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**Exploration of Horror in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*
BA Thesis**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to show the presence of features of the horror genre in Mark Z. Danielewski's postmodern novel *House of Leaves*. The horror genre addresses the fears of society and allows people to deal with them through a literary or cinematic medium. Many critically acclaimed contemporary pieces of literature also unconsciously tap into the horror genre.

The introduction will give an overview of why *House of Leaves* deserves to be analysed as a horror novel. The literature review will concern the development of the genre from Gothic fiction to contemporary horror. Because *House of Leaves* is a postmodern novel, horror tropes will be discussed through the writing styles and cinematic ideals that dominated in postmodernism. The conceptual ambiguity of Danielewski's novel will exemplify the difficulties of categorizing contemporary horror.

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INTRODUCTION

House of Leaves, written by Mark Z. Danielewski, was published in March of 2000 with only 2,000 copies. This version, now called the First Edition, quickly became a novelty, as three fourths of the copies were signed by Danielewski or by the characters in the story. The book was also expanded to two discs, *5.5 House of Leaves* and *Exploration #4*, the latter containing music from Danielewski's sister's album *Haunted*, which is heavily related to the book. It has been said that the first print also had many inconsistencies over multiple copies of the book (Rossa et al. 2001). Today, four editions circle around, though the second, published by Random House Inc., is the most common one. It was the instant follow-up to what was the First Edition. The foreword in the book explains that it was practically a manuscript of loose pages, organized and colored for mainstream publishing. The First Edition books, as well as the additional CDs of *House of Leaves*, are near to impossible to obtain (Danielewski 2002: vii).

House of Leaves consecutively tells three stories. The first is of an old blind man's, Zampanò's, pseudo-academic work about a series of video tapes recorded in the Navidson-Green household. The second story is that of *the Navidson Record*. The third story concerns Johnny Truant, the man who acquired Zampanò's work after the latter died and began assembling the writing into a cohesive piece. The book portrays Zampanò as the author of the story and credits Truant with the introduction and notes. The more Truant goes through the dead man's work, the more he is haunted by something, the more obsessed he becomes with piecing the work together, the more his body and soul deteriorates.

As the three different narratives are presented to the reader, one often finds oneself lost in trying to piece these three perspectives together. There are many references which

lead away from the story at hand and Truant's comments and journal-like passages make it difficult to continue back to *the Navidson Record*. The many appendixes at the end of the book, with references to specific times, distract one from conventional sequential reading. The story becomes a maze which the reader must navigate, as has been observed by different authors (Hagood 2012; Hansen 2004; Pressman 2006; Zecker 2008).

Another difficult aspect of reading the story is posed by the typography. There are many passages which scatter around many pages and devolve into one word per page, words are missing, the order of pages is changed and much more. However, it has been argued that this immerses the reader in the mystery maze in *House of Leaves* (Zecker 2008). The paradox of a defamiliarized story that pulls the reader in is what makes the book an interesting topic for academic study and what has inspired the book to have its cult following starting from the First Edition print.

The main issue in the research of this book done this far has focused on the metaphysics rather than the first level of analysis: *House of Leaves* is a prominent example of postmodern horror fiction. The aspect of horror is referenced in many articles (Pressman 2006; Bullock 2015), but not delved into further. There is also the underlying concept of "found footage horror" to be found in the Navidson Records, which points to the tropes of postmodern horror (Hansen 2004).

This thesis aims to prove that *House of Leaves* combines horror and postmodernism with themes such as defamiliarization, monsters and using the text as a maze. I will first explain the main concept of the horror genre through Gothic literature. Secondly, the metatext of *House of Leaves* is exceedingly postmodern; I will discuss how the dynamics of horror changed during the postmodern era. Finally, as *House of Leaves* was published in a time after the peak of postmodernism, I will analyze how horror is defined within post-postmodernism, where genre distinctions are generally ambiguous. In addition to that, I

will attempt to discuss the contemporary concepts of horror through the found footage subgenre. All this will be linked with the metatextual issues of *House of Leaves* addressed by other researchers. The empirical chapter of the thesis will use these theoretical ideas and integrate them into my own analysis of the aspect of horror in the book.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From Gothic Literature to the Horror Genre

The type of literature defined as Gothic emerged in the 18th century, with famous books from the 19th century such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* etc. Some of the main characteristics of Gothic literature are "forms of monstrosity, and images of insanity, transgression, the supernatural and excess" (Smith 2013: 4). Sigmund Freud's essay *The Uncanny* is regarded as one of the most important texts in analyzing Gothic fiction, as it describes the feelings of unease, fear of the unknown, and anxiety towards reanimation of the dead (Smith 2013: 6, 13). A simplified definition for it reads: "The 'uncanny' is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (Freud 1919: 220). Therefore, 'the uncanny' is related to the expression of horror, instilling fear and disgust in the audience for something that is of this world but is considered as abnormal (Smith 2013: 13, Huang 2007: 92).

These 19th century literary pieces helped to establish horror as a separate genre. Noël Carroll (1987: 52) has defined both Gothic and newer critically acclaimed novels as 'art-horror'. The horror genre during and after the Gothic wave emphasized emotional horror through monsters and abnormalities of nature while projecting the same negative emotions like fear and suspense that characters in the story feel in reaction to these disturbances onto the reader (Carroll 1987: 52, Rayes 2016: 1). The presence of the entities can be rooted in folklore, fear of the dead or taboo subjects in a culture, classifying these entities as outsiders and depicting them as evil (Cherry 2009: 12-13). This 'evil' itself is

usually vaguely described with key terms such as “filth, decay, deterioration, slime and so on” (Carroll 1987: 53) and it causes readers to focus on their fear.

Another characteristic of the ‘emotional’ horror of the late 19th to early 20th century involved the place. While Gothic literature focused on large sceneries like castles and ruins (Smith 2013: 4), texts which are now attributed to the horror genre rely on familiar places that have been made unfamiliar (Wagner 2015: 28; Smith 2013: 13). Known buildings and nature locations are physically, socially and psychologically broken, as characters suddenly feel threatened in their surroundings. Building a world where one is ‘at home’ and destroying that sense of ‘home’ is very prevalent in both literary and cinematic horror today (Wagner 2015: 28). Horror fiction must create an atmosphere, which can create these pervasive feelings, with words, making the audience concentrate on their uneasiness, and this has led the horror genre in literature to be more emotionally distinguished than in today’s cinema (Rayes 2016: 2-3).

Despite this, contemporary horror is more prevalent in cinema than in literature as it is easier to scare the audience in visual than in literary form, because visuals give an immediate reaction of disgust. Filmmakers are also constantly developing new tactics to evolve the scare factor. This has caused the concept of horror to deviate over time both in literary and cinematic works, but the universal characteristic remains: addressing the fears of the reader or watcher (Cherry 2009: 4).

Postmodern Horror

Postmodernism is claimed to arise as a cultural wave due to a broken world after World War II. People began to wonder about the structure of society and also literature, as critics regard the main aspect of postmodernism to be the abandonment of a realist

approach to representation (O'Donnell 2017: 148-149). Works during the peak of the Cold War questioned "aesthetics, politics and social order" and gave characters in the story ambiguity like never seen before, for example, knowing that they are characters in a story and reflecting on it (O'Donnell 2017: 149-150). The world creation was reflexive and mixed fantasy and reality. Postmodernist literature in general aimed to distance itself from fantasy by perceiving it as actual reality in the literary piece being read (Huang 2007: 105-106; O'Donnell 2017: 151). Postmodern writing also consciously combined several genres, which were by that time an important aspect in defining works of literature, as well as cinema (O'Donnell 2017: 148-153), and it is through genrefication that the topic of postmodern horror can be discussed.

As the horror genre evolved alongside postmodernism over the course of the 20th century, so did its scare tactics. The main shift involved the shift from emotional horror to physical horror. Instead of leaving the audience in the dark and making them figure it out themselves, horror cinema in particular began showing the gore in full view. The most prominent examples of this are the slasher film series of the 1970s and 1980s, with the three most popular being *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th* and *Nightmare on Elm's Street* (Cherry 2009: 11-12; Huang 2007: 90, 98-99).

What many mainstream critics fail to recognize is the cultural aspect of postmodern horror. The change from implicit to explicit has been driven by the socio-cultural context of the time slashers and 'torture films' were becoming mainstream. The main idea was the concept of 'negative aesthetic', something that aims to displease as an artform, gradually building up tension for the climactic moment when the audience feels disturbed (Cherry 2009: 53-54). Yet, the straightforwardness of the horrors of life is something the audience wants to experience in a society where this reality is being censored more now than ever. As Huang (2007: 105) observes:

[W]e are very “susceptible to the postmodern horror film, which offers us (as we have seen) the disruption of the everyday world, the explosion of our assumptions about normality, reality, and unreality, violence against the body and the socialmoral order, that is, which offers us the impossible satisfaction of the death drive, the forbidden enjoyment of always seeing more and repeating everything from the beginning all over again. Yet precisely this endless and obsessive repetition of the death drive is the real horror, the one that all the horrible cinematic images function to virtualize, that is, whose disappearance they herald.

Moreover, the antagonist characterization shifted from monsters who are foreign to people who were supernatural in some way. Monsters and humans became one through subjects of demonic possession (*The Exorcist*), characters that are traumatized into becoming the bad guy (*Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*) or the villain was simply made to have less to no morals (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*) (Huang 2007: 100-101). Besides the protagonists in slasher films, who are generally lazy and ignorant teenagers, the bad guy in the film was now someone the audience thought would be normal. The postmodern ambiguity of what it means to be human is thoroughly discussed in these movies (Huang 2007: 105-106; Cherry 2009: 11-12; Huang 2007: 105-106; O’Donnell 2017: 149).

Another important sub-genre of postmodern horror is zombie films, video games and works of literature, which are a direct equivalent to the Gothic fear of the dead (Cherry 2009: 11-12; Smith 2013: 13). While Gothic literature suggests that there is a life after death, albeit not a normal one, zombie films show that death is something you cannot physically escape and, if you do, it is no longer the spiritual you in your body. Such anxieties are explored and relieved in this safe space of the horror genre. Depicting the fears of the audience and allowing them to confront these fears could be considered the main reason why the horror genre is so popular (Cherry 11-13; Rayes 2016: 4).

While cinematic horror can be explicit, literature cannot. However, postmodern literature experimented with typography and visual elements to give works moving and, therefore, physical elements. Arrangements of words and lines were tampered with to force the audience to break from their conventional reading habits and pay attention to what is

presented rather than skimming over the text (Geyh 2017: 167). In the case of postmodern horror, unconventional text was used to mainly focus on the fact that something is not right with what is being read, once again giving into the fear factor. This also causes a surreal effect for the reader, like they are not meant to read.

Defamiliarization is primarily used in the context of analyzing texts which use typographical elements to distance the reader from reality. The main function is to convey to the audience that what they are reading would not conform with their usual reading habits, simultaneously inhibiting the reader from analyzing the text and drawing them into the new aesthetic reality (Coffman et al. 2019: 205; Zecker 2008: 110). Readers are forced to construct their own world and this increases defamiliarization (Rayes 2016: 2-3). The unfamiliarity of the new aesthetic evokes the feeling of horror, especially as the book makes the reader feel like they are the only one in the world reading it.

The peak of postmodernism was a tumultuous time and constantly experimented and stretched the limits of what is considered culturally productive writing. As these limits expanded, so did the efforts of defining them, as is the case with the horror genre, for example. Subgenres that dealt with tropes like the apocalypse, serial killers, zombies and many others explored the very limits of their generalized genre. The result is the ambiguity of generalizing something in such a diverse genre that cannot be definitively labelled.

Issues of Categorizing Contemporary Horror

Both literature and cinema are viewed through the practice of genrefication.

Alexander Moran (2019: 231) explains:

While the history of literature has in part been defined by the debate between the romance and the novel, since around the turn of the millennium this debate has become more acute as more writers have embraced genre forms. In 1989, Ursula Le Guin briefly coined the term 'genrefication' [...] What I suggest almost 30 years later is that genrefication is indeed a political concept, but that rather than denigrating genre works, it brings into focus an alternative tradition of literary history.

Genrefication has led many critics to query established critical practices. [...] Genrefication, then, refers not only to a new type of writing but also to the sense that a different type of reading is required.

It is believed that modernists tried to break the chain of associating works of literature with a single genre, which carried into postmodernism as well. Postmodernism was characterized by tackling multiple genres at once (Moran 2019: 237). A shift in style that is claimed to have started in the 1990s raises new questions about genres and their specific categorizations. This new trend is defined as ‘post-postmodern’, though the term is not universally agreed upon or fixed (Coffman et al. 2019: 196). It has been observed that over the past three decades, literature has shifted into something beyond postmodernism, especially concerning debates on late capitalism and the rapidly evolving digital sphere (Coffman et. al 2019: 196). However, the stylistic devices of postmodernism have not fully faded and the main criticism aimed at postmodernism is its concept of the real (Clare 2019: 266).

Post-postmodernism generally aims to focus on aspects which were neglected in postmodernism (Coffman et al. 2019: 197). The main problem was establishing a new writing style. Postmodernists treated their world as something surreal, and attempted to establish history as surreal, as well. Today, the trend has moved to accept history and its brutality while simultaneously criticizing it to do better in the future. As our dark history often focuses on division and exclusion, post-postmodernism tries to create a sense of collectiveness for a contemporary globalized system (Coffman et al. 2019: 200-201).

Contemporary works also try to reestablish some of the textual cohesiveness which was abandoned by many postmodernist writers. Literary works of the 1960s and 1970s relied on the reader to make their own art from what is represented. It is argued now that postmodernism was so metafictional that it missed the point of the irony it tried to represent. Therefore, post-postmodernists attempt to ground the ‘meta’ in ‘metafiction’ by

returning to the question of reality versus fiction. The text now does not question the fact that what is being read is undoubtedly real but questions the reality in a broader sense (Clare 2019: 265-266, Coffman et al. 2019: 197-199).

Genre distinctions today have also shifted into an echo of the past, with the need to differentiate between critically acclaimed literature and 'trash culture literature' (Moran 2019: 237). The tendencies of dismissal can be seen in the case of the horror genre. Many critics are quick to dismiss contemporary works of horror, cinema in particular, as a disarray of gore and jumpscars, with no insightful value. In the post-postmodern distinction between serious fiction vs. popular fiction, horror is discarded into the latter categorization, especially in the case of films, although there are also notable examples of genre blending to this day (Cherry 2009: 13). Despite these assumptions, there is a loyal audience that avidly follows horror releases and knows about them in depth; horror seems to have one of the most loyal cinema audiences today. (Cherry 2009: 40-43).

There is passionate discussion about what should be accepted into the sub-culture, as horror is still regarded as something negative and this negativity makes the fanbase vigilant about 'outsiders' (Cherry 2009: 43). The main problem is that horror has expanded into an umbrella term of anything that aims to instill fear. Many types of horror are being created today and portrayed alongside old Gothic tropes in literature and cinema (Cherry 2009: 4; Rayes 2016: 1). The problem of the constant expanding scope raises the issue of what should be regarded as horror in the end. This problem especially comes to light in cinematic genres of horror, thriller, science fiction and others that may focus on abnormal levels of violence. The issue in these movies is primarily attributed to the rapid change of the world and trying to keep up with it, which acts like a parallel for the confusion of contemporary genrefication (Cherry 2009: 11-12, Moran 2019: 239).

The horror genre's ability to tap into the current culture through the anxieties of the moment is one of the main reasons why contemporary horror works continue to prevail in a society that shuns the genre as a whole (Cherry 2009: 11). The constant development of scare tactics can cause audiences not accustomed to horror to be unable to keep up and that is what authors want: for the reader or watcher to be lost and afraid. Horror works are mostly short novels and movies that do not last over 90 minutes (Cherry 2009: 11-12; Rayes 2016: 1). A quick experience of fear ties these kinds of works to the horror genre.

Overall, the problems of categorizing contemporary horror are attributed to the fact that identifying the base tropes of any genre is complicated. For example, many books intend to be both a romance and crime novel, many films mix both comedy and horror, leaving little room to fix these works into one genre only. This is the case with horror, as well, which is often blended with other genres that once would have been considered horror but have now made their name as a separate category. Movies that are purely horror rarely gain critical acclaim today, as the genre's name is muddled with its brutal past of slasher flicks. Yet, there is a fanbase that treasures these types of works to this day, which piques the interest of the mainstream and gives the genre a foot to stand on.

Post-postmodern Horror Through the Found Footage Genre

Post-postmodern authors carried on with postmodern attempts of integrating intermediality and multiple digital mediums into their works, such as images, auditory appendixes and interactivity (Coffman et al. 2019: 204-205). The postmodern tricks of typography and layout can now be easily woven into fiction that is purely digital and does

not exist in print (Coffman et al. 2019: 205). Technology advances rapidly which can cause many issues with the authenticity of the new mediums (McRobert 2015: 138).

For the horror genre, the interpretations of new technology mainly rely on technophobia. This is especially prevalent in horror video games that are intentionally meant to be 'broken' as they glitch on the player. Horror movies like *The Ring* also capture the perfect essence of what Emily E. Crawford (2018: 79) has defined as glitch horror: technology is unreliable, so it is perceived as a monster and enemy. Works like these also require audience participation to give it the horror key because one needs to be afraid of the ever-expanding scope of technology and its increasing pervasion for it to be established as horror (Crawford 2018: 84-85).

A prominent example of the incorporation of digital elements into post-postmodern works is the found footage genre, which is said to owe its acclaim to *The Blair Witch Project*, released in 1999, though many other films which used the found footage aspect had been released before it. These previous films were simply not in the found footage key for the entire length of their runtime. Further popular works include *Paranormal Activity*, *Lake Mungo*, *Cloverfield* and many others. The genre is also integrated into works of fiction, for example, Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. While not all found footage works are of the horror genre, the majority are (McRobert 2015: 138).

The origins of this sub-genre were already rooted in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, as the novel indicated that the text was discovered, possibly by the reader (McRobert 2015: 141). It relies heavily on the fact that what is found may not be the full picture, as the uncertainty can cause one to question the authenticity of what is presented. Lacking information and context to everything is what primarily drives the found footage genre to its association with horror (McRobert 2015: 143).

The term 'found footage' is exactly what it says: a piece of writing or video is recovered and edited into a coherent composition (McRobert 2015: 138). *The Blair Witch Project* was marketed with the tag, "In October of 1994 three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkitsville, Maryland while shooting a documentary ... A year later their footage was found." Most works intend to prove that what happened in the film was real to establish a connection between the work and its watcher or reader. Implying that those who shot the footage are missing or presumed to be dead prefaces that what the audience is about to see is something horrible in the real world. This is why many of these works are attributed to the horror category (McRobert 2015: 140-141).

The main villain of these works is generally tied to the footage itself, which relies on the features of the documentary style. Documentaries are perceived to be representations of reality, though many presented facts are constantly called into question. Today, when anything can be filmed at any time, there is an abundance of information one is forced to sift through and decide what is true and what is not. While the found footage work may be tied to a narrow context, the knowledge that it exists is enough to induce anxiety for the 'simulated' reality it introduces (McRobert 2015: 142-144), because for digitalized work "there is rarely a reliable way to tell the difference" (Crawford 2018: 96).

Another aspect to consider is the reason why something would be filmed. Many found footage films include scenes where a character is aggressively asking the one with the camera why they are filming the horrid situation they find themselves in. Many films indicate that the final editors only bound the footage together, which means the intention of filming is only known for the recorder and they are free to manipulate their intentions before the footage is presented to a second party. It is also argued that as the camera acts as a mediator, the person filming is stuck to perceive the world around them only through

their camera, narrowing their point of view and making the audience unable to trust them (Cherry 2009: 188; McRobert 2015: 141).

Literature that establishes the same fears of digitalization like those in found footage movies rely on metafiction and reliability of the narrator. The discussion of fact and fiction of the writing presented is twisted in a way that it invokes horror (Crawford 2018: 88-89; Hagood 2012: 89). The narrative is also narrow and leaves the readers to create their own big picture of the terror implied in the singular point of view depicted in the work (Hagood 2012: 94-95). One story cannot have all the answers for the overall reality it tries to convey, which gives the reader the feeling of loneliness and anxiety of finding the truth from the subjective narrative (McRobert 2015: 147; Cherry 2009: 13-14).

The found footage genre is continuously advancing as technology advances. Imposing the restrictions on technology such as glitches and amateur first-person narratives creates the sense that what is presented is part of something more horrible. The fact that these works attempt to establish themselves as depictions of reality further examines the fear of today's digitalized society. For every new point of view, the story sinks into itself, until the audience is left in the dark.

***House of Leaves* as (Post-)Postmodernist Literature**

House of Leaves was published in 2000, but it is tied to postmodern styles because at that time, there was no general consensus of the trend moving past postmodernism. The book is infamous for testing the limits of typographic layouts, like Garrett Zecker (2008: 109-110) explains:

To keep the audience engaged in the story, and to add a level of audience immersion, the words themselves change direction, placement, order of pages, and even dimension as they are sometimes mirrored through the paper as if they were written on cellophane and glued onto the page. Words are

missing, blocks of text morph off the line of the print block, and the text itself drops away on several pages to become icons, stars, dots, asterisks, and musical bars.

Many analyses of the book refer to its text as a maze. The story follows many different narratives at once which prevents the reader from making a connection between all of its aspects (Zecker 2008: 110). The textual layout is meant to represent the same hallway that appears in the house on Ash Tree Lane, subjecting the audience to the same sense of uneasiness that the Navidson family must feel (Hagood 2012: 87; Pressman 2006: 112).

House of Leaves intends to keep its reader confused so as to keep them from reaching a fixed truth about the story (Hagood 2012: 89). This is achieved by the text representing what it would be like to be placed in the hallway maze yourself. When Navidson ventures into the hallway alone, he senses the isolation in the ever-expanding darkness (Hagood 2012: 94). The architecture shifts in the same pattern as the text, single words on pages emphasize the vastness of the place as something not to be understood, but felt (Hagood 2012: 88-89). The experience of reading the novel is an individualistic one and does not promote reaching a base narrative by the end of the story (Hagood 2012: 96).

Danielewski also heavily relies on defamiliarization. The chaotic storyline created by multiple narrators serves as means of the reader never connecting themselves to it (Zecker 2008: 110). Truant's footnotes constantly remind the readers that the text does not talk about anything real, yet the academic writing style and typographical architecture contribute to the reality of the maze, because the reader feels they are in there alongside the characters in the story (Zecker 2008: 111; Hagood 2012: 94-96). It is a perfect demonstration of a familiar place made unfamiliar (Wagner 2016: 28).

Making sense of the narrative often resembles an action of decoding something, as well. The underlying concept of found footage with *The Navidson Record* further proves

the integration of digital media into the text in *House of Leaves* (Hansen 2004: 598). It leaves the reader craving the visuals alongside the transcription of *The Navidson Record*. However, the book raises the issue of how digital media today can be easily manipulated and if the tapes were real, there would be no telling if the footage is real (Hansen 2004: 600-602). Despite this, the text is real and it provides enough imaginary visuals for readers to believe it could be real. Mark B. Hansen (2004: 608-609) summarizes the paradox of the house in text and recording with how Danielewski is supporting a story in print, though the print says otherwise:

Here, through its very difference from a physical entity, we can see the house for what it is: a flexible, topological form capable of infinite and seamless modification; a postvisual figure immune to the laws governing the phenomenology of photography, cinema, and video; a logic of transformation whose output is disproportionate to its input. In this perspective, the house 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, as we shall see, is analogous in its effects to the provocation of the digital.

House of Leaves is a prominent example of postmodern fiction. It experiments with typography and never announces what is real and what is not. On the other hand, it is not an entirely ambiguous novel. It blends genres but they are easily identifiable in separate pages of the book. Questioning the truth of the story and distancing the reader can be seen as aspects of encouraging feelings of anxiety. The main conflict of the book, the maze hallway, is even one of the most common symbols of horror: a dark place that hides something evil. *House of Leaves* is without a doubt a horror novel.

The Horror of *House of Leaves*

The Horror of The Navidson Record

The Navidson Record tells the story of Karen Green and Will Navidson, along with their two children, as they move into a new house and are terrorized by it. A door appears and inside it exists a dark maze with no rules which sends the family into conflict: the patriarch wants to make sense of it and the matriarch urges him to ignore it. This is a common horror story of house hauntings, told through academic writing by a man whose last name is only known, Zampanò.

Will Navidson is the main character for *The Navidson Record*. He is perceived to be a workaholic, stuck in his past glory and desperate to find a new muse to bring him recognition again. He might be a little distant, but he cares deeply about his family and for his wife. Navidson acts as the main character who drives the plot: he wants to make sense of the hallway, actively searches for help and enters the door himself multiple times. He is the reason *The Navidson Record* exists.

Navidson's wife, Karen Green, serves as a supporting character who does little to develop the story. She used to be a model who became a housewife. She protects her children and wants nothing to do with the hallway and argues with Navidson many times to not pursue what he is doing. Her and Navidson's relationship is put to test by their house.

The Navidson Record itself consists of a series of video tapes recorded inside the house on Ash Tree Lane. Will Navidson is a photographer, so his desire to record the anomaly in his house is natural. The videos are emphasized to be about the Navidson family life and Zampanò sees them as a character study, rather than an exploration of the

unnatural. However, without the disturbance in their lives there would be no story to be told.

Much of the narrative owes itself to the found footage genre, as the book explains the scenes of the tapes. The immensely descriptive style leaves only the visual picture of what is happening to the imagination. For example, pages 427-430 depict how Navidson moves in the black hallway that changes in his own line of sight:

Sometimes the ceiling drops in on him,
getting

progressively

lower

and

lower

until it begins to graze his head, only to shift a few minutes later,
until

higher

and

higher

rising

it disappears altogether.

It is also a direct opposition for the hallway itself which has no boundaries. By tying this maze to footage it becomes something to comprehend in the displayed narrow context. However, a simple perception already conveys to the reader the vast horror that hides inside the maze.

Dark places are the most common trope of the horror genre. Darkness leaves the audience in solitude with only their own perverted mind to comfort them. It has appeared

in the Navidson's house which signifies the destruction of a place they could call home (Wagner 2015: 28), causing the feeling that they are no longer safe (Cherry 2009: 4).

The fact that *The Navidson Record* could be considered found footage also raises questions about the whole story. The tapes are an integral part in developing the plot, as they are meant to capture how the incomprehensible hallway breaks the family apart. Therefore, if the hallway is fake and Will Navidson fabricated his life, then his familial relations could be faked. It does not matter if the story is real, because Navidson's character is perfectly attuned to his own fakeness. He is rendered to be an unreliable main character who lets himself succumb to the house and perhaps become an antagonist (Huang 2007: 100-101), as he never stops obsessing until it collapses into itself and leaves nothing to obsess over (Danielewski 2000: 524-527).

Karen Green, on the other hand, rises above the terror. After Will's brother, Tom, dies in the house, she leaves with the kids (Danielewski 2000: 346-347). Navidson actively tries to bring his family to the darkness of the house, but Green will not submit. It is determined that Karen ignoring the problem was the right thing to do because she walks out of the house with no negative emotions still tying itself to her. While she and Navidson are separated, she cuts the footage of their own family cameras together which is very different from the tapes of the hallway (Danielewski 2000: 368):

There are only 8,160 frames in Karen's film and yet they serve as the perfect counterpoint to that infinite stretch of hallways, rooms and stairs. The house is empty, her piece is full. The house is dark, her film glows, A growl haunts that place, her place is blessed by Charlie Parker. On Ash Tree Lane stands a house of darkness, cold, and emptiness. In 16mm stands a house of light, love, and colour.

The Navidson Record focuses on horror tropes like the fight between light and dark, emptiness in a place and how human nature works. Will Navidson is the tragic protagonist who lost the battle. Karen Green has her own demons, but she will not let

another one consume her: the house on Ash Tree Lane dissolves because Karen has saved Will from it.

The Horror of Zampanò

Zampanò's own life story seems to be the least crafted in *House of Leaves*. He is a blind man who dies in the very first pages of the book, and Johnny Truant takes his work. There is more to learn about the old man from *The Navidson Record* than from any explicit information Truant gives the reader. His character is depicted very little, yet he started the story that would lead the Navidson family into devastation and Johnny Truant into madness.

Zampanò has possibly spent his whole life writing a thesis on *The Navidson Record*, which is said from the beginning to not exist. Despite this, his arguments are well researched and referenced with nonexistent sources; he means to present *The Navidson Record* as an academic piece and not a mere ghost story. The presentation of his work in the objective academic register indicates for the reader that this story is to be perceived as real, which is essentially terrifying.

Zampanò writes fiction but by disguising it as fact he has perhaps also fooled himself, as a parallel can be made from the madness that seems to lurk the hallway maze and what killed Zampanò. Truant notes in his introduction (Danielewski 2000:xvii):

Sure enough, just as my friend had described, on the floor, in fact practically dead center, were the four marks, all of them longer than a hand, jagged bits of wood clawed up by something neither one of us dared to imagine.

During a description on *Exploration #4* of *The Navidson Record*, a team of explorers spends eight days inside the dark maze and their leader, Holloway, becomes crazy (Danielewski 2000: 133):

Nearly impossible when those guttural cries soon find them, the walls too thin to hold any of it back, sounds too obscene to be shut out, Holloway screaming like some rabid animal, no longer a man but a creature stirred by fear, pain and rage.

There are two possible conclusions about how Zampanò died. The first would argue that *The Navidson Record* is real and Zampanò has unintentionally released the same fate that befell on Holloway inside the hallway onto himself in the form of a curse that would carry itself with the tapes. The second resolution involves Zampanò somehow writing a story that conjured the curse and he died from his own creation of malevolence. Both hypotheses, however, confirm that there is an evil spirit connected to *The Navidson Record* in the form of the formless hallway and that Zampanò accidentally subjected himself to it.

Zampanò can be considered the mediator between the found footage and the audience it is presented to (Cherry 2009: 188; McRobert 2015: 141). However, he is not objective in his assigned characterization as he tries to make sense of the story himself, almost in the sense of a documentary that failed in covering the truth (McRobert 2015: 142-144). His academic text often derails with explanations and too many comments on *The Navidson Record* by other people. By involving himself in the story he falls prey to the horror of the house's existence, and by leaving the text personal he makes it personal for its first reader, Johnny Truant.

The Horror of Johnny Truant

Johnny Truant is a man who seems to have no future ahead of him. He works in a tattoo parlor and spends his free time drinking and doing drugs while trying to pick up girls for one night stands. His friend Lude is not a particularly good influence on him as they share the same recreational activities. Truant has a crush on a stripper named Thumper but cannot talk to her properly as he perceives her to be out of his league.

This is the man who seems unreliable because of his life alone, yet we are to rely on him as the narrator. He organizes Zampanò's story about the Navidson Records and presents it to us while providing commentary that is, most of the time, inappropriate for something that is considered academic work. Truant's footnotes delve deeper into his own life and distract us from what should be the actual story the book is trying to tell. He insists on wanting this work to be published but the first page of the story reads, "This is not for you" (Danielewski 2000: x). Truant's foreword (Danielewski 2000: xi-xxiii) clarifies that the reader has stumbled upon a piece that will haunt them after the book is finished, with the final paragraph (xxiii):

Then no matter where you are, in a crowded restaurant or on some desolate street or even in the comforts of your own home, you'll watch yourself dismantle every assurance you ever lived by. You'll stand by as a great complexity intrudes, tearing apart, piece by piece, all of your carefully conceived denials, whether deliberate or unconscious. And then, for better or worse you'll turn, unable to resist, though try to resist you will still, fighting with everything you've got not to face the thing you most dread, what is now, what will be, what has always come before, the creature you truly are, the creature we all are, buried in the nameless black of a name. And then the nightmares will begin.

As argued above, the novel can be interpreted to suggest that Zampanò's work is the curse. It follows that Johnny Truant has spread it. It might even be that he is a secondary villain and the curse attached to *The Navidson Record* has led him to unconsciously release the work to the public. His diary notes in chapter XXI reveal that *House of Leaves* already exists and people have read it (Danielewski 2000: 513), though this creates a timeline paradox for the story. Truant is not the hero of the story but he manipulates the narrative for it to seem that way. The dubiousness of it all is exceedingly postmodern.

The main point of Truant's ambiguity of character is that he does not have all the answers; he can only work with what is given to him and inserts his own opinion very little. In many footnotes he states that Zampanò's writing is confusing and that he may not argue

his point well, but Truant remains unbiased in his attempts to decode the text. For example, a footnote on page 57 (Danielewski 2000) reads:

There's a problem here concerning the location of "The Five and a Half Minute Hallway." Initially the doorway was supposed to be on the north wall of the living room (page 4), but now, as you can see for yourself, that position has changed. Maybe it's a mistake. Maybe there's some underlying logic to the shift. Fuck if I know. Your guess is as good as mine.

Truant acts as another mediator between the story and the reader, this time like the camera in found footage movies. The camera cannot portray everything that needs to be seen, and Truant cannot give the reader the full story. He is as much in the dark as the people he is supposed to present the story to.

Furthermore, Truant as a mediator does not believe in the story. He claims from the beginning that everything is fake and he has confirmed that many sources Zampanò has used do not exist. The collection of video tapes called *The Navidson Record* itself does not exist. Truant shows his irritation at this knowledge and often wonders why he is putting the work together in the first place. However, something keeps pushing him to reassemble *The Navidson Record*, the life work of a man who had nobody in his life.

Truant implies that Zampanò would not exist if it were not for the papers in the trunk that Truant takes from Zampanò's apartment. These unorganized papers can be considered as Zampanò's soul (Danielewski 2000: 31):

Zampanò himself probably would of insisted on corrections and edits, he was his own harshest critic, but I've come to believe errors, especially written errors, are often the only markers left by a solitary life: to sacrifice them is to lose the angles of a personality, the riddle of a soul. In this case a very old soul. A very old riddle.

Therefore, Truant is putting Zampanò's soul back together. What he does not realize is that he is also reassembling the curse that follows Zampanò's soul. The further one reads, the more Truant's footnotes change. Earlier comments generally include Truant's nights at bars, trying to impress women by telling lies. The more he pieces the story together, however, the more the story haunts him. The first instance is the footnote

between pages 25-28, where Truant feels something threatening about to consume him in the hallway of his workplace. From that moment onwards, his entries become less about his daily life and more about something hiding from him in the shadows. His health deteriorates rapidly, though he has been a normal man who can handle his vices. He stops going to work and spends more time locked up in his apartment, working on *The Navidson Record*. He makes parallels with the hallway in the Navidson house and his own life, which seems to get lonelier and lonelier as time passes. *The Navidson Record* is feeding off of him while subjecting him to the same horror that lies in the possibly nonexistent tapes Will Navidson recorded, until he goes mad and dedicates a whole chapter to his own (Danielewski 2000: 491-521) as if becoming a part of the curse.

Johnny Truant is a character with a tragic past, which may explain his current life. He has been subjected to fear in his life, which is why it is believable that he lets fear control him as soon as he feels it. In the moments where he thinks something monstrous is with him, he is paralyzed and cannot fight it. This is a common character trait in many horror movies (Huang 2007). In Truant's case, his trauma originates from his childhood when his mother tried to kill him. His mother was the person he thought he could trust most, so his visions of something lurking behind him are instantly triggered when the house turns into something unfamiliar (Cherry 2009: 11-12; Wagner 2015: 28). The story is simply too personal for him, though that fact is overshadowed by the standard way he simply arranges the pages of the text into a coherent line and makes no opinionated comments except the remarks that *The Navidson Record* does not exist.

His denial to the story and how he still sees his mother as an honest woman and instead his father as the villain follows the horror characterization trope of someone who wilfully ignores the chaos surrounding them. This follows the character traits of Karen Green. However, as *The Navidson Record* is nothing but a fiction for Truant, so is he not

subject to the same resolve as her at the end of the book. In Truant's reality there are no happy endings. In a horror piece, the villain always comes back for one final shock.

The Horror of *House of Leaves*

House of Leaves in its entirety is a prominent example of postmodern fiction. Postmodernism tried to erase the boundaries between genres (O'Donnell 2017: 148-153) but writers who moved past postmodernism brought back genrefication and applied it to older texts, as well. This practice helps to define *House of Leaves* as not just a text that masterfully represents the tendencies of postmodernism.

Danielewski obviously did not mean to narrow his writing to a single genre, however. Literary works that only use the characteristics of a single genre are rare, because old tropes were always developed and have reached the ambiguity they are today (Cherry 2009: 11-12, Moran 2019: 239). The question now is which genre is the dominant one. *House of Leaves* mainly focuses on the family life of the Navidson's which would indicate it is actually a romance novel. The nightmare-inducing footnotes of Truant and leering threat of the house on Ash Tree Lane suggest otherwise. A book cannot be read without considering all of its aspects (Coffman et al. 2019: 200-201), which is why I will define Danielewski's book as a romance-horror novel.

Both genres work to improve the other. Truant is helplessly in love with Thumper, while the Navidson family experiences anxiety that Truant possibly feels every day with his traumatic past. Maybe Zampanò meant to write his academic piece with the thought of the idyllic family life that Karen Green wants but focused too much on the threat that would not give that happiness to her. It is ultimately the reader that makes the decision whether to read the novel as romance or horror.

The horror genre is attentive in defining pieces like these (Cherry 2009: 43). *House of Leaves* does little to emphasize horror because Zampanò's writing flows everywhere and does not establish a dominant line. However, the horror comes in play with the found footage descriptions when characters enter the dark maze. The typography gives no sense of direction to the reader, which causes anxiety for what lies ahead and if they will ever make it out or succumb to the darkness (Carroll 1987: 52, Rayes 2016: 1; O'Donnell 2017: 148-149). The inside of the maze is a never-ending set of hallways, yet it is clarified that it is unfamiliar and, therefore, horrific. These are approaches to the first ambiguous aspects of horror in Gothic writing (Smith 2013: 6, 13; Wagner 2015: 28), told in the postmodern key of defamiliarization through the unusual textual layout (Coffman et al. 2019: 205; Zecker 2008: 110).

There is also a nudge towards the monstrosities that would appear in horror works (Cherry 2009: 12-13), as Truant deduces that there is a monster now lurking him after he begins piecing *The Navidson Record* together. He makes this observation as he conveys his imaginative scenario during his first encounter with the horror (Danielewski 26-27):

My hands had gone all clammy. My face was burning up. Who knows how much adrenaline had just been dumped into my system. Before I turned, it felt exactly as if in fact I had turned and at that instant caught sight of some tremendous beast crouched off in the shadows, muscles a twitch from firing its great mass forward, ragged claws slowly extending, digging into the linoleum, even as its eyes are dilating, beyond the point of reason, [...]

Having the horror digitized into print (Coffman et al. 2019: 205) pinpoints the exact place of horror in the book. It all starts from *The Navidson Record*, as it depicts a hallway of endless possibilities and how the human race assumes the worst of these possibilities (Cherry 2009: 11-12; Huang 2007: 105-107; O'Donnell 2017: 149). The allegation that the tapes are fake do little to distract the reader from considering how the characters could become mad very easily inside a maze with no light and no rules, an accurate representation of postmodern anarchic style (Huang 2007: 105; O'Donnell 2017: 148-150).

The Navidson Record would not induce horror if there was not free will for the reader to decide so.

Everything culminates with the house collapsing and destroying the sense of horror that Will Navidson subjected himself to. Truant is believed to not to see the happy ending, because he succumbed to his own horror just before the story ended and the anonymous editors probably pieced the last few chapters together. *The Navidson Record* was meant to be the ambiguous side-plot to the fiction Zampanò was writing, but it consumed the whole narrative, turning it into a curse, and Truant inherited the curse by opening the trunk with Zampanò's work in it. The house on Ash Tree Lane is the horror of *House of Leaves*.

CONCLUSION

The concepts of horror date back to Gothic literature that explored subjects like dark places and monsters. At that time, the implications were ambiguous and served to make the reader think of what it means to be human. Sigmund Freud's *The Uncanny* is considered to be the start of the serious analysis of the horror genre decades after the Gothic style was irrelevant.

Postmodernism tended to depict horror in a more explicit manner than previous literary periods. Horror movies especially expanded the concepts of horror as monsters that were previously ambivalent now became violent creatures and immoral killers. At the same time, postmodern horror literature did the opposite as horror was implied in a way that made it clear that one cannot fight it in a world that is vast and unexplainable. Typographic construction shifted in such a way that the reader was unable to understand what was going on, thereby causing anxiety.

Postmodernism is today criticised for its experiments with writing styles that did not serve their purpose to revolutionize literature. As postmodernists denounced genres, they left a hole in literary analysis. In the 1990s genres were brought back, though the problems of genrefication remain to this day. Writers never limit themselves to one category of literature and are still trying to transform the mainstream. This complicates defining aspects of genres such as horror, which has evolved into an umbrella term of anything that instills fear in the audience or reader.

Now the audiences must embrace the mixing of genres, not only literary critics. For horror, however, this genre mixing has created a protective stance among fans, because the mainstream often condemns it for the same violent movies that were a

breath of fresh air during high postmodernism. There are also many subgenres that are critically acclaimed amid the general consensus, for example, found footage horror movies that owe their fame to grasping the anxiety of our technologic era.

House of Leaves perfectly mixes postmodernism and horror. The book is about a family whose normal life becomes abnormal when they move into a new home in which a black maze appears through a single door. These are the basic concepts of horror: darkness, unknown place, putting the relationships of characters to the test. This family life is told by Zampanò, whose work is acquired by Johnny Truant after Zampanò's death. The three stories are connected by the same maze, which brings an unknown presence and fear into the lives of the family and the two men. The postmodern style means to not reveal to the audience the full scope of what happened by the end of the novel.

These aspects are why Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* is not only a horror novel. It is a postmodern masterpiece and beautifully illustrates a modern family drama novel. However, the drama for the Navidson family involves horror elements, as their own new house becomes the nightmare no family would wish upon their children: a place where you cannot be safe or protect your own. There would be no horror in the story if there was not a family to inflict it on. It is only up to the reader to decide if they want to experience that horror alongside the Navidson family.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

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Exploration of Horror in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

Õudus Mark Z. Danielewski romaanis "House of Leaves" (Lehekoda)

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Postmodernismi ja õudusžanri segu on väga hästi näha Mark Z. Danielewski teoses "*House of Leaves*" ("Lehtede koda"). Raamat räägib perest, kelle normaalne elu muutub ebanormaalseks kui nad saavad uue kodu, milles ilmub läbi ainsa ukse must labürint. Tegemist on õuduse baasmetafooridega: pimedus, tundmatu koht, suhete rikkumine. Pere elust räägib akadeemilises võttes vana mees Zampanò, kelle töö omandab Zampanò surma järel Johnny Truant. Kolme lugu ühendab seesama labürint, mis toob pere ja kahe mehe ellu tundmatuse ning hirmu. Postmodernne võti tähendab, et lugejale ei paljastata lõpuni, mis tegelikult juhtus.

Käesolev uurimus näitab, et "*House of Leaves*" ei ole täielikult õuduslugu, sest tegemist on postmodernse tekstiga, mis segas žanreid ja küsimärgistas ühe täe võimalikkuse. Raamatus kasutatud õuduse elemendid on aga perfektselt näha ning kuuluvad žanri põhitunnuste hulka. Süvaanalüüs näitab samal ajal, et need õudused ei saa ülejäänud loos eksisteerida ilma algse pereta, kes laseb ennast terroriseerida ning levitab õudust ka neile, kes nende lugu loeb. Samamoodi ei saa loos olla õuduselementi, kui selles ei ole karaktereid, kes samale emotsioonile alistuvad. Mark Z. Danielewski on ühendanud tavalise pere loo ning ebatavalise õudusloo moel, mis viitab postmodernismi ajastu ambivalentsele. "*House of Leaves*" on küll õuduslugu, aga see on ka palju enam.

Märksõnad: Ameerika kirjandus, postmodernism, õudusžanr

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