The Time of Megatexts: Dark Accumulation and Mark Z. Danielewski’s *The Familiar*

Bradley J. Fest

“Stories can also be a series of themes unfettered by time.”

—Myla Mint in Mark Z. Danielewski, *The Familiar*

Last week the fifth volume of Mark Z. Danielewski’s massive serial novel in progress, *The Familiar* (2015–), was published. Similar to the author’s first novel, *House of Leaves* (2000), which took film as its principal point of tropological reference and remediation, this most recent work is conceived as a “peak television” show in print, with Volume 5, titled *Redwood* (2017), marking the “Season One finale.”¹ *The Familiar* has been contracted for an initial ten volumes, and, if it is selling well enough to warrant “renewal” by Pantheon after its second “season,” will run to a projected twenty-seven volumes, published biannually, concluding roughly a decade from now in 2027.² Like individual television episodes, each volume in the series shares a

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similar structure: each is lushly illustrated and printed on 880 pages of high-quality, glossy paper, the majority of which follow nine point-of-view characters who are all connected in some way to the narrative’s principal protagonist, a twelve-year-old girl named Xanther Ibrahim.  

The Familiar is also filled with graphically remediated ephemera taken from across the digital and cultural landscape: previews, comics, commercials, YouTube videos in print, a lengthy list of credits, and other materials fill the front and back matter of each volume. Aesthetically, formally, and technically, Danielewski’s novel is an immensely ambitious undertaking that, following N. Katherine Hayles’s reading of House of Leaves, “extends the claims of the print book by showing what print can be in a digital age.” And though it shares a genealogical connection to the serial novels of the nineteenth century, it is thoroughly contemporary. The Familiar is of, in, and out of twenty-first-century time. It is also what I call a megatext.

From even this brief description of a work I can hardly do justice to in my limited remarks today, I hope it is already clear how important time is to Danielewski’s current project, and The Familiar’s emphasis on and exploration of temporality signals an important shift in the focus of the author’s work. Danielewski’s first novel, House of Leaves, is in many ways a kind of apotheosis (or perhaps the last gasp) of twentieth-century United States metafiction. This ergodic novel follows Fredric Jameson’s insight that in postmodernity, “our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are . . . dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism.” House of Leaves is filled with complex meditations on postmodern space: from the spatial play of text on the page, to the

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3 Who has a strange relationship to a small cat or a “familiar.”
uncanny house at the center of the book’s narrative that is (infinitely) larger on the inside than on the outside, Danielewski’s breakout success from the last year of the twentieth century was, in a very real way, about the horrors of what happens when space accumulates. His second major book, Only Revolutions (2006), a rigorous Oulipian long poem deeply concerned with history, was also profoundly spatial. As Hayles writes: “Only Revolutions . . . interrogates the datasphere by accentuating and expanding the role of spatiality in a literary text. . . . Among the transformations and deformations the text implements is a profound shift from narrative as a temporal trajectory to a topographic plane upon which a wide variety of interactions and permutations are staged.” And though it would be a mistake to ignore or gloss over The Familiar’s obvious concerns with space (e.g., even just the considerable place it anticipates taking up on its readers’ bookshelves!), Danielewski’s recent work sees him once again inverting and subverting his previous formal, thematic, and technical concerns to produce a book that multiplies the temporal planes in which it exists and to which it connects. From the deep time of its cosmic frame tale and the shifting temporalities of globalization experienced by its cosmopolitan characters, to its confrontation with Anthropocene planetarity and its biannual, serialized release schedule, The Familiar asks its reader to confront what it means to live in and at too many times. Like other massive transmedia texts produced during the twenty-first century—such as massively multiplayer online roleplaying games, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (2008–), or Richard Grossman’s forthcoming three-million-page “novel” Breeze Avenue—Danielewski’s own megatext-in-progress emerges from and responds to a world in which time is no longer out of joint, but overwhelmingly and catastrophically multiple.

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The Familiar multiplies different experiences and encounters with time materially, formally, and thematically. To begin with The Familiar’s material temporality, consider the following times: eight and three-quarter hours—roughly the time it takes to read each volume (the equivalent of 250 pages of prose in a typical novel); forty-four hours—its current runtime; 236 hours or nearly ten days—its projected final runtime; six weeks—how quickly one could read the entire series by devoting forty hours a week to it; six months—the average time between each volume’s publication; eleven years—how long Danielewski has been working on the project; twelve years—the amount of time projected between the publication of The Familiar’s first volume and its last; twenty-seven years—the time between “Redwood”—a piece Danielewski wrote in 1990, destroyed, and that would later become the impetus for House of Leaves—and the fifth volume of The Familiar sharing the same name; and I could go on. Like other megatexts, which I define as unreadably large yet concrete aesthetic and rhetorical transmedia objects produced and conceived as singular works, and which depend upon digital technology and collaborative authorship for their production, The Familiar is not only an ergodic novel that requires nontrivial effort to peruse; it frustrates its own traversal to the point of unreadability. Unlike Grossman’s Breeze Avenue, which I have written about elsewhere and which achieves megatextuality through its sheer unreadable length, The Familiar is a megatext because of its massive and complex temporal existence.

Formally, though The Familiar aspires to similitude with television shows such as Breaking Bad (2008–13) or Sense8 (2015–16), and it certainly tells a compelling story—particularly after the first volume or “pilot” One Rainy Day in May (2015) is completed and readers become familiar with the novel’s narrative conventions—it is hardly a text one can “binge watch” let alone “binge read.” Though Danielewski is as equally capable of producing

8 “Redwood” was restored by Danielewski’s sister.
page-turning prose as any Stephen King or J. K. Rowling, and indeed, great swaths of *The Familiar* can go by in a breeze, much of it is too experimentally difficult for the duration of its reading to be absorptively, passively enthralling. As a review on the back of Volume 5 informs us and as Jessica Pressman has argued elsewhere, Danielewski’s touchstones are the high modernism of Flaubert, Freud, “Mallarmé[,] and Joyce” as much as the “golden age” television of *Mad Men* (2007–15) or *The Wire* (2002–08). From the discombobulating narrative snippets that begin each volume, to the interruptions made by the metafictional Narrative Constructs that exegetically comment on the story they are telling, from the figures and images made out of wispy, tangled words, to the inscrutable triangle patterns in the middle of each page, *The Familiar*’s heady mixture of allusion, mystery, and textual play make traversing its forty-four hundred pages an exercise in anti-absorptive (and surprisingly modernist) reading.

But this is not to say that Danielewski’s writing hearkens back to T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound’s relationship to the “tradition.” Rather, his novel seems less anxious about the influences that contribute to its narrative texture than it appears to just take those influences for granted as the stuff out of which contemporary art is made. Indeed, the book is rather explicit about this. In a remarkable moment of metafictional honesty, one of the book’s narrators, TF-Narcon informs its readers that “I am not original. I am merely a blend of current texts neither influenced nor influential because all that I reveal can at any point be reconfigured [. . .]. I am [. . .] a conflation of convenient linguistic techniques, born out of context and choice, and balanced to best cover

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those subjects I’m designed to address.\textsuperscript{11} Rather than postmodern pastiche or what Jonathan Lethem might call the ecstasy of influence, \textit{The Familiar} shares with other contemporary texts what Aaron Bady has noticed as a surprising “lack of anxiety when it comes to influence,” or what Northrop Frye might call an “undiscriminating catholicity.”\textsuperscript{12} \textit{The Familiar}’s modernist difficulty and plethora of languages other than English, rather than make its pleasures available only to a limited, highly educated reading audience with the leisure time to spend on an immense and demanding novel, shows a ubiquity or (perhaps) a mundanity of influence that both serves to offset its modernist aesthetics—e.g., references to the Electronic Entertainment Expo and Rihanna exist right alongside epigraphs from David Foster Wallace and Francis Crick\textsuperscript{13}—and alerts us to the foundation upon which textual production rests in the twenty-first century: what I have elsewhere called hyperarchivalism.\textsuperscript{14} \textit{The Familiar} is assembled with the vast archive of texts now available via networked digital computers as the primary support for its aesthetic, formal, and technical experimentation. It is a book that understands the staggering number of cultural artifacts at its and its reader’s fingertips, and that history is available for its search-engine-equipped readers differently than ever before. As its automated narrators or Narcons continually emphasize, the book delights in the potential flights of googling fancy its textual layering might produce, encouraging both fleeting \textit{and} careful research into a variety of different areas, including but not limited to “voicings typically characterized as [. . .] Modernist, Imagist,

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\item Danielewski, \textit{The Familiar}, 1:566. Danielewski makes extensive use of ellipses in his writing. In keeping with the established convention for other writers who make frequent use of ellipses in their prose (e.g., Thomas Pynchon), any ellipses I insert in Danielewski’s prose will be bracketed.
\item For a further discussion of hyperarchivalism, see Bradley J. Fest, “Reading Now and Again: Hyperarchivalism and Democracy in Ranjan Ghosh and J. Hillis Miller’s \textit{Thinking Literature across Continents}” (forthcoming).
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Surrealist, Oulipian, Confessional, Postmodernist, Magical Realist, Postcolianlist, [. . .] Post-Ironic Confessional,” et cetera.¹⁵ But, of course, one can also just read the thing, front to back, Volumes 1–5, without consulting Wikipedia or one’s knowledge of literary and cultural history at all. In this way, and importantly different from television or other passive media, The Familiar produces a temporal and historical agency in its readers who exercise an important role in how long and in what ways they choose to pursue the many hyperarchival secrets and pleasures the book makes available, co-creating at every step different versions and experiences of its temporal existence.

But lest I overstate the book’s relationship to time and twenty-first-century digital realities as an uncritical celebration of the overwhelming amount of information made available to contemporary subjects, I should stress that time, as it exists in the diegesis of the novel itself, is strikingly, intoxicatingly multiple, and to a rather disturbing degree. In “Clip 4,” a short story Danielewski published in 2012 set in the universe of The Familiar, the story’s fictional author writes about seeing a film that cannot exist in space and time as it does, “time is not merely ‘out of joint,’ it is incoherent. [. . .] ‘Something sure is rotten in the state of . . . of things.’”¹⁶ In The Familiar, if time is incoherent and rotten, it is because of how much of it there is, how many different temporalities the book attempts to represent. The book dramatizes an encounter with time that becomes particularly pronounced in the twenty-first-century. In the space of the book’s diegetic “present,” 2014, the biggest to the smallest timescales converge and mimetically

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¹⁵ Danielewski, The Familiar, 1:566.
¹⁶ Mark Z. Danielewski, “Clip 4,” Black Clock, no. 15 (2012): 175, http://tomabba.com/test/Clip4.pdf. “Clip 4” is an important though still largely unknown text for understanding The Familiar, and its publication three years before One Rainy Day in May indicates that it is both a teaser for the longer work and potentially an important key for understanding Danielewski’s megatext. Further, in “Clip 4” we learn—through a reference to Danielewski’s first novel: “Super Navidson Recordy. Don’t you think?” (172)—that The Familiar and House of Leaves take place in the same fictional universe, which seems like an important piece of information for thinking about Danielewski’s career more generally.
interact, to the point where even the most powerful figures in the story—the Narcons—become overwhelmed by the accumulation of different temporalities.

To start with large timescales: each volume of *The Familiar* begins with a pair of frame tales, both of them placing the events of the book amidst a background of deep time in which the only constant appears to be violence, suffering, and “war.”\(^\text{17}\) The first frame tale is the cosmic, posthuman narrative, “Astral Omega,” set “billions of years hence” at the end of the universe, when matter has begun to decohere and the underpinnings of existence to dissolve.\(^\text{18}\) Next, each volume contains a brief story from the archaeological past—beginning over two hundred thousand years ago in Volume 1, to one hundred thousand years ago in Volume 2, and on to fifty-five hundred years ago in the most recent volume—and one imagines that these stories of ancient humans will presumably get closer and closer to the story’s present with each successive volume.\(^\text{19}\) Then there are the Narcons, which presumably exist in a technologically advanced future. The Narcons appear to be telling the story of *The Familiar* to their contemporaries while simultaneously broadcasting it into the past so that we can read it, blurring the line between past, present, and future, and offering a challenge at the most fundamental level of the book’s narration to the historical relationship between humans and narrative. Paul Ricoeur, in his magisterial three-volume work, *Time and Narrative* (1983–85), emphasizes that “time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence.”\(^\text{20}\) For Ricoeur, narrative is the fundamental way in which humans understand their existence in time, and Danielewski (I

\(^{17}\) Danielewski, *The Familiar*, 1:17.


\(^{19}\) See Danielewski, *The Familiar*, 1:35, 2:35, and 5:37. Volume 3’s frame tale begins 73,656 years ago and Volume 4’s 29,988 years ago (3:35 and 4:37).

suspect intentionally) is using the rather brilliant metafictional device of his artificially intelligent Narcons to question the human in Ricoeur’s equation. At a time when nonhuman timescales are beginning to have increasingly significant bearing on how we understand humanity’s place in geologic history, and in a novel filled with posthuman and nonhuman entities and agents, particularly animals, whose subjectivity is rather sympathetically captured by our narrators, one of the achievements of The Familiar is to demonstrate the challenge facing humans and nonhumans attempting to narrate the multiplying deep temporalities of the Anthropocene.

In terms of smaller timescales, again the Narcons show themselves to be remarkable figures, as they quilt together the book’s deep time with its present narrative by explicitly accessing the most minute moments in the story’s diegesis. As our TF-Narcon\(^9\) puts it: “I know [Xanther] down to a near-atomic level—near because near-Planck scale analysis must address quantum superposition resolutions which do not always resolve considerably [. . .]. I know every reality Xanther has encountered whether pebble, pot holder, or tangerine seed. I even know those data points her mind has mis-indexed or never retained in the first place. In other words: I know that which is just beyond Xanther too.”\(^{21}\) Despite the timestamps that begin and end each proper chapter in the book, The Familiar rigorously resists placing its readers and characters in a stable, easily locatable and discrete time. From the near-Planck scale analysis TF-Narcon\(^9\) can perform on the book’s protagonist and all Xanther’s possible permutations in the book’s multiverse, to the desperate cry for existence made by the posthuman singularity at the end of time, The Familiar multiplies the temporalities of its diegesis to the point that characters themselves are temporally confused, unstuck within their own multiversal historical space, connected to too many others, incoherent, overwhelmed by the narrative possibilities of “every reality,” awash in the digital temporality of their oceanic, distributed present.

\(^{21}\) Danielewski, The Familiar, 1:571.
As the series has progressed, the instability and slipperiness of the book’s temporal diegesis has become increasingly pronounced. In Volume 4, titled *Hades* (2017), Anwar goes to New York City for a job interview with the shady tech-giant Galvadyne and takes his adopted stepdaughter Xanther along. The representatives of this suspicious company pull no punches in attempting to woo Anwar to its ranks, making it clear that anything he or Xanther want is within their means to provide. Xanther responds to such largesse immediately: “‘*Hamilton!*’ she practically squealed. ‘Can you get us tickets?’” The head of Galvadyne finds this request mystifying, as neither he nor Anwar have ever heard of the smash hit musical. All three of the story’s Narcons are also upset by Xanther’s request for *Hamilton* (2015) tickets: “(Static recall [reconstituting {. . .}]) / (That’s not possible.) / (Confirming: not part of her historical possibilities . . .).”

This scene in New York takes place in early September of 2014; *Hamilton* would not debut until February of 2015. Though one might suggest that *Hamilton* was in production at this time and perhaps Xanther had heard it discussed in passing—or else this might just be a joke about the difficulty of acquiring tickets to the musical!—the more likely explanation, given the novel’s temporal playfulness, is that Xanther has access to events that have not yet occurred, times that have not come to pass. It seems doubtful, given what information Danielewski has provided so far, that Xanther is precognitive. Rather, time in *The Familiar* just does not exist as a linear, diachronic series of events, but is rather a synchronic network of interconnecting temporalities in which individual elements of the narrative can overcome their own limitations, break outside the boundaries of anthropocentric spacetime, and access times that simply do not yet exist. In short, Xanther’s imagination can access the future, and it is a future not foreseeable in the present but one that is nonetheless a desirable if already...

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22 Danielewski, *The Familiar*, 4:450. Note: to signal when the Narcons are speaking, the text of *The Familiar* uses a unique punctuation mark that my word processing software lacks. The closest analogue to this punctuation mark is a parenthesis, which has been used here.
written one, a future whose possibilities for surprise and change, for giving voice to unheard voices, has not yet been foreclosed by the cultural logic of its moment.

Mark Z. Danielewski has described *The Familiar* in an interview as “a longform investment in the future,” and I believe that we should take him very seriously at his word. With the disastrous effects of rising atmospheric carbon becoming increasingly observable and the relentless pace of neoliberal capital pursuing ever-increasing profit, the twenty-first century appears to be a time of *dark accumulation*. Increasingly, the risks facing the overdeveloped world stem not from absence but from overwhelming presence: everywhere there is a problem of *too much*. The logic of dark accumulation is also visible in cultural production, particularly how digital technology and the ever-expanding global visibility of corporate intellectual property have made it possible to produce unreadably massive texts that appear to be accumulating and expanding with no end in sight. Megatexts such as *World of Warcraft* (2004–) or the endless string of future *Star Wars* (1977–) transmedia products awaiting us and our progeny emerge from and respond to the accumulatory logic of contemporaneity—indeed, I argue that the megatext is an emergent form native to the digital age. But unlike these uncritical examples that embrace a horizonless perpetuation of their neoliberal present, *The Familiar* rigorously and complexly dramatizes how the dark accumulation of the neoliberal era applies to our experience of time as well, and thus is able to profoundly question the stories we are currently able to tell ourselves about our present and future. Twenty-first-century control societies overwhelm their subjects with multiplying, conflicting, incoherent temporalities: from the idiocy of tweeting


world leaders absorbing the smallest increments of our attention, to the horrors of climate change extended millions of years into the future, such timescales easily upset even our most optimistic thinking. In terms of its aesthetic and technical decisions, *The Familiar* suggests that narrative has become unstuck from its ability to make sense of time in contemporaneity and that time has come roaring back as an important category of our daily lives after postmodernism. *The Familiar* also modestly offers itself as a solution: by expanding and transforming what we think a print narrative can do, how it inhabits time materially, formally, and thematically, we might gain insight into how better to navigate the multiplying temporalities of the twenty-first century. If nothing else, *The Familiar* presents us with a longform project invested in the future, which requires the future, *a* future (though not *any* future) for its perpetuation. It might be enough if we can learn even the simplest lesson from Danielewski’s quixotic undertaking: that there might be a reason to put such future-oriented investment into other projects and institutions as well.

**About the Author**
Bradley J. Fest is assistant professor of English at Hartwick College. He is the author of two volumes of poetry, *The Rocking Chair* (Blue Sketch, 2015) and *The Shape of Things* (Salò, 2017), along with a number of essays on contemporary literature and culture. More information about his work is available at [bradleyjfest.com](http://bradleyjfest.com).