Oscillating Towards and Within

the Metamodern

Mark Z. Danielewski’s House of Leaves as a Transitional Novel
for the New Structure of Feeling within
the Contemporary Post-Postmodern Literary Debate

Supervisor: Dr. Sarah Posman

Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of “Master in de Taal- en Letterkunde: Engels” by Karel Van Ooteghem

August 2015
I have seen the future of fiction,
and its name is Mark Z. Danielewski.

—Larry McCaffery

---

Acknowledgements

After four years of studying literature, I wanted my master’s dissertation to be about something that really interested me. Throughout my years as a student at Ghent University, I have developed a taste for the classic American postmodernists and more experimental literature such as Thomas Pynchon and John Barth – definitely not the easiest authors, and I am more than willing to admit that reading those works are often more an endeavour than recreation. When browsing the internet – as we all do, and which is a returning motif in this dissertation – I stumbled upon Mark Z. Danielewski’s work on the one hand and Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s ‘metamodernism’ on the other. After reading House of Leaves, I immediately realized that it might well be one of the books that will be deemed ‘classics’ or ‘turning points’ in about fifty years from now. Truth be said, I primarily recognized its literary qualities, but the work was not really one that I would put on my list of favourites. Therefore, perhaps, it was deemed suitable as a research object for my master’s dissertation – after all, the reaction to my bachelor paper (which was on W.H. Auden’s most experimental work, The Orators) I got the feedback that my appreciation for the work was too distinguishable.

I realize full well that I did not pick an easy subject nor one that has much been documented upon, as it investigates a very recent theory within post-postmodernism. Still, even though I had to work through some frustration as I had to read Derrida, Heidegger and other philosophers whose writings have the digestibility of sawdust, I enjoyed writing this dissertation. First and foremost, I would like to thank my promoter, dr. Posman, who provided me access to several sources I need (Ghent University ordered Hume’s Aggressive Fictions just for my dissertation, for example) and gave me advice whenever I needed it. Furthermore, I would like to thank my parents who kept up with my very irregular writing, eating and sleeping scheme throughout a substantial of July. This dissertation was written on a strict diet of cornflakes at every hour of the day and a vast amount of absurdist and surrealistic (and, now that I think of it, extremely postmodern) animated series.
Table of Contents

0. Introduction........................................................................................................................................... 4

1. Metamodernism......................................................................................................................................... 11
   1.1 Notes On Metamodernism and Metaxis ................................................................................................. 12
   1.2 Metamodernism in Literature .................................................................................................................. 17
      1.2.1. The New Authentic Subject ............................................................................................................. 20
      1.2.2. The New Sublime .......................................................................................................................... 27
   1.3. Irony and Post-Irony ............................................................................................................................. 32
      1.3.1. The Postmodern Irony and the Post-Postmodern Post-Irony ......................................................... 32
      1.3.2. Post-Irony in Literature .................................................................................................................. 39
   1.4. Metamodernism and Post-Postmodernist Studies .................................................................................. 45

2. House of Leaves ....................................................................................................................................... 50
   2.1. Situating House of Leaves .................................................................................................................... 51
   2.2. The Postmodern House of Leaves ....................................................................................................... 55
      2.2.1. Aggressive Fiction .......................................................................................................................... 55
      2.2.2. Derridean Poststructuralism: Deconstruction and Trace ............................................................... 60
      2.2.3. Intertextuality and Academic Discourse as Postmodern Irony .................................................... 66
   2.3. The Metamodern House of Leaves ....................................................................................................... 69
      2.3.1. Unity: The Authentic Subject and Reading Beyond Fragmentation .............................................. 70
      2.3.2. Commitment and Engagement ...................................................................................................... 73
      2.3.3. Intertextuality and Academic Discourse as Post-postmodern Post-irony ................................... 77

3. Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................. 80

Works cited.................................................................................................................................................. 84

Attachments ................................................................................................................................................. 95

Luke Turner – The Metamodernist Manifesto .............................................................................................. 95

26040 words
0. Introduction

A vibrant discussion in current literary debate and theory is dedicated to the concept, or rather the question of existence and definition, of post-postmodernism. It is remarkable that the larger part of the publications that deal with the ‘what-after-postmodernism?’-question have been produced in only the last ten years, as Linda Hutcheon, an influential Canadian literary theorist already wound up her work The Politics of Postmodernism (1989) with the following conclusion:

Let’s just say it: it’s over. The postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on – as do those of modernism – in our contemporary twenty-first-century world. [...] historical categories like modernism and postmodernism are, after all, only heuristic labels that we create in our attempts to chart cultural changes and continuities. Post-postmodernism needs a new label of its own, and I conclude, therefore, with this challenge to readers to find it – and name it for the twenty-first century. (166)

It is the very idea or feeling of ‘an end of postmodernism,’ and Hutcheon’s call for a new label, that inspired the Dutch scholars Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van den Akker to try to define a new cultural branch, which they call ‘metamodernism’. Other critics too have tried to answer Hutcheon’s question, such as Gilles Lipovetsky, with the concept of hypermodernism, Alan Kirby, with digi- or pseudo-modernism and Robert Samuels with automodernism. However, in their essay ‘Notes on Metamodernism’ (in which they attempt to define and defend their theory) Vermeulen and Van den Akker argue that those are merely radicalizations of postmodernism, as opposed to the re(con)structions that their theory implies (2010, 3). The philosophy of metamodernism has sparked attention in the American literary scene, as proven by the fact that the well-respected

Since metamodernism tries to construe an attitude of studying arts, philosophy and politics in general, literary theory (or as they prefer to call it, story-telling) is one among many fields that is investigated by researchers with metamodernist interests. One of the novels that metamodernist literary critics claim to exhibit several of the ideas showcased in their theory is Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000), an unconventional and in certain aspects experimental novel that has gathered a significant amount of interest in literary debates over the past few years. The novel's story is told by means of multiple uses of framework writing, metafiction and several instances of visually unusual typography. What is most noteworthy in the light of metamodernism, however, is that the novel very clearly portrays a wide and thorough understanding and knowledge of not only literary history but, more importantly, of literary theory.

This dissertation will, aside from outlining one of the current 'hot topics' in literary theory, focus on *House of Leaves* and the issue of the transformed return sincerity and the emergence of post-irony, which are key elements in metamodernist theory. This research would start with the following question: does literature 'beyond the end of literature' (an idea that Danielewski's work luridly plays with) imply a reinstating of the parody or a revisiting of authenticity and genuineness – or neither? Or both? Vermeulen and Van den Akker keep the term 'post-irony' in high regards, as it has proven to be essential for their metamodernist ideas (which in part defines itself through a revival of genuineness). *House of Leaves* is indeed a piece of fiction that can be read in light of metamodernist theory, but I will argue that it can only in part serve as an advocate of the overall philosophy behind the term. The frictions between post- and metamodernism reading the work
creates when trying to apply Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s theory\(^2\), signals that the work is more a novel of transition from the post- to the metamodernist ‘structure of feeling’ (using their own terminology), rather than a clear-cut\(^3\) metamodernist pinnacle. By doing this, I will mainly draw upon the several essays Vermeulen and Van den Akker and their colleagues have written as they form the core of (the contemporary, at least) definition of metamodernism. The post-postmodern literary debate is in part what has fueled the urge of new perspectives on the *Zeitgeist*, so it would be short-sighted not to investigate how other post-postmodernist theorists (that are in part influenced by Vermeulen and Van den Akker) cope with the recent evolutions in fiction. Examples of those include Konstantinou (2013), Moraru (2013), James & Seshagiri (2014) and Stefans (2014), as their visions can help to define the (possible) shortcomings that metamodernism proves to have when applying its theory to *House of Leaves*. The tensions between post- and metamodernism that *House of Leaves* ‘embodies’ or at least on several levels prominently displays, serves as food for thought on the development of current and future literary debate: the book is a signifier of transition between the two, and is a useful element in considering the evolution of post-postmodernism in recent American literature. An important aspect of this is its ambivalent employment of portraying knowledge of literary history (by means of intertextuality or even explicit mentions of authors and/or titles) and literary theory (both implicit and explicit).

In the first part of this dissertation, I will try to outline the main ideas of Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s metamoderism when applied to literature in general. I will pay particular interest to the – for this research quintessential – notions of post-irony and metaxis (also embedded in the part where metamodernism is defined, as it is the etymological and ontological base of metamodernism) and several metamodernist techniques that are coined (or elaborated upon) by Vermeulen and Van

\(^2\) The metamodernist theory they introduce is inductive, not deductive. It refuses the title of a movement, so therefore it is nowhere implied that Vermeulen and Van den Akker would think their theory should benefit from a completely correct ‘application’. By using the verb ‘to apply’ here, I merely suggest that I will – unsuccessfully, almost by definition – attempt to fit *House of Leaves* into metamodernist theory and gather knowledge from the frictions it creates with postmodernism.

\(^3\) cf. footnote 1
den Akker’s literary circle, as they will prove to be applicable but problematic when reading and analyzing *House of Leaves*. Furthermore, I will investigate what metamodernism implies for literature within the contemporary cultural field by paying close attention to the re-emergence of the authentic subject and a reformation of the (philosophical, not literary) sublime. In the process of defining those terminologies, I will draw mainly upon Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s initial essay, their (and that of their peers) succeeding publications on their website (metamodernism.com) as well as their lecture *Periodising the 2000s: the Emergence of Metamodernism* (2013) at the International and Interdisciplinary Conference on Emotional Geographies. I will also pay attention to reactions and/or critiques on the original essay: Martin Paul Eve, among others, has issued an attack on the fundamental structure of metamodernism, and in his essay “Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace and the Problems of ‘Metamodernism’” (2012) he tries to debunk the theory and attempts to point out its fallacies. Some of those arguments will prove interesting upon identifying the problems with *House of Leaves* ‘fitting in’ the metamodernist theory. Paul Eve has chosen two remarkable authors (in light of this dissertation) to prove his point, as I will touch upon work of both authors (among others) to illustrate post- and metamodern theory and the, at times, problematic use of (post)-irony in an attempt to divide the two.

The second part of this dissertation will focus solely on *House of Leaves* and the postmodern and metamodern readings of the work. A considerable amount of the publications on this novel is uninteresting for this research, as they focus on the work’s ‘wonky’ typography, its place within genre fiction and its psychoanalytic and Freudian character. Nevertheless, multiple researcher have written on *House of Leaves* with the purpose of highlighting for example its ‘resistance to coherence and unified meaning’ (Benzon, 2010), its (un-)mimetic approach and how that affects readership (Alber et al. 2013), possible philosophies or linguistic theories that apply greatly to various readings of the novels such as a radical nihilism and the influence of Derrida on *House of Leaves* (Slocombe
2005) and how the internet helped shape this ‘networked novel’, being thus a product of this (one could argue ‘metamodern’) age (Pressman 2006). By actively and critically engaging with those publications one can reading and interpret *House of Leaves* as a novel that is neither postmodern nor metamodern, but as literary work that shares certain (opposite) characteristics with both literary traditions of theories.

There is no concise answer to the question whether or not the novel applies post-irony and evokes a feeling of oscillation (one of the key terms in Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s work) between seriousness and parody (metaxis), but there are several convincing arguments to be made for both ‘sides’ in this debate: it revokes any form of ‘easy’ interpretation or criticism. In that aspect, *House of Leaves* is a very interesting piece of ‘aggressive fiction’ – a term coined by Kathryn Hume (2013) that will prove essential for this dissertation’s main argument. Hume defines and illustrates (what she considers a rise of ‘difficult’ novels that tends to deliberately alienate the reader in American fiction. Her theory is in part based on *House of Leaves*, as she devotes an entire chapter of her theoretical work to arguing how the novel's main goal is to attack the reader’s ontological assumptions and to destabilize his or her sense of reality since the intensified textuality gives acknowledgement of a (physical and metaphysical) impossible world (156). Despite the fact that such a claim is a rather narrow interpretation of the work (as hers would also imply that it is inherently non-metamodernist), her general theory turns out very fruitful when analyzing any contemporary American novel in the light of metamodernism since she devotes special attention to mechanisms writers that are considered to be postmodern employ to purposely avoid any form or sincere writing. It is convenient to analyze *House of Leaves* with that orientation in mind as her work

---

4 Several metamodern critics pay considerable attention to the emergence (and the, by now, established value of the internet. Seth Abrahamson interprets the internet, based upon the Metamodernist Manifesto (2011) - written by Shia Labeouf and Luke Turner as they attempted to ‘manifestize’ Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s *Notes on Metamodernism* – as an ultimately democratizing place where the authority of tradition, absolute time and absolute space are being undone (2013).
tends to undo the novel of most of its ‘heartfelt’ emotions that are essential for an analysis from a metamodernist perspective.

Vermeulen and Van den Akker seem to be aware that metamodernism is only a theory of an evolution in arts, politics and Zeitgeist in general, but their arguments are influential, coherent, well defended and stand firm against most criticism. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* is a (deliberately) demanding novel, but it is not justifiable to classify it as either ‘typically metamodern’ (with the implication of overall post-irony and a metaxis of sincerity) or ‘strictly postmodern’ (which would classify it – according to their theory – a bona fide parody of literary criticism). Instead, it is better to regard the work as a transition between both sentiments: the novel is without a doubt ironic (and no critic tends to disagree), but it is debatable whether or not this irony is manifested with sincere feelings. The first and foremost goal of this dissertation is to outline the literary debate of Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s metamodernism, and researching *House of Leaves* is a tool to uncover the ‘structure of feeling’ which they hold high. I will attempt to make a clear-cut demarcation between postmodernism and metamodernism while at the same time admitting to this fluidity. Thereby, I will prove that *House of Leaves* marks an influential ‘changing point’ in (post-) postmodernist writing, and use the findings of that research to sketch the current and perhaps future sentiments of literary debate.
1. Metamodernism

Reading *House of Leaves* in the context of metamodernism requires a full understanding of the term and its implications for literature. The first chapter of this dissertation will thus thoroughly examine the term as it was coined by Vermeulen and Van den Akker, based on their writings, the writings of the editors of the *Notes on Metamodernism* website and external articles that praise, criticize or nuance their original essay. Furthermore, it is of crucial importance to outline metamodernism *in relation to* postmodernism, and not *as opposed to*. The remainder of this chapter will provide an in-depth explanation of the – for this research – essential term ‘post-irony’, as well giving insight in the rediscoveries of certain concepts in post-postmodern literature that the deconstructionist era of postmodernism has destroyed or rendered paradoxical. This is not to say that they are not still paradoxical by a postmodernist reading, but metamodernism deliberately ignores that inconsistency and goes in ‘eyes wide shut’. Investigating the latter can provide several useful concepts when reading *House of Leaves* and placing it in ‘a’ literary tradition – if that is even possible. Before engaging with metamodernism, it is very important to keep in mind that the notion which will be discussed and interpreted here is the metamodernism as laid out by Vermeulen and Van den Akker. Several others have employed the word in a sense that (sometimes just slightly) differs from that of Vermeulen and Van den Akker, but theirs can considered to be the most elaborate and influential in the current literary debate.

---

5 Most of these articles are a direct response to the 2010 essay ‘Notes on Modernism’, but Vermeulen and Van den Akker themselves have written several additions concerning their original essay, including the very recent ‘Misunderstandings and clarifications: Notes on ‘Notes on Metamodernism’’ (2015).
1.1 *Notes On Metamodernism* and metaxis

‘Notes on Metamodernism’ was the publication in which Vermeulen and Van den Akker in 2010 coined their\(^6\) term, as a response to Hutcheon’s appealing challenge (cf. supra). It is more than likely that they had a great interest in the way Hutcheon phrased her call, as metamodernism in its essence lives up to the qualities she demanded of a new term: firstly, its primary meaning is that art has shown a postmodern evolution that is developed in such a way that it can no longer be named postmodern. Secondly, metamodernism is – just as modernism and postmodernism – a heuristic label by nature: it is neither a philosophy nor a movement, but rather ‘a structure of feeling’ (Vermeulen and Van den Akker, 2015) not only of contemporary literature but of arts, philosophy and politics of the present day. Lastly, with metamodernism they provided a new label for post-postmodernism but they do not wish to undo postmodernism tendencies (idem 2010, 3). In that aspect, postmodernism and metamodernism share the concept of reshaping and redirecting their predecessor rather than reshaping and redirecting arts in general. Those redirections are taking place on several levels of the cultural field, and metamodernism simply takes note of the overall change in sentiment and policy. The examples that they give range from the reform of the economic system due to financial crises (the end of neoliberalism) and a restructuration of politics on a geopolitical and national level (the sudden importance of Eastern economics and the failure of ‘the third way’) to the debate of climate change.

\(^6\) Mind the use of the pronoun ‘their’: Vermeulen and Van den Akker explicitly state that they did not coin or invent the term metamodernism and that it already had a history that dates back at least 35 years before their essay: “Although we appear to be the first to use the term metamodernism to describe the current structure of feeling, we are not the first to use the term per se. It has been used with some frequency in literature studies in order to describe a post-modern alternative to postmodernism as presented in the works of authors as far apart as, amongst others, Blake and Guy Davenport. However, we would like to stress that our conception of metamodernism is by no means aligned to theirs, nor is it derived from them. It is in so far related to these notions that it too negotiates between the modern and the postmodern; but the function, structure, and nature of the negotiation we perceive are entirely our own and, as far as we can see, wholly unrelated to the previous perception” (2015). I deliberately attribute the interpretation of metamodernism they lay out to them, as the term has never been ‘filled in’ in the way that they did in their essay(s).
Postmodernist thinkers, they say, declared history had come to an end in the light of Hegel’s positive idealism. The inevitable Telos that history was progressing towards (by means of constant dialectics) was apparently reached when Western liberal democracy became universal. Metamodernism, on the other hand, does not acknowledge the end of history as it does not exist but acts as if it does. Vermeulen and Van den Akker explain the latter as follows:

Inspired by a modern naïveté yet informed by postmodern skepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility. (idem, 4)

They use the banal metaphor of the donkey and the carrot on a stick to illustrate their point: the modern donkey will have eaten its carrot elsewhere (chasing a still possible ‘end of history’ but not reaching it, thus searching for satisfaction elsewhere) and the postmodern donkey has most likely abandoned its chase (by realizing the superficiality a possible ‘end’ of a concept such as time – without a Telos, everything is relative) (idem). The metamodernist, however, will continue to chase an ideal with the full conscience of the inability to reach its non-existent goal.

This is the point in their essay where they coin metamodernism’s quintessential term: oscillation. And as one would have expected by now, the term mainly illustrates the metamodern ‘swinging’ between modernism and postmodernism. It is the only ‘new’ thing metamodernism introduces; the return to modernism’s hopeful enthusiasm is hindered by the fact that the metamodern era has been ‘poisoned’ by the postmodernist feeling. By using another metaphor, Vermeulen and Van den Akker do not consider this sentiment as a balance between the entire set of feelings introduced by modernism and undone by postmodernism, but as ‘a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles. Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back towards irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back towards
enthusiasm' (idem, 5). They list the opposing poles as following, thus rendering their interpretation of the set of traits and ideals modernism and postmodernism thinking entails:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modernism</th>
<th>Postmodernism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>Irony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Melancholy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naïveté</td>
<td>Knowingness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Apathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity</td>
<td>Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totality</td>
<td>Fragmentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purity</td>
<td>Ambiguity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Visual representation of Vermeulen and Van den Akker 2010)

To coherently situate their theory in the established field of postmodernism, the authors state the following:

Both the metamodern epistemology (as if) and its ontology (between) should thus be conceived of as a "both-neither" dynamic. They are each at once modern and postmodern and neither of them. (idem)

It is only natural that in a post-postmodern age, one cannot define metamodernism as a transitional phase between modernism and postmodernism, as it is beyond the bounds of possibility to evoke modernism’s sentiments without at least sensing the tensions of the postmodern taste that
destroyed the former. However, it evokes a sort of ‘sincere insincerity’, a conscious naivety that longs for Plato’s ‘Ideal Universals’. Related to his allegory of the cave, one can say that the metamodern human has been undone of his shackles, has seen the world and desperately longs for its pre-enlightenment era. Not only I but Vermeulen and Van den Akker as well consider Plato’s theories useful when discussing metamodernism. As such, they highly value his term *metaxis*, a word which finds its etymology in Old Greek for “between” but which meaning was expanded by Plato and the German philosopher Eric Voegelin. Vermeulen and Van den Akker use the term to illustrate their theory as the two philosophers employed metaxis to discuss “the experience of existence and consciousness” (idem). When they quote Voegelin, their intention becomes even more apparent:

> Existence has the structure of the In-Between, of the Platonic *metaxy*, and if anything is constant in the history of mankind it is the language of tension between life and death, immortality and mortality, perfection and imperfection, time and timelessness, between order and disorder, truth and untruth, sense and senselessness of existence; between *amor Dei* and *amor sui*, *l’aˆme ouverte* and *l’ame close*; … (Voegelin 1989, 119-120)

They do not directly accredit the etymology of the term metamodernism to metaxis and its prefix7, most likely because it the relationship between their oscillation and Plato’s and Voegelin’s metaxis is crystal clear. Vermeulen and Van den Akker confess that the debate about metaxis is one of the longest running discussions in philosophy and that their use of the term is “inevitably reductive” (7). However, even for a critical reader, that does not imply that the use of metaxis as they define it lacks consistency: their rendering of the definition gives readers a well-constructed overview of what they are aiming for. They allow themselves to summarize their outline of the term and its

---

relevance to the metamodern spirit that they wish to introduce to us by relying on Richard Avramenko – a Voegelin critic – who speaks of “irreconcilability between [...] man’s finite processes and the unlimited, intracosmic or transmundane reality” (2004, 116): the metamodernist sentiment is not the outcome of tensions but rather of a ‘double-bind of a modern desire for sens and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all” (Vermeulen and Van den Akker 2010, 8). That double-bind cannot be ‘resolved’ in any way: in other words, it is not the friction between the two opposing forces but the impossibility of establishing a ‘synthesis’ (again Hegel) that determines the structure of feeling in the emerging metamodernist era.

In their clarification essay, Vermeulen and Van den Akker stress the fact that they do not understand metamodernism in terms of the absorptions of contrasts into wholes. Although several works that are nowadays considered to be examples of metamodernism surpass postmodernism by creating a feeling of harmony, it is ‘not the dominant sensibility of present culture’, nor is ‘integration that takes place through an appreciation of complementarity and interconnectedness’ (2015). The latter is how Vermeulen and Van den Akker paraphrase the conclusion of Alexandra Dumitrescu’s essay “Interconnections in Blakean and Metamodern Space” (2007) and they respond by saying that such a way of approaching ‘metamodernism’ is exactly what Jean-François Lyotard and his critic Lieven Boeve would call ‘postmodern’. According to the latter, the focus of the former lies with the linkage of a heterogeneous plurality of discourses – very much if not entirely similar to Dumitrescu’s interconnections.

---

8 “Notes on Metamodernism” has not been written at the time, but that does not imply that they cannot disagree with Dumitrescu as she considers (her rendering of) metamodernism to portray the current developments in literature.
1.2 Metamodernism in literature

Vermeulen and Van den Akker started a website named *Notes on Metamodernism*, on which they – and several researchers from all across the globe, the current amount of writers exceeds 30 (Vermeulen and Van den Akker 2015/2) – publish articles regarding the metamodernist evolution in current cultural developments on a regular basis. The website can be seen as an extension to their original essay, as there too they highlighted phenomena from several cultural categories to ponder the trend of oscillation their theory discusses, ranging from architecture, music and film to fashion, politics and economics. No matter how valuable these topics might be and despite of how they can contribute to the credibility of the metamodernist theory, the main focus of this dissertation lies with literature: how is the literary field (and the corresponding literary theory) evolving towards the metataxis of modernist and postmodernist values outlined in chapter 1.1?

Firstly, it is of crucial importance to understand Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s metamodernism as they meant it to be: descriptive, not prescriptive. Their original essay has too often been read by critics as an agenda or the creation of a subgenre, rather than a restructuring of affection and non-affection. About that misunderstanding, Vermeulen and Van den Akker summarize their intentions in the following coherent and well-written statement:

Metamodernism, as we see, it is not a philosophy. In the same vein, it is not a movement, a programme, an aesthetic register, a visual strategy, or a literary technique or trope. To say that something is a philosophy is to suggest that it is a system of thought. This implies that it is closed, that it has boundaries. It also implies that there is a logic to it. To say that something is a movement, or indeed a programme, suggests that there is a politics to it, a belief as to how our environment should be organised. To propose any one “–ism” as an
aesthetic – register, strategy or trope – is to suggest that it is a figure that can be pinned down and picked up from a text or painting and inserted elsewhere. The notion of metamodernism we have proposed is neither of these. It is not a system of thought, nor is it a movement or a trope. For us, it is a structure of feeling. (2015, original underlinings)

This is an important starting point when looking for an evolution towards the metamodern in literature: there is no ‘preset’, guide or trend to follow, while the theory instead describes movements within literature that are fueled by external (for example by politics or economics) factors - and such was the case with modernism and postmodernism as well. It is therefore not only unnecessary but also illogical to try and fit Danielewski’s House of Leaves (or any other recent work, for that matter) within strict boundaries, as the works are pre-existent to the outlined ‘structures of feeling’ Vermeulen and Van den Akker propose. However, as evolution and change is inherent to the metamodernist theory, it can be useful to set apart the novel’s structure of feeling and situate it with regards to the oscillation of (non-)values previously described. If Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s metaphorical pendulum is not consistent in its swing between modernist and postmodernist values in such an important novel as House of Leaves, this can in part construct a more general view of the current evolutions (perhaps towards but not fully ending with metamodernism) in recent literature.

Although being a descriptive term, an excellent example of metamodernist literature is prescriptive and a direct result from its original definition: The Metamodernist Manifesto (cf. attachment 1). Put together in 2011 by Luke Turner and Shia LaBeouf, the manifesto cites or reworks the original text by Vermeulen and Van den Akker in a style that is clearly inspired by several of the modernist manifestos (e.g. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s Futurist Manifesto (1909) or André Breton’s Surrealist Manifestos (1924 & 1929)). As the modernist art manifestos denounced their current ‘stream’ and

---

9 The importance of the work with regards to the literary debate and the reasons why it is a certain milestone (without any qualitative implications) in literary history will be discussed in the chapter on House of Leaves.
made use of vibrant eloquence to not only inform but to put their readers to action, so does The Metamodernist Manifesto call for a liberation from the naïve modernism and its cynic offspring postmodernism. Turner and LaBeouf use the same amount of big and ambiguous words as their predecessors and finish off their work with a wink at the vocal qualities their works of inspiration tended to employ: ‘We must go forth and oscillate!’ (2011). However, what sets this manifesto apart from the others is not only its transformation from descriptiveness to prescriptiveness (whereas the other manifestos were solely prescriptive) is its intention:

[Metamodernism] is not a manifesto - although, as an artist myself, I couldn’t resist the temptation to imagine it as if it were, with my 2011 manifesto an exercise in simultaneously defining and embodying the metamodern spirit; at once coherent and preposterous, earnest and somewhat self-defeating, yet ultimately hopeful and optimistic. (Turner 2015)

By constructing the manifesto, Turner and LaBeouf have created a work that oscillates on several positions: not only on a diachronic level (a quintessential modernist form of art – the art manifesto – in a postmodern setting) but on a synchronic level as well. Jacques Derrida, whose theories are of utmost importance when discussing House of Leaves’ poetics, and his The Postmodern Manifesto\(^{10}\), which was allegedly found on his desk post-mortem (Hall 2015), is first and foremost ironic – a trait that metamodernism cannot escape so rather than either embracing or rejecting it, it transforms the cynical tone of to postmodern to post-irony\(^{11}\). Derrida’s manifesto is very skeptical and ironic about the postmodernism it describes – apparently prescriptive manifestos are a thing of the past. By, for example, stating that it denies any form of high art or that it is anti-elitist but at the same time

\(^{10}\) The manifesto was signed by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault (Hall 2015), which adds to the ‘credibility’ and importance of the work: together with Derrida, the trio consisted of some of the most important critics of postmodernism.

\(^{11}\) cf. 1.3.
protect its own elitism *The Postmodern Manifesto* becomes so ironic of the content it deals with that it seems like vicious critique rather than appraisal by description.

A vital question is, then, which characteristics are – in line with the idea of metataxis – characterizing the metamodern aspects of literature. *With House of Leaves* in mind, I would consider the evolution from the postmodern cold irony and skepticism to the metamodern hopeful yet deliberately delusional post-irony\textsuperscript{11} one of the quintessential metamodern traits. Before delving into that concept and how it affects metamodern literature and Danielewski’s novel in particular, it is useful to pay attention to two important concepts in metamodern literature: the re-instating of the authentic subject and the reformation of the sublime. Both of these concepts indicate a division (although not a strict one) with postmodernism in literature, so it is useful to investigate them. The two concepts are linked by the fact that they are rediscovered or at least re-appreciated in post-postmodernist literature after being denounced, abandoned or questioned by postmodernism. Their realisation in contemporary literature, however, is crucially different from that before the era of deconstruction and the skepticism for metanarratives.

1.2.1. The new authentic subject

In her article “To Engage in Literature”, published on *Notes on Metamodernism*, Nadine Feßler ventures into what she considers to be the main developments in literature of the metamodern era. Her text starts (in line with most of the articles on the website, or perhaps even most published post-postmodernist studies) by signaling change and announcing the death of postmodernism: ‘This term limits the possibilities to interpret and reflect on these texts and simplifies the complexity of today’s literature’ (2012). The consensus appears to be that the era of postmodernism has ended, indeed, and with it so has the disbelief in authenticity, Feßler argues. Such a sentiment echoes what
Vermeulen and Van den Akker wrote in their original article, but earlier in the same year in which they published "Notes on Metamodernism", Ulla Haselstein already noted the following:

Authenticity is making a comeback, in the guises of memory, ethics, religion, the new sincerity, and the renewed interest in ‘real things’. Although sometimes envisioned as the rejection of postmodernism, the ‘new’ authenticity remains profoundly shaped by postmodern skepticism regarding the grand narratives of origin, telos, reference, and essence. (2010, 19)

In this very excerpt, we hear the resonance of Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s metaxis: the return of authenticity is disturbed or corrupted by the postmodern knowledge that authenticity\textsuperscript{12} is a non-existent concept. Whereas the postmodernists were cynical towards genuineness of ideals such as truth or values as love, the metamodern writer (if one already exists) will approach those concepts with a consciously worn blindfold, knit from the experience of apparent knowingness but deliberately covering the eyes to experiment with sincerity and experience naivety. Feßler follows David Foster Wallace, whose work and its relation to post- and metamodernism will be discussed in the next chapter, when he speaks out the expectation that literature nowadays should embrace and engage the reader (Wallace 2006, 274), instead of questioning his beliefs or challenging his patience and ability to comprehend and interpret what is being written until they ultimately stop caring\textsuperscript{13}.

The loss of authenticity in the postmodern subject goes side by side with its loss of meaning. Raoul Eshelman, who coined the term ‘performatism’ (which will be clarified later in this chapter), employs a Derridean perspective when he talks about the death of the postmodern subject. The

\textsuperscript{12} It is not entirely clear whether or not Feßler acknowledges the slight postmodern touch or the revival of authenticity, as she believes in the return of transcendence – a notion that I interpret to be somewhat in line with Plato’s ideals - in literature (cf.supa).

\textsuperscript{13} This is one of the strategies of ‘aggressive fiction’, a term coined by Kathryn Hume that will be very useful in engaging with House of Leaves.
original paragraph, published in the introduction of his widely discussed *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism*, is quite lengthy but offers a good overview of both the postmodern treatment of the subject as well as a quick insight in the Derridean influences on post-postmodernist theorists:

For the subject, postmodernism presents a mighty, seemingly inescapable trap. Any attempt it makes to find itself through a search for meaning is bound to go awry, for every sign promising some sort of originary knowledge is embedded in further contexts whose explication requires the setting of even more signs. Attempting to find itself through meaning, the subject drowns in a flood of ever expanding cross-references. Yet even if the subject clings to form it fares no better. For postmodernism sees in form not an antidote to meaning, but rather a trace leading back to already existing, semantically loaded contexts. Every fixation of meaning is dispersed through cross-connected forms; every use of form links up with already existing meanings; every approach to an origin leads back to an alien sign. Searching for itself, the subject quickly ends where it began: in the endlessly expanding field of the postmodern. (2008)

A crucial difference between Eschelman’s performatism and (in this case) Feßler’s take on Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s metamodernism, is that the former does not agree with the statement that an ‘intensified search for meaning, through the introduction of new, surprising forms or through the return to an authentic origin’ (idem) leads the way to a new structure of feeling – that of the post-postmodern. Instead, he argues, a re-introduced form of performance (nomen est omen) should preserve the subject. In other words, Eschelman does not agree that a ‘new’ authenticity is a factor of the current evolution, whereas Feßler believes that what literature in the contemporary era embodies is indeed newfound and not a conscious stage act.
One approach of creating a so-called ‘new’ form of authenticity is, as Feßler quotes Nicole Krauss, the installation of protagonists that deal with essential issues while still being defined in their world. It is not very clear what exactly she means with this statement, but one can assume that she implies that the (at times rather intense) level of irony and sarcasm as well as the fragmented and deliberately incomplete nature of postmodern writing. To illustrate the former, Feßler’s quote of A. L. Kennedy serves a useful cause: ‘[people who have decided to be postmodernist are] people who enjoy a good joke about the Holocaust, because that doesn’t mean they’re being bigoted, ignorant or simply inhumane [...]. These are also people who may tell you that cruelty is more real than tenderness, but who still always seem to want tenderness for themselves – less real, or not’ (2010, 233-234). To illustrate the latter, the author of the article is consistent and again gives Holocaust literature as an example: ‘[Authors of recent novels dealing with the Holocaust] strive for some form of communication between offenders and victims which is unthinkable in a postmodern world where we tend to experience the story through the eyes of the victim’ (2012). Metamodernism, on the contrary, tends to step beyond (not away from) the irony and fragmentation that defines postmodernism. Feßler finds proof of the re-emergence of authenticity in the revival of interest in stories: authors like Jonathan Franzen, Jeffrey Eugenides, Richard Powers of Amitav Ghosh are amongst the best selling writers at the moment, and their approach to story-telling carry the (or rather, Feßler’s) metamodernist ideals at their core – engagement and familiarity, which are closing the gap between the reader and what is being read.

What then remains is the essential question of how metamodernist literature achieves that philosophical re-orientation in practice. An often returning answer – not only acknowledged by metamodernist theorists but a consensus within post-postmodernist studies as a whole - to that flooreer lies within a crucially different treatment of the subject. Nicole Timmer, for example, argues that the reconfigurations of subjectivity in novels such as Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* and, remarkably,
Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* can no longer be framed as ‘postmodern’ (2010, 13). Eshelman, a different offspring of post-postmodernism than metamodernism, offers one of the many possible interpretations of the re-invented subject with his construct (performatism, cf. supra), which he defines (in terms of postmodernism’s successor) as:

[...] an epoch in which a unified concept of sign\(^\text{14}\) and strategies of closure have begun to compete directly with - and displace - the split concept of sign and the strategies of boundary transgression typical of postmodernism. (2008, 39)

When applied to literature and ‘the subject’, performatism has several implications: firstly, the limitations of the subject prove to be liberating in the end, as post-postmodernism now returns to a closed space where it is ‘able to shut out the endless regress of filiation that would normally keep it from establishing some form of unified self’ (idem 2009). Naturally, this progression obliges the metamodernist reader to apply a different reading stance, one that accounts for the (sudden) narrative closure which ultimately results in identification with those subjects. This should be understood as a result from the post-postmodernism tendency of attempting to undo itself from the cynicism its predecessor laid upon him, so that it opens up a more closed and thus more relatable and less confusing narrative (personified by the subject, of course). Feßler, who tries to apply the performatist notions of boundary transgression and closure to her own metamodernist framework, notices the abandonment of fragmentation and destabilization in order to introduce a form of transcendence. By experiencing such a ‘(bracketed)\(^\text{15}\) transcendence, a new yet limited unity is

\(^{14}\) Interestingly, most post-postmodernist literary theorists pay a significant amount of attention to Jacques Derrida’s semiotic theories, more than to the other ‘great postmodern thinkers’ such as Deleuze or Foucault. Danielewski too has a great interest in his writings, and has oft referred to him as an inspiration for his work. Therefore, Derrida’s theory – ultimately postmodern yet apparently useful to step away from postmodernism - will serve as a useful instrument in deconstructing (a Derridean tool) *House of Leaves* and situating it within the field of literary theory.

\(^{15}\) Feßler describes the transcendence as bracketed, but it is unclear what she implies. The likeliest interpretation would be that she again refers to the fact that the closure of the gap (and thus the transcendence) is ‘poisoned’ by the knowledge that it was once wide open (in postmodernism) and that the myth of the ‘full closure’ is only established by deliberate delusion.
created. And those limitations, in their part, help the reader to familiarize with the subject (2012). In other words, the subject is no longer bound to existence’s infinity but becomes limited to what it considers important: there is no longer a postmodern sense of constant ambiguity as the metamodern subject (according to Feßler) sets out certain unequivocal (and authentic, as Haselstein would call it) ideals for itself, as well as being a representative for those or other ideals at the same time.

In “Notes on the State of the Subject”, Simone Stirner argues for a similar cause: the subject was dead, but recent developments in culture suggest that it is ‘alive and kicking as ever’ (2011). Although her article discusses the subject in a context (mainly philosophical, and she too seems to have a keen interest in Derrida) that is wider than just literature, it still offers valuable advice on how to take notice of the metamodern subject’s development. In line with Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s theory, she firstly states that the ‘modern’ subject (‘characterized in terms of the Cartesian Ego: strong, autonomous, reasonable and above all coherent’) was dismantled: it is one of the grand narratives that postmodernism was so cynical about. Nevertheless, in recent literature, art and cinema there is a visible paradigm shift. ‘The subject reappears and it comes with other dismissed categories such as trust, belief, coherence and even love’, Stirner says, and she shares the ability to see a coherence between metamodernism and Eshelman’s work: the new subject ‘establishes itself in spite of disruptive forces in an act of belief.’ As for how exactly these reinvented subjects are rendered, she declares the following:

[...], we suddenly come to meet characters who masquerade as coherent subjects. They are innovative figures who step into the scene with a quirkiness that, perhaps precisely because of their idiosyncratic authenticity, renders possible a new relation between literary hero and recipient. (idem)
To illustrate or exemplify her strain of thought, she compares the typical postmodern subject – an essentially powerless one in the workings of global capitalism\textsuperscript{16} - to an (according to her terms) in this day and age important example of the reinvented subject: the symbol of the Occupy Wall Street-movement, a ‘fragile yet brave ballerina on top of [Wall Street’s] iron bull.’ And she makes a good point by giving that example, as the new subject can be juxtaposed to its predecessor – its actions as well as the subject itself are idealistic, working towards a goal in ‘a confined space’ and undisturbed by skepticism, hopeful, authentic, and inspirational enough to masquerade itself as coherent. Although these are traits that can be attributed to the subject in the modernist era, it is important to acknowledge the ironic struggle it has been through:

The reemerged subject is not the old modern one. It contains no transcendental justifications. Concepts of identity, selfhood and subjectivity can always be dismantled and deconstructed. But while the awareness about this still rightfully persists, new times call us to acknowledge that the subject nevertheless appears, in moments of intersubjectivity, in reciprocal spaces of belief, trust and love. (idem)

It is interesting that both critics make use of the word ‘transcendence’, but in different ways. Feßler, on the one hand, believes that contemporary literature successfully gives transcendence the chance to return, despite being washed away in postmodernism. Stirner, on the other, is more bitter towards the transcendence in contemporary culture (not bound to literature): it is futile to try and rebuild what has been long lost, and transcendence is deconstructed – we see an emergence of this new and authentic subject, but ‘the contained hope is still accompanied by a twitch of melancholy’ (idem). Despite having overtly similar readings of certain concepts, there is apparently no ‘equal ground’ or consensus about a particular term like transcendence. The two academics have both

\textsuperscript{16} She bases this generalization (although it is a correct depiction of what the postmodern subject in its essence is, of course) on Slavoj Žižek’s theories.
published their articles on Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s website, so the fact that their opinions on such a specific concept differentiates is a proof that metamodernism as the two Dutch scholars have experienced it and put it forth is not an agenda or a manifesto (cf. supra) but the creation of a platform to discuss developments of the structure of feeling in contemporary art and politics.

1.2.2. The new sublime

Before discussing the sublime, it is important to note that the following subchapter will engage with the developments concerning the philosophical concept (not coined by but mostly known through the work of Immanuel Kant) and not the literary tradition of the Sublime, as employed by the Romantic poets (John Keats in particular). The two are related, but the former is a metaphysical quality that also exists outside of experience whereas the latter puts its focus on the feeling a sublime entity or idea evokes. In the words of Sara Helen Binney (2015), ‘the sublime was defined by Kant [...] as a short-lived feeling of terror and delight, of pleasurable pain.’ Although it is mainly a matter of interpretation, the division between the philosophical and the literary sublime lies in the fact that the latter limits itself to the experience it evokes, whereas the former puts rationality as the essential ‘starting point’. To interpret the sublime with rational thought in mind assists the postmodern deconstruction theory of the secondary and so-called indescribable feeling to which it ultimately leads.

Kyle Karthauser speaks of an (equally valid) dichotomy on another level in his article “The Awesome, or the Metamodern Sublime”, the one between beauty and the sublime, respectively experience and concept (2011). Where beauty has the ability to be “framed”, it would be illogical to frame sublimity as that would destroy the concept. Derrida and Lyotard showed interest in the philosophical sublime in their postmodern studies – Karthauser summarizes their stance as follows:
[Postmodern theory’s] utility lay in exposing the fundamental epistemological “gap” between reason and understanding, where both “prove inadequate to the task of making the world and our concepts conform to each other”. To fetishize the sublime meant, in effect, to foreground the paradoxes, quandaries, and limitations of signification generally. Once identified, this non-negotiable lacuna deep within the fabric of the modern project was blown up into the lack (of origin, of foundation; of truly re-presenting reality) at the center of the postmodern epoch. (idem)

Lyotard is does not believe in metanarratives due to their intrinsically totalizing nature (Lyotard 1997) and argues that the modern(ist) attempts of constructing a metaphysical system – one that totalizes experience – is a failed system before it is even created, as totality is sublime and this beyond comprehension or representation (Morley 2010, 31). Derrida, with the introduction of his idea *différence*, goes even further by deconstructing the totality of ‘beauty’ as well. It is an inherently postmodern idea to question the coherence of such a notion, and labeling it self-contained or – even worse – pure is a naive utterance that has not been rendered through postmodern skepticism.

It is debatable whether or not the sublime as the postmodernists described it (a deceitfully assembled mess) knows any contemporary reverberations, but Karthauser considers the internet to be the best thinkable corollary to it: defining the world wide web from an external viewpoint leads to an explanation of an organized and structured ‘entity’, while in fact ‘on every page we find

---

17 In the introduction of *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1997), Lyotard famously writes: ‘Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. [...] To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements--narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on.’

18 The internet plays an important role in the creation, interpretation and legacy of *House of Leaves* and will play an essential role when applying cultural criticism to the work in the second chapter of this dissertation.

19 It is important to note that while it might be a corollary of the postmodern, it is perhaps one the most important (although this has not yet been discussed in detail) instigators of the metamodernist structure of feeling.
scattered traces to other pages, [...] each supplement, in turn, containing its own web of traces; so on and so on ad infinitum’ (idem). More importantly, he notes, it is not only the corollary of the postmodernist sublime but at the same time the architect of an entirely new form of sublime: the awesome. Although perhaps not intentional, one can feel the metaphorical metamodernist pendulum swing as Karthauser tries to connect the earlier concept of beauty and experience of sublime in one image:

Etymologically it gestures at the sublime through “awe,” an experience that mingles abject fear and profound ecstasy. In today’s vernacular, it denotes [...]. And while the everyday use of “awesome” may be used to describe mundane, not-terribly-profound things, in the broadening of its definition it forces us to broaden our aesthetic understanding of the space between the sublime and the beautiful. From a classical or postmodern standpoint, there is no space between the two, and absolutely no overlap. (idem)

The awesome is a form of sublime that resists the postmodern deconstruction, as the whole of an awesome entity or embodiment of the idea is greater than the sum of its parts, and Karthauser uses the example of Evel Knievel20 to illustrate his point. It revisits the original idea of the sublime as the indescribable feeling when amazement by both terror and beauty culminate, yet reforms it so that a more mundane and accessible embodiment of that dichotomy such as Evel Knievel, instead of the Kraken or a thunderstorm, is now a possible subject to the notion. Karthauser thinks of the awesome as the inevitable result of that deconstructed postmodern sublime: in an age where the totality of such a concept is destroyed, ‘where else was there to turn?’ If we apply Lyotard’s theory, the awesome is no metanarrative but a mininarrative; it exceeds the expectations of the Western

20 The inspiration for this example comes from The Manifesto for the New Sincerity by Jesse Thorn (2006). The New Sincerity (and more importantly, its relations to metamodernism) will be briefly discussed in the chapter 1.4.
metanarrative while at the same time maintaining an inherent unity. The following quote by Karthauser serves as a good conclusion:

We are drawn to [the awesome’s] seeming authenticity, [its] “truth” just as we were once drawn to ever more abstract be-all end-all theories of everything. [...] By now it should be clear that the awesome is an inversion of the postmodern sublime. From a textual, “universal” point of view, the awesome is “sublime” in that it defies categorization. [...] In its narrative manifestation, it strives toward the category of the “beautiful” in that it seeks and/or achieves a sort of harmony for the sake of harmony, generating its own frame that can either be believed or disbelieved. Not that its reception really matters. (idem)

The awesome is therefore not a revisiting but a reformation of the sublime. That particular motion (going back and adapting) is apparently one of the key elements of metamodernism, as it appeared (or is appearing) with authenticity (cf. supra), sincerity and irony (cf. infra) at the same time.

Binney, too, sees similarities between metamodernism and the sublime in her article “Oscillating towards the sublime”. Her emphasis\(^\text{21}\) lies not with the awesome or the reformation of the sublime, but with how oscillation (quintessential for metamodernism) is inherent to how both the ‘old’ and ‘new’ sublime. She uses Neil Hertz’ work on stoppage in the sublime to establish or reveal the connection it has with metamodernism: in his work, Kant’s emphasis on rational thought becomes apparent when he describes the sublime as a ‘momentary checking of vital powers.’ That ‘checking’, according to Hertz, implies stoppage and thus blockage which is again ‘followed by a turning back into the self’ (1985, n.p.). If that is the case, Binney argues, ‘this movement of oscillation from the self to something greater and back to a renewed understanding of the self’ closely resembles the

\(^{21}\) Despite of what the title suggests, the article deals mainly with the return of the fantastic – which is an unuseful concept for this research.
oscillation Vermeulen and Van den Akker theoretized. From that, she concludes that recent novels\textsuperscript{22} are able to display ‘co-presence of [...] historically disparate concepts’ (2015). The sublime has thus been reintroduced, but one can go even further than that: it is a form of metamodernist writing, and creates yet another set of opposite values for oscillation.

\textsuperscript{22} She does not mention this, but it is safe to assume that this co-presence was by definition absent from the stereotypical postmodern novel. That structure of feeling would disperse the unity of a divided notion such as the sublime, and refuses to apply a double-bind between the rational and the experiential the term implies.
1.3. Irony and post-irony

When discussing post-irony and its relation to metamodernism, it is important to note that the concept nor its terminology emerges from metamodern debate. However, the division between post-irony and its predecessor is one that (with the right arguments) can evolve from the oscillation between irony on the one hand and the combination of sincerity and enthusiasm on the other. Although Vermeulen and Van den Akker have picked up the concept and (successfully) adapted it to their own theory, it is not theirs and it is, therefore, important to research post-irony not only in a metamodernist but in a more general framework considering contemporary literature.

1.3.1. The postmodern irony and the post-postmodern post-irony

The consensus within both postmodern and post-postmodern theory is the following: one of the main and undisputed traits of the postmodernist Zeitgeist is the application of irony. At times blatantly overt, at times only detectable in minor details, but always present. According to Toby Young and Tom Vanderbilt, the use of irony was the only defense against commodation the postmodernists had (1994), and Hutcheon considers it to be, together with skepticism, parody and intertextuality, the thing that defines the era of postmodern literature (1989). A lot can be said about the use of irony, parody and skepticism, but it is more important for this research to focus on the concept of ‘the end of irony’ or ‘the irony beyond irony’. As discussed here oft before, post-postmodernist theory considers the revival of certain concepts such as authenticity and unity one of its most remarkable aspects. However, there lies a crucial difference in a concept as for example ‘the new authenticity’ and post-irony: where the former reworks a concept of the pre-postmodern era, the latter continues to build further upon it. After all, ‘authenticity’ was in a way ruled out by postmodernism, while irony was embraced.
Andrzej Gąsiorek and David James wrote an essay on the so-called ‘postmillennial commitments’ of contemporary literature. Although their emphasis lies on the influence of the 9/11 attacks on literature (and arguing that the current trend toward that trauma is more nuanced in literature, unlike what many scholars claim), they offer some very solid comments on the current state of literature: for example, they pay great interest in the influence of economic pressure and institutional structures on fiction.

It is precisely because postmodern fiction so iconically based itself in a pervasive and often playful skepticism toward temporality and historiography that we need a new critical language for thinking about the production of temporality in the new century. (2012, 615)

Where Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s keyword is oscillation, that of Gąsiorek and James is commitment. The postmillennial writer is no longer entirely occupied by the form of his literature and his emphasis on ‘hefty postmodern slabs that formerly sat on syllabi as proof of the difficulty, and thus the worth, of contemporary writing in the academy’ (Hungerford 2008, 418). Instead, he or she must – in line with the call to literary arms by Sartre after World War II – feel committed to the fiction he or she writes, the reader to whom he or she writes but most importantly the postmillennial writer has to feel engaged with the economic and political era he or she lives in. This unity of politics and form is exactly what the postmodern has left behind, as it were then to engage with the (problematic) metanarrative – it relativizes the concept of truth and abandons that of totality, making it impossible or at least paradoxical to find a unity between commitment and literature. It does not imply, however, that postmillennial writers are distinctly political:

---

23 This is of course of no importance for this dissertation, as House of Leaves was published a year before the attacks. Furthermore, Vermeulen and Van den Akker are sceptic about the influence of 9/11 on the cultural field, as it did not ‘inspire reflection on Western [culture] and the ‘war on terror might even be taken to symbolize a reaffirmation of postmodern values’ as it imposed a typical sentiment of ‘us versus them’ (2010). One can spot a resemblance here with Lyotard’s metanarratives.

24 Good examples of topics that postmillenial writers are oft concerned with are environmental change and racism.

25 Unless, of course, there was a great deal of irony involved.
I think it's wrongly understood by a lot of people that in order to be political, one has to raise the fist and start to bray and raise one's voice; some of the most eloquent and politically powerful writing is actually whispered. (Ward quoting Caryl Phillips 2012, 636)

According to Gąsiorek and James, this commitment is an element that returns from a modernist affect, but that does not completely undo the postmillennial writing of its metacritical character. The role of fiction is the world of mass media, the diminishing of reading fiction, the tension between fiction and journalism are, among other, issues that keep returning in both postmodern and postmillennial fiction (2012).

Gąsiorek and James greatly value the commitment of postmillennial fiction and the fact that it has found a culmination point with the aesthetic form in contemporary literature. However, it is important to note that it is evident that by employing irony, one does not necessarily strip its work of commitment. It is, however, a factor that greatly diminishes the political message in a work of fiction. Prominent postmodern literature (perhaps unknowingly) decreased that political tendency in favor of its experimental form and narrative: the fragmented, challenging, distorted and ironic tone and aesthetics of for example Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* make the work read much more like a literary *tour de force* rather than the utterance of a political statement (which would be along the lines of ‘no more bombs', in this particular case). This is perhaps why an author like George Orwell escapes the label of ‘a typical postmodernist', as although satire and irony are the base ingredients of some of his works, the commitment to his political, social and economic era greatly overrides that of a fetish for ambiguity, fragmentation and uncertainty. Those examples are not provided by Gąsiorek and James in their essay, but considering the fact that they consider
authors such as Caryll Phillips or Zadie Smith as writers that successfully unify commitment and experimentation adds value to the validity of my claim.

Smith wrote manifestoes for the novel’s ethical potential, but Gąsiorek and James see it as shortcoming. In them, she re-inscribed the dichotomy between realism and innovation and by opposing the rational and the experiment, Smith somehow renders them distinct. Gąsiorek and James argue that ‘experimentalism’ in contemporary literature is no longer in opposition to a politically committed mode of realism, and a collaborative approach between the two can lead to a new unified whole. That is one of the main arguments of their essay, but they agree that – despite the strict dichotomy between innovation and realism she once spoke of – Smith surpasses a strict division of the two in her work, making it ‘committed yet unconventional’ (617). Phillips too insists that although ‘a novel is not a sociological pamphlet [...] and has other concerns’, the postmillennial novelist should not consider commitment as the adversary of craft: he or she should ‘balance the means for reconciling fiction’s aesthetic ambitions with the structures of argumentation and social commentary’ (Ward 2012, 664).

Post-irony, in its turn, is a commitment not to the political but to the irony itself. Before discussing what it implies for literature, it is important to discover the notion in a more general context. ‘The internet’ has, as it so often does, misinterpreted the term and stripped it from its original academic meaning by attributing it mainly to the hipster culture in which individuals show appreciation for objects that are generally considered to be passé – therefore being so ironic that they transcend

26 In balancing, of course, we find an echo of oscillation. However, it is important to note that I do not use postmillennial and metamodern as synonyms in any way. The former is merely a temporal indicator that is employed by Gąsiorek and James to group a number of (mainly American) writers, whereas the latter is a structure of feeling that is not bound by time (except for having first experienced postmodernism, of course).
27 It is exactly that combination of commitment and experimentalism or ‘avant-garde’ in Danielewski’s work on which Amy J. Elias wrote an essay, which will be touched upon in the corresponding chapter.
28 Of course, it is debatable what ‘the correct interpretation’ of a term like post-irony is, if there even is one. However, the ones that are found on the influential website Urban Dictionary are definitely not corresponding to how cultural theorists interpret the term – or how I would like to use it as an argument.
irony and show genuine interest in those has-been accessories (Urban Dictionary, own paraphrase). Pop culture critic Jazz Monroe wrote one of the few interesting articles about post-irony in the mainstream media\(^\text{29}\) (in this case the popular webzine Vice), which states

> There’s a sort of sneering undertone whenever the term pops up online, which is understandable - the meaning is vague and words like ‘post’ and ‘irony’ tend to indicate annoying people. But there is substance in the idea. And unless you’re deep into a zero pop culture diet, you’re probably aware of it already on some level. [...] post-irony is pretty much everywhere. Anything overtly cliché - things that should attract ridicule but actually make you warm and tingly - is post-irony. Ought’s funny, instinctive juxtaposition of cynicism and hope is post-irony. [...] Post-irony is an array of regular attitudes floating in the air. It isn’t good, bad, pointless or pretentious. It’s just there. (2014)

As he says, the contemporary pop culture and especially the internet are almost defined by this concept. In his remarks, Monroe even echoes the metamodern idea of oscillation – a proof that Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s descriptive theory has a foundation within the non-academic. Post-irony is indeed a juxtaposition between cynicism and hope, but one could argue that it goes further than that: in line with what the New Sincerity teaches us about the return of earnestness being a response to the postmodern cynicism rather reviving the modern enthusiasm, a post-ironic feeling defines itself by implementing that enthusiasm onto the ironic. If it was merely a juxtaposition, its outcome would more likely be ‘the genuine with an ironic aftertaste’. By going further, post-irony is not merely the clash of cynicism and hope but the culmination – for example, the post-ironic parody exists because of it \textit{committed} nature.

\(^{29}\) It would be paradoxical not to consider the voice of mainstream media when discussing a notion such as post-irony, as it is in part a product of the pop culture. (Non-literary) post-irony is overtly alive in that part of society, not in academics, and therefore it may (if the arguments are well-constructed) help to define it. \textit{Urban Dictionary}, too, shows a reflection on the term, but narrows it down to lifestyle – whereas its roots lie in the art.
The emergence of post-irony is not a signal that ‘traditional’ irony, cynicism and parody is or will soon be a thing of the past, unlike what Thorn means to say with “Manifesto for the New Sincerity”. This does not mean that the evolution of the usage of the concept, on the other hand, has not ended or is not reaching its final destination. For example, television shows that employ the typical postmodern irony and techniques of parody, such as sitcoms or cartoons along the lines of *The Simpsons* or *South Park*, are still being produced and aired and have a tremendously high rate of popularity. ‘Skepticism and irony aren't eliminated, but are held in check by the frame’, Eshelman says (2008, 3) and although he is discussing the metaphysical skeptic aspects of post-postmodernism, the argument still holds for the current stream of postmodern irony.

It is evident that post-irony was an inevitable concept to be picked up by metamodernist theorists. After all, it shares the post-postmodernist consensus of the return to a fake sincerity and the constant swinging between two irreconcilable notions. Although the word itself did not (yet) in any form appear on the Notes on Metamodernism website nor in their original essay, Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s theory echoes everything the term stands for:

Indeed, both metamodernism and the postmodern turn to pluralism, irony, and deconstruction in order to counter a modernist fanaticism. However, in metamodernism this pluralism and irony are utilized to counter the modern aspiration, while in postmodernism they are employed to cancel it out. That is to say, metamodern irony is intrinsically bound to desire, whereas postmodern irony is inherently tied to apathy. (2010, 7)

30 The latter two are explicitly mentioned by Vermeulen and Van den Akker as essential for the portraying of postmodern irony for people of their generation (2010). More than likely, this is because the shows apply (very fragmented, singled out) social critique to a great extent, whilst at the same time ridiculing common literary and cinematic tropes.

31 In which the experincer of the performist artwork is, again, consciously identifying itself with something implausible.
In their lecture *Periodising the 2000s: the Emergence of Metamodernism*, however, they make deliberate use of the word. Their stress lies with the informed naivety and tragic desire, two ideas that will be discussed in detail when we investigate how post-irony can be detected in contemporary literature and evoke a metamodernist feeling in fiction. For them, post-irony is the answer to how artists should engage with the end of history and the postmodern idea that ‘everything has been unmasked as false’ (2013). One way is to search for meaning in the skeptic and ironic by subverting the original message, another is to use and transform the ironic deconstructionist methods for a work of art that promotes an earnest or ‘complete’ idea or world.

Berel Lang wrote an article on “The Limits of Irony” in 1996, in which he discusses the inevitable stopping point of irony:

> [...] one ironic turn opens the way to another and that one opens on still another, with no nonironic end in sight except for the ironic consciousness itself with its denial of any stopping point that might interrupt its own continuing reflection. On this view, irony initiates (more precisely, takes place in) an infinite movement, perhaps regress, perhaps progress, that violates the supposed boundaries of every context in which it appears: it is irony that irony affirms, not just this or that single turn. (571)

When outlining the shift in change of irony throughout history - from the Greek ironic figure to Romantic irony to the postmodern skeptic and deconstructionist irony - he makes it clear that the skeptic irony attacks its predecessor for exhibiting genuine ideals, which undermine the ‘true and consistent irony’ of the postmodern (577). The results of the evolution of the irony, the (in the words of Kierkegaard) ‘infinite absolute negativity’, is an irony that has expanded over every imaginable concept. It is thus inevitable that at one point, irony would be ironic of itself and thereby
eliminate itself from any further progression; we label the result post-irony, the rendering unironic and interpreting sincere of the former irony and its techniques.

1.3.2. Post-irony in literature

As both a relatively young concept and equally young ‘feeling’, recognizing the post-ironic in a cultural field that marks its complexity by applying it side to side with postmodern irony is one of the challenges of contemporary cultural studies. As is apparent when reading *House of Leaves* (or any contemporary novel that engages with more than just storytelling), the division between the two is muddy and unclear; is the exaggerated use of intertextuality, for example, a witty and sarcastic manoeuvre to ridicule academics or does it emphasize a certain admiration for literary history, literary theory and the spirit of an age where credibility and provability are some of the highest standards?

Hutcheon\(^{32}\) notices the same dichotomy in the recalling and celebrating of (literary) history in fiction: is it a nostalgic escape from to postmodern to ‘an idealized, simpler era of “real” values’ or does it express an ironic distance that implies a ‘genuine and legitimate dissatisfaction with modernity and the unquestioned belief in... perpetual modernization’ (1998)? She notices a similar unclearness in postmodern irony as in post-irony: for the former, it is in this case the puzzling division between the nostalgic and the ironic distance, whereas we in the latter already assume that cynicism has implemented its part and the juxtaposition becomes even vaguer. It is, as she advocates about the postmodern irony, definitely possible to interpret it is either one of the two or a combination. Nostalgia can be read as either a longing and thus reinstating of ‘ideals’ or as ‘the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition’ (Stewart 1984, 23). By phrasing it so,

\(^{32}\) Hutcheon’s essay “Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern” does not discuss post-irony, but touches upon the so-called end of irony (with which she disagrees) and provides several meaningful thoughts for defining post-irony.
Susan Stewart approaches a great distinction between irony and nostalgia: that of knowingness and innocence. That distinction is alike to the one that we find in post-irony, except that the innocence of the nostalgia is much more complicated and less pure: it is a deliberate ignorance, a dream of which we know it is a dream but that we willingly try to perceive as reality. Either juxtaposition has ‘irony’ on its other side and it is, naturally, the very counterpart of the innocence and wholesome – “few have ever accused [it] of successfully reinstating the authentic and the ideal” (Hutcheon 1998).

To furthermore complicate but specify this distinction, one must acknowledge the common ground between the nostalgic and the ironic. According to Hutcheon, this is the fact that they both share an ‘unexpected twin evocation of both affect and agency’ – throughout literary history there were so many different interpretations of the notion ‘irony’, which is due to the simple fact that critics are overly interested in irony’s politics and strategies, rather than the emotions it evokes. That is paradoxical, as Hutcheon claims that the affect of irony is its primary characteristic of definition:

I want to argue that to call something ironic or nostalgic is, in fact, less a description of the ENTITY ITSELF than an attribution of a quality of RESPONSE. Irony is not something in an object that you either "get" or fail to "get": irony "happens" for you (or, better, you make it "happen") when two meanings, one said and the other unsaid, come together, usually with a certain critical edge. Likewise, nostalgia is not something you "perceive" in an object; it is what you "feel" when two different temporal moments, past and present, come together for you and, often, carry considerable emotional weight. In both cases, it is the element of response--of active participation, both intellectual and affective--that makes for the power. (2008)

---

33 I deliberately use ‘nostalgic’ because Hutcheon uses the word. What is ‘nostalgic’ in postmodern irony is not alike to the ‘rendering sincere of irony’ in post-irony, but as the latter is a transformed (or corrupted, if you will) version of the former, the claim is still valid and serves a correct interpretation of the word.
That is also why one of the greatest on-going movements of the 20th and 21st century, feminism, is considered by philosophers such as Judith Butler to be in an uneasy alliance with postmodernism: feminist literature can hardly evoke a nostalgic feeling of ‘the golden age in the past’ (idem). Firstly, this is because the main narratives of literary history are those of males. Secondly, although feminism shares the concept of the deconstruction of ideals (such as the inequality between genders that is asserted in and by history) with postmodernism, the movement creates a new set of (more favorable) narratives – a set that evokes a longing for a utopian future rather than a nostalgic look at an unequal history of oppression (Benhabib et al. 1994, 1-16).

If post-irony (and irony alike) are mainly characterized by their affect rather than their agency, one could state that in ambiguous cases ‘it is merely a matter of interpretation’ to which side of the pendulum swings (such as Hutcheon claims). To claim this is not at least partly true would be problematic, but post-irony has a specific set of traits that distinct it from the skeptic irony from which it evolved: the aforementioned informed naivety and tragic desire. Both of these notions have hardly been clarified by Vermeulen and Van den Akker, but that is excusable as they explain themselves – especially in light of the metamodern theory that surrounds it. It is safe to assume that the informed naivety they speak of has an entirely different origin than that of which Paul Ricoeur speaks in his ontological en eschatological works (Van Leeuwen 1981, 20), but it presumably ties up to the same epitome: a naivety that shows a renewed interest in mystery and transcendence, but one that is postcritical as it is the corollary of a critical phase. The tragic desire, a term that is embedded in New Romanticism, is identified by Mas’ud Zavarzadeh as the fact that ‘each individual in our time a knight errant engaged in a bewildering quest of the self in an atomized society’ (1975, 76). Seth Abrahamson, a metamodernist theorist who does not affiliate himself with Vermeulen and Van den Akker, who comments the following about Zavarzadeh’s quote:
What better statement of “tragic desire” could there be than this one? What better example of the need to occupy two positions at once than to be simultaneously a) a Romantic quester, and b) a clear-eyed resident of an atomized society, i.e. one in which quest-like truthseeking is evidently futile? (2015)

The last clue of defining the usage of post-irony literature that we will investigate is set out by David Foster Wallace34, an author that ‘although not [being] so innocent when it comes to irony, parody and side-tracking comments’ (Feßler 2012) provides a coherent formulation on the evolution of the ironic nature of fiction. In “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” (2006), a lengthy essay on seriousness in fiction, and how different media (television (especially commercials) and literature) are interconnected in the present day and age. The objective of television is the same as that of the novel; ‘to wow, to ensure that the reader is pleased and continues to read’ by instances of irony and rewarding reader/viewer for ‘unraveling the easy double layer’ these instances play with (79). However, Wallace notices a shift away from that irony. ‘The next literary [American] rebels might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels,’ he states, as they would step away from the cynicism and irony that used to be the rebel’s main weapon (81). He concludes his essay that these rebels define themselves by risking: whereas the former, postmodern rebels ‘risked the gasp and squeal’ by heavily relying on things such as shocks, disgust and outrage, the new rebels might be the ones willing to

risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the “How banal”. Accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Credulity. Willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment

---

34 DFW’s work might have been equally fit for proving the plausibility of co-existence of post- and metamodernism in contemporary literature, as his work (especially Infinite Jest) is one of the most researched and documented subjects in contemporary literary criticism. However, it lacks more avant-garde nature of House of Leaves.
without law. Today’s most engaged young fiction does seem like some kind of line’s end’s end. (82)

When considering Wallace’s remarks in this day and age, we notice that there is a shift in media: where television had a (vice-versa) influence on postmodern fiction, the internet has the same effect on metamodernist fiction and theory. To stretch Wallace’s thoughts, it is arguable that the irony of commercials that he so deeply valued is deteriorating as more and more people have access to technology that keeps them from watching those instances of cynicism: digital television, services like Netflix and the easy access to illegal downloading.

Wallace does not speak of the end of irony, but one could say that he sees the ironic in the non-ironic. It cannot be stressed enough that post-irony is not devoid of irony, but a transformed irony and skepticism that it is rendered and appreciated as authentic and sincere. The essay received attention by several literary critics that claimed Wallace successfully exploited the gap between irony and naivety (Boswell 2003, 16) and proved the worth of his essay by making his work ‘sophisticated and doggedly down to earth’ (Scott 2000). In “The Art’s Heart’s Purpose’: Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest”, Mary K. Holland states the following:

His greatest accomplishment in the novel will be to construct not a character strong enough to escape the ironic trap that the novel has set, but rather one earnest enough to suffer the irony and brave enough to struggle heroically to escape it, but still doomed, almost sadistically so, by an author who cannot overcome his own ironic ambivalence. (2006, 225)

Ultimately, that is the perfect (perhaps non-deliberate) application of post-irony. Infinite Jest is oscillating between post- and metamodernism on a different level than House of Leaves; the latter is
as shall be discussed – more a combination of elements of both whereas Wallace's is more a culmination of the two feelings. Wallace deliberately evades self-conscious metafiction, while breaking the so-called ‘fourth wall’ is one of *House of Leaves*’ primary literary characteristics. This is not to say that Wallace makes no effort of employing metafiction, but according to Amanda Redinger, his use of metafiction ‘excuses him from the recursive, ironic loop he so despises in the work of the image fictionists’. While she acknowledges his distrust of metafiction (because, ‘just like irony, it now exists solely for the purpose of parading its own cleverness’) but the fact that he blatantly uses it in his novels, she also states that his use metafiction ‘serves a purpose beyond itself’. He does not want to echo the confusion of modern life, but deliberately chooses to break the linear narrative (such as with the large amounts of footnotes, which Redinger claims to be a strategic device to be ‘a pain in the ass’ by having to constantly flip back and forth to the end of the book) with the intention of keeping the reader from getting caught in the narrative, like they would in televisional fiction (12-14). By doing so, he makes metafiction serve a very tangible cause, ergo, an authentic rendering of the ironic device. That is much unlike what is going on in *House of Leaves* – the banal fact that its (equally large amount of) footnotes are found on the page they are referring too already leads us to believe that it does not serve such a post-ironic purpose.
Metamodernism, as Vermeulen and Van den Akker argue, is a theory about post-postmodernism. Although it is a (or perhaps the most) popular subtheory in post-postmodernist studies, the two are not synonymous; it is important to distinct the two. However, in the so-called ‘information age’ where Wikipedia rules over quick check facts and unthorough researching, it is remarkable that the ‘introduction’ of both the entries post-postmodernism and metamodernism on the website note that the two are similar terms (2015). Although metamodernism shares a great set of philosophies with most other post-postmodernist theories, it is a specific term that differs on other aspects with many paradigms and considering the two to be equal says something about the current evolution in the cultural debate. Other theorists, such as Eshelman (cf. supra), too have developed a set of ideas to situate the aesthetics of end of postmodernism, several by adapting giving a different interpretation to the word ‘metamodernism’. This chapter will briefly (as it is a lengthy subject) situate Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s metamodernism in post-postmodernist theory, mainly to highlight some of the criticism it has received – many of which has been responded to in their 2015 clarification essay.

In his article “Periodizing the Present”, Lee Konstantinou stresses that there is no critical consensus on what postmodernism’s successor is: attempting to evaluate the theory on its development ‘reads more like a collection of essays than a unified monograph’ (412). He does however notice that the binding factor between these apparently disparate theories is the step away from the skepticism for metanarratives and the dedication to the deconstruction of the myth (to be consistent with the previously discussed theory, we can paraphrase this as ‘the ideal’), but the footprint will always remain. Konstantinou’s text is mainly a reflection on what Jeffrey Nealon’s theories of post-postmodernist capitalism, but he acknowledges the increasingly interconnectedness of every part of
modern day life – thus, it is not illogical that have uses post-postmodernist essays from cultural rather than from economic studies.

Alan Kirby, for example, wrote on digimodernism (the postmodern dismantled by the technological) and pseudo-modernism\(^{35}\). In his article “The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond”, Kirby pays greater attention to the interactive nature our age than Vermeulen and Van den Akker did. By stating that ‘pseudo-modernism's typical intellectual states are ignorance, fanaticism and anxiety’ (2006), instead of the postmodern irony and ambivalence, he echoes the archetypical post-postmodernist philosophy, but he downsizes the effect of the postmodern on the pseudo-modern being:

> Here, the typical emotional state, radically superseding the hyper-consciousness of irony, is the trance – the state of being swallowed up by your activity. In place of the neurosis of modernism and the narcissism of postmodernism, pseudo-modernism takes the world away, by creating a new weightless nowhere of silent autism. (2006)

The interaction thus takes away the complicated nature of art; in the end, Kirby notices an emergence of the same (although somewhat more bitterly expressed) values as those in metamodernism, but the crucial difference is that pseudo-modernism dismisses the (according to Vermeulen and Van den Akker) inevitable postmodern influence on art. His focus lies with the sentiment of the post-postmodern experiencer, not with that of the artwork.

The strategies of post-postmodernism that Andre Furlani outlines in *Postmodernism and After: Guy Davenport* is closer to those of the metamodernism discussed here, but according to Vermeulen and

---

\(^{35}\) Nomen est omen – pseudo-modernism sounds like the cynical rendering of ‘the return of (not to) modernist values’ which Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s metamodernism is concerned with.
Van den Akker the issue here is that the combination of postmodernist and modernist affect is one of ‘complementarity and “contrasts absorbed into harmony” that aspire to transcend the postmodern disorder’ (2015) instead of an oscillation between the two. Alexandra Dumitrescu (cf. supra) can be found in the same line as Furlani, as she too sees the metamodernist as a more harmonious feeling rather than the double-bind that characterizes it – the fact that she uses terms like ‘holistic’ (2007) is proof of this.

Perhaps the biggest and most direct critique on Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s metamodernism comes from Martin Paul Eve in his article “Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace and the Problems of ‘Metamodernism”. Firstly, Eve marks that in their original essay, Vermeulen and Van den Akker interpret Kant wrongly:

Metamodernism, if aligned with Kant’s grand narrative, would not seek ‘forever for a truth that it never expects to find’, but would abandon the search, only to find the truth in which it disbelieved regardless. (2012, 10)

Secondly, he accuses Vermeulen and Van den Akker of shoehorning their theory into academic discourse and draws a line with the Sokal-affair. Those two accusations are only minor attacks, as he deems metamodernism as a post-postmodernist theory inherently flawed and not worth of consideration. The oscillations within ontology and epistemology that it propagates are deemed fit for a portion of the postmodern and post-postmodern literature, as well as unfit for a different portion of the same strands. To prove his point, he for example refers to Pynchon’s fiction in which naivety and sincerity are mutually compatible (whereas Vermeulen and Van den Akker claimed those ideals to by mutually exclusive in postmodern literature). Metamodernism, to Eve, is not a temporal signifier but possesses a nominative function; it is unproductive to attribute metamodern
aspects solely to contemporary novels, and to neglect the ‘oscillation’ in postmodern literature. Vermeulen and Van den Akker have not directly reacted to Eve’s accusations, although they have excused themselves from much of this attack by stating that the metamodern is a structure of feeling and not a programme. Also, in their defense, they have never reduced their metamodernism to merely a temporal signifier – instead, they attempted to put into chart emergence that periodizes the contemporary, which does not necessarily include the possibility that that same structure of feeling is a ‘creation’ of the post-postmodern era.

David James and Urmila Seshagiri have deliberately Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s essay as the basis for their article “Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution” (2014), in which they grasp the concept and adapt it to literary tropes of contemporary writers. However, not all uses of the word metamodernism are in line with the mindset of Notes on Metamodernism – the Swedish website Metamoderna.org uses the term differently, in part to construe a post-postmodernist theory and in part as a response to Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s employment of the word. Very recently, Seth Abrahamson published a series of essays in which he highly values the Zavarzadean (cf. supra) interpretation of metamodernism, as he originally coined the term and has been misread or narrowed by the two Dutch scholars36 (2015/2). Rather than oscillation, Abrahamson finds juxtaposition to be at the center of metamodernism; even in the examples that Vermeulen and Van den Akker provide to strengthen their claims. As a literary scholar, he also accuses them of not being able to provide a division between literary and cultural studies, as the latter will investigate an enduring volume of phenomena and merely ask ‘what happened?’ while the former pays close attention to an individual artwork and asks ‘what does this herald?’ (2015/3). Furthermore, he states that

36 Although they explicitly state that they did not coin the word and that their interpretation is only one of many.
On the one hand, this idea of being constantly pulled between poles—regardless of the inclusion that, too, one prefers one pole more than another—is “classic” postmodernism. If we look within Literary Studies, for instance, we find in nearly every poststructuralist specialization evidence of a series of dialectics with a “preferred” pole. [...] So this “snap-back” motion so relied upon by Vermeulen and van den Akker is not only largely missing in the discrete metamodern phenomena they describe but also fails to justify their ongoing claim of “paradigm shift.” In another sense, however, the “snap-back” metaphor is, in Literary Studies terms, a perfect circumscription of the psychic positioning and well-developed metanarrative operative in the literary work of High Modernists such as Ezra Pound and James Joyce. (2015-3)

Abrahamson echoes Eve’s statement about the non-temporal character of the metamodern. In short, Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s pendulum oscillates because it is irreconcilable with other (even opposing) options, whereas the actual state cultural paradigm would suggest that that is due to indistinguishability. The latter is an important thing to consider when reading fiction with a metamodern framework in mind, and it is exactly what problematizes oscillation in House of Leaves.
2. *House of Leaves*

After broadly investigating the cultural paradigm of metamodernism and its literary implications, it is time to research a novel that is considered late postmodernist or early metamodernist to map a possible transition. This does, of course, not imply that metamodernism has a temporal connotation but I will prove that there is another oscillation to consider: not that between modernist and postmodernist values, but one that oscillates between the postmodern and the metamodern – *House of Leaves* thus oscillates both *within* and *towards* the metamodern. Such an oscillation is somewhat problematic, as the former already implies postmodern elements, but by applying the metamodernist literary strategies that I have engaged with in the previous chapter I will be able to set the two apart. One of the primary arguments against a metamodern reading of *House of Leaves* is that several characteristics of the novel (including the story) can hardly be considered anything but skeptically ironic. On the other hand, the novel greatly engages with several of the metamodernist tactics, such as the return of commitment and the reformation of the authentic subject.
2.1. Situating *House of Leaves*

As mentioned before, it is important to consider *House of Leaves* as an important novel for the contemporary literary debate and there are several reasons to do so – some of which I will mention here and work with when arguing for a post- or metamodern reading. Firstly, the novel has a special relation with the internet: it is an important part of its creation (Danielewski frequently uploaded chapters of the work on his website for revision by friends) and determined its popularity for a large part (Danielewski 2015). There are several quite popular forums online where fans of the novel (discuss the work and possible theories surrounding the story in detail, the most prominent (with over 65,000 posts) hosted by the author himself. That, together with the fact that the author launched a ‘pop quiz’ about the novel on its release, indicate a vice versa commitment between author and reader on an extratextual level. Furthermore, it is an example of what Kirby meant with the interactive\textsuperscript{37}: the novel has long been finished, but interaction between the author and his fans evoke new readings, fan fiction etc. The (ongoing) relationship between the novel and the internet is rarely commented upon\textsuperscript{38}, but is by definition the result of a new form of readership and it is needless to say that the interaction lies in part at the foundation of the cult and fandom surrounding this novel. Related to this, Jessica Pressman considers *House of Leaves* to be a ‘networked novel’ – a consideration that highlights the metamodern character of the work (cf. infra).

Secondly, unlike the other great ‘maximalist’ works of its age (such as *Infinite Jest* or *2666*), *House of Leaves* engages more with the possibilities of the novel as a physical medium (materiality): different fonts for different narrators, wonky or ergodic typography, visual writing, a color symbolism that is

\textsuperscript{37} Kirby’s ‘interaction’ was phrased more pessimistically, but this is a good example of how interaction can be productive.

\textsuperscript{38} That between the novel and different media, including the digital, is, however.
set out by print, et cetera. The novel resembles innovations seen in the twentieth-century avant-garde, but it serves a purpose beyond the aesthetical: by expanding the possibilities of typography, the novel summons sentiments that are aligned with the narration. To give a banal example, when a character enters a small room the text is printed in a small square in the middle of the page, in order to evoke a claustrophobic feeling – Jesse Stommel wrote about this novel as a haptic device (cf. infra). Furthermore, the novel successfully combines several forms of literature; we find instances of various types of prose and poetry (both often composed as ‘concrete’) but also text in the form of a diary, photographs, advertisements, academic research and even Braille.

Lastly, the novel is deliberately engaging with literary history and discourse as well as cultural and specific scientific academics on a very visible level. Throughout the work, numerous footnotes referring to other novels within the canon, academic works, musical works, philosophy and the history of cinema add up to make the reader believe that the novel is in fact the work of an academic, rather than that of a fiction writer. Danielewski studied English Literature at Yale (Danielewski 2015/2) and is thus affiliated with an academic approach to literature – a thing that he overtly exploited in his own work. That being said, the novel incorporates a large amount of ‘stereotypical’ tropes from literature across all ages; by using a ‘blind storyteller’ (referring to Homer or Borges) to, for example, mentioning the urban myths of the ‘snuff film’, the novel preoccupies itself with ‘literature’ as man knows it from ancient Greek and Norse mythology to postmodernist parody. There are few literary devices that the novel does not at least touch upon, and one gets the feeling that the author tried his best to incorporate almost every single one of these in his novel.
At the center of one of the major (but for this research superfluous) ongoing debates is the novel’s genre: a modern gothic horror story due to its grim theme and disturbing ontology or ultimately a love story that uplifts the strength of a relationship even in the uncanniest of times. Aside from readers’ and publishers’ irresistible urge to attribute a genre to a novel, that question is still not at order: if anything, *House of Leaves* successfully escapes genre fiction by carefully picking elements of several fictional and non-fictional literary genre and melting them together whilst still keeping true to some of their main characteristics. However, it is important to consider the horror aspect in the novel’s day and age: the work was published in 2000 but written in the 1990’s, where the horror genre reached an ‘era of self-reflexive parody’ (Hennelly 2001, 74). This was mainly in cinema, but the interconnectedness of the media is a trait not only specific to *House of Leaves* but to contemporary culture in general (cf. supra, Wallace). Movies like Wes Anderson’s *Scream* (1996) and *Scream 2* (1998) were ultimately metatextual ‘in their playful double exposure of Gothic horror-film conventions’ and shared Kirby’s pseudomodern affect with ‘their performative exploration of audience participation’ (idem). If *House of Leaves* were of the horror genre fiction and influenced by its contemporaries, it would thus be a straightforward postmodern parody – which it is not.

Fitting the novel into a certain genre is hard, but situating *House of Leaves* within a cultural strand such as post- or metamodernism is even more of a challenge if not impossible. While all the critics that researched the work noted its avant-garde and highly intertextual character, some refer to it as a postmodern work (Hayles 2002; Badmington 2003; Jacobson 2005) while others note its abandonment of postmodern clichés (Hansen 2004) or, in the light of modernism, the return of unironic sentiments (Hennelly 2001) and Will Slocombe calls it a radicalization of postmodern nihilism (by which he stresses the difficulty of situating *House of Leaves*) (2005, 87). Vermeulen states that the work is ‘supposedly squarely postmodern’ but marks that one should consider its characterization of firm hope and belief, a ‘belief that centers and systems remain though particular
things do not, that organizing principles and frameworks remain ready to be fleshed with meaning — belief that the word continues to appear and move through bodies’ (2013, 9); ergo speaking of a metamodernist affect in what is ‘supposedly postmodern’.

Due to the very diverse textual character and the length of the novel, together with the fact that one should see unity in its fragmentation (cf. infra), a close reading in which I single out certain excerpts of the novel would not suffice for an interpretation of the work. It is untrue that there are no essential or more important parts in the text, but paradoxically, the novel defines its overall structure of feeling through its combination with less essential or at times even completely superfluous blots of text that – as some critics argue – should not be read at all. To single out specific sections of the novel would imply giving in to deconstructionist techniques, and it is exactly that which House of Leaves refuses. Therefore, it is of vital importance to analyse the text ‘as a whole’ – despite its scattered, inconsistent and self-contradictory character – to capture its affect, as that structure of feeling defines itself by means of ‘coherent incoherence’.
2.2. The postmodern *House of Leaves*

To read *House of Leaves* as a result of postmodernism rather than a precursor of metamodernism, one must carefully deconstruct the work and fit it in the postmodern framework of skeptical irony, fragmentation and ambiguity. The novel marks a transition between the two, and by claiming so I will argue that an important amount of the work’s main characteristics are inherently postmodern and cannot be fit into the theory of oscillation. Intertextuality in *House of Leaves* is one of its most prominent literary techniques but is also the most problematic when interpreting it as ironic or post-ironic, as will become clear.

2.2.1. *Aggressive Fictions*

In her 2012 book *Aggressive Fictions*, Kathryn Hume defines what she calls the emergence of the contemporary American novel that ‘deliberately not gives pleasure to the reader’ (ix). In her work, she tries to outline several strategies of that phenomenon, including fragmentation, deliberate switching between narrative speed, self-reflexive and self-centered complaints and attacking the reader’s ontological assumptions. Breaking the so-called ‘reader-author contract’ is aggressive but does not imply that one should not appreciate the novel, as highly skilled readers find pleasure in reading a novel that messes with our assumptions (although the larger part of the reader audience may not fall under this category), Hume argues, ‘even if they do not present a reward for the readership’ (3). Although the largest amount of novels she researches are undisputable postmodern fictions, a smaller part of her work is dedicated to works that are certainly not (such as Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*). Postmodernism is an etymologically and semantically defunct term when describing literature that has fragmentation and irony as its main characteristics, as it is a temporal modifier for ‘what came after modernism’. Some critics argue that, for example, Lawrence Sterne’s *The Life
and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman was the first postmodern novel (Graf 2007, 22), rendering ‘post-modernism’ obsolete. However, it would be dangerous to assume that ‘aggressive fiction’ as Hume coins it is a primary characteristic of solely postmodernism – although she sets the ‘original expectations and assumptions of literature’ (such as a coherent structure that is not undermined by contradicting narrators) as juxtaposed against ‘the harder to decipher postmodern fragmentation’ (7), hinting at the fact that these aggressive strategies are definitely in line with the postmodern technique of disorientating the reader.

_House of Leaves_ is a perfect example of aggressive fiction, which Hume recognized by applying her theory to it in a subchapter of “Attacking the Reader’s Ontological Assumptions”. The novel could be useful to present the frequent switch in narrative speed by the constant shift of narration frame, or as partly exhibiting conjugations of the grotesque and violence (especially in the parts where the entire team investigates the house or in “The Whaletoe’s Letters”), but Hume rightfully assigned the task of proving the evoked ontological insecurities and incoherencies of aggressive fiction by researching _House of Leaves_. The purely textual aggression of the novel is obviously its typography, which is often literally hard to read (rather than to interpret):

Some of the insets may be in mirror-image type. Sometimes the print runs diagonally on the page; sometimes it squeezes into a very small window, the rest of the page blank. Many pages contain only a sentence or two surrounded by glaring white space. Quotations occur in a dozen languages. (152)

That is merely ‘surface aggression’, and Hume continues by investigating the actual attack on the reader’s ontological assumptions by noting that ‘within the world of fiction, the reality of various authors and editors of the text is rendered problematic in the extreme.’ The framework narrative is
indeed one of the novel’s most challenging traits, especially as they often contradict each other, are incomplete or break each other off in the middle of a sentence. In that way, it is hard if not impossible for the reader to gather enough (coherent) information to fully grasp what is going on. Johnny Truant, narrating the 'largest frame'\textsuperscript{39}, is one of the many untrustworthy narrators: the man suffers from his obsession with \textit{House of Leaves} and has severe insomnia. Furthermore, he warns us for his untrustworthiness in the introduction of the work, exclaiming that the book damaged his character – just as, possibly, it will harm the assumptions of the reader:

Out of the blue, beyond and cause you can trace, you'll suddenly realize things are not how you perceived them to be at all. Then no matter who you are [...] you'll watch yourself dismantle every assurance you ever lived by. You will fight to avoid facing what you truly are, the creature we all are, buried in the nameless black of a name. And then the nightmares begin. (xxiii)

Truant is the ‘obvious’ untrustworthy narrator, but Hume states that the fact that we only see Navidson’s movie through scraps of paper of a blind man (who is inherently untrustworthy as he could not have seen the film) is undermining the reader’s full engagement, as he or she never knows that what he or she reads is in fact veritable. ‘The book destabilizes us epistemologically as well as ontologically’ (154). Ontologically, as the plot defies nature as we know it; epistemologically, as the reader cannot set apart (literary) truth from imagination.

No matter how many deliberate literary tropes \textit{House of Leaves} plays with, its core idea – endless space within a limited house – is ‘original and clever’. If the house were infested with ghosts, as

\textsuperscript{39}Although, we are of course supposed to believe that Danielewski is the highest form – as the cover of every edition mentions his name as the author, but once the work is opened (even before the actual fiction commences) we read that \textit{House of Leaves} was ‘written by Zampanò with introduction and notes by Johnny Truant’, installing Danielewski as yet another part of the framework and interconnecting reality and fiction. That too is an attack on the reader’s assumption (a concise authorship), although Hume does not mention this extra strategy of the novel.
Hume considers the traditional house in horror tales, ‘we absorb the uneasiness as a rule’. Now, however, our personal sense or reality is undermined in part because ‘we have no preexisting defenses’ and such an endless space gives substance to an impossibility that disturbs us. Together with the complexity of the text, *House of Leaves* ‘attacks’ the reader on more than one level:

We must struggle to disentangle the confusing strands, struggle to follow up footnotes and not lose our place in the text, and struggle to keep narrative possibilities straight. We are certainly drubbed into recognizing that nothing in a written text is “real”, that all we have is just words in play, and yet the palpable representational detail of description of corridors and stairs keeps insisting on reality. [...] What can be filmed is something seen, and we tend to trust our sense of sight. [...] We are forced to realize that the suspension of disbelief we ordinarily extend toward fiction is an act of our volition, and this text refuses to permit that suspension. Denying the usual comforts does damage to the cozy relationship that we generally enjoy with fiction. (155)

Not only the casual reader but the academic as well is target to the attack of the work, as by implementing the scientific writing by both Zampanò and Truant; ‘all but the dimmest readers will be dissatisfied with their attempts to explain [Danielewski’s] complex creation’ as he anticipates as many interpretations as possible. That resolves to an ‘untamable’ text that readers will never believe to be ‘their own’ as we ‘tend to feel that we own texts we have explained to our satisfaction’ (idem). The intensified textuality of the work leads to an intellectual game, one that immediately does away with the satisfaction of ‘solving a puzzle’ because of its incoherence and internal contradictions, making it not only ontologically and epistemologically aggressive but *apparently* devoid of all pleasure as well. Not true, says Hume, as the work perfectly balances its attacks to make them just likable enough to not lose any readers;
We may stand back and marvel at how easily we believe, in fictional terms, in an impossible world, but we are probably not driven to the nightmares of Johnny Truant as his reality crumbles about him. The assault does not penetrate deeply enough into our sense of personal reality to achieve that. We play, though, with that possibility, and will carry with us the traces of experiencing an impossible world. (156)

Considering *House of Leaves* as aggressive fiction by these accounts renders a metamodernist reading practically useless. After all, Brian McHale noted that ontological destabilization is the ultimate goal of all postmodern fiction (1987). Not only does the fragmented narration disturb literary premises, it deliberately evokes skepticism and ambiguity. The fact that ‘we play with a possibility of an impossible world’ should not be understood as putting on the conscious blindfold (cf. supra) but as the impossibility to do so. By attacking the reader in his core beliefs – both epistemologically and ontologically – there is no Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s ‘what if?’, yet instead only a ‘what is?’ remains. Nothing is certain, and several pages of the work feature merely the explanation that something was there in the original transcript but were lost in the process or ‘crossed out with what looked suspiciously like black crayon and tar’ (354); ‘what is?’ is a times literally the question, even on a more banal level of reading. If anything, the difficult and self-contradicting frameworks of narration erase all ‘naïveté’ because the work decisively not lets its reader be naïve in any sense: instead, it constantly challenges him or her to reevaluate what he or she has read, striking out any possibility of willfully believing what is being written as it is often rendered false or doubtful within the next pages. Naivety’s counterpoint in Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s theory, knowingness, translates itself to a Socratesian ‘I know that I know nothing.’

‘Aggressive fiction’ is not postmodern per se (nor vice-versa), but the reading of *House of Leaves* in its framework is. However, it should, of course, be noted that Hume investigated the work with
these inherently postmodern clues (fragmentation, disruption of assumptions, etc.) as a target. Therefore, solely reading the work as an attack on rather than an embrace of the reader would downgrade the work's complicated character. By no means does this minimize Hume's efforts; the fact that it is indeed 'aggressive fiction' is one its major of not its primary characteristic. Still, *House of Leaves* is no *Gravity's Rainbow*: employing such a reading without regard for the strategies the work uses to commit itself to its readers and to engage with the readership (rather than just laying out intrinsically indecipherable patterns) does not do justice to Danielewski's efforts. It is possible to turn Hume's argument around, in the favor of the novel's interactive qualities: by installing these (unsolvable) riddles in the work, the reader will feel more likely to occupy itself with solving them – proof of this is the vast amount of online discussion (concerning the plot, not its theoretical implications) about the novel.

2.2.2. Derridean poststructuralism: deconstruction and Trace

Although it is not a suited argument for a specific reason, nor should we assume that it necessarily implies anything concerning the novel, it is important to note that Danielewski is a well-read man if it comes down to the literary canon and postmodern (especially Derridean) literary theory. Substantiations of the former are the overt intertextual references to great literary or cultural works, varying from Ovid to *The Gilgamesh Epic*, from The Beatles to Ezra Pound. Proof of the latter is Danielewski’s degree in Literature, but more importantly his contributions to *Derrida: The Movie* – a 2002 documentary which focuses on both Derrida's theory and person (Derrida The Movie 2014). The second edition of *House of Leaves* even features a quote by literature reviewer John Freeman of Time Out New York that states:
A love story by a semiotician. Danielewski has a songwriter’s heart as attuned to heartache as he is to Derrida’s theory of the sign. (back cover)

Derrida is namedropped in the novel four times, and in all except one feature his theory is (deliberately poorly) translated by Truant and set against what Zampanó writes. In a specific part of the work – ‘A Partial Transcript Of What Some Have Thought by Karen Green’ – where several academics and celebrities are interviewed about their interpretation of the house, Derrida and his theory are slightly mocked:


Setting: Artaud Exhibit

Derrida: Well that which is inside, which is to say, if I may say, that which infinitely patterns itself without the outside, without the other, though where then is the other?

Finished? Good.

[Pause]

Hold my hand. We stroll.

[...]

The other. [Pause] Or what other, which is to say then, the same thing. The other, no other.

You see? (361; 365)

However, a simple footnote by Truant two pages earlier reveals that these transcriptions are more than likely to be the offspring of Karen Green (or for as far as the reader knows any other narrator). Still, it is interesting to see how the work engages with (or parodies) postmodern deconstruction
methodology: 'the other’ is a distinguishable element that relates to the ‘trace theory’ Derrida coined. In short, he defines it as follows:

The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace. . . . In this way the metaphysical text is understood; it is still readable, and remains read. (1973, 156)

A sign is defined by everything it is not. The hallways in House of Leaves are similar; since one cannot ever fully understand its metaphysics, we are left with our ontological premises and ‘the other’ – an uncanny and incomprehensible entity that might be defined by Heidegger’s ‘the unheimlich’. In the same subchapter, a text that is attributed to (a fictional version of) Harold Bloom mentions the term to describe the hallways: ‘The unheimlich, or “unhomely” as the “uncanny,” is perceived wherever we are reminded of our inner tendency to yield to obsessive patterns of action. Overruling the pleasure principle, the daemonic in oneself yields to a “repetition compulsion”’ (359).

Earlier in the novel, Zampanò portrays his knowledge by commenting on Heidegger’s interpretation of the word in his Rede von der Unheimlichkeit: ‘[He] fails to point out that unheimlich when used as an adverb means "dreadfully," "awfully," "heaps of," and "an awful lot of." Largeness has always been the condition of the weird and unsafe; it is overwhelming, too much or too big. Thus that which is uncanny or unheimlich is neither homey nor protective, nor comforting nor familiar. It is alien, exposed, and unsettling, or in other words, the perfect description of the house on Ash Tree Lane’ (28). Although this comment is superfluous, it echoes what Heidegger says about ‘Dasein’ and
‘Nicht-zuhause-sein': when confronted with fear, the existence\textsuperscript{40} finds itself in peculiar indefiniteness when alongside to anxiety (1962, 233). The presentation\textsuperscript{41} of Heidegger's unheimlichkeit is more fitting than that of Kierkegaard, as it is portrayed more detailed and more closely related to the ontology of the doorway.

In “'This Is Not For You”: Nihilism and the House that Jacques Built’ – the first name referring to Derrida - Will Slocombe offers insights in a very detailed investigation of Derridean theory and House of Leaves. All of those are very interesting to those interested in post-structuralism and Freudian nihilism in contemporary novels, but he construes several arguments that are useful to bear in mind when reading the work as a typically postmodern novel. Firstly, he notes, Derrida says that deconstruction must happen within a text, 'moving inside the space of the house\textsuperscript{42}, looking for structural instabilities’ (2005, 91):

This approach to reading, especially when considered in relation to House of Leaves, is problematized because we cannot inhabit the text. [...] As readers, we are unable to dwell within the space proffered by House of Leaves, just as Navidson finds it impossible to live within the House. The House symbolizes absence and to live inside absence is impossible.

(92)

This inconsistency marginalizes the reader, he argues. House of Leaves is full of tropes, which would make it a very 'deconstructable' text, but refuses deconstruction as ‘while [it] uses deconstructive

\textsuperscript{40} Heidegger's philosophy is found in the strand of existentialism, thus it is important to value the importance of ‘Dasein’ or ‘experience of being’ – ‘Befindlichkeit [...] macht offenbar >>wie einem ist<<’ (1977, 250).

\textsuperscript{41} Of course, one needs to keep in mind that (in the work) Kierkegaard’s and Heidegger’s unheimlichkeit are respectively explained by renounced literary critic Harold Bloom on the one hand and commented upon by the blind Zampanò and homeless, uneducated Truant on the other. One finds a form of irony in this: the more fitting solution to this particular case is offered by the least favorable option. The reader might interpret this hidden clue as a embodiment of the interactive character of the novel: although here the problem is resolved, it is not implausible for non-academics to construe constructive readings.

\textsuperscript{42} Slocombe uses the very (in this case very convenient) metaphor of a house for a text, as it too is a construction with several levels and has an interior and exterior character.
strategy, its primary aim is to undo the violent hierarchy of its own existence’ (idem). Violent hierarchy is Derridean terminology for the ranking of undeconstructed opposing co-existences – deconstruction is an attempt to find those oppositions and unveil its hierarchy (Derrida 1981, 41); in this case, Slocombe most likely refers to ‘being’ and ‘not-being’. Danielewski has, in a way, deconstructed the text before we could – that does not render the text ‘beyond deconstruction’. Instead, the novel is cynically applying postmodern literary techniques of analysis to its own primary postmodern characteristics.

This labyrinth of the House is allied closely with the principle of deconstruction and is seen throughout the text in a number of different figures, but perhaps most especially in the narrative and structural use of both echoes and mirrors, two phenomena closely related to deconstructive practice. Both of these are similar to the play of différance. (Slocombe 2005, 98)

Steven Belletto, too, notices a similarity between the text (which gives form to the labyrinth) and Derridean theory: ‘For those who have already waded through Derrida’s labyrinthine prose, it would seem a given that the nature of the house would call to mind those concepts which have made Derrida consequential to literary and cultural critics. In this way, then, House of Leaves offers numerous pre-emptive readings; that is, it folds in various interpretive acts that would make sense to those coming to the novel from differing theoretical perspectives’ (107-108). And indeed, Derrida called language labyrinthine: woven by oppositions that define themselves by not-being. I shall stick to the metaphor of the labyrinth and call ‘trace’ Ariadne’s wire to ‘indicate a way out of the closure imposed by the system’ (Derrida 1973, 141). The labyrinthine hallways – the epicenter of the novel – in House of Leaves can be read as a pun on Derridean theory that large enough to be the core of the work. After all, the labyrinth ‘exists’ not only physically (despite its ontological difficulties) but
textually as well; on a meta level, the reader enters a labyrinth of text about a labyrinth. It is even possible to outline their similar structure: Navidson enters the hallway, which at first is not labyrinthlike – just as the reader is first introduced with the simple framework of Truant, Zampanò and Navidson. After multiple visits, however, the labyrinth forms and leads Navidson to empty chambers, crawlspaces, shifting loops and dead ends; respectively, the readers is confronted with blank pages, constant shifts in narration framework and text that requires effort (e.g. mirroring) to read, a copious amount of internal contradictions that are ad verecundiumwise being justified by (mostly made-up) unrelated sources and large amounts of superficially constructed superfluous information (e.g. Truant’s etymology of unimportant words in Zampanò’s text or the discussion of architectural history in great detail). Although he does not comment on the resemblance I spot here, Mark C. Taylor summarizes the two labyrinthine levels of the text as follows:

As Derrida folds into Danielewski who folds into Derrida, the reader becomes implicated in the text that now appears to be implicated in him. Inasmuch as the ear is a labyrinth, the labyrinth into which House of Leaves leads us is not merely outside but is inside as an outside we incorporate but cannot assimilate. (2013, 134)

Far more has been written on Derrida’s post-structuralism and House of Leaves (the remainder of Slocombe 2005; Hansen 2004; additional yet non-academic comments on the official forums), but in the light of this research it is important to consider what it implies for the novel’s cultural importance. Danielewski is obviously engaging with Derrida’s theory, and at times one might even consider the entire novel a ‘witty rendering’ of his work. Critics have (rightfully) argued that deconstruction in House of Leaves is remarkable, as the novel applies the theory on itself in the footnotes. This does not imply, however, that House of Leaves renders deconstruction pointless, as the novel in its entirety can of course still be the subject of deconstructionist techniques. If anything,
using postmodern theory in an attempt to undo itself of a postmodernist spirit is a very postmodern thing to do; it is ironic to a large degree and fuels fragmentation and ambiguity. This renders the work not ‘post-Derridean’ but ‘Derridean’ at is very core and on every level. The metamodern naivety and unity are ultimately torn apart by a (self-proposed!) theory of the recognition of opposition and différance. The primary technique of New Sincerity – a return to storytelling – is *House of Leaves*’ most problematic issue, as it is cynic about any form of *told* truth (similar to the ideal in metamodernism).

### 2.2.3. Intertextuality and academic discourse as postmodern irony

One of *House of Leaves*’ most prominent features is the amount of footnotes that refer (for the greater part) to academic sources. However, a large number of these references are either absolutely not contributory to the plot or discuss completely unrelated matters. As Joseph Noah states,

> The essay acts as a satire of academic discourse; there are footnotes quoting authors who do not exist from fictitious academic journals, and quotations from things real authors never wrote. The essay also features an unreliable author who constantly places meaning into the film he analyzes (without being able to see the film in the first place, because he is blind). This experience of reading someone who is reading became a humorous commentary on my own reading of the novel [...] (4)

---

43 I do not claim that the novel tries to undo itself of postmodernism, but it is an important remark when opposing the work to metamodern theory.
There are few ways to employ skeptical postmodern irony other than a mocking satire. Danielewski is familiar with academic discourse and has found a way to ridicule it: exaggeration - David Letzler even refers to it as unimportant ‘artful junk’ (2012, 310). To claim that it can solely be read as a satire is an exaggeration as well\(^\text{44}\), but accepting its cynicism at least to a major degree is indeed the reader’s (deliberately evoked) first and foremost interpretation.

Postmodernism is not a programme, but Danielewski defies its laws by treating it as one. The ironic comments in the footnotes as well as the installment of the parody itself are clues of an ironic treatment of the postmodern: it copies ‘by the book’ what postmodern writers have done over the past fifty years, but more importantly, it mocks postmodern academic research and the love for deconstruction. In a 2003 interview, he claimed the following:

I don’t mind admitting that I was extremely self-conscious about everything that went into *House of Leaves*. In fact [...] I have yet to hear an interpretation of *House of Leaves* that I had not anticipated. I have yet to be surprised, but I’m hoping. (Taylor 2013, 119)

A megalomaniacal claim, yet if one thoroughly reads the novel one can but admit that he is likely to speak to speak the truth: ‘[his] ironic take on literary criticism is trenchant [...] the writer outsmarts the writer who claim to be writers’ (idem).

The intertextuality of *House of Leaves* is not the one we find in Pynchon or DeLillo’s novels: it is not waiting to be discovered, it is extravagantly displayed and waiting for analysis. And that is where the skeptic irony is at its height (as it parodies even itself); literary critics are so eager to discover the patterns and their implications within a work of fiction (by means of deconstruction) that when

\(^{44}\text{c.f. 2.3.3. Post-postmodern Post-irony}\)
those exact same devices of juxtaposition are handed to them on a silver platter, the post-
structuralist search for innuendo becomes empty. The work makes those patterns deliberately
worthless, of course, and that is where the postmodernist – the master of fragmentation and
cynicism – is ironically beaten at his own game. This can be understood twofold, and depends
critically on interpretation: it is either the ultimate postmodern trick, the final step of irony in which
it becomes self-reflective or it is the instigator of an entirely new stance towards irony; post-irony.
Either way, *House of Leaves’* intertextual strategy is still ironic at its finest, and conquers the
postmodern spirit with postmodern techniques.
2.3. The metamodern *House of Leaves*

The amount of commitment to the reading process (no matter its outcome), engagement with different forms of media and the evocation of authentic emotions in *House of Leaves* has led many critics to consider the novel to be ‘more than’, ‘beyond’ or ‘signaling the end of’ postmodernism. In particular, the reconfiguration of subjectivity has led metamodernist critics to believe that *House of Leaves* is a precursor or even in part an embodiment of their strand of post-postmodern theory. As I have argued, the novel definitely lives up to that conclusion, but it would be unwise not to consider the essential postmodern elements (outlined in the previous chapter) when applying broader theories to the work.

Oscillation between modern and postmodern affect, as Vermeulen and Van den Akker lay it out, is certainly detectable in *House of Leaves* – however, it does not define the novel (but neither do its postmodernist (non-)values). The primary oscillations which were outlined by the metamodernists that the novel engages with are those between totality and fragmentation, naivety and knowingness and enthusiasm and irony. Whereas I have outlined in detail the fragmentation of the novel – which sounds at surface level the rational approach of the two in this novel – one can also advocate a reading of the unity in the text, which is represented by the authenticity of the subject. An oscillation between (metamodern) naivety and knowingness is faced when paying attention to the level of engagement the novel has (which then leads to a paradoxical naivety); the classic enthusiasm and irony juxtaposition can be dissolved when drawing further on the arguments I made concerning the ironic use of intertextuality and academic discourse.
2.3.1. Unity: the authentic subject and reading beyond fragmentation

At first (and perhaps second) glance, *House of Leaves* is as pluralistic as it gets due to its incoherent narration scheme and labyrinthine textual structure. It is, however, possible to consider its extreme pluralism as a factor of unity: the classic postmodern maximalist novel uses fragmentation and incoherence as a strategy to attack the reader, whereas fragmentation in *House of Leaves* is not a tactic but a characteristic – one of its primary, even. The unity is then found in the ‘totality’ of the novel; fragmentation is not a trait of the work, it is the work. Few passages, if any at all, can be read with the classic readership expectation of structure and definiteness. This is a beautiful example of the oscillation that Vermeulen and Van den Akker introduce: there is a double-bind between plurality and fragmentation on the one hand and totality and unity on the other. If either one would be erased or greatly enlarged (e.g. by the retelling of the story as ‘classic’ prose or decreasing the grade of plurality by dissolving the difficult narration scheme), *House of Leaves* character and literary quality would fall apart, rendering it either very postmodern or pulp fiction. The metamodernist pendulum is still present, as it does not ‘resolve’ the juxtaposition (as critics who misinterpreted the theory would say) but swings back and forth between both opposing forces: the work is not ultimately fragmented since the fragmentation and plurality provide unity, nor does it portray a unified state of fiction and story-telling due to its inconsistent nature. Inconsistency provides the unity, and vice-versa; ultimately metamodern.

‘None of the dynamics displayed in *House of Leaves* is entirely original, yet the bits and pieces add up to something specific, if not unique’ (2002, 781); that is how Katherine Hayles summarizes the fragmented nature of the work. In her article, she highlights another typically metamodern trait in the work, the beforementioned reconstruction of the authentic subject. They who have lived through a postmodern era are skeptic about coherency of subjects, but ‘Danielewski has found a
way to subvert and have his subject at the same time’ (779). The novel, she argues, ‘recuperates the vitality of the novel as a genre by recovering, through the process of remediation, subjectivities coherent enough to become the foci of the sustained narration that remains the hallmark of the print novel’ (781). The remediation she speaks of is representation of material that has a long literary or cultural existence (tropes) through a new medium – in this case primarily the computer, a medium that can incorporate any other medium. Several times, a single moment is remediated up to five times in *House of Leaves* (moment – filming of the moment – Zampanò’s description of the film – Truant’s interpretation and footnotes to Zampanò’s description – the physical text as interpreted by ‘the reader’), adding layer upon layer of complexity. However,

[...]

these complexities all come from the multiple remediations of the supposedly original moment, recorded on a film that does not exist in a house that cannot be because it violates the fundamental laws of physics. Thus subjects [...] are evacuated as originary objects of representation but reconstituted through multiple layers of remediation. [...] However visible the mediations of consciousness (and unconsciousness), the technologies of inscription are invisible, their effects erased from the narrative world. (782-784)

The text emphasizes that people in the novel only exist because they have been recorded. We move away from an unreliable narrator to a remediated narrator, ‘a literary invention foregrounding a proliferation of inscription technologies that evacuate consciousness as the source of production and recover in its place a mediated subjectivity that cannot be conceived as an independent entity’ (idem). Contrary to its mediated counterpart, the unreliable narrator is used to merely foreground consciousness in constructing reality, whereas now we witness a fusion with ‘technologies of inscription’. The subject is reconstructed, as it is now present inside and outside (by means of materiality) the text. Introducing a remediated allowed *House of Leaves* to reposition the reader; his
or her subjectivity is preexistent to the text, where that of the subject begins with reading (803-804).

Hayles’ notes on the reconstruction of the subject might not seem that which post-postmodernism introduced, yet it closely related to its primary premises. When Eshelman speaks ‘being able to shut out the endless regress of filiation that would normally keep it from establishing some form of unified self’, a remediated narration translates that to the confined space of materiality (the text in all its forms) as a place for existence. Truant, the epicentrum of the remediation as he is both the practician as the subject of the very act, interprets texts but always ends up with his recounting his personal life and experiences. The materiality allows readers then to consider him a masqueraded (cf. Stirner) coherent subject, as he overcomes the ambiguity of the layers of presentation that he deals with by returning to his own ideals (cf. Feßler) – rendering him apparently authentic (cf. Haselstein) while the reader is very much aware (as he is constantly reminded) that the subject is merely a creation of the text. This awareness is set aside for belief, which is the metamodern practice.

Joseph B. Noah (2012) adds a comment to Hayles’ remarks and states that Danielewski satirizes the linguistic realm established by Kant and Hegel (coincidentally the philosophers Vermeulen and Van den Akker refer to in their original essay) to highlight the link between the object (writing) and subject (state of mind) of Truant (36-43). In “The Story of My Pekinese”, for example, Truant critically mentions that Zampanò nor Navidson investigate the issue of domestic animals and the hallway, but fails to deliver any constructive comment due to his condition: ‘Unfortunately, Zampanò never returns to the matter and while I would like to offer you my own interpretation I am a little high and alot drunk, trying to determine what set me off in the first place on this private little home-bound binge’ (76). Noah’s very plausible interpretation leans more towards postmodern
practice, and adds up to the multivalent character of the novel in a cultural framework which this
dissertation investigates. Truant is a ‘bracketed transcended subject’; despite his efforts of refusing
clear-cut characterization, he closes the gap between the reader and novel due to his genuine
character. He is coherent in his incoherencies, and notwithstanding his attempts to primarily merely
comment on Zampanò’s work and be the scholar that he is not, Truant consistently returns to his
personal narrative.

2.3.2. Commitment to and engagement from the reader

If Aggressive Fictions teaches us one thing, it is that typical postmodern writers have little regard for
their audience’s appreciation of their work: the attacks their difficult fiction initiate are addressed to
every reader, only them whose resistance to the utterly complex prose is high enough are ‘lucky’ to
continue reading and experience satisfaction. House of Leaves is, as Hume argued, definitely an
example of aggressive fiction, but it does not share the abandonment of reader engagement with the
postmodern classics. Belletto is correct when he states that the novel is written for an audience (and
not simply for ‘the text’), especially the audience that likes to engage critically with literary theory
(108). There is an overlap with the audience of the aggressive postmodern novel, as they too are
probably more likely to be appreciated by people with interests in literature, but the crucial
difference is that whereas the typically postmodern happens to be liked by that audience, House of
Leaves in a way addresses that audience – two entirely different purposes with sortlike outcomes.

Aside from Hayles and Hansen45, Jessica Pressman also acknowledges the impact of digital media on
the novel. She calls the work a ‘networked novel’46, a piece of fiction that deeply engages with the

45 Whereas Hayles primarily investigates the effect of different media on the novel, Hansen’s article is occupied with the (for this
age rather paradoxical) transformation of digital media to print.
possibilities of computers and the internet. Pressman’s article dates back almost ten years and Danielewski’s novel more than fifteen, but the overall structure of today’s internet differs not from that age. She does not explicitly compares their structures, but just like House of Leaves, the internet is a giant network that often leads one to superfluous information – only when one is familiar with its structure, he or she can navigate towards a goal (or reading). Not coincidentally, we find the exact same labyrinthine structure in the hallways; this idea is now present in the text (the hallway), as the text (the footnotes and narration framework) and precurring the text (the internet). Pressman points out that the blue color of every appearance of the word ‘house’ in the novel – a highly debated subject on the online forums – resembles a hyperlink (108), by which she implicitly acknowledges the labyrinthine character of the hallway (considering ‘clicking’ the hyperlink imply entering the house) and the internet. The internet lies at the foundation of the work (cf. supra) and plays a great role in it; this reminds of Kirby’s ‘interaction’. By installing such a network, not only outside and in but also as the text, a new form of engagement with the reader occurs:

The novel procures from its reader a sense of identification with the characters not through emotional empathy but by producing a convergence of house and book that puts the novel’s reader in the position of a reader within the text. (111)

In other words, as the reader is baffled by the defeat of his or her assumption of coherence and unity on the surface leven of the novel, he or she realizes that interpretation (which the text of House of Leaves is made out of for a great deal) is the very key to the novel – the reader thus becomes ‘the final framework’. Unlike in postmodern novels, Pressman argues that House of Leaves rewards its readers not only with clues of the digital but also by ‘providing, in its central text, a pedagogical example of a reader learning to navigate the system’: Truant. He is ‘the novel’s representative

---

46 Aside from the debate of post- and metamodernism, the networked novel is also a clue of contemporary changes in literature (be it on a textual level, not on that of the structure of feeling).
reader, and it is through him that House of Leaves' reader witnesses what is at stake in adopting appropriate reading practices for approaching networked narratives' (117). Danielewski offers its readers a blueprint on how to understand and interact with the text, which is exactly what postmodernist fragmentation deliberately avoids.

The introduction of Jesse Stommel's article, “Toward an Interactive Criticism: House of Leaves as Haptic Interface”, learns us that he primarily engages with the novel from the perspective of a reader – not that of a critic; he explores how the text is committed to the reader, with himself as a ‘test subject’. He introduces his findings by stating that the novel is a haptic device: a highly materialistic definition – the reader does not only engage with the text but with the book as well, one will forcefully bend it while the other cautiously turns pages to preserve the object. 'How we handle a printed text effects how we encounter and interpret its contents', he exclaims. Stommel emphasizes this by claiming that it is essentially a work that one should not read, but examine:

I've spent more time not reading *House of Leaves* than I've spent reading other books. [...] All the while, the book incessantly urges me and its other readers to examine our looking away — and to examine our compulsion to avoid thinking about or theorizing that looking away. An interactive criticism takes as its subject *criticism* and so must be unabashed about the many lovely (and not so lovely) shapes of that criticism. Sometimes, the shape of that criticism is a hole or a gap, one we can only hollar into. (idem)

And indeed, *House of Leaves* is interactive. Much of the work is ‘dependent upon collaboration, both between reader and text and among a cacophony of readers’. Ergo, Stommel sees a purpose in the novel: inviting readers to discuss the undiscussable. Not only the novel is self-conscious, so should the reader be.
It is very ‘non-metamodern’ for fiction to be unfamiliar\textsuperscript{47}, yet Sean Michael Morris calls it exactly that. ‘We do not read *House of Leaves,*’ he says, ‘we parse it through the decisions we make during our interaction with the text. We must read more actively, more tensely, because the guardrails have been removed. The descent is unsafe, requiring prudence’ (2013). I disagree with the label ‘unfamiliar’, as there are more than enough arguments for a familiarity in readership in the framework of narration (and likewise, interpretation). Calling it that is a minimalisation of the novel’s commitment to the reader – textually, *House of Leaves* is unfamiliar to fiction, but not to the psychology of readership. Furthermore, the extratextual level of providing official forums which invites readers to engage with the text and with other readers is proof of the commitment that the novel makes to its readers. If the work were very postmodern, in the sense that it deliberately attacks and blocks of the reader, it would never show this level of engagement both inside and outside the text.

That is exactly where the metamodern double-bind between naivety and knowingness comes into play: the very moment the reader gets carried away by the story/ies, he or she is reminded of his own existence as a reader – when the reader is too suspicious of the work’s incoherence, he or she employs a deliberate non-critical stance and lets the novel do its bidding. The fragmentation and (ab)use of sources have a double effect; one puts his trust in the text while at the same time the reader becomes more critical due to the misuse of authorial references. We know full well that the novel is throwing us around in a labyrinth on several levels, but we take the inconsistencies as just ‘a part of’ the work. That is where the magic of interpretation is at its highest, and the vast amount of ‘readings’ (at times deliberately implemented by the novel) construe this oscillation between naivety and knowingness (or self-consciousness). It is impossible to read the novel with either of these notions as the highest standard, due to the transformed authentic nature of its subjects. One

\textsuperscript{47}Ironically, Danielewski’s very recent book series are titled *The Familiar.*
experiences their confusing narrative as ‘real’ – and the text successfully attempts to bring them to life - whereas the postmodern subject is ‘constructed’. And that very idea opens the text up for interaction, both from text to reader and vice-versa.

2.3.3. Intertextuality and academic discourse as post-postmodern post-irony

Being one of the novel’s most outstanding characteristics, the intertextuality and ‘satire’ (or not) of academic discourse is also one of its most multivalent traits. To read them entirely as ironic would be a very limited interpretation, yet it is a plausible one. In fact, to construe the argument that they are post-ironic would first and foremost need an ‘ironic reading’ (cf. supra). A possible interpretation could be in line with what Pressman writes about the networked novel: in a time where information is only a click away, fiction is the obvious next step of ‘verification by authority’ – yet, the novel shares the internet’s confusing, superfluous and very ambiguous nature. An experienced user of the internet will be skeptical towards the first source he meets, just like the experienced reader of House of Leaves knows not to take everything that is written for granted: both inquire a search for meaningful elements in an ocean of information. Concerning for example the extremely unnecessary lists of architectural styles that take up several pages (Danielewski 2000, 120-140) or any other of the superfluous (dis)information Truant provides, Letzler argues:

To read thoroughly the scores of items on each of these lists would be beside the point: as even the novel’s most exuberant critics admit, none but the most obsessive readers actually “read” all this text, because one might easily get lost trying. [...] The text’s apparent purpose is not to be read carefully but to disorient its readers, giving them the sensation of being overcome [...] Once readers adjust to the labyrinth, though, they should quickly realize that this text is meaningless and should be skipped entirely. (310)
In that case, they serve an entirely function than merely showing off the postmodern author’s intellect. They are yet another tool to enlarge the strenuousness, but rather than a deliberately chosen set of painfully difficult (non-)information, the footnotes in *House of Leaves* are clues to be picked up by the reader to help him or her navigate in the textual labyrinth. By doing so, Danielewski has transformed a typically postmodern ironic technique – implanting redundant amounts of challenging information to merely stress out the reader – to an actual useful cause; thus bringing post-irony into play48.

According to Mary K. Holland, Danielewski does not only parody academic discourse but transforms it at the same time. The postmodern skeptic irony in the use of confusing footnotes has evolved from a ‘debilitating detachment to an instrumental narrative technique’ – not only does it give academic criticism a new function in the postmodern world, it also serves for psychoanalytic construction49.

*House of Leaves*, then, offers in literary form an answer to the problem of the ironist’s cage [...]: the deprivileging of irony. [...] in order to propose a viable possibility in this twenty-first-century culture of the reemergence of some sort of earnestness and meaning – and antidote to the destructiveness of ironic detachment – that possibility must arise within the ironizing and mediating culture itself. (2014, 123)

48 Letzler notes that besides being a guide to what the reader should not read, ‘this pointless text’ (the footnotes and academic references) can also ‘be justified via its dazzling visual effect’ (idem). His text does not engage with the concepts of (post-) irony, yet this comment is also relevant to a metamodernist reading: by installing these visual effects, *House of Leaves* (once again) engages with materiality that reminds us of that of the modernist avant-garde. As Drucker argues, the modernist avant-garde’s ‘typographic work embodied and manifested a complex attitude toward the materiality of visual and verbal aspects of signification’ (1994, 89). If one attempts to fit *House of Leaves* in the metamodernist framework, it is impossible not to mention the resemblance and reworking (as the attitude towards materiality is of course of a different kind in contemporary literature, it is obviously more based on digital media) of this essentially modernist trait. It may only be a detail that does not abide to ‘structure of feeling’ but it is a return to a modernist technique that has been tempered by an age of postmodernism: ergodic literature.

49 She refers to Truant’s fragmented writing as a Freudian technique. For more on Freud and *House of Leaves*, see Noah (2012).
Furthermore, Holland argues that efforts by authors like Danielewski to repurpose the postmodern tools at hand are clues of ‘affect-oriented, unapologetically humanist poststructural fiction that is coming to characterize literature of the early twenty-first century’. A highly post-postmodern or even metamodern point of view, as the efforts she targets ‘constructs textual spaces in which it can make present not just the self and empathy between selves but also belief, truth. and the real’ (idem).

Oscillation between enthusiasm and irony is inescapable when one interprets the academic discourse of *House of Leaves* as post-ironic. Irony is inherent to such a discourse (and in the entirety of ‘post-irony’, as a matter of fact), and without it the factor of enthousiasm would merely construe classic story-telling. Instead, by moving back and forth between the irony (including but not limited to its fragmented and incoherent character) at one hand and the remediation (which allows ‘affect-orientation’) lies at the core of the post-ironic idea: transforming skepticism into enthusiasm. The reader realizes is fully up to date with the ironic and cynic (e.g. by employing form of parody) implications of its disintegrated narrative, but voluntarily acknowledges its authentic affect. Within the same phrase of for example Truant’s footnotes, the reader feels connected on an emotional level and disconnected on an ontological and spatial level; but neither gets in full charge. There is no ‘either/or’ or coalescence of the two – when one gets dragged too deep into interpreting it as one or the other, the opposing sentiment shows up and nuances the thought of believing it to be either completely ironic or wholly sincere. *House of Leaves* not only successfully criticizes postmodernism and its act over overanalysing the unanalysable, it shows genuine interest in academic writing as a genre and abuses materiality (which is ironic in the postmodern sense) to construe an enthusiastic and sincere, post-ironic narrative that connects with the reader instead of fending him or her off.
3. Conclusion: towards and within the metamodern

There are few to no cultural critics that deny the end of postmodernism in literature, an era that defined itself through fragmentation, irony and a lack of genuine and heartfelt emotions. The time in which Derrida’s deconstructionist techniques and Lyotard’s dislike of the metanarrative reigned supreme is over, and although they have forever put their imprint on reading literature, the new generation is looking for authenticity and the possibility within the impossible. Although post-postmodernists do not wholeheartedly agree on how to define these new sentiments and how to analyse its main technique, Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s interpretation of ‘metamodernism’ has proposed an interesting forum for debate. Modernist naivety can and will never be truly unspoiled and it is futile to try to evoke that same sentiment – instead, the emergence of an oscillation between the two sentiments creates an entirely new spectrum of literature: the metamodern.

Just like with postmodernism, it would be naïve to assume that all literature of the metamodernist era abides by the principles it describes. Furthermore, metamodernism should not be considered as a temporal signifier; at the moment, and very likely for quite a while in the future, art that exhibits postmodern (non-)values will still make up a significant amount of both the production and attention of various – if not all – cultural fields. Aside from that, the ambiguity of analyzing something as metamodern, or within the strand of any other post-postmodern theory, adds a level of difficulty to the interpretation of art. An important question to consider, is whether a cultural product can be exclusively postmodern in an era of metamodernism (as one can now often denounce the irony as post-ironic), and whether or not the possibility of an ‘entirely metamodern’ piece of art exists (as interpreting the metamodern always takes postmodernism in account). Those considerations are the primary challenge to the post-postmodernist debate; in a world where the postmodern ambiguity and nuance has manifested its way throughout not only the cultural field, but
society as a whole, where an individual is confused as to what values are more valuable than other, how can the ever expanding art of literature abide by a consistent ‘structure of feeling’?

That is not to say that the theory of oscillation is flawed. Even better, it has proven to be a very useful and detectable strategy to analyse contemporary literature. Oscillation in *House of Leaves* is very detectable on some levels, but apparently non-existent on others. The work was written in a crucial period of transition, a short era in literature where David Foster Wallace’ *Infinite Jest* shook the literary debate to its core and instigated – after years of wondering when it would finally happen – a possible end to the postmodern spirit. However, upon closely analyzing *House of Leaves*, one cannot escape the postmodern elements that defy oscillation, such as its aggressive character and rupture of the ‘reader-author-contract’ to acknowledge the reader’s premises and assumptions about ‘A Novel’50. The work does not only oscillate (as Vermeulen and Van den Akker laid it out) between modernist and postmodernist sentiments, a metaphorical pendulum also swung on a larger level: between postmodernism and metamodernism. A great example of this is the debate on the level of irony in the misuse of academic discourse the novel greatly engages with; it is not postmodern nor metamodern, nor both nor neither at the same time.

It is of great importance not to read ‘transitional novel’ as a temporal signifier as well. I do not claim that there was a ‘period of transition between postmodernism and metamodernism in the late nineties or early nillies’ and that *House of Leaves* is a product of that era, as that would defy both postmodern and metamodern theory. If the novel was published today, every single one of my arguments would be equally valid – it just happens to be written and published at a time where the post-postmodernist debate started blossoming. Instead, *House of Leaves* is transitional on a textual and non-ephimeral level: it is a signifier of postmodern and metamodernism sentiments, the

50 Because, after all, that is literally what *House of Leaves* propagates itself as on its font cover.
unsolvable double-bind between the two is what makes the novel such an interesting piece of fiction.

Furthermore, to label *House of Leaves* as a transitional novel tells us a lot about the current literary debate – and its future at the same time. There is no consensus on how to define the structure of feeling of this new era (has there ever been?) in literature, and the continuous globalization as well as rapid interconnectedness of the cultural field (by means of the for this age – and for *House of Leaves* - quintessential use of the internet) lead up to two things: firstly, more and more ideas and-realizations of fiction spark and find their way into the public literary discourse, which only broadens the range of sentiments open for analysis. Secondly, it allows more and more active voices to step to the foreground and introduce their theory or their reading of the contemporary novel; leading to an era where the search for the return genuineness and unity (as that is the common ground for the lion's share of post-postmodernist theories) paradoxically leads to dispersion and fragmentation within the literary debate.

Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s theory may not be flawless, but it provides a useful guide and introduction to the affect of the age. We might not have fully reached the era of complete metamodernism, and it is likely that we never will – postmodernism ruined the possibility, but it is not unwise to accept the strain of thought of the two young Dutch scholars and build upon their theory. ‘Oscillation’ is a powerful and valid tool of analysis, and as they have proven that interpretation is to main key to engagement and an informed naivety, it might well be safe to say that metamodernism plays an important role in contemporary cultural studies and will continue to do so – if it is not fully accepted, it can tear open the debate and lead to new and interesting opinions on its flaws. Analyzing *House of Leaves* as only partially abiding by the metamodern theory is one of those, yet it accepts the effectiveness of interpretation of its principles.
To conclude my dissertation, I leave you with this quote of Noah Bunnell, who shares my vision on the state of the current and future literary debate:

It may not be this year or the next, but a metamodernist culture of negative idealism is poised to displace postmodernism as the dominant cultural paradigm. As the next generation experiences this change of dominant, writers will pass on, critics will continue to define the cultural moment, and something will eventually come along to take metamodernism’s place. But for now, metamodernism’s oscillatory, “as if” mentality indicates that humankind will continue to progress toward confronting the issues of the twenty-first century. (2015, 7)
Works cited

ABRAHAMSON 2013

ABRAHAMSON 2015

ABRAHAMSON 2015/2

ABRAHAMSON 2015/3

ALBER et al. 2013
AVRAMENKO 2004


BADMINGTON 2003


BELLETTI 2009


BENHABIB et al. 1994


BENZON 2010


BUNNELL 2015


BOSWELL 2009


DANIELEWSKI 2000


DANIELEWSKI 2015


<http://www.markzdanielewski.info/features/guide/index.html>
DANIELEWSKI 2015/2

DERRIDA 1973

DERRIDA 1981

DERRIDA THE MOVIE 2014

DRUCKER 1994

DUMITRESCU 2007

ELIAS 2012

ESHELMAN 2008
ESHELMAN 2009

<http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1501/1501eshelman.htm>

EVE 2012


FEßLER 2012


FURLANI 2007


GRAF 2007


HALL 2015

<http://www.theoriginalkingofpainting.com/blog/2015/3/12/the-postmodern-manifesto>

HANSEN 2004

HASELSTEIN 2010

HAYLES 2002

HEIDEGGER 1962

HEIDEGGER 1977

HENNELLY 2001

HERTZ 1985

HOLLAND 2006

HOLLAND 2014
HUME 2011


HUNGERFORD 2008


HUTCHEON 1989


HUTCHEON 1998


<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html>

JACOBSON 2005


JAMES & SESHAGIRI 2014


KENNEDY 2000


KIRBY 2006


<https://philosophynow.org/issues/58/The_Death_of_Postmodernism_And_Beyond>
KONSTANTINOU 2013


LANG 1996


LETZLER 2012


LYOTARD 1997


MCHALE 1987


MONROE 2014


MORLEY 2010


MORRIS 2013


PRESSMAN 2006


REDINGER 2008


SCOTT 2000


SLOCOMBE 2005


STEWART 1984


STIRNER 2011

STOMMEL 2014


TAYLOR 2014


THORN 2006


TIMMER 2010


TURNER 2011


TURNER 2015


URBAN DICTIONARY 2015

VAN LEEUWEN 1981

VERMEULEN 2013

VERMEULEN & VAN DEN AKKER 2010

VERMEULEN & VAN DEN AKKER 2013

VERMEULEN & VAN DEN AKKER 2015
<http://www.metamodernism.com/2015/06/03/misunderstandings-and-clarifications/>.

VERMEULEN & VAN DEN AKKER 2015/2

VOEGELIN 1989
WALLACE 1993


WALLACE 2006


WARD 2012


WIKIPEDIA 2015


WIKIPEDIA 2015/2


YOUNG & VANDERBILT 1994


ZAVARZADEH 1975

Attachments


METAMODERNIST // MANIFESTO

1. We recognise oscillation to be the natural order of the world.

2. We must liberate ourselves from the inertia resulting from a century of modernist ideological naivety and the cynical insincerity of its antonymous bastard child.

3. Movement shall henceforth be enabled by way of an oscillation between positions, with diametrically opposed ideas operating like the pulsating polarities of a colossal electric machine, propelling the world into action.

4. We acknowledge the limitations inherent to all movement and experience, and the futility of any attempt to transcend the boundaries set forth therein. The essential incompleteness of a system should necessitate an adherence, not in order to achieve a given end or be slaves to its course, but rather perchance to glimpse by proxy some hidden exteriority. Existence is enriched if we set about our task as if those limits might be exceeded, for such action unfolds the world.

5. All things are caught within the irrevocable slide towards a state of maximum entropic dissemblance. Artistic creation is contingent upon the origination or revelation of difference therein. Affect at its zenith is the unmediated experience of difference in itself. It must be art’s role to explore the promise of its own paradoxical ambition by coaxing excess towards presence.

6. The present is a symptom of the twin birth of immediacy and obsolescence. Today, we are nostalgists as much as we are futurists. The new technology enables the simultaneous experience and enactment of events from a multiplicity of positions. Far from signalling its demise, these emergent networks facilitate the democratisation of history, illuminating the forking paths along which its grand narratives may navigate the here and now.

7. Just as science strives for poetic elegance, artists might assume a quest for truth. All information is grounds for knowledge, whether empirical or aphoristic, no matter its truth-value. We should embrace the scientific-poetic synthesis and informed naivety of a magical realism. Error breeds sense.

8. We propose a pragmatic romanticism unhindered by ideological anchorage. Thus, metamodernism shall be defined as the mercurial condition between and beyond irony and sincerity, naivety and knowingness, relativism and truth, optimism and doubt, in pursuit of a plurality of disparate and elusive horizons. We must go forth and oscillate!