

**A PSYCHOANALYTICAL APPROACH TO THE TV
SERIES *THE NO-END HOUSE*:
THE FASCINATING HOUSE OF DESIRE**

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Abstract

“It's 6 rooms, each is supposed to be scarier than the last but it's psychological- gets in your head. Everybody who goes in describes it totally different. Most people don't even make it to the sixth room, and the people who do are never seen again” (“This Isn't Real” 12:17-12:34). Such are the first urban-legend like pieces of information given by one character on the No-End house, the second season title and the cornerstone around which the plot of the TV series Channel Zero revolves. Aired on the SyFy channel in 2017, the series lived true to its ambition of spiralling around the topics of imagination and the supernatural. Appearing and disappearing in diverse locations around the world, the house gives birth to an alternate reality where the border between rationality and irrationality is shattered. It occupies an omnipresent position as an object of fascination, as the centre of the gaze. In Lacan's wake, the gaze is the point at which the object looks back. The outcome is an interpretation that shatters the observing subject's sense of control. The desire to see what is being shown and what is not ubiquitous. The notion of desire will be developed; at the core of the house lays a fundamental lack that cannot be filled in. The house is a reflection of the fissures that crack open our lives when the Real disrupts them; holding a relatable force for everyone.

Key Words: TV Series, House, Desire, Psychoanalytic Approach, Psychological

Introduction

“It's 6 rooms, each is supposed to be scarier than the last but it's psychological- gets in your head. Everybody who goes in describes it totally different. Most people don't even make it to the sixth room, and the people who do are never seen again” (“This Isn't Real” 12:17-12:34). Such are the first urban-legend like pieces of information submitted by the character JT to three other major characters, Margot, Jules and Seth, and to the audience on the No-End house, the second season title and the cornerstone around which the plot of the TV series *Channel Zero* revolves. The second season which aired on the SyFy channel in 2017 lived true to its ambition of spiralling around the topics of imagination, the supernatural and horror. The producer, Nick Antosca, made of the unfathomable the leitmotif of the four seasons composing *Channel Zero* by giving life to storylines based on popular creepy pastas, horror short stories published on the net. The first season focused on a children's television program connected to a series of murders. Season 3 intermingled mental illness and cannibalism while season 4 exposed newlyweds' secrets following the discovery of a door in their basement. The second season, which is under scrutiny here, narrates the adventures of the protagonist Margot and her best friend, Jules.

Margot is introduced to the viewers as a character trapped in an uncompleted work of mourning and clinging to the memories of her dead father. Jules suffocates under her guilt feeling mainly originating from the distance that settled between her sister, mother and herself. Under the incentive of a common friend, JT, and along with Seth, a young man met at a bar and

with whom Margot quickly establishes a connection, the four of them decide to get a closer look at the No-End house. It is presented as an auxiliary of the irresistible appeal for the unknown, for the exploration of boundaries but also deception. Appearing and disappearing in diverse locations all over the world, the house occupies an omnipresent position as an object of fascination, as the centre of the gaze, both observing the characters and being observed. It gives birth to an alternate world which mimics Margot's reality; her father is for instance brought back to life, thus annihilating the border between life and death, between rationality and irrationality.

This article aims at accounting for the fascination effect *The House* exerts on the characters and on the viewers by referring to the French psychoanalytical theorist Jacques Lacan's approach on desire. The path of interpretation will first lead to the hypnotic rhythm engendered by a process of repetition: a repetition of places, persons, objects or events. However, *in the No-End House*, what is repeated is similar but not totally identical to the primary element, making it hard for the characters and the audience to cling to reality.

This hypnotic rhythm is linked to the "Medusa effect" defined as the "simultaneous reactions of intense attraction and repulsion" and that captures the gaze. The Medusa effect both elicits the petrifying power of the gaze and the mingling of attraction and repulsion. The combination of attraction and repulsion is reminiscent of the components of the sublime, fairly reminded by Bjorn K. Myskja in *The Sublime in Kant and Beckett*. "To fascinate is to immobilize by the power of the gaze", hence the emphasis laid in the second part of this article on the action of seeing and being seen (Encyclopedia of Lacanian Psychoanalysis). For Lacan, the gaze was primarily related to the mirror stage when after viewing himself in the mirror the subject establishes a stable version of the self. In his later essays, the gaze refers not to the look of the subject at the object but to the point at which the object looks back. The outcome is an interpretation that escapes the observing subject, shattering his/her sense of control. This is reinforced by the theme of the inverted mirror stage and even a *regressus ad uterum* in a house assimilated to a womb.

The desire to see what is being shown and what is not ubiquitous. The notion of desire will be developed for at the core of the house lays a fundamental lack that cannot be filled in. The house is a reflection of the fissures that crack open our lives when the Real disrupts them; the catch phrase 'this isn't real' used in the series holds a relatable force to each and every one of us.

The spell of repetition

The title of the series prefigures the pattern of repetition pursuing the characters and the viewers. What returns is what is repeated and what is added have to be considered for what matters, is the different factor between the original element and the repeated one. Lacan states that repetition inevitably leads to a gap, a loss of meaning. After seemingly stepping out of the No End house, Margot returns to a perfect replica of her home but the signs of otherness lead Margot and Jules to understand that they are actually imprisoned in the sixth room of the house; the neighbourhood where they live has been identically reproduced. The apparent sameness of their neighbourhood is disturbed by the addition of a unique flower, the orchid, replacing the marigolds normally present in Margot's garden. Inside her house, Margot is greeted by her dead father. The house is an auxiliary of the loss of meaning by introducing the Real -what cannot be grasped by the logos- into the Symbolic order of language. For Lacan, the psyche is structured through a triad: the Real is a state where only need exists. It cannot be expressed in language. The Imaginary order corresponds to the mirror stage while the Symbolic order marks the acceptance of the Name-of-the-Father, that is, the rules of society

controlling desire and communication. The resuscitated father is a figure of the impossible whose existence is prohibited in a law-organized society. The streets and houses are reproduced but additions are made: a new road appears out of nowhere with signs in French when the house shows itself in Quebec in the sixth episode. It seems to digest elements in the characters' everyday reality while defying the rational possibility of having a street and houses built overnight. In Margot's fridge, egg cartons are reproduced from one second to the next.

The first room in the house is an exhibition room where eight busts are displayed; they are clay replicas of the group-Margot, Jules, JT and Seth have joined when entering the house. The agreeable aesthetic experience of seeing their flawless busts, is shattered after the lights come out to reveal the clay busts, pulled apart in two, with the head opened by two hands defying gravity and a third hand splitting open the chests; it is proleptic of the shattering of the characters' identity and loss of meaning. The experience in room 1 is repeated in episode 4 when Margot and Jules re-enter the house in order to step back into reality. The different factor then lies in the display of the busts. Another dark colored face is seen emerging from the top of each head, highlighting the quasi annihilation of their identity devoured by the house. Room 2 is an empty blue room which exposes a man wearing a suit, a black mask and black gloves. The camera accompanies the hypnotic circular walk of the mysterious man around the characters and more intensely close to Margot. He vanishes after the lights are turned off and on again and a trace of blood is visible on the floor. The setting remains unchanged the second time; the masked man is no longer there but Jules has to jump over spreading pools of blood before they close on them, emphasizing the widening role played by the house in the taking over of the characters' identity.

In room 3, Margot is placed in the corridor of a hotel. The process of repetition begins with the wallpaper motif on the walls and the identical lamps set on each side of them. A mirror stands at the end of the corridor; a hand popping out holding the mirror frame and two feet can be seen. A mad sound mingling crying and laughing is heard. The viewer's discover at the same time Margot does when she walks past the mirror a man with gaunt eyes and a crazy smile. The presence of the mad man confirms the immersion into the irrational. He is the only element repeated on Margot's second passage in the room; the experience is then displaced to an old school of hers. Writing endlessly the imperative sentence "don't go" in chalk on a board, the mad man then dressed up as a female teacher conforms to the motif of repetition haunting the series.

An attic, empty except for a video projected on a screen, is the locus of the fourth room. The video repeats Margot's discovery of her father's dead body. The father figure is reproduced on Margot's second passage in the room with only his face on a stand, eyes closed, with the sound of breathing. The discrepancy factor which provokes the intrusion of the Real is that the face seems to be "an autonomous partial object, an organ which can magically survive without the body whose organ it is" (Zizek xi). In room 5, the confrontation with the Real takes the form of the reunion with the fatherly figure whose facial features are a vague echo of the true one. The video played on TV is the same watched by Margot in episode 1. Sequences and sentences from this video are themselves repeated. The intertwined repetitions are visible when Margot enters the room a second time. The same scene unfolds with the difference being the deformed faced father playing with water in a bathtub echoing Jules's scene in a tub in episode 2.

The repetition compulsion conjures up uncanny elements that "shatter the coordinates of our common reality" (Zizek xv). Margot's father dies three times in the alternate reality. The difference factor is the way he dies; Margot's presence is the common denominator in all three

cases. The repetition process and the discrepancy factor concur to the oppressive feeling of anxiety conveyed through the over proximity of the Real. The cars look like cars but have no engines. The orchids are actually orchid mantis, luring insects to feed on them. The swimming pool at Margot's house is bottomless. The 24 hours of a day are shortened: "how did they do it so fast?" (22:50) Jules asks in episode 1 after their busts are created within seconds. "How is it night already?" (The Reflection 12:07) she asks again in episode 4 when they are looking for a way out.

The entrancing repeated rhythm of the music tune accompanies the conjuring up of the unfathomable. Reminiscent of a hammer falling down mingled with a shrilling tune; it enlightens the characters' engulfment in the loss of meaning as well as the addition of the discrepancy factor. It is first heard in episode 1 when the camera zooms in and out on the house after the characters step inside it or in episode 2 after Margot sees a mask-like version of her mother's face in the kitchen bin. The house mirrors Ackbar Abbas's concept of "the deceptions of fascination." It refers to "any experience that captures our attention without at the same time submitting entirely to our understanding" (Abbas 348). The repetition of the discrepancy factor "makes what is ungraspable inescapable" (Blanchot 25). The house is incessantly gazed at by the characters and the viewers while being, at the same time, a beholder of "the gaze of the incessant and interminable" (Blanchot 25). This is Blanchot's very definition of the term fascination; it reveals the motif of the gaze as a key element in understanding the power of the No-End house.

The petrifying lure of the house

The term "lure" connects the theme of deception with the ideas developed in part 1 but also with the hypnotising vampirish power of the house which petrifies its victims, hence the advanced idea of the Medusa effect. The expression is borrowed here to indicate the Medusa effect of the house and its creatures, the theme of deception and it hints at the mingling of attraction and repulsion at the heart of fascination. These elements are mingled with the motif of the gaze, not only in the sense of the act of seeing and being seen or who is holding the eye of authority but more decisively in Lacan's wake. For the latter, the gaze is "a point of *failure* in the visual field, where, because the subject cannot see or be seen properly, s/he is discommoded, made anxious" (Krips 95). It is also linked with indeterminacy, elusiveness: "the source of the gaze is a 'stain', a point where what 'we try to apprehend... seems to elude us.'" This stain is precisely indeterminate, "totally lacking a precise identity" (Krips 97); it can evoke any interpretation and this provokes anxiety. At first, the house appears as the object of the act of observation but when it vanishes, it leaves an emptiness in the visual field, also making the characters inside it vanish from the common reality. The house is the central point of observation, suffocating by its overwhelming presence. The act of observation is omnipresent and a repetitive pattern lies at its core. The characters react the same way when they discover their clay busts in the first room. They use the sense of sight and touch: the upward and downward movement of the eyes that follow the harmonious lines of the replicas, the slight parting of their lips, the slow circular movement of the body around the busts to thoroughly realise them, the halting position to focus on the details and the light touch with their fingers. All the gestures reveal an attempt at grasping the unconceivable (the creation of perfect replicas of their faces in a matter of seconds) but the prolonged act of observation is also a marker of seduction by the uncanny.

The observation of the ungraspable follows the same pattern: the camera lingers on the characters' faces, shows their reaction before widening the scope and revealing to the viewers what they are transfixed with. The first episode analeptically shows Margot's discovery of her father's body. Through a close shot on her face, her unblinking eyes and immobility, the camera

reveals her disbelief and a need to understand before disclosing the object of Margot's gaze. The father's face is deformed, not precisely a Lacanian "stain" but certainly a point of indeterminacy as it lacks a precise identity. The moment of confrontation with the Real is invariably connected to the sense of sight and the slow change to immobility that expresses "an experience of trauma, dislocation and fascination all at once" (Abbas 349). It is the trauma of having "seen too much," of entering "a forbidden territory of what should have remained unseen" (Zizek xv). It is the dislocation ensuing from the sensation of being "outside human coordinates, outside our human reality" (Zizek x).

Trauma and dislocation rime with fascination because the very force of the discrepancy factor is mesmerising. When, in episode 2, JT sees his double in his duplicated house, his body reacts the same way Margot's does: the camera focuses on his face (unblinking eyes) and quasi immobility. It is for JT impossible not to look at his double kissing a girl. The hypnotic force of the house has the characters accept the improbable by transforming them into passive observers. The house is an omnipotent living entity vampirishly feeding from the characters' identity and memories. Vampires' mesmerising and luring force endures because of their "ability to reshape [themselves] continuously according to the time period's values or morals" (Buckley 1). The No-End house is both a dead organism (dormant when it is full and does not open the front door to visitors) and a living entity creating different experiences according to each character's memories. It feeds from memories and gives birth to other vampiric creatures referred to as "cannibals".

The question of the authority of the gaze is central: "to the vampire's victim, the vampire seems all-powerful, compelling, hypnotic" (Punter 104). This is the effect the house exerts on the persons who live in it: they lose their individuality. The house is not a stain *per se* but it eludes interpretation for it is the vehicle of negation. It keeps changing location and in those moments becomes a point of failure in the visual field. Likewise, the masked man in room 2 is a point of failure. Object of the characters' and the viewers' gaze, he gazes at the characters at the same time. Their quasi immobility illustrates Medusa's petrifying gaze: "there is a fear of physical petrification when faced with horrific circumstances, a deep-rooted and uneasy concern the body might not flee as it is supposed to when being attacked" (Kaplan 77). The characters are not attacked but the man's physical closeness creates anxiety. The absence of a face makes him a point of failure even if he appears as the eye of authority in the scene. He is an auxiliary of the scopic drive of the house.

The Medusa effect the house engenders transfixes both the characters and the viewers thanks to the zoom-in / zoom-out movement of the camera. The camera is the eye of the house showing the viewers what takes place inside. The play on closeness and distance equals a vampire and prey game. This close-up and zoom-out alternation contributes to "the tension between representation and elusiveness" (Baumbach 8) that accounts for the fascination effect. As the eye of authority, the house controls the balance between monstration and absence, hence the theme of deception. The cars have no engines, the orchids are cannibal flowers, the swimming pool is an entrance into a bottomless world, Margot's wardrobe opens on the swimming pool, but the window of her bedroom does not open. Once in the house, the characters' status changes from "I see" to "I am seen by".

The mesmerising force of the house leads the characters to cohabit with the impossible: Seth is a permanent resident in the house, luring people into entering and staying inside, bringing new girls in as a food source, then having them lived confined in different houses surrounding a cage. Five people are kept prisoners in it, the family the house created for him and that he accepted as such. This normalised situation parallels Margot casually having

breakfast with her fake father and JT telling his double he could give him advice on girls. The house fragments the characters' mastery of perception of the surrounding world, of rationality and of their own identity, slowly filling them with the same void the house is actually made of. It is linked to the observation of the self.

The series highlights the path from identity deconstruction to reconstruction. In room 3 (episode 1), a mirror stands in the middle of a corridor; a single hand is seen on one side of its frame and two feet. Margot's eyes are fixated on the mirror, on the hand and feet. The vision of these body parts conjoined with her vision of her father's face exposed on a stand (room 4) or her mother's face in a bin show the emphasis laid upon the body fragmentation. Margot's alternate reality is a place of regression to childhood. In the No-End house, Lacan's mirror stage seems reversed. It is the process of identification for a child between his body and his image in a mirror. For Margot, room 6 is the place of the disunification of the self: "it's like he took the memory in and ate it" (Beware The Cannibals 24:35-24:37). The self is fragmented because the characters are subtracted from the power of the eye/I, from the Symbolic triggered by the confrontation with the Real. The fragmented self is connected to the multiplicity of viewpoints on the same element: each visitor sees different things in rooms 3, 4 and 5. In room 5, JT sees the mysterious masked man met in room 2 who takes his mask off only to reveal a second mask that looks identical to him. Proleptic of JT's meeting with his double, the mysterious man plays the role of a mirror but the projected reflection is a fake persona created by the house. JT sees a deceiving version of himself which only confronts him with the Real. For Jules, the process of regression goes even deeper as what she experiences can be assimilated to a *regressus ad uterum*. In room 3, she comes into contact with a membranous white ball -which seems to play the role of a mirror- and whose hypnotizing force entices her to touch it in order to eat away the memories of her as a toddler with her mother and sister. The beginning of episode 2 films her immersed in a bathtub. With the water as a reminder of the amniotic fluid combined with the sound of a heartbeat, she seems to be regressing to the state of a foetus. This connection to fluids or womb-like elements reaches a climax when she finds herself imprisoned within the ball in episode 6. The ball appears to function as an organ *per se*. Endowed with the Medusa effect, it attracts Jules, calling on her: "come here... come closer" (The Hollow Girl 16:13-16:21). This voice coming out of the ball stands for Žižek's partial object. The ball stands for the point of failure in her visual field. It is an indeterminate, leaving stains on her memories. The more she touches the ball, the more blurred her vision becomes and the more she even fails to see herself in those memories. Instability was already present in Margot's, Jules's and JT's lives before entering the house but, as a magnifying glass, it pushes the disruption further. The house offers the possibility of fulfilling the desire of filling in the absence that permeates their lives.

The fascinating house of desire

At the heart of the distinction between desire and want is the satisfaction of a lack which is not possible in desire. For Lacan, man lives "according to a permanently *unsatisfied* desire, a desire that is for this reason inevitably a little painful and awkward, and which continually reminds him of the fundamental lack that lies at the heart of his being" (Kesel 3). Margot expresses to Jules why she won't leave the house: "I can't just walk away right now. You know how long I've wanted a second chance with him" (Nice Neighbourhood 18:28-18:33). The house reunites her with her father to free her from her guilt feeling and help her understand the reason for his suicide. The fake father confirms this fact when he says to Margot: "I was put

here because I think that's what you wanted." (Beware The Cannibals 06:17). When Jules touches the ball, she can feel the closeness she lost with her mother and sister; the ball satisfies her immediate lack. JT wants a perfect appearance, that is what the house gives him with his bust in room 1 and his double, "the version of you that you want to be; the alpha version" (Nice Neighborhood 27:48- 27:54).

What the house wants is made clear before the characters enter it the first time. The plate nailed at the entrance reads: "Unknown artist The No-End House Date unknown Wood, nails, copper, caulk, you". The house is a kernel of absence which cannot exist without the persons it feeds on. It is a vagina dentata, sharing characteristics with a castrative mother figure. It reproduces persons, animals, objects remembered by Margot although they only exist to be torn apart by the father creature to devour the pomegranate-like substance they are made of.

Margot's desire is underlyingly linked to an absence: "I just wanted to see what you saw and feel what you felt, just anything that would make me feel closer to you again" (Beware The Cannibals 10:30-10:38). Her desire is to fill in the absence the non-recognition of his face left in her memory, to fill in the lack of understanding left by the confrontation with the Real, symbolised by the blank left in language itself. Her sentence remains unfinished: "I found you, you didn't look like you, your face..." (Beware The Cannibals 9:26-9:32). She can only leave the blank that haunts her unanswered; she has to accept the attempt at filling in the absence only impregnates her with a bigger absence, that is the blank left by the fading of her dearest memories.

Likewise, the father creature has to figure out that he is simply an auxiliary of the scopical drive of the house. The scopical drive is "a site for the circulation of both voyeuristic and exhibitionistic impetuses that, working together, create pleasure" (Krips 98). The fake father leaves a mark of his cannibalistic act to be seen: what is left of the eaten mother is a face found in the kitchen bin by Margot. The camera lingers on the act of devouring intermingling moaning, tearing apart of the limbs, avidity and visible pleasure. The viewers are the observers of this deviant act. Only when he admits he is a figure of lack, only made from Margot's memories can he die free from any guilt and not be brought back by the house. He slowly becomes aware of his true nature: "there is a gap in my memory and I realize I'm not supposed to be here" (Nice Neighborhood 14:51-14:58). The ultimate sign of love is to remain an absence; accepting the impossibility of his existence, he reaches a self-awakening and is eventually called by his name "John".

The white ball wants to be gazed at and touched by Jules to eat away her memories. The more she touches it, the longer her trance lasts, the more attraction and torment are visible on her face. The surrender in episode 3 of her body leaning forward and backward before she faints and falls on the floor can be assimilated to a *jouissance*, which is close to pain for Lacan. The womb-like ball completely engulfs Jules in episode 6. She goes through the initiation stages depicted by Mircea Eliade: the isolation from family members, the trials before facing the ultimate monster and the symbolic death and rebirth when she uses a knife to cut her way out. She emerges from the ball soaked in blood. Her symbolic rebirth is possible when she understands that her desire to comprehend the absence left by the distancing with her family has to remain a blank.

Seth lives a fulfilled life in the house because it stands for what he desires: to be an absence himself. "I keep waiting for one of you to understand how magnificent this place is, all the gifts that it can give you because memory is a disease and that this house is the cure"

(The Hollow Girl 33:00-33:38). Seth is offered an absence of memories whereas JT's double is avid for memories; he wants to step into the Symbolic: "I just wanna get out of here. I'm real. I feel everything" (The Reflection 23:23-23:33).

The house is a vehicle of the non. "This house looks like our house but it's not. This street looks like ours but it's not in our neighborhood. It's not in our reality. You don't belong here" (Nice Neighborhood 23:08-23:17). "This is not your home and that is not your dad [...] It's him but it's not him" (Nice Neighborhood 18:22-18:25). The eggs Margot's fake father cooks "taste like nothing" (Nice Neighborhood 09:35). It is "an organism, it has instincts, it has an appetite, it has a will to survive" (The Hollow Girl 12:09-12:20). It is an endless void, an excess of indeterminacy which explains "the very blindness at the heart of vision" (Harris 3). This blindness echoes the stain as the source of the gaze. "The emptiness Lacan has in mind [...] is and remains empty once and for all. For him, desire never ceases desiring" (Kesel 36). The house's object of desire is not so much having a perennial presence in the Symbolic as feeding from the characters to fill in the absence that lies at its core. The blank it is made of cannot be filled in, hence the endless displacement on a multiplicity of victims.

The exit sign appears when the symbolic castration is performed: Margot stabs the fake father with Jules's help, cutting the bond with this transitional object to her desire of knowledge of the mysteries of death. Jules tears apart the transitional object to her desire of piercing the reasons for familial separateness. Only then can Margot and Jules glance behind them and see what had been there all along: an emptiness they had to accept and are now ready to live with after the correct distance has been installed between them and the object of desire.

Conclusion

This article considered the interconnectedness between the repetition pattern, the power of the gaze, the themes of deception, fragmentation, deconstruction and reconstruction to try and comprehend the fascination effect *The No-End House* triggers. The discrepancy factor between the original element and the repeated one is the intrusion of the Real, leading the characters to be hypnotized by what the house gives them to see. At the image of Medusa, it horrifies but equally captivates its victims; it petrifies them, physically immobilizing them and capturing their minds. The house gazes back at the characters and the viewers and questions the reason for their fascination. A shatterer of bodies, a fragmenter of the self and of the sense of sight itself, the house constitutes an excess of emptiness; its existence is only possible thanks to its victims' memories and desires. For the characters, it is about the desire to fill in the absence triggered by an idealized past, and more importantly a desire to obsessively understand the gap left by the confrontation with the Real. The house exists through its desire to fill in the non (non place, non time, non experience of memories) that lays at its core. The experiences in the No-end house are meaningful to each of us. Memories can have a vampiric force; we might want, just like Seth, to find a cure. The house is, for the viewers, a projection of their own desire. Who would say no to the possibility of filling in the absence left by the loss of a loved one? The house is also a projection of our own moments of insanity when facing trauma, mental stability vacillates and we want to convince ourselves that "this isn't real". It is a projection of all the times we are on the edge of the Symbolic. The house will continue to exist, allure and repulse, remaining simply "hungrier and hungrier" (The Hollow Girl 10:38).

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