The Poetics of Impossible Spaces

Franjić, Stijepan

Sveučilište u Splitu

Filozofski fakultet

Odsjek za engleski jezik i književnost

Stijepan Franjić

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Diplomski rad

Split, 2024.

University of Split

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of English Language and Literature

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MA Thesis

Student:

Stijepan Franjić

Supervisor:

Simon John Ryle, Associate Professor

Split, 2024.

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1. Introduction

Space is always the first and the final frontier. The conquest of space is an inherent part of humanity's identity. What one sees always entails space; visible space is humanity's operational space, one cannot avoid it, one is always included in its boundaries. However, when one approaches the invisible, the imperceptible domain of space, these transformations become less frequent. The abstract ideas that are not graspable by humans' senses present an obstacle for the unprepared. For a long time, this space has been reserved for an educated minority. Now, space is more open than ever. Life now occurs inside invisible, digital spaces. Distances are continuously being decreased. Worlds can be created in an instant.

And yet, art persists. It always participates in this spatial discourse, but its creative power is unparalleled. Art is the spatial playground in the sense that it enables testing of new ideas, reshaping the old concepts, and experimenting with forms and meanings that have established themselves in this spatial discourse. This thesis seeks to present just a sliver of art's power to experience space anew and to reshape the idea of the impossible into something completely different.

This thesis aims to introduce the concept of impossible space in order to analyse two contemporary novels, *Piranesi* by Susanna Clarke and *House of Leaves* by Mark Danielewski. Their representation of space is very important for discussing impossible spaces because they both present spaces that are physically impossible or inconceivable in an innovative manner. The concept of impossible space is briefly defined within the scope of mathematics and physics, namely the Euclidean geometry, and Newton's and Einstein's conceptions of space. The concept of impossible space can also be understood in terms of various aesthetic and literary theories. These include the famous French aesthetician Maurice Blanchot whose concept of

"space of literature" is analysed through Ovid's myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Spaces are examined with regard to their social dimension and the method of their "production"; Henri Lefebvre, a prominent figure of French Marxism and a philosopher, introduced these ideas in his famous work *The Production of Space*. Gaston Bachelard's experience of the house and the home described in his famous work *The Poetics of Space* is connected with the houses in both novels. Yi-Fu Tuan's writing on space and human bodies is used to pinpoint the manner in which the human body is key to understanding and representing spatial relationships both in real life and in literature. A concept of "mapping" is introduced to describe the process of exploring, understanding, and representing space, which parallels the common practice of cartography. This concept of mapping is further utilized to highlight the relationship between the mental and the physical space. Space is also briefly observed through the lens of Mark Fisher's analysis of capitalist realism.

By combining these ideas and applying them to the primary texts, this thesis claims that impossible spaces in literature transform the way one perceives space in general, encourage innovative thinking, and expose the inner mechanisms of spatiality inherent to our experience of social, political, and psychological reality. Their radical experimentation with form and creative processes is worthy of examination because such literature normalizes the notion of impossible and stimulates the reader to re-examine the groundworks of their entire knowledge.

2. The impossible space

Piranesi, written by Susanna Clarke, is a novel concerned with a special kind of house; it is, essentially, another world accessed by secret knowledge and occult rituals. Matthew Rose Sorensen, the main character, inhabits this world, occasionally being visited by Ketterley, a disciple of Laurence Arne-Sayles, the man responsible for the discovery of this world. However, this world resembles a House with infinite hallways, statues and various other landmarks. Sorensen suffers from a memory and identity loss; the nature of the house has influenced his mind deeply. Ketterley calls him Piranesi, and Sorensen accepts this, living inside the House, exploring its space for Ketterley's purposes, surviving the cyclical floods, gathering food and material, visiting various statues, and writing in his journal. Piranesi (Sorensen) eventually discovers the House's and Ketterley's true nature, faces the truth and eventually leaves the House, but ultimately finds that he is no longer Sorensen; life without the impossible space of the House seems pointless to him.

House of Leaves, written by Mark Danielewski, is a postmodern novel that has established a cult of following because of its cryptic nature and complex ways of mediating narrative and space through a rather experimental form. It is a novel written from various points of views, constantly challenging the metanarrative and the process of reading itself. The (seemingly) central narrative deals with the Navidson family who just moved in to Ash Tree Lane. Will Navidson, a famous war photojournalist, discovers a door inside his house that leads to an impossible dark hallway, implying that the house is bigger on the inside. When this impossible space grows larger, he calls some friends and his brother Tom for help and they explore the infinite hallways together; unfortunately, with tragic consequences. This story is presented through the narrative of Zampanò, an old man who wrote a book about *The Navidson Record*, a documentary film created by Navidson in order to document the truth about the

House. It resembles an academic paper, with numerous citations and appendices. However, we are made aware of Zampanò's existence by yet another narrative, that of Johnny Truant, a young apprentice in a tattoo shop who supposedly finds Zampanò's book, becomes obsessed with it, and proceeds to edit it. His story occurs within the space of the book's footnotes. All these narratives produce a confusing and memorable reading experience that imitates the hardships of imagining such impossible spaces.

Both novels offer a reconceptualization of a house. The house becomes an impossible space that is very important or deeply troubling for the characters that inhabit it. But to examine impossible spaces, a proper definition of an impossible space must be given. After all, the adjective *impossible* must refer to something which can neither exist nor occur within the realm of everyday experience. And yet, one finds that the perception of space mostly depends on *the impossible*, not the adjective but the noun, as it pervades all the important philosophical and scientific studies. Fortunately, what is classified as *impossible* is often merely imperceptible, a barrier between the understanding of a concept and the limits of human senses. The lived experience is often imperceptible in a myriad of ways, but rarely or never is it understood as *impossible*; likewise, what is not lived experience, but a domain of fantasy, imagination, or assumption is understood as *the impossible*. Therefore, to speak of impossible spaces is, essentially, to pursue the act of breaking down the limits of perception. One inhabits space and one cannot do so impossibly; likewise, one cannot inhabit what is impossible. Such is the nature of the physical world. What is, then, *the impossible*? If science aims to elucidate the unknown, it must, as a starting point, define the basic principles of material existence (all within the realm of what is later considered possible, and further on, proven). If there exists a concept that does not follow these principles, it naturally falls into the category of the impossible. One can, naturally, speculate and theorize, but one cannot deny that the perception of world (and space in general) is shaped by the dominant scientific, religious, political, and various other

discourses. Of course, that is not to say that history had sealed the impossible inside the vault of Knowledge and remained content with unanswered questions; scientific inquiry implies continuous sealing and unsealing of such vaults.

Throughout history, one could, for the most part, consider non-Euclidean spaces impossible. Euclidean geometry, based on Euclid's twenty definitions, five postulates, and five common notions – all of which are essential for our perception of geometrical constructions, primarily the fifth and the most controversial postulate on parallel lines – remains the most famous formulation of geometry ever given.[1] A non-Euclidean space, naturally, does not follow these postulates and notions. Although Greeks themselves constantly questioned these principles, Euclidean geometry had begun to take root in mathematics, which one might understand as non-Euclidean approaching the realm of the impossible. This movement was later reinforced by Isaac Newton who claimed that "[a]bsolute space, in its own nature, without relation to anything external, remains always similar and immovable."[2] Although not without its problems, the structure of space finally seemed to become uniform.

> The counterpart to Euclidean space in mathematics is Newtonian space in physics. It can be thought of as an enormous stage, across which pass the events that make up the universe: the enduring stars, the brief particles, ourselves. Inside this box everything has its position, its path, and its time, and the business of the scientist is to give a rational account of it all. The rise of science in its modern form is associated with a view that one should attend to observables – positions, paths, and times – rather than to innate properties, tendencies, or essential natures.[3]

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[1] Jeremy Gray, *Ideas of Space: Euclidean, Non-Euclidean and Relativistic* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 26-28.
[2] Isaac Newton, *Newton's Principia: The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (1687), https://archive.org/details/100878576/page/n7/mode/2up?view=theater.
[3] Gray, *Ideas of Space*, 177.

The positivist ordering of life and knowledge, focused precisely on those observables, is what reinforces the concept of *the impossible*. Although never explicitly described as impossible, the impossible (the non-Euclidean, the non-Newtonian) remains relegated to the margins of all discourses because it remains imperceptible; the scientific paradigm is foregrounded on this stage and when faced with measurable properties, humanity naturally prefers to interact with models that produce tangible results. Those areas of study where no tangible results were made represented the next great breakthrough; what seemed inexplicable was not necessarily impossible. And this holds true today, for there is no new theory without theorizing the impossible. The importance of this process cannot be overstated because it deals with one of the most basic concepts of everyday life: inhabiting space, perceiving the spatial, understanding the dimensions. To experiment with space is to re-examine what is possible. Consider Gray's description of scientific enquiry:

> [i]t is also worth remarking that to design an experiment is to commit yourself to a lot of theories apart from the one you want to check (…) to which your equipment is supposed to conform. You then 'see' the experimental facts that your theories permit you to conclude from your measurements, and so potentially a chase through many theories begin, and with it the possibility of '*ad hocness*'.
>
> Therefore it is not surprising that theories are what survive: theories are what everyone works with. A decisive experiment would need to summon up a new theory for it to be truly intelligible, and not intelligible but inexplicable on the old one. An anomalous result on this formulation is a sign that we do not fully understand our theory and concepts, and that perhaps the concepts and theory need changing.[4]

It is no surprise, then, that Einstein's relativity theory radically changed the world. And before him, perhaps less prominent (but not less important), Nikolai Lobachevski and János Bolai introduced hyperbolic geometry and destabilized the Euclidean status quo by negating Euclid's

[4] Ibid., 188.

fifth postulate.[5] The existing spatial theories produced a myriad of such anomalous results – which signified that the existing theories were not describing space adequately because they had not included time. For example, consider Euclidean and hyperbolic geometries:

> two Geometries: one, *in common use* to this day owing to its simplicity, actually agrees with all measurements; the other, an *imaginary* one, more general and therefore more difficult in its calculations, admits the possibility of dependence of lines on angles.[6]

Geometry (and mathematics in general) is primarily concerned with internal consistency of such models. Even if the other geometry is *imaginary*, it remains internally consistent and suitable for practical applications. What is practiced is naturally conventionalized, and so it follows that non-Euclidean space does not seem as impossible as before. Furthermore, after Einstein, the concept of absolute space now seems almost rudimentary. The relativity of time and space echoes throughout the modernity, its importance invaluable.

But how does this relate to the concept of *the impossible*? As stated before, one must work with theories, and the goal is not to produce an infallible model, but to perceive space in a different way. Non-Euclidean space is now intelligible, but only using certain models and theories. The others remain obscure. Is it, then, a question of finding the right model, an appropriate perspective?

> The question of the "truth" of the individual geometrical propositions is thus reduced to one of the "truth" of the axioms. (…) We can only say that Euclidean geometry deals with things called "straight lines," to each of which is ascribed the property of being uniquely determined by two points situated on it. The concept "true" does not tally with the assertions of pure geometry, because by the word "true" we are eventually in the

[5] Boris Rosenfeld, *A History of Non-Euclidean Geometry: Evolution of the Concept of a Geometric Space*, trans. Abe Shenitzer (Springer-Verlag, 1988), 206-246.
[6] Rosenfeld, *A History of Non-Euclidean Geometry*, 207.

> habit of designating always the correspondence with a "real" object: geometry, however, is not concerned with the relation of the ideas involved in it to objects of experience, but only with the logical connection of these ideas among themselves.[7]

A conceptual model of space does not need to be authentic (in the sense that it corresponds to the reality), as reality can be represented by Euclidean *and* non-Euclidean geometry. However, that is purely abstract; mathematics is an abstract science, while physics is a natural one. Is it safe to conclude, then, that the geometrical model is not a relevant criterion for determining the nature of impossible spaces?

Yes and no. A space that challenges the physical limitations and principles of the universe is, inherently, impossible. If such a space somehow exists, then the limitations and the principles are not defined properly. On the other hand, a space that challenges the abstract limitations and principles of its own *representation* must not necessarily be categorized as an impossible space. Consider, again, the Euclidean space; it is an acceptable representation of space on a certain scale, but neither does it account for time nor space curvature caused by gravity; it cannot represent the significantly larger and smaller scale of the universe accurately; or in other words, "the space-time continuum cannot be regarded as a Euclidean one."[8] To one's senses, Euclidean space is perfectly mundane. Flat enough for our perception, Euclidean space is conventional, the most natural of all possible representations. But when faced with the imperceptible, it is not adequate.

Another fine example of this is the concept of infinity. "The idea of the infinity of space seems to have arisen in ancient Greece, notwithstanding the fact that the ancient Greek scholars viewed the world as finite"[9], and this finiteness was marked by Earth's uniform circular shape.

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[7] Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*, trans. Robert W. Lawson (Pi Press, 2005), 6-7.
[8] Einstein, *Relativity*, 120.
[9] Rosenfeld, *A History of Non-Euclidean Geometry*, 181.

However, the infinity of space remains one of the most prominent theories, as the ever-expanding universe bears no visible mark of a limit. Is an infinite space – an impossible space? Again – the infinite is imperceptible, but it is a physical possibility. If the mathematical models used to represent reality use infinity for the purpose of elucidating this imperceptibility, it is yet again familiar, but distant. There is no adequate representation of infinity, and so it becomes, to some extent, impossible.

Impossible space, therefore, is a space that challenges one's perception, defies the physical or abstract limitations and principles of the universe. It depends on ideology, status quo, scientific progress; it is not prohibitively impossible, but rather open to re-examination of the universal principles. It can defy both the physical reality and the abstract model used to represent the physical reality. An inexhaustible source of theories, a versatile tool for experimentation.

3. Orphic literature

The leap from science to literature implies a movement from empirical reality of space to an imaginary space of literature. And it does seem so, as the nature of art is to always mediate space through cultural convention, symbols, or the limitations of the medium itself. One never works with *true* space in literature. However, literature that does not directly deal with impossible spaces is always validated by the principles and models used to represent physical reality of space; that sort of literature challenges (or leaves an impression upon) the experience *inside* the representational model, the transformative power of art does not transgress its limits. Art that deals with impossible spaces, on the other hand, challenges *the model itself*. Nevertheless, science does not fully impose itself upon the space of literature. Elana Gomel describes this relationship in detail:

> I believe that science alone can make veridical claims about the nature of reality that are subject to empirical testing. It is precisely this epistemological authority that makes science so influential in modernity and that enables our spatiotemporal intuitions to be constantly modified and reshaped by its findings. However, I also believe that the epistemological question as to the universal validity of scientific knowledge is largely irrelevant to the cultural and literary inquiry into its dissemination and impact (. . .) Both Newtonian and Einsteinian models of spacetime had profound cultural and literary implications, and these implications were reflected back to science itself. The loop of influence, correspondence, and convergence operates as an intracultural mechanism,[10]

and it is precisely this mechanism that connects literature with science, but also separates it and gives it authenticity and a degree of authority on the creative process of reimagining space. A scientific revolution initiated by literature is unlikely, but not impossible. Its profound influence on understanding of space cannot be underestimated.

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[10] Elana Gomel, *Narrative Space and Time: Representing Impossible Topologies in Literature* (Routledge, 2014), 8.

In his seminal work *The Space of Literature*, Maurice Blanchot talks about art and artist's quest for the essence of art in a chapter dedicated to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. When Orpheus gazes at Eurydice, he gazes at the pure otherness, the ungraspable quality of art. A parallel can be drawn here between an artist of impossible spaces who seeks to gaze at the impossible, but this gaze betrays him. The impossible, then, is Eurydice approached by Orpheus. "When Orpheus descends toward Eurydice, art is the power by which night opens. Because of art's strength, night welcomes him; it becomes welcoming intimacy, the harmony and accord of the first night."[11] Orpheus is a skilled artist; with the power of his art (music), the night opens. This is Blanchot's *first* night, the night that presupposes a peaceful repose, perhaps even a space of death, an extension of the day. Nocturnal art can speak of death indeed, but it is ordered and harmonious. This is the literature of ordinary spaces that never gazes at Eurydice. But for Orpheus, "this is the furthest that art can reach (…) she is the instant when the essence of night approaches as the *other* night."[12] The literature of impossible spaces is precisely of this Orpheus's gaze – it glimpses into the impossible. This first night is what is so enticing and one seeks to possess it and inhabit it; but Eurydice, the impossible, is the obstacle. What Eurydice represents here is the very limit of art (and of spatial thinking and experience), Blanchot's *other* night. Blanchot then emphasizes the fact that the essence of Orpheus's work is not within this approach towards the *other* night, but to "bring it back to the light of day and to give it form, shape, and reality in the day."[13] In a similar manner, literature of the impossible spaces seeks to normalize the impossible space and present it in a comprehensible manner. However, one cannot directly gaze at Eurydice because she would disappear; what one glimpses is only a trace, a resemblance of this other night. Likewise, to perceive impossible spaces would present a similar endeavour; the limits of eyesight and Euclidean perception would betray the essence

[11] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 228.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

of the impossible. It is important to note that Blanchot does not speak of *capturing* the essence, but of approaching it. Orpheus's fame lies not in his descent, but rather in his *ascent*, in the return of his work, the return from the domain of Hades. Eurydice was never approachable; or rather, to approach her was always bound to fail. The myth claims that she would return to the world of living if Orpheus does not look back, if Orpheus believes that Eurydice can be Eurydice of the day once more. The only way he can approach this essence is by turning away from it, but to do so is to betray the true nature of art – to look into the other night.[14] But how does literature turn away from the impossible? In essence, by blind obedience to empirical reality and science, by not gazing at the impossible in the first place.

It seems that Blanchot rejects the notion of *l'art pour l'art* as he claims that art's purpose is not to produce itself (the work), but to always approach Eurydice, to grasp this impossible essence; for ancient Greeks, this descent into the depths must not be pursued for its own sake.[15] But art is seemingly powerless; it cannot draw out this essence and what is left is merely the inessential of the night. The *other* night remains out of reach. To look back upon Eurydice is to betray the work, but this is bound to happen. This is why literature of impossible spaces, in the end, cannot fully grasp the essence of space; the very nature of art betrays this quest for the impossible. Art must, however, remain open to this betrayal. Eurydice is not desirable when she is alive, but only her death – her *absolute* death, belonging to the *other* night – can inspire great works of art. When she is alive, she is familiar; what art seeks is this foreignness opposite of the day. Likewise, literature can talk of familiar space, but this is untrue to Orpheus's desire. Literature must provoke, it must speak of the impossible. Literature can speak of death – that is Hades, the underworld – and of life – that is Eurydice resurrected. But literature can speak of it and reach it precisely because those are forever present; art can neither negate nor transgress

[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

life and death, it speaks of presences. Eurydice is the absence, total death (not merely the absent death, the death of presence), the limit of the impossible. Art for Blanchot must place this absence in the heart of the everyday experience, but doing so ruins it, "[s]omething more important than the work, more bereft of importance than the work, announces and affirms itself."[16] This obscurity of the work is why such literature always "fails" to reach its goal, but in turn becomes "consecrated in impossibility."[17]

There exists literature that is perhaps more profound, more ambitious, perhaps truer to this yearning for Eurydice. There also exists literature that remains content with the familiar, that never transgresses the limits of what is perceived as real space. Literature of impossible spaces is more ambitious in the sense that it is not afraid to gaze at the impossible, it dares to draw out the otherness even when it is doomed to fail. To understand space and what remains unknown about space is to move towards this underworld, to gaze at Eurydice and to fail again and again. Great literature is never afraid of this failure; lesser literature is content not to challenge the status quo. This is not to say that literature of non-impossible spaces is necessarily of lesser importance; after all, all literature is Orphic in this sense. Blanchot speaks of Orpheus's impatience to exhaust the infinite, "the failing of one who wants to withdraw from the absence of time."[18] Orpheus is perhaps aware that to bridge the gap between himself and Eurydice, he must endure, at the very least, an eternity; but Eurydice does not come to the passive, and art must act, hence the gaze. One cannot wait, one must approach the essence of art. This resembles artistic passion to some extent. True patience, for Blanchot, includes intimacy with this impatience[19]; in other words, it is enduring this impatience forever. But one must differentiate between false patience of art (this would imply literature that does not deal with impossible

[16] Ibid., 232.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., 230.
[19] Ibid.

spaces, for example) and *true* patience of art. Truly patient literature is simply literature that endures this process of exhausting the infinite even when it is futile, always remaining faithful to Eurydice. Impatience is the impulse towards this impossible of the night, but patience is devotion to the consequences of the initial impatient gaze. Literature that does not seek the impossible space emanates this false patience which is merely a state of contentment with the spatiotemporal status quo. Literature of impossible spaces seeks to destroy this stasis; regardless of its success, it patiently defies the conventions. It is commitment to the artistic vision even at the cost of the work itself. It is, essentially, pure openness to art's possibilities.

4. Mapping the impossible

4.1. The body and the world

Both novels, *Piranesi* and *House of Leaves*, deal with houses and their infinite interiors. The characters find themselves in a situation where their living space must be adequately explored, which is unlike any other familiar conception of a house. A house is always familiar, but these houses are strange and alluring. The strange lure of the houses in *House of Leaves* and *Piranesi*, however, lies not inside the impossible spaces themselves, but rather within the general project of appropriating and exploring such spaces. But to speak of such a *project* – continuously being planned and executed, both on textual and extratextual level – is to speak of mapping.

A map, in its essence, should strive for perfect clarity, veracity and readability; whatever its associated space, the map tames it and represents its truth. But paradoxically, a map can never represent true space, it can only approach it; "[t]he impossibility of creating a perfectly accurate 1:1 map is sometimes invoked as an argument against scientific objectivity and the dream of total knowledge"[20] because it shows that space must not necessarily be fully represented, but merely reconceptualized and made readable. "Resistance to representation"[21] inevitably pervades every mapping of space, whether that space is impossible or not. It is merely a question of finding a suitable scale. Deleuze and Guattari also speak of maps; for them, the map's orientation is towards experimentation in contact with the real world, it constructs the unconscious, it always remains open, with multiple entryways. It is a method of constructing reality, of shaping both space and mind.[22]

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[20] Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote, and Maoz Azaryahu, *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet* (Ohio State University Press, 2016), 44.
[21] Mark, Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (Pantheon Books, 2000), 90.
[22] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Continuum, 2004), 37-38.

The narrative of *Piranesi* is constructed as a series of journal entries describing Piranesi's life inside the House. The various expeditions into the vast hallways, the daily activities, the interesting and the mundane observations are all meticulously noted and dated; as a whole, *Piranesi* resembles a mapping project of the House. He must approach this project as "a scientist and must proceed according to the evidence"[23], but this turns out to be merely a safety precaution which ultimately pays off when his knowledge of space saves him from certain death. It is also a precaution against the House eroding his memories away, much like the incessant waves erode the marble of the hallways. If the nature of the House is harmful for one's senses, mapping is a remedy; if the mind cannot grasp the infinite space of the House, paper (writing, literature) can delineate it. What is of great importance here is the manner of stratification of space.

> The House has three Levels. The Lower Halls are the Domain of the Tides; their Windows – when seen from across a Courtyard – are grey-green with the restless Waters and white with the spatter of Foam. The Lower Halls provide nourishment in the form of fish, crustaceans and sea vegetation.
>
> The Upper Halls are, as I have said, the Domain of the Clouds; their Windows are grey-white and misty. Sometimes you will see a whole line of Windows suddenly illuminated by a flash of lightning. The Upper Halls give Fresh Water, which is shed in the Vestibules in the form of Rain and flows in streams down Walls and Staircases.
>
> Between these two (largely uninhabitable) Levels are the Middle Halls, which are the Domain of birds and of men. The Beautiful Orderliness of the House is what gives us Life.[24]

Already the familiar strata emerge: the uninhabitable polarities, the depths and the heights, interpose the inhabitable realm of men. According to Lefebvre, this totemic verticality pervades all representational spaces throughout history; if the House is being mapped and stratified

[23] Susanna Clarke, *Piranesi* (Bloomsbury, 2021), 7.
[24] Clarke, *Piranesi*, 6-7.

according to these principles of verticality, Piranesi thus traces the outline of an existing spatial model of representation, appropriates it, and maps the House as if it were *the* world, *the* universe. For Lefebvre, "[a]ntiquity's representations of space have collapsed: the Firmament, the celestial spheres, the Mediterranean as centre of the inhabited earth. Its representational spaces, however, have survived: the realm of the dead, chthonian and telluric forces, the depths and the heights."[25] Of course, one must also account for Piranesi's peculiar situation and mental state to observe the properties of the impossible space, but it is safe to conclude that his process of mapping (making sense of the House) is executed according to these familiar principles and ideas. A house, as a concept, possesses the quality of verticality, but life and lived experience occur within the entirety of this axis; the world, on the other hand, appropriates the depths and the heights to the realm of religion and unlived experience. What Lefebvre names *antiquity* here can also be applied to modernity, as space is continuously being re-examined and reconceptualized. In *Piranesi*, the antiquity's (or modernity's) abstract ideas of space collapse once Sorensen and the others before him enter the House; when faced with the impossible, the truth is sought within the universal, the graspable.

Architecture aids this process of appropriating space. Tuan claims that the small mirrors the large because it is "accessible to all human senses (…) Architectural space—a house, a temple, or a city—is a microcosm possessing a lucidity that natural features lack. Architecture continues the line of human effort to heighten awareness by creating a tangible world that articulates experiences."[26] Piranesi must perceive the house as a microcosm in order to experience his new life. Vertical stratification of existence, then, seems to become a universal quality of space. Inside the House, Piranesi comprehends it in the manner of Plato's world of

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[25] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Blackwell, 1992), 231.
[26] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 100.

forms: not only do these properties of space present themselves to Piranesi as truthful and universal, unburdened by finiteness, but they properly associate the cyclical nature of life with the environment of the House: the Lower Halls are the soil and the roots of the Earth, the place where food grows; the Upper Halls are the skies and the atmosphere of the Earth, a place where rain forms and offers fresh water for life and growth; the Middle Halls are, then, the inhabitable part of the Earth.

But what is the cause of such mapping? Tuan claims that humans impose a schema on space simply by being present; mostly they are not aware of it, they mark its absence when they are lost, and they mark its presence in extraordinary situations that make them re-evaluate life's values, especially those manifested in space.[27] When one imposes this schema upon space (impossible or not), or in other words, when one *inhabits* space, the body becomes an implied reference point, as it is delineated by (and is delineating) the human senses. The spatial awareness ultimately depends on the capacity of body to recall this schema and apply it accordingly. The body tries to map space on its own, which naturally stems from Piranesi inhabiting the Middle Halls and stratifying the House into three levels: "[t]he prestige of the center is well established"[28] and it extends into conceptualizing and perceiving the impossible where, "[i]n addition to the vertical-horizontal and high-low polarities, the shape and posture of the human body define its ambient space as front-back and right-left"[29]. It remains unclear whether Piranesi's mapping of the House stems purely from this corporeal property of self-orienting or there is some left-over knowledge or model of representation influencing this process after the memory loss. In any case, one cannot deny that the body seeks to command space.

[27] Tuan, *Space and Place*, 36-37.
[28] Ibid., 38.
[29] Ibid., 40.

> In deep sleep man continues to be influenced by his environment but loses his world; he is a body occupying space. Awake and upright he regains his world, and space is articulated in accordance with his corporeal schema. What does it mean to be in command of space, to feel at home in it? It means that the objective reference points in space, such as landmarks and the cardinal positions, conform with the intention and the coordinates of the human body.[30]

When these objective reference points in space do not conform with the body, one does not feel at home inside that space. Consequently, impossible spaces conform neither with any objective reference point nor with the body. Piranesi feels at home because he is born of the house; the House provides for his body, because it took away Sorensen inside him. However, to *feel not at home* inside the impossible space is one thing, but to perceive the concept of an impossible space that is also a home is another, which is precisely the case in *House of Leaves*.

4.2. The impossible home

House of Leaves carries a very meaningful title; the space of a house projected onto the leaves of the book. When one opens a book, one can easily imagine it as a container or a house that hides many interesting things, each leaf uniformly presenting its little space. However, this paper structure is sometimes misleading. When compared to *House of Leaves*, the narrative structure of *Piranesi* seems relatively simple. Clarke's infinite House is only experienced through Piranesi's journal entries, these being the only trace of mapping available to the reader. Danielewski's House, on the other hand, resembles a literary Gordian knot. *House of Leaves* combines multiple narrative lines. *The Navidson Record*, Zampanò's manuscript, the story of Johnny Truant, and various appendices; these all blur one into another, with constant

[30] Ibid., 35-36.

interruptions, interventions, and diversions both on narrative and metanarrative level. The mapping of space now includes the reader, as one must navigate and map not only the literary space, but also the physical vessel, the book itself.

The Navidson Record is a fictional film by Will Navidson, the centrepiece of the novel's plot. It is a document of the impossible space inside the Navidson family's house. Zampanò's manuscript merely resembles a collection of academic papers on *The Navidson Record*. The story of Johnny Truant is simply based on his character finding Zampanò's book and annotating it. What is crucial here is the fact that the novel – the work itself, the physical book – resists reading and mapping; the story has no coherent centre beside the incoherence of the impossible space, with only fleeting glimpses into its madness, reverberated *mise-en-abîme*, providing no satisfactory reference points. The labyrinthine quality of the House is mirrored in the labyrinthine quality of the text. This is further reinforced by the textual formatting (font, colour, mirrored letters, shape of the text) which adds more noise to the cacophony produced by the multiplicity of voices. *House of Leaves* is indeed musical in the sense that it reproduces the visual of a page in a rhythmic structure, providing tempo to the reading process. If the characters are climbing up or down, the text places itself on the upper or the lower margin of the page; if the character is falling, the text follows the fall; when the tension is unbearable, the text becomes sparser, making the reader flip the pages faster. The novel resembles a symphony that can be fully appreciated only when the individual parts are isolated and mastered. Such a project may seem daunting, but it is doubly rewarding; the mapping of the House is, at least spectrally, equivalent to the mapping of the text, and vice versa. Even the remastered, full-colour second edition from 2000 comes with a front cover that is visibly smaller than the rest of the book,

which is a direct reference to Navidson discovering that "[t]he width of the house inside would appear to exceed the width of the house as measured from the outside by 1/4"".[31]

To read *House of Leaves* is strangely reminiscent of Piranesi's mapping of the house; the (ideal) reader approaches the impossible meticulously and scientifically, placing faith into the false body of the text masquerading as the House itself. Which is all the more deceiving because the House is built on lies, mysteries, and false testimonies, all purposely obfuscated by Zampanò's writing. The academic style reaches its point of utter absurdity at various points in the novel, with countless tangential and meaningless references and footnotes flooding the narrative, often unreliable or plainly misattributed, all written in an almost self-parodying, self-important tone. What this accomplishes is double disorientation – the reader identifies with Navidson as they both navigate the House and subsequently become lost inside it. These footnotes and hallways often present dead-ends or long, meandering detours into the unverified and the impossible. The accumulation of the meaningless purposely obscures the meaningless of the void behind it all. One has no choice but to go along with it if one wants to map the space of the House.

In *House of Leaves*, impossible space is depicted via the motif of the uncanny. The mapping of the impossible space in *House of Leaves* begins with a simple appearance. Inside Navidson's house, a door appears.

> Upstairs, in the master bedroom, we discover along with Will and Karen a plain, white door with a glass knob. It does not, however, open into the children's room but into a space resembling a walk-in closet. However unlike other closets in the house, this one lacks outlets, sockets, switches, shelves, a rod on which to hang things, or even some decorative molding. Instead, the walls are perfectly smooth and almost pure black –

[31] Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 30.

> ‘almost’ because there is a slightly grey quality to the surface. The space cannot be more than five feet wide and at most four feet long.[32]

The horror of *House of Leaves* stems precisely from this slow transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar, the uncanny. The impossible space is, for now, merely resembling a walk-in closet. What is uncanny is its emptiness, its lack of functionality, and ultimately – the fact that it does not belong there; all the more distressing because it invades upon the sacred space of the master bedroom. The space mapped at this moment dramatically changes later as the closet transforms into an endless labyrinth. At first, a small inconsistency between the dimensions of the interior and the exterior seems unusual, but not outlandish; the horror increases proportionally with the largeness of new-found space. “Largeness has always been a condition of the weird and unsafe; it is overwhelming, too much or too big. Thus that which is uncanny or *unheimleich* 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.”[33]

To retrace the mapping of the House from Navidson’s perspective: first, a smaller space appears. It is a suitable reference point, graspable for human mind, and its location is verified. It is still alien, it still does not belong there, but the scale of horror perceived is significantly smaller. Then, the space is altered. It becomes too large to map. One cannot inhabit Danielewski’s House like Piranesi inhabits Clarke’s house; here, one *survives* it. One also cannot appropriate this space, since it contains nothing. What is left of space is reduced to floor, walls, staircases, doors, and the abyss. Merely an extension of the existing house, it cannot be stratified, it resists representation. And yet, Navidson persists. Despite the futility of such an endeavour, Navidson wants to explore the impossible space; it calls out to him repeatedly

[32] Ibid., 28.
[33] Ibid.

because he "began believing darkness could offer something other than itself"[34], for how can one ignore infinity inside one's own house?

Lefebvre claims that visible boundaries (walls, enclosures) merely create an appearance of separation of spaces; instead, one should consider those spaces as an ambiguous continuity, as each space can be separated by barriers, but still remain part of that space.[35] The impossible here has already transcended the visible boundaries; at one point, the entire house collapses into the abyss[36]. It has contaminated not only space, but the family life and the mental state of its inhabitants as well. As such, the impossible of the House continues beyond the boundary of the original door. It is the inseparability of the impossible (and the uninhabitable) from the ordinary lived experience that beckons one to such spaces; the eternal striving for the perfect map, the conquering of space, Navidson's ego refusing to accept the fact that every mapping of space (primarily through the visual medium, alluding to Navidson's career as a photographer) he had previously done up to that point has now proved futile. Piranesi is content to live inside his House and map its space because he replaced one mode of existence with another, whereas Navidson represents the ideal of humanity, with an almost colonial attitude towards the impossible, to approach the Truth, even at the cost of losing his family. Reconquering the space of the House represents so much more than mere mapping for Navidson: it is reclaiming the serenity of life, releasing the sexual and emotional tension in his marriage, reuniting with his brother Tom, and facing the traumas of his past (Delial and his experience as a war photographer). All of this is symbolized with the spatial intrusion. Inhabitation sets limits and introduces order: it seems so because "unoccupied space will never cease to change simply because nothing forbids it to do so. The continuous internal alterations only prove that such a

[34] Ibid., 387.
[35] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 87.
[36] Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 339-346.

house is necessarily uninhabited."[37] Home is the extension of the person, and to keep the home orderly is to be at peace with oneself; if the person is disturbed, the space of the home reflects this. Navidson is not an obsessive cleaner or a hoarder, but often the shape and the state of one's home seems to reflect the person's attitude towards life, their current mental state, or their economic status. Navidson's home is tainted by the impossible, signifying eternal disarray and irreconcilability of the mind and the space, which is precisely why the impossible space becomes Navidson's obsession.

The uncanny is connected to the familiar, but sometimes a general lack of familiarity can also become a problem. Relationship towards people or spaces are determined by a level of familiarity. When one knows someone or something for a longer period of time, one understands it better. For Tuan, this relationship can also translate to the interior and the exterior.

> An object or a place achieves concrete reality when our experience of it is total, that is, through all the senses as well as with the active and reflective mind. Long residence enables us to know a place intimately, yet its image may lack sharpness unless we can also see it from the outside and reflect upon our experience. Another place may lack the weight of reality because we know it only from the outside—through the eyes as tourists, and from reading about it in a guidebook. It is a characteristic of the symbol-making human species that its members can become passionately attached to places of enormous size, such as a nation-state, of which they can have only limited direct experience.[38]

Long residence is desired, but unobtainable inside the impossible space. Mapping turns into frustration; this House cannot be seen from the outside as it is, and the true nature of it remains a mystery. Places of enormous size, according to Tuan, are attractive purely because they are not fully experienced, the enticing prospect of largeness seemingly promising more to discover.

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[37] Ibid., 120.
[38] Tuan, *Space and Place*, 18.

The impossible space then becomes symbolized as a space where intimate knowledge of the interior and the prohibitive occlusion of the exterior converge. One needs the exterior to reflect upon the inhabited space, whereas the interior is needed to inhabit the reflected space. "The epistemology of the house remains entirely commensurate with its size. After all, one always approaches the unknown with greater caution the first time around. Thus it appears far more expansive than it literally is. Knowledge of the terrain on a second visit dramatically contracts this sense of distance."[39] Inside the infinite hallways, however, this relationship represents nothing. Multiple explorations of the House do not produce moments of familiarity; in fact, with each subsequent exploration, the House grows larger. The interiority itself is disrupted by the physical impossibility of the infinite hallways. Its limits are invisible; visual mapping remains impossible, but so does auditory mapping as well – the impossible space produces no echo.

4.3. Echo

So far, the mapping of space was described within the scope of the visual and the kinaesthetic. The auditory experience of space is no less important and it plays a significant role in *House of Leaves*. Since sound is a result of physical vibrations, it needs a medium for its creation, which means that sound cannot exist within total emptiness like the vacuum of the outer space. Likewise, total silence can never be experienced as there is no total emptiness. One can approach the total silence inside anechoic chambers, but the sound of body's internal functions persists. It seems, then, that sound is an inseparable part of our lived experience – but to what extent does it shape our perception of space?

[39] Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 166.

> Sounds, though vaguely located, can convey a strong sense of size (volume) and of distance. For example, in an empty cathedral the sound of footsteps tapping sharply on the stone floor creates an impression of cavernous vastness (. . .) Blind people develop an acute sensitivity to sounds; they are able to use them and their reverberations to evaluate an environment's spatial character. People who can see are less sensitive to auditory cues because they are not so dependent on them.[40]

Which is all the more interesting when one remembers that Zampanò is blind. Most of his manuscript is allegedly dictated, but it is, essentially, a work on space written by a blind man. This does not diminish Zampanò's credibility, at least strictly scientifically speaking (as he does tend to use questionable sources). In the chapter on Echo, he introduces the formula for the resonance frequency of a room[41]:

$$f = \frac{c}{2}\sqrt{\frac{p^2}{L^2} + \frac{q^2}{W^2} + \frac{r^2}{H^2}}$$

Where c stands for speed of sound, L for length, W for width, H for height, and p, q, r for integers necessary to find certain modes. The unassuming appearance of this formula hides subtle horror when one examines it and realizes that it represents echo; however, given that L, W, and H are infinite (if one accepts the reality of the infinite hallways), frequency must equal zero, and therefore no echo is produced. This does not occur constantly; the House seems to possess physical limits at times, enabling sound to echo at certain occasions. However, when Navidson finds a quarter dropped by his brother Tom, after falling off the rope on the impossibly

[40] Tuan, *Space and Place*, 15.
[41] F. Alton Everest and Ken C. Pohlmann, *Master Handbook of Acoustics* (McGraw Hill, 2009), 230.

high staircase, he concludes that it must have been falling an impossible distance[42] based on the time passed during the fall. And when there is no echo at all, the impossible space is once again verified; the sound has no obstacle to meet, does not come back, and is forever lost in the abyss.

Zampanò evokes the myth of Echo and connects it with desire. In this case, desire stems from spatial and linguistic barriers; "Echo colours the words with faint traces of sorrow (The Narcissus myth) or accusation (The Pan myth) never present in the original"[43]. The original sound or the original utterance is always returned different, eternally marked by the property of its medium (its sorrow), having no way to manifest itself but through the Other. The Other is hidden in space, it *is* space; merely an obstacle for physical waves that enable the creation of echo. To grasp the Other is to listen to the echo of oneself; it is the Other who absorbs and reflects one's desire, one's physical act upon the world, one's mapping of the space. Navidson listens for the echo to make sure *something* is out there, but more importantly, to make sure there are conditions for *someone* to inhabit this space.

> Ironically, hollowness only increases the eerie quality of otherness inherent in any echo. Delay and fragmented repetition create a sense of another inhabiting a necessarily deserted place. Strange then how something so uncanny and outside of the self, even ghostly as some have suggested, can at the same time also contain a resilient comfort: the assurance that even if it is imaginary and at best the product of a wall, there is still something else out there, something to stake out in the face of nothingness.[44]

This *outside-of-the-self* is not a neutral entity. Compare Navidson's exploration of the house to a caving expedition. When one explores a cave, one does not want the company of an intruder (a dangerous animal, for example); the echo, in this case, is the reminder of the Other, of the

[42] Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 305.
[43] Ibid., 41.
[44] Ibid., 46.

outside-of-the-self, a dangerous potentiality lurking in the unknown. This cave is a space that can be fully mapped, within sensible limits, and its form and function are clearly delineated. One can deduce what does and what does not belong inside a cave. Other spaces can be perceived in a similar manner; a house, for example, is a space with its social function, the sense of home is clearly marked by those things which belong inside this space. On the other hand, Navidson's exploration of the House implies a space that effaces this sense of belonging. Nothing and no one can belong there, the concept of intrusion now being irrelevant. Instead, the self seeks out the *outside-of-the-self* to verify its own existence, to differentiate itself from the void. An echo would be comforting merely because it offers hope that there is something to return to. It is safe to assume that Navidson would never be able to inhabit his House like Piranesi inhabits his own; even if one could survive its harsh conditions, the House on Ash Tree Lane offers no statues, animals, or natural elements to stake out as a reference point. Mapping is, then, a process that implies hope – hope that the space being mapped will remain in the same position. Mapping is verifying space and verifying the sense of self, a blind obedience to image, sound, touch, taste and smell. When the mapping process fails, and when echo does not return, the mind is helpless against the vastness of the impossible space.

5. Mapping the mind

5.1. Art and death

Mapping of space implies both conscious and unconscious mental effort. The idea that the central nervous system diligently maps space (through physical impulses and interaction of the body with the world) and then becomes linked with the mind's faculties (hippocampus precisely) has been proposed many times throughout history; proponents of the Gestalt theory, for example, claimed that the central nervous system is extended in space and that its patterns of simultaneous activity possess a spatial quality.[45] Theorizing impossible spaces does not differ from other similar mental activities whose goal is to exercise or expand the power of mind. However, "the impossible is one thing when considered as a purely intellectual conceit (…) It is quite another thing when one faces a physical reality the mind and body cannot accept."[46] For better or for worse, one cannot experience this physical reality of the impossible. What is experienced through literature must be apprehended inside a moment where physical mapping becomes impossible; the intellect must conceive of a scenario where the physical reality alters the intellect itself, and begin theorizing from that point. Such is the power of art and literature that it alters the reality to the extent where the mind can approach the impossible. Observing *House of Leaves* and *Piranesi* as artworks that depict impossible spaces marks an artistic statement on space. Theodor Adorno, a Frankfurt School philosopher whose concepts of negative dialectics and non-identicality can be closely related to uncanniness, subjectivity and social space, claims that "[i]nherently every artwork desires identity with itself, an identity that in empirical reality is violently forced on all objects as identity with the subject and thus

[45] John O'Keefe and Lynn Nadel, *The Hippocampus as a Cognitive Map* (Clarendon Press, 1978), 37-38.
[46] Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 30.

travestied. Aesthetic identity seeks to aid the nonidentical, which in reality is repressed by reality's compulsion to identity"[47]. What is meant by aesthetic identity here is the property of these artworks to exist as identical to the notion of the impossible; the art's identity (the complete form of art, its structure) commensurate with its non-identity (that which resists becoming-identical to empirical reality). Thus, the aesthetics of *House of Leaves* and *Piranesi* employs the concept of impossible spaces to uncover what is repressed in empirical reality by its virtue of conforming to the said empirical reality. In other words, these novels do not merely present the ways in which space can be reconceptualized; instead, their aesthetic identity (being-identical to impossible space) allows the reader to become aware of what is repressed within the mode of existence dictated by the empirical reality (of physical space) and to gain a fresh perspective on the reality issued by the novels themselves.

Adorno highlights this separation of art and reality and the manner in which the two intertwine, which has profound implications for both art and science.

> Only by virtue of separation from empirical reality, which sanctions art to model the relation of the whole and the part according to the work's own need, does the artwork achieve a heightened order of existence. Artworks are afterimages of empirical life insofar as they help the latter to what is denied them outside their own sphere and thereby free it from that to which they are condemned by reified external experience (…) Artworks are alive in that they speak in a fashion that is denied to natural objects and the subjects who make them.[48]

Art then becomes a companion to scientific enquiry. The perceived reality, the perceived mode of existence cannot embrace the non-Euclidean space without art's transformative power. A precise mathematical model is perhaps not necessarily born out of art, but opens a space for it

[47] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Bloomsbury, 2013), 33.
[48] Ibid.

to flourish. Literary impossible spaces do not directly address the limits of mathematical models and physical reality; instead, they merely reside within those limits, showing what they could resemble in a world where mind can become fully flexible, where mind is the equivalent to full understanding of art and its limitless possibilities. Art, itself bounded within the limits of the visual, auditory and the tactile, always transgresses those limits. When this limit is space, impossible spaces become alive. The power of narrative is underestimated; mathematical models describe the empirical reality, but the narrative appropriates it and allows it to take on new forms. The spaces one operates with are a product of both the stories told about the world and one's sensory capacities; the fact that "non-Euclidean geometries and non-Newtonian topologies can be represented mathematically militates against the idea that our spatial imagination is eternally limited by biology."[49]

Interestingly, both *Piranesi* and *House of Leaves* highlight the danger of transgressing the limits of space. Hidden knowledge is tempting because it always implies serious consequences for one's mind. The impossible is often presented as pure, indescribable horror that forces the mind to reject the notion of its existence. This kind of horror lies not in the impossible and the incomprehensible, but precisely in the possibility of our mode of existence being a façade, the safety of our mind's constructions becoming irretrievably destroyed. Piranesi experiences this destruction of mind's construction after a long period of inhabiting the impossible space of the House. At the end of the novel, Piranesi claims that "Piranesi is always with me, but of Rose Sorensen I have only hints and shadows. I piece him together out of the objects he has left behind, for what is said about him by other people and, of course, from his journals. Without the journals I would be all at sea."[50] The protagonist is now split between Piranesi and Sorensen and he is aware of this rupture. What has been lost by inhabitation of the

[49] Gomel, *Narrative Space and Time*, 4-5.
[50] Clarke, *Piranesi*, 238.

impossible House is now remedied through segments of the real world (of *Piranesi*), but the trace of the impossible remains in this process of mapping of Piranesi's/Sorensen's mind. It is mapping precisely because it seeks out the physical reality to confirm that the protagonist truly is Sorensen; journals, people, and objects all correspond to localities on a map. Personality is constructed in relation to external factors and relationships affecting the individual and shaping them into likes, dislikes, virtues, and vices. To "be all at sea"[51] is a noteworthy expression; not only does it signify the sea of the lower Halls of the House, associated with Piranesi's personality, but also the dissipation of one's character in general when faced with the impossible. The vastness of sea is symbolic; experience of sailing with no land on the horizon anywhere grants a sense of immensity of space. This resembles the vastness of the impossible space. Piranesi is now aware of the personality's split approaching the impossible unless it is mapped according to Sorensen's reality.

The construction of Piranesi's personality seems to manifest itself through his various routines and rituals. His journal entries serve the purpose of mapping the House, but such repetitive tasks turn into habits which shape the experience of life inside the House for Piranesi. Essentially, mapping the House becomes an instinctual process akin to those of basic biological functions. Shelter, food, and water must be obtained, but to accomplish this, Piranesi must explore his surroundings. However, the reader knows that Piranesi is being manipulated by Ketterley who takes advantage of the fact that the impossible space of the House effaces identities and memories (after a long exposure); since it is dangerous for Ketterley to map the House continuously, he can manipulate Piranesi into behaving as if this was the perfect reality. Interestingly, Ketterley does not encourage or know about all of Piranesi's routines and rituals. Piranesi is indeed manipulated into serving a specific role (that of a cartographer and an explorer), but the plasticity of his mind is not fully exploited by Ketterley. It seems that certain

[51] Ibid.

aspects of life cannot be deliberately reproduced by such a manipulation (if one understands manipulation of a mind not as mere brainwashing, but as creation of a computer or a tool to help convey the impossible – both, of course, morally corrupt concepts); instead, those aspects of life manifest themselves simply through lived experience inside the House. One such aspect is the already mentioned vertical stratification of space – it seems to be a leftover understanding of space in general, as Piranesi shows awareness of other worlds multiple times throughout the novel. Such stratification is also naturally born of the human body – the centre appropriates the vertical and the horizontal.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect is Piranesi's attitude towards death, namely the spatial relegation of death. Piranesi understands the concept of death and believes that the skeletal remains of previous inhabitants should be taken care of, which is why he participates in a death ritual. "I visit all the Dead, but particularly the Folded-Up Child. I bring them food, water and water lilies from the Drowned Halls. I speak to them (…) In this way they know that they are not alone."[52] Interestingly, Ketterley does not care for such practice. Piranesi is aware of this: "Only I do this. The Other does not. As far as I know he has no religious practices."[53] The practice is marked as religious. Piranesi knows of religious practices, but this is not lucid knowledge of its history and implications; it is a form of instinctual knowledge, a *lived* religion experienced through pure inhabitation of space, further amplified by Piranesi's replication of indigenous practice that enable him to live inside the House in the first place. Although a case could be made for Clarke's personal religious belief influencing the representation of religious and ritualistic practices (in the sense that ritual enables one to enter another world, but one pays a price for disregarding morals to accomplish this), Piranesi's practice can also be observed as another universal property of spatialization. Assuming one can naturalize inhabitation of

[52] Ibid., 12.
[53] Ibid.

impossible spaces, encounters with death still evoke a primordial reaction that connects all humans – pain, grief, fear of the unknown. A desire to separate those from the mundane experiences is understandable; therefore, to please the gods, to celebrate life, or merely just to grieve and be practical, death rituals are created.

For Lefebvre, death must be both represented and rejected; it must have a location, below or above appropriated social space, and it must be relegated to the infinite realm to repel the finiteness of the associated social practice.[54] Death is represented through Piranesi's ritual, but it is also rejected – it is relegated to a specific part of the House where "People of the Alcove"[55] rest. By doing this, death is localized and appropriated, separated from what is marked by life and the living. However, Lefebvre speaks of relegating death to *the* infinite realm – this has strange implications for someone already inhabiting an impossible, essentially infinite realm. One has to approach Lefebvre's statement from the perspective of physical reality and approach death as an absolute. Lefebvre's infinite realm is the space of death. This does not categorize Piranesi's realm as a space of death; on the contrary, Piranesi's perception of the House proves that the infinite (the impossible) merely communes with death, but does not incorporate it.

Death is always the Other that cannot be bridged; the impossible, on the other hand, is always being bridged. Death is an absolute certainty and it is *always possible*. The infinite space is *the impossible,* or at the very least, it is an uncertainty. This is why such practices persist even inside impossible spaces – death is the permanent trace which cannot be effaced like the rest of Piranesi's identity. The absence of death would imply nothingness, a void. These practices keep the void at bay because even the incomprehensible horror of the impossible allows the mind to delineate space and concepts, but the void is merely a singularity: "in absolute space the

[54] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 35.
[55] Clarke, *Piranesi*, 11.

absolute has no place."[56] The void is absolutely prohibitive; there is no experience of space inside the void.

This fear of the void is mirrored in the cadaver. The nature of Piranesi's religious practice shows that one only has to perceive oneself inside the face of the cadaver in order to distance oneself from this void. This is what Blanchot names *the cadaverous resemblance*.

> The cadaverous resemblance haunts us (…) We dress the corpse, and we bring it as close as possible to a normal appearance by effacing the hurtful marks of sickness, but we know that in its ever so peaceful and secure immobility it does not rest. The place which it occupies is drawn down by it, sinks with it, and in this dissolution attacks the possibility of a *dwelling place* even for us who remain (…) We do not cohabit with the dead for the fear of seeing *here* collapse into the unfathomable *nowhere* – a fall of the House of Usher illustrated. And so the dear departed is conveyed into another place.[57]

Piranesi decorates the skeletal remains with handcrafted jewellery and water lilies not only to please the dead or perform his duties, but to bring the cadaver's appearance as close to normal, that is, to the appearance of the living. The cadaver is always a signifier of sickness and death. The cadaver also occupies space, but somehow it is always drawn to the void of Death. Being a reminder of impossibility of inhabitation – the collapse of *here* into *nowhere* – is what makes the cadaver so repulsive. Thus, the relegation of the cadaver and the relegation of death become an integral part of the process of mapping.

[56] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 35.
[57] Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 258.

5.2. House, home, psychology

Piranesi's case is specific because one cannot meet Sorensen, as the original personality is effaced and all that is left is a person shaped by the impossible space and Ketterley's ambitions. This is why Clarke's House is "immeasurable; it's Kindness infinite"[58], but only for Piranesi; for Ketterley and the other visitors, the House provides no comfort. For Piranesi, it is home. Danielewski's House, on the other hand, does not discriminate with its hostility; there is not a single character who feels secure inside this House. *House of Leaves* is far more precise in its spatialization of the psyche; each member of the Navidson family, along with the three explorers, experiences the House as a place of psychological (and physical) horror. At long last, the mapping of space is now a mirror to the mapping of the psychological. This is confirmed by Zampanò and his imaginary critics who "believe the house's mutations reflect the psychology of anyone who enters it"[59]. Most importantly, what is happening inside the House on Ash Tree Lane is not concordant with the desired, universal properties of a house (or a home, to be precise).

Bachelard claims that one's memories and psychological being are inseparable from this (almost primordial) concept of the house. Memories are spatialized in the sense that, if one's house contains cellars, garrets, corridors and other similar spaces, those memories take refuge fitting into these containers; Bachelard names this concept topoanalysis, a psychological study of intimate spaces, auxiliary to psychoanalysis.[60] Although Bachelard's position is somewhat privileged and cannot be applied to all cases (houses and shelter in general are, unfortunately, unavailable to a significant number of children and adults), his idea of topoanalysis and the house as a vessel of memories is applicable to *House of Leaves*. At the beginning of the story

[58] Clarke, *Piranesi*, 245.
[59] Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 165.
[60] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Penguin Classics, 2014), 30.

of *The Navidson Record*, the Navidsons had just moved in and there was no time to create memories for this specific dwelling place. As such, their house has never constituted itself as a safe space. Instead, it was always becoming-inhabited, and once the impossible space appeared, the house resisted inhabitation in all senses.

One such example of resisting inhabitation is Karen's interest in *Feng Shui*. To improve the energy of the house, Karen bought and placed various objects around the house and arranged them in a suitable manner; however, after some time, the House rejected this and all the objects were gone.[61] During this process of determining the proper placement of these objects, the shocking nature of the House is revealed to Karen.

> After a long conversation with this expert, Karen is relieved to learn she has been putting all the ceramic animals, crystals, and plants in the wrong places. She is still told to use the Pau Kua table, *I Ching*, and the Lo Shu magic square, but to do so with the assistance of a compass (. . .) Karen immediately goes out and buys a compass—this while the men are in the midst of Exploration #2. Upon returning home, however, she is astonished to find the compass refuses to settle on any one direction inside the house (. . .) No matter what room she stands in, whether in the back or the front, upstairs or downstairs, the needle never stays still. North it seems has no authority there.[62]

It is interesting how *Feng Shui*, a form of Chinese geomancy, is used as a last-resort remedy for the impossibility of inhabitation. Using a set of prescribed methods to cleanse certain parts of spaces is an idea that echoes within the process of mapping. Mapping can also compartmentalize space in this manner; however, where the top of the map usually signifies north, now resides a confused, restless needle of uncertainty. Karen gets another physical evidence of this malevolent energy that plagues her relationship with Navidson (the first being the impossible measurement of the House), but she still refuses to accept what it implies.

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[61] Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 269.
[62] Ibid., 90.

Moreover, Karen's behaviour represents a strong domestic desire for caring, as she seeks to naturalize this space and help her husband and children with all the daily rituals and routines present inside a house – cleaning, space arrangement, cooking, decorating. These activities are essentially what constitutes the social space of a house. "A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability"[63] (Bachelard 2014: 38), so Karen defies the impossible and assumes the traditional role of a caretaker that dispenses those images through her actions.

> Karen's project is one mechanism against the uncanny or that which is "un-home-like" She remains watchful and willing to let the bizarre dimensions of her house gestate within her. She challenges its irregularity by introducing normalcy: her friend's presence, bookshelves, peaceful conversation. In this respect, Karen acts as the quintessential gatherer. She keeps close to the homestead and while she may not forage for berries and mushroom she does accumulate tiny bits of sense.[64]

To describe Karen as a gatherer evokes a primordial sense of space that begins with the simple goal of securing nourishment and shelter. Karen seeks to become a reference point, a landmark upon which the rest of the map is built; a safe harbour for her children and husband, Karen introduces normalcy in the face of the impossible. Even if she is not as successful as she would like to be, this mechanism against the uncanny represents a courageous attitude towards mapping of space. However, the parallel between the gatherer and the uncanny goes even further.

> Let us take first the uncanny effect associated with the omnipotence of thoughts, instantaneous wish-fulfilment, secret harmful forces and the return of the dead. There is no mistaking the conditions under which the sense of the uncanny arises here. We – or our primitive forebears – once regarded such things as real possibilities; we were

[63] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 38.
[64] Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 37.

> convinced that they really happened. Today we no longer believe in them, having *surmounted* such modes of thought. Yet we do not feel entirely secure in these new convictions; the old ones live on in us, on the look-out for confirmation. Now, as soon as something *happens* in our lives that seems to confirm these old, discarded beliefs, we experience a sense of the uncanny.[65]

The hostile environment of the impossible House naturally evokes such ideas. The primitive part of one's mind always remains vigilant. But what does a surmounting of a mode of thought imply in the first place? In essence, this can symbolize scientific breakthrough, destruction of dogmas or perhaps even reconceptualization of space. It is conquering the danger in a measurable way. But a mere sign of the original danger, a mere resemblance, evokes the sense of uncanny; that which has somehow estranged itself from the safe embrace of familiarity. The sudden trace of difference inside the familiar is what strikes the person as uncanny. If Karen is a gatherer – a person who enacts the time where the primitive fears were somehow *more real* – "Navidson and Tom, on the other hand, are classic hunters. They select weapons (tools; reason) and they track their prey (a solution)."[66] The two brothers resemble enterprising hunters who set out on journey towards the impossible, hoping to draw out the truth in an almost Orphic manner. Although his brother Tom perishes in a most heroic manner, Navidson is the Ulysses of *House of Leaves*, a figure almost larger than the House itself; his unyielding quest for documenting the truth is the very basis of the novel. Navidson symbolizes the essence of the process of mapping – to tame the space, at any cost. His sacrifice is immeasurable, but perhaps not as unselfish as it may seem.

Navidson is repeatedly haunted by the image of Delial, or more precisely by her photograph, because it is the photograph of a starving child Delial that made Navidson famous and controversial, opening discussion on ethical dilemma of observing against acting. This is a

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[65] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (Penguin Books, 2003), 154.
[66] Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 37.

clear reference to a real, historical figure of Kevin Carter, a famous and controversial photojournalist who committed suicide after winning the Pulitzer Prize for a photograph of a starving child stalked by a vulture.[67] Once again, Navidson's trauma reminds him of his lack of action when he explores the bowels of the House. This is why, despite Karen's threats, he decides to explore the House until the very end. For him, mapping this space symbolizes the exorcising of the ghost of Delial; to finally act upon the darkness, but also to document it. Photography is a map of the moment, artful in its strange, ephemeral quality. Unfortunately, the impossible space offers almost nothing to map. What Navidson records is supported by the light sources from outside, but in the final moments of his final exploration in *The Navidson Record*, only darkness remains. Utter failure to act, to map, to inhabit. And then, he somehow survives, being saved by Karen, and the two find themselves outside the House.

The ever-changing nature of the House on Ash Tree Lane is, surprisingly or not, affected by the actions of its inhabitants. "We are constantly re-imagining its reality: to distinguish all these images would be to describe the soul of the house; it would mean developing a veritable psychology of the house"[68]. The reality of the House dramatically changes with Holloway's descent into madness which culminates with violence; Holloway shoots Navidson and his two colleagues, which results in Jed's death and Holloway's suicide. The most violent and brutal result of exposure to the impossible space. "Initally, distance, dark, and cold were the only modes of violence. Now suddenly, the house offers a new one. It is impossible to conclude that Holloway's actions altered the physics of that space. Nevertheless, it is impossible to deny that its nature seems to have changed."[69] After the impossible space of the House has become tainted with murder, the House mimics this violence and as the result, Navidson's brother Tom dies.

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[67] Greg Marinovich and João Silva, *The Bang-Bang Club: Snapshots from a Hidden War* (Basic Books, 2000), 109-121.
[68] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 38-39.
[69] Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 341.

The entire house seems to collapse into itself at one point, with darkness swallowing complete rooms and injuring people. But later, the House returns to its previous state, with not even a single door leading into the impossible. This is the most challenging segment of mapping where space influences the actions of its inhabitants, but also the inhabitants influence the space by mapping. Internal conflict (parallel to the interior conflict of House's dimensions) can never have a satisfying conclusion in the context of repressed trauma; it is always shrouded, constantly being resolved and renewed. Transgressive thinking is almost always marked as dangerous; these examples of mental deterioration occur because the mind dares conceive the impossible. But in reality, what palpable danger can a mapping of space cause at all?

6. Statues and ideology

6.1. Statues

The House of *Piranesi* is an impossible space that reveals certain qualities of life that are perhaps misrepresented or forgotten in the realm of the empirical reality. The strange environment of this impossible space can paint the objects and ideas of the ordinary space in a completely different light. A fine example of this are the statues situated inside the House.

A statue is usually a sculpture that represents a human or an animal figure that carries a symbolic meaning; there are exceptions to this rule, such as abstract sculptures with experimental form and material, but when speaking of Clarke's House, one deals with classical sculptures resembling those of ancient Greece or Rome. Interestingly, "[n]o Hall, no Vestibule, no Staircase, no Passage is without its Statues. In most Halls they cover all the available space, though here and there you will find an Empty Plinth, Niche or Apse, or even a blank space on a Wall otherwise encrusted with Statues."[70] The already peculiar nature of the House (its seemingly endless hallways) offers a strange plenitude of statues. A singular statue opens up a monumental space. Lefebvre describes this space as a collective mirror for society that presents an image of each member's social visage; throughout history, this monumentality conveyed meaning, power, and social relationships through spatiality.[71] Therefore, a space can be dominated by a statue or a monument; a public square, for instance, is usually delineated by its shape, openness, and architecture, but a monument ties the social relationships and symbolic meanings of this space together. The very fact that the House holds these plinths and niches seems to convey the fact that a statue emanates a sense of some function, a representational

[70] Clarke, *Piranesi*, 5.
[71] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 220.

force, as the House designates separate subspaces for these statues. The absence of the statue (marked by a space or an object designated to bear this statue) is just as powerful; Piranesi explains that "[t]hese absences are as mysterious in their way as the Statues themselves."[72] A question arises – can monumentality exist inside the space of the House when its space is not stratified for the purposes of a society? A society is perhaps in a process of creation – this would include Piranesi, Ketterley and other visitors – but the nature of the House seems neither particularly accommodating nor hostile towards the society. Impossible space in this case implies no hidden social power, institution, or a grand creator entity that shapes the hallways of the House and populates it with statues. The social elements seem to be introduced by the visitors and the experience of the House is shaped precisely through Piranesi's social lens, hence the vertical stratification of space, dedication of spaces to death, and other routines. It is safe to conclude, then, that statues inside the House do not possess inherent monumentality, but they become appropriated and monumentalized by Piranesi's interpretation of this space. Piranesi's project of mapping the House is closely intertwined with his project of cataloguing "the Position, Size and Subject of each Statue,"[73] which implies that the space of the House, for him, is governed not only by vertical stratification (the method by which he names the locations of the upper, the middle, and the lower halls), but also by the locations of the statues. Suddenly, the impossible space of the House becomes divided into smaller, localized spaces that are marked by the presence (or absence) of certain statues. Piranesi becomes aware of this when he descends towards the statues of the lower halls.

> From what I could see, these depicted Human or Demi-Human figures, all two or three times my own stature and all in throes of violent action: Men fighting, Women and Men being carried off by Centaurs or Satyrs, Octopuses tearing people apart. In most Regions

[72] Clarke, *Piranesi*, 5.
[73] Ibid., 6.

> of the House the expressions of Statues are joyful and tranquil or possessed of a distant calm; but here the Faces were distorted in screams of rage and anguish.[74]

The more dangerous parts of the House (the lower halls) are filled with statues that represent the more negative aspects of life. Here, the most logical connection with Lefebvre's representations of space arises; the depths are associated with what is usually associated with Christian hell, underworlds in general, and the repression of psyche and society. The heights (the overworld in general, parallel to the middle and upper halls of the House) express the neutral and more positive aspects of life. Now one arrives at an impasse – if the statues are devoid of monumentality (in this imaginary creative moment of the House), for there is no society for whom one builds monuments, why do these statues mirror the spatial characteristics and social relationships of reality? When Piranesi speaks of the kindness of the House, does he imply that this space was created with a future society in mind? Such might be the nature of the impossible space – a utopian (or dystopian) dimension where the social dimension has no origin, no power play of creation and repression; what is needed for its inhabitation is already provided by space itself, one arriving at its premises and making perfect sense of it. This is the false illusion of nature, or rather, a second nature. "That space signifies is incontestable. But what it signifies is dos and don'ts – and this brings us back to power. Power's message is confused – deliberately so"[75]. This perhaps obscures the question of ideology and power, as it assumes that such spaces naturally, by virtue of their existence, produce exactly what is needed for life and the quest for knowledge. For Ketterley, this is a double evasion of morale and law; real world prohibits murder and exploitation of individuals, so the House covers these crimes up and does not judge, its environment perfectly content with any action in its stony silence. Therefore, one cannot think of Clarke's House as a public square or a government building that

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[74] Ibid., 37.
[75] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 142.

emanates some sort of cultural heritage or the power of a state. Instead, it resembles an archive, a repository of ideas and concepts belonging to the real world. The House behaves like a museum in the sense that it grants the property of monumentality by recognizing the importance of statues and social relationships inherent to this object, but its visitors are made aware of the fact that this belongs to some other culture or world. Thus, if the space of such a museum or an archive is shaped according to its exhibits, it is purely for the purpose of representing the form of the depicted society, it is not a product of this specific society per se. If a visitor enters, like Piranesi does, he recognizes these statues as representations of some long-lost ideas or concepts (which are, in reality, connected to the modern world Sorensen once inhabited), but he does not perceive the House as an archive or a museum, for him it is a natural state of inhabitation. The impossible space achieves this purity of experience; its visitors never feel like they are entering an institution or a state where its dynamics of power and ideology must be obeyed. It is a second nature that has embraced some aspects of civilized society (statues) inside its space, but it has never made an exclusive statement concerning these aspects in the first place. The special experience of these statues is then interpreted by Piranesi who draws upon the leftover knowledge of the real world after his memory loss.

> 'I do not see why you say I can *only* see a representation in this World,' I said with some sharpness. 'The word "only" suggests a relationship of inferiority. You make it sound as if the Statue was somehow inferior to the thing itself. I do not see that is the case at all. I would argue that the Statue is superior to the thing itself, the Statue being perfect, eternal and not subject to decay.'[76]

Plato's theory of forms claims that forms are true reality of objects, while the physical objects are merely imitations of these forms. When Socrates discusses this with Glaucon, he uses the

[76] Clarke, *Piranesi*, 222.

example of students of geometry who talk of diagonals and squares and base their arguments on the forms themselves, not the physical diagonals and squares that they draw, those being merely a shadow image of the forms.[77] Piranesi evokes this idea in a similar manner. The statues of the House represent the things (forms) in the real world, but for Piranesi, the representation is superior to the form. This is also a subversion of Plato's cave allegory; individuals who are unaware that their world is a world of appearances would be enlightened by their departure from the cave and the revelation of the world of true forms[78], whereas Piranesi would prefer to remain inside this allegorical cave. For him, the statues are perfect because they are eternal and not subject to decay; however, Piranesi is mistaken here. When compared to their human and animal counterparts, these statues may seem enduring. But they are made of material (marble) and they are all subject to decay. Piranesi describes the Drowned Halls as a place "surrounded by Dereliction on all sides."[79] The House knows of decay; the temporality cannot be escaped, even if it comes in the form of cyclical floods that erode the marble. Art attempts to eternalize life, but it is betrayed by material. However, one must remember that material is not necessarily an obstacle for impossible spaces. If the House can potentially create an infinity of hallways and statues, is the decay of a statue relevant at all? If Piranesi is aware that this space is impossible in its infinity, does he perhaps conclude that there is an infinity of statues as well? A world of representations can afford to multiply them. But to identify Sorensen's real world with the world of forms would also be a mistake; people, for example, also decay and die, but this is not a death of a form. Form is eternal and truer than reality itself. Piranesi simply mistakes the non-biological form of existence as superior to the biological because, for him, the House provides for the animals and the humans inside its space. A statue remains above this relationship because it is a part of the house, and its decay is purely speculative in the face of

[77] Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 206.
[78] Ibid., 208-211.
[79] Clarke, *Piranesi*, 36.

the infinity. But more importantly, a statue can, by virtue of its specific kind of monumentality, allow Piranesi to recognize a form of an idea, a feeling, or a concept, and to name it. In this process of naming, the representation rises above the form, it is born of oneself, of Piranesi, of the House. This is perhaps why so many nouns are proper and capitalized in the text – a statue is always a Statue because of House elevating it above the real thing.

The statues of the House can also be incomplete. Piranesi encounters one of these when he explores the western part of the House.

> There are many others that I love – the Young Boy playing the Cymbals, the Elephant carrying a Castle, the Two Kings playing Chess. The last I will mention is not exactly a favourite. Rather it is a Statue, or, to be more exact, a pair of Statues, that never fails to arrest my attention whenever I see it. The two Statues flank the Eastern Door of the First Western Hall. They are approximately six metres tall and have two unusual features: firstly, they are much larger than the other Statues in the First Western Hall; secondly, they are incomplete. Their Trunks emerge from the Wall at their Waists; their Arms reach back to push mightily; their Muscles swell with the effort and their Faces are contorted. They are not comfortable to contemplate. They seem to be in pain, struggling to be born; the struggle may be fruitless and yet they do not give up. Their Heads are extravagantly horned and so I have named them the Horned Giants. They represent Endeavour and the Struggle against a Wretched Fate.[80]

Piranesi identifies the incompleteness of the statue with the struggle of being born. Marble emerges from marble, a painful process of artistic creation captured in a moment of struggle. Much like the impossible space challenges one's perception and calls for a reimagining of creative processes, this statue calls for a different kind of birth. Normally, a statue arises from a block of stone or marble, by removing the material, but the Horned Giants seem to be an extension of this original material. In a movement of separation, they betray their connection with the House, remaining incomplete, but also a part of the wall. When Piranesi claims that

[80] Ibid., 16.

this statue is not comfortable to contemplate, the novel also calls attention to the uncomfortable contemplation of the House and its infinity. The notion that a statue arises as a separation of the material is nothing new; this is the process of exploitation of Earth's resources. However, to contemplate this kind of separation is to grant agency to the material; furthermore, it gives agency to art, desperately trying to express its essence, but still bound within the material. What is visible to Piranesi here is only this struggle, that is why he names it appropriately. The spatiality of the statue is different, it seems wrong. This parallels the status of impossible spaces in literature, in art in general; the spatiality challenges the conventions, it is very difficult to contemplate. The only visible result is precisely this struggle, a struggle of the medium used to convey the impossible. The statues of *Piranesi* are important because they indicate the subtle way in which impossible space manifests social relationships; if such a space contains object or concepts that are inherently tied to the function of society in general, it implies that a creation of such a space is always influenced by sociological factors.

6.2. Unaffordability of fiction

Sometimes, the medium struggles to represent the truth; but sometimes, one struggles to believe the medium at all. When the authenticity of *The Navidson Record* is questioned in Zampanò's manuscript, it is revealed that Navidson and his family are not wealthy enough to afford the price of special effects and editing. The public seems eager to dismiss the events of *The Navidson Record* as pure fiction. "Strangely then, the best argument for fact is the absolute unaffordability of fiction. Thus it would appear the ghost haunting *The Navidson Record*, continually bashing against the door, is none other than the recurring threat of its own reality."[81]

[81] Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 149.

Describing fiction as unaffordable also raises the question of capitalism, fiction, and impossible spaces as the general framework of this fiction.

In Navidson's case, reality resembles fiction. The primary criterion for this statement is the physical limitation of space; the interior of the House cannot, under any circumstances, be bigger than the exterior. To claim differently is to ignore the laws of physics. However, this criterion is not tested on the ground of its physical authenticity, but on the grounds of affordability. Manipulation of image and sound is always a possibility; therefore, it is natural that this imaginary public would be suspicious of such documentary films. The absurdity lies in the method of verification; the authenticity is not tested by meticulous examination of the film in search for any traces of manipulation, but rather by comparing Navidson's finances with the realistic expenses of falsification. As strange as it may seem, this reveals the inherently capitalist dynamic of observing art and impossible spaces in general. Capitalism pervades reality; as such, it naturalizes its relationships and principles onto the basic principles of reality. It becomes harder and harder to distinguish between empirical reality and reality that is under the influence of ideology. Capitalism conditions the production of culture, regulation of work and education, but it also obstructs and constrains thought and action.[82] This also applies to reimagining the concept of space; how can a revolutionary mathematical model arise from a system that ties reality to value? The concern for reality and value is also a "more general concern: whether or not, with the advent of digital technology, image has forsaken its once unimpeachable hold on the truth."[83] Photography is a medium, but if art becomes merely a product in a consumerist society, one verifies the integrity of a product, and if the product is tied to its value, then it can forego the integrity. Falsification of reality would be very profitable for Navidson if the final product is appealing to the masses to the extent that they want to spend

[82] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009), 16.
[83] Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 3.

money on consuming it (note how enjoying art becomes consumption in capitalism). Ironically, Navidson is a famous photojournalist whose work was never questioned before *The Navidson Record*; photography that deals with war and poverty is sensationalistic and global, profitable for agencies and corporations that control the media. Mark Fisher claims that "[a] moral critique of capitalism, emphasizing the ways in which it leads to suffering, only reinforces capitalist realism. Poverty, famine and war can be presented as an inevitable part of reality, while the hope that these forms of suffering could be eliminated easily painted as naive utopianism."[84] But when Davidson turns to the domestic uncanniness, this can, in the eyes of the public, only present a personal quest for profit in this context. The global is accepted as inevitable, the personal is always questioned. Navidson dares to question the spatial status quo by documenting his reality, but the use of photography and video inherently calls upon the previously mentioned interrelationships. Art of reality (and the reality in art) is scrutinized through the lens of capitalism.

Unfortunately, this presents a limiting factor to the poetics of impossible spaces. Such spaces are usually devoid of power dynamics inherent to the ideological mechanisms. Ideology is omnipresent and all-pervading, even in the fields of mathematics and science. How can a creative process concerning impossible spaces ever be conceived without the influence of ideology? Lefebvre noted that ideological tendencies are always present inside social space, always tied to scientific credentials, and that they unconsciously express the ideas of the dominant class which creates a practice that only appears to be extra-ideological.[85] Reconceptualization of space occurs inside social space, which contaminates the process with ideological tendencies. Therefore, space that is characterized as realistic or unrealistic (possible or impossible) is never extra-ideological. "[W]hat counts as 'realistic', what seems possible at

[84] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 16.
[85] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 6.

any point in the social field, is defined by a series of political determinations. An ideological position can never be really successful until it is naturalized, and it cannot be naturalized while it is still though of as a value rather than a fact."[86] Does this imply that seeking the impossible space is futile? Not in the slightest. It is important to challenge these ideas in order to exorcise these ideological tendencies and approach the radical, the impossible. In this approach, one can expose the inconsistencies of both mathematical representational models of spatial experience and ideological mechanisms that influence the way we perceive space.

7. Conclusion

Theorizing impossible spaces is not a Sisyphean task. As difficult as it may seem, re-examining space can produce radical, new ideas that can transform many fields of science. Such breakthroughs already happened several times throughout history; society owes much to Euclid, Newton, Einstein, and many other scientists and thinkers. But perhaps even more importantly, impossible spaces can stimulate and inspire one to experience the world in a different light. Although literature (and art in general) does not hold the same influence on culture and society it used to hold before the modernity's technological advancements, it is still an important factor that determines the general direction of society's growth. When literature problematizes space, it problematizes so much more; space is an integral part of everyday experience because all social relationships occur within its boundaries. One can also speak of social space; it is still delineated by our understanding of geometry, physics, and science concerned with space. Literature of impossible spaces unites space with the idea of the impossible. The impossible is, fortunately, the expansive direction of art, creativity in its full potential. There is literature that

[86] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 16.

does not seek to move boundaries of spatial thinking; it remains within the limits of status quo, content to represent its ideas in the established representational models. Then, there is literature of impossible spaces; it is sometimes subtle and homely, like *Piranesi*; sometimes, it is radical, experimental, and uncanny like *House of Leaves*. When one experiments with physical limits, one can learn much about the nature of one's mind, the connection of body with the space it inhabits, the ideological mechanisms that influence our experience of space. Literature of impossible spaces allows one to be curious; its space is always open, inviting readers to enter a world unlike any other.

8. Summary

The subject of this paper is the poetics of impossible spaces in the novels *Piranesi* and *House of Leaves*. Impossible spaces are defined as spaces that break the laws of physics, but also as spaces that challenge the established models of representation of reality. The process of mapping of space is explained in relation to human's perception of the body and the mind. The ideological mechanisms that pervade each analysis of space are examined in the context of the previously mentioned novels.

Key words: space, impossible, mapping, Piranesi, House of Leaves

9. Sažetak

Predmet ovog rada jest poetika nemogućih prostora u romanima *Piranesi* i *House of Leaves*. Nemogući prostori definiraju su kao prostori koji krše zakone fizike, ali i kao prostori koji preispituju ustaljene modele prikaza stvarnosti. Proces mapiranja prostora objašnjava se i veže uz percepciju čovjekova tijela i uma. U prethodno spomenutim romanima proučavaju se ideološki mehanizmi koji prožimaju svaku analizu prostora.

Ključne riječi: prostor, nemoguće, mapiranje, Piranesi, House of Leaves

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Obrazac A.Č.

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Simon John Ryle, izv. prof. dr. sc.

Komentor/ica rada (ime i prezime, akad. stupanj i zvanje):

Članovi povjerenstva (ime i prezime, akad. stupanj i zvanje):
Gordan Matas, izv. prof. dr. sc.
Victoria Vestić, asistent

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