

The Serial Novel in an Age of Binging: How to Read Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*

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Abstract

Under the influence of television serials, the graphic novel and computer games, we are currently witnessing a revival of the serialized novel. This article focuses on transformations of readership in the first three volumes of Mark Z. Danielewski's 27-part novel series *The Familiar*, which the author has announced as a remediation of narratively complex television series like *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*. I argue that *The Familiar* is narratively complex in its hybridization of the conventions of episodic and serial storytelling. Further, Danielewski's employs the 'signiconic' as an innovative way to familiarize and thus hook his readers to his story world. These formal qualities in turn encourage particular modes and strategies of reading and interpretative tactics, as well as collaborative readings marked by shared waiting, collective intelligence, and crowdsourcing of contents. At the same time, I state, this series emphasizes novelistic affordances like mediacy, materiality, opacity, and time-boundedness, reminding the reader of the pleasures of delay and 'slow reading' in times of 'real-time' media and binge-watching. As more novels are becoming serialized, we are beginning to see how seriality in the digital age holds a promise of transforming the modes of reading that pertain to the literary novel.

Résumé

Sous l'influence des séries télévisées, du roman graphique et des jeux vidéo, nous assistons aujourd'hui à un retour du roman-feuilleton. Cet article examine les changements du lectorat des trois premiers volumes de l'ensemble romanesque en 27 volumes de Mark Z. Danielewski, *The Familiar*, un projet que l'auteur annonçait comme une remédiatisation de séries « complexes » comme *The Wire* ou *Breaking Bad*. Selon moi, la notion de complexité narrative tient ici du mélange de deux conventions : la narration par épisodes et la sérialisation. En plus, l'auteur utilise des « signicônes » comme une nouvelle manière d'introduire le lecteur dans son univers narratif. A leur tour, ces qualités formelles encouragent de nouvelles tactiques et stratégies de lecture et d'interprétation ainsi que des types de lecture collaborative définies par l'attente partagée, l'intelligence collective et la construction collective de contenus. En même temps, le travail de Danielewski se sert de propriétés romanesques telles que structure médiatique, opacité ou ancrage temporel du texte qui ont toutes pour effet de faire l'éloge du ralentissement et de la lenteur dans une culture obsédée par la vitesse, l'accélération et le temps réel médiatique. Le passage du roman au roman-feuilleton qu'on observe de plus en plus, nous aide aussi à comprendre que la culture numérique pourrait s'avérer capable de modifier radicalement les types de lecture typiques du roman littéraire.

Keywords

new media, novel, serialization, television, post-network, participatory culture

The serial novel is back. In the nineteenth century, industrialized print production provided a mass readership with access to cheap books. Serial publication strategies then supported the logic and rhythms of an industrialized literary marketplace and drove the demand of consumers.¹ But after the popularity of the nineteenth-century *feuilleton*, serials were for a long time considered cheap, mass-produced media, and associated with ‘low’ culture such as comics, soap operas, and genre fiction. Today, the serial has become relevant again, both as a popular and esteemed cultural form and as a central topic in the theoretical study of literature and media. Under the influence of sophisticated forms like narratively complex TV-series and the newfound prestige of the graphic novel and computer games, we witness a revival of the serialized novel as an *innovative* form.² Thus, Karl Ove Knausgård published his six-volume autobiographical series *My Struggle* in a span of three years; William T. Vollmann’s 2015 novel *The Dying Grass* is the latest installment of his series *Seven Dreams: A Book of North American Landscapes*. In this same year, Amitav Ghosh has completed his *Ibis* trilogy. And Elena Ferrante’s four ‘Neapolitan novels’ (2011-‘14) have been widely praised.

Mark Z. Danielewski, author of *House of Leaves* (2000) and *Only Revolutions* (2006), takes the literary serial to a new extreme. He has embarked upon a 27-volume (and 21,000-page) novel series titled *The Familiar*, a new volume scheduled for publication every six months. The author claims that his project was inspired by quality television series, and in fact

had been impossible to conceive had it not been for the sudden efflorescence of great television. Looking at the five seasons of *The Wire* or the wild speculations of *Battlestar Galactica*. Certainly *Mad Men*, certainly *The Sopranos*, certainly *Breaking Bad*. These visual novels that have come into our living rooms and bedrooms and they tell a story in much greater detail and with much greater patience.³

Yet he also hints at an element of competition, of ‘paragon’ between the novel and the TV series, by claiming his novels can go beyond what these quality series have to offer: “If *House of Leaves* tackles the movie, *Only Revolutions* music and *The Fifty Year Sword* the campfire story, then *The Familiar* will show how the novel can stalk, take down and devour the television series”.⁴ This article will tease out this double-edged relationship between *The Familiar* and the narratively complex TV series.

I discuss the first three volumes of this series, *One Rainy Day in May* (2015), *Into the Forest* (2015), and *Honeysuckle & Pain* (2016), in the context of the present moment in television storytelling which is closely connected to altered industrial conditions, as accounts of the rise of Netflix and HBO and the ‘post-network

1 Rob Allen and Thijs van den Berg (eds.), *Serialization in Popular Culture*. London: Routledge, 2013, pp.3-4; James Mussell, *The Nineteenth-Century Press in the Digital Age*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

2 On the complexity of television serials: see Jason Mittell, “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television.” *The Velvet Light Trap* 56, 2006; on the graphic novel: see Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey, *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014; on serial logic as embedded in the software of computer games: see Shane Denson and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann. “Introduction: Ludic Seriality, Digital Seriality.” *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 8.1, 2014, pp. 1-5; on the serial in social media and blogging: see Jill Walker Rettberg, *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology. How We Use Selfies, Blogs and Wearable Devices to See and Shape Ourselves*. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; on the former association of serials with ‘low’ culture such as soap operas and genre fiction: see Jennifer Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures. Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1997.

3 Arun Rath, “Danielewski Returns With A Long, Sideways Look At *The Familiar*.” *NPR Books*, 10-05-2015. Accessed 07-04-2015. <<http://www.npr.org/2015/05/10/404917355/danielewski-returns-with-a-long-sideways-look-at-the-familiar>>

4 Danielewski, in Pantheon and Schocken Books catalogue, Fall 2015. Accessed 12-06-2015. <http://knopfdoubleday.com/marketing/test/Hosting/Pantheon_Schocken%20Fall%2015%20Catalog.pdf>

era' make clear.⁵ More specifically, I ask what reading experiences pertain to Danielewski's literary answer to quality TV. The 27th volume is scheduled to be out by 2029, which would make for eight 'seasons' if we approach each volume as the equivalent of a TV series' season. But how exactly do we read a series that will see its conclusion, if ever, in thirteen years? How do the expansive transformations in the serial novel affect our reading pace and temporal experience of the unfolding of narrative threads? What new forms of attention will such literary objects compel? What practices of reading will they inspire (e.g. 'slow' reading, 'binge' reading, crowdsourced readings)? I argue that *The Familiar* is committed to exploiting and reimagining the possibilities of the codex under the influence of serial media, while at the same time stressing the unique capacities of the book-bound novel. While Danielewski's project is unique and unprecedented in its serial scope and explicit remediation of the television series, I believe it also offers us valuable perspectives on the transformations of readership as the literary novel is increasingly serialized in interaction with newer media.

Scholarly analyses of Danielewski's debut *House of Leaves* generally concur that this novel engages with the shift from analog to digital media and asks readers to come to terms with experiences of information overload and the internet as all-encompassing medium that devours all other media. Thus, in Mark Hansen's reading, the titular house that mysteriously expands and becomes bigger on the inside than on the outside "is nothing if not a figure for the digital: its paradoxical presence as the impossible absence at the core of the novel forms a provocation that ... is analogous in its effects to the provocation of the digital."⁶ Jessica Pressman reads *House of Leaves* across a network of media from the notion that it "uses its assemblaged narrative to teach the reader to engage with a contemporary print novel that is distributed across the digital network."⁷ *The Familiar* can be said to make a similar 'grand gesture' of intervention. This time, the context is today's media culture marked by post-network trends and discourses such as circulation of content across multiple (digital) media platforms, audience empowerment, media franchise development, and the use of data mining to predict audience behavior. Entering in a complex interrelation with these developments, of both inspiration and competition, this series stresses the unique properties of book-bound literature in a culture of bingeing. Remediation, the re-presentation of material that has already been represented in another medium, has a long history, as Richard Grusin and Jay Bolter point out in their groundbreaking book on the subject.⁸ However, it is important to note that *The Familiar* neither remediates nor relates to any *specific* TV series but, rather, to a genre as such. This absence of one specific source text (or, in Gérard Genette's terms, hypotext)⁹ accounts for the hybrid nature of *The Familiar*. While accommodating features of complex TV form, the novel also includes other modes and media (words, images, colors, typography). In what follows I map the complex relations of resistance and adaptation between different genres, modes and media within the very texture of *The Familiar*.

The central character in *The Familiar* is a twelve-year old girl from Los Angeles. In the first volume, Xanther, who struggles with epilepsy, saves a cat from drowning on the titular 'rainy day in may' (10-05-2014).

5 See Warhol, "Binge-watching"; Alberto N. García, "A Storytelling Machine: The Complexity and Revolution of Narrative Television." *Forms, Strategies and Mutations of Serial Narratives*, Eds. A. Bernardelli – E. Federici – G. Rossini, *Between* 6.11, 2016. <<http://www.betweenjournal.it>>

6 Mark B. Hansen, "The Digital Topography of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*." *Contemporary Literature* 45.2, 2004, p. 609.

7 Jessica Pressman, "*House of Leaves: Reading the Networked Novel*." *Studies in American Fiction* 34.1, 2006, p. 107. See also N. Katherine Hayles, "Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*." *American Literature* 74.4, 2002, pp. 779-806.

8 Richard Grusin and Jay David Bolter, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge: MIT P, 2000.

9 Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. U of Nebraska P, 1997.

Her story is intertwined with those of eight other characters: her parents, drug addict JingJing from Singapore, East-LA gang member Luther, computer scientist Cas, detective Özgür, Shnorkh the Armenian taxi driver, and the mysterious traveler Isandòrno. These narratives traverse the entire globe, from LA to Texas and from Singapore to Mexico (a stamp with date, location, and time is given at the beginning of each new section). They incorporate multiple languages, codes, dialects, and genres. In this multilinear structure, Danielewski's project adopts elements of 'hyperlink cinema' or what Neil Narine has called the 'global network film': films like *Traffic* (2000), *Crash* (2004) and *Babel* (2006), consisting of seemingly geographically or historically remote yet interconnected stories, vast networks that the protagonists can discern nor escape.¹⁰ Like these films (and literary adaptations of the genre such as David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, 2004), the narrative of *The Familiar* dramatizes a social network. As I will show, these nine characters are rendered in a cycle of distinct linguistic, syntactic, and typographic styles.

Anticipation and Speculation: Familiarizing the Unfamiliar

If this were like on a TV show, they might CGI in these cheesy rocks over everyone's eyes, but that wouldn't be right, ... Of course, since when is a TV series ever this life? Maybe some stuff you can never show.

—Xanther¹¹

First and perhaps most clearly, *The Familiar* visually mimics the televisual serial by featuring textual 'trailers' at the beginning of each volume. Before reaching the first chapter, the reader must work her way through 40-odd pages of coming attractions ("New This Season"). These include seemingly unrelated stories set 243,243 (*TF1*), 106,101 (*TF2*), and 73,656 (*TF3*) years ago, and a description of a gangster film within a display that emulates a *Youtube* frame. Each volume likewise ends with rolling 'credits' and a preview (or rather: a teaser) of the next volume ("COMING SOON: *The Familiar 4*").

Second and more fundamentally, Danielewski's project resembles the televisual series on a structural level. At the core of all serial narration lies the interplay of repetition and variation.¹² Of course, this applies to all stories to a greater or lesser extent. We humans are pattern-seeking animals. As Frank Kermode has argued, more than facts, we tend to live according to cultural patterns; it is these patterns that make human experience meaningful. Once necessary for survival, behavioral pattern recognition is still an important way to make sense of our world and interact with it, to mediate between the familiar and the unfamiliar.¹³ This is one explanation for the pleasures of engaging with serial media: seriality enacts a play, a tension between the familiar and the unknown, code and 'glitch,' pattern and noise, stability and change. In a time of omnipresent digitalization, the task of divining patterns within a cascade of data becomes especially pressing. Serial media in their form dramatize this interplay between repetition and variation, which is one of the reasons for their omnipresence in the current media ecology.

Televisual serials are among the most obviously 'patterned'. They are typically marked by a multiplicity

10 Neil Narine, "Global Trauma and the Cinematic Network Society." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 27 (3), 209-34.

11 Mark Z. Danielewski, *Into the Forest. The Familiar Volume II*. New York: Pantheon, 2015, p. 572.

12 Umberto Eco, "Interpreting Serials." *The Limits of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990, pp. 83-100.

13 Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1966.

of interlocking storylines that structure an episode, with the aim of ‘hooking’ the audience, thus ensuring the series’ continuation.¹⁴ This design of serial narrative is a product of its basic industrial conditions, from which follow structural and aesthetic elements such as cliffhangers, drawn-out narratives, and deferred narrative closure. These incite in the viewer emotional responses of suspense and curiosity, but also frustration: a so-called “managed dissatisfaction.”¹⁵ This is attempted on three levels, as Michael Z. Newman has set out: a micro level of the scene or ‘beat,’ a middle level of the episode, and a macro level of the multi-episode arc.¹⁶ Narratively complex television as defined by Jason Mittell, is a storytelling mode introduced roughly twenty years ago. Instead of being either episodic or serial, a narratively complex series employs hybrid forms between the two with a “heightened degree of self-consciousness in storytelling mechanics,” and calls for “intensified viewer engagement focused on both diegetic pleasures and formal awareness.”¹⁷ The viewer is expected to be active and attentive as producers employ innovative devices. I now analyze *The Familiar* as a literary answer to such narratively complex serials.

The average television episode counts about twenty-five beats, or scenes: units that offer a piece of new information and arouse the desire to find out more.¹⁸ *The Familiar* consists of thirty (vol. I), twenty-nine (vol. II), and thirty-one (vol. III) of such beat-like units: individualized, color-coded dog-eared sections for each character. These enable the reader to chart how the ‘screen-time’ is divided over characters before even opening the book. An important difference with respect to the average television series, which allows Danielewski to go beyond even the most narratively complex TV serials, lies in the length of these micro-units of information. Network executives tend to reject scenes that take up over two-and-a-half script pages (one page being the equivalent to a minute of screen time), out of concerns for their audience’s attention spans.¹⁹ Danielewski caters to no such concerns: although varying in page length, font size, textual density, and semantic obscurity, his dog-eared section invariably take much longer to read than two-and-a-half minutes and thus make for extraordinarily long beats.

Combined, these beats form an episode, which consists of multiple, intertwined plots. In *The Familiar*, the individual book volume parallels the episode, with the first volume as the equivalent of a pilot. Xanther (pink) and her parents Astair (orange) and Anwar (green), whose stories are most clearly intertwined, make up the so-called A-plots: they are each given four or five beats an episode. They are closely followed by the B-plot of gang leader Luther Perez (black). With only 2+3+2 beats, respectively, Isandòrno’s sections (yellow) constitute a C-plot. The episodes display a minimal amount of closure in the sense of a “resolution of narrative cause-effect chains”.²⁰ At the same time, they leave larger questions unresolved for the next installment, and typically end with a cliffhanger. As with the beats, the very length of an “episode” (an 880-page volume) makes its straightforward interpretation as a TV series’ episode problematic. *The Familiar* poses the type of questions

14 Television’s dependency on such codes has also been a reason for critics to deride this medium. This was also true for the *roman feuilleton* and the serialized novels of the Victorian age by authors like Charles Dickens. According to critics, a reliance on commercial values automatically entailed a lack of aesthetic and artistic innovation. See Graham Law, *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Press*. New York and Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000; Danielle Aubry, *Du roman-feuilleton à la série télévisuelle: pour une rhétorique du genre et de la sérialité*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2006.

15 Robyn Warhol, “Binge-watching: How Netflix Original Programs Are Changing Serial Form.” *Literatur in Wissenschaft & Unterricht* 47.1/2, 2014. Theme issue: Serial Narratives, ed. Kathleen Loock, pp. 145-58; Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures*, p. 151.

16 Michael Z. Newman, “From Beats to Arcs: Toward a Poetics of Television Narrative.” *The Velvet Light Trap* 58, 2006.

17 Mittell, p. 53.

18 Larry Brody, *Television Writing from the Inside Out: Your Channel to Success*. New York: Applause, 2003, pp. 150-51; 76.

19 Madeline DiMaggio, *How to Write for Television*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1990, p. 88.

20 Newman, p. 20.

that, in Xanther's words, "give an answer that doesn't just create one or two more questions but, like, forests of them."²¹ In this respect, the comparison with David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* is a fitting one, even though this cult series came about at a different moment in the history of television. Like *The Familiar*, Lynch's series featured surreal and supernatural elements following on a few more formulaic episodes, causing a large number of viewer to tune out: "Many of the viewers who abandoned *Twin Peaks* midway through its initial broadcast exclaimed, 'I have no idea what's going on' or, 'This is weird!' uncomfortable with the unexplained".²² After having read (part of) *One Rainy Day in May*, some of Danielewski's readers and reviewers express a similar sense of frustration. Several reviewers remark that they give up on *The Familiar* after this first volume, complaining of its lack of coherence.²³ With *Twin Peaks*, it shares the characteristic of so-called 'cult' texts Matt Hills has called *hyperdiegesis*, "a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic of extension."²⁴

Do the squiggly lines towards the binding of the book mean anything? Why do they turn from black to pink, and pulse in and out of the binding throughout the book? What is the connection between the failed drug deal involving 'pink balloons' in Luther's story, and Isandørno who finds a dead donkey and goat on the side of the road? What is the mysterious Orb that Cas and her crew try to protect, which allows one to view any moment in the past, present, an future? Because of the lack of coherence on the episode level, the reader is pointed to a future convergence of the story arcs, left over to *speculation*. Such long-term narrative conflicts and mysteries left unresolved (answering the question 'what happened to ...?') constitute the macro level: the character arc. In television, "the viewer's interest in character is often a product of recognizing familiar bits of action, *mise en scène*, and dialogue".²⁵ *The Familiar* is precisely so demanding because of its reliance on long-term characters arcs.

That explains the import of intra-episodic hints to the effect of possible connections between the seemingly isolated character and events. These include intra-serial nudges, like multiple characters chewing the same brand of gum, but also important occurrences which emphatically hint at intersections and coalescences in volumes to come. Thus in the first volume, all characters hear the same sound of a cat in distress (the cat which passes hands from JingJing's aunt Tian Li to Xanther). Often, such links are accompanied by similarities in design: in the case of this mysterious sound, an ellipsis on the page. Xanther reinforces this sense of connectivity when she confesses to her therapist that she senses "a conversation going on, you know, like somewhere out there, somehow parallel to the one you're having with yourself, like in your head, or even with someone else".²⁶ The multiple plotlines are entangled with the main plot for the length of multiple episodes

21 Mark Z. Danielewski, *One Rainy Day in May. The Familiar Volume I*. New York: Pantheon, 2015, p. 58.

22 Marisa C. Hayes, *Fan Phenomena: Twin Peaks*. Bristol: Intellect, 2013, p. 6.

23 *Guardian's* Michael Schaub claims that "the problem with *The Familiar* isn't that it's difficult; it's that it's unreadable ... a sprawling mess of a book, ... impenetrable and willfully obtuse" (n.p.). In: "What the font is going on?" *Guardian*, 12-05-2015. Accessed 02-07-2015. <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/may/12/the-familiar-mark-z-danielewski-review>>. In a similar vein, Jeff Alford asks "What if we're not interested in speculating on online message boards, endlessly discussing theories around Danielewski's enigmas that may or may not be addressed in subsequent volumes?" *Run Spot Run*, 10-05-2015. Accessed 02-07-2015. <<http://www.runspotrun.com/book-reviews/the-familiar-volume-1-one-rainy-day-in-may-by-mark-z-danielewski/>>

24 Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*. London: Routledge, 2002, p. 137.

25 Newman, p. 23.

26 *One Rainy Day*, p. 193. There are many more correlations in the first three volumes, the significance of which has yet to be established: Xanther and Hopi (a boy who would be initiated in Luther's gang but gets killed instead) use the same social media

(and, presumably, seasons), and sub-plot lines interact with each other as well. This is a complex storytelling device. Thus we can discern a tension between the demands of episodic and serial storytelling, as *The Familiar* oscillates between long-term arcs and stand-alone episodes in the manner of Mittell's narratively complex series: "within the broader mode of complexity, many programs actively work against serial norms but also embrace narrative strategies to rebel against episodic conventionality."²⁷ Seriality here cannot be regarded a mere marker of continuity, such as the interminable arcs of soap operas. It is rather a multifaceted variable able to bring forth a whole range of storytelling possibilities.²⁸

I, by no means, mean to suggest that anticipation and speculation are exclusive features of narratively complex TV series as of course, they are responses that pertain to storytelling tout court. They do, however, gain in force as narratives become lengthier and more complex, consistent of a multitude of threads that might or might not converge at a point in the future. Narratively complex television eminently exploits these features. Danielewski has understood the power of anticipation and speculation, and operationalizes these responses in the narrative rhythms and forms of *The Familiar*. The viewer is then invited to take an active stance in discovering how these complex narrative mechanics work—I will expand upon this in the next section.

Third, besides televisual trailers and structure, Danielewski's works are characterized by another level of patterning that needs to be mentioned here: the distinct typographic codes that are employed for each character, in a verbal-visual style of presentation the author has called 'signiconic.'²⁹ Each character is assigned a unique font that evokes their respective modes of speech and style of thought. The printed layout of their narratives is likewise personalized. Thus, the sections devoted to Xanther's stepfather Anwar, a computer programmer and game designer, are set in Garamond, and his thoughts nested in parenthesis and brackets as if he were thinking in HTML code: "How much [vastly {immensely <unfathomably> tremendously} . . .] Anwar loves [t] his child."³⁰ Her mother Astair, an aspiring therapist, is rendered with nested parenthesis that reflect a slightly worrying, (over)analytical mind:

Children asleep (if snoring (moaning?))(fidgets of (fitful (precocious! or . . . (?)))) sounds)) and then on the kitchen corkboard (not just the receipt for the dog bed (when did she pin that up? (did Anwar?) (chucks it (if only she could chuck the vet's bill as easily))) . . . ³¹

In this case the encapsulated or 'hugged' fragments of thought remind the reader of the 'parent' in 'parenthetic'. As other instances of the signiconic, the story of the lone hitman Isandørno is placed in a small square center-page surrounded by vast white spaces, as if to underscore his existential isolation; the LA-based detective

page, 'Parcel Thoughts'; in both Anwar's and Cas's environment there is talk of the brutal murder of a hacker. In *Into the Forest*, Anwar's vanished friend and colleague Mefisto turns out to be the much-discussed 'Sorcerer' in Cas's story; the drug lord Peyo makes an appearance in both Isandørno's and Luther's parts. In the third volume, *Honeysuckle & Pain*, some of the arcs start to converge geographically: Luther and Lupita almost run over Xanther in the streets, Mefisto pays her a house visit, Xian Li and JingJing travel to LA, Özgür is on the trail of Luther's gang, the sections on which share with JingJing's and Luther's story the repeated mention of colored balloons.

27 Mittell, p. 20.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

29 Danielewski uses this term "signiconic" (*TFI* 33) in reference to representations that combine text and image in order to "achieve a third perception no longer dependent on sign and image for remediating a world in which the mind plays no part." Danielewski in Knopf, Pantheon reader's guide. Accessed 02-07-2015. <<http://knopfdoubleday.com/guide/9780375714948/the-familiar-volume-1/>>

30 *One Rainy Day*, p. 97.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 407.

Özgür is rendered in Baskerville, with a wink to Sherlock Holmes. A character taking a pause to think is rendered as a page break, whereas a whisper is displayed in a tiny font. This signiconic treatment should evoke a distinct atmosphere for each character, allowing us to enter into an immediate, intimate relation to them, to a degree that surpasses the affective powers of either words or images. These patterns constitutes a powerful visceral and visual rhythm that adopt the medium-specific properties of the TV serial to the form of the novel.

Striving to maintain a (barely-)managed dissatisfaction on all these levels, Danielewski's project, albeit highly innovative, also reminds us that there is great comfort in the formulaic and predictable. Indeed, there is pleasure to be derived from discovering the formula and fitting each new episode to one's understanding of the algorithm that was used to create it. We all need something familiar to cling to: the serial narrative typically offers a safe sense of continuity in the form of characters and locales to revisit. Xanther's cat embodies this sense of companionship, warmth, and intimacy (it even magically suppresses her epilepsy). At the same time, the cat represents something dark and unknown, a gap at the center of this textual artefact. That is very much how *The Familiar* as a series feels as well: it is tactile yet extremely incomplete, beautiful yet dark, an intimate space to dwell in but also a vast empty space that cannot (yet) be known. *The Familiar* asks of its reader to actively familiarize the unfamiliar, but it also solicits the reverse: to defamiliarize the familiar.

Fourth (after visual trailers, narrative structures, and signiconic 'special effects'), and perhaps most important, the intention behind a 27-volume series should be understood in the context of the accumulated cultural capital of television in its post-network era. This, after all, explains why an experimental 'cult' author like Danielewski feels compelled to engage with seriality at this specific moment in media culture. After a long period of 'low-brow' associations, and a gradual rise in prestige in the 1990s, TV is now worthy of its 'Golden Age'. In his adoption of the narrative strategies and visual effects of TV serials, and his references to series like *Breaking Bad* in interviews and throughout the novels, Danielewski exploits this new potential and credibility.³² An important part of this new-found prestige lies in longevity and the devotion that serials ask of their viewers. And that is also how we should understand Danielewski's promise to keep publishing well into the future: as a cultural intervention in the present that is enormously ambitious for a novelist, while feasible for series made for HBO and Netflix.

Danielewski's series exemplifies how in its serialized rhythm, reading increasingly becomes *anticipatory*, ever craving 'one more' installment according to the cumulative logic of new media. Moreover, reading and interpreting become *speculative* activities because of the duration and multiplicity of the narrative arcs and the temporal gaps between installments. Anwar's description of a frustrating computer game assignment goes for *The Familiar* as a(n unfinished) whole: "{pieces beyond pieces <hinting at a whole <<beyond the whole <no assembly ever required>>> }]"'.³³ A quick browse through discussion sites like goodreads.com learns that speculation abounds even on meta-levels of interpretation: is this project a gimmick, a clever way to generate attention? Is it going to be worth the effort, are the nine threads eventually going to 'come together' and make sense? What will the literary landscape look like thirteen years from now? Will the novel proliferate? And

32 I thank one of the reviewers of an earlier draft of this article for pointing out the cultural specificity of this current moment in media culture, and in particular for emphasizing the importance of the Golden Age in television and its prestige for analyzing the grand gesture that Danielewski makes with *The Familiar*.

33 *Into the Forest*, p. 511.

what will I, the reader, be doing then? These questions call upon the reader to leave and surpass the materially given text. Yet, readers do not necessarily need to ponder these questions alone, which brings me to the second transformation of readership I seek to address.

Collectivizing Readership: Serial Relations

That was one part that put Anwar on alert [this desire for greater {outsourced <?>} connectivity].³⁴ Reading increasingly becomes participatory under the influence of serial media, and these novels envision new ways to mobilize social configurations of readers. This happened to television before, with the rise of the internet. Once considered a private activity, television-viewing has become a collective affair, where online forums allow participants to share their knowledge and interpretations.³⁵ Inspired by these developments, *The Familiar* seeks to reinvent the literary novel as a social experience, a topic to discuss communally online and in ‘real life’. Danielewski is convinced that, much like *Mad Men* and *Lost*, “[l]iterature is capable of being a subject that people want to catch up on or discuss, whether at a coffee shop or a watercooler ... It can become an intrinsic part of their dialogue”. His editor Edward Kastenmeier adds that his books are intended to enter into a “serial relationship” with readers, who collectively anticipate the next volume and discuss the newest ‘episode’.³⁶ *The Familiar* attempts to collectivize readership in at least three ways: collective intelligence, shared waiting, and crowdsourced contents.

First, the serialization of media mobilizes Henry Jenkins’s notion of collective intelligence as set out in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2004). As narratives become increasingly more complex and move away from the episodic toward the long-term, fans turn to the online community to collectively parse the information given—think of fan-based Wikis (such as *Lost*’s ‘Lostpedia’³⁷). According to Jenkins, “consumption has become a collective process. ... None of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills.”³⁸ With its fragments in Mandarin, Cantonese, Russian, Turkish, Hebrew, and Singlish (a pidgin dialect from Singapore), *The Familiar* necessitates such a collective intelligence. It calls for analyses from many different angles and areas of expertise. Cleverly, in order to facilitate such collective (and speculative) readings, advance copies of *One Rainy Day in May* were distributed among Danielewski’s online fan base, as well as selected students and academics, months before the official release.³⁹ In addition, the author pre-published a short, enigmatic story called “Clip 4” in the literary journal *Black Clock* (2012), which is referenced throughout *The Familiar* by Anwar and the other computer programmers.⁴⁰ In this case, the communal response on online platforms is especially fitting since it repeats the collaborative aspect of production evidenced by the ‘credit sequence’ at the end of each volume (including several translators and a designers’ team). Like authorship, readership

34 *Ibid.*

35 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York UP, 2006, p. 26.

36 Julie Bosman, “Periodical Novel, Coming Soon.” *The New York Times*, 20-22-2011. Accessed 05-07-2015. <http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/periodic-novel-coming-soon/?_r=0>

37 <<http://lostpedia.wikia.com>>

38 Jenkins, p. 4.

39 See Danielewski’s prolific forum <<http://forums.markzdanielewski.com/forum/the-familiar>>, as well as popular book discussion websites such as <www.goodreads.com>. A group of students and staff from different US-based universities has commenced a collective analysis of the series on <<https://thefamiliar.wordpress.com>>.

40 The story can be found online: <<http://tomabba.com/test/Clip4.pdf>>

becomes a collective and social undertaking.

A second way in which collectivity is implied in the serial structure, is the necessity of ‘shared waiting’: an experience which has historically performed an important function in terms of narrative and social structure. Television’s aforementioned ‘beats and arcs’ structure and the fixed blocks of time between installments encourage writers to incorporate climactic moments and increase narrative tension, creating a powerful momentum through periods of shared waiting. We know this strategic use of publishing gaps from the serialized Victorian novel. As a social form, Anne Kustritz argues, shared waiting intensifies the audience’s self-experience as an imagined community.⁴¹

Third, serials are particularly apt to make use of new media’s potential for what Jenkins has called ‘participatory culture’ when the reader is allowed to influence how the story arcs will develop in the next volume. Netflix makes use of big data to churn out information about viewers’ favorite actors, genres, directors, and plot twists, and uses these to tailor content to their unique tastes and produce series like *House of Cards* (2013-), whose success is mathematically guaranteed. As Danielewski depends upon his readers for the conclusion of this project, he, too, has promised to adjust his works according to reader feedback.⁴² One foreseeable way of doing this, is to divide the space accorded to the respective character arcs according to popularity with the online community. Moreover, the first novels themselves have partly been constituted through social media. During the pre-publication campaign, followers of Danielewski’s social media accounts dedicated 27 months attempting to solve the puzzles that the authors posted on a bi-weekly basis. Their collective acts of decoding then resulted in a text in the front matter of *TF1*, “Our Common Horrors/Astral Omega”. To mention one last example of crowdsourced content, the author solicited his readers to send in photographs of their cats, which are printed in the back matter of the books. This clever gimmick functions as yet another way to increase ‘prosumers’ anticipation of the next volume, as well as their making-familiar of these book objects.

I have argued so far that *The Familiar* taps into the cultural capital of the complex narrative television series in the post-network age as it is constructed with the aim to evoke a response of anticipation and speculation, and as its readers enter into a serial relationship with the work and form a collective through shared waiting, as well as collective identity and crowdsourced content. Yet, with respect to television, there are certain ongoing developments in media consumption that challenge the experience of shared waiting, and the anticipation and speculation connected to it. I will now conclude this article by zooming in on these developments.

Slow Reading in a Culture of Binge Watching

When it comes to the manipulation of reading speed, Danielewski takes his cue from the cinema. The layout of his work instills a heightened awareness in the reader of the temporal unfolding of the narrative. As Hayles wrote on *House of Leaves*, Danielewski drew an analogy with cinematic techniques that relate a scene’s intensity to the extent to which the viewers’ eyes rapidly move across the screen. The author suggested

41 Anne Kustritz, “Seriality and Transmediality in the Fan Multiverse: Flexible and Multiple Narrative Structures in Fan Fiction, Art, and Vids.” *TV/Series* 6, 2014, pp. 225-61.

42 Rath, “Danielewski Returns” (n.p.)

that his typographic experimentations likewise forge a correspondence between the duration of reading and the action represented: “the time it takes to read a page functions as a remediation of the narrative action in the life-world of the reader, linking real-time decoding with the intensity and pacing of the represented events in a correlation that itself is a remediation of eyetracking in cinematic action.”⁴³

In *The Familiar*, Danielewski refines this technique, using page layout to make the reader reflect on the temporal unfolding of the narrative, for instance through the excessive use of white spaces to visually perform the characters’ emotions. He tracts single sentences across multiple pages, manipulating the reading pace. At times, this results in accelerated page-turning. When Xanther hears the cry of the cat and she jumps out of her father’s car, for instance, a sense of heightened tension is effected by the placement of three lonely sentences on the page. The reader is invited to identify with the anxious father who sees his frail epileptic daughter storming off into the storm:

And Xanther nowhere in sight.

Just like that.

In a blast of storm.⁴⁴

Surrounded by vast white spaces, these lines reflect the hopelessness Anwar experiences upon losing his daughter. Not only does this technique visually express characters’ thoughts and emotions: it also urges us to flip through the pages at ever greater speed, thus generating a physical velocity that follows the momentum of the narrative arc. But Danielewski also employs white spaces to create the opposite effect: of delay and postponement. When Anwar later looks inside the cat’s crib, we read: “now there really is something peculiar. Something Anwar doesn’t want to see”.⁴⁵ Anxious to discover what he sees, the reader has to work through several pages of information to find out that the cat has found its way into Xanther’s bed. This building of ominous suspense and frustration culminates on pages 757, 758 and 762, where only a single word, “dead,” is printed (and then, on 756: “dead, dead, dead”). In passages like these, reading speed is interlinked with the emotional pacing of the narrative.

Throughout this article, I have argued that *The Familiar* takes its inspiration from serial media like the narratively complex television series. Yet, there is one aspect in contemporary media culture from which this novel series deviates: the popularity of ‘binging’. Once set on a fixed time schedule, television consumption has been transformed with the advent and proliferation of the DVR, online streaming devices such as Netflix, file-sharing technologies, and piracy. Traditionally structured around pre-set weekly intervals and reliant on advertising, the television industry now must engage with an audience that steers clear of commercials, watches on their own schedule, and delays gratification for months or years after publication in order to experience the pleasure of absorbing the narratives in a short time-span.⁴⁶ In the face of these transformations of television’s

43 N. Katherine Hayles, “Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*.” *American Literature* 74.4, 2002, p. 797.

44 *One Rainy Day*, p.553.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 732.

46 This suspended collection of episodes for ‘binging’ did of course not originate with the digital age, as it was already a possibility with VHS, and later DVD. Even the serialized novels of the nineteenth-century were often eventually published as a compendium, allowing readers to determine their own reading speed. Yet with the ease of, and increased access to, this mode of viewing today,

viewership, *The Familiar* can be said to take an oppositional stance. A 27-part series of 900-page books with six month intervals obviously entails a long-term delay of gratification.

Throughout *The Familiar*, the opacity of chapters written entirely in a Pidgin dialect, the amount of visual-textual information on the pages, as well as the bulk of paratextual material without a clear connection to the chapters, all make for a visual-tactile experience of the book-bound novel that is emphatically time-consuming. This stands in sharp contrast to a pervasive emphasis in contemporary media on ‘real time’ and instantaneity.⁴⁷ The delay thus effectuated stems from a resistance that is embedded in the linear, finite form of the novel, which poses an obstruction to any straightforward or ‘transparent’ experience of events. This resistance is made palpable as we plow through the linearity of the codex. With these techniques, Danielewski offers his readers a temporal experience that is highly dependent on the perspective of his characters, their moods and story arcs. While adapting to new forms of representation and modes of reading, monumental novel series like these also harbor a potential counterforce to binge-viewing and consumption ‘on demand’: a promise of pleasure and reflection (sometimes by way of frustration and boredom) in a culture that privileges directness, speed, and immediacy.⁴⁸ As the author admits: “Certainly, you could tell the whole story in ten pages. You could accelerate it. You could have one of those shows that rapidly eat up plot points. In the devouring, you eat up all the nutrients.”⁴⁹ *The Familiar* provokes reflection on the novel as a material artefact, promoting a mode of ‘slow reading’: it re-inscribes the unique affordances of the book-bound novel, precisely by demanding of its readers an effort and dedication.

In the final analysis, the title of the series pertains not only to the *cat*, but also to the *codex*—an utterly familiar thing that can be rendered unfamiliar through innovative employment of unknown verbal-visual algorithms. I have argued that Danielewski engages with the present cultural moment in which the serial is once again one of the foremost modes of producing and consuming media. He exploits the affordances of digital culture in a way that is clearly informed by recent developments in television as this medium has reached an unprecedented peak in its prestige and narrative potential. As we have seen, *The Familiar* is narratively complex in its hybridization of the conventions of episodic and serial storytelling, “oscillating between long-term arcs and stand-alone episodes exemplifies narrative complexity.”⁵⁰ Further, Danielewski employs the ‘signiconic’ as an innovative way to familiarize and thus hook his readers to his story world. These formal qualities, I have argued, in turn encourage particular modes and strategies of reading and interpretative tactics. These include anticipation and speculation as well as collaborative readings marked by shared waiting, collective intelligence, and crowdsourcing of contents. Yet we have also seen that in *The Familiar*’s case, a renewed emphasis on the unique novelistic affordances of mediacy, materiality, opacity, and time-boundedness is effected that reminds the reader of the pleasures of delay and slow reading in times of ‘real-time’ media and

binge-viewers who would have to wait for years for the release of the DVD collection now only need to wait a few months to watch it on Netflix.

47 Andrew Hoskins, “Media, Memory, Metaphor: Remembering and the Connective Turn.” *Parallax* 17.4, 2011, pp. 19-31.

48 That the author thus exploits the medium-specific properties of the TV serial to reflect on the affordances of the book-bound novel, by no means suggests a belittling stance towards television series. If anything, as argued, the cultural capital of television in its Golden Age is undeniable and Danielewski capitalizes on that prestige. Moreover, it is precisely to the extent that they are ‘bingeable’ (because of good writing and complexity) that series are increasingly subjected to tactics of close reading. See Matt Hills, “From the Box in the Corner to the Box Set on the Shelf.” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 5.1, 2007, pp. 41-60.

49 Foley, Dylan. “The Rumpus Interview with Mark Danielewski.” May 20th, 2015. <http://therumpus.net/2015/05/the-rumpus-interview-with-mark-danielewski/>

50 Mittel, p. 19.

binge-watching. Rather than straightforwardly remediating a particular television series, *The Familiar* is an impure, hybrid work that enters into a complex relation with TV and digital media—one of inspiration *and* competition. By situating it within this media ecology, Danielewski once again reevaluates the unique powers of the literary novel:

I think what has always interested me is bringing forth not only what the book itself is capable of doing, the novel, the pages, the codex itself, but actually, the way language can tickle parts of our imagination and bring a new kind of vibrancy and awareness to our lives that goes beyond what can actually be displayed on any kind of screen.⁵¹

As more novels are becoming serialized, we begin to see how seriality in the digital age is expected to transform the modes of reading that pertain to the literary novel.

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51 Doug Gordon, “‘House Of Leaves’ Author Talks Writing A Novel Like A TV Series.” 20-08-2015. Accessed 13-11-2015. <<http://www.wpr.org/house-leaves-author-talks-writing-novel-tv-series>>