

# Haunted by a House:

The Terrors of Postmodernity in American Haunting

House Tales

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Master Thesis

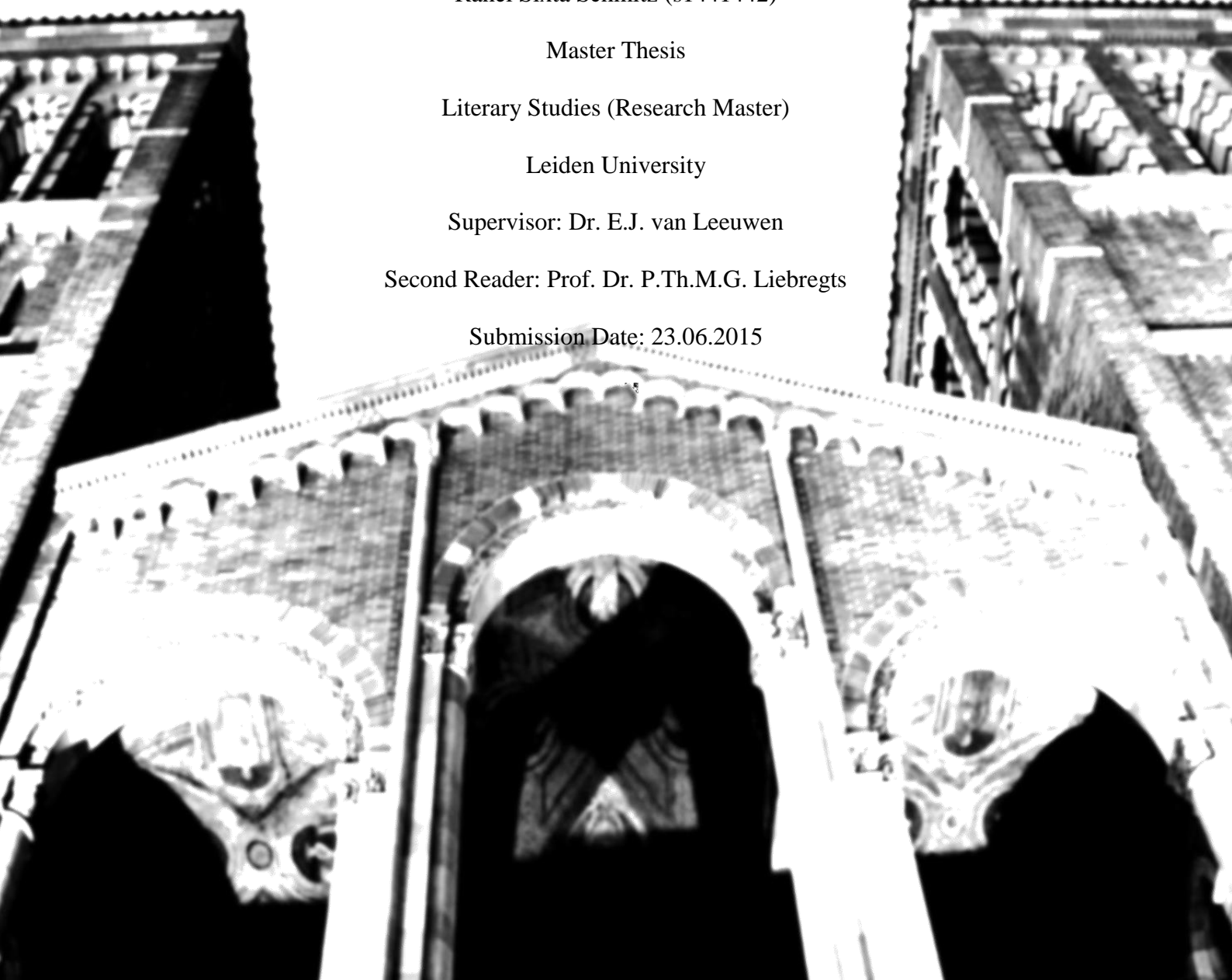
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## Introduction

The House is one's own space, a place that is familiar and at the same time enclosed and protected; [...] it is [...] the centre and focus of the world order.

– Yuri M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*

In gothic fiction, setting is destiny – and it's been so from the first.

– Dale Bailey, *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction*

A house symbolizes two things: firstly, it signifies safety, warmth, and familiarity. As such, it is a shelter, a home. It is this type of house that Lotman refers to when claiming that the house is the center of one's world order. Secondly, the house can also symbolize social status and material wealth: “[t]he house is our primary marker of class and our central symbol of domesticity” (Bailey 8). Either way, the house usually represents something positive.

In haunted house tales, the house as a symbol for safety and wealth comes under attack. What is supposed to be a “primary marker of class” and a shelter for its human inhabitants is haunted by the ghosts of a dreadful past. Horace Walpole's Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), one of the first Gothic haunted house tales, illustrates this

point. It features a haunted castle, which is visited by diverse apparitions, such as sighing portraits, bleeding statues, and giants in armor. It is through these supernatural occurrences that the past misdeeds of Otranto's lord Manfred are revealed.

Over the past centuries, the haunted house has become a well-known trope. In his article "The Haunted House," Steven J. Mariconda gives a broad definition of the haunted house: "a haunted house may be defined as a dwelling that is inhabited by or visited regularly by a ghost or other supposedly supernatural being" (268). Mariconda also explains which narrative elements and plot structures haunted house stories should have:

The haunted house story has to have, needless to say, a house [...]. In theory, we need not confine ourselves to a family dwelling; in the broader sense we could take a house as 'a building in which someone or something is sheltered or located.' In terms of plot line, the haunted house has to have a series of supernatural events; and the best tales will have a backstory [...] of the provenance and discovery of these events. (268-9)

Usually, according to Mariconda, the driving force behind the haunting of the house is a gruesome murder, an improper burial, or even both. The ghost of the deceased occupies the building even after death, and it is only when this history is found out and the remains are buried properly that the hauntings end. This is the basic plot structure of the haunted house tale and has, according to Mariconda, changed only little over the past centuries (269).

Indeed, in *The Castle of Otranto*, the inhabitants of the castle can only find peace and quiet once the cause for the haunting is discovered and the wrongs of the past are set right: Manfred, unscrupulous aristocrat, is not the rightful owner of Otranto, and

it is not until the true heirs of the castle are revealed and thus the proper lineage restored that the haunting of Otranto comes to an end.

In *Gothic*, literary scholar Fred Botting states that the Gothic provides a means of embodying diverse cultural fears (2). It is thus no surprise that the haunted house tale – a subgenre of the Gothic – has thrived over the past centuries: the depiction of the corruption and violation of the house as the “focus of the world order” (Lotman 97), that is, as core of human life, plays into such anxieties. This also explains why families, or family-like groupings, often constitute the main characters of haunted house tales. The house, as the representative of both a shelter and a family line, is the site where, for instance, fears about changes in domesticity or gender roles are played out.

However, Gothic fiction not only gives a form to such anxieties, but it also contains them by means of narrative:

The terrors and horrors of transgression in Gothic writing become a powerful means to reassert the values of society, virtue and propriety: transgression, by crossing the social and aesthetic limits, serves to reinforce or underline their value and necessity, restoring or defining limits. Gothic novels frequently adopt this cautionary strategy, warning of dangers of social and moral transgression by presenting them in their darkest and most threatening form. (Botting, *Gothic* 5)

*The Castle of Otranto* portrays the barbaric transgressions of social norms. The figure of Manfred, with his selfishness and tyranny, becomes the embodiment of these transgressions. By disposing of the villain, the ending of the novel reasserts “proper” values, that is, the dominant values of the Walpole’s times.

Despite their origin in fictions like *The Castle of Otranto*, Dale Bailey reads the haunted house tale as a typically American phenomenon. He writes: “[t]hey [haunted

house stories] often provoke our fears about ourselves and our society, and, at their very best, they present deeply subversive critiques of all that we hold to be true – about class, about race, about gender, about American history itself” (6). If the house is a marker of social status, wealth, and personal achievement – in short, the fulfillment of the American Dream – then the haunted house signifies the darker side of that dream, or rather, nightmare: moral corruption, inequality, and a violent history. At the same time, by giving these American nightmares a tangible shape in haunted house stories, they can be grappled with and eventually overcome.

However, what if the house itself is sentient and malevolent? What if there are no ghosts of the past to be exorcized? It is this type of active house – not a *haunted*, but a *haunting* house – that is the focus of this thesis. The haunting house is, in the broadest sense, a building that is itself the cause of supernatural occurrences. These fictions do not fit into the classic narrative structure of the haunted house tale, since the human inhabitants are not terrorized by a ghost, but instead by a house. Of course, the haunting house can also be frequented by specters, but it is the power of the malign, supernatural house that has created these ghosts. There are no remains that need proper burial, no murders to be avenged – there is only an evil house.

Some scholars ignore the difference between an active and a passive house completely, analyzing such houses solely as a mirror for the psychologies of the characters in the fiction. Fred Botting, for instance, describes the Overlook Hotel in Stephen King’s *The Shining* (1977) as a “site of terror” and a “magnifying glass or mirror for psychic energies” (*Gothic* 105). Botting does not recognize that the Overlook, rather than being merely a “site,” has its own psyche and motives, and that much of the tale’s appeal stems from the hotel’s cunning. Over the years, the hotel has

killed its visitors or driven them to suicide, growing stronger with every soul it collects. The Overlook is therefore haunted by ghosts, but each specter is subservient to the hotel's malevolent hive mind.

Analyses such as Botting's fail to grasp a central aspect of haunting house tales, namely the absence of a ghost and its terrible past as the cause of the haunting. Through this absence, the narrative structure defined by Mariconda is no longer tenable. Bailey recognizes this evolution of the haunted house tale: "the contemporary haunted house rarely serves merely to contain the unquiet spirits of past human inhabitants. Rather, taking a cue from Poe, the house itself usually takes on an actively antagonistic role, to which any apparitions, if they exist at all, become subordinate" (57-8). However, Bailey neither explains why this shift occurred, nor how it affects the dynamics of the haunted house story.

If, as Botting explains, the Gothic mode serves to express cultural anxieties, then it should theoretically be possible to identify these feelings of unease with which the fictions correspond. This can be done by analyzing the typical iconography of haunted house stories – the house, the family, and so on –, the way this iconography is represented, and by examining how the conventions of this type of fiction are changed in haunting house stories.

First, it is important to identify at which point in literary history the haunted house came alive. According to Bailey, Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne laid the corner stone for the contemporary, ghostless haunted house, but it is not until Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) that the genre truly developed the shape it has today (25). Beginning with Jackson's text, haunted house tales dispense both with specters and the "ontological uncertainty" (5) typical for earlier fictions,

opting for a clear supernatural explanation of the experienced events that is, however, unrelated to ghostly hauntings. In other words, the active, sentient, and malevolent house enters the stage at the end of the 1950s.

Accepting Bailey's claim, it is important to realize that the shift from haunted to haunting house coincides with the rise of another literary development: postmodernism. Postmodernist literature is marked by its experimental and often metafictional narratives (Beville 7). Dominant views and ideologies are undermined by a literature that emphasizes the absence of any stable categories:

Whilst modernism focused on the fragmented nature of subjectivity [...], postmodernism represents a scepticism about the grand narratives (such as religion, for example) which once provided social and moral norms. In a contemporary, postmodern age one can no longer believe in coherent, universal, claims to truth which, so the argument goes, are replaced by moral relativism. (Smith 141)

In other words, postmodernism challenges those categories and ideas that hitherto went unquestioned. History is one example for these, as Linda Hutcheon explains in her work on postmodernist literature. History and historiography are not objective truths, but rather a human construct (*Poetics* 16). This reasoning holds not only for history, but also for other "grand narratives" such as scientific knowledge; the perception and understanding of our world is always a discursive construct dependent on interpretation and representation.

In trying to delimit postmodernism from modernism, Brian McHale focuses on the strategies employed and questions asked by these two types of literatures. As McHale has it, modernist writing is concerned with epistemological questions related to



knowledge, whereas postmodernism focuses on ontological aspects, engaging with questions about the represented world as well as the literary text itself (*Postmodernist Fiction* 9-10).

As this brief survey already indicates, postmodernism and the Gothic share several defining aspects. Characterized by its focus on excess and transgression, the Gothic functions to disrupt seemingly clear-cut binary oppositions such as past and present, dead and alive, good and evil. Therefore, the “scepticism about the grand narratives” and “moral relativism” mentioned by Andrew Smith are not only typical for postmodernist literature, but also find expression in the Gothic mode.

In a similar manner, Noël Carroll draws an extensive comparison between the horror genre and postmodernism in his analysis of contemporary horror.<sup>1</sup> According to Carroll, postmodernism is not only marked by a moral relativism, but especially by a conceptual relativism. Classificatory norms, on which our understanding of the surrounding world is based, are arbitrary and instable – there is no absolute meaning. Not even the heroes and heroines of such fiction can hold on to their privileged status of being the center of the narrative, but are themselves at risk of becoming the victim of contemporary horror’s “person-as-meat” aesthetics (211-2). In a similar vein, monstrous figures of today’s Gothic are no longer terrifying, but instead become a site of “identification, sympathy, desire, and self-recognition” (Botting, “Aftergothic” 286). Thus, the traditional Gothic roles like hero and villain are destabilized and sometimes even reversed.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, Gothic and horror are by no means synonymous terms. However, as Smith explains in *Gothic Literature*, the term “Gothic” is often being replaced with “horror” in the twentieth century (140). In so far as both Gothic and horror are fictions of fear, much of what Carroll claims for contemporary horror also holds for contemporary Gothic.

This development, however, implies a fundamental change in the working mechanisms of the Gothic. Whereas these texts previously defused cultural anxieties, the Gothic today no longer provides this resolution and reaffirmation of norms. The postmodernist literary tradition demands a moral and conceptual relativism that does not allow for the belief in such fixed values. Thus, the basic narrative conventions of the Gothic are deconstructed in the fusion with postmodernism. Yet, what is the result of this fusion? Discussing the similarities between postmodernist writing and the Gothic, Maria Beville proclaims “the Gothic as the clearest mode of expression in literature for voicing the terrors of postmodernity” (8). Beville states that many contemporary texts, whilst being predominantly postmodernist, bear distinctly Gothic characteristics; questions posed by postmodernism are thus approached by employing the Gothic mode.

Following Beville’s claim, the shift from haunted to haunting house has to be analyzed not primarily in light of its indebtedness to the Gothic, but rather in relation to its postmodernist influences. Especially questions regarding the ineffectuality of knowledge and the status of history as fiction are relevant in this context, since the active house cannot be exorcized and “normalized” by uncovering its ill past; there simply is no historical origin of the haunting. Even if the inhabitants of these houses are able to obtain information about the building’s past, the gained knowledge will not give them any control over the house. Knowledge is not an empowerment, and history is not the key to unlocking the secret of the house. Haunting houses, therefore, embody postmodernism’s “scepticism about the grand narratives” (Smith 141). Consequentially, these texts offer no concluding resolution and never re-establish those values that were transgressed over the course of the story.

This thesis addresses three questions in the analysis of haunting house tales: first of all, how and to what effect do haunting house tales rework the conventions of the Gothic and the traditional haunted house story? If Gothic fictions – and with that also haunted house tales – transport real threats and anxieties into the realm of the supernatural and the monstrous, but also contain these fears by means of narrative, then it is important to analyze how these dynamics are modified through postmodernist literary conventions.

Closely linked to this is the second question: how is the notion of the house's history – typical for haunted house stories – employed? How reliable and truthful is the account of the house's past, and how do the characters come by this knowledge? An ill history, such as a violent murder, is one of the main components of haunted house fictions. However, in haunting house tales, the house is already malevolent before any such event has taken place. In fact, the house is not created by its gruesome past, but instead "writes" its own history by causing terrible events. The relationship between the house and its history is therefore reversed. Additionally, the account of the house's past is often biased, misleading rather than empowering the characters.

Thirdly: to what extent do haunting house tales reflect on and problematize notions of science, knowledge, and the production of knowledge? A house that can write its own history also has the capability to create and define its own identity. However, the house remains alien and otherworldly: it does not "think" like a human being and its intentions often remain obscure. Therefore, whilst the house has gained the agency to produce information, this information is often incomprehensible, chaotic, and even threatening. Themes of postmodernism are thus foregrounded by calling into question the notions of history as an objective truth and knowledge as empowerment:

gaining information about the supernatural house will not enable the characters of the story to exorcize the house and end its haunting.

Before these questions can be approached, a detailed outline of the ideas of postmodernism as a literary movement is of essence. Therefore, the first chapter of this thesis examines conventions and characteristics associated with postmodernist literature, focusing specifically on the theories of Linda Hutcheon and Brian McHale. Furthermore, this section brings these theories of postmodernism into dialogue with theories of the Gothic, highlighting the similarities of and differences between the two types of literature.

After this theoretical framework has been established, the questions stated above are discussed by conducting a close-textual analysis of three post-war American haunting house tales. The second chapter examines Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and focuses on the depiction of science and knowledge in the novel. To be more specific, Dr. Montague's scientific (mis-)conduct is analyzed in detail, focusing on the doctor's futile attempts to match the manifestations at Hill House to his biased expectations.

Chapter Three discusses Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977), focusing on how the novel self-consciously lays bare the process of world-creation by depicting the processes of reading and writing and by making extensive use of intertextual references. However, as is discussed, the novel simultaneously stresses that the ontology of this constructed world is unstable by creating a temporally fragmented world.

The fourth and final chapter examines Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000). This text foregrounds the themes and questions of postmodernism most clearly, both in terms of form and content. Tracing parallels between the haunting house and the

text itself, the discussion regards the novel as a postmodernist parody of such types of scientific discourse which claim to produce true and objective knowledge about the world.

Chapter 1: Postmodern Gothic or Gothic-Postmodernism?

To parody is not to destroy the past; in fact to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it. And this [...] is the postmodern paradox.

– Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*

[A]lthough it would be perfectly possible to interrogate a postmodernist text about its epistemological implications, it is more *urgent* to interrogate it about its ontological implications.

– Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*

While it is not an easy task to arrive at a fixed definition of postmodernism as a literary movement, this type of literature is identifiable through a specific set of characteristics. According to Andrew Smith, the dominant aspects of postmodernism are the challenging of concepts and ideologies that previously went unquestioned. These ideologies are what Jean-François Lyotard calls “metanarratives” or “grand narratives” in *The Postmodern Condition* (xxiii). Such narratives legitimize particular social values and claim to be comprehensive theories of historical progress and knowledge. For Lyotard, postmodernism is in essence the breakdown of these grand narratives: “[s]implifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv, original emphasis).

As Lyotard's focus on narratives and narrativity implies, not only problems of knowledge and history, but also the representation thereof are foregrounded in postmodernist writing. With postmodernism comes the realization that the theories about the world are discursive constructs; history – that is, the knowledge of the past – is only accessible through textual representation. In other words, history, never being an objective venture, is closely related to fiction.

It is, amongst other things, this interest in the problematic distinction between fiction and history that Linda Hutcheon concentrates on in her work on postmodernism.<sup>2</sup> Hutcheon is careful to differentiate between postmodernity and postmodernism. Whereas she understands the term “postmodernity” as the “designation of a social and philosophical period or ‘condition,’” postmodernism is the cultural expression or manifestation of this condition (*Politics* 23). These manifestations are marked by their paradoxical nature:

We hear of discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentring, indeterminacy, and antitotalization. What all of these words literally do (precisely by their disavowing prefixes – *dis*, *de*, *in*, *anti*) is incorporate that which they aim to contest – as does, I suppose, the term postmodernism itself. (*Poetics* 3)

Using only six terms, Hutcheon identifies what is commonly regarded as the most important characteristics of postmodernist literature – its capacity to destabilize or disrupt norms and beliefs as well as its tendency to pose more questions than give answers. She also illustrates the underlying paradox of postmodernism: this literature employs those concepts it attempts to challenge. This leads Hutcheon to the conclusion

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<sup>2</sup> Hutcheon is especially known for her work on “historiographic metafiction.” This is a type of fiction that attempts to portray past events whilst at the same time being highly self-reflexive (*Poetics* 5). Authors often associated with such writings are, for example, Michael Ondaatje and Graham Swift. Catherine Spooner claims that historiographic metafiction is often written in the Gothic mode, since its subversion of dominant historical accounts “lends itself naturally to Gothic treatment” (Spooner 43-4).

that parody is the “perfect postmodern form” (11). Through its use of irony and intertextuality, parody can at the same time emphasize the *difference from* and the *dependence on* past literary forms. It is important to note that for Hutcheon parody is not a form of ridicule, but instead a means of critiquing and re-thinking the foundations of previously unchallenged ideas:

[P]arody works to foreground the *politics* of representation. [...] The prevailing interpretation is that postmodernism offers a value-free, decorative, de-historicized quotation of past forms and that this is a most apt mode for a culture like our own that is oversaturated with images. Instead, I would want to argue that postmodernist parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations. (*Politics* 90, original emphasis)

By claiming that postmodernism works mostly through parody, Hutcheon calls attention to its intertextuality. Postmodernism highlights that the work of art is not a closed and autonomous object, but that it is instead always indebted to past creations (*Poetics* 125). Consequentially, postmodernist literature is filled with allusions to and quotations of both specific works and entire genres.

Significantly, through the (ab-)use of well-known, formulaic plots and forms, such intertextual parody re-evaluates the function and underlying assumptions of these forms. Hutcheon illustrates this at hand of Doctorov’s novel *Welcome to Hard Times*, which builds on the conventions of the American Western; this novel, according to Hutcheon, undermines the idea of nature as wilderness and America’s pioneers as hardworking survivors (134). Doctorov’s novel therefore asks for the reinterpretation of



America's history as it is dominantly conceived, whilst also posing questions concerned directly with the representation of this past.

The preoccupation of postmodernist literature with problems of representation, knowledge, and history has also been discussed by scholars other than Hutcheon. Brian McHale, for instance, explains that postmodernism itself is only a discursive construct, thereby further emphasizing the impossibility of finding a set definition for this movement:

The referent of "postmodernism," the *thing* to which the term claims to refer, *does not exist*. [...] There is no postmodernism "out there" in the world any more than there ever was a Renaissance or a romanticism "out there." These are all literary-historical fictions, discursive artifacts constructed either by contemporary readers and writers or retrospectively by literary historians.

(*Postmodernist Fiction* 4, original emphases)

Significantly, if postmodernism is a discursive construct, then there can never be a "true" definition of the movement, only a number of different interpretations or "literary-historical fictions." Thus, just like postmodernism contends that scientific knowledge and history are only fictions, so postmodernism itself is a fiction.

McHale's own interpretation of postmodernism builds on the types of questions asked in such literature. According to his understanding, postmodernist literature is predominantly concerned with ontological issues, whereas modernist writing is marked by an epistemological dominant (9-10). In other words, modernism poses questions such as "What can be known?," whereas postmodernism problematizes the world itself: "Which world is this? What is to be done with it?" (10).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> McHale uses this distinction to classify a number of texts. For instance, in his study *Constructing Postmodernism*, he claims that James Joyce's *Ulysses* is logically both modernist and postmodernist,

According to McHale, both modernism and postmodernism have a corresponding “low art” genre: “[w]e can think of science fiction as postmodernism’s noncanonized or ‘low art’ double, its sister-genre in the same sense that the popular detective thriller is modernist fiction’s sister-genre” (59). This claim is once again based on the types of themes each genre engages with: the detective novel is concerned with knowledge and finding the truth, whereas science fiction “changes the rules” of reality by creating entirely new worlds. Due to this correspondence, postmodernism has absorbed some of the tropes of the science fiction genre – its “raw materials,” as McHale has it – to explore some of its own, predominantly postmodern themes (65-6).

A similar claim can be made for the relation between postmodernism and the Gothic. Several scholars have discussed the parallels between both literatures. Allan Lloyd Smith, for example, lists multiple coincident characteristics, such as indeterminacy and the tension between epistemology/ontology. According to Lloyd Smith, indeterminacy is “the stock in trade of the Gothic mode” and the “*raison d’être* of the postmodern” (7). In the Gothic, this indeterminacy is both of an epistemological and an ontological nature. On the one hand, Gothic scenarios are a reaction against classicism and the Enlightenment, portraying the insufficiency of knowledge and rationality. It is this epistemological indeterminacy that provides the necessary requirements for the mystery and suspense typical for the Gothic. On the other hand, these scenarios foreground ontological themes as well. Significantly, according to Lloyd Smith, the Gothic poses ontological questions also through the form of the literary text, which is characterized by “its tendency towards narrative digressions, opposition of

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since it encompasses an epistemological as well as an ontological dominant: “Joyce’s *Ulysses* is a literary-historical scandal. It is at one and the same time a founding text of ‘High Modernism’ and a postmodern text, a ‘demonstration and summation’ of modernist poetics and a parody of modernist poetics” (55).

various stories and registers, disputes of veracity, and an excessiveness in language, gesture, and motive” (8). Following the claims of McHale and Lloyd Smith, therefore, postmodernism can use the “raw materials” of the Gothic – its tropes, motifs, and conventions – for its own purposes, just as it can employ the *topoi* of science fiction.

One of these Gothic motifs that fits perfectly to the postmodernist agenda is its focus on “the disturbing return of pasts upon presents” (Botting, *Gothic* 1). If history and the representation thereof is one of postmodernism’s main concerns, then the Gothic mode, obsessed with arcane manuscripts and secret pasts, is an ideal vehicle for the self-reflexive examination of both past representations and representations of the past. Furthermore, the Gothic lends itself to Hutcheon’s idea of postmodernist parody: it can both “use and abuse” (*Poetics* 20) its own concepts and conventions through irony and intertextuality.

In *The Philosophy of Horror*, Noël Carroll examines the commonalities between postmodernism and contemporary horror. He specifically points out how horror fictions of the recent decades have adopted postmodernism’s tendency towards self-reflexivity: “[t]he genre is particularly reflexive and self-conscious at present [...]. Specifically, it is highly intertextual in an overtly self-declaming way. [...] It proceeds by recombining acknowledged elements of the past in a way that suggest that the root of creativity is to be found in looking backwards” (211). In other words, contemporary horror, like postmodernist fiction, lays bare the literary tradition from which it springs.

Carroll’s examination is a good illustration of the fact that there is a difference between postmodern Gothic – or in his case horror – and Gothic postmodernism. For Carroll, contemporary horror has postmodernist aspects, but nonetheless belongs clearly to the horror genre. In contrast, Maria Beville argues for the reverse, examining such

texts that are in essence postmodernist, yet employ Gothic tropes. She defines such fictions as “Gothic-postmodernist,” explaining that they are concerned with postmodernist issues and utilize the Gothic as a mode to express these themes (7-8). Similar to Lloyd Smith, Beville comes to the conclusion that the fusion of these two distinct literatures is possible because they are concerned with similar issues: “crises of identity, fragmentation of the self, the darkness of the human psyche, and the philosophy of being and knowing” (53).

Beville’s understanding of Gothic as a qualifier of postmodernism is convincing in light of Botting’s claim that the Gothic is “a mode that exceeds genre and categories, restricted neither to a literary school nor to a historical period” (*Gothic* 9). In other words, because the Gothic is not confined to any particular era or genre, postmodernist writing can utilize the mode for its own venture. Therefore, “the Gothic is the clearest mode of expression in literature for voicing the terrors of postmodernity” (Beville 8).

So far, only the connection between postmodernism and the Gothic has been analyzed. How do Hutcheon’s and McHale’s understandings of postmodernism as well as Beville’s notion of Gothic-postmodernism relate to haunting house tales? According to Bailey, the haunted house tale is a typically American genre, in which the initial promise and eventual disillusionment of the American Dream is portrayed. The house is the “primary marker of class and [...] central symbol of domesticity” (8); the haunted house, therefore, embodies the corruption of this ideology – the American Nightmare.

Bailey realizes that contemporary haunted house tales dispense with ghosts and instead depict a malevolent, animated house, yet he fails to read this development in its

broader literary context – postmodernism.<sup>4</sup> The American Dream can be regarded as one of Lyotard’s grand narratives, legitimizing not only a particular lifestyle, but purporting an outlook on life: dreams, hopes, and expectations. Bailey is correct in assuming that the haunted house portrays the disillusionment of that metanarrative. However, sentient and malevolent houses do more than merely conjuring up the American Nightmare: they also problematize the narrative conventions of the Gothic and traditional haunted house tales.

Unlike their passive counterparts, haunting houses do not allow for a clear and easy solution of the problem. Since the haunting of the house does not have a historical origin, such as a gruesome murder, no wrongs of the past can be set right again. This, however, also implies that the American Dream cannot be as easily retrieved anymore – a fact that Bailey does not consider. Furthermore, this modified narrative structure also challenges common conceptions of knowledge, history, and science. Knowledge about the house does not grant any control over its manifestations, and neither history nor science can explain why supernatural events occur in the first place.

Through this subversion of formulaic plots, haunting house tales are a prime example of Hutcheon’s parody. By self-reflexively utilizing such forms, they ask for the reinterpretation of the functions of these narratives as well as the meanings and ideologies they convey. In this sense, the postmodernist update of the haunted house fulfills similar purposes as Doctorov’s invocation of the American Western in *Welcome to Hard Times*.

Another claim put forward by Bailey is that the contemporary haunted house tale dispenses with the “ontological uncertainty” of psychological ghost stories (5). In

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<sup>4</sup> Bailey does not make the terminological distinction between “haunted house” and “haunting house” that is employed in the present paper. What he refers to as contemporary haunted house fictions, however, is coincident with what is here denoted as haunting house tales.

other words, whereas fictions by authors such as James and Wharton retain a sense of mystery by not making it explicit whether supernatural events indeed occurred, today's haunted house tale unambiguously opts for a supernatural explanation.

Indeed, with haunting house tales it is no longer a question whether there are supernatural goings-on in the house or not – it soon becomes clear that the house is truly alive. Bailey's claim that these fictions no longer employ ontological uncertainty therefore at first appears to imply that they do not fit McHale's theory of postmodernism. However, there are three problems with this reasoning: firstly, McHale does not deny that epistemological themes may be at work in postmodernist texts; he merely states that ontological issues are of greater importance – hence, they are dominant (*Postmodernist Fiction* 11).

Secondly, Bailey's premise that earlier ghost stories are ontologically ambiguous is incorrect. Being *psychological* ghost stories, their uncertainty is strictly speaking not ontological, but epistemological. The question of whether a ghost exists remains unanswered not because the world itself is indeterminate, but instead because such stories are restricted to subjective, possibly unreliable points of view. The reader can never get an objective and omniscient glimpse at the narrated events. In that sense, these tales ask those questions that McHale associates with the epistemological dominant: "How can I interpret this world of which I am part? [...] What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?" (*Postmodernist Fiction* 9).

Thirdly, even though haunting house stories problematize notions of knowledge and history, they nonetheless are marked by an ontological dominant. The traditional haunted house tale is, in many regards, a detective fiction: faced with supernatural

manifestations, it becomes the characters' main aim to uncover the truth about the house's past. However, in haunting house tales, this venture falls flat; the characters are forced to understand that the world they are confronted with follows different rules. In this world, knowledge is not an empowerment – the history of the house becomes irrelevant.

This chapter has outlined the main ideas and characteristics of postmodernism. Marked by a disbelief in grand narratives – especially the notions of history and science as objective truths come under attack – postmodernist writing employs strategies such as parody and intertextuality to challenge previously unquestioned ideas about the surrounding world and its representation. The Gothic mode, often depicting crises of identity and meaning, is the ideal vehicle to voice these critiques. Haunting house tales, whilst obviously being a derivative of Gothic traditions, are a subgenre of this Gothic-postmodernism. As a parody of the Gothic and the traditional haunted house fiction, these stories depict a world in which knowledge is ineffectual and history meaningless.

Chapter 2: Standing on the Shoulders of Giant Failures: Inexplicable Hauntings and Scientific (Mis-)Conduct in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*

Materializations are often best produced in rooms where there are books. I cannot think of any time when materialization was in any way hampered by the presence of books.

– Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*

In 1959, Shirley Jackson published her novel *The Haunting of Hill House*, which became an instant success. Having spawned two movie adaptations to this date, the novel is often regarded as one of the best haunted house stories ever written. In his non-fiction work *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King even claims Jackson's novel to be one of the two greatest supernatural fictions of the past century in general (300).<sup>5</sup>

Spanning the course of roughly one week, the novel tells the story of Eleanor “Nell” Vance who comes to the supposedly haunted Hill House to partake in an investigation of the house's supernatural manifestations. Under the guidance of Dr. Montague, an anthropologist whose hobby it is to study psychic phenomena, his three “assistants” Eleanor, Theodora, and Luke investigate the claims of hauntings at the house. Whereas Luke is a representative of the house's owners, Eleanor and Theodora have been invited by Dr. Montague because they have both allegedly exhibited psychic capabilities in the past. Theodora, a flamboyant young woman, has proven above-average accuracy in identifying concealed cards in a laboratory. Eleanor appeared to be

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<sup>5</sup> The other one, according to King, is Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (*Danse Macabre* 300).



responsible for a poltergeist incident in her childhood, during which stones fell on her family's house for three days.

It is not a ghost or a monster that the four investigate, but Hill House itself. Shortly after their arrival, uncanny things begin to happen in the building: doors simply will not stay open, a cold spot guards the entrance to the nursery, and rappings keep the investigators awake at night. Eventually, the timid Eleanor succumbs to the dark influence of Hill House and is literally driven to suicide, steering her car into a tree.

In his analysis of the novel, Darryl Hattenhauer claims that *The Haunting of Hill House* is "Jackson's most Gothic novel" (155), drawing on Gothic conventions in terms of characterization, setting, and plot. On first sight, the tale indeed has everything a good Gothic fiction needs. Already the novel's first paragraph sets the tone for the entire tale, introducing the novel's dark setting and a general atmosphere of doom and gloom:

No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone. (Jackson 1)

This three-sentence paragraph establishes the long history of Hill House, playing into the conventions of the typical haunted house story. However, this section also states that Hill House is "not sane" – a claim that, on closer examination, is extremely ambiguous and can mean two things: firstly, that Hill House, being merely an inanimate building, is

not a living thing, thus falling outside of such categories as “sane” and “insane,” and therefore should simply be regarded as “not sane.” Secondly, it could mean that the house is a living organism, but has existed too long “under conditions of absolute reality” and has consequentially gone insane. This latter option would imply that Hill House is not only the setting of the tale, but also its antagonist; Eleanor and the others must overcome the house itself.

However, the ambiguity with which Jackson introduces her reader to the tale is misleading; once Eleanor arrives at Hill House, it quickly become obvious that the goings-on are definitely of supernatural origin. For instance, the cold spot in front of the house’s nursery, experienced by all four characters, cannot be explained – not even measured – by scientific means. Likewise, there is no natural explanation for Hill House’s “dancing” one night – doors swinging open and shut.

By introducing such a house, Jackson gives the haunted house tale a new twist. In “Haunted Habitability: Wilderness and American Haunted House Narratives,” Christine Wilson claims that *The Haunting of Hill House* is the first haunted house story to feature a sentient house: “Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ is creepy, and Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* is haunted, but Jackson’s Hill House is alive” (200). Starting with Jackson’s novel, haunted house fictions introduce the active, malevolent house more frequently. In this respect, Wilson’s view is similar to that of Bailey, who in *American Nightmares* devotes a chapter to Jackson’s novel. He comes to the conclusion that Jackson’s novel may be regarded as the precursor of the haunted house formula of the 1970s. By presenting aspects such as the tortured family – at least in a symbolical sense – the sentient house, and a concrete social issue – the oppressive patriarchal society – the novel anticipates what would eventually become the formulaic

haunted house tale whilst also drawing on psychological ghost stories by authors such as Henry James (Bailey 25).

Significantly, Jackson subverts many of the Gothic conventions she invokes in her novel. None of the novel's characters adhere to the archetypal Gothic roles they at first appear to assume. In her timidity and awkwardness, Eleanor Vance takes on the role of the virgin maiden, waiting to be saved by a hero. However, she is not an innocent, lovable woman. Instead, the novel introduces her as a person filled with negativity and dislike of other people:

The only person in the world she genuinely hated, now that her mother was dead, was her sister. She disliked her brother-in-law and her five-year-old niece, and she had no friends. [...] She could not remember ever being truly happy in her adult life; her years with her mother had been built up devotedly around small guilts and small reproaches, constant weariness, and unending despair.

(Jackson 3)

The exact circumstances under which her mother died remain obscure to the reader. Eleanor claims that she slept through her mother's knocking on the wall and therefore did not realize that she needed help; however, how could Eleanor know that her mother knocked if she was fast asleep? Discussing this paradox, Hattenhauer states in his study *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic* that Eleanor is either responsible for her mother's death by willingly neglecting her and that she is now attempting to hide her guilt, or that she has constructed this scenario as an explanation for her unwilling failure as caretaker (158).

Indeed, over the course of the novel, it becomes clear that Eleanor likes to create such scenarios, casting herself in an imagined world of fairy tales. The phrase "journeys

end in lovers meeting,” a direct quote from Shakespeare’s meta-theatrical comedy *Twelfth Night; Or, What You Will*, is repeated over and over again throughout the novel. This phrase is Eleanor’s *leitmotif*, denoting her susceptibility to fantasy and imagination (Bailey 34-5). After seeing Luke for the first time, this motif is the first phrase to come to her mind. For Eleanor, who spends large parts of her life daydreaming, Luke Sanderson is the knight in shining armor she has been waiting for so long.

This supposed hero, however, does not fit his role either. From the first he is described as a never-do-well: “Luke Sanderson was a liar. He was also a thief” (5). He is neither at Hill House because he has any paranormal capabilities nor because he is in any other way interested in the investigation; instead, he is there because his aunt, legal owner of the building, “would have leaped at any chance to put him safely away for a few weeks” (6). Only once does Luke rise to the occasion by rescuing Eleanor from the fragile staircase of Hill House’s tower. Bailey interprets this act of courage as an indication that, even though not a perfect character, Luke is the only male figure in the novel capable of growth (38). This positive reading, however, does not take into account that Luke first threatens to push Eleanor off the staircase should she not do what he tells her to, and later emphasizes that he would not undertake such a rescue mission ever again for her. In light of his crudeness, Luke’s act of “heroism” instead seems like an attempt to put Eleanor back in her place after she has momentarily broken free from the control of the group. Such a reading is supported by her later exclusion from the group by the doctor; having become an uncontrollable element, Eleanor cannot be allowed to stay.

According to Hattenhauer, the writing of Jackson can be regarded as “proto-postmodernist” (2), that is, as anticipating some of the most prominent features of

postmodernism. Her characterizations, according to Hattenhauer, are one of the most clearly proto-postmodernist aspects. Jackson's characters are disunified, decentered, and entropic, disintegrating rather than growing. They are furthermore incapable of completing the hero journey (3-4).

The maybe best illustration for such characters is Eleanor; aged thirty-two, she still lives in a childlike world of fairy tales. Her journey to Hill House does not end in "lovers meeting," but instead in her death. She is incapable of "conquering" the house and instead slowly dissolves into its fabric. This becomes especially clear during the novel's climax, which constitutes the moment at which Eleanor gives in to the influence of the house. Significantly, she acts out several of the hauntings which Hill House previously exposed her and the others to. After she has left her bedroom during the night, she wanders through the house, laughing, and pounds on numerous doors with her fists. Then, just like Hill House itself only a few nights before, Eleanor goes "dancing," running through the house and hiding from her companions. At this point, the boundaries between her and Hill House are completely eroded: "Poor house, Eleanor thought, I had forgotten Eleanor" (169).

This erosion of boundaries between characters and settings are, according to Hattenhauer, another proto-postmodernist aspect of Jackson's writing: "Her characters are sometimes so restricted by place that they start to merge with it" (4).<sup>6</sup> For the four investigators, Hill House is the microcosm in which they collide – with each other and with themselves. The longer Eleanor is exposed to this isolated microcosm, the less she can withstand its overpowering influence. Indeed, in her own notes, Jackson wrote that

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<sup>6</sup> This is not only a postmodernist aspect, but also a Gothic feature. One of the best examples for this is Poe's short story "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839). In this fiction, the "House of Usher" of the title represents both a building and a family. The two have merged to such extent that the decay of the family brings about the decay of the house, and vice versa.

“Eleanor *IS* house” and that she is “ALL DISTORTED *LIKE HOUSE*” (qtd in Hattenhauer 159, original emphases). This fusion of characters and setting asks for a closer inspection of Hill House itself – the “novel’s oldest character” (Hattenhauer 164). As is explained here, none of the house’s hauntings correspond to Hill House’s past, thus problematizing the idea that the experienced events must be caused by a gruesome history. Dr. Montague – the novel’s representative scientist – fails to acknowledge this disparity and instead tries to fit the events at Hill House to his pre-formed “scientific” assumptions of the supernatural.

### 2.1 *The Hauntings of Hill House*

The way in which Jackson employs the history of Hill House throughout the narrative is the most striking subversion of Gothic conventions and resonates strongly with postmodern ideas. As has been pointed out above, the novel’s first paragraph emphasizes the house’s long history. This aspect is later expanded on by means of Dr. Montague’s lengthy account of Hill House’s dark and tragic past. Thus, *The Haunting of Hill House* appears to adhere to one of the most basic Gothic conventions: making the “haunting return of past transgressions” (Botting, *Gothic* 7), and the need to redress these wrongs, the driving force behind the plot. However, most manifestations witnessed by the four characters are unrelated to the past of Hill House.

After their first day at the house, Eleanor, Theodora, and Luke hear of Hill House’s history from Dr. Montague. In good ghost story manner, the tale is told at night, by the fire and with drink in hand. Montague begins by recounting the circumstances under which Hugh Crain built Hill House. Shortly after its completion, Crain’s first wife died even before setting eyes on the house for the first time. The man

remarried again, yet his second wife found her untimely end in an unexplained fall. Crain's third and last wife fell ill; together, they left Hill House and travelled to various health resorts in Europe, where both found their end.

After Crain's death, his two daughters inherited the house, and quarreled over their legal ownership. Eventually, the younger sister married and forewent her inheritance, while the older sister took a companion from the nearby village and moved into Hill House. However, the dispute continued even after that, with the younger of the two claiming that her sister owed her a number of family heirlooms. Once old Miss Crain died of pneumonia, the younger sister continued her quarrels over Hill House and the heirlooms with the companion. The companion not only won the case – thus making her rightful owner of the house – but also swore in court that the younger sister had broken into Hill House at night to steal things, even though this claim could never be proven properly. Shortly after she inherited Hill House, the companion committed suicide by hanging herself, supposedly in the building's tower. After her death, the house went to the Sanderson family and has since remained uninhabited, since no tenant would stay longer than a few days.

Dr. Montague himself has gained access to this information through two different types of sources: oral accounts given by a number of people and old newspaper articles. His attention was first drawn to Hill House when talking to one of its former tenants, who told him that “the house ought to be burned down and the ground sowed with salt” (51). Intrigued by this strong reaction, Dr. Montague attempted to talk to other tenants, yet they were all unwilling to discuss their experience at the house in detail. Therefore, the scientist visited Hillsdale, the village nearest to Hill House. Here

he studied the newspaper records and once again tried to talk to several people about the house.

However, the information the doctor gained in Hillsdale consists of a vast number of different stories and rumors. In light of the paucity and dubious credibility of his sources, it is highly questionable how accurate this account actually is, even if Montague was able to create a meaningful narrative out of these bits and pieces. It is also obvious that his narrative is incomplete; he was, for instance, neither capable to discern the exact fate of Crain's second wife, nor could he find factual proof of where the companion committed suicide. The assumption that she hanged herself in Hill House's tower is mere rumor. These missing pieces of information emphasize how much of Montague's knowledge is based on hearsay. The doctor's information is by no means an objective, scientific truth, but instead a narrative-driven, subjective interpretation. History, as Montague's conduct illustrates, is always a discursive construct, a grand narrative.

Nevertheless, the history of Hill House is without question sinister and scandalous. Hugh Crain's book of instruction for his daughter, found by Luke one day in the library,<sup>7</sup> fits this frame perfectly. This book, a collage of aphorisms, prints, etchings, and some of his own drawings, is the horrid proof of Crain's dark character. Each of the gruesome illustrations is followed by a warning of deviant behavior. The book's last page is even written in Crain's own blood, featuring the portentous words: "Daughter: sacred pacts are signed in blood, and I have here taken from my own wrist the vial fluid with which I bind you" (Jackson 126). Does the key to the haunting of Hill

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<sup>7</sup> In this scene, Jackson subtly alludes to Luke's dodgy trustworthiness again: "I found it in the library," Luke said. "I swear I found it in the library" (123). Remembering the introduction of Luke as a liar and a thief, his explanation of where he found the book seems rather dubious. The issue, however, is never brought up again.



House lie in this sentence? Has Crain bound his own daughter to the house through this dark pact? On first sight, it appears as if Crain has invoked otherworldly forces by writing this book in his blood. On closer examination, however, it becomes clear that this is not the case. The ominous history of the house and the baleful book of instruction, plot devices the reader immediately recognizes as key elements of the traditional Gothic, are red herrings, distracting from the fact that the events experienced by Eleanor and the others correspond in no way to the past of Hill House and its inhabitants. The only occurrence that has any paralleling past event is the death by vehicle accident through which Crain's first wife, an unnamed man, and Eleanor herself find their ends. As King points out: "[n]one of the four characters come upon the shade of the companion flapping up the hall with a rope burn around her ectoplasmic neck" (*Danse Macabre* 305). Dr. Montague's account of the house's history does not explain why Eleanor and the others encounter the apparition of a dog or a ghostly family having a picnic in the garden at night.

Through this lack of correspondence, Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* falls outside of the haunted house formula as it is described by Mariconda. The history of Hill House does not provide the backstory explaining the hauntings at the building. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that Hill House was already an ominous place before Crain's daughter died there; therefore, it cannot be her ghost, bound by Crain's blood, which is the cause for the haunting. Both the history of the house and the horrid book of instruction are red herrings: they are neither an explanation of the goings-on, nor do they offer a possibility of ending the supernatural manifestations.

Instead of meeting the gruesomely disfigured ghosts of Hill House's past, the researchers have to face a writing on the wall directly referring to one of their own:

“HELP ELEANOR COME HOME” (107). This has led many scholars to analyze the events at Hill House in relation to Eleanor, claiming that her psychic powers may be the true cause for the haunting of Hill House. One of these is Bailey, who reads *The Haunting of Hill House* as a critique of a very specific social issue during Jackson’s time: the persistence of patriarchal ideology (25). Hill House itself, according to Bailey, is a metaphor for the patriarchal society, luring Eleanor in and eventually bringing on her demise. She has internalized what Bailey calls the “June Cleaver ideology”: “The June Cleaver ideology flourished in the two decades following World War II, when domesticity experienced a resurgence as soldiers returned home, displacing women from the work force” (33). Following this development, the ideal woman was supposed to be homemaker, mother, and obedient wife. Eleanor’s suicide, then, is a consequence of her succumbence to Hill House and therefore also her failure to rebel against an oppressive ideology.

Insightful as it may be, Bailey’s interpretation has a number of shortfalls. First of all, to only read Hill House and its hauntings as a metaphor for patriarchal society in relation to Eleanor’s struggle is too simplistic. Though *The Haunting of Hill House* definitely presents a critique of domesticity, Bailey’s discussion of gender issues in the novel ignores several very important aspects of the text. According to Bailey, who himself builds on a claim by literary scholar Sue Verrege Lape, Hill House is “unmistakably male” (qtd in Bailey 41). It features a phallic tower and terrorizes mostly women, and Eleanor is its next chosen victim. However, both of these premises are wrong. Hill House is, in fact, neither “unmistakably” male nor female: if one is inclined to read the tower as a phallic symbol – and it is questionable how illuminative such a reading is – then it must also be acknowledged that Hill House has a yonic lay-out

consisting of concentric circles. Furthermore, the house is described in specifically female terms by the characters: “‘It’s all so motherly,’ Luke said. ‘Everything so soft. Everything so padded. Great embracing chairs and sofas which turn out to be hard and unwelcome when you sit down, and reject you at once—’” (154).

Additionally, even though it may be true that only one man has *died* at Hill House, as Dr. Montague explains to his assistants, it must not be forgotten that the house has also caused pain and despair for its owner and creator Hugh Crain. His first wife died on the premises of the house, suffering a fatal accident shortly before seeing Hill House for the first time. Crain’s second wife died in a fall at the house, whose exact circumstances remain obscure in the novel. Eventually, with his third and last wife falling ill, Crain left Hill House altogether, and spent the rest of his life travelling to diverse health resorts in Europe with his spouse.

Bailey’s focus on the underlying gender conflicts in the novel, therefore, is too narrow. In her introduction to the novel, Laura Miller claims that “Jackson [...] sets a trap for her readers” (ix); Bailey has fallen into that trap. Expecting the conventions of the traditional Gothic, he overlooks how these are turned on their heads in this narrative. Whereas fictions such as Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* or Lewis’ *The Monk* depict tyrannical, dominating men, Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House* depicts dominating women. With Hugh Crain being the sole exception, Hill House has only been owned by women: Crain’s daughter, her companion, and eventually Luke’s aunt. Furthermore, Eleanor’s and Dr. Montague’s lives are shaped by tyrannical women, namely a mother and a wife, respectively.

Even though Eleanor eventually proves to be the weakest link in the group, she is not the only one to be targeted by the supernatural manifestations. This provides a

second objection to Bailey's analysis. There are at least two supernatural events which are not witnessed by Eleanor: wandering on the premises of the house with Theodora at night, both women suddenly see a bright, hallucinatory vision of a family having a picnic. While Eleanor continues to watch the family, Theodora looks over her shoulder and sees something so terrifying that she screams at Eleanor to run and not look back. It is never explained what exactly she saw – yet, her strong reaction indicates that it must have been absolutely horrifying.

The second occurrence not witnessed by Eleanor is the apparition of an animal inside the house – possibly a dog – seen only by Dr. Montague and Luke. The two men chase after the apparition and follow it outside, thus leaving Eleanor and Theodora alone inside Hill House (98). According to Miller, this event is merely a decoy to lure the men away, exposing the two women to the loud poundings inside the house (xxi-ii). There is no foundation, however, for this claim, other than the assertion that Jackson's novel is exclusively about Eleanor and her relation to Hill House.

Instead of reading Jackson's novel merely as a Gothic tale, it is more fruitful to approach the text as a Gothic-postmodernist fiction. The analyses above show that Jackson simultaneously invokes and subverts familiar Gothic tropes: her characterizations as well as her portrayal of Hill House and its history do not fit to the formula of the Gothic tale. Even if the reader is initially invited to expect another installment of the traditional haunted house tale, *The Haunting of Hill House* turns out to be a different story entirely. In this sense, Jackson's novel is a good example for Hutcheon's parody that both uses and abuses Gothic conventions to foreground postmodernist themes, questioning the grand narratives of scientific knowledge and history.

The novel's intertextuality especially emphasizes its status as parody. In his analysis of the novel, Hattenhauer counts almost a dozen of such allusions (166), each of which have significant connotations for *The Haunting of Hill House*: for example, Dr. Montague has brought *Pamela* and *Sir Charles Grandison*, both authored by Samuel Richardson, as leisure reading. In these fictions, virtuous and villainous intentions are contrasted with each other. Especially the allusion to *Pamela*, in which the villainous Mr. B attempts to seduce young and virtuous Pamela, can be read as a critical reflection on the problematic, asymmetrical power relationship between Dr. Montague and Eleanor. At the same time, however, such a comparison should be conducted with care; after all, as has been established above, Eleanor is by no means the innocent, virtuous woman she at first appears to be.

Furthermore, the reference to the Shakespearean comedy *Twelfth Night* through Nell's *leitmotif* "journeys end in lovers meeting" is by no means an arbitrary choice. In this meta-theatrical play, the ship-wrecked Viola disguises herself as a man named Cesario. The comedy therefore is essentially a play about play-acting. Eleanor's repeated allusions to *Twelfth Night* thus do not only illustrate her romantic hopes, but also highlight that each character in *The Haunting of Hill House* assumes a deceptive and oftentimes ill-fitting role. Eleanor is not the traditional Gothic heroine, Luke is not the knight in shining armor, and Dr. Montague is everything but a loving father-figure. Unlike *Twelfth Night*, however, Jackson's novel does not have a happy ending for its play-acting characters.

Supernatural fictions such as Stoker's *Dracula* and Wilde's "The Canterville Ghost" are also mentioned in Jackson's novel. In Wilde's short story, an old country house is haunted by the ghost of its previous owner. The new tenants, however, refuse

to be frightened by the ghostly events in their home, since they do not believe in the supernatural. The ghost feels increasingly distressed and humiliated, unable to fulfill his role as haunting, terrifying specter. Similar to this comic short story, *The Haunting of Hill House* mixes elements of the traditional Gothic with comedy.

These allusions emphasize the status of *The Haunting of Hill House* as a fictional text inspired by previous narratives. The novel self-reflexively displays its familiarity with these literary conventions by drawing on key motifs and tropes. The reader is thus invited to compare Jackson's novel with its literary predecessors. At the same time, *The Haunting of Hill House* also subverts these texts by modifying these *topoi*. To paraphrase this in Hutcheon's words: Jackson's narrative acknowledges "the difference from the past" through irony and at the same time stresses "the connection with the past" through intertextuality (*Poetics* 125).

Realizing that *The Haunting of Hill House* bears the characteristics of the postmodernist parody, the question arises what exactly it is that is being parodied. Hattenhauer concludes that *The Haunting of Hill House* is, at least to some extent, the parody of literal-minded stances towards the supernatural, and that it voices Jackson's critique of spiritualism and parapsychology: "[t]hey thought that they were being terribly scientific and proving all kinds of things, and yet the story that kept coming through their dry reports was not at all the story of a haunted house, it was the story of several earnest, I believe misguided, certainly determined people" (qtd in Hattenhauer 10-1). Surely, Jackson's novel portrays the misguided investigations of such "determined people."

However, Jackson's novel is not only a response to spiritual ventures – also science comes under attack in her narrative. Miller claims that the dog apparition seen

by the doctor and Luke is merely a decoy; however, is it not also possible that this manifestation serves another purpose, namely to further encourage Dr. Montague's eagerness to investigate a haunted house and its ghosts? In light of this possibility, the focus of attention needs to be shifted from Eleanor to Montague. As the following section explains, many of the events taking place at Hill House play not only into Eleanor's anxieties, but also serve Dr. Montague's wish to prove the existence of the supernatural. The doctor – described as the “voice of knowledge scholarship learning” in Jackson's notes (qtd in Hattenhauer 155) – is the embodiment of science and scientific conduct. On close examination, however, his methods are rather unscientific; befitting the postmodernist mindset, it is this embodiment of “knowledge scholarship learning” that is the true focus of Jackson's parody.

### *2.2 The Dubious Science of Dr. John Montague*

After the eerie opening paragraph describing Hill House, Dr. Montague is the first human character to be introduced. The brief description of his person is very revealing. Montague, a doctor of philosophy, holds a degree in anthropology; his “true vocation,” however, is the study of the supernatural (Jackson 1). From the start of the novel it is made clear that the doctor is fully aware of the questionable credibility of his investigations:

He was scrupulous about the use of his title because, his investigations being so utterly unscientific, he hoped to borrow an air of respectability, even scholarly authority, from his education. It had cost him a good deal, in money and pride, since he was not a begging man, to rent Hill House for three months, but he expected absolutely to be compensated for his pains by the sensation following

upon the publication of his definitive work on the causes and effects of psychic disturbances in a house commonly known as “haunted.” (1)

With the planned investigation at Hill House, Montague hopes to finally achieve his goal: to prove the existence of the supernatural in respectable, scientific terms of cause and effect. However, through the use of the word “borrow” it is suggested that respectability does not rightfully belong to the doctor; in fact, this passage also hints at the possibility that his methods are not as dedicated to the laws of science as it first seems.

Firstly, his aim is not only to study supernatural manifestations, but especially to become famous by publishing his work. Secondly, he approaches the supernatural not as an objective scientist, but is rather eager to endorse it: “[h]e had been looking for an honestly haunted house all his life. When he heard of Hill House he had been first doubtful, then hopeful, then indefatigable” (Jackson 1). Significantly, Montague goes from “doubtful” to “indefatigable” before ever visiting the “honestly haunted” Hill House in person; he has already arrived at a conclusion before ever beginning the investigation.

This attitude is further proven when the doctor relays the history of Hill House to his companions: “some houses are born bad. Hill House [...] has been unfit for human habitation for upwards of twenty years. What it was like before then, whether its personality was molded by the people who lived here, or the things they did, or whether it was evil from its start are all questions I cannot answer” (50-1). This conversation takes place during the first night at Hill House, before any supernatural disturbances have been detected by the four. Nonetheless, Montague is already convinced of the building’s malevolent psychic powers.



The doctor's methodology is no less questionable than his scientific objectivity: inspired by nineteenth-century ghost hunters, he wishes to stay at Hill House for the duration of one summer and observe the goings-on. His role model in this venture is a psychic investigator of Ballechin House who "ran a summer-long house party for skeptics and believers, with croquet and ghost-watching as the outstanding attractions" (2). Thus, his methods are not only outdated, but are furthermore aimed at creating a pleasurable experience instead of generating scientific results.

Importantly, both Ballechin House and the researcher, described only as an "anonymous Lady" in the novel (3), have existed. It can be assumed that Dr. Montague refers to Ada Goodrich Freer, a notorious medium, who invited a party to Ballechin House in 1897. The investigation soon caused controversy after it was claimed that ghosts were seen only due to Freer's suggestions (Sausman 58-9). Dr. Montague, therefore, should not only know about the supposed success of Freer's venture, but also of the claims of fraud following it. Yet, he chooses to ignore these claims. Over the course of the novel, the doctor refers to several more supposedly haunted houses, all of which have had a history of failed investigations similar to that of Ballechin House: the Winchester House in California, Borley Rectory in England, and Glamis Castle in Scotland.<sup>8</sup> This illustrates the extent to which Montague – the group's expert – relies on the knowledge of other (failed) researchers, since he himself has little or even no real experience with the supernatural.

In addition to this, Dr. Montague takes no issues with relying on dubious sources when it comes to gaining more knowledge about the haunted house and finding adequate research assistants. The analysis of Montague's history of Hill House above

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed discussion of these houses, see Hauser's "Haunted Detectives: The Masteries of American Trauma."

pointed out that the doctor's knowledge of Hill House stems, to a great extent, from mere rumors and a few old newspaper articles. He has found Eleanor and Theodora in a similar manner, combing "the records of the psychic societies, the back files of sensational newspapers, the reports of parapsychologists" (2). These sources are everything but reliable and credible.

Once arrived at Hill House, with three untrained researchers assisting him, Dr. Montague plans to study the building closely, asking his companions to take notes of everything they experience. He has explained the purpose of their stay to them in the invitation letters each of them received: "to observe and explore the various unsavory stories which had been circulated about the house for most of its eighty years of existence" (2). In other words, Montague intends to compare the events taking place at Hill House to the rumors about the house. His approach is once again questionable: he is the only authority to decide which of these rumors are worthy of investigation. This is underlined when Theodora jokingly suggests that there might be hidden rooms in the house: "'There are no secret chambers in Hill House,' the doctor said with finality. 'Naturally, that possibility has been suggested before, and I think I may say with assurance that no such romantic devices exist here'" (47). Dr. Montague is not willing to believe in secret chambers, but he does not doubt for a moment that Hill House is the cause of all the bad luck experienced by the Crains and their successors.

Analyzing the character of Montague, Hattenhauer comes to the conclusion that the doctor is eager to explore the "traditional ghost story" (166). His entire attitude fits such a reading: secret chambers might indeed be merely "romantic devices," but a dramatic suicide in an old haunted house's tower is almost a necessary requirement for a good ghost story. Already from the outset, Dr. Montague tries to fit his and the

assistants' findings into the formula of such a tale. Arguably, the doctor even attempts to construct their entire stay at Hill House in such a manner. Only reluctantly does he recount the house's past during the first night there, since he believes that such knowledge will influence the assistants' experience and lower their receptivity. In the tradition of the Gothic story, the investigators should first witness a series of supernatural events before they finally find out about the house's dark past.

His wife, Mrs. Montague, appears to be the opposite of the doctor. Whereas Dr. Montague sets value on rationality and proper scientific language – even though his conduct might not fit this intention – his wife enters the novel as a confident psychic medium with no pretense of such scientific conduct. She constantly runs her husband's reasoning and methods over with her own irrationality.

Yet, even though her character surely is comical, she is by no means mere comic relief, and her presence at Hill House should not be brushed off as the “spouting [of] nonsense about the spirit world,” as Hattenhauer does (156). In fact, Mrs. Montague is not the opposite of her husband, but rather a comical caricature – or parody – of Dr. Montague and his working methods, through which the contradictions of his character as embodiment of science are brought to the fore. Therefore, Mrs. Montague's character must be examined in greater detail.

Her main approach to contacting the spirits of Hill House is by using Planchette, an aperture to facilitate automatic writing. The answers she and her lackey, Arthur, receive appear to be absurd and ridiculous. Planchette tells them of a nun – supposedly walled up alive – a monk, and an old well. The last bit of information they gain by questioning the device is that a spirit named “Nell” is looking for its home. Dr. Montague is quick to dismiss this information since he does not believe Planchette to be

a scientifically sound method, even though some of the answers obviously refer to one of his assistants, namely Eleanor.

On close inspection, the information Mrs. Montague gains constitutes, in essence, exactly the kind of traditional ghost story that her husband is hoping to experience at Hill House. A mysterious spirit tells of overtly Gothic characters – a nun and a monk – furthermore indicates a terrible crime – the walling up of the nun –, and finally hints at an unsolved secret – the old well in the house’s cellar. Mrs. Montague regards Planchette’s answers as true, undeniable facts, and repeatedly asks whether any of the companions have encountered events that fit to these facts. She reads the events at Hill House in relation to her findings. Like her husband, she never actually attempts to investigate the hauntings at the house, but instead only wishes to find her own expectations proven. The Montagues therefore both commit the same logical fallacy: believing their dubious sources to be true, they conclude that there must necessarily be a corresponding event in Hill House’s past. This entire assumption, however, is in itself based on the premise that such a correspondence between history and haunting exists, as it is typically assumed of ghost stories.

Another similarity between Dr. Montague and his wife is their habit of “proving” their observations by referring to their own authority. Fiercely reacting to her husband’s claim that no nuns ever found their end at Hill House, Mrs. Montague exclaims: “John. May I point out to you once more that I *myself* have had messages from nuns walled up alive? Do you think I am telling you a fib, John?” (139, original emphasis). Overdrawn and ridiculous as Mrs. Montague’s appeal to her own authority may seem, this practice is in no way different from the doctor’s fervor to use his degree to gain “scholarly authority” (1).

A last significant parallel between the two Montagues is their way of presenting the information they have gained. When passing on Planchette's answers to the others, Mrs. Montague stages a read-out of the notes together with Arthur to make it "sound more natural" (141). How, exactly, does a natural, written conversation with supernatural entities sound? Like Dr. Montague's dramatic retelling of Hill House's history, this performance is simply a spectacular charade, seeking to convince by thrill rather than sound reasoning.

Both Dr. Montague and his wife are a parodic embodiment of multiple ideas problematized by postmodern thinking. Especially the notion of science and the assumption that the world can be explained through science comes under attack. Mrs. Montague's reading out loud of Planchette's answers, for instance, is a dramatic reminder that "facts" are silent: what is commonly regarded as a scientific fact is always already a discursive construct – a narrative. In a sense, both Montagues attempt to create a grand narrative about the microcosm that is Hill House – yet, from the first, this narrative is not credible. Significantly, Jackson voices this critique of science and knowledge as metanarratives through a double parody. Just like Mrs. Montague is a parody of her husband, so Dr. Montague himself is the parody of "knowledge scholarship learning."

So far, this chapter has only examined the extent to which *The Haunting of Hill House* can be regarded as a postmodernist parody in Hutcheon's sense. However, does the novel also comply with McHale's claim that postmodernism is marked by an ontological instead of epistemological dominant? The focus on the failure of Dr. Montague as a scientist appears to imply that Jackson's novel is mostly preoccupied with questions of knowledge. It is due to his deficient conduct that the investigation of

Hill House fails and Eleanor dies. Therefore, the narrative seems to engage with predominantly epistemological questions. The fact that the reader experiences the story only through Eleanor's possibly unreliable narration adds to this impression; McHale's epistemological questions "What is there to be known [...] and with what degree of certainty?" appear to constitute the driving force behind the plot (*Postmodernist Fiction* 9).

On closer examination, such an interpretation of Jackson's novel as predominantly occupied with epistemological questions is problematic. Even though the epistemological aspect may be vital to the tale, the overarching theme is ontological. It is not only Eleanor who experiences the haunting of Hill House, but also her companions. Therefore, these supernatural manifestations cannot be dismissed as Eleanor's subjective and unreliable point of view. In the end, the investigation of Hill House fails not simply because Dr. Montague's assumptions were wrong. This would suggest that another, better equipped researcher could possibly exorcize the house. Jackson refutes such an interpretation by reminding her reader twice – at the novel's beginning and its end – that Hill House "had stood for eighty years and might stand for eighty more" (1; 182). Dr. Montague is neither the first nor the last person to attempt to make the building habitable. This house will not be conquered by means of science and knowledge. Knowledge about Hill House is completely irrelevant and ineffectual, because this entity will always follow its own rules. Read in this light, the opening paragraph of the tale as it was discussed above might not simply pose an epistemological conundrum – is Hill House alive or not? – but instead an ontological problem: Hill House is *both* a living organism and "just" a house. Hence, *The Haunting of Hill House* poses not only questions about knowing, but especially about being.

To summarize, Jackson has constructed the tale in such a way that the reader, like the Montagues, anticipates a traditional ghost story: secret crimes of the past need to be uncovered and set right again for peace to be restored at Hill House. Due to the constant subversions of such Gothic conventions, however, these expectations are never fulfilled.

The biggest deception in the novel is the house's history; sinister as it may be, the knowledge of Hill House's past neither enables the characters to end its haunting, nor can they anticipate the house's next attack. According to Hattenhauer, this is typical for the fiction of Jackson: "often there is a revelation but it offers no salvation, or even delivers the character into perdition" (4). Indeed, the more time Eleanor spends at Hill House and the more knowledge she gains about the building, the deeper she is pulled into house's deadly trap.

Rather than reading *The Haunting of Hill House* only in light of its critique of the "June Cleaver" ideology, the novel should also be interpreted in light of its (proto-) postmodernist aspects. By depicting the faultiness of the scientific approaches of Dr. Montague in such a vivid manner, Jackson expresses the "scepticism about the grand narratives" that Smith claims to be the typical feature of postmodernism (141), with knowledge and science being those grand narratives that come under attack the most. Jackson's mocking of these beliefs is maybe best expressed in the epigraph to this chapter, a quote from Mrs. Montague: "[m]aterializations are often best produced in rooms where there are books. I cannot think of any time when materialization was in any way hampered by the presence of books" (137). Ghostly apparitions, so it appears, are best facilitated through scientific knowledge itself – or at least the blind faith in it.

Chapter 3: “All times were one:” Authorship, Intertextuality, and Temporal Uncertainty  
in Stephen King’s *The Shining*

It seemed that before today he had never really understood the breadth of his responsibility to the Overlook. It was almost like having a responsibility to history.

– Stephen King, *The Shining*

Stephen King is one of the most popular writers of contemporary Gothic and horror. Novels such as *Carrie* (1974), *The Stand* (1978), and *It* (1986) cemented his success as “America’s Storyteller” (Magistrale, *Stephen King: America’s Storyteller* 91). This chapter focuses on the first fiction in which King has directly reworked the haunted house trope: *The Shining* (1977). To this date, this novel has been adapted twice for the big and the small screen and was recently followed by the sequel *Doctor Sleep* (2013).

The novel tells the story of Jack Torrance, his wife Wendy, and their five-year-old son Danny. Jack is a failed writer and a recovering alcoholic with anger issues, who takes a job as the winter caretaker of the Overlook Hotel in the Colorado Mountains. Knowing that he and his family will be isolated for several months due to the region’s hard winters, Jack hopes to reconnect with his family and to continue writing a play. Under the influence of the malevolent Overlook, however, Jack slowly descends into madness – until he eventually attempts to murder his family with a Roque mallet.

Jack’s son Danny is gifted with “the shining,” psychic abilities such as telepathy and precognition. From the outset, Danny senses that their stay at the Overlook Hotel will take a gruesome turn. The boy’s “shine” seems to amplify the Overlook’s power –



which is why, once the family is snowbound, the hotel tries to persuade Jack that he must kill his son and wife. It is Danny and his abilities that the building wants, but it can only get a grip on his alcoholic, violent father.

The literary traditions of the Gothic resonate throughout *The Shining* and have been widely discussed. Bailey and Strengell, for example, compare this novel to Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in their analyses, claiming that both fictions are similar with regards to settings and characters. The Overlook is thus seen as a modern-day Gothic castle and Jack, Danny, and Wendy take on the traditional roles of villain, hero, and heroine, respectively (Bailey 98; Strengell 100). Discussing such Gothic aspects in the author's oeuvre, Bailey claims that King, like other horror authors of his era, keeps the mythologies he draws on intact and instead modifies the elements surrounding this mythology. The novel *'Salem's Lot*, for instance, depicts the same type of vampire as Stoker's *Dracula*; however, King transports Stoker's Count to a modern day American setting (92).

However, such interpretations of *The Shining* as a modern retelling of classic Gothic fictions are not very useful. By trying to read King's novel merely as a modern interpretation of fixed motifs and formulae, Bailey and Strengell ignore the extent to which the fiction subverts these conventions in order to question their dominant ideologies and to foreground postmodernist themes.

The traditional mythology of the haunted house, for example, does not apply to the Overlook Hotel. The hotel houses numerous ghosts and has witnessed an abundance of crimes, yet, the cause of its sentience and malevolence ultimately remains obscure. It appears as if this house was always already haunting; its evil does not originate in violent murders, but instead the Overlook is itself the cause of crime and corruption.

Therefore, it must be acknowledged that, even though King assimilates specific Gothic features into his fiction, he also modifies these conventions and mythologies.

For example, King's characterizations do not conform to the traditional Gothic roles of hero, heroine, and villain. With his five years, Danny is much too young to be the tale's hero. Even though his psychic abilities grant him a vision of the hotel's plans, he does not have the power to prevent them. The boy can only observe and warn, but he cannot defeat the evil he is faced with on his own.

Wendy grows from her role as the helpless, childlike heroine to an independent, strong woman. At the beginning of the tale, Wendy may be the obedient wife that follows her husband to the Overlook – but the novel ends with her emancipation from Jack and her role of the helpless heroine.

King's characterization of Jack is the most significant subversion of typical Gothic roles. Even though he develops into a dominating, vicious patriarch, he is also the novel's tragic hero. His present condition – including his susceptibility to the Overlook's influence – is determined by his past: his upbringing by an abusive father, his alcoholism, and the resulting social insecurity. Jack is constantly torn between two opposing poles of his personality: the violent alcoholic and the loving family father. Whenever he is "himself," as Jack likes to think, there is no "nicer guy in the whole state of Vermont" (111); whenever he is not, however, he beats his son and students. It soon becomes clear that it is not as easy to separate between these two personalities – in contrast to what Jack believes, both are intrinsic parts of "himself." With the aid of the hotel, it appears as if his darker side is ultimately gaining the upper hand. Yet, even when Jack wanders through the Overlook's corridors, equipped with a Roque mallet and deadly intentions, his good side is not completely lost. Having cornered Danny, the

loving father once more breaks through the viscous mask: “‘Doc,’ Jack Torrance said. ‘Run away. Quick. And remember how much I love you’” (399).

Unlike the villains of the conventional Gothic, therefore, the reader cannot simply dismiss Jack as the novel’s antagonist; this man is paradoxically both good and evil, both hero and villain. The characterizations of the traditional Gothic are inadequate categories that do no justice to *The Shining*’s figures. Instead, these characters – particularly Jack – embody postmodernist ideas, destabilizing the clear-cut roles of the Gothic and complicating a black-and-white reading of the text. As a decentered character, Jack always oscillates between two seemingly disparate identities. He is the figuration of the “crises of identity, fragmentation of the self, [and] the darkness of the human psyche” that Beville views as central aspects of the intersection between the Gothic and postmodernism (53). Furthermore, he is the best illustration of Carroll’s observation that, in today’s horror, “[e]ven those we identify as heroes and heroines can readily wind up under the chopper” (212). Setting out with the intention to get his life and family back on track, Jack is ultimately corrupted and destroyed by the Overlook.

*The Shining*’s status as a postmodernist text is not only asserted through this subversive (ab)use of the Gothic’s literary conventions. As is claimed here, the novel furthermore highlights ontological questions by depicting the process of world-creation and by simultaneously destabilizing this constructed world. This chapter begins with an analysis of how the novel portrays the process of world-construction through Jack’s dual position of writer and reader as well as his confrontation with various sources of the Overlook’s history. Subsequently, it is examined how numerous intertextual references are employed to create a world with a kind of composite ontology, drawing

on diverse literary forms. The chapter ends with a close inspection of this ontology, discussing how the world presented in *The Shining* is temporally unstable.

### 3.1 Writing the World: Jack and the Overlook

Jack's aspirations as a writer are the driving force behind his motivations in *The Shining*.<sup>9</sup> For him, the Overlook may be the last chance to have a creative breakthrough with his play. However, once Jack finds a scrapbook composed of newspaper articles in the building's basement recording the ill history of the hotel, he soon scents a new opportunity: writing a bestseller about the dark past of the Overlook Hotel. In a sense, he envisions the hotel as the key to his own success.

This leads Bailey to the conclusion that the Overlook and its past are a metaphor for the dark side of the American Dream: “[i]ts history, like the nation's history, is an economic cycle of boom and bust in which the rich (men like the patrician Al Shockley) get richer and richer, and the poor (men like our friend Jack Torrance) just get poorer” (101). Jack, incapable of escaping these dynamics, is struggling desperately to get his slice of the cake, to gain access to this world of glamour.

In the end, Jack is seduced by the false promises the Overlook makes; blinded by the gleaming riches, he consigns his soul to the ghosts of the hotel and agrees to sacrifice his family for the good of his career: “the hotel expertly manipulates him into accepting his part [as murderer], partially through alcohol and the promise of sexual gratification, but more significantly through the prospect of corporate advancement” (103). When his plans to write a book about the Overlook are thwarted by his supposed friend Al, Jack instead seeks this “corporate advancement” with the hotel itself. The

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<sup>9</sup> Many of King's protagonists are novelists. See, for instance, *Salem's Lot* (1975), *Misery* (1987), *The Dark Half* (1989), and *Bag of Bones* (1998). For a discussion of such author-protagonists, see Strengell's *Dissecting Stephen King* and McRobert's “Figuring the Author in Modern Gothic Writing.”

idea of the American Dream, therefore, is at least partially to blame for Jack's disintegration.

Tony Magistrale opts for a similar reading in his study *Stephen King: America's Storyteller*. As he claims, the combination of capitalism and supernatural forces "create a complementary nexus where the ghosts on board still represent the design and power of wealth and privilege" (95). Being socially insecure, Jack is highly susceptible to the exploitation by the Overlook. Reeled in by false promises of success, he does not notice that he has merely been assigned the lowly position of caretaker.

These readings shed light on the underlying critique of capitalism expressed in King's novel. However, Jack's occupation as a (failed) author expresses more than the non-fulfillment of the American Dream. As Neil McRobert explains in "Figuring the Author in Modern Gothic Writing," contemporary Gothic tends towards the "metafictional staging of textual engagement," focusing explicitly on the writing process (297). According to McRobert, Gothic has always placed an emphasis on textuality; yet, this focus has shifted only recently from the process of reading to that of writing. The discovery of arcane manuscripts is a prominent plot element in early Gothic fiction. As Botting explains in *Gothic*: "[t]he historical distance that is opened up by the device of the discovered manuscript [...] produces an uncomfortable interplay between past and present that both displaces and confronts contemporary aesthetic and social concerns" (32). It is the process of reading – the discovery of dark secrets – that produces this uncomfortable effect in early Gothic. In postmodernist Gothic, in contrast, it is now the process of writing – the construction of a world – that becomes a location of terror (McRobert 298-9).

In *The Shining*, writing is the means by which Jack can fulfill his dreams and take his life into his own hands again. In other words, he is literally trying to write his own story, coping with his past and paving the way for his future. When Jack muses about one of his published short stories, it is not hard to draw parallels between his situation and that of his protagonist:

Monkey was not the only one to blame for the three rape-murders in his past. There had been bad parents, the father a beater as his own father had been, the mother a limp and silent dishrag as his mother had been. A homosexual experience in grammar school. Public humiliation. Worse experiences in high school and college. (242)

While the story of Monkey DeLong is a reflection of Jack's violent past, the unfinished play *The Little School* is Jack's reflection on what his future might be. The piece portrays the conflict between a once gifted, now brutalizing headmaster and one of his students. During Jack's stay at the Overlook, his own understanding of the play changes dramatically:

[L]ately he had begun to choose up sides, and worse still, he had come to loathe his hero, Gary Benson. Originally conceived as a bright boy more cursed with money than blessed with it [...] he had become to Jack a kind of simpering Goody Two-shoes, [...] filled not with real brilliance (as he had first been conceived) but only with sly animal cunning. All through the play he unfailingly addressed Denker [the headmaster] as "sir," [...] but as he had begun Act V, it had come more and more strongly to him that Gary was using the word satirically, outwardly, straight-faced while the Gary Benson inside was mugging and leering at Denker. Denker, who had never had any of the things Gary had.

Denker, who had had to work all his life just to become head of a single little school. Who was now faced with ruin over this handsome, innocent-seeming rich boy. (242-3)

Faced with his own failure, Jack begins to identify with the sadistic headmaster, making the student responsible for the Denker's misdemeanors. At the same time, Jack becomes more violent towards his family. Under the influence of the Overlook Hotel, his good intentions vanish behind a curtain of hatred, envy, and irresponsibility. Thus, the process of writing here stages not only the "uncomfortable interplay" between past and present and future, but illustrates the extent to which these temporal conditions are constructed. Incapable of realizing or "writing" his own story of success, Jack descends into madness and becomes truly monstrous.

Significantly, however, Jack is not only a writer – he is also a reader. Once he finds the scrapbook, he spends more and more time researching the building's past, reading in the book whenever he can. The portrayal of Jack as both writer and reader produces a tension between the notions of reality and fiction. As a creative writer, Jack can construct a reality to his liking and seduce his reader to delve into this projected world. As a reader, however, Jack is himself easily seduced by the (hi)story of the Overlook, taking at face value what might as well be pure fiction.

What exactly is this history that the scrapbook discloses? When he first comes to the hotel for an interview with Stuart Ullman, its manager, Jack learns only few details about the building's past: built at the beginning of the century, the Overlook has housed numerous famous people, but has never yielded profits. It was sold multiple times, until it was eventually bought by the multimillionaire Horace Derwent. Yet, even he had no luck with the hotel, and therefore sold it again. In 1970, then, Shockley and his

associates became the new investors of the Overlook and finally managed to realize profit. The only dark spot in this version of the hotel's past is a triple murder-suicide in the winter of 1970-1; the former caretaker killed his family and committed suicide.

The scrapbook, however, fills in all the scandalous details left out by Ullman. Derwent, so it turns out, had connections to organized crime and possibly acquired the Overlook again via an investment firm. The newspaper articles in the scrapbook tell a story of mafia dealings and gruesome crimes, all under the protection of Derwent.

Jack is immediately drawn into this world of mob shootings, questioning only once where this information stems from: "for the first time he wondered consciously whose book this was, left atop the highest pile of records in the cellar" (152). He accepts the information provided in the scrapbook without hesitation, never doubting the objectivity and truthfulness of the newspaper articles. The failure to critically reflect on the details he is presented with mark his eventual downfall. His disintegration is brought on by the unchallenged acceptance of a historical record even though he, being himself a writer, should know how flexible terms such as "reality" and "fiction" are, and that "history" partakes in *both* these terms.

None of the two accounts of the Overlook's past are absolutely reliable or complete. Even though they might not be *contradictory*, they are nonetheless *conflicting*: both omit details that do not fit the image of the hotel they want to uphold. By simply leaving out a few scandalous details, Ullman tells of a magnificent hotel visited by numerous illustrious people. The scrapbook, in contrast, adds the gruesome details, whilst disregarding those events narrated by the manager.

This disparity illustrates the observations Hutcheon makes in her discussion of historiographic metafiction concerning parallels between history and fiction:



“storytellers can certainly silence, exclude, and absent certain past events – and people – but [...] historians have done the same” (*Poetics* 107). With postmodernity, the subjectivity of the historian and the realization that there is no objective truth is brought to the fore. Hutcheon writes of the “postmodern concern for the multiplicity and dispersion of truth(s)” and the fact that “there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth” (108-9, original emphasis). In King’s fiction, this subjectivity of historiography and the multiplicity of truths is expressed through the two “faces” of the Overlook: none of its historical records can be fully dismissed, but it must also not be forgotten that they both are highly subjective. The novel thus highlights the constructedness of both records by showing how selective they are. Especially with regards to the scrapbook this becomes obvious; a fragmented manuscript composed of newspaper articles, the book brings multiple “facts” into confrontation by accumulating them on a few pages. Whilst borrowing from the rhetoric of news, characterized by its claim to truthfulness, the scrapbook condenses these articles into a decontextualized record displaying the information of several decades simultaneously.

*The Shining*, thus, takes a critical stance towards the notion of history by illustrating how closely this term relates to both “reality” and “fiction.” Even though there might be a kernel of truth in the historical records of the Overlook, they are created with an agenda in mind, selecting those pieces of information that form a historical fiction supporting this bias. Two plot developments related to the scrapbook further underline this critique. The first is the origin of the book; as has been pointed out above, Jack wonders only briefly where this record might stem from, even though he should have realized that the book was positioned too neatly and too obtrusive to have been left there accidentally:

A pile of five boxes stood on his left like some tottering Pisa. The one on top was stuffed with more invoices and ledgers. Balanced on top of those, keeping its angle of repose for who knew how many years, was a thick scrapbook with white leather covers, its pages bound with two hanks of gold string that had been tied along the binding in gaudy bows. (147)

Unwittingly, Jack has walked right into the trap set by the Overlook. The scrapbook is the bait that draws the author in. Once he descends into madness, it is finally revealed who provided the scrapbook for Jack to find. Having been locked into the pantry by Wendy, Jack has a conversation with the ghost of Grady, the former caretaker who murdered his family. He acts as the Overlook's spokesman:

“Education always pays, don't you agree, sir?”

“Yes,” Jack said dazedly.

“For instance, you show a great interest in learning more about the Overlook Hotel. Very wise of you, sir. Very noble. A certain scrapbook was left in the basement for you to find –”

“By whom?” Jack asked eagerly.

“By the manager, of course. Certain other materials could be put at your disposal, if you wished them...”

“I do. Very much.” He tried to control the eagerness in his voice and failed miserably. (329)

At this point of the novel, it is already too late for Jack to understand what the Overlook has done to him. As Grady explained earlier in the same conversation, the “manager” is the hotel— in other words, the Overlook itself has compiled the scrapbook and placed it for Jack to find. By feeding his thirst for a good story, the hotel has made Jack

dependent on its sheer endless supplies of scandalous details. Convincing him to serve his will and kill Wendy and Danny, consequentially, becomes an easy task.

Significantly, the truthfulness of this account is only of little importance. *The Shining*, thus, portrays a haunting house that literally writes its own history – and, what is worse, the Overlook is a historian with an agenda.

The second development is the effect the scrapbook has on Jack. In the conventional haunted house tale, such a book would be the central plot device for the “gradual unfolding of provenance for the supernatural events,” as Bailey phrases it (61). By offering insight into the hotel’s history, the scrapbook should theoretically enable Jack and his family to understand the supernatural goings-on and set the wrongs of the past right. Therefore, when the reader of *The Shining* discovers the scrapbook together with Jack, he/she instantly recognizes the book as the key plot device empowering the protagonists and thus offering resolution.

In King’s novel, however, the scrapbook has the exact opposite effect: Jack is not empowered, but driven to insanity. Instead of him gaining control over the house, the Overlook forces the writer into subservience. In this sense, therefore, *The Shining* “uses and abuses” plot devices and conventions of the conventional haunted house story, to use Hutcheon’s terms. Similar to Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*, knowledge about King’s haunting house is absolutely ineffectual, even endangering.

*The Shining* thus illustrates the process of world-creation by casting Jack in dual position of reader-writer and by portraying a house that authors its own history.

Additionally, the novel problematizes notions of reality, fiction, and history in a manner that fits to Hutcheon’s ideas on historiographic metafiction: knowledge about the hotel’s past is never an objective truth corresponding to reality, but is instead always a

fictionalized account created with a specific agenda. As the next section illustrates, the novel constructs its own world through the use of intertextual references, which establish the rules according to which this world functions.

### 3.2 Intertextuality as Key to Ontology

Similarly to Hill House, the Overlook Hotel poses an ontological problem. What at first appears to be a mere building eventually turns out to be a living organism. Both houses use writing to achieve their goals: Jackson's haunting house scribbles Eleanor's name on its walls and thereby creates conflict amongst the investigators, whereas King's malevolent hotel composes an entire scrapbook in order to gain control over Jack. This book metaphorically and literally exemplifies how the Overlook has always been writing its own history.

Especially Danny's "shine" is valuable for the Overlook, providing a vast resource of psychic energy. As Wendy finally realizes: "[w]ithout Danny it was not much more than an amusement park haunted house [...]. But if it absorbed Danny...Danny's shine or life-force or spirit... [...] into itself – what would it be then?" (King, *The Shining* 348). Wendy is familiar with the working mechanisms of the conventional "amusement park haunted house," where the most dramatic occurrences are rappings and phantom sounds. These rules, as she realizes, no longer apply to the Overlook should it gain control over Danny. Her question "what would it be then?" is a key question of the novel. Wendy does not merely wonder how powerful the Overlook might become, but explicitly *what* the hotel would come to be. She thus inquires about the Overlook's ontology, and how it might change through Danny's "shine." These are questions concerning the hotel's "modes of being," as McHale would phrase it. *The*

*Shining*, therefore, is marked by an ontological dominant, posing questions such as “[w]hich world is this? What is to be done in it? [...] What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?” (*Postmodernist Fiction* 10).

The answer to these questions lies in the fiction’s intertextuality. The novel is filled with references to Gothic fictions, myths, and fairy tales. Significantly, the novel opens with an epigraph quoting Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death.” This short story portrays a group of privileged nobles sealing themselves off from a deadly plague, celebrating their safety with a day-long masquerade ball. The Red Death, however, invades the abbey nonetheless, killing every guest.

Thematically, this short story frames the action of *The Shining* (Bailey 102). Significantly, Poe’s story is an allegory – a type of tale in which events, figures, and settings represent certain ideas or concepts. By referring to an allegory, King’s novel thus invites to “read between the lines” and to carefully analyze diverse plot elements. There are multiple parallels between both fictions: the corruption and decadence of the noblemen; the deceptive safety of isolation; a masquerade ball. Especially the last aspect is of high importance, since the two fictions do not only portray a masquerade ball, but also the shocking reveal of what horrors can hide beneath a mask. In Poe’s short story, the guests of the party realize that the Red Death has made its way into the abbey in disguise. Similarly, in *The Shining*, the Overlook Hotel possesses Jack and secretly “invades” the Torrance family. By referring to this specific short story at the very beginning of his novel, therefore, King not only sets the tone for his tale, but also gives his reader a sense of foreboding of how this story might play out. Over the course of the text, references to Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” resurface multiple

times; for instance, when Jack finds the scrapbook, the phrase “[t]he Red Death held sway over all!” suddenly springs to his mind (King, *The Shining* 148).

Throughout the novel, other intertextual references foreshadow the story’s conclusion in a similar manner. Contemplating the power of the hotel, Jack even refers to Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*: “if it [the Overlook] played its cards right they could end up flitting through the Overlook’s halls like insubstantial shades in a Shirley Jackson novel, whatever walked in Hill House walked alone, but you wouldn’t be alone in the Overlook, oh no, there would be plenty of company here” (264). By alluding to such supernatural texts, *The Shining* exposes the literary conventions it builds on and allows the reader to form expectations of how the plot will develop.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, the novel also distances itself from these texts by slightly altering well-known quotes. With regards to the reference to *The Haunting of Hill House*, this modification is relatively obvious: whereas Hill House lacks the presence of any ghosts, the Overlook is filled with a vast number of spirits, all of which are in subservience to the hotel. The alteration of Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death,” in contrast, is more subtle; the original tale does not employ the word “sway,” but instead ends with “the Red Death held *illimitable dominion* over all” (311, my emphasis). By exchanging the word “dominion” for “sway,” King shifts the focus from physical decay brought on by disease as it appears in Poe’s story to the Overlook’s psychological corruption, the mental control it has over Jack. These slightly modified references denote *The Shining* as a postmodernist text in the sense of Hutcheon: they emphasize

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<sup>10</sup> King does not primarily read *The Haunting of Hill House* as a (proto-)postmodernist text, but instead as an example of the “new American gothic tradition” (*Danse Macabre* 298). In such fictions, as King has it, it is impossible to discover exactly what kind of evil is at work and where that evil comes from, complicating a black-and-white reading (276). Thus, even though he himself does not view Jackson’s fiction through the lens of postmodernism, his analysis calls attention to some of the main characteristics of Gothic-postmodernist writing.

the novel's inspiration by past texts, whilst also emphasizing its difference from these fictions. Even though King's fiction may be read in the tradition of Jackson and Poe, the reader is repeatedly reminded that the Torrances are attacked by a ghostly hive mind unlike any hauntings of Hill House and face a mental disintegration far more dangerous than the disease brought on by the Red Death.

In addition to these Gothic allusions, four fairy tales are referred to: "Hansel and Gretel," "Goldilocks," "Bluebeard," and "Little Red Riding Hood." The novel also alludes to Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. These references serve three distinct purposes: firstly, they often portray the world as five-year old Danny experiences it.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, by alluding to stories such as "Bluebeard," the novel once again allows the reader to anticipate future events. Danny's curiosity about and eventual intrusion into room 217 illustrates these first two points best:

He had been drawn to room 217 by a morbid kind of curiosity. He remembered a story Daddy had read to him once [...]. The name of the story was *Bluebeard* [...]. Actually the story was about *Bluebeard's* wife, a pretty lady that had corn-colored hair like Mommy. After *Bluebeard* married her, they lived in a big and ominous castle that was not unlike the Overlook. And every day *Bluebeard* went off to work and every day he would tell his pretty little wife not to look in a certain room, although the key to that room was hanging right on a hook, just like the passkey was hanging on the office wall downstairs. *Bluebeard's* wife had gotten more and more curious about the locked room. She tried to peep through the keyhole the way Danny had tried to look through Room 217's peephole. (160-1)

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<sup>11</sup> Danny is not the only character associated with fairy tales. At the beginning of the novel, Wendy alludes to such tales as well. On the one hand, this underlines her intimate bond with her son. On the other hand, it also emphasizes her initial child-like qualities.

As this paragraph shows, Danny models his perception of his family, the Overlook, and room 217 on the gruesome tale of Bluebeard. He also anticipates that, even though he might not find the bodies of Bluebeard's wives behind that door, the secret of room 217 might be just as horrifying. Later, when Danny finally decides to enter the room to satiate his curiosity, the tale of Bluebeard is enriched with allusions to "Little Red Riding Hood" and *Alice in Wonderland*:

There was nothing, really nothing, in this hotel that could hurt him, and if he had to prove that to himself by going into this room, shouldn't he do so? [...]

*(what big teeth you have grandma and is that a wolf in a BLUEBEARD suit or a BLUEBEARD in a wolf suit [...] [...])*

*(the white rabbit had been on its way to a croquet party to the Red Queen's croquet party storks for mallets hedgehogs for balls)*

[...] He turned the key and the tumblers thumped back smoothly.

*(OFF WITH HIS HEAD! OFF WITH HIS HEAD! OFF WITH HIS HEAD!)*

*(this game isn't croquet though the mallets are too short this game is). (202-3, original emphases)*

At this point, the references to fairy tales are no longer a mere foreboding of what might hide in room 217, but rather anticipate the outcome of the entire novel: the Overlook will possess Jack, who will become the "wolf in a BLUEBEARD suit" and attack his family with a mallet similar to those used at the Red Queen's croquet party.

However, such references do not only illustrate the world as Danny sees it or foreshadow future events. Importantly, they also shed light on what kind of world the Torrances and the Overlook are placed in. Whereas such intertextuality in *The Haunting of Hill House* predominantly serves to clarify the novel's status as postmodernist



parody, it rather establishes a set of ontological laws in *The Shining*. By drawing on works by Poe and Jackson, King's fiction acknowledges its literary heritage: in this world, ghostly hauntings are very much possible. Simultaneously, through the subtle alteration of these texts, it is also underlined that the formulas of such tales do not suffice to explain the goings-on. Therefore, the novel also draws on other literary forms, such as fairy tales. In these types of texts, children take center stage and inanimate objects can suddenly come to life. *The Shining* hence displays a world where fairy tales and Gothic terrors come together, where a building can come alive, and where a man like Jack Torrance can be both violent villain and loving father. Significantly, as the following section explains, the thereby constructed fictional world is temporally fragmented and therefore ontologically unstable.

### 3.3 *The Inner Workings of the Overlook Hotel*

Time is a central theme in *The Shining*. The novel's epigraph introduces this theme by quoting a very specific section of Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death:"

[T]here stood... a gigantic clock of ebony. Its pendulum swung to and fro with a dull, heavy, monotonous clang; and when... the hour was to be stricken, there came from the brazen lungs of the clock a sound which was clear and loud and deep and exceedingly musical, but of so peculiar a note and emphasis that [...] there was a brief disconcert of the whole gay company. (Poe qtd in King, *The Shining* 6)

In this tale, the gaiety of the ball is arrested every time the "gigantic clock of ebony" strikes the hour. For a few brief moments, the party comes to a halt, only to start anew

once the clock falls silent, as if the assembly was stuck in a continuous loop. It is only when the Red Death reveals itself that this loop comes to an end.

The Overlook Hotel also has a clock, albeit a very different one. This timepiece – a so-called skeleton clock, since its inner workings are visible – is placed on the mantelpiece of the hotel’s ballroom. In King’s novel, this clock has a different effect than Poe’s clock, as the scene depicting Jack’s commitment to the Overlook illustrates best:

There was a clock under a glass dome, flanked by two carved ivory elephants.

Its hands stood at a minute to midnight. He gazed at it blearily. [...]

“The hour is at hand!” Horace Derwent proclaimed, “Midnight! Unmask!  
Unmask!”

He tried to turn again, to see what famous faces were hidden beneath the glitter and paint and masks, but he was frozen now, unable to look away from the clock – its hands had come together and pointed straight up.

“*Unmask! Unmask!*” the chant went up. (331, original emphasis)

Instead of bringing the party to a halt, the chime of this skeleton clock makes only Jack pause, while it gets the ghostly celebration of the Overlook into full action. When the clock strikes midnight and Jack consigns his soul, the loving side of his personality comes to a standstill, whereas the malevolent hotel grows stronger. Significantly, as Strengell points out, this moment – the striking of the clock, the unmasking, and Jack’s commitment to the Overlook – also marks the point where the pursuit of Danny begins (101).

The repeated mentioning of the skeleton clock emphasizes that the world of *The Shining* is temporally twisted – time is awry in the Overlook Hotel:

Here in the Overlook all times were one. There was an endless night in August of 1945, with laughter and drinks [...]. It was a not-yet-light morning in June some twenty years later and the organization hitters endlessly pumped shotgun shells into the torn and bleeding bodies of three men who went through their agony endlessly.

[...] It was as if the whole place had been wound up with a silver key. The clock was running. The clock was running. (284)

Every of the hotel's numerous doors, so it appears, leads to a different time and every event happens simultaneously. Like the privileged noblemen of "The Masque of the Red Death," the "guests" of the Overlook – its ghosts – are stuck in a continuous loop. According to Bailey, this is also why the hotel can manipulate Jack so easily: "Jack Torrance is on the wagon as the novel begins, but that doesn't matter once he arrives at the Overlook because there all times exist simultaneously – and somewhere in Jack's history another version of himself *is drinking*" (99, original emphasis). Regardless of whether Jack might presently be in control over his drinking habits – the hotel can easily bring his alcoholic past to the surface again.

The temporal fragmentation of the hotel is mirrored in the novel's structure. As Bailey points out, Jack's past is repeatedly played against his future through the use of flashbacks and Danny's premonitions (92). Already short sentences can trigger one of Jack's numerous flashbacks. For instance, during his initial interview, Ullman discloses to the writer that he knows about his troubled, violent past. When the Overlook's maintenance man Watson later shows Jack around and explains the things he needs to take heed of, Jack's mind repeatedly wanders to the memory of the interview as well as

the day he broke Danny's arm out of rage. Thus, this chapter superimposes three different times: Jack's present, his recent past, and a past long bygone.

Likewise, Danny's visions of the future, brought to him by Tony – dismissed as their son's imaginary friend by Jack and Wendy – are always superimposed with the boy's present. An extreme case of the resulting temporal uncertainty is the novel's fourth chapter, in which the reader gains insight into the boy's psychic abilities. Here, Danny is waiting for his father to return from the interview with Ullman. While he is sitting outside, Danny contemplates his "shine" and remembers his parents' past reactions to his uncanny capabilities. Thus, his present is interrupted by flashbacks. At the same time, the boy uses his powers to find out how his father is doing, thus also tapping into Jack's present. Suddenly, however, Danny gets another visit from Tony, who shows him visions of the Overlook and warns him of "REDRUM" ("MURDER" spelled backwards), thereby warning Danny of his future at the hotel (35). This frequent merging is confusing to such a degree that, more than once, the diverse times cannot be distinguished anymore.

Such repeated disruptions of the story's chronology highlight the relevance of time also with regards to the processes of reading and writing. When reading the book cover-to-cover and thus following the plot's sequence, the reader obtains an achronological understanding of the story, in which specific events are detached from their original context and embedded in a new frame. To some extent, therefore, the experience of reading *The Shining* mirrors Jack's confrontation with the Overlook's scrapbook, which compiles and opposes articles from different times on a few pages.

As Strengell puts it, the "observant reader realizes the inevitable fate from the beginning" (97); the novel's outcome is already foreseeable from the first chapters

onwards through, for instance, Danny's premonitions. Additionally, the numerous intertextual references discussed in the previous section foreshadow major plot developments through allusions to the Red Queen's roque party, the fatal unmasking of the Red Death, or the "*wolf in a BLUEBEARD suit*" (203). Even Jack's first visit at the Overlook already hints at the novel's end: as Watson leads Jack to the Overlook's obsolete boiler, he explains to him that he must under all circumstances release the pressure of the boiler regularly. "'She creeps,' Watson said. [...] 'You got to check the press. If you forget, it'll just creep and creep and like as not you an your fambly'll wake up on the fuckin moon' [*sic*]" (24). And indeed, during the novel's climax, the possessed Jack forgets the boiler – and the entire hotel explodes, with Danny, Wendy, and Hallorann barely escaping.

In a sense, then, *The Shining* begins with its end. At the same time, the novel's conclusion is not an end at all. As the Overlook explodes, Hallorann looks back to watch it burn:

[I]t was only Hallorann who saw the final thing, and he never spoke of it. From the window of the Presidential Suite he thought he saw a huge dark shape issue, blotting out the snowfield behind it. For a moment it assumed the shape of a huge, obscene manta, and then the wind seemed to catch it, to tear it and shred it like old dark paper. It fragmented, was caught in a whirling eddy of smoke, and a moment later it was gone as if it had never been. (407)

Shortly after this sight, Hallorann is briefly overcome by sinister thoughts: "*(Do it! Do it, you weak-kneed no-balls nigger! Kill them! KILL THEM BOTH!)*" (409). Even though he can resist this mental attack and flee together with the others, the implications of this scene are clear: the "body" of the Overlook – the physical structure of the hotel –

may have been destroyed, but its “ghost” lingers on, possibly freed from its previous material limitations. Therefore, this novel does not offer a concluding resolution: the haunting of the Overlook has only just begun.

Through the theme of time – the temporal fragmentation of the Overlook and the tale’s anachronistic plot structure – *The Shining* becomes an illustration of the shifting focus from epistemology to ontology as discussed by McHale. The novel does not only depict the psychological breakdown of its characters – the focus on “the fragmented nature of subjectivity” typical for modernism, as Smith phrases it (141) – but especially emphasizes the fragmented nature of the world these people are placed in. By doing so, the novel problematizes the grand narrative of history as a linear progression of events. In the hotel, all times exist simultaneously: ghosts of different times can interact with each other and with the Torrances. The promise of becoming a guest of a masquerade ball held thirty years ago convinces Jack to murder his family in the present. Furthermore, as is revealed towards the end of the novel, Danny’s friend Tony is his own future-self attempting to save him from the Overlook: “now Tony stood directly in front of him, and looking at Tony was like looking into a magic mirror and seeing himself in ten years [...], as if Tony – as if the Daniel Anthony Torrance that would someday be – was a halfling caught between father and son, a ghost of both, a fusion” (King, *The Shining* 391). The temporal fragmentation of the Overlook thus destabilizes the notions of past, present, and future to the extent where they are not only interdependent, but almost indistinguishable. Just as the reader is denied a sequential presentation of the story, so the Torrances experience time as non-linear; they do not merely remember the past, but instead actively live it in the present. Likewise, as Tony’s aid illustrates, future events can have a causal effect on the present.

On close inspection, time and history in *The Shining* are rather cyclical instead of linear. The masquerade ball always starts anew, and every time the clock strikes twelve the masks fall. The Torrances are preyed upon by the hotel just like the Grady family was a few years before them. This cyclical nature of time is further emphasized through the father-son relationships in the Torrance family, which in turn is mirrored in the names of the Torrance men. Just like Jack – John Daniel Torrance – was abused by his father Mark Anthony Torrance, so Danny – Daniel Anthony Torrance – suffers from his father’s violent outbursts.

Importantly, knowing what the future might bring does not imply that it can be prevented. This is also the reason why *The Shining* does not feature an ebony clock like Poe’s tale did, but instead a transparent skeleton clock: the Torrances may be able to watch the inner workings of the clock and to know what is coming for them – yet, they cannot bring this machinery to a halt. Survival is only possible due to Danny’s psychic powers and Hallorann’s aid. However, who will save Danny once the horrors of the Overlook are overcome? After all, his future as violent alcoholic already seems to be determined by his name.

To conclude, King’s novel reworks the conventions of the Gothic – especially its characters and the mythology of the haunted house – and thereby foregrounds postmodernist themes. Firstly, the novel self-consciously highlights the process of world-creation. It does so through the depiction of Jack as reader-writer and the Overlook as a haunting house that metaphorically and literally authors its own (hi)story. Significantly, as Jack’s demise proves, knowledge about the Overlook’s past is not empowering as would be the case in the traditional haunted house tale. Rather, by

unquestioningly immersing himself the scrapbook, Jack begins to disintegrate and thus embodies the dangers of such careless, inconsiderate acceptance.

Secondly, the novel itself engages in such a process of world-construction through numerous intertextual references to diverse literary forms. The result of this is a kind of composite ontology, where the rules of Gothic fictions and fairy tales come together. On the one hand, these references allow the reader to form expectations regarding the novel's ending. On the other hand, they also illustrate that the world of *The Shining* does not fit clearly into any of these categories and conventions.

Significantly, the world thus created is ontologically unstable, since it is temporally uncertain. In the hotel all times exist simultaneously and are repeated endlessly; the concept of time as the linear progression of events thus becomes meaningless. This fragmented conception of time is mirrored in the novel's structure, which is characterized by multiple flashbacks and premonitions. At the end of the fiction, many questions remain unresolved: has the haunting of the Overlook truly ended? Will Danny become like the Torrance men before him? The destruction of the hotel, so it seems, does not resolve the haunting of the house, but instead only triggers a new cycle.



Chapter 4: Lost in the Narrative: Scholarly Writing and Ontological Indeterminacy in  
Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

The impossible is one thing when considered as a purely intellectual conceit. After all, it is not so large a problem when one can puzzle over an Escher print and then close the book. It is quite another thing when one faces a physical reality the mind and body cannot accept.

– Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*

Bailey ends his study *American Nightmares* with the claim that the haunted house tale has become a moribund formula at the turn of the century, and that it can only rise again in an evolved form. To be more specific, Bailey envisions a development towards the “ghost in the machine,” where the house – or any other type of dwelling, such as a spaceship – is no longer haunted by ghosts, but instead by malign technology (111). Surveying fictions of the 1980s and 1990s, he comes to the conclusion that “few haunted house novels [...] possess the stature of *The Shining*, the artistry of *The House Next Door*, the subversive metaphorical bite of *Burnt Offerings*” (107). This conclusion displays the narrow focus of Bailey’s analysis of haunted house tales. For him, this type of fiction is an American phenomenon that specifically reflects on ideologies such as the American Dream. It is only when the haunted house tale can be read as a critique of capitalism that it possesses adequate “stature,” “artistry,” and “subversive metaphorical bite” – whatever these critical terms may mean. Therefore, as Bailey’s conclusion

indicates, the moment the American Dream is no longer a central theme in American culture, the haunted house tale in its current form finds its end.

Ironically, at the moment Bailey was formulating his verdict, a digital version of Mark Z Danielewski's *House of Leaves* circulated the Internet (three years prior to its print publication in 2000 (Pressman 119)), thus proving the haunted house tale to be everything *but* dead. Trying to describe what this fiction "is about" is not an easy task. From the outset the reader is confronted with a number of interlinked, sometimes conflicting narrative levels and pathways, some of which exist only in the novel's vast body of footnotes and appendices.

The introduction of the text, written by Johnny Truant – himself a fictional character of the novel – explains how he obtained a collection of snippets authored by an old, recently deceased man named Zampanò. Put together, these pieces of writing constitute a monograph about a film called *The Navidson Record*. The film, created by photographer Will Navidson in his own home, shows a house that violates the laws of physics: on the outside a mere building, the house constantly transforms its size and shape on the inside. In attempting to edit and complete Zampanò's monograph, Truant stumbles upon a number of inconsistencies regarding the dead man's work. Firstly, many of the academic texts around which Zampanò builds his own theories do not exist. Secondly, it appears as if Navidson's film, too, is non-existent. And lastly, what considerably complicates Zampanò's claims: the old man was "blind as a bat" – so how could he have seen such a movie, even if it existed (xxi)? These and others are the questions that both Truant and the reader of *House of Leaves* are confronted with at all times.

After the introduction, Johnny's own comments, ideas, and stories descend into the footnotes. Importantly, Truant's writings have been edited as well, namely by a number of unspecified editors, simply appearing as "Ed." throughout the text. The reader thus has to dig through Zampanò's fragmented monograph and a set of footnotes by Zampanò, Truant, and the Editors (see fig.1). This, however, is only the main body of the text. In addition to this, *House of Leaves* includes a foreword written by the Editors, Truant's aforementioned introduction, incomplete exhibits by Zampanò, three appendices – one provided by Truant and two provided by the Editors – an index, credits, and an ominous section simply denoted as "Yggdrasil" (709).<sup>12</sup> In other words: this fiction is a very complex novel to read. Whereas the reader of *The Shining* merely reads about a scrapbook, the reader of *House of Leaves* has to dig through such a disorienting scrapbook him-/herself, thus being placed in a precarious position similar to that of Jack Torrance.

The novel foregrounds its Gothic heritage from the outset. Most obviously, the fiction features Gothic tropes such as the terrorizing house as well cryptic manuscripts and impending madness. Readers familiar with the concepts of the Gothic will furthermore pick up on several references to the uncanny throughout the novel. Additionally, the text also engages with Gothic terminology, as Johnny's description of how he and a friend retrieved Zampanò's manuscript exemplifies: "[t]he way Lude's keys rattled like bone-chimes as he opened the main gate; the hinges suddenly shrieking as if we weren't entering a crowded building but some ancient moss-eaten crypt" (xiv). What he retrieves from this crypt changes Johnny's life dramatically. In the course of

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<sup>12</sup> "Yggdrasil" is the world tree featured in Scandinavian mythology. This ash tree holds the diverse worlds of the universe together (Pressman 122). The novel contains numerous references to ash and ash trees, thereby inviting a mythological reading of the text. For the purposes of the present discussion, however, such an approach is irrelevant.

“plain man, dwelling in tents.”<sup>242</sup>

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This then is the meaning of Esau

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As Scholem writes: “Frank’s ultimate vision of the future was based upon the still unrevealed laws of the Torah of *atzilut* which he promised his disciples would take effect once they had ‘come to Esau,’ that is, when the passage through the ‘abyss’ with its unmitigated destruction and negation was finally accomplished.”<sup>245</sup>

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But as a great Hasidic maxim reminds us: “The Messiah will not come until the tears of Esau have ceased.”<sup>246</sup>

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and so returns to Tom and Will Navidson, divided by experience, endowed with different talents and disposi-

tions, yet still brothers and “naught without the other.”

As Ruccalla states in her concluding chapter: “While the differences are there, like the serpents of the Caduceus, these two brothers have always been and always will be inextricably intertwined; and just like the Caduceus, their shared history creates a meaning and that meaning is health.”<sup>247</sup>

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By the end of the first night, Tom has begun to feel the terrible strain of that place. At one point he even threatens to abandon his post. He does not. His devotion to his brother triumphs over his own fears. Remaining by the radio, “[Tom] gnaws on boredom like a dog gnawing on a bone while all the time eyeing fear like a mongoose.”<sup>248</sup>

Fortunately for us, some trace of this struggle survives on his Hi 8 where Tom recorded an eclectic, sometimes funny, sometimes bizarre history of thoughts passing away in the atrocity of that darkness.

<sup>242</sup>See Genesis 27:24<sup>243</sup>

<sup>243</sup>Wrong. See Genesis 27:29.<sup>244</sup>

<sup>244</sup>Mr. Truant also appears to be in error. The correct reference is Genesis 25:27. — Ed.

<sup>245</sup>Gershom Scholem’s *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 133. In taking the time to consider Frank’s work, Scholem does not fail to also point out Frank’s questionable character: “Jacob Frank (1726-91) will always be remembered as one of the most frightening phenomena in the whole Jewish history: a religious leader who, whether for purely self-interested motives or otherwise, was in all his actions a truly corrupt and degenerate individual.” p. 126.

<sup>246</sup>Lost.

<sup>247</sup>Eta Ruccalla, p. 897.

But it also means [Rest missing.]

<sup>248</sup>Ibid., p. 249.

Fig. 1. A page from *House of Leaves*, illustrating the novel’s complex narrative structure. The main text, at this point itself disrupted by multiple omissions, is further undercut by footnotes from three different authors.

the novel, he grows erratic and paranoid, withdraws from his friends, and can eventually no longer discern between reality and imagination – almost as if he has been corrupted by Zampanò's text, forced to complete the monograph whilst disintegrating under its influence.

However, even though *House of Leaves* promises its readers a Gothic story about a supernatural house – possibly haunted by a Minotaur-like figure – arcane manuscripts, and madness, the novel subverts most of the conventions and themes it refers to. For instance, the events at the house on Ash Tree Lane cannot be simply defined and explained as “supernatural.” Rather, as is discussed in the following section, the house completely destabilizes the notion of “natural” as defined by science – the term “supernatural” therefore becomes redundant.

The concept of the uncanny, furthermore, is discussed twice in detail in the text. Yet, Freud's psychoanalytical understanding of the *Unheimlich* – the conceptualization usually referred to when discussing Gothic texts – is only of marginal importance. Instead, *House of Leaves* draws on Martin Heidegger's discussion of *Unheimlichkeit* and later refers to Harold Bloom's understanding of the uncanny. Thus, while self-consciously alluding to the uncanny, the novel deliberately avoids the reference to the concept as it is usually employed in the Gothic context.

Of the three texts that are analyzed here, Danielewski's novel engages with postmodernism most clearly, both in terms of the questions it poses and the issues it raises as well as the narrative techniques it employs. Notably, few of the fiction's devices are entirely novel; already *The Haunting of Hill House* portrays a house that, even though it may not transform, disorients its inhabitants through its unusual

architecture. Inspired by Jackson's novel, the miniseries *Stephen King's Red Rose* – not completed until 2002, but already conceived in the 1990s (Magistrale, *Hollywood's Stephen King* 211) – features a house that grows like a cancer. The idea of a transforming house, therefore, may have been taken to a new extreme by Danielewski, but it is not truly original. Likewise, other, earlier novels, such as Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), Chrichton's *The Andromeda Strain* (1969), or Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), have employed experimental techniques similar to that of *House of Leaves* by imitating academic writing, featuring commentaries, end- or footnotes, and illustrations. Therefore, instead of inventing completely new techniques or themes, Danielewski's novel rather picks up on several literary developments and unifies them in an ultimately unique form.

Due to its layout and typeset, the novel often demands extensive effort from the reader to decode its meaning, thus abandoning a conventional, linear narrative structure. As Katherine Hayles states in *Writing Machines*: “Camouflaged as a haunted house tale, *House of Leaves* is a metaphysical inquiry worlds away from the likes of *The Amityville Horror*. It instantiates the crisis characteristic of postmodernism, in which representation is short-circuited by the realization that there is no reality independent of mediation” (110). According to Hayles, Danielewski's novel accomplishes two things:

First, it extends the claims of the print book by showing what print can be in a digital age; second, it recuperates the vitality of the novel as a genre by recovering, *through the processes of remediation themselves*, subjectivities coherent enough to become the foci of the sustained narration that remains the hallmark of the print novel. [...] As if imitating the computer's omnivorous appetite, *House of Leaves* in a frenzy of remediation attempts to eat all the other

media, but this binging leaves traces on the text's body, resulting in a transformed physical and narrative corpus. (112, original emphasis)

In other words, this novel both reasserts the status of the novel in today's digital age and updates the print book to fit the new demands of this age. Hayles' analysis offers good insight into the processes of (re-)mediation and (re-)presentation in *House of Leaves*; yet, it pays only little attention to the relevance of the house itself. Other scholars, such as Jessica Pressman and Steven Belletto, take a similar approach, focusing mostly on the interplay between diverse narrative levels and discussing the house on Ash Tree Lane only minimally. Of course, these issues of representation are central aspects of the novel. However, the relevance of the house in itself and for the text as a whole should not be disregarded. Therefore, the present discussion enters the novel by beginning with a close analysis of this fiction's haunting house. The house challenges concepts such as "science" and "logic" by being an ontological impossibility. After examining the depiction of the house, its history, and the characters' confrontation with it, the discussion moves to the analysis of the novel's representation, focusing especially on paratextual elements as well as the clash of multiple narrative levels. As is claimed here, *House of Leaves* is in fact a postmodernist parody aimed at the type of scholarship that makes claims to absolute, objective truths – in other terms, scientific discourse which attempts to establish a grand narrative about the world and its knowability. The reader is thereby invited to question the authority and trustworthiness of such discourse. Furthermore, the novel destabilizes categories such as "reality" and "fiction" by repeatedly blurring the boundaries between supposedly distinct narrative worlds.

#### *4.1 The House as Ontological Impossibility*

When the Navidson family moves into their new home, they soon discover that something is fundamentally wrong with the house. Suddenly, there is a small closet between two connecting rooms that has not been there before. This curious incident prompts Will Navidson to measure his house – with the result that the inside of the building exceeds its outside by the quarter of an inch. No measuring equipment can eliminate this ontological impossibility. After a few days, another mysterious space opens up in the Navidsons’ living room. This time, the new addition is a dark hallway that leads into a seemingly infinite maze of rooms and hallways. Yet, this spatial disparity is not the only horror the family has to face: the house can furthermore shift, grow, and shrink without a warning, trapping and even killing careless explorers intruding into its bowels.

Navidson eventually engages the help of three wilderness explorers – Holloway Roberts, Jed Leeder, and Kirby “Wax” Hook. Equipped for day-long expeditions into Navidson’s house, the three attempt to gather more knowledge about the building and to reach its true center. As Wilson points out in “Haunted Habitability,” this venture – its participants as well as its conduction – sheds light on “the true nature of the house. It is more akin to Mount McKinley than a house” (202). The house is not a domestic space, but instead a wilderness that must be explored and made habitable.

Wilson’s focus on the tension between human domestication and natural wilderness – in this novel expressed through the expeditions and the house – emphasizes one of the main driving forces in haunted house tales: every attempt to exorcize such a house aims at domesticating the building and making it habitable. In a fiction such as this, where the house is not merely haunted by a ghost, but rather an



animate being in itself, this venture is especially difficult, if not impossible. However, Wilson ignores a central aspect of Navidson's attempts to domesticate his own house: for Navidson, the key in gaining control over this wilderness is science. He measures the building, takes samples for later analysis, and documents every confrontation with the house by means of multiple video cameras.

Through these investigations, several characteristics of the house can be established, such as temperature and air movement.<sup>13</sup> Yet, the gathered information does not procure any useful insight as to how and why the house exhibits its peculiar behavior. Any such scientific endeavors prove to be absolutely unhelpful in accounting for the goings-on, let alone in elucidating the origins of the house. It is impossible to create an accurate map of the labyrinth, since it constantly changes its layout. The best measuring equipment can furthermore only refine Navidson's measurements – as his friend Billy Reston proves, the interior of the house does not exceed its exterior by 1/4", but by 5/16" – but it can neither eliminate that disparity nor explain how it came to be. Likewise, the cameras can penetrate the darkness of the house only so far and can never offer any understanding of the maze's underlying structure:

[M]aze-treaders, whose vision ahead and behind is severely constricted and fragmented, suffer confusion, whereas maze-viewers who see the pattern whole, from above or in a diagram, are dazzled by its complex artistry. What you see depends on where you stand, and thus, at one and the same time, labyrinths are [...] order and disorder, clarity and confusion. (Doob qtd in Danielewski 113-4)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For a summary of the findings, see footnote 151 on page 121 as well as pages 370-1 in *House of Leaves*.

<sup>14</sup> Penelope Reed Doob's *The Idea of the Labyrinth: from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages* (1990) is one of the novel's few real sources.

Yet, as Zampanò points out in his discussion of Doob's text, there is no outside view of this labyrinth; from within, this maze is pure chaos and confusion. Consequentially, the cameras can only convey, never resolve this disorder.

It does not come as a surprise that knowledge gathered about the history of the house is similarly unhelpful and ineffectual. The reader of *House of Leaves* is provided with three different sources shedding light on the house's past: firstly, the results of a petrologist's analysis of the above-mentioned wall samples. These have been collected mostly by the Holloway expedition and later submitted to analysis by Navidson. According to the consulted scientist, already the first sample, taken from the hallway adjoining the Navidsons' living room, is "a few thousand years old;" the last sample, however, even predates the formation of the solar system (378). These absurd scientific results indicate that the house must be incredibly old, if not even infinitely old.

Secondly, Karen, Navidson's partner, obtains some statistical data regarding past owners by consulting her real estate agent Alicia Rosenbaum. Intrigued by Karen's account of their uncanny experiences, the agent conducts some research regarding the house. Rosenbaum comes up with two pieces of information: first of all, the house was not built on an "old Indian burial ground" (409). By alluding to this tradition of the haunted house atop the "old Indian burial ground" as featured, for instance, in Kubrick's film adaptation of *The Shining* (1980) or Hooper's *Poltergeist* (1982), the novel once again foregrounds its Gothic heritage whilst at the same time distancing itself from it, emphasizing that the devices of the traditional haunted house story are insufficient to explain the goings-on. In fact, *House of Leaves* repeatedly references such and other fictions, thus establishing a kind of genealogy – yet, as footnote 166 on page 134 and footnote 167 on page 130 prove, the novel relegates its ancestors to the footnotes. Thus,

even though the reader finds many parallels between Danielewski's novel and other fictions, he/she is constantly reminded that this text self-consciously displays its dependence on and difference from these fictions.

Additionally, Rosenbaum found that the house has had almost twenty owners in fifty years – an average of approximately 0.4 owners per year. She explains: “[n]o one seems to stay there for more than a few years. Some died, heart attacks that sort of thing and the rest just disappeared. I mean we lost track of ‘em. One man said the place was too roomy, another called it ‘unstable’” (409). This data thus proves that the Navidsons are not the first to suffer from the house's behavior.

Lastly, Zampanò conducts some research regarding the history of the region where the house allegedly stands. He provides excerpts from a seventeenth-century diary of a settler. Together with two companions, the settler had left the Jamestown Colony in search of game. Soon, they lost their way and had to camp in the forest. Close to freezing to death, plagued by bad dreams, and haunted by an inexplicable feeling of dread, the diary ends with the following entry: “Ftaires [*sic*]! We have found ftaires!” (414).<sup>15</sup> As this indicates, the “essence” of the house – the coldness, the depressing atmosphere, and a stairway – apparently already existed before the actual architectural structure did.

Yet, what is gained by discovering these facts? This knowledge neither empowers those people confronted with the house, nor does it give the reader of the novel a better understanding of the goings-on. In other words: instead of resolving the mystery around the house on Ash Tree Lane, the knowledge about the house's past only

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<sup>15</sup> As footnote 399 (provided by the Editors) clarifies, Truant mistakes the long “s” for an “f” in his transcription (Danielewski 413).

creates more confusion. There is no event from which the behavior of the house originates.

At this point, it is fruitful to compare the explorations of the house on Ash Tree Lane to the investigations of Jackson's Hill House and King's Overlook Hotel. In both *The Haunting of Hill House* and *House of Leaves*, the scientific investigation of the supernatural house plays a central role. In some ways, Navidson's scientific approach to the house resembles Dr. Montague's investigation of Hill House. They attempt to map and measure the supernatural characteristics of the respective haunting house. The outcomes of these scientific undertakings, however, are very different: whereas the doctor cannot obtain any significant results – according to his readings, there is no drop in temperature at the cold spot in front of the nursery – Navidson has more success in his endeavors. His readings, however, go against everything that science and logic dictate.

A significant difference between Montague and Navidson is that the doctor's proceedings, though camouflaged as respectable science, are utterly unsound and questionable. Navidson's conduct, in contrast, is more reliable in that he consults experts such as Holloway or the petrologist and double-checks the findings of one measuring instrument with the readings of another. In other words, the absurd findings of Navidson cannot be attributed to his faulty methods as easily. The grand narrative of science – the illusion of order and the knowability of the world – is destabilized by scientific research itself, which reveals pure chaos.

This irrefutability is further supported by the sources from which the reader gains knowledge about the house. This data has been collected independently by different people – Navidson, Karen, and Zampanò – and consists of diverse types of

information – chemical analyses, statistical data, and a historical document. Taken together, the data may form an unbelievable account about the house’s history, yet its content corresponds to the experiences of the Navidsons at the house.

In *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Shining*, in contrast, the knowledge about the respective haunting houses consists of newspaper articles and similar documents. All these texts are not only subject to interpretation, but – more significantly – are already in themselves narrative-driven interpretations attempting to create a coherent story of past events. The disparity between Ullman’s and the scrapbook’s versions of the Overlook’s past, for instance, illustrates to what extent these documents are highly selective and biased, aiming at establishing a specific story. It is therefore obviously questionable how truthful they are. Is the author of these articles reliable, or does he maybe have a hidden agenda? As has been discussed above, in both Jackson’s and King’s novels the histories of the houses are heavily biased – either through Dr. Montague’s desperate expectations of the traditional ghost story, or through the Overlook’s malevolent plans to reel in Jack.

In *House of Leaves*, in contrast, the information about the house appears to be more reliable, simply because it has diverse sources and consists, with the exception of the diary, of “cold facts.” Of course, this data must be analyzed and interpreted as well; yet, since it is not narrative-driven, it seems to be less prone to biases and cannot be refuted as easily. By emphasizing the role of sound and reliable scientific methods in the exploration of the house, Danielewski’s novel foregrounds the ontological problems that this house poses. The events in the house cannot be dismissed as mere phantasms or measurement errors; concepts such as “logic” and “reality” suddenly stand in

confrontation with each other. In *House of Leaves*, science produces more questions than it answers.

The house is what McHale would denote a “world under erasure” (*Postmodernist Fiction* 99): it both does and does not exist. McHale calls such ontological indeterminacy a “flickering,” in which “two or more – often many more – mutually-exclusive states of affairs are projected by the same text” (101). The settler’s diary illustrates this indeterminate existence by explaining how these people found stairs in an otherwise desolate forest, experiencing the influence of the house without the building as such being present.

Significantly, this flickering effect concerns not only the reality of the house on Ash Tree Lane, but also the representation thereof: the house is simultaneously absent and present in the novel. The reader of *House of Leaves* only has access to a textual representation of the labyrinth, namely Zampanò’s description of *The Navidson Record*. Even though Danielewski’s novel includes visual media, such as photographs and diagrams, any visual representation of the house is absent.<sup>16</sup> This absence brings a very central point to the fore: the house on Ash Tree Lane appears in none of the multiple narrative levels. Zampanò merely describes and discusses a film about the house, not the house itself. Furthermore, neither Truant nor the Editors have been capable of locating or even visiting the building – in fact, they have even failed to obtain a copy of *The Navidson Record*. In other words, the haunting house, which is the key motif of this fiction and the driving force behind the plot, is utterly absent from *House of Leaves*.

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<sup>16</sup> The only exception to this are a few sketches created by Truant and provided in Appendix II-A. Yet, as he has made explicit in his introduction, Johnny has never seen the film. The drawings, therefore, can only be his imaginations of the house.

Through this dual mode of presence and absence the novel also foregrounds problems of representation typical of postmodernism. Zampanò already hints at these problems after the above-quoted section taken from Doob's *The Idea of the Labyrinth*:

This [the impossibility of seeing the labyrinth in its entirety] not only applies to the house but to the film itself. From the outset of *The Navidson Record*, we are involved in a labyrinth, meandering from one celluloid cell to the next, trying to peek around the next edit in hopes of finding a solution, a centre, a sense of whole, only to discover another sequence, leading in a completely different direction, a continually devolving discourse, promising the possibility of discovery while all along dissolving into chaotic ambiguities too blurry to ever completely comprehend. (Danielewski 114)

Zampanò voices this insight in the novel's most confusing section, namely Chapter IX. This chapter forces the reader to work through abstruse footnotes, many of which lead to dead ends. Therefore, when Zampanò points out that not only the house is labyrinthine, but also Navidson's film, the reader has to realize that the novel he holds in his hands, too, is like a labyrinth, and that he is himself wandering through the "house of leaves."

#### 4.2 *The Text as Labyrinth*

Chapter IX of *House of Leaves* is the most extreme example of the novel mirroring its content (see fig.2). The term "plot *line*" is insufficient to describe this obfuscating structure. Instead, it is more sensible to speak of a "story architecture," as Hayles does. She writes: "the story's architecture is envisioned not so much as a sequential narrative as alternative paths within the same immense labyrinth of a fictional spacetime" (115).

Ironically, the very technology that instructs us to mistrust the image also creates the means by which to accredit it.

« Or TNT. Truth And Truth therefore becoming another name  
 for the nitrating of toluene or C<sub>7</sub>H<sub>5</sub>N<sub>3</sub>O<sub>6</sub>—not to be  
 confused with C<sub>16</sub>H<sub>10</sub>N<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>—in other words one word: trini-  
 trotoluene. TNT<sup>188</sup> telegraphing a weird coalition of  
 sense. On one hand transcendent and lasting and on the  
 other violent and extremely flammable.

186Murphy Gruner's *Document Detectives* (New York: Pantheon, 1995), p. 37.<sup>187</sup>  
 187

One can imagine a group of Documentary  
 Detectives whose sole purpose is to uphold  
 Truth & Truth « by guaranteeing the  
 the authenticity of all works. Their seal  
 of approval would create a sense of  
 public faith which could only be main-  
 tained if said Documentary Detec-  
 tives were as fierce as pit bulls and as  
 scrupulous as saints. Of course, this is  
 more the kind of thing a novelist or  
 playwright would deal with, and as I  
 am pointedly not a novelist or a playwright  
 I will leave that tale to someone else —

« Or TNT. Truth And Truth therefore becoming another name  
 for the nitrating of toluene or C<sub>7</sub>H<sub>5</sub>N<sub>3</sub>O<sub>6</sub>—not to be  
 confused with C<sub>16</sub>H<sub>10</sub>N<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>—in other words one word: trini-  
 trotoluene. TNT<sup>188</sup> telegraphing a weird coalition of  
 sense. On one hand transcendent and lasting and on the  
 other violent and extremely flammable.

As author Murphy Gruner once remarked:

“Just as is true with Chandler’s Marlowe, the viewer is won over simply because the shirts are rumpled, the soles are worn, and there’s that ever present hat. These days nothing deserves our faith less than the slick and expensive. Which is how video and film technology comes to us: rumpled or slick.

“Rumpled Technology—capital M for Marlowe—hails from Good Guys, Radio Shack or Fry’s Electronics. It is cheap, available and very dangerous. One needs only to consider *The George Holliday Rodney King Video* to recognize the power of such low-end technology. Furthermore, as the recording time for tapes and digital disks increases, as battery life is extended, and as camera size is reduced, the larger the window will grow for capturing events as they occur.

“Slick Technology—capital S for Slick—is the opposite: expensive, cumbersome, and time consuming. But it too is also very powerful. Digital manipulation allows for the creation of almost anything the imagination can come up with, all in the safe confines of an editing suite, equipped with 24 hour catering and an on site masseuse.”<sup>186</sup>

Fig. 2. A sample page from Chapter IX of *House of Leaves*. The disorienting layout of the chapter simulates that of a labyrinth, featuring numerous misleading footnotes.



It is up to the reader to decide how to explore the novel's architecture and which path to follow. Already early in the fiction he/she is invited to stray from the conventional cover-to-cover reading. A footnote by the Editors regarding one of Truant's personal stories reads as follows:

Though Mr. Truant's asides may often seem impenetrable, they are not without rhyme or reason. The reader who wishes to interpret Mr. Truant on his or her own may disregard this note. Those, however, who feel they would profit from a better understanding of his past may wish to proceed ahead and read his father's obituary in Appendix II-D as well as those letters written by his institutionalized mother in Appendix II-E. – Ed. (Danielewski 72)

With this remark, the reader is given the option to continue reading on the next page, or to leaf through the book and study the appendices. The choice will severely affect the remaining reading experience: what at first appears to be mere background information regarding Johnny's past has deep implications for the understanding of the novel.

Appendix II-E consists of letters to Johnny written by his mother – a literal madwoman in the attic: after having almost strangled her own son, Pelafina Lièvre was institutionalized in the “Three Attic Whalestoe Institute.” Without reading these letters, the reader will not notice multiple allusions to Truant's mother. For instance, the relevance of the color purple throughout the entire novel or the meaning of a check mark in the lower right hand corner on page 67 can only be known when having read Pelafina's letters.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Johnny associates the color purple with his mother's painted nails. In the novel, therefore, the color purple often connects to a mother motif, even though this relation is seldom made explicit. Additionally, two text passages appear as struck lines printed in purple: a section in the edition notice and the phrase “what I'm remembering now” shortly before Truant tells the story of a mother and her moribund baby (518). The check mark was a secret symbol, with which Johnny should indicate to his mother that he had received her letters (609).

Through its multi-path architecture, *House of Leaves* problematizes the superior position of author and editor. In this novel, it is neither of those two who control the narrative, but instead the reader. This constitutes a parallel between the experience of reading the labyrinthine *House of Leaves* and that of those wandering about the house's maze. The shape of the labyrinth depends not on its creator, but on those who wander within it, as Zampanò clarifies: "some critics believe the house's mutations reflect the psychology of anyone who enters it" (Danielewski 165).

The categories of "author" and "editor" are further destabilized by the novel's paratextual elements. In *Paratexts*, Gérard Genette defines the paratext as follows: "the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers [...]. More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a *threshold*" (1-2, original emphasis). In other words, the paratext is that which presents or frames a text and makes it recognizable as such. Examples for this are a book's cover, its title, chapter titles, but also the preface and notes. All these paratextual elements are "characterized by an authorial intention and assumption of responsibility" (3). This responsibility lies not solely with the author, but also with the text's publishers.

In *House of Leaves*, the paratext is no longer a threshold between the text and the discourse about the text. Instead, this novel depicts the "collapse of text and paratext" (Hayles 120). The narrative is to great parts conveyed not in the novel's "main text" – if there even is such a thing – but instead in its footnotes and appendices. As Graulund states in "Text and Paratext in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*:" "the paratext is apportioned so much power that it is allowed constantly to encroach on the text, often to the point where there is nothing but paratext left" (379). It thus oftentimes becomes impossible to discern with certainty who has authored which part of the text.

The novel's typography further underlines this breakdown of text/paratext and the difficulty of identifying the author by disrupting the conventional, homogenous layout that is expected when opening a book. At first glance, it is impossible to discern which of these textual elements constitutes the main narrative.

Furthermore, the paratext also challenges the notion of the neutral and objective editor. Truant's digressive footnotes often span several pages, telling his personal stories rather than supporting Zampanò's text. Significantly, in one of his footnotes Johnny even openly admits that he has modified Zampanò's narration, which tells of a broken water heater in the Navidsons' house. Truant laments his own broken water heater, and ends the footnote with the following words:

Now I'm sure you're wondering something. Is it just coincidence that this cold water predicament of mine also appears in this chapter? Not at all. Zampanò wrote only "heater." The word "water" back there – I added that. [...] Hey, not fair, you cry. Hey, hey, fuck you, I say. (Danielewski 16)

This is only one of many incidents where the text's editing is highly dubious, though only seldom the interferences of the diverse editors are as obvious.

Thus, the "assumption of responsibility," as Genette terms it (3), of the various authors and editors featured in the novel is done away with. The reader is repeatedly reminded that none of these figures are truly reliable and trustworthy. Consequentially, it is now the reader's responsibility to explore the text, searching for errors and contradictions indicating the credibility of each narrator.

This leads to another function of the paratext in *House of Leaves*: it deliberately misleads the reader. According to Genette, the paratext can communicate pure information, such as the date of publication, or it can convey an intention or

interpretation, which is function of a preface (10-1). In Danielewski's novel, however, it is impossible to find any type of paratext that truly contains *only* information. The maybe best illustration for this is the novel's index. Since indexes are usually only featured in specific types of books, such as academic works, an index is also an indicator for what type of text the reader holds in his or her hands. Therefore, the index in *House of Leaves* at first appears to lend the novel a certain authority and trustworthiness. The contents of the index, however, stand in sharp contrast to this: nonsensical terms such as "and," "something," and "nothing" are listed.

The purpose of an index is to convey neutral information, such as a term's position in the text as well as its frequency of appearance. However, through its peculiar and nonsensical entries, this index does the exact opposite. To a large extent, the listed terms are distracting "white noise," which renders the conveyed information useless due to its excessiveness. Other, more significant entries are drowned in this flood of nonsense. At the same time, these terms remind the reader that someone has consciously created this index, deciding which words to list and which to omit. The supposedly objective data provided here is, in fact, already a selection and interpretation. Claims to authority and objectivity of such academic discourse usually featuring an index are thereby challenged.

*House of Leaves* thus positions itself as a postmodernist parody in Hutcheon's sense, imitating and subverting scholarly writing. It is specifically that type of scientific discourse which attempts to create a grand narrative about the world and its knowability that is the focus of this parody. By parodying such academic discourse, the novel foregrounds the constructedness of scientific knowledge and subverts its authority. This is illustrated by numerous references to non-existent scholars, through which

Danielewski's novel takes postmodernism's intertextuality to a new level: *House of Leaves* itself creates those literatures it depends on. By doing so, the narrative parodies the seemingly endless chain of references found in academic writing. Furthermore, the fiction embodies a tendency that McHale deems typical of postmodernist literature: “[l]ately the tables have been turned, and instead of narrative being the object of narratological theory, it is theory that has become the object of narrative: where once we had theories about narrative, we begin now to have stories about theory” (*Constructing Postmodernism* 4). Indeed, this novel essentially contains its own critical analysis, pitting diverse theories and ideas against each other.

As a consequence, this parody places the reader in a problematic position. As Graulund claims, the novel plays “on the need of the reader to believe in the authority of the text by referring to common authoritarian standards [...], yet repeatedly [shatters] this authority by deviating from the chosen standard in some form or another” (381). On the one hand, it appears as if much of the reader's work has already been done for him/her; after all, *House of Leaves* analyzes itself through its numerous footnotes:

Fans of poststructuralism, for example, might conceive of the house as having a center that is not a center, so perhaps a judicious use of Derrida would be helpful when writing an essay on *House of Leaves* [...]. But Zampanò has already provided a footnote, ‘strictly as an aside,’ that quotes liberally and in French from ‘Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences.’ [...] *House of Leaves* provides a gloss on itself, so one might bring in the concept of [...] the play of structure into a discussion of the novel without ever having to leave the novel. (Belletto 107)

On the other hand, this analysis oftentimes seems absurd and dubious, citing fictional scholars or quoting excessively in foreign languages without providing any translations. Thus, instead of blindly believing in the authority and truthfulness of the academic inquiries of the narrators, the reader is forced to reconsider their credibility.

The house on Ash Tree Lane is the motif through which this conflict of authority and trustworthiness is embodied. Neither the house nor the narrative can be tamed through analysis and ultimately remain a disorienting wilderness. Just like Navidson attempts to control the house through scientific examination, so Zampanò tries to get a grip on Navidson's film by subjecting it to in-depth analysis. Both endeavors lead to absurd results: many of Zampanò's footnotes, for example, span several pages merely listing names of (non-existent) scholars, without explaining their relevance to his own monograph. The reader has to make sense of Zampanò's manuscript – as well as Truant's and the Editors' additions – by conducting his own examination of the text. Thus, knowledge gathered about this structure – be that the house or the narrative – is never truly enlightening, let alone empowering. Instead of leading to some sort of resolution regarding the mystery of the house, scholarship here only leads to more confusion, forcing every reader – be that Truant, the Editors, or the reader of *House of Leaves* – to analyze and (re-)interpret the work of his predecessor.

The excessive narrative digressions that result from this confusing processes of interpretation and re-interpretation create a narrative that is decentered and destabilized to the point where it is impossible to claim any of the narrative levels to be the “main text.” Just like the house does not have a core, so the narrative itself lacks a center.

In the previous section, the house on Ash Tree Lane was regarded as a “world under erasure,” an object that is both present and absent. Significantly, the narrative

itself undergoes a similar erasure, or “un-projection” (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 100). Zampanò has deleted several passages relating to the figure of the Minotaur from his original manuscript. Truant, however, retrieves these fragments and decides to include them in the monograph after all. In the text, these passages appear as struck lines printed in red. The reader is thereby presented with a section of text that is both absent and present, deleted and preserved – it is un-projected. McHale explains the importance of this un-projection the following way: “[p]hysically canceled, yet still legible beneath the cancelation, these signs *sous rature* [under erasure] continue to function in the discourse even while they are excluded from it” (100). In *House of Leaves*, fragments relating to the Minotaur are highlighted instead of deleted through their un-projection.

Similar to the “flickering” house, these passages *sous rature* are a key element of the novel,<sup>18</sup> foregrounding the ontological indeterminacy of the projected world as well as the representation thereof. Multiple narratives clash and struggle for predominance, modifying and negating each other. Through this clash – what Lloyd Smith identifies as Gothic-postmodernism’s “tendency towards narrative digressions, opposition of various stories and registers, disputes of veracity” (8) – *House of Leaves* places supposedly distinct worlds in confrontation with each other. Danielewski’s novel is a prime example of what McHale discusses as “metalepsis” or “strange loops” – a term borrowed from Hofstadter – in *Postmodernist Fiction*. As he explains, metalepsis is the “violation of the hierarchy of narrative levels that occurs whenever a nested representation slips from still to animation” (119). Like an Escher print, the narrative loops in on itself, making it “impossible to determine who is the author of whom, or, to

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<sup>18</sup> The references to the Minotaur are not only figuratively the key to the novel: footnote 123, providing a novel interpretation of the Minotaur myth, is shaped like a key (Danielewski 110-1).

put it slightly differently, which narrative level is hierarchically superior, which subordinate” (120). In *House of Leaves*, what at first appeared to be a clean hierarchy of narrative levels turns out to be a strange loop, making it impossible to identify a narrative voice that dominates or outranks the others. Such violations of narrative levels are omnipresent and none of the projected worlds can claim ontological priority. At first glance, the narrative has a clear hierarchy dictated by a chronological order. The story begins with the events experienced by the Navidson family. In the novel, these are only related through Zampanò’s narrative, which thus constitutes the lowest or first layer, followed by Truant’s additions to the older man’s manuscript. The Editors’ notes on Johnny’s work form the highest or last layer. However, this order of levels is repeatedly disrupted.

The recurrent allusions to Pelafina Lièvre are one of the more subtle examples of metalepsis. It is not surprising that the memory of his mother resonates throughout Truant’s narrative. Implicit references to Pelafina throughout the older man’s text are also understandable, since Johnny is obviously not the neutral, truthful editor that he should be, changing Zampanò’s manuscript to his liking. What remains inexplicable, however, are allusions to his mother on narrative levels to which he should theoretically have no access, such as the Editors’ footnotes and the edition notice.

A more dramatic example of metalepsis occurs when Navidson, alone and lost in the maze, reads “the only book in his possession: *House of Leaves*” (465). According to Zampanò’s commentary to this scene, Navidson’s book has 736 pages – exactly the same number of pages as the book the reader is currently holding in his or her hands, also counting Truant’s introduction, title page, blurbs, and the edition notice. In other words: Navidson is reading the same version of *House of Leaves* as the reader. Yet, how



can Navidson possess a novel whose existence he must necessarily precede in order for it to be written, edited, and published? This situation constitutes a strange loop that is ontologically impossible.

Significantly, these metalepses put the reader at risk by questioning his supposedly superior position as well. As Hayles writes: “[t]he image of him [Navidson] reading the story that contains him presents us with a vivid warning that this book threatens always to break out of the cover that binds it. It is an artifact fashioned to consume the reader even as he consumes it” (129).<sup>19</sup> Just like Navidson is lost in the labyrinth that is his own house, so the reader of Danielewski’s fiction is caught in a chaotic “house of leaves.” He/She is enmeshed in a maze that can never be viewed from a distant, omniscient perspective, and, in light of the descent into insanity suffered by the fiction’s representative reader Truant, might as well deteriorate under its influence.

This discussion ends by going back to the novel’s beginning, namely Truant’s introduction. Already on the fiction’s first pages, Johnny warns his reader of the effect that the following narrative will have on them:

[Y]ou’ll discover you no longer trust the very walls you always took for granted. [...] You might try then, as I did, to find a sky so full of stars it will blind you again. Only no sky can blind you now. [...] You’ll care only about the darkness and you’ll watch it for hours [...], trying in vain to believe you’re some kind of indispensable, universe-appointed sentinel [...]. You’ll stand aside as a great complexity intrudes, tearing apart, piece by piece, all of your carefully conceived denials, whether deliberate or unconscious. (Danielewski xxiii)

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<sup>19</sup> Humorously, the book indeed breaks out of its cover; the cover of the Remastered Full-Color Edition is slightly smaller than the pages contained within.

The misleading walls Truant refers to signify not only the shifting and confusing house on Ash Tree Lane. They also allude to the narrative itself, displaying how similar house and text truly are. On the one hand, these walls stand for the blind trust in scientific knowledge and scholarship. Neither house nor narrative can be controlled through such endeavors, which will ultimately lead to only more confusion. Danielewski's novel consciously parodies the conventions of scholarly writing, asking its reader to question the credibility of such analyses which attempt to create a grand narrative about the world. On the other hand, these walls also symbolize the break-down of supposedly fixed categories. The house is an ontological impossibility, disrupting the laws dictated by logic and science. The narrative, likewise, destabilizes the notions of "reality" and "fiction," violating the apparent hierarchy of narrative levels and even endangering the reader's supposedly safe, superior position outside of the text. In the end, it is irrelevant if the house on Ash Tree Lane or *The Navidson Record* exists, as Truant emphasizes: "it makes no difference that the documentary at the heart of this book is fiction. Zampanò knew from the get go that what's real or isn't real doesn't matter here. The consequences are the same" (xx). In other words, whether fictional or not, this novel can have dire consequences for its reader.

## Conclusion

The house always wins.

– Proverb

This thesis has analyzed three American haunting house tales: Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, Stephen King's *The Shining*, and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. In each of these fictions, the characters are confronted with a house that is in itself active and malevolent. The animated house problematizes the conventional plot structure of the haunted house tale: there are no ghosts of a wrongful, terrible past that can be exorcized, no remains which need proper burial. In other words, the haunting house fiction does away with its precursor's need for a historical origin of the supernatural goings-on.

It is with *The Haunting of Hill House* that the ghostly house comes alive and haunts its inhabitants for the first time. The development of the haunting house tale hence coincides with the rise of postmodernist literature in the 1950s. Tracing this coincidence, this paper has analyzed the three novels through the lens of postmodernism, using especially the theories of Linda Hutcheon and Brian McHale. Instead of reading these fictions as a contemporary take on the traditional Gothic or haunted house tale as scholars such as Dale Bailey do, it is more fruitful to regard them as examples of Gothic-postmodernism – texts that employ the conventions and tropes of the Gothic to reflect on postmodernist themes. In this context, especially the notion of the house's history, which constitutes a central plot device in the conventional haunted house tale, is of relevance; by denying any historical origin of the supernatural events,

thus also eliminating the possibility of exorcizing the house by redressing the wrongs of the past, haunting house tales problematize the notion of knowledge as empowerment.

Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* is a prime example of the postmodernist parody as discussed by Hutcheon. The novel is constructed in such a way that the reader anticipates a traditional ghost story; the dark history of Hill House is repeatedly highlighted, suggesting that secret crimes of the past need to be discovered and set right again. However, sinister as it may be, the history of the house is, in essence, a red herring: none of the hauntings experienced by the characters correspond to any event of Hill House's past. Instead, the novel voices a critique of the scientific method through the figure of Dr. Montague. Rather than objectively investigating the house, the doctor merely tries to verify his assumptions and expectations. In the end, the investigation of the house fails due to his narrow-mindedness.

In contrast to this, King's *The Shining* emphasizes ontological issues as discussed by McHale, laying bare the process of literary world-creation on the one hand, and creating an ontologically unstable world on the other hand. The processes of writing and reading – thus, the processes of projecting and engaging in a fictional world – are foregrounded in the novel through various means, such as Jack's dual position of reader-writer and the Overlook as a building that authors its own (hi)story. Additionally, numerous intertextual references are employed to create a kind of composite ontology borrowing from, but also slightly modifying the rules of fairy tales and Gothic fictions. Significantly, the world of *The Shining* is also temporally fragmented and therefore unstable: in the Overlook, all times are one. The notion of time as a linear, causal progression of events becomes meaningless.

Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, lastly, centers on an ontologically impossible house that defies the laws of physics. Every attempt to map and measure this house through scientific means leads only to absurd results, proving science to be incapable of controlling, let alone ending the goings-on. Featuring numerous footnotes and references, the novel parodies and critiques scholarly discourse that aims at creating a grand narrative about the world and its knowability. Neither house nor narrative can be tamed through analysis; both will always remain a confusing labyrinth.

Examining these three post-war American novels reveals the increasing centrality of postmodernist ideas in haunting house tales. Reading such fictions only in relation to their critique of the American Dream as Bailey does is insufficient, ignoring other, grander themes foregrounded through the haunting house. Instead of merely illustrating the dark side of the American Dream, these fictions create a fictional world that is ontologically indeterminate and which cannot be controlled through knowledge. Thus, the haunting house, simultaneously drawing on and differentiating itself from the Gothic tradition, becomes the ideal vessel for a postmodernist critique of the grand narratives of science and history.

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