Whence the fear? It’s true, Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, with its extreme and unorthodox formatting, is full of quite literal tight spaces to complement the claustrophobia it suggests to the reader; its dark corridors and break-neck narrative of mortality are coupled with a cleverly disconcerting use of space that leaves one desperately flipping pages, pulse ever increasing and palms getting progressively clammy as the numbers ascend. Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, similarly, never allows for a moment of repose; any given paragraph can put the reader in an entirely different decade than the one before, while a battery of haunting imagery forms an aggressive vanguard for the plot. Vonnegut never lets the knots in our stomachs come undone, in this or his *Sirens of Titan*. He’s consistently, relentlessly concerned with reminding us of our own worthlessness, of the straw-house fragility of our lives.

Or, how about sadness? As for Milan Kundera and his *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, phantasmagoric dream sequences speckle tales of forlorn lovers and lives endemically incapable of completion, while short, sometimes paragraph-length chapters remind us of futility, *once is never*, their fleeting nature mirroring that of the story in which they’re set. David Lynch’s *Inland Empire*, a surrealist foray into the darkest and most trying parts of the human psyche, is nearly devoid of story, a waking nightmare that leaves the observer feeling cold, afraid, and inexplicably alone. Somewhere in the turbulent jumble of harrowing, smeary shots on PD150 digicam, the disquieting scenery, and the disheartening lack of discernible story, one cannot help but endure a heartbreak, cannot stave off the goosebumps, no matter how desperately one tries.

Perhaps best framed, then, the question: by what force the shivers? They seem to be a common denominator to works of great merit, and yet it’s not patently obvious why. Why do some works of art send cascades of wordless understanding down our spines? What quality, what intersection of form, function, and context relegates some pieces of music pleasantly and quietly to
the kingdom of kitsch, fated to be background noise, pretty or frightening or relaxing or silly, and allows others to trickle into our collective consciousness and change the operations of our minds? How is it that a novel can sometimes change from story to parable, that there exist tales which ultimately pervade us and become something far greater than entertainment, greater than lesson, greater than matter or even thought? What is it, what elusive property, what trick of form or manipulation of emotion is there in art, that makes the reader of a novel, the watcher of a film, internalize and canonize a piece, to classify it “literature” and carry it, covet it, for the length of his life?

The Blueprint

*House of Leaves* has a peculiar structure: it is, ostensibly, a novel within a novel within a novel, layers upon layers of character, narrative, footnote, etc. First, there’s central protagonist Will Navidson and his family, whose struggles form the primary story; then Zampanò, an elderly man, recently and mysteriously deceased, who spent his life cataloguing and collecting information about the Navidsons in an attempt to chronicle their story; and finally Johnny Truant, a young L.A. vagrant who discovers Zampanò’s manuscripts and comments on them in a lengthy and complex series of interwoven footnotes, supplements of Zampanò’s own. Thus, we’re presented with a fascinating view as readers, a rather singular opportunity, it turns out, to peer into the psyches of other observers even as they observe, to experience other minds (fabricated though they may be) as they themselves experience something beautiful and horrifying. We get to see what it is, precisely, as well as the *when* of that thing, that sets our characters off, that engages their obsession and fascination and turns narrative into something else entirely, something that will ultimately take control of Truant’s life and end Zampanò’s and, if Danielewski has done his job well, make a mark on ours as well.

The central plot is as follows: after moving into an idyllic Virginia home with family in tow, Will Navidson quickly discovers that his new domicile has a sinister aspect. Although the outside dimensions never shift, a door suddenly and unceremoniously appears on an interior living room wall. It opens up into a labyrinthine and ever-changing space, a black, smooth-walled structure that reaches on seemingly forever, a series of vaulted, impossibly large cathedralesque spaces, miles-long hallways, doors concealing tiny empty rooms, and a hair-raising, pervasive sense of evil. Navidson, with help, attempts to explore and quantify this space, and, perhaps predictably, things do not go as smoothly as he had hoped. We’re made the gift of a beautiful and compelling
metaphor to explore weight, distance, depth, to travel into the annals of a text and find what lurks beneath the surface, to explain what makes it different from every other, what turns some houses from mere structures, wood, concrete, furniture, and memories, into undulating, living things, comprised of profundity, beauty, and wonder.

Echoes

As Danielewski tells us through the voice of the elderly Zampanò, echoes are an operative part of the equation in understanding a place, or, therefore, a piece. They are, he explains at length, an indispensable part of our sensory apparatus, what we use to confirm the finite and physical nature of objects all around us. Though we lack the definitive power of a bat’s echolocation, still we wait for the return sounds of our calls, cast back by the boundaries of cavernous spaces, to measure where we are, who we are, what we are. “And where there is no Echo there is no description of space or love. There is only silence,” Zampanò tells us, and surely experience bears out the truth of this statement (50). Poised at the doorway of a novel, a story, we are faced ultimately by shadows, by a length of incomprehensible corridor with wends and turns of plot and character that we cannot navigate by ego alone. And so we shout, we cast a piece of ourselves into the darkness and wait for a resonance, for Vonnegut’s words, Lynch’s images, or Kundera’s characters to vibrate with the pitches of our experiences and dormant psychology in such a way that we can make sense of them.

The nature of these echoes has much to do with the relationship we develop with a text. It should be patently obvious, for example, that captivity in an alien zoo and the passage of time as a series of disjointed episodes are not inherent to most of humanity’s experience; to peer, therefore, into Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five, to contemplate the horror of Dresden and the ploddingly absurd tone with which he relates his story to us, is not unlike peering into a dark, unexplored abyss. Upon even our first foray into the darkness of its pages, however, waiting anxiously for the return sounds that herald shapes that we can decipher, we’re met with an easy understanding, a coming to terms: “As a trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue, and suspense and confrontations, I had outlined the Dresden story many times. The best outline I ever made, or anyway the prettiest one, was on the back of a roll of wallpaper,” Vonnegut tells us (6). Instantly encapsulating and explaining away much of his own seriousness and inanity by way of humor and flippancy, Vonnegut imbues the stilted and
bizarre jaunts of protagonist Billy Pilgrim to the far-off planet of Tralfamadore with an aspect of childish story-telling, the ubiquitous human asset of youthful imagination—although in this situation it is utilized to come to terms with tragedy. It’s as if Vonnegut provides small vestibules at regular intervals along the length of the corridors that comprise his novels, asides where he can contextualize and give form to the overwhelming scale and darkness of his writerly palate, via either straightforward explanation or juxtaposition of elements.

These respites are chambers where the story, by virtue of compression, can echo more powerfully, can resound in boomy ways within us, can remind us and teach us things about the nature of our relationship with reality and the nature of human cruelty. Often, these moments are comedic, either altogether ridiculous or scathingly ironic—upon waking up on a train, amidst horrifying and dehumanizing reveries of death and cruelty, Billy Pilgrim is informed by a porter, “Man . . . you sure had a hard-on” (161). In a lengthy digression on the nature of heavenly bodies in *Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut quips, during a tirade on the perceived stagnation of human social growth, “Every passing hour brings the Solar System forty-three thousand miles closer to Globular Cluster M13 in Hercules—and still there are some misfits who insist that there is no such thing as progress” (5). Suddenly, through exploiting a universal sense of humor, Tralfamadore and Titan alike don’t seem so very far away, nor Dresden so unimaginable and intellectually alienating; they carry some familiar sounds and aspects of home.

So, too, for *Inland Empire*, a film described by Jim Emerson as “practically impossible to review in a newspaper. It has a story—multiple stories, all intertwined and interconnected at various nodes—but it’s structured more like a web than a yarn. Synopsis is futile.” It’s not outlandish to posit that such a film has the potential to scare off and overwhelm many would-be watchers without even a nod as to content. Factor in, then, the shocking imagery, the nightmare quality of the shots and performances, the absence of linear story, and it’s difficult to understand how anyone could enjoy, let alone adopt, the spirit of a film like this. Lynch, though, much like Vonnegut, is a master of echoes, of setting up sophisticated spaces designed to amplify and make real the primal, the atavistic, the dreamscape. One need look no further than what appears on the surface to be one of the most austere and inhuman parts of the entire film—the stomach-churningly weird pseudo-sitcom “Rabbits” that is interspersed in bits throughout the length of *Inland Empire*—to understand both his mastery and the way in which it evinces the profound.
Much as the hallways in *House of Leaves* leave space every so often for a door that opens to an empty room, a place where the explorers can hide from the unknown and take a moment to try to understand the chaos of their surroundings, Lynch has designed his film so that whenever the action becomes too intense or the narrative thread too hard to follow, we are allowed to retreat for a moment into a seemingly normal American living room, albeit one that’s populated by a family of off-puttingly anthropomorphic rabbits. The first time we meet them, for example, after a particularly vicious scene of abuse against a young prostitute filmed through low-pass filters, Mother Rabbit, wearing a frilly pink nightgown, is ironing in the corner. Her daughter, voiced by Naomi Watts, sits on a couch in the foreground and stares into silence for nearly a minute, a vista into some Norman Rockwell tableau gone horribly, horribly awry. Then the door to their apartment creaks open and in walks Father Rabbit, wearing a pressed suit and carrying a leather briefcase, to the sound of an uproarious and disembodied laugh-track that lasts far too long. Not to say that these scenes are any less disturbing than the rest of the film, any more relevant to everyday life than the rest of the outlandish three hours, but there’s something inherently familiar at work in this room. We realize slowly, even if we don’t know what it is, that there’s something we understand about this small rabbit family that speaks in a hobbled, illogical sing-song and stares always into nothingness. There is some similarity in its feeling of absence and utter, nondescript horror to our own lives and to the Hollywood perception of domestic normalcy we’ve adopted in America, to the undefined parts of our own psyche that are shrouded in the darkness of subconsciousness. We thus form a connection, grasp at the particulars we understand, because even in those parts that we do not, there is something there. As Danielewski’s Johnny Truant tells us,

> Of course there always will be darkness but I realize now something inhabits it. Historical or not. Sometimes it seems like a cat, the panther with its moon mad gait or a tiger with stripes of ash and eyes as wild as winter oceans. Sometimes it’s the curve of a wrist or what’s left of romance, still hiding in the drawer of some long lost nightstand or carefully drawn in the margins of an old discarded calendar. Sometimes it’s even just a vapor trail speeding west, prophetic, over clouds aglow with dangerous light. Of course these are only images, my images, and in the end they’re born out of something much more akin to a Voice, which though invisible to the eye and frequently unheard by even the ear still continues, day and night, year after year, to sweep through us all.
> Just as you have swept through me.
> Just as I now sweep through you. (518)
Kundera, on the other hand, takes the subtler approach; his story is the one that makes sense, that can be plotted out so that B follows A and C follows B. The danger, naturally, is that we will not find in it depth, that instead of a sprawling and mesmerizing interior space of beautiful and unexplored terrain, the reading of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* will be a stroll through the mundane, a story that, however pretty and well-wrought it might be, is destined to fade from our greater memories without leaving a trace. It might be full of echoes, but none of them so loud as to mean much to our deeper natures. Kundera, however, through philosophical digression intermingled shoulder-to-shoulder with the happenings of story, through transcendent dream-sequences that unobtrusively dot the landscape of the novel, provides the literal inversion of the forms used by Danielewski, Vonnegut, and Lynch; to read *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is to walk down the sunny roads of two European love stories, with darker, menacing alleys, the hangouts of self-scrutiny, violent Communist oppression, and existentialist worry over Nietzsche's concept of eternal return cropping up every few blocks to arrest the attention and force a new and profound reading of events.

These peculiar turns of Kundera's novel echo in us our own fears, our own inabilities to puzzle away the complexity of our lives and relationships, to put side by side the sterility of everyday life with the off-color and saturated wanderings of the novel's characters. Thus, the lives of central couple Tomas and Tereza, and the way in which Tomas's one-time mistress Sabina defects unavoidably from everything that might mean something to her in pursuit of what amounts to nothing but the pursuit itself, cause our hearts to tremble in uncertainty and shortcoming. We shrink at the prospect that we do not know and shall never know what it is that causes our lives to unfold as they do. Tereza, a mild-mannered girl conceptually born, Kundera tells us, from the sobering rumble of a stomach in moments of intimacy between lovers, disappears into fantasies that she and her husband should "merge into a hermaphrodite" so that "then the other women's bodies would be their playthings" (62). She dreams that on a sunny Prague Sunday afternoon, she is led to a hilltop where "three men, their eyes blindfolded, their heads turned to the sky, stood with their backs against three trees on the endless lawn," in what was to be her euthanasia by firing squad, planned and paid for by her loving husband (149). The romance of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* gains entry to our hearts straight-off through interesting turns of plot, and then is catapulted to loftier heights, to levels of self-awareness and vast import, by the way its form rattles through ribcage, spinal cord, and brain alike to take up residence somewhere deep inside the mind.

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Through-Composition

There’s more to it than just echoes, though; after all, although there are wondrous caves and expansive churches, places empty and abandoned and miraculous to behold, whose echoes are far-reaching and powerful, there are also shopping malls and factory floors, places where echo abounds even when it is just a facet of the mundane. Kundera provides for us, however, another metaphor, with which he describes the virtue of a life, but which can be just as readily applied to the shape of a novel. It is in truth already a hallmark of another medium for the profound: music. To him, and to his characters, life and therefore art are as carefully orchestrated and through-composed as a piece of music, replete with motifs, changes in meter, chords defined by the murky and sometimes inaudible lower registers, each moment defined by the particular and exhaustive properties of itself and those that come before and after. To turn to his own words:

The bowler hat was a motif in the musical composition that was Sabina’s life. It returned again and again, each time with a different meaning, and all the meanings flowed through the bowler hat like water through a riverbed. I might call it Heraclitus’ (‘You can’t step twice into the same river’) riverbed: the bowler hat was a bed through which each time Sabina saw another river flow, another semantic river: each time the same object would give rise to a new meaning, though all former meanings would resonate (like an echo, like a parade of echoes) together with the new one. Each new experience would resound, each time enriching the harmony. (88)

Of course, echoes are here too, but they are not Kundera’s focus. Instead, he’s concerned with the concertedness and well-formedness of a life (or novel). The intervention of choice images or elements at times of heightened artfulness, of self-aware moments of intrusion, draws not just a narrative arc but one too of thought, a development of idea, of a mature and complete introspection, so that the discursive unfoldings of a concept are but a substantive for something else that is universally true and equally universally spine-tint-ling. Tomas lives his life by Beethoven’s String Quartet No. 16, the repeated theme under which the composer famously scribbled es muss sein (“It must be”). It is always in Tomas’s mind but of a remarkably different character in every hour of his life, dependent on the particular stuff of his heart at that moment in time. Similarly, the novel at large is constructed so that every time a word is repeated, every instance an image or sentence is recalled, its melodic swells call to mind the circumstances under which it was first uttered. Its
recurrence brings back the sentiment of that original motif; its new harmonic surroundings evoke and contrast with its other various permutations. The images and words are not, therefore, self-serving, but inextricably important parts of a wider texture, notes on a staff and staves in a score, crucial in their timing, pitch, and timbre to the integrity of the whole.

*Sirens of Titan*, a young Kurt Vonnegut’s sophomore bid at the art of the novel, is obsessed with this idea. In it, humanity’s existence, as it turns out, is nothing more than an elaborately orchestrated industrial technique for the creation of a certain substance, manufacturable only by a species of relatively advanced technology, masterminded by a far-off species on the planet of Tralfamadore so that they might send a message of greeting to another far-off species of alien: “Hello.” Every event of protagonist Malachi Constant’s life is pre-arranged by the seemingly omniscient Winston Niles Rumfoord, a man who, by accidentally piloting himself into a chronosynclastic infundibulum (a sort of wormhole), gains powers over time and space, and plays with the lesser members of humanity for his own ends. His own ends, in turn, as well as his sudden ascension to superhuman power, have been craftily engineered by the Tralfamadorians; the greatest irony of all, of course, is that even the Tralfamadorians owe their designs to the mind of one Kurt Vonnegut, whose exhaustive and brilliant talents for arrangement are nevertheless entirely *homo sapiens*. From the extensive description of Kazak the dog’s jowls to the meta-aware last will and testament of one Beatrice Rumfoord—which reads, “The worst thing that could possibly happen to anybody would be to not be used for anything by anybody. Thank you for using me, even though I didn’t want to be used by anybody”—every turn of phrase is a baton-tick by the mostly-invisible conductor (317). Each unit is laboriously honed to add color and fascination and transcendent beauty to the whole, placed with care so that the pastoral and jaunty opening bars on Earth, the heavy and discordant reprises that are the Martian invasion, and the mourning coda on the surface of Titan sing together and form a landscape in which a reader might get truly lost and learn about himself and his relationship with the world.

There is more to understanding orchestration than understanding moments, however: a piece of music exists all at once and, once heard, is understood as a simultaneous phenomenon. Chronology, although a factor, is no more important than any of the other qualities of a piece. Vonnegut takes this concept one step further in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, where he introduces us to the concept of Tralfamadorian time: “All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warning or explanations. It simply is. Take it moment by moment, and you find that we are all, as I’ve said before, bugs in
The style of narration that comprises Billy Pilgrim’s unstuck wanderings through Dresden and the rest of his life does not exist just for a gradual reveal of the story, although that is one of its functions. It is a commentary on the reality of a text, the interconnectedness of each and every fiber, the way that expositions are shaped and worded just as painstakingly as their later instantiations.

That is to say, *Slaughterhouse-Five* does not begin in the world of Vonnegut by accident and then acknowledge his presence later only in tribute, nor does his authorial analogue Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut’s perennial facsimile for self-abuse, make an appearance only so that Vonnegut can poke fun at himself. All qualities of this novel co-exist to help shape its identity, the jarring and sad diminished chords of profanely absurd soldiering mixed in amongst the heady and complex major ninths of Tralfamadore and bombastic, staccato tritones of Dresden. All these strains combine so that the novel might be manifest as one coherent offering, a single retrospective of human nature and fate and all the rest.

To up the ante one final time, then, let us consider *House of Leaves* and *Inland Empire*, works that are much harder to discuss in tangible terms. Once again the provocative words of Danielewski’s Johnny Truant challenge us: “Yeah I know, the dots here don’t really connect. After all, how does one go from a piece of poetry to a heart wrenching beauty to the details of a drunken one night stand? I mean even if you could connect those dots, which I don’t think you can, what kind of picture would you really draw?” (117). The sprawling bid of surrealism that constitutes both works, like the unorthodox techniques, improvisation, and often indiscriminately employed noise of so-called 20th century art music is not designed to make a digestible whole. The constituent pieces do come together, surely; Lynch’s scene work is self-referential, and many interpretations place most of the film on a timeline, and with enough cataloguing and critical discussion, *House of Leaves* is rather inescapably logical. The overwhelming, fascinating part is the intention: a scraping, swelling, horrifying Penderecki composition is a work of music, certainly, but its musicians do not read from a note-by-note score, nor even necessarily play with the right side of their bows. The Russian nesting-doll that is *House of Leaves*, similarly, does not build a stepwise story of facts presented in the correct orientation on the page; *Inland Empire* does not show a given actor in the same roles throughout its duration, does not ultimately wrap up loose ends, or ever define the line between reality and dream.

Still, we can connect to each, can walk away from either story and have it play in our heads again and again, can live informed and grown from these
nebulous interchanges that we do not understand. To sit in a concert hall and encounter Penderecki’s *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*, an uncharted piece of hair-raising chaos and abnormal techniques, a piece that defies what it is to be music and yet still is music, is to understand this principle. There is an electricity, some elaborate series of echoes, that causes even the seemingly (or actually) haphazard to elicit a visceral emotional response, to cause tears, or shivers, laughs or smiles, or even subsequent hours of pondering and discussion. Through-composition can be either a slow, methodical process, the kind that Beethoven or Kundera might champion, a pursuit of all-out intuition and pseudo-awareness, the preferred method of Lynch, or the kind of mix of the two that characterizes Danielewski, Vonnegut, and so many others.

*Ut Scriptum Vivat*¹

This account is by no means comprehensive—far more than two definitive qualities transform a work into a work of art. Perhaps it’s not even shivers at the root of it, and perhaps they’re only one more symptom of the well-executed and beauteous; regardless, these shivers are always present in those novels and films and works of music that aim to speak to us, to do more than simply entertain or invoke curiosity or show mastery of form, and in light of the evidence presented here, it seems that they must always be. For ultimately, there’s something in these shivers that we’re looking for, some subtle and powerful force that can affect us so: an indication of life, of the desire to impart, a passion and conviction so implicit to the author’s idea that it imbues his work with a heart and soul of its own. The novel is as much a breathing, feeling sentience as you or I. The folds of its body are determined by inflections and words, yes, but its subconscious is at least as expansive as that of its human counterparts, if not more so. The depth of its message and its soul pervades contexts psychological, sociological, economic, and historical, its idle thoughts are allusions and apostrophes and zeugmas, asyndeton and tone and paraprosdokian, symbol, sentence structure, and even semi-colons, commas, spellings, and italics. To read a novel is to dance, to give and take, to acknowledge profundity and force, desire and interpretation. To read a novel is to fear, is to encounter sadness; to read a novel is to shiver.

¹ “That the text may live”


