

‘Print Novels and the Mark of the Digital’: Mark Z. Danielewski’s *Only Revolutions* (2006) and Media Convergence

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Abstract:

The text format that Mark Z. Danielewski adopts in his novel *Only Revolutions* (2006) is more than challenging since he resorts to simultaneously interweaving ‘stories’ which, on the page, appear in an upside-down or in a colored and multiple-sized font fashion. His new book description may well resemble Danielewski’s previous hit *The House of Leaves* (2000) but it definitely signals a new kind of convergence between print and electronic media. Troy Patterson, reviewer in *The New York Times*, talks about this text as an ‘exercise in narrative gamesmanship’ (2006). This is quite apparent in the way the text is presented to the reader, since the writer makes excellent use of the interactive quality digital media is endowed with when it comes to the functionality of this book’s typesetting as well as the navigational quality of its design.

Thus, digitality is not simply a ‘significant component of the twenty-first century canon’, as Hayles claims, it does indeed promote literary innovation and ‘intermediation’. What this paper will attempt to explore then is the extent to which the interpenetration of digitality and printed textuality has further fortified narrative experimentation and storytelling interactivity by taking the printed media on to a new level of production. Special attention will be paid to the kind of sensation Danielewski’s book creates, since its storyline is not solely determined by print narrative models. A way of viewing Danielewski’s novel will be suggested: the intermingling of print and World Wide Web practices result in the formation of a much more aesthetically diversified and fortified print book culture. Subsequently, Danielewski’s book will serve as a case study through which the ‘benefits’ of crossmedia will be assessed and commented on as well as its impact on the formation of new habits in terms of thinking, reading and expressing ourselves in a literary manner.

Key Words:

Convergence, crossmedia, digitality, uncanny, spectrality, vision, mutability, perception.

1. Introduction

Troy Patterson in the review he wrote for *The New York Times* immediately after the publication of Mark Z. Danielewski’s new ‘novel’—*Only Revolutions* (2006)—said:

Mark Danielewski’s publisher recommends you read his new book, ‘Only Revolutions’ ... in incremental bursts. The idea is that, if you turn the book upside down and swing it around every eight pages, you can alternate the monologues of its two narrators, Sam and Hailey, so as to spin them together. Should this idea be trusted? Pantheon, after all, also insists the book is a novel, and that’s quite a stretch.¹

The author himself in an interview to Callie Miller and Michele Reverte for the magazine *LAist* in 2007 argues that his new novel is ‘designed to be read in so many different ways. ... It depends on your mind—maybe there is someone who could read it all and hold it all. [He] couldn’t do it, but [he] could understand the thrill of trying’.² As these quotes suggest, Danielewski’s novelistic endeavor pushes digitality and print publishing on to a different level of creative expression. After the experience he had acquired with his first novel published in 2000 under the title *House of Leaves*, Danielewski has now moved on to the construction and execution of a novelistic experiment that he describes as ‘centrifugal’,³ most probably heralding a new phase in the realm of print and digital convergence. In this paper, I will attempt to argue that Danielewski’s new ‘novel’ constitutes quite an interesting, thought-provoking and challenging case study through which the ‘benefits’ of crossmedia in the realm of book/fiction publishing can be assessed and evaluated.

2. The Intersection of Print and Digital Media

N. Katherine Hayles in her new study entitled *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (2008) claims that ‘the digital leaves its mark on print in new capabilities for innovative typography, new aesthetics for book design, and in the near future new modes of marketing’.⁴ Danielewski himself admits in an interview to Kiki Benzon that his new novel ‘could not exist without technology. Without [his] G5 and 23-inch screen, with two pages on the screen at one time. ... Online recourses, certain archival things. OED online so [he] could race through etymologies quickly, double check words’.⁵

Even looking at the book or flicking through its pages, one can easily understand that this colorful and pleasing to the eye piece of hardbound work could not have been materialized if it had not been for digital technologies. This is the reason why, for the sake of this paper, I insist on putting the word book within quotation marks so as to place emphasis on the dynamic complexity of such media intermingling. By bringing the past printing tradition intelligibly together with contemporary digital publishing software, this ‘book’ proclaims a new phase in printed fiction production. Having no formal starting or ending page, this ‘book’ invites the reader to plunge into a completely different ‘reading’ experience of constantly mutating, evolving and intertwining storylines. Even though in terms of character development it seems as if it is following a much more regimented structure, since the two voices governing the pace of the ‘narrative’ is that of Sam’s and Hailey’s, Danielewski’s new novel is introducing the reader to an experience that goes beyond hermeneutics and affective responses. The novelist William H. Gass said in his book *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1970) that ‘a character, first of all, is the noise of his name’,⁶ indicating in this manner that a character’s name in a fictional text can either be allusive to a particular notion or concept, or point to the kind of nature the character embodies. However, the word ‘noise’ that he uses could have a different sort of significance that moves beyond the notion of voice or point of view that each character contributes to the narrative, as it could stand for the low drone of what is happening in the background of the novel production, the sound of technological equipment, the disembodied voices of the free-floating and simultaneously interweaving ‘storylines’ which appear in the ‘book’ in an upside-down, colored or multiple-sized font fashion as well as it could be the noise of the character keys of a word processor.

The novelistic experience that Danielewski attempts to enclose within the hard covers of *Only Revolutions* does not succumb to any clear-cut or straightforward

interpretations; as for the characters Sam and Hailey, they do not stand for singular entities but they additionally embrace readers, writer and programmer(s). Rita Raley in a comment on new media writing claims that

it literally commands an oscillation between cognitive and machinic processing, between blur and focus, between legibility and visibility, between signification and noise. In these terms, the concept of interactivity speaks to a cyborgian interplay between the body and the machine as the new media reader-user intermittently captures, processes, transmits, and even introduces data streams, all of which may themselves have different rhythms and tempos.⁷

In this way, the characters of Sam and Hailey are only the generators of the experience or the intermediaries between two kinds of printing mentalities that correspond to a pre- and post-internet book production state of mind. This kind of work echoes the experiments of other artists mainly in the field of poetry, such as Stephanie Strickland's, where words are no longer translatable into sheer images or sounds but into flickering or oscillating effects.⁸

Danielewski seems to be working in the same terrain where words in various font and print patterns as well as layouts vacillate between legibility and illegibility, perceptibility and imperceptibility. Of course, in the present instance, legibility and perceptibility relate to patterns of reading, ways of seeing or even ways of looking at the text, since Sam's and Hailey's textual streams which the book contains seem to be diminishing or increasing in size as the narrative develops, being simultaneously accompanied by long strips of historical data. In this kind of texts, one cannot view or read everything as s/he would have done in a solely Gutenberg-styled book, but one realizes, as it would happen in computational media, that the information printed on the page follows a pattern of 'dynamic hierarchy'. In this sense, every segment of text works not only independently but also in conjunction with the other segments, each one re-forming the other simultaneously, which adds to the complexity of the endeavor under discussion here. One could argue that the characters of Sam and Hailey metaphorically function as computational prompts for the existence of a binary code by which this novelistic experience is shaped and formulated. Hayles writes that 'binaries operate as a spectrum of possibilities rather than as polar opposites with an excluded middle'.⁹ In Danielewski's book, the oppositional notions of male and female that the characters of Sam and Hailey represent actually interconnect and supplement each other, paving the path for lots of unforeseen cognitive entanglements. Even the colors that herald their existence—Sam as green and Hailey as yellow—give way in the text to a much more diverse palette of color shades when it comes to the printing of particular characters or page sequences, further fortifying and enhancing the 'textual' surfaces that this book is composed of. It is also worth mentioning the kind of flap jacket that the hardback edition of the book has been marketed with, with each side featuring a dual-colored, both green and yellow, iris, highlighting in this manner the foreseeable and unforeseeable data that it contains. To this end, Danielewski states in his interview to Benzon that

one of the things this [*Only Revolutions*] resists is vision. ... With the exception of some color mentioned, it never quite paints those borders, the edges ... [T]he word, for instance, 'spectacular' is never there, because it comes from *speculare*, to see. Words that are about seeing, for the most part,

were taken out. ... But the resistance allows for the proliferation of other words.¹⁰

Consequently, readers experience a constant uncertainty as to what they see or read in this novel which is keeping them in a constant motion of figuring and re-figuring the context of the narrative. Whether this kind of uncertainty encourages narrative creativity or incites fear or even *terror* of what may happen to fictional narrative in the age of the digital is what we will explore next.

3. Flickering Texts – Uncanny Texts

If one accepts that machines are not only fashioned to respond to our needs but we are also refashioned due to our interaction with them, according to Hayles own argumentation,¹¹ one could claim that we are on the threshold of an interesting evolution which will be down to other scientists to consider. What is important from a narrative point of view is that this text does not work by following certain rigid rules, but it is a mixture of various narrative paths and possibly still unforeseeable patterns of reading or ways of perceiving its textual surfaces. So the beauty of Danielewski's undertaking, if we want to follow Edward Fredkin's syllogism, is that 'the meaning of information is given by the process that interprets it'.¹² This whole idea of oscillating meanings and perpetually evolving texts is further reinforced by a particular symbol that Danielewski's book bears at different pages, that of the pause symbol. The same symbol, one could also claim, is inserted into certain words, such as 'Allways,' operating as a visual connector with the symbol itself or as, one could claim, a *trop l'oeil* mechanism.¹³ Particularly, he says in his interview to Miller and Reverte that 'when you pause, it means the thing is playing. When you press the pause button, it turns into the play. So when you see the pause symbol, it's playing'.¹⁴ With this comment it becomes apparent that the 'book' we are holding in our hands is more than a few ink marks printed on paper, but, actually, it is a sophisticated artifact that its value rests in its potential to trigger multiple combinations and re-combinations in the way the narrative or the data it delivers flows, is read or even is perceived.

Obviously, the way one perceives a text and the kind of information this text transfers very much depends on the kind of activity its characters are engaged with. This is of a double nature since characters, according to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, are 'nodes in the verbal design; in the story they are—by definition—non (or pre-) verbal abstractions, constructs. Although these constructs are by no means human beings in the literal sense of the world, they are partly modeled on the reader's conception of people and in this they are person-like'.¹⁵ Danielewski himself when composing his novel had the idea of 'using the book to manifest [Sam's and Hailey's] relationship physically. ... What is terrifying about them is that the world withers and shakes and burns to the ground around them, but it doesn't bother them at all. They are so caught up in their affection for each other and their antics that they lose track.'¹⁶ These quotes bring a few interesting notions to our attention, such as those of 'node', 'design', 'physicality' and 'person-like.' Indeed, in *Only Revolutions*, the characters' names do function as harbingers of subjectivity and physical existence; however, what about the way they are positioned *in* the narrative?

As shown in the following lines, Sam and Hailey are constantly on the move: 'We are without perimeters, perpetually unwinding, unifying. All around receding before our freedom. Even the Vengeful & Needy. Because we're mighty. We are the feer every Itinerant longs to scoot clear of. ... We are all strays. Allways astray. Unwelcome. Continuously unchallenged, unchanged by all we legally & illegally

dissuade.¹⁷ After reading these couple of lines, one could argue that the word ‘unchallenged’ could serve as a very interesting clue as to how this ‘book’ actually works. Danielewski maintains that his characters are ‘un-pursued’ so as to avoid giving to his narrative a ‘plot-driven feeling’,¹⁸ which in a way justifies the meaning of the word ‘unchallenged’. So if there is nobody they are running away from, what is it then that keeps them on the run? If they are nodes, what is it that their presence is helping to bring or join together? Could their mobility be suggesting or be interpreted as something else? Hayles, when talking about computer-mediated text, says that ‘code can never be seen or accessed by a user *while it is running*’.¹⁹ Could it be then that Sam and Hailey are trying to prevent us from something or that their storylines are only a façade of the data code that runs behind them? This whole idea echoes Nicholas Royle’s argument about the uncanniness of a text in relation to what Jacques Derrida calls spectrality and phantom writing, as expressed in his study *Spectres of Marx* (1994), serving ‘as a sort of model for thinking about texts in general in terms of phantom effects. ... textual phantoms which ... do not in fact come to rest *anywhere*. Phantom texts are fleeting, continually moving on, leading us away, ... to some other scene or scenes which we, as readers, cannot anticipate.’²⁰ As a result, in the case of an uncanny or phantom text, Royle argues that beneath the textual surface that appears in front of our very eyes there is an-other, unseen kind of ‘text’ that determines or regulates our ‘principal’ novelistic experience. This other text may be determined by factors we barely notice when we are reading which constitute the variable codes or textual layers that the visible text—in other words the text that we have been *trained* to see—is made of. The efficacy of *Only Revolutions* very much relies on the ‘multiple vocabularies’ that Danielewski resorts to: he is paying attention to voice, the way one looks at a composition, how various elements are juxtaposed, the size and shifts between fonts, parataxis, typography and interdisciplinary knowledge.²¹

Moreover, the relation that there is between Danielewski’s text and spectrality could also be interpreted by some as a manifestation of elusiveness, liminality or even terror: terror of what might this text bring to *life* on the page; terror of what is going to happen *to* the text; terror of what is going to happen *beyond* this text; or terror of what is going to happen to *us* in relation to this text. With terror having a socio-political dimension attached to it, one could claim that Danielewski’s book is another example of this newly-formed ‘threat’ against our long-acquired reading and writing habits. But is this really the case? Not being able to foresee what is coming next or what is going to become of the fiction industry in the near future, we tend to succumb to the fear of the unknown, to the uncertainty of what such textual experiments stand for. David Punter, in his approach of terror from the perspective of textuality, writes:

The meanings of terror, ... will always hover undecidably between the psychological and the political, between the inner and the outer, between the sense of a free, humanized self and the countervailing sense of being deselfed, being ‘at the mercy’ of forces beyond our control. And this returns us again to the condition of all textuality, where the free will of the characters is an illusion but one in which we are more than happy to share until the point where we sense that our own freedom as readers is being demonstrably assailed and that we are being led to conclusions which involve death and destruction.²²

Could death and destruction here be related to fiction writing or to the suspiciously emerging narrative and reading styles that books, such as Danielewski's, bring to the foreground? Or could it just be us viewing anything technological as menacing and distrustful? Being witnesses of an interesting evolution in the realm of fiction production, we are all at the threshold of a very interesting development in terms of fiction writing and fiction production.

The sensation that the multiple and somehow disjointed textual streams that Danielewski's 'book' creates to us is not that foreign if we compare it to the multi-tasking skills that we acquire while using our word processing software. In this sense, Danielewski's text *does* affect the way we relate to text and the way we 'see' it; but does it also mirror the next step forward? In this sense, it is the formation of a new kind of aesthetics that we will be looking at next.

4. Convergence Aesthetics

No matter how menacing the feelings of unfamiliarity, spectrality, or uncanniness may sound to us with regard to fiction writing and fiction reading, but they do certainly take us on to another level of appreciating, understanding and interpreting fiction not only in terms of its content but also in terms of the technologies that produce it.

Depending heavily on the power of the eye as well as on the duplicity of the act of seeing, Danielewski is preparing the ground for a 'new' but not that unfamiliar way of interacting with printed texts. This very much echoes Pierry Levy's take on the emergence of a new kind of aesthetics, as evidenced in his study *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace* (1997), where the 'distinction between authors and readers, producers and spectators, creators and interpreters will blend' so as to 'sustain the activity' of each one of them.²³ Danielewski's 'book' does constitute a very good example of this emerging trend, gradually leading fiction writers to new ways of expression and new insights. Insights into the way we relate to the printed text or the literary experience that it formulates and into the medium that determines it alongside the author's own imagination.

Nevertheless, the question is whether the audience is *ready* to appreciate this kind of writing. Of course, even out of curiosity readers will be tempted to get hold of such 'books'; but the question remains: are they in a position to value the printed as well as the computational strategies that are at work for the publication of such texts? Ithiel de Sola Pool in his work *Technologies of Freedom: On Free Speech in an Electronic Age* (1983) warns us about media transition and media convergence. He says: 'Convergence does not mean ultimate stability or unity. It operates as a constant force for unification but always in dynamic tension with change. ... There is no immutable law of growing convergence; the process is more complicated than that.'²⁴ This is quite an intuitive observation if one considers the number of changes that such a convergence could generate.

It is true that we are at the dawn of a new era of communication patterns. The convergence of media will lead to the generation of a different kind of emotional, sensory or even moral data which will need to be communicated or disseminated to us. Of course, we always need to be aware of the financial or consumerist 'merit' of such an enterprise as well as of the availability of this kind of technology to all. What is certain is that at this stage we can only make hypotheses about how this new phase that we are now entering will affect, either positively or negatively, the way we talk and write about as well as read and interpret the changes that are taking place around

us. What is of the utmost importance for us though is to consider right now not how magnificent convergence is but what it is that we want to gain from it.

5. Concluding Remarks

What I have intended to achieve with this paper is to share with you a few ideas, observations or even realizations as to where fiction production is nowadays moving towards. Whether we are ready to tackle the intricacies and challenges of the newly-emerging aesthetics in the realm of fiction writing and fiction reading, it is too early to tell. According to Pool's argumentation, the road to media convergence may be long and volatile but it will certainly reshape the way we think about printed and electronic media as well as envision our relationship with it. Speaking through his characters, Sam and Hailey respectively, Danielewski writes: 'I will sacrifice nothing. For there are no countries. Except me. And there is only one boundary. Me'²⁵ and 'I will sacrifice nothing. For there are no conflicts. Except me. And there's only one transgression. Me'.²⁶ In this case, *we* and each one of us—as writers, readers or software designers—are probably the ones who need to reconfigure our position in a changing world and shift our perspective by surpassing our inhibitions about the new era of collaborative communication that we are now entering without letting our guards down. It is no longer the case of books disappearing because of the emergence of digital technologies, but it is the case of each one of us becoming aware of the participatory potential we will be gradually endowed with in a culture whose multi-media make up is yet under construction. What of course will determine the success of this new endeavor, it is the clarity of our aims and objectives as well as the awareness of our position in a changing world. Having quite a long experience before us, we should make sure that this is not going to be another trick that the publishing industries will manipulate in order to sustain consumer allegiance but another stage in our evolutionary chain as perceptive individuals.

Notes

¹ Troy Patterson, 'Complete 360', Rev. of *Only Revolutions*, by Mark Z. Danielewski. *New York Times*, 5 Nov. 2006. 9 Nov. 2008 <query.nytimes.com>.

² Callie Miller and Michele Reverte, 'LAist Interview: Mark Z. Danielewski', 23 Oct. 2007, 4 Feb. 2009 <laist.com/2007/10/23/laist_interview_55.php>.

³ Kiki Benzon, 'Revolution 2: An Interview with Mark Z. Danielewski', *Electronic Book Review*, 20 March 2007, 4 Feb. 2009 <www.electronicbookreview.com>.

⁴ N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame, 2008, p. 159.

⁵ Kiki Benzon, 'Revolution 2: An Interview with Mark Z. Danielewski', *Electronic Book Review*, 20 March 2007, 4 Feb. 2009 <www.electronicbookreview.com>.

⁶ William H Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, New York, Knopf, 1970, p. 49.

⁷ Rita Raley, 'Response by Rita Raley', in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (eds), Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2004, p. 184.

⁸ "Flickering or oscillating poems differ from pure sound and pure image work in the following respect: whereas sound layered on sound creates new sound, and image on image makes a new image, alphabetic text, superimposed on alphabetic text *or* on image, does not reliably yield legible text. In the poems that explore this truth, one flickers between seeing the viewable and reading the legible" (Strickland, p. 185).

⁹ N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame, 2008, p. 51.

¹⁰ Kiki Benzon, 'Revolution 2: An Interview with Mark Z. Danielewski', *Electronic Book Review*, 20 March 2007, 4 Feb. 2009 <www.electronicbookreview.com>.

¹¹ "Humans engineer computers and computers reengineer humans in systems bound together by recursive feedback and feed-forward loops, with emergent complexities catalyzed by leaps between different media substrates and levels of complexity" (Hayles, p. 48).

¹² N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame, 2008, p. 52.

¹³ Brian McHale in his book *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) defines the device of *trompe-l'oeil* as a technique which is particularly employed in postmodern narratives so as to highlight the multiple diegetic worlds that exist in them as well as the confusion or illusion created as to their status ("real" or "virtual") and order (see pp. 115-119). In the case of Danielewski's narrative, this term is used in order to suggest its multilayering and flickering nature.

¹⁴ Callie Miller and Michele Reverte, 'LAist Interview: Mark Z. Danielewski', 23 Oct. 2007, 4 Feb. 2009 <laist.com/2007/10/23/laist_interview_55.php>.

¹⁵ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, 1983, London and New York, Routledge, 1991, p. 33.

¹⁶ Callie Miller, and Michele Reverte, 'LAist Interview: Mark Z. Danielewski', 23 Oct. 2007, 4 Feb. 2009 <laist.com/2007/10/23/laist_interview_55.php>.

¹⁷ Mark Z Danielewski, *Only Revolutions*, London, Doubleday, 2006, pp. 221-22, 287-88.

¹⁸ Callie Miller and Michele Reverte, 'LAist Interview: Mark Z. Danielewski', 23 Oct. 2007, 4 Feb. 2009 <laist.com/2007/10/23/laist_interview_55.php>.

¹⁹ N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame, 2008, p. 164, emphasis in original.

²⁰ Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003, 280, emphasis in original.

²¹ Kiki Benzon, 'Revolution 2: An Interview with Mark Z. Danielewski', *Electronic Book Review*, 20 March 2007. 4 Feb. 2009 <www.electronicbookreview.com>.

²² David Punter, 'Terror', in *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, Marie Mulbey-Roberts (ed), London, Macmillan Press, 1998, p. 240.

²³ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York and London, New York University Press, 2006, p. 95.

²⁴ Ithiel de Sola Pool, *Technologies of Freedom: On Free Speech in an Electronic Age*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1983, pp. 53-54.

²⁵ Mark Z Danielewski, *Only Revolutions*, London, Doubleday, 2006, p.3.

²⁶ Mark Z Danielewski, *Only Revolutions*, London, Doubleday, 2006, p.3.

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