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Defeat is Good for Art: The Metamodern impulse in Gothic Metafiction.

*A sense of cultural exhaustion haunts the present. An inhuman future is shrouded in
old Gothic trappings emptied of any strong charge; past images and forms
are worn too thin to veil the gaping hole of objectless anxiety*

(Botting 298)

The years of postmodern deconstruction have leached into the Gothic. Mark Z Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), Bret Easton Ellis's *Lunar Park* (2005) and *S* (2013), the collaborative project of J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst, all recycle Gothic tropes, presenting as postmodern Gothic and as metafictional novels which highlight their artificiality. Each adheres to and problematizes the trope of the haunted house, the found manuscript, and the Gothic sublime for reasons that seem to align with postmodern ideals of deconstruction and fragmentation. Yet there is something distinguishable in their treatment of Gothic conventions that deliberately fails to adhere to the postmodern impulse. Within each text there are elements that suggest a new form of sincerity, a search for post-irony, that, in fact, seem to suggest a yearning for something beyond the surface. I aim to first show how each text seems primarily to present as postmodern Gothic, before moving on to an analysis of how each can be seen to appropriate genre tropes in a way that fails to adhere to postmodern pastiche and fragmentation. Rather, these texts will be shown to parody and metafictionally highlight these conventions as a means of expressing an increasingly post-postmodern, and specifically metamodern, sensibility that threads the contemporary Gothic.

Postmodern Gothic Hauntings

House of Leaves presents itself primarily as the novelization of a haunted house film, though one that takes a substantial departure from conventions of such. Within the metaleptic narrative frames the novel depicts the events of 'The Navidson Record,' a cult horror film that distorts the traditional Gothic trope of the haunted house by seemingly removing the haunting presence and this narrative, as described in a pseudo-academic essay by Zampanò, will be the main focus of this analysis. The house which Will Navidson and his wife Karen enter eventually reveals a dark and impossibly large series of labyrinthine hallways. The hallway, as Joanne Watkiss attests, 'refuses to be contained and ultimately consumes those who attempt to force it to signify'(7). Here toying with the concept of vampirism, the house is seen to feed, in a loose sense, on Navidson and his hired explorer Holloway Roberts as they navigate the hallways. It draws strength from the explorers of the space, growing gradually bolder in its strategies to isolate or devour them as they are increasingly weakened by these acts. The house draws energy from their terror, becoming steadily more complex and overtly hostile in response to their increasing anxiety, sapping their energy and will to continue as they progress. It is not just these explorers of the hallways within the text, but the readers of *House of Leaves* who are consumed with the desire to 'force' the text 'to signify'.

Alison Gibbons refers to the novel's seemingly obsessive readership as a 'cult following' who are 'contributing to online forums, creating websites in homage, and zealously collecting books to which [the novel] intertextually refers' (85).¹ All of this speaks of a new Lovecraftian Necronomicon, of a *House of Leaves* mythos that extends way beyond the limits or control of the text itself. Danielewski also pays homage to the Gothic tradition by placing an image of Edgar Allan Poe within one of the collages that form part of the 'Re-mastered Full-Color' second edition, where his portrait appears on two postage stamps.² This instantly forces the phonetic connection between Poe's well-known house of Usher and Danielewski's house on Ash Tree lane, situating the text within the same Gothic tradition. Perhaps most significantly of all, the text presents itself as a found manuscript.

Johnny Truant finds and annotates Zampanò's manuscript before he himself is edited and we, the reader, are presented with these edited results. Though not 'found in the library of an ancient catholic family in the north of England' (Walpole 5), Danielewski still links his text to the Gothic convention of the found manuscript device. In his text, however, the lines between the frames are consistently blurred as each 'finder' constantly interrupts the narrative to question the validity of the others, or their respective manuscripts: the Editors continuously discredit Truant, who questions Zampanò, who analyses *The Navidson Record* even as he describes it. The house on Ash Tree Lane subverts the haunted house motif, creating a house haunted not by spirits or ghosts tied to the space, no Gothic villain forcing his aristocratic supremacy upon his victims, merely a relentless malevolence that hounds the family. A house haunted only by itself.

Similarly, Ellis's *Lunar Park* creates a traditional haunted house setting before subverting the trope in a distinctly postmodern manner. *Lunar Park* follows 'Bret Easton Ellis', a famous writer turned suburban father living with his illegitimate son, famous wife and her daughter. The plot is ostensibly that of a haunted house, though this becomes an awkward categorization in light of Ellis's adherence to postmodern self-awareness; the novel is rife with ironic representations of Gothic and horror cliché, each instance seen through a veil of postmodern pastiche and deconstruction. It is a text filled with children terrorized by demon dolls, animals attuned to spirits, grisly deaths, the grotesque, ghostbusters, fake gravestones and spray-on cobwebs. It is a text with a disruptive past, with horror hair and doppelgangers, with vanishing graves and missing children, a text of mysterious strangers and, significantly, paternal anxiety. As Botting writes of paternity and the Gothic:

Since Walpole, Gothic has emerged as an effect of and an engagement with a crisis in the legitimacy and authority of the structured circulation of social exchanges and meanings over which the father figure presides. More precisely, the usual subject of Gothic Fiction can be defined as a transgression of the paternal metaphor. (282)

This aligns with the over-arching theme of *Lunar Park*, in which the central conflict is always that of paternal anxiety, whether that of Bret agonizing over the potential of his father's return, his role as father to his new family or, indeed, his role as 'father' to his novels. Watkiss suggests that Bret's attempts to stabilize his relationship with his father work only to deny him both resolution of paternal anxiety and a stable lineage at the same time (101). Yet Bret's secured lineage can be argued to be the novel itself, or, rather, the after effects of its production.

Lunar Park obsesses over the idea of lineage and, in particular, returns repeatedly to an anxiety over a disrupted legacy. The solution posited is one achieved via the creation of a text which detaches itself from the stigma of its own creator. The text suggests the creation of a novel which grows without Ellis, devoid of his influence and eager, even, to escape his patriarchal influence and the poisoning madness of his other creations - the hairy child-eater and the antagonistic Patrick Bateman. The text personifies the desire of author and novel to break away from the toxic legacy of Ellis's previous writings, cemented firmly during the final meeting of Bret and Robby.^{x3} Robby appears looking 'strikingly like Clayton' (Ellis 305), the main character from Ellis's debut novel *Less Than Zero*, yet also taller, older and with a deeper voice. He has become a version of Clayton, or rather a hybridized version of both, becoming a character that is definitely created by Ellis yet which has seemingly developed independent of his influence, having become older, no longer shy and able to forgive in this absence (Ellis 305). In this way Bret's true lineage is not the illegitimate child but *Lunar Park* itself, the text that Robby comes to personify. A text which, in the final moments, frees Ellis from the detrimental legacy of his previous texts and allows him to continue his career without their stigma attached to his works. Robby comes to represent the text in which he is constructed, but also symbolic of the texts to follow, becoming the lasting lost legacy of Ellis, ungraspable and leaving

to move on without Bret's influence. Robby wishes to break free of his parent's influence, just as Ellis wishes *Lunar Park* and the novels to come to break free from the influence of his previous texts, a conflict which is personified in his own struggles against Bateman and Clayton in the text. Robby still appears as Clayton and thus as a representation of Ellis's writing past, but not a version that the author has control over. *Lunar Park* becomes, then, the story of a child's desperate attempt to be rid of his father's influence: whether Bret's attempts to escape his father, Robby's attempts to escape Bret, the text's attempts to escape its author, or even Ellis's desire to escape the postmodern, an idea which I will return to later.

As Maria Beville points out, *Lunar Park*, in a similar manner to *House of Leaves*, positions itself within the Gothic through its inclusion of a sequence in which Bret's hair turns white from shock, referencing and paying homage to Edgar Allan Poe's "A Descent into the Maelström" (188). Beville also draws comparisons to *The Fall of the House of Usher*, exploring *Lunar Park*'s allusions to the trope of the castle as character, expressed in Poe's short story and also many other Gothic texts (188–9).⁴ Instead of the house imposing itself upon the victim however, Bret's intrusion into the family home begins to distort the physical nature of the building around him. The furniture re-arranges itself constantly into what at first seem 'odd formations' (Ellis 52), the carpet begins to become 'shaggier and darker' with 'large footprints' of ash 'stamped' into it (52) and the paint is seemingly clawed from the walls to reveal an undercoat that never existed (102). The house begins to transform, Bret eventually realizes, into a facsimile of his childhood home (168–70), and he recognizes that it is not the house that is haunting him, but that he is haunting the house and the family. In this way, Bret becomes a postmodern form of the classic tyrannical Gothic villain. He becomes a pastiche of the trope, representing and subverting it in that he is not stealing his victims away to his own castle, but instead trapping them in a castle of his own making, born from his own psyche and which builds itself around his victims. This is evidenced by a section in which Bret, originally believing that he is the site of the haunting, is explicitly told that 'Robby is, in fact, the focal point of the haunting' (Ellis 271). Though he believes the spirits disrupting his life have come to target him, in truth it is his personal haunting that he forces onto the house and impresses upon his unwitting family, the main centre of which is his son. Bret imposes his own childhood traumas upon Robby in a repeating cycle of misery, a scenario which both seem desperate to avoid, again foregrounding the issue of paternal anxiety.

Haunted by his own previous works, *Lunar Park* fictionalizes Ellis's desire to break away from his own literary canon. In contrast, the plot of J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst's *S* centres on the search for unifying meaning within fictional author's V.M. Straka's eclectic *oeuvre*. Inside the black sleeve of *S* the reader finds a heavily annotated copy of Straka's *Ship of Theseus*. Here, Jen and Eric, an undergraduate student and a disgraced postgraduate student respectively, pass the book back and forth in a collaborative attempt to decode the intent of the novel from the marginalia. The mystery they reveal is that of a shadow society of writers known as 'The S' and their cult-war with 'The New S' a group of corporate spies determined to stop the original 'S'. The *Ship of Theseus* narrative itself, not the marginalia story that surrounds it, follows a man named only 'S.' as he is shanghaied onto a ship filled with grotesque muted sailors, their objective unknown. These sailors are presented as cultists devoted to their vessel and its unknown mission. They are revealed to self-mutilate in a ritualistic ceremony when the latest crew member 'sews his mouth shut to the din of the crew urging him on, stitch after stitch, blood trickling down his chin and staining his face, his neck, with droplets of red' (Abrams and Dorst 216).

The crew are also seen to degenerate throughout the text as S., after an interval away from the vessel, sees a sailor as 'recently a *person*, not [the] freakish salt-crusted mute' that they have become (Abrams and Dorst 267). The sailors are not seen as people anymore, but grotesque mutes, communicating only through the whistles they manage to slot between the red stitches in their lips.

Not only are the cultists devoted to their ship, but when the ship is destroyed in a cataclysm at sea, they are later seen to be resurrected along with it. The ship thus becomes a ghost ship, rising from the waters and bringing undead revenants with it from the grave. Never explicitly named, the ship also adheres to the motif of the Gothic ruin, while transposing it into a mobile setting: it is a derelict place, anachronistic to the time period of the text, warped and torn with supernatural denizens and secrets kept within it. *S* presents the ship as a constantly degenerating and partially renewing construct, a ‘mad assemblage of misfit masts and decks and hatches and portholes and scuppers and bulwarks and bowsprit and wheel and rudder and sails [...]’ (291). It is a ‘horrible thing’ (291), as *S.* describes, with a crew devoted bodily to its maintenance. Each sailor takes shifts at a secret task beneath the deck and this is shown to physically drain them. Again, as *House of Leaves* presents a space which feeds from the fear of those who explore it, the ship in *S* initially seems to feed on the laboured efforts of its crew. As *S.* describes:

And every three hours or so, by *S.*’s crude estimation, an exhausted and slack-jawed sailor struggles through the hatchway onto the main deck, blows his whistle, and replaces another sailor [...] who then disappears through the hatch to that deepest portion of the ship. [...] Now that *S.* has seen the entire crew cycle through, he realizes they all seem bluer around the gills when they emerge. And if he’s not mistaken, he’s hearing muted expressions of pain from all about the ship. (Abrams and Dorst 57)

This, coupled with the brief annotation of ‘It’s draining them’ that follows, suggests a vampiric nature to this floating Gothic ruin, that it feeds from the lives which give themselves willingly to the ship. It is an undying vampiric ruin, though one that is not rooted to one place. It is not a castle or an abbey, but a ship; able to travel across water and through time, and which inhabits a seemingly supernatural body of water as evidenced by the shock of the ship’s captain when Vévoda’s airplanes force entry into that space (338-9). The captain’s name too pays homage, in the same manner as the previous texts, to the novel’s Gothic roots in the form of reference to Edgar Allan Poe. As Eric’s annotations suggest, Maelström’s name is a link to the aforementioned short story “A Descent into the Maelstrom” (38).

S follows the genre of the haunted house story, though again challenging the convention. The site of the haunting is the ghost ship traveling within a supernatural, previously inaccessible ocean, but the actual haunted (or indeed *haunting*) figure is that of *S.* himself. Not only in the main narrative is *S.* haunted by repetitive figures representative of his past, his shameful decisions and his love interest, but the tale of his life becomes that of a ghostly origin story. As the text states, he is ‘a man whose physical presence is intangible, but whose influence on the world – on its boundaries and its resources, its agonies and aspirations – is anything but’ (316). *S.* (d)evolves into an avenging presence in the novel following his initiation into the cultish crew’s ranks. A chapter titled ‘Interlude’ follows his own forced lip-sewing ceremony, in which various agents of Vévoda across different time periods are hunted down and assassinated. *S.* becomes a ghost, able to appear seemingly anywhere and kill his enemies, leaving only a trademark crumpled page of ‘some madman’s tale’ (Abrams and Dorst 313) on the bodies as a calling card. He is a timeless figure that emerges from the archaic ship (the representation of the past) to disrupt the machinations of the present. In this way, *S* comes to reveal its true narrative, namely that of a ghost story but one filtered through postmodern metafictional experimentation. It is a ghost story told from the perspective of the ghost, not the victims who must discover the ghost’s origins and motive to end the haunting.

Self-Conscious Texts

Each of these texts highlights the Gothic aesthetic within which it is situated, subverting these tropes in order to explore or highlight specific genre conventions. They are all novels which 'self-consciously and systematically draw attention to [their] status as an artefact' (Waugh 2). As metafiction, each novel self-analyses even as it progresses. Aligning with postmodern ideas of deconstruction, pastiche and irony, they take pains to remind the reader of their nature as constructed texts. *S* forces the reader to navigate the paratextual, to consciously disrupt the narrative illusion by the inclusion of inserts and detailed marginalia analysis, often heavily annotating the page around the core text.⁵ The reader is repeatedly reminded of the presence of the authorial figure of Straka and, by extension, of Abrams and Dorst as the 'true' authors of the piece.

Equally, *House of Leaves* confronts its readership with demanding typographical sections that force the reader to scan back and forth between pages of seemingly endless and incessantly self-referential footnotes.⁶ This convoluted design draws attention to the physical construction of the novel and is ironically as inescapable as the labyrinth described, as Navidson finds. Lost and alone in the dark, Navidson 'turns his attention to the last possible activity, the only book in his possession: *House of Leaves*' (Danielewski 465). Navidson struggles with this reading, having to contend, as the reader must, with the fact that 'the words in the book have been arranged in such a way as to make them practically impossible to read' (Danielewski 467). By placing the text as an object within itself, Danielewski reminds the reader of their place outside it, their own struggles with the typography and the artificiality of the object.

Lunar Park also applies this metafictional technique, as one among many, by consistently reminding the reader that *Lunar Park* is a fictional construct. There is a large portion of the text in which 'the writer' (first appearing at 205) appears to offer omniscient comments on the action, often in the form of an internal dialogue with the main character, or forcing him into action, whether 'whisper[ing]' (206, 295), 'murmer[ing]' (252) forcing Bret to 'look closer' (206), or 'fill[ing] in the blanks' (252). It is left to the reader to decide whether this refers to Bret Easton Ellis, the extra-textual author of the text, or merely 'the writer' as a title for a specific line of analysis followed by Bret Easton Ellis, the character. The intrusion of the idea of a textual 'writer' again breaks the illusion of reality, reminding the reader of the act of textual construction, particularly in one conversation with Robby in which Bret asks the writer directly 'are you writing his dialogue?' (221) though he receives no response in this instance.

In *House of Leaves*, *Lunar Park* and *S*, we find three texts that manipulate various tropes of the Gothic aesthetic both to establish themselves within the genre and to question the relevance and continuation of these literary conventions. One such convention which all three texts take to task is that of the found manuscript. As discussed, *House of Leaves* immediately presents a blurred multiplicity of narrative layers, the full name for the novel after all being Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves by Zampanò with introduction and notes by Johnny Truant*. The plot itself is buried within these framing narratives: the main narrative of 'The Navidson Record' is told through Zampanò's analysis, which is found and adapted by Truant, which is passed through the editorial process of 'the Editors.' Frames within frames are presented that seem to intermingle throughout, with no clear distinction of where each belongs. Though a hierarchy of editorial layers is somewhat established (Editor>Truant>Zampanò) there is no Frankenstein-like clear cut distinction between the beginning and end of the framing narratives, merely a blurring of each that extends even to the paratext, where the typical disclaimer of fictional status is accredited to 'The Ed.'. The text demands interrogation and takes the idea of analysis as a central antagonistic force; each character, whether Navidson, Truant, or Zampanò, is attempting to discover significance within their respective found 'manuscripts' and are often frustrated in their attempts. Watkiss makes an excellent argument that the hallways within the house on Ash Tree Lane actually represents a text, and that Navidson's struggle is

not one of trying to find the limits of the halls, but to find the meaning within the seemingly meaningless text (Watkiss 7–24).

All the while, Zampanò is attempting to draw a singular line of argument from an apparently academically contested film. He repeatedly draws parallels to fictional texts, including *Paradise Lost* (Danielewski 4), *The Jungle Book* (37) and *King Lear* (47), while continually referencing academic criticism both real and fictitious in an attempt to ground himself within the theory. Zampanò, in effect, is attempting to explain via assimilation of other explanations. Finally Truant, in finding Zampanò's manuscript, begins to attempt to annotate, to draw everything together, only to lapse into an autobiographical narrative of how he has been influenced by the manuscript.⁷ Navidson seeks to discover significance by immersing himself within the text, Zampanò by taking a removed critical stance and Truant by impressing himself upon it. Each fails and succeeds in various ways in these endeavours: Navidson has his film, but has lost a brother; Zampanò has a detailed manuscript, but dies before the bloated piece can reach completion; and Truant has passed on his tale, but has become vagrant and lost in the process. The house has removed something from Navidson, who sought to take meaning from it, Zampanò's work becomes tangled within the plethora of voices it sought to establish itself with, and Truant fulfils his desire to be heard, to be noticed, but at the cost of the dissolution of the very self he desired to express. The text plays with the conventions of the found manuscript as containing the narrative by presenting several frames that struggle desperately with their attempts to logically define and thus contain their interiors. Each found manuscript bleeds outwards, drawing the reader into an obsession with their text.

Similarly, *Lunar Park* is framed by a seemingly autobiographical account of the author's life up to the moment of the novel's construction. The text opens with the following lines:

“You do an awfully good impression of yourself.”

This is the first line of *Lunar Park* and in its brevity and simplicity it was supposed to be a return to form, an echo, of the opening line from my debut novel *Less Than Zero*. (Ellis 3)

Similarities can be drawn here between the opening of *Lunar Park* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5*.⁸ Both begin with a chapter that prefaces the novel, delineated as the ‘first’ chapter, in which autobiographical influences, the process of textual construction, the events leading to its production, and the first and final lines are discussed. Both also use this same metafictional technique to highlight the artificiality of their texts, as each novel, in this manner, embeds the process of textual construction within the text itself. Vonnegut and Ellis use this frame to tie the narrative events to reality, to blur the lines between fiction and non-fiction or frame and narrative. In *Lunar Park*, this blurring comes immediately to the fore, as chapter two begins with “You do an awfully good impression of yourself” just as Ellis stated that the novel would, though the line could equally refer to the first instance of its own use as quoted above. This raises the question of whether the novel begins at the first instance in chapter one, or if that serves purely as a preface and the true beginning of the novel is at the start of chapter two. This blurring places the novel as an account within the same novel, a manuscript found within its own manuscript. *Lunar Park* is a distinct entity referenced several times within *Lunar Park* and Ellis twists the found manuscript trope by creating a manuscript found within itself, by the writer of that same manuscript.

S too plays with the convention of this trope by introducing several layers of the found manuscript, both within and without the text. VM Straka's *Ship of Theseus* is found first in pieces by the author's translator who collates the fragments into a text before a copy is later found in a university library by Jen. The narrative of *Ship of Theseus* presents itself as a found manuscript framed by a manuscript discovered by an undergraduate. Though the novel does not blur the

boundaries of these two distinct framing findings it does work to highlight the artificial nature of the novel; presented as a physical library copy of the book, *S* forces the reader into the role of the 'finder' of the found text, compounding the layers of interpretation.⁹

S presents a ghost story that is gradually revealed as the origins and tale of the ghost itself, while *House of Leaves* presents a haunted house that is haunted by the house itself, and *Lunar Park* is the story of one man's haunting of both self and family, of a ghost of the father disrupting the life of the son. Each text affects a postmodern ironic deconstruction, relying on metafictional techniques to highlight the layers of construction, questioning the standard formulation of conventions. Whether the haunted house, the found manuscript, the ghost story, paternal anxiety, vampirism or the Gothic castle, each trope is highlighted and interrogated. This prompts the question of whether these novels belong to the postmodern period of literary history. They may appear as merely ironically self-assessing, but, in their re-assessment of the Gothic, each points to a desire and movement beyond the postmodern.

Structures of Gothic Feeling.

As metafiction, these texts point to their construction via the manipulation of Gothic conventions not in order to intimate postmodern or Gothic discourse but to make a statement about the dissociation between the 'genuinely felt sense of crisis, alienation and oppression in contemporary society and [...] the continuance of traditional literary forms like realism which are no longer adequate vehicles for the mediation of this experience' (Waugh 11). The tropes are not highlighted purely for the purpose of pastiche, but to suggest a movement away from the standards to which they conform and the ideas they explore. These metafictional tendencies are not exclusively employed to effect a destabilization of fictional boundaries, though, but often as a comment on the conventions which they challenge for the purpose of social commentary. Metafiction, after all, 'converts what it sees as the negative values of outworn literary conventions into the basis of a potentially constructive social criticism' (Waugh 11). Here, I believe, these authors have created metafictional works for just such a reason. Each text appears, not as a postmodern Gothic metafiction but as a metamodern experiment in the Gothic.

Metamodernism, briefly and broadly speaking, argues that the postmodern years of plenty, pastiche and parataxis have been over for quite a while (Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism" 2).¹⁰ The seminal essay "Notes on Metamodernism" suggests that current cultural 'trends and tendencies can no longer be explained in terms of the postmodern. They express a (often guarded) hopefulness and (at times feigned) sincerity that hint at another structure of feeling, intimating another discourse' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2). Vermeulen and van den Akker identify this 'structure of feeling' in the arts growing in the wake of the apparent decline of postmodernism. It is a 'cultural logic, a certain dominant ideological patterning that leaves its traces across culture' (Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Misunderstandings and Clarifications") that can be broadly characterised by three trends: a desire for sincerity and forms of post-irony; an oscillation between postmodern irony and modern enthusiasm, never maintaining a stable position at either of these (described as a pendulum swinging between innumerable poles); and a yearning for a future, or at least for the movement towards one. Metamodernism is not suggestive of any ideas of utopia, as our postmodern training deconstructs such ideas to an impossibility, but instead describes a desire for utopias in spite of this, a movement forwards despite the futility. A key term is that of an 'informed naivety',¹¹ in which the subject knows that an objective is flawed to the point of failure, but chooses to believe in its success and strive towards it regardless. Metamodernism moves for the sake of that movement, determined to head towards an unknowable future, it 'attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever a truth that it never expects to find' (Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism" 5).

House of Leaves, *S* and *Lunar Park* conform to this structure, particularly to the representation of a yearning for movement despite not knowing in which direction they are heading, a desire to head towards that 'future presence that is futureless' (Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism" 12). *House of Leaves* presents itself as the novelization of a film, emphasized by the 're-mastered full-color' edition. Thematically, and as a conflict within the text, the novel experiments with the representation of a predominantly visual medium - film - within a relatively non-visual format - the novel. *Lunar Park* begins as an autobiographical account of the author which soon degenerates into an impossible fictional account of events. One objective of the text seems to be to act as a therapeutic, or cathartic, artefact through which the author can attempt to resolve lingering issues over the death of his father.¹² Fiction is arguably not, however, the best environment in which to deal with these issues, since writing 'delivers us from nothing, cures nothing, because by projecting one's suffering, one freezes it and encloses it, one consecrates it rather than obliterating it' (Blot-Labarrère). Ellis attempts to deal with his paternal anxieties here by 'enclosing them' neatly into the Gothic genre before blurring the results, chasing a catharsis that can only be achieved vicariously through Robby, who stands apart from Bret at the essential moment of release. *S* too adheres to these tendencies. It is a definitively physical book in an increasingly digital age, filled with the aforementioned inserts and designed to replicate the look and feel of a 1960s library book, despite the ever-growing popularity of e-books.¹³

Each works in a material not best suited to the fulfilment of their tasks but continues with the attempt regardless, aligning them with the metamodern impulse. The metamodern artist can be seen not 'to employ methods and materials better suited to their mission or task' (Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism" 9) as their primary concern is not to succeed, 'not to fulfil it, but to attempt to fulfil it, in spite of its 'unfulfillableness'' (Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism" 9). After all, as Ellis writes, 'defeat is good for art'.

Sublime Experimentation

Significantly, all three texts subscribe to the metamodern via their experimentation with the sublime. In *House of Leaves*, the sublime is encountered through the dark labyrinth which opens up within the house.¹⁴ Danielewski uses this space to explore an idea of the Kantian sublime, subverted by an adherence to the manmade. The hallways are a space that replicate the hallways of traditional 'built' houses, although those twisting and shifting halls could have never have been so. The dark corridors present an uncanny sublime by creating a space which is both familiar and unfamiliarly autonomous, yet which still brings the feelings of terror and awe to the fore. The hallways growl, shift, and are seen to actively pursue the explorers, but are always still presented as hallways, inanimate at times, familiar throughout. The Gothic, as Mishra writes, 'tropes the sublime as the unthinkable, the unnameable, and the unspeakable' (23), a categorization to which the hallways adhere. Again they are simultaneously autonomous and lifeless, familiar and unfamiliar, *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. They are uncanny. Here Danielewski presents these seemingly familiar halls as unfamiliar and cold, as existing where they cannot possibly exist, often transforming into an enormity of scale which dwarfs Navidson. He, and the other explorers, feels that sense of insignificance before the halls, but also the desire to conquer, to explore, to understand, and in so doing, gain transcendence. As Zampanò surmises, 'only knowledge illuminates that bottomless place' (Danielewski 87). They wish to gain something conclusive by conquering this uncanny sublime, desperately searching for a return to a Burkean sublime in which the mind is expanded by the experience, the self is improved, yet inevitably failing and experiencing a fracturing more similar to that of Kant's interpretation.¹⁵ Whether Navidson or in fact the reader, the explorers return time and again to the halls, seeking to tame, to understand, and knowing that there is never anything new to be discovered. Within that labyrinth progress is

impossible. It is a metamodern duality and multiplicity of polar desires that Danielewski offers here. A yearning for progress, for movement, for understanding and the desire to keep experiencing that sublime, though from within an environment that never escapes from its essentially man-made aesthetic. The reader oscillates in their desire for the sublime, swinging between unknowing and understanding, awe and fear, desire and terror. What *House of Leaves* shows is a yearning to regain, experience, or even find that feeling of the sublime within a man-made Gothic environment.

Unlike the single site of the sublime within 'The Navidson Record', *Lunar Park* offers a more contested representation of the sublime. The text takes pains to adhere to the Gothic trope, while also maintaining a distinct postmodern deconstructive stance. In a moment that adheres to postmodern ideas of the sublime, as put forward by Lyotard, Bret attempts to witness the evil that is hounding him, but cannot and so his interpretation fractures into several Gothic or horror images in quick succession before settling on the indescribable: He witnesses a 'shape' that moves in a 'spiderlike' fashion, which 'lurches 'grotesquely' after the dog, before a figure appears from the woods which flees across the field 'grasping what appeared to be a pitchfork', and is accompanied by the sounds of locusts, the emergence of a headstone, large animal shapes and seemingly malevolent-minded wind (Ellis 94–6). Lyotard's comments on the sublime are appropriate here as Bret's 'imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept' (Lyotard 77–8). Zampanò too experiences this negative sublime reaction during his analysis of 'The Navidson Record'. Indeed, the challenging typography of the text could be said to reflect his attempts to record the experience of the halls, only for Zampanò to fail in this attempt, and thus lapse into delivering a fractured representation as his 'discourse itself breaks down', his 'reason struggles with imagination for ascendancy: what can be grasped is not equivalent to what is meaningful' (Mishra 20).

Parallels were also drawn earlier between *Lunar Park* and *Slaughterhouse 5*, and yet again we can return to Vonnegut's text for comparison. Both texts present terror and horror as sublime moments, or, more specifically, in a way which aligns with Kantian ideas of the sublime. A negative sublime moment occurs in each text when both Billy Pilgrim and Bret Easton Ellis attempt to describe or define the horrors that they see. As Beville points out, Vonnegut 'imagines the unimaginable, which can only be achieved from a defamiliarized perspective that is absurd and terrifying' (110). Similarly Bret, on first attempting to envisage the horrors in the woods, is unable to comprehend or represent what he is witnessing and thus falls into a series of fragmented images, absurdist in their reliance on cliché. This is a reaction to the sublime that adheres to postmodern interpretation, but settles on cliché rather than pure fragmentation to describe it and so presents a hollow representation, which ties into the theme of the text; that these grand ideals have failed, but we still long for more, for a break from the postmodern as even the supposed moments of sublime are mired in postmodern irony and deconstruction and fail to illicit their prime response. It establishes Bret as within that postmodern tradition which Robby so desperately wishes to escape, and which Ellis wishes the next generation to move on from.¹⁶

The moon, that traditional symbol of the sublime, is also given a similar postmodern treatment. It becomes a depthless image, a symbol only of itself, turning into a background feature that does not instil any terror or call to mind that sublime reaction. Instead, it is presented as empty of all emotional charge serving only as a useful source of light, much like the screensaver facsimile that shines perpetually from Robby's computer screen (Ellis 149). The sublime elements are once more used to enforce a motif of postmodern emptiness and a growing desire to move away from these modes of thought.

Beville states that the current 'fascination with the Gothic is entirely narcissistic. It is to do with explorations of self and reality and the terror of the end, with issues that we cannot know or directly represent' (106), and *Lunar Park* personifies this idea by manifesting the sublime in the form of Bret's sublime narcissism. The sublime in the Gothic constructs an unnameable dread, a blockage

that threatens subjectivity itself, and this is displayed as a major concern of the text (Mishra 20). Bret's narcissism is an internalized sublime; the dread is the loss of his subjectivity, his ego is the blockage that inspires terror and awe. The text begins with him and proceeds to center around Bret and his desires not to be imposed upon by his Father, his new family or his son's needs, and the conflict that arises from this threatens his sense of self. Bret's focus remains purely on the maintenance of his self, whether lying about his relapse into substance abuse, visiting a psychiatrist to help establish a relationship with his son and never speaking of him or his own belief that he is the center of the haunting, not his family. These instances serve to establish Bret as the main focus of the text.

Bret's narcissism creates an environment which overrides the text, his sense of self becomes a sacred ideal not to be changed or tampered with and so any threat to that sense of self, such as the doppelganger blurring, the past coming back, the warnings from his Father, produce a sublime effect. It creates a simultaneous terror and awe within Bret, forcing moments that demand he expand his mind and self to be forcefully rejected in favour of his preservation of the original self. He is never able to allow himself that moment of sublime self-expansion and so each threat becomes a constant experience of the negative sublime. The self is threatened and terror is created before Bret attempts to comprehend that he must somehow change. His self must adapt, but he fails to comprehend this, or represent it, and so lapses into postmodern irony and a fragmented series of failed images. *Lunar Park* establishes the postmodern sublime within itself via the initial horror, the repeated empty moon imagery, suggesting that these effects are no longer sustainable for our ideological experimentation. The answer, or the attempt to find it, comes from the internalization of the sublime. From establishing an overpowering sense of self and forming moments of sublime terror whenever this sense is threatened or disrupted. *Lunar Park* poses questions of whether we are wrong to be so mired in postmodern thought, and the answer is merely a fragmented suggestion that something must change.

While Danielewski looks to the past, and Ellis questions the present, Dorst and Abrams explore the sublime in an attempt to move beyond current interpretations. In *S*, the sublime chiefly manifests through the use of Vévoda's weapon and 'the black stuff' left in its wake. Vévoda, the main antagonist of the novel, rises to wealth and power through the creation of a super weapon that obliterates everything that it is deployed against. What it leaves behind, the by-product of the extreme destruction, is described mostly as a 'substance.' This is a black, ink-like tar that corrodes whatever it touches, yet is also able to be converted into a wine (albeit a flammable vintage that stains the tongue of any who drink it.) This weapon, dubbed a 'Black Vine,' is extracted from a specific source of the natural sublime. The primary ingredient is discovered to be mined from a range of mountains on a private island, mountains which are decapitated in the process, a 'false mesa' created on the summit with 'an open pit' dug into it, 'with men and machines hacking out the hill's innards' (Abrams and Dorst 347). It is this mining process which is seen to destroy, or to defame, the source of sublime inspiration, but the use of the Black Vine itself is specifically linked to the destruction of social myth and history.

[As a consequence of unleashing a Black Vine] individuals and communities are wiped clean. Traditions and histories, myths [...] all gone.

To drink the black stuff is to drink what has been lost.

To hold it in a barrel, *S*. imagines, is to imprison the vital; to cellar that bottle is to warehouse the sublime. To launch a Black Vine is to take all the churning fury of the lost and use it to render other people, in some other place, equally lost. (Abrams and Dorst 449–50)

What *S* suggests is the idea of a metamodern sublime, or rather, a return to the grandeur of nature, the romantic sublime and the insignificance it inspires, but with a knowledge that it has been, or is in the process of being destroyed. This is an eco-conscious sublime, perhaps, or a neo-romantic sublime that links to the metamodern structure of feeling. Metamodernism finds its 'clearest expression in an emergent neo-romantic sensibility'(Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism" 8).

As Vermeulen and van den Akker state, the metamodern artists, despite the vast differences in medium, each employ 'tropes of mysticism, estrangement, and alienation to signify potential alternatives' and make a 'conscious decision to attempt, in spite of those alternatives', 'untenableness'(Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism" 9). It is this alternative that these three texts are searching for, and which *S* finds suggestions of through the depiction of Vévoda's 'black stuff.' It causes fear, it forces those who witness it to lose their countries, their stories, to become estranged and alienated and creates an impression of awe upon those who are witness to its effects. In an environment of shrinking, or destroyed, natural sublime elements, where the 'ecosystem is severely disrupted'(Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism" 2). *S* asks if we must turn to this as a new source of that sublime feeling. If we should look to the aftermath of the destruction itself, the black stuff left in the wake of a black vine, to feel this sublime feeling. Can we look to the man-made destruction and still receive the same experience as the sublime element it has destroyed?

S explores this idea of an eco-concerned sublime, a humanized sublime, setting this within the Gothic context that supported previous questions of this nature. *Lunar Park*, meanwhile, turns the argument into a psychological examination, asking whether we should feel this terror when we realize that our current modes of thought are unsustainable. It asks if our recognition, or internalization, of the sublime could move us beyond the postmodern. *House of Leaves* clings to old modes, exploring whether we could re-attain any sublime feeling when it is has been so thoroughly stripped of representation. These three texts suggest a desire to regain the enlightenment promised by the sublime, though *S* acknowledges that we are in the process of destroying those elements and environments which can instil this, and so too the stories which rely on these moments. Instead, the novel suggests a search for the sublime sentiment within the remnants of this destruction, from within the 'churning fury of the lost' and the remnants of the destruction. *S* explores a sublime, then, built from its own destruction, much as *Lunar Park* searches the seeming emptiness of postmodern deconstruction for something more, for the next generation to find a future not flattened by the presence of the past (Ellis 116).

These texts situate themselves within the Gothic as a platform from which to explore this yearning for a utopia of feeling, a movement towards a post-ironic sublime experience. Danielewski attempts this through looking back to previous forms, attempting to reclaim the feeling of the sublime via pure surface. Ellis posits the postmodern sublime as too empty of significant emotional significance and expresses a desire to move beyond this. Dorst and Abrams, meanwhile, look forwards, accepting the loss of sublime elements, but attempting to salvage something from the wreckage. They focus their metamodern experiments on ideas of the sublime by trying to stimulate new thoughts, after all 'It is not what the Gothic sublime *is* that is crucial, it is what it *effects* that is its essence'(Mishra 23).

A New Gothic Sincerity

Finally, an examination of the chronology of the texts, I believe, demonstrates a movement away from Botting's 'sense of cultural exhaustion' (Botting 298) haunting the present and a desire for movement beyond. We begin with *House of Leaves*, published in 2000, which still seems to cling to postmodern

ideas of deconstruction, yet hints at a metamodern desire for movement, for sincerity, though never for long without returning to the fact that ‘This is not for you’ (Danielewski ix). We then reach the self-obsessed *Lunar Park* in 2005, which still deals in postmodern fragmentation and self-awareness, though it is exploring these further, suggesting a desire to escape from the postmodern past obsessed with artificiality, yet still embedded in metafictional practices and irony. Finally, we find *S*, published in 2013, filled with more of a sincere desire for movement, which has the largest swings of the pendulum between hope and despair, irony and sincerity; it is reaching a critical point where it is striving against each swing, wishing to break away at either end. *S* is devoted to sincerity and its attempt to find post-irony, though doing this from within irony, within a postmodern pastiche. It is a novel about a novel, dressed as a novel. These three texts signal a gradual movement away from the postmodern, or rather, a developing extremity of anxiety. Rather than exhausted, these texts hint at a new enthusiasm for movement, a developing desire or agitated anxiousness to push further away from the postmodern, despite being perpetually dragged back.

As they demonstrate, the Gothic is a fundamentally apt mode for metamodern experimentation, for exploring post-postmodernity, as the genre has ‘always been a barometer of the anxieties plaguing a certain culture at a particular moment in history’ (Bruhm 260). Paternal anxiety, a well-founded Gothic concern, becomes a prescient metaphoric site for the struggle for freedom from the ‘paternal’ postmodern impulse. The found manuscript trope allows a metafictional self-analysis that establishes the Gothic motif of the text, while suggesting a need for change. The genre contains an inherent pastiche and irony, providing room for the postmodern pole, yet through ideas of enlightenment via the sublime, which I have focused on here, it can suggest a modern enthusiasm as the counter swing. And, of course, a metamodern sincerity is seemingly inherent within the Gothic as a form. Even though it is just a mad tale about an impossible tentacle-dragon god, we still feel fear when it rams the ship. Even though we always know he was the heir to the castle, we rejoice when he reclaims his birth right. Even though the sublime has been defamed, destroyed or devalued, we still yearn for that terror and awe, for that pain and pleasure that can propel us towards enlightenment. It is through the Gothic that we, as readers, can explore our yearning and desire for movement, swinging in that pit upon that metamodern pendulum. Each text oscillates between postmodern ironic deconstruction and modern enthusiasm for reason and utopian ideals, they swing between the sublime and the subpar, between hope and despair, sincerity and cynicism, never lingering at either, before being dragged back to the other.

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Notes

¹ For more on this readership, see Bronwen Thomas, 'Trickster Authors and Tricky Readers on the MZD forms' in Gibbons, Alison. *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

² These stamps also appear on the uncredited collage beneath the front cover of this edition, effectively framing the text with Poe. Another frame to add to the growing list.

³ It can be noted that Robby's desire to be free of paternal influence, whether Bret, postmodernism, or indeed Ellis's writing stigma, ironically culminates in a section that forces multiple interpretations upon him.

⁴ See *Rebecca*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* or *House of Leaves* for example.

⁵ See page 422 for one example among many.

⁶ I am thinking of the particularly labyrinthine section from page 119 to 146 here.

⁷ See, for example, footnote 98 on page 87 for one example among many.

⁸ For an excellent argument that *Slaughterhouse 5* serves as a Gothic text, see 'Unrepresentable Terrors: Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5*' in Maria Beville's *Gothic-Postmodernism: Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity*.

⁹ *S* also plays with the idea of the found manuscript in a similar vein to the ideas presented in James Hogg's *Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* in which the Editor's influence over the representation of the narrative is questioned. *S* constantly raises the problem of whether Filomela, the translator who finds Straka's final manuscript, was right to alter the original manuscript as she is seen to do on several occasions, each time in an attempt to reach out to the vanished Straka with whom she was in love.

¹⁰ For a far more detailed description of the metamodern see Vermeulen & van den Akker's original *Notes on Metamodernism* & the follow up 'Misunderstandings and Clarifications' on the *Notes on Metamodernism* website. <<http://www.metamodernism.com/2015/06/03/misunderstandings-and-clarifications/>>.

¹¹ 'Indeed, if, simplistically put, the modern outlook vis-a-vis idealism and ideals could be characterized as fanatic and/or naive, and the postmodern mindset as apathetic and/or skeptic, the current generation's attitude-for it is, and very much so, an attitude tied to a generation- can be conceived of as a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism.' (Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism")

¹² See Ellis's interview with Tom Waters for Acid Logic, 2005 <http://www.acidlogic.com/bret_easton_ellis.htm> [accessed 15 July 2015].

¹³ *S* is also available as an e-book, with options to remove the marginalia from the text while reading. Though this would seem to contribute towards the availability of the text, an argument can be made that it does somewhat detract from the central theme of the novel.

¹⁴ For further evidence, see p.660 in the 'Remastered Full-Color second edition for the painting 'Another Great Hall on Ash Tree Lane', in which the distant horizon, seen as a wall to the great hall, could equally represent an enormous, calamitous wave or a mountain range.

¹⁵ Helen Dennis's account of the difference between the Burkean and Kantian Sublime may provide a relevant expansion at this point. As she explains: 'In Edmund Burke's account of the sublime the subject encounters the external cause of terror, the subjects' imagination "swells" and rises to meet it and feels a triumphant pleasure at having expanded the human facilities to join with it. In Kant, the sublime permits the imagination a merely futile attempt at this union before collapsing, and this failure produces not exaltation in the subject but obedient "Respect"' (55).

¹⁶ At several points in the text Ellis laments society's impact on his son and the fact that Robby's life seems to lack any 'poetry and romance' (Ellis 113). Robby too is desperate to escape the postmodern structures that Bret imposes, but seems unable to do so. We see Robby struggling under the tyranny of his father's postmodern affectation, his obsession with materiality, his inherent irony, his depthlessness, all of which cause Robby and other boys of the next generation to flee. Though not specifically commenting on the sublime here, *Lunar Park* does align itself with a desire for post-postmodernity, seeming to ascribe to the 'structure of feeling' described by metamodernism in its yearning for a movement away from postmodernity, for post-ironic forms and a subsequent return to sincerity.