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"…town that doesn't keep showing up in books": Genre Reflexivity in Post-Millennial Metafictional Horror

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Abstract

Metafiction and horror can be traced back as far as classical antiquity and even the early ages of oral storytelling, but it is their relationship within a post-millennial readership with which this paper is concerned. Metafictional horror—as it appears towards the end of the twentieth century and, more specifically, the beginning of the twenty-first century—is written against a backdrop of unavoidable, mass-mediated horrors within the realm of the real. In the face of worldwide threats—which included, but were not limited to, pandemics, terrorism, extreme weather events, and economic crises—this essay asks what metafictional horror looks like in the shadow of such events which preceded and superseded the millennium, and what this post-millennial metafictional horror is trying to say about the horror genre itself. Deconstructing the terms horror, metafiction, and metahorror along etymological, historical, and cultural lines, this paper uses David Wong's *John Dies at the End* as a case study, which stylistically deploys genre reflexivity. Wong's text will form the basis of a horror genre analysis to show that his metahorror allows for the text to provide a nuanced discourse on horror fiction's traditional consumption across multiple mediums, notably in literature, film, and video-gaming.

Keywords*: Metafiction, Horror, Metahorror, Millenium, Parody, David Wong*

At first glance, it might seem suspicious that the etymological roots of *horror* trace it back to the hedgehog (Harper). *Eris*, with which the term *hedgehog* was once affiliated in its Latin genitive form, soon became *ghers* for other ancient Indo-European languages, meaning "to bristle." *Ghers* was returned to by the Latin language, becoming *horrere* which meant "to bristle with fear, shudder," until officially becoming *horror* which, according to Latin utterance, could be separated into the

figurative and the physical: "dread, veneration, religious awe" and "a shaking, trembling (as with cold or fear), shudder, chill." It is from hedgehog that figures of speech like "hair standing on end" are transposed onto the human experience of horror, just as the hedgehog's spines point outward upon fright.[1] It might seem reasonable to assume then that horror fiction writes with a rhetoric of horror, insofar as the author aims to affect fear, dread, chills, among other stimuli within the readerly response. On the surface, this suggests that horror writings must be meticulously configured in order to elicit their intended, albeit niche response within the reader, and leads to the question as to what response is to be solicited from the reader when horror writings are infused with, say, comedy for example: is comedy horror supposed to make us reel with laughter, or shudder with fear?[2] Should we swoon at the romance between Julie and R in *Warm Bodies*, or be horrified by the fact that Julie is a human and R is among the undead? Do the fantastical elements of Guilllermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* take precedent, or do we succumb to the child-eating monsters and Francoist regime as a source of horror? Of course, there exists a multitude of stylistic hybridizations through which horror writers can frame their work, all of which allow the writer to exceed the boundaries of horror rhetoric and elicit a layered readerly response. This essay interests itself in the stylistic fusion of metafiction with horror, i.e., metafictional horror after the millennium, and the implications this fusion can have when, instead of exposing fictional constructs, the constructs of the horror genre are exposed through it. The study will first explore the stylistic categories of horror fiction and metafiction, then look at how metafictional horror fits into a broader cultural framework, and finally analyse the genre of the metafictional horror novel through David Wong's *John Dies at the End*.

Recalling *Macbeth*'s banquet scene, in which the ghost of Banquo manifests before the eyes of Macbeth, Ann Radcliffe motions towards a view of horror fiction as possessing inferiority, presenting its supposedly cheap scare tactics as a lesser experience to that of terror fictions: she writes that terror fiction "expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a higher degree of life" (150). Radcliffe frames terror through the lens of the sublime aesthetic which, as made famous in claims by Burke, "excite[s] the ideas of pain, and danger, […] is in any

[1]See, for example, the following remark in Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked this Way Comes*: "Hair! I read it all my life. In scary stories, it stands on end! Mine's doing it – now!" (57).

[2]"Horror, in some sense oppresses; comedy liberates. Horror turns the screw; comedy releases it. Comedy elates; horror simulates depression, paranoia, and dread," according to Noel Carroll (147). Comedy horror is possibly the most polarized example of genre hybridity in fiction.

sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects" (Radcliffe 150; Burke 13). In other words, it seems that terror remains fixed on a pre-meditative imagining of threat, whereas horror embodies the consequentiality of threat. Radcliffe confirms her opinions of horror's inferiority when she writes about our close encounters with it as "respecting the dreaded evil" (150). This recalls horror's Latin roots of inspiring "religious awe" in the sense that she believes horror to compromise one's religious sensibilities (Harper). Regardless of Radcliffe's disseminations between terror and horror fictions, the two terms have remained closely intertwined in later critical discussions.

In his late twentieth century non-fiction work *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King develops the hierarchy posed by Radcliffe, wherein terror is considered more dignified than horror, presenting "terror on top, horror below it, and lowest of all, the gag reflex of revulsion" (King 37). King's addition of "revulsion" presents a level of horror which, as mentioned, induces the gag reflex by gory means.[3] It seems, then, that revulsion and horror are closely linked, with the former often acting as a consequence, or impact, of the latter. Whilst useful in terms of setting a criterion for horror writing, King's level-based approach to horror exhausts the genre because it presumes that the prospective reader's interpretation can be predicted in advance, despite horror priding itself on affectivity, which will vary from one reader to the next. Noel Carroll writes in *The Philosophy of Horror* that instead of occurring in separate vacuums, horror, terror, and revulsion can and often occur simultaneously in horror fiction: "threat [or terror] is compounded with revulsion, nausea, and disgust" (22). He coins the term *art-horror* as a reminder that horror's containment within an artistic framework is not only artificial but mediated to us by the affected characters within the medium, thus being more viewable as horror by proxy (8). By extension, the addressee of horror in art has a somewhat detached experience, and it is the subject's psyche which will ultimately allow, or disallow, a terrified, horrified, or gag-induced reaction to *art-horror*. Therefore, it seems appropriate to acknowledge that horror, terror, and revulsion, among other styles of writing, are strands which represent the writing of horror fiction. If terror is to be regarded as a precursory experience to threat, horror is the realised experience of threat, and revulsion as a bodily consequence of horror—then horror fiction itself might be defined as a rhetorical writing which displays different stages of threat in order to affect fear within the reader.

[3]King exemplifies revulsion by analysing a scene from *Alien* in which an extra-terrestrial bursts from a character's chest (37).

Not unlike horror fiction, metafiction as a term is difficult to pin down. Whilst horror's reliance on affectivity renders it subject to interpretation, metafiction by its very nature is paradoxical, and hence suffers similar semantic drawbacks. A "direct and immediate concern with fiction-making" was what first characterized metafiction when it was entered into critical discussion by William H. Gass in the late twentieth century, alluding to a style of writing which is concerned with the topic of writing (qtd. in Currie 1). Gass may allude to the reflexivity apparent in metafiction, but the term has since been clarified by the likes of Patricia Waugh, who refers to "[…] fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact" (2). Metafiction is presented as a stylistic choice by Waugh, which is written with the intent of spotlighting the fictionality of fiction. It seems, however, that Waugh favours a postmodernist lens, claiming that metafiction "[…] poses questions between fiction and reality" (2). There is no denying that metafiction—through its breaking of the fourth wall with which it is commonly affiliated—is capable of facilitating a postmodern reading; and yet metafiction, by its paradoxical nature, cannot be restricted to solely one critique, which this essay will demonstrate by opting for a genre study of metafictional horror. In order for metafiction to highlight its own fictionality, it must first utilize and make topical the schema through which we typically understand and interact with traditional fictions, which metafiction accomplishes through its inherent "*self-awareness*."[4] This schema can take many forms but is often looked at spatially, as Linda Hutcheon among others[5] says, "self-sufficient and closed" narrative world (170). Of course there exists other lenses through which fiction is traditionally understood, but upon reflection of the previously established definitions, it might be worth reconsidering metafiction as a style of fiction-writing which exposes the schemata we typically use to interact with and understand fiction.[6] The interests of this essay, however, are with metafictional horror more specifically, and what happens when the schemata which are typically used to understand horror are exposed, with a focus on post-millennial fiction. In this regard, it seems appropriate to discuss

[4]In my recent work, metafiction is characterized as a "*self-awareness and exploitation of fiction's artifice through an elaborate writing of the parts which make up fiction in its most conventional form*" (Thompson 17; italics in original).

[5]Wenche Ommundsen notes metafiction's "assum[ed] familiarity with historical and geographical conditions" (170).

[6]Metafiction was previously considered in terms of how it "*exploits*" the components of fiction. This is true in some cases, but to exploit is to perform an offensive manoeuvre, and is thus more applicable to antifiction. The antinovel, or new novel, resists traditional novelistic readings "[…] in that it ignores such elements as plot, dialogue, linear narrative, and human interest" (Encyclopaedia Brittanica).

metafiction and horror's pre-existing relationship and the horrors which surrounded the millennium event.

Metafictional devices within horror writing can be traced back to classical antiquity. In *Haunted Greece and Rome*, Debby Felton casts our attention towards a frame narrative in the play *Mostellaria* by Plautus, in which a slave invents a ghost story as a means of keeping his master distracted (51). Frame narratives, or *mise-en-abyme*, have since come to be an underlying feature of metafiction because they interrogate reality as a perspective. Metafiction's tendency towards intertextuality emerges when Felton charts parallels between Lucian's *Philopseudes* and the ghost stories contained within Pliny the Younger's letters, suggesting that the metafictional device is far from a modern concept in metafictional horror (82–83). As Felton notes at the beginning of her book though, the classical antiquity was a period where folklore took precedence; therefore, intertextuality was necessitated by the customs of shared oral storytelling (1). Even before horror had received its own categorization as a genre, ancient ghost stories were ahead of their time, making allusions to what has since been called metahorror.[7] "Lucian intentionally satirizes the irrational beliefs of gullible people," according to Felton, suggesting that early horror fictions sometimes reached a meta level vis-à-vis the tropes of the ghost story (87). Thus, it seems that metafiction emerged within early instances of horror fiction through the functionality of repeating stories so that authors could reach audiences far and wide—*mise-en-abyme* so that authors could intellectualize horror—and through self-criticism of the ghost story trope so that authors could, in some cases, debunk popular beliefs in ghosts. Metafictional horror also featured within penmanship of Gothic Horror during the Romantic Period.

The resurgence of metafictional devices coalesced with the arrival of Gothic Horror writings, which arguably began with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. The first edition, published in 1764, presents itself as "A Story Translated by William Marshal […] From the Original Italian of Onuphrio Muralto," which contains an entire preface dedicated to proving that the contents of the book are actually the translations of a rediscovered manuscript (i–ix). Through this self-performance as a historical account, it seems that Walpole aims to enhance the experience of horror by suggesting "the ground-work of the

[7]Metahorror is not to be confused with horror writings of metafiction. The former pertains to a story's self-awareness of what characterizes horror, whilst the latter stylistically performs as horror but offers a self-awareness of what characterizes fiction.

story is founded on truth" (viii).[8] Walpole was ahead of his time by experimenting with verisimilitude, predating what Linda Hutcheon later called "historiographic metafiction" (76–77).[9] Other notable deployments of the metafictional device in Romantic portrayals of Gothic Horror include the framing narratives of *Frankenstein*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Dracula*, and the *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Their tendencies towards *mise-en-abyme* "[…] blur narrative and cognitive boundaries, producing a destabilizing effect that challenges rational epistemology and suggests a deeper "reality" than the realist novel can possibly achieve" (Carlyle 2). The classical antiquity and Romantic Period have offered only two cultural movements within which metafiction and horror have previously intersected, but there exist far more, which this essay aims to prove by discussing post-millennial metafictional horror and its introspective turn towards genre. The following section will offer some insight into the cultural horrors which appeared to orbit the nineties and the beginning of the new millennium, which facilitated and inadvertently demanded the post-millennial metafictional horror which followed.

Prior to the millennium, a momentous build-up of horrors in the nineties presented the public with a real sense of threat that no life was sacred or exempt from pain and suffering. For example, the horror of disease was inadvertently spread by organizations such as UNAIDS and the World Health Organization reporting the continued worldwide outbreak of HIV/AIDS (Schwartländer et al. 64). Terrorist attacks from Al-Qaeda, the IRA, etc., were manifesting horror within the everyday; natural disasters, such as the Midwestern United States Heat Wave and the Vargas Tragedy flash flood, began to publicize the horror of the extreme weather event.[10] The horrors of the nineties were multi-faceted and mass-mediated, exposing the fragility of human existence to all. All these events occurred alongside polarizing debates about when the third millennium, and the twenty-first century, should be ushered in.

Calendar experts reminded those intent on celebrating the beginning of a new millennium on 31 December 1999 that,

[8]The text's second edition has since debunked the claims of its predecessor, with Walpole outing himself as the pseudonymous translator William Marshal and admitting the fictionality of the Italian author Onuphrio Muralto (Walpole).

[9]She elaborates further that "[f]iction and history are narratives distinguished by their frames […], frames which historiographic metafiction first establishes then crosses."

[10]This is not an exhaustive list. The death of Diana, otherwise known by her coveted role as "The People's Princess," shattered the once untouchable, sovereign status of the Royal Family; the Dunblane massacre of primary school children in Scotland bred a culture of fear where a child's safety could not be ensured in a learning environment, which the 1999 Columbine Massacre confirmed on an international scale; a series of commercial plane crashes; and a comet's near miss of the Earth's atmosphere.

theoretically, they were a year premature; there is no year zero in the commonly used Gregorian calendar, because it began with AD 1, so the accurate end of the second millennium was 31 December 2000 (Klöpffer 219; Wilkins 6.9). This personified the new millennium as a meta-event, so to speak. This cultural anxiety towards temporal uncertainty fuelled conspiracy theories which, in turn, prescribed a self-consciousness to the millennium: the event was widely feared for its potential to cause technological disasters and even instigate nuclear annihilation (Lean). We need only turn to forums from the night of 31 December, 1999, to infer the sense of horror which underpinned the arrival of the 2000s:

> […] I intend to party on 31 Dec 2000. Mind you, I had read and heard so many dark predictions for 31 Dec 1999, that I was terrified that someone somewhere would really make this prediction come true by exploding some sort of doomsday device.
>
> – CD Baxter, Scotland, UK
>
> I've been stuck here at work since 7.30pm last night (it's now 11.28am on New Year's Day) looking after the non-existent bug for a major UK healthcare company. The only panic we had all night was when we heard about missiles being fired from Russia...false alarm!! […]
>
> – Tony Martin, England
>
> […] One woman on London Bridge cried happily at midnight, "We're alive! We made it!". So, for those of you who thought the apocalypse had started when the Russian missile launch was detected, isn't it a relief to know they weren't aimed at us?
>
> – Jeremy Fry, UK (“A New Millenium – How is it for you?” BBC News)

The paranoias of the nineties were not lost on the new millennium either—if anything, they intensified. As Catherine Spooner notes, “[r]eports of SARS, avian flu, global warming, the war on terror, economic breakdown, all contributed to a cultural climate in which the threat of annihilation constantly appeared to be shadowing the human race” (5). Indeed, it seems that the twenty-first century, whenever it marked its appearance, ushered in a population of post-millennials who, under constant threats to the spatiotemporality they exist in, are more critical of their existence within time and space and are thus more

susceptible to fictions which expose constructs. "Knowledge is hot water on wool" writes Mark Z. Danielewski, "It shrinks time and space" (*House of Leaves* 167).

Danielewski's novel came out on the cusp of the twenty-first century and tapped into the increasing cultural self-awareness and metafictional behaviour that our understanding of the world is conducted through a series of frames. Danielewski's labyrinthine approach to novel-writing, as Catherine Spooner puts it, "[…] allows the source of horror to remain nameless, shapeless […]," which sets the tone for a wave of varying metafictional horrors seeing a twenty-first century release (46). The meta- message is not only on the rise, but it is necessitated by a post-millennial culture: metafictional texts from the nineties with horrifying elements, such as Austin Wright's *Tony and Susan* (otherwise known as *Nocturnal Animals*) and *Funny Games*, saw a post-millennial re-release, suggesting an audience which is more than receptive to reflexive fictions, particularly those with a tendency toward horrific expression.

As post-millennial audiences become increasingly aware of fiction's components, they are "finding it fascinating how they can become so emotionally affected by horrific imagery," (Woodcock 317). In addition to being more receptive to reflexive horror fictions, the essay argues that post-millennial metafiction oftentimes comes with reflexive genres. At the turn of the millennium, and to much commercial success, came the *Scary Movie* saga, which assimilated and parodied an abundance of pre-existing popular horror cinema in the same narrative world, realising the extent to which horror genre conventions can be cross-referenced.[11] The Twenty Tens brought *Scream 4*, *The Cabin in the Woods*, *Tucker & Dale vs. Evil*, and *The Final Girls*, where each example foregrounded the typified rules for surviving a horror narrative, whilst simultaneously breathing new life into the horror genre. This movement is not strictly filmic either, with the multiplayer video game *Dead by Daylight* offering players the chance to play as a survivor or killer in a slasher film formula. Narrative-centric, single-player games like *Until Dawn* place users amid blatantly trope-ridden horror landscapes, wherein causality is thematised and decisions as futile as

[11]This movement is not solely limited to Horror either. 2019 saw the release of *Isn't it Romantic*, within which Rebel Wilson's cynically single character wakes from a concussion in an alternative reality, her life riddled with the clichés of a romantic comedy. The suave, Bond-esque protagonist in espionage fictions has been reconfigured in recent years as well through spy-comedy genre hybrids from the likes of *Johnny English*, *Spy*, and *Austin Powers*. The *Shrek* saga, *Hoodwinked!*, and both the filmic and theatrical renditions of *Into the Woods* parody the tropes belonging to fairy-tales.

checking a fellow character's mobile phone can present multiple narrative directions. In television, *American Horror Story*'s most recent season, titled "1984," nostalgically recalls the horror Cinema of the eighties, where camp counsellors express an outward exhaustion with the clichés of the horror from which they have taken inspiration. Indeed, there seems to be emerging an abundance of horror fictions which are aware of their own composition, and by extension are aware of their own construction; to be 'meta-' about genre is to be 'meta-' about fiction, after all—'meta-horror,' thus, refers to these genre-reflexive fictions which place horror in their sights.

Contrary to the supposed free reign of reflexive genre fictions, it comes as a surprise to learn that metahorror, a term which denotes a self-awareness of the horror genre specifically, has suffered from an exclusively film-centric school of thought. Kimberley Jackson, for example, defines metahorror as a subgenre of "films overtly concerned with the horror genre and its conventions" (11). Firstly, it seems ironic that metahorror, by its very nature of transcending genre schematics, is reduced to the categorization of a "subgenre." Metahorror might be more appropriately viewed as a technique of the metafictional style, because genre is but one of many fictional components which metafiction makes topical, and metafiction as a term applies to all mediums. Jackson's strictly filmic criteria for metahorror falls into the popular critical trap where abstract concepts, in our efforts to understand them, become pigeonholed as terms. For frame-breaking phenomena like metahorror and metafiction, placing them within frameworks only creates more confusion, and limits metahorror's abilities to intellectually project insightful readings onto horror metafictions. Now that metahorror can be understood as an extension of metafiction, it will be examined as a technique favoured by David Wong in his metafictional horror novel *John Dies at the End*, with a view to explore the extent to which metahorror affects the horror genre within which it frames itself, and what metahorror is enabling post-millennial reflexive fictions to say. Whilst Wong's text takes a wholly novelistic form, *John Dies at the End* is a reflexive discourse which highlights the tropes of horror in literature, cinema, and video-gaming, and is thus representative of the trend of genre-reflexive horror fictions which shadows the millennium. In keeping with the idea that metahorror is available to all fictional mediums, the following case study will structure itself by drawing attention to the novelistic, filmic, and video-game horror conventions which are made topical by the metahorror in *John Dies at the End*, and will use pre-existing horror fictions to substantiate the existence of horror fiction tropes.

Prior to turning the first page, the title of Wong's text engages with the spoiler-alert discourse of popular culture. By announcing that John Dies at the End, the reader is subjected to what Johnson and Rosenbaum call the "premature and undesired information about how a narrative's arc will conclude," thus placing into question whether a novel can truly horrify if it cannot keep its own secrets (1089). Contrary to the beliefs of Sandra Laugier, who remarks that "the terror of the spoiler […] blocks reflexivity and introduces unbearable constraints" upon fiction, Wong's spoiler capitalizes on terror (Laugier 151). There is a clear, underlying criticism of *deus-ex-machina*[12] for the use of extreme plot devices to tie up loose narrative ends, which Wong entertains by so apathetically announcing that John dies at the end. By highlighting the ending though, Wong announces terror by tempting a readerly, temporal curiosity towards the events which precede John's death; if the novel's destination speaks to horror, then so too must its yet unaccounted for journey. His spoiler-alert title fosters the reflexivity of fiction and lifts horror from its constraints, in spite of Laugier's comments, presenting a novelistic form which transcends both fictional and horror conventions, how the expectations of either are discussed in popular culture, and sets the novel up as a disruption to how horror is traditionally consumed. Furthermore, it might seem appropriate to reconsider the term *metahorror* as relating to the conventions behind horror's production and consumption as well. Attention to the novelistic form surfaces throughout the novel's structure as a method of critiquing the traditional horror novel.

Wong's novel begins in *medias res*, presenting the main characters David[13] and John at the peak of their successful career dealing with paranormal investigations. With a wealth of experience behind them, they are asked by Shelly, a victim of domestic abuse by the ghost of her ex-boyfriend, for their backstory, to which John responds that "[t]here was an incident. […] A series of incidents, I guess. A dead guy, another dead guy. Some drugs. It's kind of a long story" (8). The notion of beginning narratives in *medias res* typically provides an atmosphere which is eerie and unsettling: far less familiar than the delivery of traditionally chronologized storytelling. It can be recognized as a favoured structure within gothic horror literature as well; Catherine Spooner remarks that the Gothic "[…] can be thought of as interrogating the anxiety of influence of the past and present"

[12]The plot device through which a narrative's problems get resolved by an unexpected incident.

[13]To avoid confusion between David Wong, the author, and his eponymous protagonist called David, 'Wong' will refer to him in his authorial capacity, and 'David' will refer to his character within the novel.

(Spooner and McEvoy 36). Taking 'The Tell-Tale Heart' by Poe as an example, the narrator's deliberation over their current mental health state creates a readerly unease towards experiencing their past; "How, then, am I mad? Harken! And observe how healthily – how calmly I can tell you the whole story" (691). John, however, shrugs off the temporal instability which can foster the horror in his story. He generalizes his history with death and drugs, underplays his story's relevance with the litotic "I guess," and "it's kind of a long story," and performs his narrative as unnecessarily long and insignificant. Indeed, Wong's text may begin in *medias res*, but expresses an exhaustion with horror fiction's popularized approach of beginning non-chronologically.[14] For Wong, the beginnings of novelistic horror fit into the wider debate that novels, in and of themselves, are conventional means of framing horror.

In a conversation with Arnie, a reporter, whose desire for a story enables the grand-narrative to explore David's backstory prior to the novel's plot, the fictional realism element of novelistic horror is criticised when Arnie insinuates that David's backstory is fictional and should be fleshed out into a novel, prompting the following response from David: "A book? Meaning a work of fiction? Meaning it's all bullshit?" (77). Commentaries about the process of novelizing horror within a horror novel create a paradoxical conflict between horror's portrayal within the real and within fictional realism. Nevertheless, Wong challenges the novelistic dimensions through which horror is formally represented, suggesting that metahorror exceeds the novel. Such is the case when David suggests that he and John "[…] drive until we find a town that doesn't keep showing up in books" (210); metahorror, as much as it exposes the patterns in horror, appears to be actively seeking out uncharted territories for the horror novel too. This commentary of Wong's can be seen within the textual self-awareness and trivialisation of existing tropes within the horror novel, such as the Freudian uncanny.

> *There's a deer, complete with little hoofprints in the snow. A happy little cabin, the family in the yard…*
>
> As I took in those little details, my amazement began to sour, congealing into a cold dread.
>
> *The cabin on the mountainside, that's not a little tree out front. It's a makeshift cross, with a man hanging from it. His legs have been cut off. The woman standing next to it… look at the infant*

[14]Interestingly, given the context of Wong's novel, our early introduction to the character of Shelly suggests an intertextual reference to the author Mary Shelley, whose monumental gothic novel, *Frankenstein*, also began in *medias res*.

> *in her arms. It has a single, curved horn coming out of its skull. And unfortunately for the old man, the baby still looks hungry. The frozen pond in back, those aren't reeds sticking up through the ice all across the surface. Those are hands. And that deer? It has a huge cock, making a little trench in the snow behind it…*
> (Wong 90–91; italics in original)

David's interpretive approach to the aesthetic of a mural in a drug-dealer's trailer is textbook uncanny. At first, the familiar, idyllic setting of rustic life is established through imagery of a cabin, a mountainside and deer, recalling the uncanny's prerequisite as "something which is familiar and old-established in the mind" (Freud 241). However, David's dread, and ultimately the uncanny's alienation of the familiar, surfaces when a closer interpretation of the mural garners a horrified response (241). A discourse follows which pits seemingly similar instances of visual imagery together, as David refocuses on the images: a tree becomes a cross; reeds in water become outstretched hands; and a mother's new-born becomes the spawn of Satan. This familiar-unfamiliar paradox which characterizes the uncanny is a frequented approach of the literary horror genre, particularly in horror's spatial explorations. The uncanny is continually favoured by horror fiction-writers as a means of exploring the dissonance and the anxiety between the familiar and the unfamiliar. *The Haunting of Hill House*, for example, contrasts domesticity with the seemingly evil presence within Hill House, manifesting the uncanny;[15] Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* hovers over the uncanny threshold between life and death with a graveyard which possesses the ability to reanimate the dead; and Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy presents a cordoned off US coastline which becomes increasingly alien as its ecosystem mutates. In the case of Wong's text, however, his self-awareness of the parameters of the uncanny needed to create horror become purposefully parodied when David's interpretation of the mural ends with a hyperbolic depiction of a deer's genitalia. The uncanny makes way for a punchline which provides comic relief through phallic imagery, but not before Wong's text instils itself with an awareness of typified Freudian applications to horror writing.[16] Horror utilises the filmic form in the

[15]"It was a house without kindness, never meant to be lived in, not a fit place for people or for hope" (Jackson 35).

[16]In *John Dies at the End*, the uncanny emerges in other instances to highlight not just self-aware horror, but self-aware books. Referencing a book by fictitious character Dr. Marconi, John quotes a section which says, "when you read the Bible, the Devil looks back at you through the pages" (195). The prescription of a malicious voyeurism to the Bible uncannily alienates the reader of Wong's text by interrogating the extent to which the consumer of a book is consumed by it.

language of *John Dies at the End* as well, to express a self-awareness of horror's cinematic conventions.

As much as this essay aims to debunk the misconception that metahorror can only be filmic, there of course exists a hefty amount of references to filmic metahorror in the novel. Perhaps this is because genre conventions are made more readily available by the visual technologies of film and television; "people who wake up in the middle of the night and see those big-eyed alien abductors or a ghostly old woman … it's always something they saw in some movie, isn't it?" (Wong 128). Wong's comments on archetypal horror villains not only allow him to draw on the lasting fear caused by simulated horror, but also to elevate the horror within the reality he has created because "here, somehow it becomes real" (128). By presenting the framed limitations of cinema's simulated horror, Wong uses metahorror to present the reader with a scenario of horror which transcends fictional boundaries. His allusion towards the clichéd performances of victims in horror cinema allow him to deepen his metahorror message.

Referring back to the character of Shelly, a victim of domestic abuse, Wong presents her as small in stature, having a "china doll look," and as having "the kind of self-conscious, pleading helplessness some guys go crazy for" (5). In other words, she is objectified, misogynised, and seemingly necessitated as a victim to propel the narrative. Such is the case in the late twentieth-century slasher film, notes Carol Clover in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, who posits "the immensely generative story of a psycho-killer who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims" (21). Instead, Shelly's role as the victim is short-lived and she is soon revealed to be a demonic apparition. "She burst[s] into snakes," and traps David and John in the basement with faecal matter which rises to fill the room (13). This refreshing, albeit revolting, inversion of the archetypal female-as-victim proves that Wong's text is as much concerned with re-examining performances in horror as it is with exposing them, particularly those relating to film.[17] In an effort to summon the demonized Shelly, John assumes one of many vulnerable positions made typical by horror cinema: "Oh, no! […] It's dark in here and here I am in the shower! Alone! I'm so naked and vulnerable" (14). Clearly reminiscing the death of Marion Crane in *Psycho*, among a wealth of other iconic on-screen bathroom deaths, Wong parodies a frequented horror trope which adds insult to injury by sexualizing victims as they fall prey to a murderous predator in the bathroom. John's dialogue speaks to an air of stupidity which often accompanies the dialogue of victims in horror films, and it reverberates throughout

[17]Even before revealing her possession, Shelly is noted as 'playing the part' (12).

Wong's text.[18] By alluding to a subset of knowledge on filmic performance, the metahorror in *John Dies at the End* equips its characters with a rationale in the face of horror which filmic horror characters have previously lacked by comparison. This reinvigorates the appeal of horror because the reader is assured that characters make well-informed decisions based upon an archive of pre-existing horror fiction knowledge. Even when rationale is lost in Wong's text, characters are astutely aware of their lack of judgement: "[*y*]*ou've found [drugs] in the home of a dead man, after following a trail of dead bodies to get here. So go ahead, put it right in your mouth, dipshit*" (98; italics in original). David's innermost thoughts, as displayed in moments of italicised text, can provide commentary on horror character performance, but are also known to critique the conventions of horror cinematography as well.

Recalling his pursuit of a creature in a deserted car park, John casts the following remark: "Black as pitch out here. I glanced up and noticed the lights were off in the lot – *of course they* are –" (215; italics in original).[19] It is crucial to acknowledge Wong's switch from a past tense recollection of events to the interrogation of past events in the present, because it reminds the reader that this is a framed narrative being relayed by John to a reporter. Although it is not clear whether John or Arnie (the reporter) is providing the critique in italics, it speaks to how "[m]etafiction assimilates all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself," in this case a criticism of the horror genre's manipulation of lighting (Scholes 106). Contrasts between light and dark images in horror can be traced back to the silent horror film as a semiotic point of contact between the good-versus-evil binary signifiers (Powell 120). Lighting has always facilitated the meaning-making process of threat in horror cinema, beginning in the German Expressionist shadows of *Nosferatu* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, continuing into the colour motion picture filmed evils of *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Omen*, to name a few examples, and lasting long into horror's current state within digital cinematography.[20] Nevertheless, Wong imbues his text with a cynical self-awareness of it being

[18]In reaction to a growing lump filled with cockroaches in the driver's seat of his car, David compares his experience to "people in horror movies standing there stupidly while some special effect takes shape before them, the dumb-asses gawking at it instead of turning and running like the wind" which, by using horror film performances as a framework to model his own behaviour, adds an air of reality to the situation (217–218).

[19]Grady Hendrix, in his novel *Horrorstör*, also criticizes the tropes of horror spaces: "She walked to the main entrance and found that the doors had closed and dead-bolted themselves. Of course they had" (171–172).

[20]For examples of lighting in digital cinematography horror, see the *Paranormal Activity* or the *Unfriended* franchises.

commonplace, in horror cinema particularly, to house dark forces in dark spaces. Arnie, whilst doubting the truth of John's story, provides the reader with a micro-narrative of horror lighting which nearly makes him privy to belief in the supernatural:

> One time, […] I was down in my basement and there's just a couple of bare lightbulbs that hang down, you know? So it's all shadows, and your shadow kind of stretches out across the floor. Anyway, one time, out the corner of my eye, you know, it sort of looked like my shadow back there was movin' without me. I don't mean the bulb was swinging and the shadow was just wavering back and forth, I mean the limbs were, like, flailing around. Real fast, too. It was just for a second and like I said, it was just one of those tricks of light you get out the corner of your eye. (78)

In a scene which recalls a culmination of horror film symbols, such as the manipulated shadows of German Expressionism, or the swinging lightbulb towards the end of *Psycho*, Arnie temporarily interrogates the frame which exists between fictional horror's "tricks of light," and a real-life experience of horror. As the reader later learns, Arnie's account of sentient shadows does not seem too irrational in a novel where shadow people are the main antagonists, preying on those who have taken the novel's fictitious drug, soy sauce.[21] From this, a working assumption can be made that the horror film's placement of objects, or *mise-en-scène*, is exposed in *John Dies at the End* in equal measure to cinematography.

In an interrogation room, David is handed crime scene photos which the recreational use of soy sauce caused, prompting the following micro-narrative:

> Once, when I was twelve, for reasons that made sense at the time I filled a blender with some ice cubes and three cans of maraschino cherries. I didn't know you had to use a lid on one of those things, so I hit the button and watched it erupt like a volcano. The room in the cop's photographs looked like the resulting mess in our kitchen that day, everything a red spray with lumps. (Wong 74)

Linking the spatter of maraschino cherries to a grotesque depiction of drug misuse suggests a concern by Wong, and his characters, with the

[21]For a description of shadow people, see page 322 when David describes them as "[…] walking death. They take you and you're gone and nobody knows you were ever there."

composition of horror as a visual image. It recalls the golden age of special effects in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which gave rise to films like *An American Werewolf in London* and *The Thing* in a new wave of horror films showcasing the potential for graphic realism (Abbott 123–125). However, this renaissance of special effects often required unconventional ingredients, such as jam, heated bubble-gum and other household items (Holmes). Thus, Wong's simile likening blended, maraschino cherries to gore seems to act as a parodic response to the prosthetics of horror and their makeshift origins, but Wong is able to horrify by making a scene of unimaginable gore conceivably imaginable to the readers through imagery with which they are more likely to be familiar. It seems that metahorror, even when it is contained within a novelistic framework, cannot escape filmic representation. Even David and John's characters both work at a video rental store, which turns the novel into a faucet of intertextual, filmic reference.[22] And when the novel somehow lacks in allusions to filmic texts, it makes up for it by implying the worldview of its characters has been framed by movies: "Hollywood raised us. Your mind processes the world through a filter formed by comic books and action movies on Cinemax. That's why kids put on trench coats and take guns to schools" (128).[23] But among the array of filmic and novelistic metahorror, there is also an awareness of video-game horror conventions in Wong's text.

It is made clear from the start that *John Dies at the End* will make commentary on the abundance of media in the digital age, but when John and David are described "in a room dominated by a huge plasma-screen TV with four video game systems wired to it," it seems that a discourse on video games will feature at some point (5). Such is the case when John passes the following remark, after a battle with coyotes suspiciously leads to the discovery of a key:

> "A key," said John, clicking shells into his shotgun. "Good. Now, if I know what's going on here, and I think I do, we'll have to wander around looking for that door. Behind it we'll meet a series of monsters or, more likely a whole bunch of the same

[22]For evidence of John and David's video-rental jobs, see page 252 when David "[…] had just left a nightmarish sixteen-hour, soul-numbing shift at Wally's Video Rental Orifice." For examples of intertextual reference in the text, see page 141 when "[m]aybe he had thought he'd burst in and we'd all be in *Alien*-style cocoons and he could just torch the place and declare it mission accomplished"; "It looks like – like the end of the world.[…] Like those huge, scary future buildings in *Blade Runner*" (155); "[…] three of the five investors disappeared (I always imagined that all three simultaneously shot each other, like in the movie *Reservoir Dogs*)" (223).

[23]Let it also be noted that "it looked like the world outside [John's] window had lost its signal and gone to static" (360), which suggests that even characters' perceptions of the world allude to the cinematic.

> one. We'll kill them, get another key, and then it'll open a really big door. Now right before that we'll probably get nicer guns. It may require us to backtrack some and it might get really tedious and annoying." (234–235)

John's dialogue, which presumes to "know what's going on here," is undoubtedly making contact with the processes involved in video game design, namely how simulated worlds are segmented into levels. Like acts in a play, chapters in a book, or movements in a symphony, Richard Rouse remarks that the video game structurally emerges with its own compartments, called levels, which appear as microcosms of the larger work and can serve as temporal junctions, so that the player is aware of their progression within the grand-narrative (409). John's repetitive mentioning of doors, which unlock rooms containing monsters, spatially represents the rooms as levels in this analogy. He draws attention to the increasing levels of difficulty which will ensue throughout the mall, presenting possible navigational problems as they seek the appropriate keyhole for their key, and the fact that they might be faced with an increasing number of enemies. Equally, "[w]ell-designed levels are set up such that difficulty and tension ramp upward […]," according to Rouse, and John's dialogue expresses an astute awareness of this convention by interrogating the typical flow of a gameplayer's level-based experience (409). John is holding a shotgun during this narration, but suggests that, at some point, the group's arsenal may be conveniently upgraded, which is similar to the reward system in video games, whereby players gain achievements, incentives, or items in receipt of their participation in a level (Johnson et al. 69; Balkaya and Catak 22). The upgraded arsenal is described in accessory with the task of unlocking a "really big door" which foreshadows the video game's popularized concept of the boss battle.[24] There is something profoundly horrifying about the boss battle, with Rouse referencing the "Boss Monster," who is resistant to typical gameplay tactics and requires a rethinking of one's strategy, and Mia Consalvo mentioning the seemingly unbeatable nature of the boss (Rouse 517; Consalvo 155). Thus, a transcendent sort of evil manifests in the reading of this passage, prompting a reading into John's narration which is as much metahorror as it is meta- about gaming. Monsters are discussed as lurking behind closed doors in the above quotation; a theme of isolation is apparent

[24]"[T]he boss challenge is usually the culmination of the game," notes Martin Picard, "representing a unique and highest form of challenge," not too dissimilar from the "really big door" which John and others are faced with, and their ominous, precursory reward of higher calibre guns (Picard 105).

through the wanderings of John's group in the mall; and there is a fear attached to opening the really big door.

Canonical video game horror texts such as the *Resident Evil* franchise, *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* and *Little Nightmares* come to mind, each deploying a usage of keys, labyrinthine mapping, and monsters. John's reference to "a whole bunch of the same" monster, however, interrogates the design approach taken in horror games where, to save time, the same character model is used to texture most, if not all, monsters (Knapp). This is especially true in zombie games where, in order to save time whilst satisfying a growing cultural fixation with hordes, there is little variation in the appearance of zombies within the horde itself (Stratton 264). If we take the recently released *World War Z* game, for example, only a handful of enemy archetypes can be counted despite each level containing thousands of zombies. John highlights the redundancies of video game design through its apparent inability to make a game's antagonists look different from another, thus positioning Wong's novel as an example of post-millennial reflexive fiction which is in one sense exhausted with media-wide genre convention, and in another sense concerned with reapproaching convention by engaging in a playful dialogue with these tropes.

Throughout *John Dies at the End*, Wong draws attention to how novelistic, filmic, and video-gaming frameworks mediate our experience of horror by providing a reflexive discourse which interrogates the schemata through which we typically understand horror. However, Wong also comments on the profound sense of horror which orbits our consumption of these frameworks. On video-gaming, for example, Wong remarks on how a "kid said he had made a pact with Satan to kill both his parents, then backed out of it when his mom unexpectedly bought him a video game console" (315); in the novel, David suggests that we "[…] keep driving until we find a town that doesn't keep showing up in books" (210); and on Cinema, "Hollywood raised us. Your mind processes the world through a filter formed by comic books and action movies on Cinemax. That's why kids put on trench coats and take guns to school" (128). As much as it possesses the ability to horrify within its textual constraints, horror fiction has the ability to transcend the textual space and create a culture of horror. Likewise, *John Dies at the End* explores this very idea that, following the millennium, the reimagination of horror occurs when it becomes aware of its own genre schematics and transcends them.

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