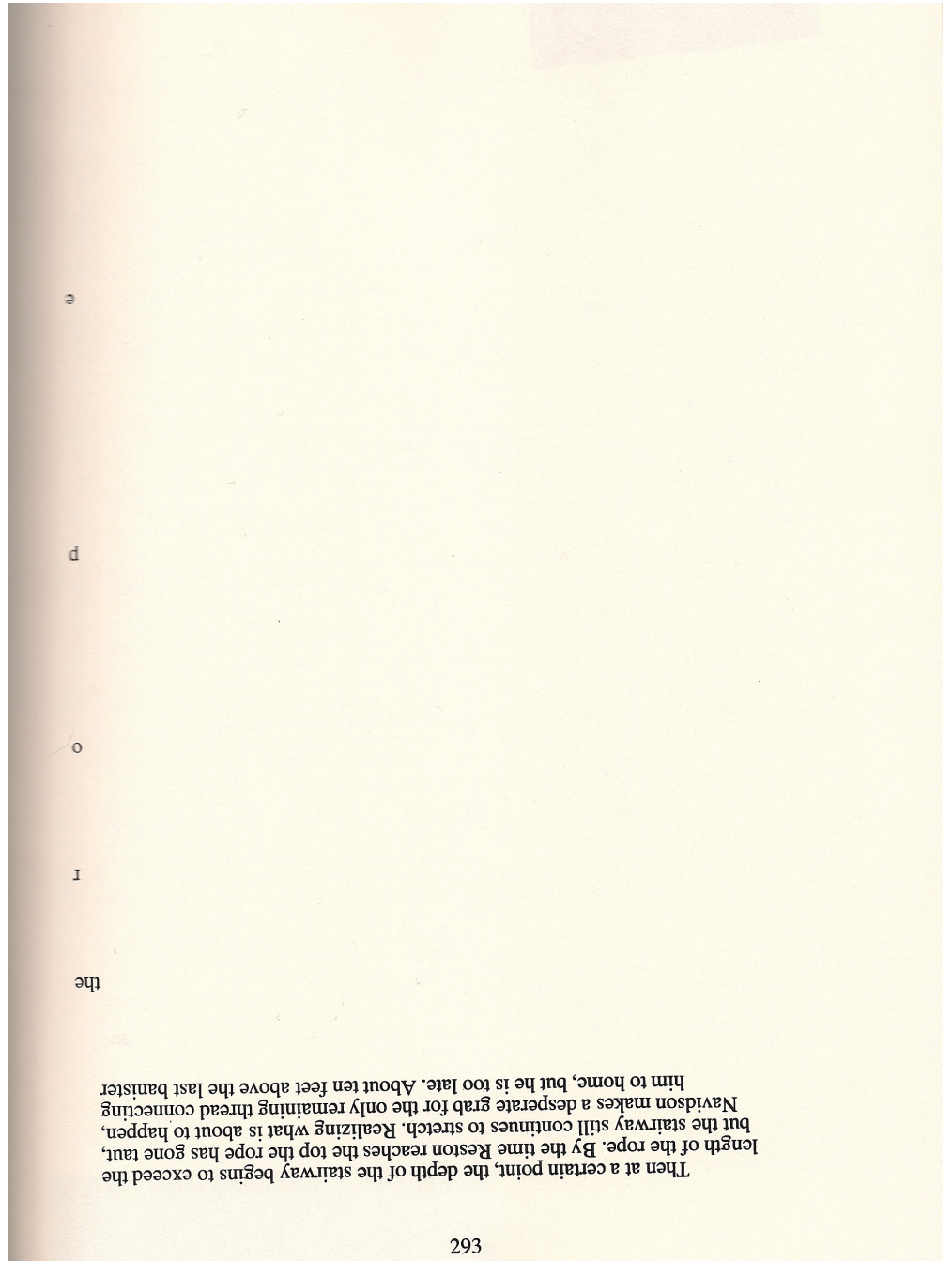


Figure 4. *House of Leaves*. 2000. Publication. Atypical layout causes the participant to slow with the characters.

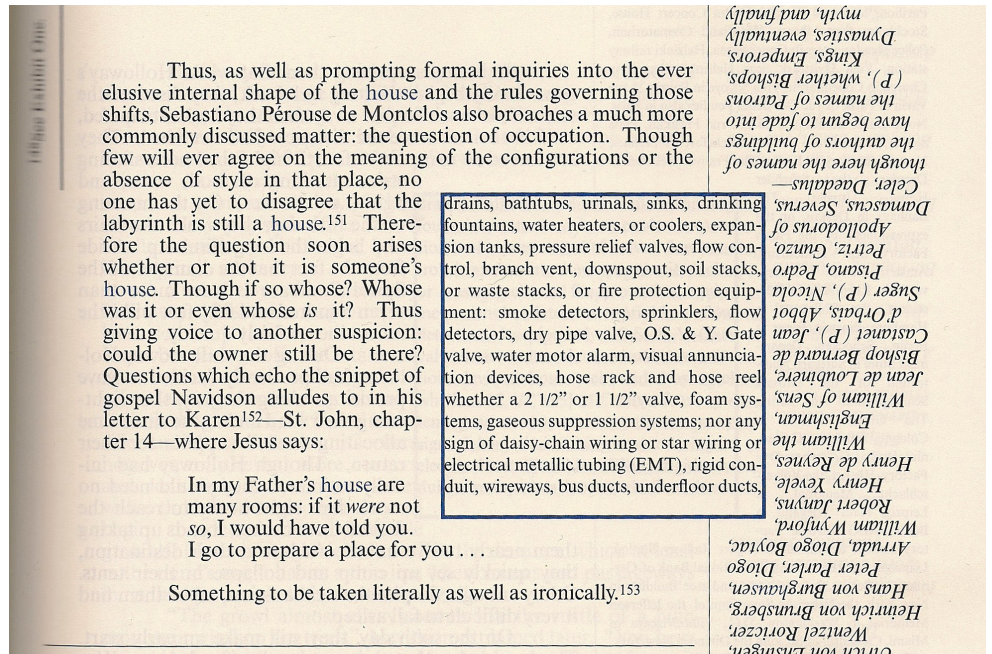


Figure 5. *House of Leaves*. 2000. Publication. *House* and related “imagery” appears in blue screen Chroma key.

Currently, the greatest threat comes from the area of digital manipulation.

In 1990 in *The New York Times*, Andy Grundberg wrote:

“In the future, readers of newspapers and magazines will probably view news pictures more as illustrations than as reportage, since they will be well aware that they can no longer distinguish between a genuine image and one that has been manipulated. Even if news photographers and editors resist the temptations of electronic manipulation, as they are likely to do, the credibility of all reproduced images will be diminished by a climate of reduced expectations. In short, photographs will not seem as real as they once did.”¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴Andy Grundberg, “Ask It No Questions: The Camera Can Lie,” *The New York Times*, August 12, 1990, Section 2, 1, 29. All of which reiterates in many ways what Marshall McLuhan already anticipated when he wrote: “To say ‘the camera cannot lie’ is merely to underline the multiple deceptions that are now practiced in its name.”

Kovachev, Will Roberts, Josef von Sternberg, René Richard T. Heffron, Robert Gardner, Alexander Clement, Connie Field, Roy Boulting, Jack Glen and Petrovich Dovzhenko, Eric Háms, Beryl Fox, Robert Lothar Wolff, Lipscomb, Alain Resnais, Karl Gass, Vas, Morton Silverstein, Andy Warhol, Abe Osheroff, Ruspoli, Jean Grémillon, Marcel William Richert, Frédéric Rossif, Jean Paimlévé, Ophüls, Louis Lumière, Fred Friendly, Koenig, Arthur R. Dubs, Kon Ichikawa, Chris Marker, Georges Franju, John Huston, Bunny Peters Dana, Vsevolod Pudovkin, John Pett, Al Di Lauro, Garson Yuli Sroyanov, Jim Brown, Brault, Raymond Depardon, Kanin, Denys Colomb de Daunant, John Cohen, Michael Apted, Cinda Firestone, Louis de Rochemont, George Rouquier, James Algar, Frederick Wiseman, Harry Watt, Erik Barnouw, Jean Renoir, Robert Snyder, Jerry Blumenthal, Jennifer Rohrer, Gualtiero Jacopetti, Yulia Solntseva, Džiga Vertov, Robert Flaxman, Edgar Anstey, Sergei Eisenstein, Ralph Steiner, George Stoney, George Viandis, Leon Poirier, Heinz Sielman, John Karty, Helen Whitney, John Whitmore, Budd Boettcher, Janus Majewski, Howard Smith-Sarah Ker-nochan, J. B. Holmes, Peter Davis, Jeremy Sanford, Charlotte Zwerin, Amalie Rothschild, Emile de Antonio, Thor Heyerdahl, Jonathan Danam Christian Blackwood, Herbert Kline, Siegfried Kracauer, Tony Richardson, Jozsef Csoké, Joseph Strick, Lindsay Anderson, George Greenough, James Algar, Murray Lerner, Karel Reisz, Michael Powell, Bert Stern, David Wolper, Herman van der Horst, Albert and David Maysles, Arthur Baron, Gerhard Scheumann, Craig Gilbert, Garson Kanin, Sidney Meyers, Wladislaw Stesicki, Bruce Brown—183

modillions, or even trefoil, Tudor, stilted, horeshoe, ogee, lancet, or equilateral arches, most probably resembling basket handle though without any sign of a key-stone, pier, spandrel, voussour, springer, or import.

Picture that. In your dreams.

Figure 6. *House of Leaves*. 2000. Publication. Red strikethroughs suggest revision and represent discomfort/fear.

