The Supernatural Media Virus: Virus Anxiety in Gothic Fiction Since 1990

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[transcript] Contemporary Literature

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Introduction: The Age of Virus Anxiety

In June 2009, a thread on the forum SomethingAwful.com asked users to participate in a Photoshop challenge involving the creation of images displaying a paranormal feature. One user named Victor Surge, whose real name was later revealed to be Eric Knudsen, uploaded two grainy black-and-white images in response to this call. These pictures showed a faceless and uncannily tall figure in a suit lurking in the background of each photo; the creature was referred to as "Slender Man" by the user. Slender Man became a highly successful Internet myth almost instantly; he was a figure of "crowd-sourced online mythology" (Crawford 2015: 42). Numerous users added their own manipulated photographs, drawings, and short stories too; some even created web series and video games. A feature film entitled *Slender Man* (dir. Sylvain White) was even released in 2018.[1] All of these creations have one thing in common: an obsession with the eerie Slender Man.

Due to its origin, the Slender Man phenomenon has proven to be highly mutable and, thus, it cannot be pinned down to one specific plot or narrative scheme. Some documents depict the Slender Man as having tentacles, whereas others do not; the figure abducts children and young adults in many versions, but not in all of them; the diverse web series revolving around this particular monster have furthermore added the ideas that close proximity to the Slender Man causes interference

1 Knudsen copyrighted his creation in 2010 (Chess/Newsom 2015: 29). As a result, only a few for-profit works that center on the Slender Man have been created, the major exception being the *Slender Man* film. Instead, the myth has thrived in digital subculture through nonprofit fan ventures.

with video and audio recordings, that this creature can induce memory loss as well as violent behavior, and that becoming aware of the monster causes it to target that observer. The characters of these web shows film as much of their own lives as possible by means of video diaries. Through this self-surveillance, they attempt to detect the monster's presence and account for gaps in their own recollection. However, the vast amount of footage created in this fashion poses a great danger to other people: should they watch the videos, and thereby learn of the monster's existence, they will become its next victims. As this exemplifies, the Slender Man is essentially a modern reincarnation of the tale of the boogeyman,[2] adapted to new media technologies, and infused with an uncanny notion of contagion.

The Slender Man phenomenon reveals a growing interest in storytelling practices that were impossible prior to the advent of what Henry Jenkins has termed "participatory culture" (2006: 3). The myth "came about during the mass media turn toward transmedia storytelling" (Chess/Newsom 2015: 16) and, hence, thrived through storytelling practices that highlight "the fluidity of medium, storyteller, and process" (ibid: 18). Slender Man is not one coherent story; instead, it is a network of diverse media objects that all add little bits and pieces to the myth. In addition to such networked storytelling, the myth is deeply concerned with the implications of network culture itself: after all, Slender Man travels through the links and nodes of social media networks such as YouTube – not unlike a computer virus – in order to find new victims, thereby revealing the otherwise invisible ties between users through the storyworld. Almost all of the Slender Man web series either play with or outright break the fourth wall by featuring eerie and threatening posts in some of the videos' comment sections; in this way,

2 Indeed, discussions of the Slender Man almost always include a close examination of monsters that appear in folklore or popular fiction and that may have inspired this myth. Victor Surge himself stated that he was inspired by "The Tall Man" from the 1979 movie *Phantasm* (dir. Don Coscarelli); other than that, the myth also strongly engages with Lovecraftian ideas. For a concise discussion of possible inspirations for Slender Man, see Chess/Newsom (2015).

the story transcends the video frame's defined borders, as happens in *Marble Hornets* (2009-2014). Other web series acknowledge each other's existence: characters from *TribeTwelve* (2010-), *EverymanHYBRID* (2010-2018), and *DarkHarvest00* (2010-) eventually meet up to compare their findings about the monster. While this primarily serves to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality, it also plays with the idea that our networks and media may pose a threat to us. As Joseph Crawford explains, the Slender Man myth gives narrative shape to fears that are specific to the era of the Internet:

> The way that Slenderman [sic] follows its victims evokes fears of cyberstalking, online harassment and internet surveillance, all of which can feel like being stalked by some faceless, omnipresent monster. Like computer viruses, or online pornography and propaganda, Slenderman proliferates virally. […] Slenderman's victims, like the figure of the internet addict in the popular imagination, tend to become unhealthy, anxious, obsessive and socially isolated, and the fact that the monster is often depicted as preying upon children reflects the anxiety that young people might be particularly vulnerable to being misled, traumatised or exploited by the individuals and content they interact with online. (Crawford 2019: 81-82)

Its focus on new media, social networks, and online culture as well as its viral nature are very possibly the decisive factors that have allowed the myth to become an overnight success.

Slender Man is an excellent example of a trope that has occurred repeatedly in Gothic fiction over the past decades and that I define and discuss in detail in this book: this trope is the "supernatural media virus," a paranormal entity that follows the logic of contagion and that exploits modern media as well as society's interconnectedness in order to spread its malevolent influence.[3] This trope conjoins two cultural key metaphors – the virus and the network – and pairs them with

3 I have advanced aspects of this trope in a research article in which I focus specifically on the supernatural media virus as a crisis narrative. For more information, see Schmitz (2020b).

diverse media. Significantly, while the monstrous embodiment of this confluence of virus, network, and media is a recurring theme in Gothic fiction, it has received little explicit academic attention and, thus, remains undertheorized. I advance a definition of the supernatural media virus and examine its function in Gothic narratives since the 1990s in order to address this gap in research.

Both the virus and the network are cultural key metaphors at present. Such cultural metaphors function as seemingly universally applicable thinking patterns that affect how we engage with reality (Friedrich 2015: 381). As such, they are applied to many facets of life and fundamentally affect our understanding of the world around us. Metaphors do more than merely describe a specific phenomenon by referring to another, more readily understandable term; instead, metaphors actively shape our perception of reality. As such, they are "worldmaking devices" that function "as a means of structuring, narrativizing, and naturalizing cultural phenomena and transformations" (Nünning/Grabes/Baumbach 2009: xii). Thus, they have a prescriptive function that reinforces ideologies and dictate certain norms and behaviors (Nünning 2009b: 244-245). Metaphors do significant cultural work by organizing an otherwise chaotic reality and by shaping social practices.

Describing something as a virus or as behaving virally does not solely mean that the phenomenon resembles a virus in terms of its behavioral mechanisms; instead, it also dictates a certain way of interacting with that entity and with everything affected – or infected – by it. Thus, when it became customary to designate a certain type of malignant software as a "computer virus" in the 1980s, this terminology was accompanied by phrases such as "safe hex" and "digital hygienics," dictating a "healthy" way of interacting with computers (Parikka 2016: 179). This terminology closely resembles the AIDS discourse of the time.[4] Up until this day, users who do not adhere to these rules and hence "catch"

4 Parikka illustrates the powerful implications of the virus metaphor by offering an in-depth analysis of the intersection of the discourses surrounding both computer viruses and the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. Both phenomena entered

a computer virus, as well as hackers who create such malware, are stigmatized as irresponsible or reckless persons. "Virus," "viral," and "contagion" are omnipresent buzzwords that employ the idea of the biological virus as a blueprint to approach a variety of social, technological, and media-related phenomena. These terms illustrate a fixation on diseases in both bodies and machines in the form of biological viruses and computer viruses. Narratives produced within this "Virus Culture," to borrow a term coined by literary scholar Jeffrey Weinstock (1997: 83), attest to the current preoccupation with viral diseases: recent "reanimations" of the zombie in horror fiction, for example, almost exclusively explain the rise of the undead by means of a mysterious biological virus, as exemplified by the *Resident Evil* media franchise (1996-), whereas earlier narratives feature supernatural explanations for the monstrous undead (Luckhurst 2015: 170). However, it is not just a fascination with biological contagions that has found its way into popular culture; computer viruses infecting and disrupting the foundations of a society that has become dependent on technology are a common trope in science fiction. These digital viruses affect not only computers, but also frequently biological bodies: in William Gibson's cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* (1984), a person can die by being attacked by malignant software while hooked up to the virtual reality called "The Matrix."

The metaphor can also be applied to the media landscape, in which it gives shape to both benign and worrisome phenomena: viral videos, viral tactics, viral marketing, and so on. A particularly intriguing video – be it a funny home video, an unsettling recording of police misconduct, or an intriguing deepfake of a celebrity – can travel across the world within hours through platforms such as YouTube or Facebook, simply because it evokes an emotional resonance and because users decide to share it. It is this phenomenon that media strategists try to utilize in viral marketing campaigns: instead of investing vast amounts of money in advertising, such campaigns rely on preexisting social networks to raise awareness of the product and to create a buzz which

popular consciousness at roughly the same time and could, hence, exploit similar assumptions and anxieties regarding physical/digital contacts.

will be spread around the network by its users. Recent years have witnessed, time and again, how these same dynamics can be utilized to flood social media platforms with so-called "fake news" – hoaxes, propaganda, and outright false information disguised as legitimate, real news. While fake news might not be a new phenomenon, as the traditional medium of the "yellow press" shows, social media in particular have allowed for a hitherto unknown and uncontrolled dissemination speed and the possible reach of such misinformation. The 2016 US presidential campaign in particular illustrated the strong influence that fake news can have on political discourse and showed the consequences of their uncontrolled spread. Similar dynamics of misinformation and rumors have been observable during the COVID-19 pandemic. Much of the shared content engages in fearmongering as well as scapegoating, moving somewhere between exaggerations, false information, and elaborate conspiracy theories.

The coronavirus pandemic exemplifies that there is more to a virus than merely its microbe; the stories and rumors we share about these diseases also spread virally. Few people are medical experts with an in-depth knowledge of the extremely complex phenomenon of a global virus strain. The vast majority of people rely on these experts to study and structure the goings-on and to narrate a coherent tale about the disease outbreak, spread, and to imagine its eventual containment. Vague ideas and assumptions arise due to any outbreak's complexity as well as due to the dependency on only a few experts who often do not agree with one another; fake news, rumors, scapegoating, and fearmongering abound. Microbes such as SARS-CoV-2 not only cause illnesses among biological bodies, but also induce powerful media viruses. We need to scrutinize those discourses that emerge around any viral phenomenon in order to gauge the cultural significance of these assumptions, imaginations, narratives, and metaphors.

Metaphors, such as the virus, are never just a simple reflection of reality, but instead fulfill important ideological functions. Weinstock, writing in an American context at the end of the 20th century, claims that the omnipresence of the viral in public discourse is due to the fact that virus "paranoia" is the contemporary cultural paradigm: "*Fin de siecle*

[sic] American society is a 'Virus Culture' – a landscape obsessed with the fear of contagion, infected with 'infection paranoia'" (1997: 83). This claim accounts for virus narratives' popularity in popular science and horror fiction of the late 20th century, even up until today. However, it does not explain the virus metaphor's application to harmless phenomena, such as viral videos of cats. Stephen Dougherty instead ties the popularity of the metaphor to the increase in digitalization processes, which are changing society fundamentally (2001: 4). Dougherty explains the success of the virus metaphor by tracing it back to current social conditions: society is developing into an interconnected structure in which contagions of all kinds travel both fast and far.

At present, we live in times of virus anxiety: the permanent expectation of all kinds of viral diseases and, in particular, the anticipation of the virus – that one disease that might well do us all in. "Fear" describes an emotional response to some specific, immediate threat, regardless of whether that threat is real or imagined. Anxiety, by contrast, is an on-going and unpleasant state of uneasiness, restlessness, and inner turmoil that is focused on some diffuse, future threat. Expanding on Weinstock's and Dougherty's ideas, virus anxiety describes that dreadful realization that today's societies have become susceptible to a variety of afflictions. Globalization, technologization, digitalization, and increasing connectivity are the great benefits of our times that certainly offer a broad range of luxuries. At the same time, they also each create dangerous weak spots: with global travel comes the fast, global spread of disease, as the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates; with technologization and digitalization comes the dependency on these technologies, and thus the likelihood of technological failures and computer viruses, such as Emotet, which was deemed one of the greatest digital threats in 2019; the wish for greater connectivity comprises the origin of those vast networks that ultimately facilitate any virus' spread, regardless of whether that is a biological, technological/digital, or media-related virus. Our current virus anxiety relates directly to the realization that we are living in the globalized and technologized network society.

We encounter networks everywhere in the current language of everyday life. We speak of social networks, the Internet, television net-

works, train and bus networks, and so on. Numerous examples in popular culture illustrate our fascination with the so-called "small world theory" put forward by network scientists such as Albert-László Barabási (2002) and Duncan J. Watts (2004).[5] According to this theory, every person is connected to any other person through a chain of people with an average number of only six intermediaries. The popularity of the small world theory exemplifies the current fascination with the network metaphor and networking as a behavioral paradigm, even though this theory is frequently reduced to simplistic platitudes such as "everything is connected to everything."

Alexander Friedrich claims that the term "network" has become a *kulturelle Leitmetapher* ("cultural key metaphor") (2015: 381). Today, networking appears to be a basic pattern that governs organic, social, and technical structures (ibid: 382). As Friedrich explains elsewhere: "Aware of the numerous interdependencies in complex societies, we use network metaphors colloquially to label the ways things are connected in our daily existence – while not really understanding all these relationships in detail" (2009: 291). Importantly, networking eventually develops from a description of states to an objective of actions through the prescriptive nature of metaphors: networking becomes a behavioral paradigm (Friedrich 2015: 382). The network metaphor, therefore, allows us to simply grasp the otherwise complex, networked structures of reality; at the same time, however, it is the metaphor itself that imposes these structures onto the world.

The sociological concept of the "network society" was coined during the 1980s and 1990s in order to describe transformations in the structures of societies, something befitting the rise of the network as a cultural key metaphor (Castells 2010b; van Dijk 2012). Jan van Dijk describes networks in general as "becoming the nervous system of our society" (2012: 2). He sees social, media, and communication networks

5 Some examples are the film *Six Degrees of Separation* (dir. Fred Schepisi, 1993), the TV series *The L Word* (2004-2009), or the party game "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon."

as the organizational modes that determine our modern society's structure. As well as van Dijk, Manuel Castells is one of the sociologists who is most commonly associated with the concept of the network society. Castells has more radical views on this type of society when compared to van Dijk. As he writes in *The Rise of the Network Society*, it is no longer people and groups that constitute the basic units of society, but rather networks. These decentralized networks drive the underlying dynamics of modern societies: "Not that people, locales, or activities disappear. But their structural meaning does, subsumed in the unseen logic of the meta-network where value is produced, cultural codes are created, and power is decided" (2010b: 508). Castells' conceptualization of the network society has many more sinister implications for the individual person than van Dijk's; the network is described as a self-expanding, uncontrollable entity that not only impacts upon every aspect of society, but furthermore assumes the power to determine politics, cultures, and even nature itself.

This monograph builds upon this notion of the network society. What makes the concept so useful for discussion is that it is abstract and obscure on the one hand, and suspiciously concrete on the other. The concept is currently used to describe Western societies in particular; the idea already shapes how we view and understand these societies at this present moment. However, most theories of the network society oftentimes build on ill-defined ideas of connectivity and seldom consider the network metaphor's implications. In other words, a suspiciously vague concept currently affects how we view modern societies and actively imposes the structures of networks upon these societies. Similarly, vague stances and imaginations resonate in fictional treatments of the network society: on the one hand, it is claimed that these networks are omnipresent and extremely powerful, while they are depicted as elusive and too complex to be fully understood on the other.

Contagion is one of the network society's defining characteristics. Due to its interconnectedness on all levels – social, financial, economic, and others – the network society is highly susceptible to chain reactions. Social trends are amplified and biological diseases as well as computer viruses travel faster through these networks. In

Contagious Metaphor, Peta Mitchell even goes so far as to claim that by now the terms "contagion" and "network" have become co-constitutive, making it impossible to think of one without thinking of the other (2012: 123). Viruses – whether media-related, biological, or digital – have found their ideal environment in today's network society, spreading seemingly everywhere within a brief moment.

As this rough overview has shown, several scholars have discussed the recent proliferation of both virus and network metaphors in a variety of discourses. Some of those scholars, such as Mitchell, have proceeded to explicitly focus on the intersection of the two metaphors. However, too little attention has been paid to date to the *interlinking* of viruses and networks as it is represented in *fiction*. Furthermore, those scholars who do discuss the intersection of these metaphors in fiction, such as Priscilla Wald in her excellent study *Contagious* (2008), often limit their analyses to medical thrillers. Hence, nonmedical fiction's power to negotiate and even shape our understanding of viruses and networks as well as our capacity to recognize and estimate the implications of the interplay of these metaphors is underappreciated. However, it is particularly this type of fiction that can yield valuable insights into how these metaphors find application in novel subject matters and the cultural work they do, given that this medium is not restricted to the dynamics dictated by the procedures and politics that lie behind biomedical and/or public health institutions.

In this monograph, I expand on work that has already been conducted on these cultural key metaphors by focusing explicitly on their representation in Gothic fiction. This type of fiction has frequently employed a cautionary strategy in which the dangers of moral deviations are exemplified by vividly depicting them in their most horrifying form. The "dark side" of social and cultural developments, and new technology and its possibly detrimental effect on humans in particular, are one of the Gothic's favorite topics: in *Frankenstein* (Shelley 1818), electricity allows Dr. Viktor Frankenstein to create life and, thus, to play God – albeit with terrible consequences; *Poltergeist* (dir. Tobe Hooper, 1982) envisions the television as the gateway to another, ghostly world that looms in our living rooms; users of cell phones turn into raging, zombie-like

creatures in *Cell* (King 2006). Every emerging technology has received its Gothic treatment, even since the earliest days of Gothic fiction. The supernatural media virus, hence, comprises a continuation of an age-old tradition, one which highlights the downside of omnipresent media and the global flows of capital, information, and people.

Contemporary Gothic fiction, as well the study thereof, has focused on factors such as globalization, technologization, and mediatization. For example, the collected volume *Technologies of the Gothic in Literature and Culture: Technogothics*, edited by Justin D. Edwards (2015a), concentrates explicitly on the interplay between Gothic and technology; likewise, *Globalgothic*, edited by Glennis Byron (2013a), investigates the globalization of the Gothic and the Gothicization of globalization. In addition, a plethora of research has been published on contemporary fictions of the "zombie apocalypse" and discuss a shrinking world in which people and their infections travel fast and far, seemingly without any boundaries left to stop them. These are only some of the currently popular approaches; significantly, these approaches all regard Gothic as an investigation into the changing nature of the human being and the fear of dehumanization. The body of research pertaining to the themes of technology, connectivity, and globalization in late 20th and 21st century Gothic fiction is expanding at exceptional speed.

By focusing on the intersection of the virus and the network metaphor in Gothic fiction since 1990, this book gauges how such narratives reflect on the pervasiveness of technology and modern media in a networked society. This is achieved by focusing on a particular form of the virus metaphor, namely what I have referred to above as the "supernatural media virus." This term describes a specific type of monster that is portrayed in popular culture, which may be defined as a virulent supernatural entity that uses diverse media technologies, such as videotapes or the Internet, as vectors of transmission. The Slender Man is but one example of such a supernatural media virus, using footage of itself to infect new victims and exploiting both the networks and dynamics of the Internet. This study explores how depictions of the supernatural media virus reflect on, negotiate, and ultimately shape anxieties regarding today's network society by situating the trope in its

current cultural context and by examining this particular form of the virus metaphor further.

The idea that the mere encounter with a text can have dire implications for its readers is not new. Previous Gothic fiction already features one such "corruptive manuscript," as I refer to it. Robert W. Chambers' short story collection *The King in Yellow* (1895), for example, features a mysterious, forbidden play that induces madness in its readers. In M. R. James' "Casting the Runes" (1911),[6] a spurned academic and occultist murders his critics by slipping them a piece of paper with runic letters scrawled on them. Similarly, the very act of reading the *Necronomicon*, H. P. Lovecraft's infamous fictional grimoire that appears in numerous iterations of his fiction as well as in those of his like-minded authors, "leads to terrible consequences" (Lovecraft 2008 [1938]: 622).[7] The Gothic trope of the corruptive manuscript has taken on new forms with the advent of the information age and the rise of the network society – in short, with the emergence of an increasingly digitalized, technologized, and interconnected society. First, it has been adapted to encompass modern media: it is not only printed text, such as those found in the aforementioned examples, but also film, television, video games, and virtually every type of medium that can potentially contaminate those engaging therewith. Second, the corruptive manuscript, as represented nowadays, has the capacity to cause a far-reaching catastrophe within in a short period of time by traveling through the vast networks created by today's media landscape: the corruptive manuscript has gone viral.

This discussion focuses not only on the representation of the supernatural media virus, but specifically upon how such representations implicitly negotiate life in a networked and technologized world. Of par-

6 Mysterious documents, and the supernatural forces that may reside within them, comprise a recurring theme in James' tales. Other well-known examples include "Canon Alberic's Scrapbook" (1894), "The Tractate Middoth" (1911), and "The Uncommon Prayer-book" (1921).

7 Joseph Crawford uses the term "Terrible Text" to describe this trope (2015: 39). However, in order to place greater emphasis on the negative consequences that the act of reading in itself has, I instead prefer the term "corruptive manuscript."

ticular interest in this context is the representation of the interactions between the virus and its host, its environment, and its vector – or, to use different terms, its consumer, the network society, and the corruptive manuscript, respectively. These factors yield insight into how life in the network society is perceived and which behaviors are legitimized through the metaphor. Three sets of tightly interwoven questions resonate in each of my analyses: first, how is the interaction between the virus and the reader/viewer/user of the corruptive manuscript represented? Does this person, for instance, spread the virus knowingly and, if so, what are the motivations for doing so? I argue that it is possible to examine how the virus enforces a specific behavior in its victims, and how the life of the individual person as well as their influence over the network as a whole is conceived of in such fictions, by focusing on the interaction between virus and host/consumer.

Second, how does the supernatural media virus operate within and affect its environment (i.e., the network society)? To what extent is society explicitly represented as a network? Whereas the first set of questions focuses on the potential consequences of a single person's actions for the network, this second set concentrates more on the network's influence on the individual through a close analysis of the, oftentimes only implicit, portrayal of the network's characteristics. Most fictions depict the network as an omnipresent, yet invisible and confusing structure that influences all of life's aspects. It is also an ominous, complex, and incomprehensible structure; the anxieties regarding the network society arise in large part from the inability to view and to understand this structure in its totality.

Third, how does the virus exploit its own vector's medium-specific characteristics? The network society's implementation affects diverse fields of our everyday lives, be it politics, the economy, law, or culture; in order to pare down this otherwise vast topic, the present monograph centers mostly on the (changing) function of media and communication technologies in the network society. Hence, this set of questions focuses particularly on the corruptive manuscript's nature. Some media, for example, are more easily accessible or reproducible than others, and are, therefore, advantageous vectors for rapid transmission. Each medium

has different properties that affect the virus' method and capacity to cause disease.

These three interrelated aspects of host, environment, and vector reveal how the trope of the supernatural media virus and the anxieties regarding today's network society both coincide. Further themes that are relevant to the discussion of virus metaphors are encompassed within these questions: for instance, researching a virus' resilience and its evolution always also implies examining the virus' environment and its vector; similarly, discussing herd immunity – the indirect immune response that occurs through the formation of a high number of resistant hosts in a given population – harkens back to questions regarding the virus' environment and its potential hosts. Significantly, these focal points can be used for an analysis of most virus representations, not merely representations of the supernatural media virus. Hence, they situate the trope in the wider context of virus narratives in fiction, while also bringing this particular metaphor's specificities to the fore.

Yet, what are those specificities that comprise this trope? It is necessary at this point to take a closer look at the three components that the term "supernatural media virus" encapsulates. The texts that I discuss here revolve around a *supernatural* entity that operates in a virus-like manner. Hence, while some narratives, such as David Cronenberg's film *Videodrome* (1983) or Stephen King's novel *Cell* (2006), feature corruptive viral media – television in the first instance, mobile phones in the second – they do not fit the purpose of this study because they offer a scientific explanation of the goings-on. While these scientific explanations are almost always outrageously unrealistic and ludicrous, they nonetheless support the impression that the viral phenomenon can be analyzed in some way and is, therefore, ultimately comprehensible, and that it can thus be contained by scientific means. The problem was created by human means; it therefore should also be possible to solve the issue by human means. This is not the case with supernatural media viruses; these phenomena always elude the grasp of science and are, hence, "magic." They do not play by human rules and always evade our understanding. A similar claim holds true for the representation of the network society in these fictions: the network, too, is "magic" in that it

is too obscure, too complex, and simply too confusing to ever be fully understood, let alone to eventually become predictable or controllable. The virus' supernaturalness, hence, resonates with anxieties regarding the network society more generally.

The second component of the trope is the term "media." Communication and media technologies feature prominently in all of the discussions about the network society, oftentimes being viewed as a factor of unmatched importance in the dynamics of the network. Media, be it telecommunication media, social media or news and entertainment media, have become an omnipresent, inevitable part of everyday life. While these technologies and *the* media in particular – those institutions providing everyday news and entertainment – have always played a significant role in structuring society, they have achieved a hitherto unmatched level of pervasion today. It is the inescapable nature of such media that makes this research focus so valuable for a discussion of anxieties regarding the network society and its perceived dangers: in large part, the true impact of media technologies on our lives and worldviews cannot be estimated in full.

Lastly, the term "virus" is used deliberately instead of terms such as "contagion" or "infection." Due to its very nature, the virus is by far the most Gothic phenomenon of these three: not only does it transgress national, social, geographical, and bodily boundaries, but it also evades such dichotomous categories as dead/living. Viruses do not grow or metabolize, and they exploit other cells to reproduce themselves. The virus is hence parasitic and ghostlike. Furthermore, the term "virus" holds a problematic double meaning: it refers to both the microbe and to its disease, thereby conflating cause and effect to a certain degree. Finally, a virus' agency always depends on a host; it is only when the virus is introduced to a host that it becomes active. The spread of a virus always implies some form of (unintentional) complicity, transforming its victims into dangerous virus spreaders.

A detailed discussion of Gothic fiction is essential to understanding the Gothic potential of the virus in general as well as the supernatural media virus in particular. At first, it might seem easy to list a number of common features that appear in those fictions – whether in literature,

film, television, or any other narrative medium – generally described as "Gothic": they are frequently set in desolate places, such as castles, ruins, or labyrinths, and these texts represent the disturbing presence of ghosts, vampires, and other types of monsters. A general atmosphere of mystery, doom, and gloom pervades throughout the entire narrative, until the forces of evil are finally overcome, and the tale's heroes find their happy ending. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), today regarded as the first instance of Gothic fiction, certainly includes most of these signposts: the events take place in a medieval castle standing atop labyrinthine underground passages, which is haunted by a range of apparitions, such as bleeding statues and moving portraits. These supernatural occurrences eventually reveal the misdeeds of Manfred, lord of Otranto, and are only resolved once his wrongful rule over the castle comes to an end. Upon closer inspection, however, many texts which have been classified as Gothic do not include any of these characteristics: Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818), for instance, is not only devoid of medieval architecture, but furthermore abandons the idea of a supernatural monster at all, since the terrifying creature is the direct result of Frankenstein's scientific endeavors. Merely compiling a list of settings and characters does not offer a satisfactory explanation of what constitutes the Gothic – this type of fiction is simply too diffuse for that kind of reduction.

Part of the difficulty to define the Gothic resides in the fact that it is *not* a genre. Referring to it as a monolithic genre would mean tying the Gothic down to a specific period and making it subscribe to a predictable set of conventions. Instead, it is more useful to regard the Gothic as a mode:

> Changing features, emphases and meanings disclose Gothic writing as a mode that exceeds genre and categories, restricted neither to a literary school nor to a historical period. The diffusion of Gothic features across texts and historical periods distinguishes the Gothic as a hybrid form, incorporating and transforming other literary forms as well as developing and changing its own conventions in relation to newer modes of writing. (Botting 1996: 9)

As a mode, the Gothic not only transcends genres and periods, but also cultures. What originally began as a European literary phenomenon in the second half of the 18th century, has by now become a global mode. As Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes phrase it: "the Gothic, as a mode no longer constrained by fixed settings, time or characters, has freely materialised beyond the borders of generic ascription or emotion-generation in the English-speaking world" (2019: 2). Publications such as *Globalgothic* illustrate the extent to which the Gothic has come to be regarded as a mode that spans the entire world. Today, the Gothic has been globalized and globalization has been Gothicized, according to Byron; while (originally Western) Gothic tropes now appear everywhere, the globalization processes themselves are increasingly being described using Gothic terminology (Byron 2013b: 2). With the late 20th and early 21st century comes the emergence of cross-cultural and transnational Gothics, in which the by now global Gothic tropes merge with local folklore. Significantly, these cultural flows have in no way been unidirectional. While literary criticism once painted a gloomy picture of a "Mcglobal-Mcgothic monoculture" resulting from cultural homogenization, it now must be acknowledged that globalization does not equal Americanization, and that American culture, too, has assimilated tropes from other cultures (ibid: 3). The US American film *The Ring*, which I discuss in Chapter Four, is a case in point: the visual appearance of the ghost Samara strongly resembles Japanese depictions of the *onryō* – vengeful spirits from Japanese folklore. In other words, when speaking of Globalgothic we must acknowledge the multidirectional cultural flows that are the result of globalization.

In light of the mode's flexibility and diffuseness, it is more fruitful to view Gothic fiction as being primarily defined in terms of four tightly interrelated characteristics. In formulating them, I keep these features deliberately abstract and adaptable so as to acknowledge the mode's inherent changeability; they may be translated to more concrete terms when discussing specific texts. For this book's purposes, the defining features of the Gothic – regardless of medium or cultural context – can be summarized as follows: thematically, Gothic fiction is characterized by its intent focus on the intruding past, the transgression of moral or

social norms as well as ontological categories, and lastly by its ambivalence. Stylistically, the Gothic tends to mirror these features through complicated narrative techniques such as fragmentation, narrative digressions, unreliable narration, and open-endedness. These pillars are highly adaptable both historically and culturally, concern both a narrative's content and form, and are applicable regardless of a fiction's narrative medium. Well-known tropes from the Gothic, such as the ghost, decaying ruins, and the general atmosphere of doom and gloom, all fit into this framework. Likewise, the supernatural media virus works along the lines of these aspects. Just as these aspects feature to varying degrees in fiction, such narratives can have varying degrees of "Gothicness." Drawing a clear line of what counts as a Gothic text and what does not is therefore a difficult venture that seldom leads to a fruitful conclusion. In my analysis, I follow the suggestion advanced by Catherine Spooner: "Rather than worrying about what twenty-first century Gothic 'is', perhaps instead we should focus on what it does – how it is deployed, what kind of cultural work it performs, what meanings it produces" (2010: xii). In order to gauge this cultural work, a discussion is in order to elucidate what I postulate to be the four main features of the Gothic – the myriad forms in which they may appear and the function they fulfil in the narrative.

The relationship between past and present in the Gothic is discussed by Chris Baldick in his definition of this type of fiction. He concentrates specifically on the function of time and space, and on the question of how the two are interwoven intricately:

> For the Gothic effect to be attained, a tale should combine a fearful sense of *inheritance in time* with a *claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space*, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration. (1992: xix, my emphasis)

The Gothic distinguishes itself from other forms of fiction not only through its use of specific claustrophobic settings such as the aforementioned castle or labyrinth, but also through its portrayal of how such settings relate to the intersection of past and present. This is what Fred

Botting calls the "disturbing *return* of pasts upon presents" (1996: 1, my emphasis). The past is never truly gone and done with, but always encroaches upon and haunts the present. Ghosts and medieval settings feature so broadly in the Gothic because they all serve to signify the close interconnection of past and present.

Gilda Williams describes how variable such signifiers of a haunting past can be when discussing Gothic aesthetics in the visual arts:

> [T]he key Gothic pattern sees a lost history or an uninvited force impose itself on the present as a kind of haunting, demanding our urgent attention and resolution. This theme is often expressed in a set of familiar visual and conceptual symbols of a persisting past: ruins, the undead, history-laden objects, talking pictures, long-lost diaries and letters, haunted places or foreboding machinery. All of these Gothic (literary) tropes can be similarly updated in myriad forms, from cybernetically undead replicants to immortal e-mails which refuse supernaturally to be deleted. (2014: 415)

All of the seminal tropes associated with classic, canonical Gothic texts can have a modern, oftentimes technology-based equivalent. The supernatural media virus is one such modern equivalent of the Gothic's notorious tropes, frequently pairing conventional monsters from the past with modern technology.

Another central aspect of Gothic fiction is its focus on transgression. This can be an ontological transgression, such as the disruption of categories like living/dead: what is supposed to fit into mutually exclusive categories – either/or – becomes an uncanny in-between or neither. This applies to almost all of the Gothic's typical monsters. The ghost or the zombie, but also the virus of course, is neither alive nor dead, but instead an entity situated somewhere between these states of being. This ontological transgression often comes in conjunction with the neglect and overstepping of social or moral values: Victor Frankenstein's attempt to create a life-form out of corpses, for instance, is a rebellion against God's own power. Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) portrays a similar transgression of the order of things, with scientist Dr. Jekyll trying to change his human nature

by means of scientific potions, instead of self-restraint. Such transgressions almost never find a happy ending: Frankenstein and Jekyll both die after facing the consequences of their scientific endeavors. Similarly, in most fiction that depicts a virus of some sort – regardless of whether it is a biological, digital, media-related, or some other type of virus – its initial outbreak is caused by recklessness or even outright evil intent. Gothic writing becomes a means by which to reflect upon such transgressions and their cultural anxieties through the embodiment of these fears.

Gothic fiction inevitably remains ambivalent in its representation of such transgressions, attempting both to contest and reassert moral boundaries at the same time. In some fictions, the disruption of seemingly clear-cut oppositions such as past and present, death and life, or good and evil eventually leads to the restoration of social norms; other fictions, however, do not feature such a concluding resolution. The socially acceptable order of things is not always satisfyingly restored. Heroes may die, villains go unpunished, or, although all wrongs are seemingly set to right, the haunting simply goes on unabated. Additionally, these texts tend to be epistemologically ambiguous, remaining vague about significant plot developments. Hence, often confronted with only inferred indications about an event, readers can merely speculate about what has truly happened. It is this ambivalence that Scott Brewster refers to when describing the experience of reading a Gothic text: "Every sign, every detail, may conceal secret import: the critic/analyst cannot safely delimit interpretation or deliver a final reading without the possibility of missing some further meaning" (2012: 485-486). As he goes on to write: "Reading Gothic, we compulsively interpret random signs, haunted by the possibility that we may be deluded, that we have not seen enough or have seen too much. […] [M]adness in Gothic lies in the reading" (ibid: 493). It becomes impossible for the reader to ever create one coherent, final interpretation of a Gothic text. Instead, the narrative is a complex puzzle with too few or too many pieces – if they even fit together at all. The experience of reading such a fiction is in itself already a Gothic undertaking.

This epistemological ambivalence comes to the fore in the text's stylistic strategies. Gothic writing is characterized by a "tendency towards narrative digressions, opposition of various stories and registers, disputes of veracity; and an excessiveness in language, gesture, and motive" (Lloyd Smith 1996: 8). Here, once again, Shelley's *Frankenstein* is the Gothic novel *par excellence*: the novel includes multiple frame narratives, diverse narrative forms, and shifting points of view. Other recognizable strategies in the Gothic include unreliable narration, contradictory perspectives, and omissions; these elements all function to complicate a fixed, clear interpretation of the narrative. This stylistic ambiguity of the Gothic is by no means restricted to literature, but also appears in film, television, video games, graphic novels, and virtually every other narrative medium. The Gothic's storytelling strategies are transposed to fit their respective media. In film, for instance, flashbacks or episodic storytelling are two excellent examples of complicated, convoluted, and often even non-linear representational techniques borrowing from the Gothic.

It is this epistemological uncertainty, created through both thematic and stylistic means, that denotes the Gothic mode as particularly suitable for an exploration of networks and of the network society itself. Since networks are too complex and chaotic to be grasped in their totality, seemingly expanding and transforming endlessly, the ideal fictional representation of such interconnectedness consists in refusing easy interpretation and also withholding information:

> Because these sprawling, overlapping, and indefinitely expanding processes of interconnectedness, from law to disease to kinship, can never be fully grasped all at once, the emphasis on withholding knowledge may actually be essential to the task of representing multiple distributed networks. Or to put this another way: in order to represent a world of networks, the text must refuse totality. (Levine 2015: 129)

For instance, the impossibility of ever arriving at one coherent interpretation of *House of Leaves* is one of this particular narrative's most important features. Fictions about networks tend to withhold knowledge,

mislead the reader, or overwhelm them with a glut of superfluous information.

The term "Gothic" is often wrongly used synonymously with "horror." Nowadays, the dynamic and flexible Gothic mode often appears in conjunction with more stable genres, such as science fiction or the Western, to name only two examples. Generic hybrids such as "cybergothic," "space goth," or "weird West" abound. While these subgenres are usually easily recognizable as a combination of distinct types of fiction, delineation becomes more difficult when it comes to Gothic and horror fiction. There are several reasons for this: first of all, any understanding of the term in its everyday usage is vague at best, given that there is no clear definition of the Gothic. Second, horror fiction is also a rather flexible genre and, hence, frequently appears to be almost as obscure as the Gothic. Third, it is often claimed that one of the most essential purposes of both Gothic and horror is to produce feelings of fear and fright in readers or viewers.[8] Lastly, with the rise of film in the 20th century, it seems as though horror cinema has overtaken Gothic fiction – a form most dominantly associated with the print novel, even today – in popularity. Yet there are decisive differences between Gothic and horror fiction. Just as not all horror tales may be regarded as Gothic, not all Gothic fictions contain elements of horror. Brigid Cherry illustrates this difference with the example of television:

8 This claim is not entirely true when it comes to Gothic fiction; while many of these narratives may certainly aim to induce feelings of terror in the reader – regardless of whether they actually manage to do so – some other texts instead utilize the Gothic in order to create a more general atmosphere of gloom and foreboding. Contemporary historical fiction in particular – such as Sarah Waters' neo-Victorian fictions, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), and *Fingersmith* (2002) – are cases in point. According to Catherine Spooner, this Gothicization of historical narratives can be explained through a deepening interest in "marginal voices, untold tales, and the difficulties history has in getting told" that comes with postmodernism; Gothic is the ideal mode for expressing this interest (2007: 43-44). In contrast to this, Diana Wallace has argued that historical fiction has, from the very beginning, been "deeply entangled in the Gothic tradition," and not merely with the onset of postmodernism's skepticism toward grand narratives (2013: 136).

> Gothic television functions as a discursive Other to horror, the identifying features of which are gore, splatter, graphic monstrosity and other conventions often associated with low-cultural forms and tastes. Gothic television is conversely identified by its restrained suggestion of terror and it carries connotations of historical tradition which are crucial to its position as art and high culture. (2014: 489)

In other words, one of horror fiction's essential characteristics is its visceral explicitness, whereas the Gothic is marked by its implicitness and ambiguity.

Cherry's opposition of Gothic and horror brings another aspect to the fore: the difference in these two types of fictions' social appreciation. According to Cherry, the former is associated with high culture, whereas the latter is part of low culture entertainment. While this claim may reflect the current situation when it comes to the reception of Gothic and horror to some extent, it is nevertheless highly problematic. The Gothic has by no means always been recognized as a valuable form. Discussing the early reception of Gothic fiction, Botting writes: "Gothic fictions seemed to promote vice and violence, giving free reign to selfish ambitions and sexual desires beyond the prescriptions of law or familial duty" (1996: 3). By merely exchanging the term "Gothic" for "horror," this quote could easily be applied to the reception of horror fiction today. At best, horror is regarded as mass-produced trash, merely attempting to attract attention through gore and violence. At worst, it is held accountable for violent crimes and deviant behavior in real life. For instance, the video game *Doom* (1993), a first-person shooter belonging to the subgenre of survival horror, was implicated as a potential cause for the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, because both perpetrators were fans of the game. Likewise, the 1996 movie *Scream* (dir. Wes Craven) has been accused of inspiring copycat killings in 1998 and 1999. In 2014, two twelve-year-old girls nearly stabbed a third one to death, claiming to have been driven by their wish to please the Slender Man (Tolbert 2015: 41). These are only three cases involving extreme violence that have kept the controversial discussion of the detrimental influence of horror fiction alive, particularly among young adults. Even today,

horror fiction repeatedly provokes debates on the effects of media violence.[9] This debate shows how contested Gothic and horror are, and how both types of fiction continue to spark public debates.

Significantly, the Gothic – like any other type of fiction – is also a thought experiment. These narratives can accomplish what scientists cannot do, particularly when it comes to the portrayal of viral epidemics: without any claims to *explanation*, these fictions instead *represent* the spread of the virus and its consequences for society, thereby projecting an epidemiological "what if?" scenario. Significantly, the Gothic emerged as a "dark form of cultural engagement," a tool or method with which to approach and interpret culture (Wester/Aldana Reyes 2019: 5) particularly at the end of the 20th century. The Gothic mode suits the purpose of the present monograph perfectly, with its capacity to explore and to question cultural and social anxieties. It is by analyzing how such fears are coded into Gothic texts that Gothic criticism can become a kind of gateway to the study of culture. This does not imply that this study purports a unidirectional reading of the Gothic in which certain key topics are projected onto the text. Such an approach, in which the Gothic is read as symptomatic of cultural anxieties, risks giving rise to a tautological argument: starting from the premise that a culture is haunted by its ideological Others, Gothic fictions are read with a focus on terrifying Otherness, thereby "proving" the initial assumption correct. Avoiding such circularity, I advocate a multidirectional reading of Gothic fiction, acknowledging the reciprocities between the Gothic and its cultural contexts. The Gothic is never merely a symptom of cultural fears; it is always already actively shaping these anxieties.

I discuss four distinct narrative franchise in this book in order to gauge the supernatural media virus' cultural significance as it appears in the Gothic. Each of these fictions was created after 1990. While there are earlier precursors of the trope, it was during this decade, at the turn of the century, that both the virus metaphor and the notion of the network society became hot topics. Thus, the fictions that I examine here

9 For more information on this debate, consult Weaver/Carter (2006).

were all created within that specific mindset of omnipresent virality and connectivity. Furthermore, each of these narratives has taken multiplex forms, inspiring prequels, sequels, transmedia extensions, and/or adaptations. This makes it possible to trace the "evolution" of the text and to analyze those elements that are either foregrounded or left out in each continuation of the narrative and to examine how each addition further refines the story's supernatural media virus.

Chapter One explores the virus and network metaphors across diverse fields and contexts, unpacking their cultural and historical "evolution" as well as the ideological baggage that these terms carry. The concept of the virus may have originated in biology at the end of the 19th century, but it has traveled fast and far from that discipline to infecting social studies, computer science, and media studies. The metaphor of the web or network, in turn, has a very long tradition, making its appearance as early as in ancient mythologies. The network paradigm emerged over the course of the centuries and the term became ubiquitous as a large number of everyday phenomena came to be understood increasingly in terms of their connectedness. One of this paradigm's concrete consequence is the concept of the network society, seeking to theorize society and social life itself as a structure of overlapping and interwoven webs. The supernatural media virus as a Gothic trope expands on the diverse meanings of both metaphors and constitutes the convergence point of the virus, the network, and a profound media anxiety.

Chapter Two, "*Ghostwatch* and the Advent of the Network Society," focuses on the BBC mockumentary *Ghostwatch* (dir. Lesley Manning), which was broadcasted on Halloween 1992 and which stirred great controversy. The film enacts the "live" investigation of an allegedly haunted house by borrowing the formal conventions of a live broadcast and featuring well-known television personalities. During its climax, it is revealed that the broadcast has catalyzed a large-scale séance and has allowed a malevolent ghost to spread throughout the entire nation by means of the television sets that have tuned in to the program. Some of the audiences failed to realize that *Ghostwatch* was a fictional, prerecorded film; claims of post-traumatic stress disorder and even suicides

caused by the broadcast were soon made public. Although the show has not been rebroadcast in the UK to date due to this controversy, the mockumentary attained such popularity that it inspired its own documentary, companion book, and a short story sequel. As the chapter illustrates, the rationale behind *Ghostwatch* is still firmly grounded in mass society, building upon the notion of television as a one-to-many communication medium that is policed by a trustworthy authority, such as the BBC. In this regard, the mockumentary resembles Orson Welles' "The War of the Worlds" (1938) radio drama, which caused a similar controversy in the 1930s. However, the TV broadcast already anticipates anxieties pertaining to the network society. *Ghostwatch* bridges the transition from mass society to network society and features an early instance of the supernatural media virus at work.

Chapter Three centers on Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves* (2000a) and its transmedia extensions. This novel is a labyrinthine, disorienting text; readers attempting to decode its meaning must navigate through multiple interlinked narrative levels and plot lines. At the heart of the story lies a film about the uncanny house on Ash Tree Lane – a building constantly shifting, growing, and shrinking on the inside. This film has been watched and analyzed by a blind man named Zampanò; yet his writing soon becomes fragmented and incomprehensible. A young tattoo artist named Johnny Truant attempts to make sense of these fragments and edits Zampanò's writings through numerous footnotes. However, Truant grows obsessed with the task during this editing process, and his writing becomes incomprehensible as well. Another narrative layer is then added to this confusing manuscript, through a set of footnotes that are provided by unidentified editors. Further complicating the matter, *House of Leaves* was published as a transmedia narrative simultaneously with two companion pieces: first, the epistolary novel *The Whalestoe Letters* by Danielewski, parts of which are already included in *House of Leaves*, and second, the music album *Haunted* by the musician Poe, Danielewski's sister. *House of Leaves* is not concerned with the network society exclusively, but rather with networks in general. Numerous types of networks pervade the text, which in itself is structured as a complex network. The novel and its transmedia exten-

sions create a web of interacting metaphors, thereby illuminating increasing connectivity's diverse implications. This chapter approaches the multimedia franchise by using the idea of an omnipresent network paradigm: the current tendency to see networks in all matters. In the novel, the supernatural media virus is the inevitable result of the network paradigm. Unwanted side effects, such as alienation and disconnection, arise alongside increasing interconnectedness.

Chapter Four, "The Moral Dimension of the Supernatural Media Virus in the *Ring* Franchise," discusses what is perhaps the most popular example of the supernatural media virus: *Ring*. Kōji Suzuki's novel of the same name, first published in 1991, centers on a cursed videotape that kills its viewers after one week, unless they in turn copy the tape and show it to someone else. The franchise continues to grow even to this day, spawning sequels, prequels, adaptations, and remakes at least every few years. I focus mostly on Suzuki's *Ring*, its Japanese adaptation *Ringu* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 1998), and the US adaptation *The Ring* (dir. Gore Verbinski, 2002), given that a discussion of the franchise in its totality would go beyond the scope of a single chapter. This chapter examines the settings of each installment as well as the moral implications of the supernatural media virus, by taking the cultural differences between these texts into consideration. Each text is set in a sprawling metropolis; the city itself becomes a symbol of the network society and its dangers. It is easy for the infection to take hold in such a densely populated and media-saturated city, where anonymity and selfishness abound. The Ring virus forces its victims to victimize others if they wish to survive. Media and especially *the* media motivate immoral behavior in each narrative.

In Chapter Five, I examine the Japanese film *Kairo* (dir. Kiyoshi Kurosawa, 2001) as well as its US adaptation *Pulse* (dir. Jim Sonzero, 2006), which take the supernatural media virus to an apocalyptic level. The viral vectors in these films are digital media, and the Internet in particular, which ghosts utilize to invade the world of the living. Every person who meets a ghost loses their will to live and eventually simply dissolves. Both narratives conclude with society suffering a complete breakdown. The films are firmly grounded in the logic of digitality

and connectivity. Significantly, people are already suffering from the effects of the network society before the supernatural media virus even takes hold: *Kairo*, in particular, portrays a society in which personal relationships have dissolved, and feelings of isolation and alienation abound. *Pulse* frames the story in terms of the narrative conventions of outbreak narratives. The film's characters become epidemiologists trying to uncover the cause of the infection; epidemiological maps display how far the supernatural media virus has already spread. In both narratives, the issue of surveillance enabled by digital technologies comes to the fore: not only do these media establish links between human beings, but they might also enable someone or something to watch us secretly.

Some of the texts – most notably the *Ring* franchise – have already been discussed with regard to the virality of their monsters; yet, the significance of the virus metaphor remains only a minor aspect in almost all of these analyses, and attempts to compare several such viral monsters are practically nonexistent. Those few comparative approaches that do exist (Crawford 2015; Jackson 2013; Tirrell 2010) fail to recognize the supernatural media virus as a recurring trope and, therefore, do not gauge its full potential.

The four narratives discussed here by no means comprise a comprehensive list of fictions representing a supernatural media virus, as the concluding chapter of this study illustrates. Attempting an exhaustive survey of every single portrayal of the trope would exceed the scope of any book, and the argument would not benefit from such an endeavor. Rather, in this work I focus only upon selected fictions that highlight distinct aspects of the trope.

1. The Virus, the Network, and the Supernatural Media Virus

"Cascades, congestions, contaminations, chain reactions, epidemics, and crises are endemic fears of the network society."
Alexander Friedrich, Metaphorologie der Vernetzung

"Thanks to sensors and internet connectivity, the most banal everyday objects have acquired tremendous power to regulate behaviour."
Evgeny Morozov, "The Rise of Data and the Death of Politics"

"These media events are not *like* viruses. They *are* viruses."
Douglas Rushkoff, Media Virus!

1.1 Theories of Metaphor

The metaphors used in Gothic fiction have always been illuminating when it comes to the concerns and anxieties voiced in such fiction. The virus and the network are both key components of the supernatural media virus and, therefore, require greater scrutiny. The logic of metaphor, generally, needs to be discussed first, in order to examine the developments and dynamics of these two terms. Different theories foreground different aspects of metaphor; while some views of metaphor regard it merely as a rhetorical ornament or as a simple substitution of one term for another, other theories ascribe far greater power to metaphor. It is fruitful to consider some essential approaches to metaphor in order to

establish a framework through which the implications and meanings of the virus and the network – and, therefore, about the supernatural media virus itself – might be grasped.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle describes metaphor as "giving the thing a name that belongs to something else" (1995a: 4999). A specific object, person, phenomenon, or experience is circumscribed by referring to something else. Metaphors, as Aristotle claims in *Rhetoric*, are so vitally important because they allow the listener to learn something new: "strange words simply puzzle us; ordinary words convey only what we know already; it is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh" (1995b: 4820). This conception, in which a metaphor functions as a vehicle for comparison, has been referred to as the "*substitution view of metaphor*" (Black 1955: 279, original emphasis). It is through the substitution of an unknown word with a familiar term that similarities between the two phenomena are pointed out and that a novel phenomenon can be made comprehensible.

One major point of critique of this substitution view is that it regards metaphor as a purely passive descriptor. However, metaphors not only describe a phenomenon, but also actively shape our perception of these experiences. It is for this reason that Max Black rejects the notion of metaphor as substitution and instead advances an "*interaction view*" (1955: 285, original emphasis),[1] which acknowledges that any metaphorical utterance affects the meaning of both terms that are linked together through the expression:

> Metaphorical statement is not a substitute for a formal comparison or any other kind of literal statement, but has its own *distinctive* capacities and achievements. […] It would be more illuminating […] to say that the metaphor *creates* the similarity than to say that it formulates some similarity antecedently existing. (ibid: 284-285, original emphases)

1 The first scholars to advance such an interaction view were Wilhelm Stählin and Karl Bühler. However, Black's notion of interaction builds upon and expands the theory of metaphor outlined by Ivor Armstrong Richards (Peil 2008: 492).

A metaphorical expression does not merely foreground a preexistent resemblance, but instead creates this resemblance, thereby affecting the meaning of each term found in the expression.

It is the potential ability of metaphor to organize and structure a worldview that George Lakoff and Mark Johnson expand on in *Metaphors We Live By*, as they introduce their conceptual metaphor theory (CMT). Metaphors are of central importance in our everyday lives, structuring most of our conceptual system and human thought according to this cognitive theory. Hence, "the people who get to impose their metaphors on the culture get to define what we consider to be true" (1980: 160). Metaphors actively shape the reality that they appear to merely describe. Lakoff and Johnson regard the process of metaphor as a mapping: a "source" domain is transferred or projected onto an abstract "target" domain. For instance, the virus metaphor applies qualities of the source domain "virus" to a new, and possibly less readily understandable, target domain; a "viral video" bears certain viruslike qualities, such as fast reproduction and dissemination. CMT captures metaphor's potential to structure both human thought and perception.

However, several problems arise from the application of Lakoff and Johnson's theory. First, the theory largely disregards metaphor's historical and cultural dimensions. Yet, every metaphor's meaning is based on "a rich cultural framework, [...] a universe of content that is already organized into networks of interpretants" (Eco 1984: 269). Metaphors are subject to cultural and historical change since any metaphor depends on such cultural agreement within the "framework" or "network of interpretants" (Nünning/Grabes/Baumbach 2009: xvi). Metaphor's meanings thus shift over time; the exploration of the virus and network in the sections that follow illustrate how those two metaphors in particular have adjusted in accordance with their cultural and historical circumstances.

Second, CMT envisages metaphor as a unidirectional mapping process because the target domain cannot be mapped back onto the source. Whereas the target is transformed during the mapping, the source remains unaffected by the target. In an attempt to unsettle this unidirectionality, Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier advance their theory

of conceptual blending. As they explain, every metaphorical mapping creates a space in between or "blend," in which the meanings of both "inputs" – which are termed source and target in conceptual metaphor theory – are affected. Significantly, the outcome is not merely a "composition of meanings," but rather results in the generation of an entirely new meaning (Turner/Fauconnier 1999: 398). Hence, conceptual blending offers a more useful approach to the complex, bidirectional dynamics of metaphorical statements, while still acknowledging that the mapping process may be asymmetrical.

Using cognitive metaphor theory in tandem with the notion of the blend, Nünning, Grabes, and Baumbach discuss the potential impact of metaphor in their introduction to *Metaphors Shaping Culture and Theory*. They regard metaphors as "worldmaking devices" that function to structure, narrativize, and naturalize cultural phenomena (2009: xii). Metaphors do this cultural work by creating coherent systems of thought. The source domains utilized in the metaphoric mapping are bound to the culture from which they originate:

> The images that form the source domain of such metaphors do not arise out of nowhere and do not by mere chance suddenly become favoured suppliers of schemas to be mapped onto important target domains. It shows that their choice is linked to changes of culture at large and in particular in technology, social formations, and practices. (ibid: xvi)

The relationship between metaphor and culture is, therefore, bidirectional: not only does our use of metaphors shape prevailing perspectives on culture, but metaphors are also shaped in turn by their cultural and historical contexts (ibid: xii). The study of metaphors is always also a study of culture.

Metaphors are essentially "mininarrations" – narratives that are compressed into a single word (Eubanks 1999: 437; Nünning 2009b: 230). These narratives fulfill multiple functions: they impose structures on complex phenomena and provide simplified interpretive frameworks; they prescribe and legitimize specific, potentially ideologically charged responses to these experiences, and they help to both form and main-

tain collective identities. To illustrate this claim, Nünning uses the example of "crisis," a term that has been used over and over again to apparently describe every current problem encountered in the world. A certain plot pattern arises when claims are made that a certain situation constitutes a crisis – whether it be an economic crisis, a soccer club in financial distress, or any other possible scenario:

> What are in demand in a crisis are active crisis managers (physicians, politicians, management boards, 'experts,' etc.), crisis management plans, and purposeful actions (in short: successful crisis management). […] [T]he mode of speaking about a crisis always evokes conventionalized schemata and plot patterns which sketch out the future course of action. For this reason a crisis diagnosis is always already more than a specific definition of the situation and, in retrospect, oftentimes appears as a self-fulfilling prophecy. (Nünning 2009b: 243)

It is in this regard that metaphors are never merely descriptive, but instead also fulfill a prescriptive function, as ideologies and norms become naturalized and reinforced. Metaphor's influence on how we understand the world around us makes it absolutely necessary to consider the implications of the deployment of certain metaphors. For example, Nünning explains how "[t]he rapid increase of crises staged by the media […] is a clear indicator for the fact that the present culture of description significantly differs from those of earlier centuries" (ibid: 239). This "crisis inflation" (ibid) is not due to the increasing occurrence of events that may be described as crises, but rather signifies a changing world view. At the same time, such metaphors function as seemingly self-sufficient "strategies of containment" (Jameson 1983: 10; Nünning/Grabes/Baumbach 2009: xvii): they not only structure our understanding of reality, but also do this work by foregrounding some aspects of the mapping and by glossing over others.

The relationship between any metaphor and its cultural and historical context is always reciprocal. By evoking specific narrative patterns and plots, these terms impact our understanding of the world. Yet, the metaphorical potential of terms such as "virus" or "network" is seldom

considered, given that these terms have been naturalized. The following sections unpack these metaphors and the "baggage" they carry in order to tackle this task.

1.2 The Viral Metaphor: The Spread of the Virus Across Disciplines

While the virus has developed into a metaphor that has itself "gone viral," finding an application in a broad range of phenomena, the concept originally stems from the disciplines of biology and medicine. In simple terms, "viruses are collections of genetic information directed toward one end: their own replication" (Wagner/Hewlett/Bloom/Camerini 2008: 3). Behaving parasitically, viruses first infect a cell, subsequently modifying that cell to produce further, possibly mutated copies of themselves, and finally burst from the cell to infect new hosts.

Virology's beginnings date back to the end of the 19th century, when microbes were discovered that defied the assumptions hitherto put forward by germ theory. These microbes were neither visible under a microscope, nor could they be retained with bacteria-proof filters or cultivated in a petri dish. They appeared to have no cellular structure, instead replicating by hijacking the reproductive mechanisms of another cell (van Loon 2002: 117). Germ theory could not account for the existence of these microbes, given that it was grounded in the principle that the cell is the basic unit of all organic life. The term "virus" was at first used merely as a descriptor for an infectious agent that was, as yet, unknown; its Latin meaning simply translates to "venom," "poison," or "slime."

In order to understand how and why the biological virus propagated across disciplines and narratives as a metaphor, and what this metaphor's cultural dimensions are, it is essential to examine some of virality's key features. The most obvious ideas that are invoked in uses of the virus metaphor are its mechanisms of uncontrolled spread, infection or contamination, and its continuous, random mutations. In addition to these, there are several aspects that shape this metaphor

and make it so viable for application to the Gothic domain. An example for this is virus' defiance of dichotomous categories, such as visibility/invisibility as well as living/non-living. Invisible to the human eye, the virus can only be represented by means of visualization strategies and technologies such as epidemiological maps or electron microscopes (Wald 2008: 37). Representations, therefore, often relocate the threat to tangible subjects and objects: infected individuals – zombies in particular –, contaminated foods, unsanitary locations, and so on. While the pathogen always remains visually elusive, it can also reveal the structure and dynamics of its host population:

> Diseases are symptomatic of the ways cultures interact. They reveal paths of communication and commerce, of interaction and cultural hierarchies, which form the networks of a society: what affects what, who frequents whom and where, and so forth. Diseases *expose*. (Parikka 2016: xiv, original emphasis)

Hitherto unseen social ties are made visible as the invisible virus spreads along these paths, exploiting the dark side of today's interconnection and revealing potentially sensitive information.

In addition, the microbe's ambivalent ontological status is troubling: by their very nature, viruses have always contested the categories and classifications dictated by medical science. Neither living nor non-living, they are situated in a problematic space in between: "[t]hey do not grow, they do not metabolize small molecules for energy, and they only 'live' when in the active process of infecting a cell and replicating in that cell" (Wagner/Hewlett/Bloom/Camerini 2008: 11). Hence, while viruses may be biological agents that are capable of acting against other organisms, they cannot be regarded as self-sufficient living entities themselves. This ambivalence is particularly alluring in the context of Gothic fiction: fascinated by the unknowable, the invisible, the undecidable, and the interstitial, these narratives find an ideal villain in the virus.

Significantly, unlike the ghosts, vampires, and evil aristocrats of old, this villain is no longer a singular, identifiable monster, but a mass of microscopic pathogens that threaten mankind not necessarily by force,

but rather by their sheer endless numbers. This opponent's otherness is not only due to its multiplicity, but also due to its nonhuman qualities:

> [I]t is the alien, nonhuman character of epidemics that incite public anxiety – there is no intentionality, no rationale, no aim except to carry out iterations of what we understand to be simple rules (infect, replicate, infect, replicate …). (Thacker 2005)

The virus is driven solely by the logic of repetition; it does not follow any recognizable thinking pattern, it cannot be argued with, and it does not adhere to any man-made borders.

Another of the virus' key aspects that is transferred in the metaphorical borrowing of the term is the idea of coevolution, based on the complex relationship with its host population: a virus can cause widespread disease and mortality when introduced into a novel population because the host population has not yet developed an efficient immune response thereto. Over time, however, immunity occurs and the virus either genetically adapts to the evolved host or causes only low or even no levels of disease (Wagner/Hewlett/Bloom/Camerini 2008: 4-5). Virus and host are, therefore, situated in a relationship of coevolution. When it comes to Gothic fiction, such coevolution becomes apparent upon examining these tales' subject matter. The implementation of every new technology and medium inspires a plethora of uncanny narratives portraying the dangers inherent to this innovation – until a new medium comes along to induce new fears (Crawford 2015: 39). This coevolution is bound to the development of new media technologies and their surrounding social practices in representations of the supernatural media virus. In short, new media create new viruses.

However, it is not only such (co-)evolution, but also societal and technological progresses that affect the pathogen's virulence. Some viral diseases spread more efficiently – that is quicker and farther – than others, depending on a society's organization. Arguably, HIV could not have posed the problem that it does today only a century ago: with lower population densities, restricted migration as well as slower means of travel, and with little knowledge of blood transfusion, the HI virus simply would not have gained a foothold

(Wagner/Hewlett/Bloom/Camerini 2008: 7).[2] The disruption of natural ecosystems, bioterrorism, and heightened drug resistance all constitute additional factors that facilitate the virus' spread throughout the contemporary world – it is the dark side of progress, in other words. It is this idea of careless practices that represents a driving force behind the plot of most outbreak narratives.

The field of "emerging infections" came into existence at the end of the 1980s as a reaction to the realization that these modern circumstances provide ideal conditions for diseases to spread fast and far in general, as well as to the AIDS crisis in particular. After observing outbreaks of newly identified or resurfaced diseases, medical scientists concluded that such emerging infections were the result of globalization itself:

> An expanding human population worldwide meant that human beings were living and working in previously uninhabited places and coming into contact with unfamiliar or dormant microbes, which in turn globe-trotted by hitching rides in hosts—human, animal, and insect—using the variety of transportation networks that constitute the global village. (Wald 2008: 30)

However, the scientific interest in emerging infections attests not only to a feeling of pending apocalypse in a globalized, uncontrollable world, but also to the potential of counteracting disease outbreaks more efficiently. While it may be true that fast travel and communication, as well as technologization, enables the spread of diseases, it is likewise true that these same factors allow for greater success in the search for an effective vaccine through international collaboration and joint political or social efforts. It was, for instance, only through the carefully orchestrated social and political campaigns advocating vaccines created by modern medicine that smallpox was finally eradicated (Wag-

2 A similar claim can be made for the COVID-19 pandemic. The affordances of globalization enabled the rapid spread of the virus. Hence, most attempts to contain the disease have focused on restricting some of the essential aspects of globalization, such as global travel.

ner/Hewlett/Bloom/Camerini 2008: 8). Here, international collaboration, in tandem with the new achievements of medicine, wiped out a viral disease that had repeatedly wreaked havoc throughout the previous centuries. The pessimistic idea of a humanity doomed to extinction by its Promethean ambitions does not capture the whole picture; instead, the relationship between mankind and its diseases is more complex and ambiguous.

This ambivalence resonates throughout every use of the virus metaphor. Like all metaphors, the virus comprises a mininarration, evoking specific narrative schemes and plots: if there is a virus, then there are also always carriers, experts, sanitary and unsanitary locations, processes of infection, mutation, and spread. It is such a narrativization that Susan Sontag builds upon when claiming that illness metaphors are usually harmful: "Victims suggest innocence. And innocence, by the inexorable logic that governs all relational terms, suggests guilt" (2002 [1989]: 97). A single term can encompass an entire narrative, distinguishing innocent victims from guilty disease-spreaders.

In both fictional and factual outbreak narratives of the 20th and 21st centuries, these "miniplots" are developed into a larger narrative formula that seeks to provide a coherent story about the disease: first, an emerging infection is identified; subsequently, the global networks which have enabled the infection's spread are discussed; in a third step, the epidemiologists' expertise is established and their efforts of containing the epidemic are chronicled; last, the infection is successfully neutralized (Wald 2008: 2).[3] This narrative scheme covers both the factors that enabled a pathogen's spread and the affordances of globalization through which the threat may be contained. Thus, while fic-

3 This last step of Wald's formula is not applicable to many narratives in recent Gothic, horror, and science fiction. Fictions depicting the "zombie apocalypse," for instance, explicitly portray a world in which the infection was *not* contained. The final section of this chapter, "The Virus in the Network Society: The Supernatural Media Virus as a Gothic Trope," discusses the narrative formula in greater detail.

tions such as *Outbreak* (dir. Wolfgang Petersen, 1995), *Twelve Monkeys* (dir. Terry Gilliam, 1995), or AMC's *The Walking Dead* (2010–2022) oftentimes portray the deadly disease as a man-made problem, and as a symptom of modern life, they simultaneously envision these same factors as a possible antidote to the epidemic. Globalization, in other words, may be the solution to all of the problems it created in the first place.

These narratives tend to fuse myth and science, fiction and nonfiction in the process of structuring disease outbreaks around one coherent plot: large-scale outbreaks are reduced to the actions of lone individuals – the so-called "Patient Zero"[4] – who carry dangerous microbes and spread them to a large number of people, either out of ignorance or irresponsibility; scientists' efforts are portrayed as a kind of epidemiological detective work; viruses are described as cunning villains, hiding and waiting for a chance to attack. These views serve to both question and reinforce a set of social norms (Schell 1997: 114): the emergence of a new disease is imagined as being caused by some kind of transformation, such as changing urban structures, progressive sexual politics, or man-made disruptions of ecological equilibria. This simplistic perspective on the viral outbreak is utilized in outbreak narratives as well as applications of the virus metaphor in extramedical disciplines.

One possible factor behind the metaphor's rising popularity as well as its spread to other discourses is the rise of digital technology. In "The Biopolitics of the Killer Virus Novel," Dougherty explicitly links the

4 The term "index case" refers to the first case of a disease to be discussed in medical literature, regardless of whether this person is the first person to have been affected. In popular terms, this is often simplified to the idea of a "Patient Zero," the initial carrier of a disease and, hence, the ideal scapegoat. Perhaps the most famous example of a "Patient Zero" is Gaetan Dugas, the airline steward who, up until this day, is popularly believed to have brought the HI virus to North America and spread it to an incredibly large number of people – regardless of the fact that it is not only highly unlikely that such a large-scale outbreak was caused by a single person, but furthermore also impossible to identify the source of each new infection. For a more detailed discussion of this, see Chapter 5: "'The Columbus of AIDS': The Invention of 'Patient Zero'" in Wald (2008).

boom of large-scale disease narratives to the rise of modern information and communication systems. As Dougherty puts it, the contemporary world is characterized by the paradoxical opposition of biologization and debiologization: while biology and biomedicine have risen to the status of powerful sciences, the human body itself has been debiologized, turned into an information system and reduced "to the universal currency of information" (2001: 2). In popular fiction, this paradox and the question of what it means to be human in a technologized age is negotiated through the genre of the "killer virus novel,"[5] which is fixated on the representation of bodily crisis and disintegration (ibid: 4). This genre is "classic Gothic terrain […]: the place of the undead, where the reign of the *who* is suspended – the reign of the liberal, autonomous subject, the counterpart of the organic self – and the *what* threatens to take over" (ibid: 9, original emphases). This who/what opposition is exploited explicitly in fictions of the zombie apocalypse. A "zombie virus" is released and, consequently, transforms the liberal human being into a mindless creature driven by a single instinct: hunger. The zombie is, thus, the macroscopic representation of the microscopic, invisible virus that has created it. In killer virus fiction, the biological human body decays viscerally once attacked by the horde of invisible microbes:

> The infectious scenario is one wherein the body is besieged by a glut of information that threatens not only to overwhelm the immune system, but at the same time to transform the nature of what it means to be human. The virally infected and desecrated body thus becomes a metaphor for the fate of the human in the information age. (ibid: 10)

The virus captures both sides of the paradox through its transgressive and ambivalent nature: it is both a biological organism and pure information. As such, it is the ideal villain in contemporary Gothic fiction.

Portrayals of the supernatural media virus often simultaneously build upon several metaphorical connotations of the virus as they flourish in distinct disciplines. It is, therefore, important to take

5 While Dougherty restricts his analysis to novels, his arguments can be applied to other media as well.

a closer look at some of the scientific fields that have adopted the metaphor: contagion as a sociopsychological model for group dynamics; the computer virus as a technological application; and virality as the key logic behind certain media phenomena. These examples illustrate how the concept of the biological virus developed into a surprisingly flexible metaphor that traveled across disciplines, in order to be eventually consolidated into a fully developed concept once again. Significantly, the supernatural media virus tends to draw on the virus' manifold metaphorical meanings that arise from these diverse fields, as subsequent chapters exemplify.

Social psychologists were turning to the concept of contagion in order to investigate group behavior and community formation at roughly the same time that virology came into being. Sociologists, such as Gustave Le Bon, attempted to explain phenomena such as riots through the notion of moral or social "contagion," claiming the contagious potential of ideas and emotions in crowds to be as powerful as that of microbes (Le Bon 2002 [1895]: 78). The emergence of social contagion theory is linked intimately to a changing social structure evoked by processes of modernization and urbanization as well as the development of mass media (Mitchell 2012: 60). In addition to the easy and far-reaching dissemination of information via newspapers, increasing population densities within cities impacted the nature of social interactions between people. Contagion provided the ideal metaphor for grasping group dynamics as it uncovered hitherto unnoticed social ties, hence laying bare the oftentimes invisible interdependence of persons within one social group.

According to Mitchell, the belief in contagious group behavior flourished during both the 1890s and the 1990s, thus hinting at a recurrent *fin de siècle* anxiety (ibid). While it appears to be true that this fascination with contagion increased in both of those two decades, it must be emphasized that the preoccupation with all things contagious/infectious/viral, even with regard to group dynamics, is still growing today. Limiting it to an end-of-century sentiment would not serve to appreciate the phenomenon's entire scope. Additionally, this fascination may have less to do with a *fin de siècle* anxiety than with

profound changes to the social structure that happen to coincide with these decades. Whereas the 19th century ended with modernization, urbanization, and the development of mass media in Western cultures – in short, the implementation of mass society – those same societies were restructured again through a process of technologization, digitalization, and globalization at the close of the 20th century. Each restructuring affected the social ties between human beings and, hence, called for a rethinking of these interdependencies. While social contagion theory itself is regarded as outdated nowadays, many of its ideas still loom large.

Computer studies adopted the virus metaphor during the second half of the 20th century. To give an indication as to the earliest point at which computer viruses where perceived as a public concern: By 1949, computer scientist John von Neumann had published a theory of self-reproducing automata (Parikka 2016: 257). The first noteworthy incident with a computer virus occurred in the early 1970s, when the Creeper virus was released in the ARPANET (ibid: 258). In the early 1980s, the first large-scale dissemination of a computer virus took place with the emergence of Elk Cloner (ibid: 21). The "evolution" of computer viruses sped up considerably, with new viruses being created on a daily basis and with malware becoming ever more complex. Today, we witness massive, coordinated cyberattacks on large institutions on a regular basis. The European Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-EU) observed "[w]aves of ransomware" that concluded the year 2019 with a flood of attacks on governments, administrations, universities, and other high profile institutions throughout the world (2020: 1). Of course, not only did 2019 end with those computer viruses, but it primed us for things to come in the future, where an increasing number of such massive ransomware attacks are to be expected.

Fred Cohen is among the first to provide an in-depth discussion of computer viruses. Cohen focuses on the virus' ability to infect other programs in his definition of this type of malware (1987: 23). Unlike other malware, such as computer worms, a computer virus does not merely propagate through a network – it modifies other programs to do so and to possibly produce evolved copies of itself: "Every program that gets in-

fected may also act as a virus and thus the infection grows" (ibid). This is why computer viruses – particularly those that are programmed to execute their damaging payloads under specific circumstances, such as a set date – are a major security concern:

> As an analogy to a computer virus, consider a biological disease that is 100% infectious, spreads whenever animals communicate, kills all infected animals instantly at a given moment, and has no detectable side effects until that moment. If a delay of even one week were used between the introduction of the disease and its effect, it would be very likely to leave only a few remote villages alive, and would certainly wipe out the vast majority of modern society. If a computer virus of this type could spread through the computers of the world, it would likely stop most computer use for a significant period of time, and wreak havoc on modern government, financial, business, and academic institutions. (ibid: 24)

Such viruses cannot be prevented if networking and data sharing is desired, given that it is impossible to control all of users' activities on a network. The only solution, hence, lies in finding ways of detecting and disabling computer viruses before they can do damage. Thus, what is needed is a type of vaccine, an antivirus. Of course, Cohen deliberately exaggerates the potential danger of such malware through the analogy above. At the same time, his paper is an excellent example of the cultural work that metaphors do, actively shaping our perspective on a specific phenomenon: not only is a certain type of computer program defined through the logic of infection, spread, and evolution, but the virus is also specifically envisioned as an invisible piece of perilous – potentially even lethal – information that may operate at a large scale due to the actions of a few users.

Cohen's paper was published long before the launch of the highly interactive and densely networked Web 2.0. Today's Internet topology deviates from the structure originally implemented during the 1960s. First designed as a random network with a highly redundant distribution (Parikka 2016: 212; Sampson 2009: 49-50), the Internet eventually adopted the structure of a scale-free network. In such designs, new

nodes have a higher probability of connecting to those nodes that have a high number of links (van Dijk 2012: 41-42). Therefore, connectivity on the Internet follows a rich-getting-richer model. For example, people are more likely to sign up to Facebook or WhatsApp than to other comparable platforms, simply because they know that a larger number of acquaintances are using this specific service. If, for some reason, such a service is not functioning correctly at a given time, then the consequences of the outage will be felt throughout the entire net almost immediately. Their clustering is both the greatest benefit as well as the greatest weakness of such scale-free networks when compared to random designs. An attack focused on its hubs can disable large parts of the network. The potential impact of computer viruses must be reconsidered in light of this new network topology. Jussi Parikka maintains that computer viruses constitute a central part of network culture today (2016: xvii), thus already hinting at the codependence of the virus and the network that is at the heart of the supernatural media virus. Users experience an almost paranoid feeling of having to interact with untrustworthy users and the potentially malicious code they disperse throughout the net in this network culture (ibid: 23). Today, computer viruses are the anomalous element that has the potential to throw the entire networked system into chaos.

In fiction, the potential impact of a computer virus was recognized as early as in the 1970s. In the 1973 film *Westworld*, written and directed by Michael Crichton, amusement park androids begin to malfunction, and the faulty programming spreads like a disease. The invisible, yet potentially life-threatening, computer virus is hence given a bodily form in this narrative by having murderous robots revolt against their creators. *Star Trek*'s Borg, who made their first appearance on the TV series *The Next Generation* in 1989, are yet another bodily configuration of the computer virus. As cyborg-like creatures, they do not procreate, but rather assimilate other individuals into their collective hive mind by injecting so-called nanoprobes into their bloodstream. Not only are the Borg marked by their uncanny biotechnological hybridity, but they are also specifically portrayed as a type of disease: infecting other beings with their nanoprobes and turning them into a mindless drone of the

larger collective; the Borg spread from one spaceship or planet to the next. Significantly, their networked hive mind is also their fatal weakness, given that they are ultimately destroyed while assimilating a single individual carrying a pathogen specifically designed to wipe out the entire race. King's novel *Cell* comprises yet another take on the dangers of computer viruses for human life in which the human brain is "reprogrammed" by means of a hazardous signal transmitted via cellular networks. While King's novel portrays neither robots nor biotechnological hybrids, as *Westworld* and *Star Trek* do, it questions whether there is any difference between the human brain and a computer's hard drive in the first place; it does so by employing a disease created by means of the one effortlessly attacking the other (Schmitz 2020a: 201-202). These narratives observe and explore the cultural impact of computer viruses, and how they might affect our understanding of human nature.

As the subsequent chapters illustrate, the supernatural media virus carries forward the connotations of these diverse disciplines; however, as its name already implies, it is the phenomenon of media viruses in particular that is essential when discussing the trope. Discussing such media viruses, Douglas Rushkoff explicitly states that "[t]hese media events are not *like* viruses. They *are* viruses" (1996: 9, original emphases). Rushkoff glosses over the meanings and characteristics that are selected, modified, and transported in the mapping process in his denial of the term's metaphorical status. While he is not the first to discuss the phenomenon, Rushkoff's book is noteworthy in that it covers a wide range of assumptions about how modern media are popularly thought to impact upon everyday life. Rushkoff explains how the "datasphere" has become the new territory for human interaction by starting from the claim that a person's influence is less bound to their material wealth than to the amount of media attention gathered. This datasphere is a complex, far-reaching, and self-sustaining "breeding ground for new ideas in our culture," allowing certain media events to thrive and spread (ibid). As Rushkoff has it, these media viruses flourish in and ultimately promote chaos; they disable efforts at oversimplification, distraction, and marginalization utilized in a culture's dominant discourse and as promoted by politics and public relations (ibid: 36).

The virus' ability to spread depends on its host's susceptibility – popular culture – to the topics and themes conveyed by the virus. The more a society adopts an ambiguous attitude towards these topics, the higher the chances are of spread (ibid: 11). While not made explicit, the notion of coevolution resonates with Rushkoff's theory here: the media virus needs to be interesting if it is to continue propagating; after a while, popular culture will develop an immunity against it. By exploiting potential tipping points in public opinion, media viruses "infiltrate the way we do business, educate ourselves, interact with one another – even the way we perceive reality" (ibid: 10). It is noteworthy to observe how metaphorically charged Rushkoff's language is: if the datasphere is a "breeding ground," then it follows that culture, too, is a type of living organism; at the same time, the media virus is envisaged as a scheming, spylike "infiltrator" that exploits culture's weakest points.

While foregrounding the media virus' multiple fascinating and central aspects, Rushkoff's theory is rather dated today and no longer holds up to the (social) media events of the 21st century. While he claims that media viruses are neither good nor bad, but simply part of the media as a kind of virtual ecosystem (ibid: 320), he nevertheless tends to view these phenomena as an empowerment of the masses, subverting dominant discourses, and creating participatory spectatorship instead of passive consumption. Yet, the media spectacle surrounding the 2016 US presidential elections in particular – in which complex political matters were successfully reduced to platitudes such as "America First"; where extremely discriminatory statements against marginalized groups did not prevent the Republican candidate Donald Trump from being elected; where platforms such as Facebook made it possible for so-called "fake news" to become viral phenomena; where questionable firms such as Cambridge Analytica purposefully orchestrated media phenomena, thereby shaping the outcome of the vote – places these assertions in a different light. These elections are only one example of how media viruses can also be powerful weapons in the *facilitation* of oversimplification, distraction, and marginalization.

A different approach to media, one which considers the implications of the virus metaphor, is put forward in *Spreadable Media: Creating*

Meaning and Value in a Networked Culture by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green (2013). The underlying logic of media circulation, as the authors understand it, is simple: "if it doesn't spread, it's dead" (ibid: 1). Those media that are the most successful in reaching large audiences in today's media landscape are those that can easily be shared with others and retrofitted in unanticipated ways – these media are "spreadable." In this context, "spreadability" is defined as

> the technical resources that make it easier to circulate some kinds of content than others, the economic structures that support or restrict circulation, the attributes of a media text that might appeal to a community's motivation for sharing material, and the social networks that link people through the exchange of meaningful bytes. (ibid: 4)

Thus, the concept of spreadability[6] essentially describes a media product's potential of being shared, factoring in technical, economic, cultural, and social variables.

The authors place greater emphasis on a bottom-up participatory model of culture through their use of spreadability; for instance, how some spreadable content is used in the sharing process is often unpredictable and uncontrollable. Furthermore, such activities often blur the distinctions between "producer" and "audience," as collaboration between these roles increases (ibid: 7). The phenomenon of the Slender Man online myth, discussed in the Introduction, is an excellent example of this fusion of producer and audience: while the origin of the myth can be pinned down to one specific person, the myth in its entirety is the result of crowdsourcing.

Jenkins, Ford, and Green have specifically designed the concept of spreadability in order to avoid using phrases such as "viral media." As they purport, the virus metaphor may be able to capture the speed at

6 Some scholars have criticized the term, arguing that "spreadability" is too suggestive of spreads such as peanut butter (Jenkins/Ford/Green 2013: 3). According to Jenkins, Ford, and Green, this connotation is not necessarily unfitting: like such spreads, spreadable media are "sticky" – they motivate deep audience engagement (ibid: 4, 9).

which content is now dispersed via the Internet – yet, beyond this, the assumptions that come with the metaphor are too simplistic and deceptive; to that end, it not only hinders, but outright harms our understanding of the media landscape. It is furthermore a paradox that the notion of media viruses – and, with that, the idea of a passive audience infected by that virus – has coemerged with the acknowledgement that audience members are *not* passive recipients, but active participants in networked media (ibid: 20). This is where the crux of the metaphor lies: the term "viral media" allegedly presupposes a passive audience, ignoring how individuals actively shape a media text, share it with a number of carefully selected people for whom this text might be interesting and, in turn, consume or reject what others share with them. In order to avoid such deceptive assumptions, Jenkins, Ford, and Green demand that the modifier "viral" should only be used to describe media phenomena that truly are viral in that they "deploy automated ways to induce audience members to unwittingly pass along their marketing messages" (ibid: 21). For all other phenomena, the term "spreadable" should be preferred, given that it avoids metaphors such as "infection" or "contamination."

As justified as these goals are, there are some difficulties that remain in substituting what they define as the "spreadability model" for what – in the context and for the purposes of this book – may be called the "virality model." First and foremost, it is too simplistic to demand that only those media phenomena be defined as "viral" that somehow force audiences to unwillingly, or even unknowingly, pass along marketing messages. Incidents like the political involvement of Cambridge Analytica or the opacity of those algorithms structuring Facebook and other web services illustrate that the agency that facilitates the manner in which media content spreads is often undecidable. Additionally, some viral texts create such a buzz that they become omnipresent; it is almost impossible to avoid contents such as the plethora of cat videos. If a person cannot avoid being confronted – or "infected" – with these contents, would it be so wrong to think of them as being viral? Furthermore, most of these contents are eventually forgotten again – almost as if a metaphorical immune response had disabled their initial im-

pact. Jenkins, Ford, and Green reduce the virus metaphor solely to its implications of spread and agency, while disregarding other aspects of the metaphor in their criticism of the virality model.

Furthermore, and most importantly, it is highly questionable whether the term "spreadability" *truly* avoids potentially harmful metaphors of infection or contamination. After all, when we discuss viruses – regardless of which kind – we always also discuss their *spread*: by what means they spread from host to host, how fast they spread throughout a population, and so on. "Spreadability" hence does not successfully replace "virality" – instead, it simply foregrounds a singular aspect of the virus metaphor. Instead of abandoning the modifier "viral," it is more fruitful to consider which of the metaphor's meanings are transferred, which are not, and how this metaphorical expression fundamentally affects our understanding of both viruses and of the media ecology. In short: we need to unpack the virus metaphor to better grasp its cultural significance. In popular fiction and especially in fictions featuring the supernatural media virus, the metaphorical use of the virus is turned into a literal one, thereby giving visible forms to those diverse meanings of the term.

1.3 The Ubiquity of the Network Metaphor and the Emergence of the Network Society

In recent decades, the virus and the network have become co-constitutive terms. Mitchell describes this as "a 'network' turn in the study of infectious disease and an 'epidemiological' turn in network theory" (2012: 124). While Weinstock, writing within the context of US culture during the 1990s and restricting his analysis largely to the rise of AIDS and computer viruses during the preceding decade, observed the development of a "Virus Culture" (1997: 83), Mitchell claims that this culture has since been supplanted by a "viral *network* culture" (2012: 135, original emphasis). Situated within this viral network culture, the Gothic trope of the supernatural media virus hinges not only upon the logic of virality but is additionally intricately linked to the notion of intercon-

nection and strongly resonates with the concept of the network society. Any discussion of the trope, therefore, depends upon an analysis of the network metaphor in general as well as an in-depth examination of the network society in particular.

A brief historical overview of the network metaphor's development hints at several themes that resonate throughout portrayals of the supernatural media virus. Metaphors of webs and nets have a long tradition. The cosmology of ancient mythologies, for instance, frequently features a wide array of "spinning and weaving goddesses of fate wielding power over death of life" (Friedrich 2009: 287).[7] Reality and existence are considered in textile terms: fabrics that can be woven, expanded, reshaped, or torn apart. Like the "web of life" metaphor, the net as a tool used for hunting or fishing evokes associations with a superior authority controlling the web (Friedrich 2015: 335). These ancient uses of the metaphor rely on a godlike entity that determines the shape of the net.

The metaphor modernized during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in light of scientific and technological progress, becoming intertwined with the biological metaphor of the organism. It was in those days that the network as a metaphor for connection and organization first emerged (ibid: 336). The network metaphor detaches itself from the organic metaphor as a cultural key metaphor for grasping societies and communities during the 20th and 21st centuries (ibid: 342). Significantly, whereas ancient notions of the web metaphor usually envision some higher authority holding and controlling the net, this is no longer the case today (ibid: 368). There is no superior entity; there is only the network seemingly controlling itself. These questions regarding (a lack of) control and the naturalness of the network are negotiated in fictions about the supernatural media virus.

The metaphor's ubiquity – what may be called the network paradigm – reveals itself in its proliferation across several disciplines that have adopted networks or network-like phenomena as the key metaphor around which theoretical advancements are organized.

7 Examples of this are Moirai, Parcae, and Norns, the Fates in Greek, Roman, and Norse mythology, respectively.

Borrowing from biology, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari introduce their concept of the rhizome in *A Thousand Plateaus* (2005 [1980]) to advance a theory of knowledge and thought as horizontal, heterogenous, and processual. The verb "to be" is inadequate to describe the rhizome, which is always in the process of becoming, shifting and re-shifting, growing and collapsing (ibid: 25). Another central theory that builds upon the idea of networks is actor-network-theory (ANT). Bruno Latour defines actors as "*anything* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference" (2005: 71, original emphasis). Speed bumps that slow a car down, a hammer that enables the hitting of a nail, the remote that allows for control over the TV, all qualify as actors. They are "mediators and translators linked in extended constellations of cause and effect" (Felski 2015: 164). Networks complicate simplistic, constraining conceptions of causality and instead allow for the observation of linkages between actors and patterns of interaction (Latour 2005: 8). Thus, ANT does not attempt to describe set structures, but rather attempts to make complex processes of associations visible.

Both the rhizome and ANT exemplify the network's potential as a dynamic, processual, and highly complex structure. In her discussion of the network as a narrative form, Caroline Levine points out how the term's etymology already rejects any unidirectionality:

> The term *network* derives from the language of metallurgy and textiles used in the sixteenth century to describe objects made out of fabric or metal fibers interlaced as in a net or web. Something like *text*, the roots of the term imply interwoven strands moving in multiple directions rather than directed toward a single end. (2015: 113, original emphases)

She suggests that one of the most vital affordances of networks, next to their connectedness, is that they "usefully confound containing forms" and that they "do not fit formal models of unified shape or wholeness" (ibid: 112). The totality of the networked form cannot be comprehended fully at once.

It is this confounding complexity and the notion of object agency that Florian Sprenger and Christoph Engemann build upon in their ex-

amination of the changing relationship between human subjects and their (networked) technologies. Computers are no longer isolated "black boxes," but are "invisible, smart, miniaturized, spatially distributed, and omnipresent" (2015: 7, my translation). As such, they not only collect data, but are also able to process this information and make decisions based upon them – they are actors (ibid: 8). While great potential of efficiency increase and personalization of content lies in this powerful type of computing, it also brings into existence the fear of surveillance and of external control: "[t]hanks to sensors and internet connectivity, the most banal everyday objects have acquired tremendous power to regulate behaviour" (Morozov 2014). Today's smart technologies purport to offer solutions for all sorts of problems, from obesity to climate change; however, they do so by encouraging peer surveillance and continuous self-monitoring (Morozov 2013: 3, 227). It is anxieties such as these that are an intricate part of the sociological concept of the network society.

The extent to which networks supposedly pervade society and change the human condition becomes apparent in a claim put forward by van Dijk in his introduction to *The Network Society*:

> With little exaggeration, we may call the 21st century the age of networks. Networks are becoming the nervous system of our society, and we can expect this infrastructure to have more influence on our entire social and personal lives than did the construction of roads for the transportation of goods and people in the past. (2012: 2)

This somewhat bold statement resonates with a more general sentiment of the late 20th and 21st century that everything is connected to everything else; that we are constantly surrounded and possibly even monitored by networked communication technology; that the world is shrinking in an ongoing process of globalization and digitalization. It is significant that the concept of the network society not only expresses, but also actively shapes a specific worldview. Networks are regarded as the underlying structure of almost everything, while networking itself has become a behavioral paradigm. This double function is foregrounded in van Dijk's metaphor of a societal "nervous system": a healthy nervous system is a well-connected network and only such a

nervous system can guarantee an organic body's efficient functioning as a whole. The descriptive and prescriptive potential of the network metaphor is, hence, transferred into the sociological concept.

This concept is one particular instance of what may be called the network paradigm: the current tendency to see and to impose networks as the basic organizational principle in all matters. Networks as structures and networking as a process are regarded as an almost natural imperative. However, what are those networks that supposedly constitute the nervous system of society in actuality? Financial networks, media networks, the Internet, transport networks; these are all extremely diverse types of networks that impact our everyday lives in very different ways. While entire books have been written about the network society, the concept remains abstract, ill-defined, and difficult to grasp. Similarly, the key concepts used in theorizing the network society, such as information and the network, are insufficiently delineated.[8] The network society exemplifies the fact that "we use network metaphors colloquially to label the ways things are connected in our daily existence – while not really understanding all these relationships in detail" (Friedrich 2009: 291). Regardless of how vague it is, the network society as a concept continues to shape our worldview: how we perceive of the social structures we live in; how we engage with media technologies; how we understand globalization processes are taking place, and so on. It is, therefore, vital to disentangle the sociological concept from its metaphorical implications.

In his trilogy, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, Castells advances the idea that humanity has entered the "Information Age," bringing about a new social structure (the network society), economy (the informational or global economy), and culture (a culture of "real virtuality"). The network society is characterized by its being

8 Frank Webster has discussed this definitional problem in detail in his *Theories of the Information Society* (2014), dedicating an entire chapter to Castells' trilogy. As Webster further discusses at length in the second chapter of his study, many theories focusing on the concept of the "information society" offer only insufficient definitions of "information."

organized around networks in all dimensions of social structure and practice (2010b: xviii). Yet, as Castells goes on to explain, networking in itself is not a really novel form of social organization; the one feature that truly distinguishes this type of society from previous societal forms is its "informational mode of development": "the action of knowledge upon knowledge itself as the main source of productivity" (ibid: 17). It is not the quality or quantity of knowledge or information, in itself, that is new; elsewhere, he emphasizes that information in its widest sense has always played a key role in all societies (ibid: 21). Instead, it is the fact that information has now become the main source of productivity in society – the "raw material" (ibid: 70). Consequently, a large segment of labor is now moving towards information-processing activities, with these types of employment being more valuable to the network society than others (ibid: 81). The success of these informational types of employment, and the network society as a whole, was made possible by the rise of modern computer communications technologies which allow for the interlinking of businesses, locales, and economies.

The everyday lives of individual persons are affected by the network society as well. Castells focuses on changes in space-time relations and claims that the Information Age is characterized by the emergence of the "space of flows":

> In this network [of interactions made possible by information technology devices], no place exists by itself, since the positions are defined by the exchanges of flows in the network. Thus, the network of communication is the fundamental spatial configuration: places do not disappear, but their logic and their meaning become absorbed in the network. (ibid: 442-443)

In a similar manner, the concept of time is also profoundly changed by digital communication networks, doing away with the notion of linear, predictable time. Instead, according to Castells, the Information Age is characterized by "timeless time" (ibid: 465). Biological rhythms, such as life expectancy, can be manipulated; electronic management systems monitor stock markets around the clock; working hours become flexible. Thus, we are currently witnessing "the supersession of space and

the annihilation of time" (ibid: 502). The emergence of a "real virtuality" is a consequence of this drastic modification of space-time relations in connection to the omnipresent network logic and is, "*a system in which reality itself (that is, people's material/symbolic existence) is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting* [...] *in which appearances* [...] *become the experience*" (ibid: 404, original emphasis). Cultural expressions become detached from specific historical or geographical contexts, due to fast and far-reaching information or communications technologies.

Multiple aspects of Castells' theory of the network society find expression in portrayals of the supernatural media virus. Castells' understanding of time and space, as well as his Baudrillardian conception of "real virtuality", resonate in these fictions and are expressed through motifs such as displacement, disembodiment, repetition, and replication, as well as the agency of virtual images. Furthermore, while the main focus may lie on one or the other, it is usually both the macro- and the microscopic effects of the network which are negotiated in fictions that feature the trope: while most of the narratives that I discuss here focus on the struggles of the individual, many of them carry apocalyptic undertones, implying that the virus may cause large-scale societal breakdown. Finally, the alleged inseparability of networks and information travelling through those connections is exemplified by the fact that the supernatural media virus is pure information: a broadcasting signal; a manuscript; a video clip; a piece of computer code.

The disputed aspects of his theory are revealing and relevant in the context of the supernatural media virus as well, since it is those precise points in which the metaphorical impact of Castells' concept becomes most apparent. Central points of criticism are that the theory is too technology-focused and that it portrays the network as a self-expanding omnivore. An underlying technological determinism arises from Castells' focus on technology as the engine driving the restructuring of society. Two quotes are especially conspicuous in this context:

> Toward the end of the second millennium of the Christian era several events of historical significance transformed the social landscape of human life. A technological revolution, centered around information

> technologies, began to reshape, at accelerated pace, the material basis of society. (ibid: 1)

Moreover:

> [T]he ability or inability of societies to master technology, and particularly technologies that are strategically decisive in each historical period, largely shapes their destiny, to the point where we could say that while technology *per se* does not determine historical evolution and social change, technology (or the lack of it) embodies the capacity of societies to transform themselves […]. (ibid: 7)

Here, technology – or the supposed "technological revolution" – is an *event* that is expected to reshape society. While Castells denies that technology determines social change, it nonetheless appears as if, in his conception at least, technology itself is an autonomous phenomenon independent of such changes. It is this view of a unidirectional influence of technology on society – the idea of technology *controlling* society – that becomes a driving force in representations of the supernatural media virus.

Resulting from this focus on technology is Castells' view of the network as all-embracing and self-expanding (2010a: 372), which comprises the second major point of criticism. The network appears to be an outside force invading the social structure, unstoppable, and ultimately inescapable:

> The social construction of new dominant forms of space and time develops a meta-network that switches off non-essential functions, subordinate social groups, and devalued territories. By so doing, infinite social distance is created between this meta-network and most individuals, activities, and locales around the world. Not that people, locales, or activities disappear. But their structural meaning does, subsumed in the unseen logic of the meta-network where value is produced, cultural codes are created, and power is decided. The new social order, the network society, increasingly appears to most people as a meta-social disorder. Namely, as an automated, random sequence of

> events, derived from the uncontrollable logic of markets, technology, geopolitical order, or biological determination. (2010b: 508)

The network is portrayed as an "automated," "random," and "uncontrollable" omnivore that simultaneously threatens to subsume anything and everyone, while also "switching off" those units that have become irrelevant. This notion of the network vividly exemplifies how the metaphor today no longer features an exterior, superior controlling entity, but instead portrays the network itself as a self-controlling agent, which is incomprehensible in its totality – a truly Gothic vision.

Van Dijk provides another theory of the network society that differs vastly from Castells' theory. Not only does his theory have different focal points, centering more on communication media networks and their influences on diverse social spheres instead of economics, but van Dijk is also quite a bit more optimistic when it comes to the network's controllability (2012: 295-297). He differentiates the network society from two other societal forms, namely the information society and the mass society, by defining the network society as a "modern type of society with an infrastructure of social and media networks that characterizes its mode of organization at every level: individual, group/organizational and societal" (ibid: 24).[9]

Van Dijk takes what he defines as the "seven 'laws' of the Web" for his starting point in his conceptualization of the network society (2012: 37): these include the law of network articulation, the law of network externality, the law of network extension, the law of small worlds, the law of limits to attention, the power law in networks, and the law of trend amplification. Each of these tightly interconnected laws essentially describes the structural properties that govern human behavior in the network society; to that end, they serve to foreground the network's complexity while also offering some understanding of the underlying mechanisms of that complex network. Each of these laws touches upon one or several points that are highly relevant when it comes to the portrayal

9 Van Dijk's conception of the mass society is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two: "*Ghostwatch* and the Advent of the Network Society."

of the supernatural media virus, in particular the relationship between human subjects and the apparently omnipresent media networks. It is, therefore, worthwhile to have a brief look at each of these seven laws.

The law of network articulation – the most important of the seven laws, according to van Dijk – postulates that "social *relations* are gaining influence as compared to the social *units* they are linking" (ibid: 37, original emphases). In other terms, links are becoming more important than nodes in the network society insofar as these relations deeply affect all of life's domains.

The law of network externality refers to the fact that objects or people outside of the network do not remain unaffected by it. While media networks may facilitate an increase in sociability, there is also a social pressure to become, and to remain, part of the network: "new media access is necessary for an increasing number of jobs […]. In social networking, access is required to create new ties and to maintain old ties […]. Those without access will be isolated in future society" (ibid: 196-197). The more people are part of a network, the higher the incentive is to join in as well.

The third and fourth laws, focusing on network extension and small worlds, describe the consequences of network growth:

> When networks such as the Web grow, they tend to become too big. Network units lose oversight and do not reach each other anymore. To solve this problem, *intermediaries*, such as search engines, portals and social networking sites are necessary. (ibid: 39, original emphasis)

Intermediaries become a necessity as it becomes impossible to link every node to every other node. These intermediaries bridge the distance between diverse clusters – that is, between tightly interconnected groups of nodes – thereby creating so-called "small worlds." Even though most units are not neighbors in large-scale networks, they can nonetheless reach every other node through a small number of

intermediaries.[10] As a consequence, the majority of network units, therefore, have to rely on such expert information agents.

The law of the limits to attention emphasizes the disparity between the capacity for sending and receiving messages in networks. While it may be easy to say something, being heard is much more difficult (ibid: 40). Not only does this result in increasingly shallow media content (ibid: 216), but participants in the network are further confronted with an information overload constantly, in which "the glut of information no longer adds to our quality of life, but instead begins to cultivate stress, confusion, and even ignorance" (Shenk 1997: 15). Trying to alleviate this flood of content, much of the network's attention is governed by intermediaries – the "Googlearchy" and social media influencers being two pertinent examples. Thus, popular websites are usually ranked at the top of a result page and, therefore, become even more popular. The consequence is a "rich getting richer" dynamic that van Dijk conceptualizes as the "power law in networks": "In large, scale-free networks those units already having many links acquire even more, while most units keep only a few links. The mechanisms are a continuous growth of links, preferential attachment and contagion" (2012: 41).

The last of these three mechanisms, contagion, is central to the seventh and final law: trend amplification. It is often claimed that the Internet in general, and social media in particular, have a revolutionary potential, enabling the overthrowing of established norms and institutions. According to van Dijk, however, the exact opposite is true: while the technology of new media might be regarded as revolutionary, its social effects are instead evolutionary. These networks reinforce existing social trends and relations, rather than dismantling them (ibid: 42-3). Thus, one central risk of the network society is the rise of "echo chambers" (Sunstein qtd. in van Dijk 2012: 231), which leave no room for new impressions, but instead echo and amplify already existing opinions,

10 This refers to the phenomenon of the six degrees of separation, according to which all human beings are connected to one another through a maximum of six intermediaries. For more on this, see Barabási (2002) as well as Watts (2004).

frequently allowing for a faster proliferation of such opinions and beliefs in the place of hard facts.

As a result of the structural properties described by van Dijk's seven laws, the network society is governed by the seemingly paradoxical dynamic of simultaneous scale extension and scale reduction (2012: 45): small communities arise in the network in the form of clusters, even while the network grows continuously in the processes of nationalization, internationalization, and globalization. Independently of the rise of these clusters, the network society is less inclusive than the mass society, given that individuals have to continuously prove their value to the network in order to remain connected thereto (ibid: 46). It can become more difficult to find a place to fit into a society that is no longer dependent on collectives structured around geographical proximity.

Of course, while van Dijk's account of the network society may be more nuanced than Castells' account in parts, his theory is not unproblematic either. Again, an insufficient definition of concepts and the failure to consider the metaphorical baggage carried by these distinct terms need to be emphasized at this point. Additionally, van Dijk's claim that the network could theoretically be designed before its implementation, and that the network is controllable even after its establishment, is dubious. For instance, legal systems are always one step behind as the interests of multinational corporations are opposed to those of individual states. One indication of this is the fact that the algorithms of services such as Facebook or Google, which ultimately determine any user's online experience – which contents they see, which websites or friend connections are suggested to them, etc. – are often untransparent and subtly enforce those aforementioned echo chambers. The network seemingly evolves more quickly than the legislature governing it.

What becomes apparent is one of the central problems of discussions concerning the network society and which, in turn, is a fulcrum in the present book: it is impossible to ever reach a satisfactory understanding of the network society due to the complexity of the network paradigm in general and the network society in particular – as both the concept and the claimed condition of society. Most discussions of the network society, for instance, overlook the fact that there is not *one*

network governing all social structures. Instead, there is a multitude of overlapping networks – transportation, political, media networks, and more – that all work simultaneously (Levine 2015: 121). It is impossible to accurately foresee the consequences of life in such an interconnected society. Therefore, it is vital to focus instead on the *perceived* dangers of the network society for this monograph: the fears and worries that are coded into imaginations of this type of society as they appear in contemporary Gothic fiction. These perceived, oftentimes simplistic, anxieties are the driving force behind the supernatural media virus.

As Friedrich explains, "cascades, congestions, contaminations, chain reactions, epidemics, and crises are endemic fears of the network society" (Friedrich 2015: 376, my translation). Each of the network's benefits may also yield disadvantages. For instance, today's communication networks may enable speedy communication between people across vast distances as well as easy access to information; at the same time, however, these media can also disseminate harmful information or facilitate fearmongering. Likewise, these networks may allow for an increase in social relationships and interactivity, but this increase may come at the cost of privacy or encourage people to withdraw into completely self-chosen environments, thereby decreasing some types of social relationships and causing the fragmentation of some social units. Every positive development that is enabled by the network society can have a negative side effect.

All these factors contribute to the perception of the network society as an obscure entity that follows complex, incomprehensible rules and which controls seemingly every aspect of human life. Van Dijk captures this sentiment in the following sentences:

> The social environments made by humans increasingly adopt the character of a natural environment. Individuals therefore feel that they face an anonymous, opaque, inaccessible and uncontrollable reality. Symptoms of alienation and uprooting are widespread. Social and economic crises begin to resemble natural disasters. (2012: 175)

This notion of the crisis within the network appearing almost as a natural catastrophe – that is, as something outside of human control and

which is unintelligible – resonates with Castells' arguments in *Rise of the Network Society* and hints at the network metaphor's overall cultural impact. Regardless of how accurate these theories may or may not be, they pick up on numerous anxieties regarding life in a networked, technologized world: the fear of being "switched off" by the network when no longer valuable; the idea of a sudden technological revolution that is both too complex to be fully understood and so pervasive that it reshapes the very basis of society; and the notion of a self-expanding and all-embracing network that follows its own rules.

1.4 The Virus in the Network Society: The Supernatural Media Virus as a Gothic Trope

The virus and the network metaphor are often used unquestioningly as established concepts without any regard for their metaphorical potential. How well these terms fit the phenomena they are used to refer to, or what the implications of the metaphorical mapping are, is something that is seldom questioned – in short, what ideological "baggage" these terms carry. As with all metaphors, they are worldmaking devices: they shape a worldview and enforce certain behavioral paradigms associated with it. The supernatural media virus as a contemporary Gothic trope builds upon these metaphors' interdependency and their worldmaking potential. In my book, metaphor serves as a conceptual and methodological tool to unpack the trope and its diverse implications.

The supernatural media virus connects both metaphors to the idea of uncanny media technologies that possess a will of their own. Such a conception of the media as a source of terror is by no means new. In *Haunted Media*, Jeffrey Sconce discusses the metaphysics of electricity and electronic presence, exploring the relationship between diverse technological innovations and their surrounding discourses of uncanniness and haunting. As he explains, "the cultural construction of electronic presence is always inextricably bound to the social application of a technology within a given historical moment" (2000: 10); each medium and its corresponding fears, therefore, need to be read within

this specific context. Sconce identifies medium-specific imaginations and metaphors by analyzing the common imaginations of ghostliness that are associated with the telegraph, radio, and television. The parallel rise of the telegraph and spiritualism invoked metaphors such as "celestial telegraphy" or the "spirit battery" (ibid: 28-29), foregrounding the newly available long-distance communication methods that were enabled by electricity. Radio, in contrast, was framed using oceanic metaphors: the "etheric ocean," and the feeling of being "adrift on the new century's social currents" (ibid: 63). While radio offered a means of contacting distant worlds across this vast ocean, television seemed to comprise an independent world or dimension of its own, blurring the boundaries between the real and the virtual: "televisionland" (ibid: 177). The television set itself becomes a kind of "gateway to oblivion" within the domestic space of the living room (ibid: 166). Different media invoke different metaphors, and these metaphors, in turn, reinforce specific narratives.

All of these imaginations that are discussed by Sconce utilize metaphors of "flow," "suggesting analogies between electricity, consciousness, and information that enable fantastic forms of electronic transmutation, substitution, and exchange" (ibid: 7). The contents transmitted – the information flowing through a medium – influence the technology itself:

> In these scenarios, media technologies are more than just media; they are affected by the material that passes through them. Narratives of haunted media suggest that this material – messages, images, voices – does not merely pass through; parts of it remain and leave traces. Further, since these technologies act as extensions of human consciousness and perception, aspects of those faculties begin to rub off as well, resulting in narratives of technologies and technological devices imbued with their own will. The "other side" thus stores much more than the spirits of the dead; it provides the murky borderland for all sorts of other-intrusions to disturb the distinctions a society holds dear: conscious/unconscious, known/unknown, domestic/for-

> eign, reality/unreality, life/death, mind/body, self/other. (Jackson 2013: 33-34)

Significantly, *Haunted Media* only briefly touches upon the development of the personal computer, even though it was published in 2000; Sconce does not discuss the discourses surrounding digital media in greater detail. Expanding on his theory, I claim that viruses and networks are the key metaphors through which today's media, and their ghostly presences, are envisioned. Both metaphors are deeply imbued with the notion of flow as well: while the virus represents the uncontrolled flow of harmful information; the network provides the points and pathways for this flow. As fictions of the supernatural media virus exemplify, it is not just relatively recent technologies – the Internet, digital communication networks, and so on – that have been conceived of as networks, but even older media, such as analog network television or the print novel, that are becoming reconsidered through the lens of interconnection. "Network" here denotes both the structure and the process: these media are understood as being structured as networks, while they are also seen as continuously undergoing the process of networking, changing their shape, incorporating new nodes, and disconnecting other nodes. Viruses travel through these networks with ease, infecting every node and affecting the shape and growth of the entire structure. It is these narratives of interconnection and contagion that evolve alongside today's digital, networked media.

In some cases, the network paradigm is taken to the extreme by organizing the narrative itself as one such network, as is the case in *House of Leaves* or *Kairo*. Aris Mousoutzanis describes such texts as "network fictions" or "narratives of interconnectedness" (2014: 95). These fictions are characterized by the narrative patterns that result from their thematic preoccupations:

> The "global network" in particular would be one of the most persistent motifs of the 1990s that has emerged during the last decade as a paradigm to organise a set of fictions consisting of different interlocking narratives set in different times and places around the globe, involving many characters, often in a constant state of travel and mo-

> bility as they find themselves involved in or affected by incidents from a distant time, place or storyline. (ibid: 223)

In short, networks comprise such fictions' subject matter as well as storytelling strategy. David Bordwell advances a similar theory of narrative, albeit one specifically for film. Like Mousoutzanis, he maintains that the "form's recent popularity may also owe something to the emergence of network theory in the 1980s and 1990s" (Bordwell 2006: 100). In popular culture, the idea of the "butterfly effect" in particular, as well as that of the "six degrees of separation" took hold, inspiring films such as *Six Degrees of Separation* (dir. Fred Schepisi, 1993) and *Love Actually* (dir. Richard Curtis, 2003). However, as Bordwell explains, most of these narratives remain comprehensible and are structured according to "principles of causality, temporal sequence and duration, character wants and needs, and motivic harmony that have characterized mainstream storytelling (not just in cinema) for at least a century" (2006: 100). Discussing Bordwell's ideas, Levine explains that films can never realize the full potential of network narratives, since they are too restricted in terms of length; therefore, films can only portray more simple chain networks of cause and effect (2015: 127).[11] Nonetheless, the trend to simulate a network – the narrative's subject matter – by dividing the fiction into multiple narrative strands that converge at some point is apparent.

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11 Levine's point is somewhat undermined by interactive films such as *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (dir. David Slade, 2018). Released on Netflix, *Bandersnatch* asks viewer to make decisions for its main character that lead to different results. Thus, the film's run time is highly variable. Since the movie invites viewers to explore several narrative paths, it establishes a narrative network that is far more complex than those chain networks discussed by Levine. A similar claim could be made for the growing number of video games that can be classified as interactive dramas. Well-known examples of these in the Gothic/horror genre include *Until Dawn* (2015) as well as the *Dark Pictures Anthology*, which so far includes the games *Man of Medan* (2019) and *Little Hope* (2020), all developed by Supermassive Games. These games all rely on the butterfly effect and feature surprising levels of complexity.

Significantly, these fictions often focus on seemingly small events that spread throughout the entire network. One concrete example for this is what Mousoutzanis deems the "network apocalypse": "the impending apocalypse as a result of a major event or accident that escalates due to the connectivity and interconnectedness of different narratives, events, computers, machines or individuals" (ibid: 94). The centrality of the global network and the network apocalypse in fiction looms large today, even though Mousoutzanis restricts his own analysis to *fin de siècle* fictions from the 20th century.

A viral outbreak is one possible cause for such a cataclysmic network event. The outbreak narrative scheme advanced by Wald (2008: 2) relies on a number of ingredients, the most important of which are: the establishing of scientific expertise and the global networks used by these experts; the identification of certain people who are *at* risk and the identification of other people *as* risk; the delineation of sanitary and unsanitary zones; and the description of the channels through which the pathogen travels. While the supernatural media virus is not always explicitly described in viral terms, the narratives featuring the trope nevertheless adhere to the outbreak formula and negotiate these central concerns. By modifying some of the scheme's ingredients, nonmedical contagions such as the supernatural media virus can be grasped using the formula: first, the notion of expertise is deeply affected. In the texts discussed, it is neither medical scientists, biologists, nor military experts, but instead media-savvy people who identify the emerging media infection. At the same time, it is often these people who are also among the first to be put at risk by the supernatural media virus. The role of expert, victim, and host can all be assumed by one person.

Second, the global networks that enhance and inhibit the virus' spread need to be reconsidered: while the supernatural media virus may utilize routes of physical travel, it predominantly spreads through those media networks that are central to the network society: piggybacking on a television signal; inscribing itself into the words of a book; hiding as a visual artifact on a videotape, or traveling along the information highway of the Internet. These media networks have their

own dynamics and rules concerning what can spread, how far, and how fast.

This leads to the third point: the novel nature of the vector, host, and environment. The vectors of a fatal infection are neither mosquitoes nor ticks, neither contaminated needles nor unhygienic doorknobs, but rather everyday media. Everybody who interacts with these dangerous media contents can become a host to the supernatural media virus – possibly even without realizing it at first. The environment through which the virus spreads is not predominantly described in terms of its climate or population density, but rather in light of its technologization, digitalization, medialization, and networkedness. While the delineation of safe, sanitary zones, and unsanitary places in narratives of biological pandemics oftentimes hinges upon a "thirdworldification" – the portrayal of infected regions as primitive, backward, and poor (Wald 2008: 45)[12] – it is instead highly modernized and technologized metropolises, in which the network society already seems to have been fully implemented, which serve as the danger spots of the supernatural media virus.

The degree to which fictions featuring the supernatural media virus make the contagious potential of their antagonist explicit varies, as I show in the following chapters. *House of Leaves*, for instance, repeatedly foregrounds the physical symptoms that the virus induces in its victims. *Ring* dwells on the pattern of the virus' spread and how fast it might disseminate on a global scale. *Pulse* even features animated epidemiological maps in its opening credits. In comparison, *Ghostwatch* and *Kairo* introduce the idea of viral infection more subtly, instead focusing on the social environment of the supernatural media virus. Significantly,

12 These processes of thirdworldification and othering could also be witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Xenophobia and anti-China sentiment arose, expressing themselves in derogatory jokes, false rumors about "primitive" Chinese cuisine, warnings to avoid Asian-populated quarters, and outright dehumanizing hate. These discourses largely built upon age-old racist imaginations associating the Chinese with filth, dirty/contaminated food, and disease.

the trope frequently bears connotations of diverse types of viruses: biological, digital, and media-related variations. Through the confluence of diverse virus metaphors and the impending bodily disintegration, the trope of the supernatural media virus emphasizes the impossibility of disentangling the technological and the biological. Examining the extent to which each of these fictions follows the conventions of the outbreak narrative, how they adapt its ingredients to fit their purpose, and how they frame the nature of the virus is a necessary step in discussing the trope.

Fears regarding the network society are translated into the language of outbreak narratives and are given a recognizable shape in the form of the supernatural media virus. In his afterword to the special issue *Contagion and Infection*, Arnold Weinstein writes: "literary texts about disease are revelatory and can tell us something about the repressed fears and the emerging fault lines of a culture in ways that the epidemiologist as such cannot chart" (2003: 109). Fictions about disease are a kind of thought experiment that represents the reaction of individuals and societies to an outbreak and involve more than merely charting the outbreak and progress of a disease. Whereas a scientific model tends to focus on the hard facts – places, dates, numbers of infections and deaths – fiction can represent the hypothetical lives of people confronted with disease. Representations of the supernatural media virus function in a similar way, posing vital questions regarding the effect of the network society and its media technologies.

The network society takes center stage through the portrayal of highly interconnected and densely populated urban spaces in some of the fictions that I discuss; here, it is vital to examine the interplay of the virus and its environment (e.g., *Ghostwatch*, *Ring*, *Kairo*, *Pulse*). In other cases, such as the *Ring* franchise, the analysis of the virus-host interaction is more important, exploring how the virus enforces certain behaviors in its victims and adding a moral dimension to media consumption and spread. Yet another set of fictions still revolves around the impact of digital media on our everyday lives: how deeply such technologies pervade society and how even the simplest tasks and actions are performed with the aid of devices such as cell phones or

computers (e.g., *Kairo* and *Pulse*). In these fictions, the analysis of the relationship between virus and viral vector is particularly fruitful. Every narrative, in short, highlights different aspects of the supernatural media virus. The metaphorical potential of the trope of the supernatural media virus can be uncovered, by focusing on the three aspects of host, vector, and environment, thereby revealing not only how it responds to, but also actively forms, certain imaginations regarding increasing interconnection and mediatization.

Several of the narratives chosen here have been adapted to a new medium and/or culture. In treating these texts, I follow Linda Hutcheon's notion of adaptation as both a product and a process (2006: 9). Hutcheon rejects the idea of reading adaptation exclusively in terms of a fidelity discourse, which implies that any such text is the inferior derivative of some original: "an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative – a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing" (ibid). The process of adaptation is neither parasitic nor vampiric; it neither drains the source text, nor is it necessarily "paler" than the original (ibid: 176). Using the metaphor of evolution, Hutcheon instead suggests regarding adaptation as a type of mutation which can give valuable insights into the cultural context of a text:

> Some [stories] have great fitness through survival (persistence in a culture) or reproduction (number of adaptations). Adaptation, like evolution, is a transgenerational phenomenon. […] Stories do get retold in different ways in new material and cultural environments; like genes, they adapt to those new environments *by virtue of* mutation – in their "offspring" or their adaptations. (ibid: 32, original emphasis)

By tracing the evolution of a text over time and across cultures, it is possible to uncover the ideologies and social values of a culture. Therefore, the analyses that follows never focus on one text exclusively, but, where possible, also take its adaptations into consideration. Of course, some of the narratives discussed do not have any adaptations – even these fictions, however, have some form of prequel/sequel and/or transmedia extension. The metaphor of evolution applies to this process of franchis-

ing as well, given that the narrative mutates over time and spawns additional installments. In the case of the *Ring* franchise, for instance, this process has reached a level where the narrative itself is oftentimes described as being viral (Lacefield 2010b: 21). Other fictions, such as *House of Leaves*, are multimodal constructs that exploit the characteristics of multiple narrative media and even create a complex, singular narrative dispersed across multiple media. Tracing these complex narrative structures is key to understanding how anxieties regarding the network society and conceptions of virality are written into the franchise. No straightforward, linear analysis of these narratives would prove sufficient, given that they challenge traditional forms of narration.

Significantly, I approach these fictions as they appear in a wide range of media with similar tools, taking the specificities of the narrative medium into consideration. In so doing, I draw on the concepts and methods developed in the field of transmedia narratology, or, as Marie-Laure Ryan calls it in her later work: a "media-conscious narratology" (2014: 30). Such a narratology examines the interplay of narrative and medium: how a story and its structure change when migrating between media through, for instance, the act of adaptation; how narrative meaning is created in diverse media; how the particular properties of a medium affect the narrative. Just as metaphors are mininarrations that evoke specific narrative schemata and plots, so too is the supernatural media virus a mininarration. On the diegetic level, the virus is always a story to be decoded: its origins must be discovered (was there a gruesome crime?) and its motivations found out (does the virus seek revenge?). This is all undertaken in the hopes of finding a cure or to contain the infection. Borrowing heavily from detective fiction, for instance, hosts of the Ring virus race against the seven-day incubation period in an attempt to decode the cursed videotape's secret messages, discovering the tragic history of Sadako/Samara. Hence, the virus can be regarded as a narrative that is inscribed into a corruptive medium. Each of the selected fictions is a text about another text, with one medium remediating another. In some examples, the narrative medium and the viral vector are conflated, playing with the fourth wall and implying that the reader/viewer of the fiction might be infected

by the supernatural media virus in the process. Such portrayals are relevant to our understanding of the supernatural media virus and how it reflects on the media environment and network society in which it thrives. A media-conscious narratology makes it possible to approach these points, particularly through its focus on narrative/medium interactions.

One approach to reading network fictions is what Jessica Pressman calls a "networked reading strategy" (2006: 116). This strategy foregrounds both the internal structure of a narrative and the nature of the narrative as a network comprised of a multitude of singular texts and demands that close attention be paid to the intra- and intertextual networks of a text. A networked reading strategy can, therefore, cope with rhizomatic fictions that either lack a stable center, such as *House of Leaves*, or have evolved far beyond their original center, such as *Ring*. For this reason, I regard each individual text of a franchise to be a node belonging to a larger narrative network. Similarly, in adopting actor-network-theory for literary criticism, Rita Felski calls for a rethinking of conventional approaches to a text:

> Texts are objects that do a lot of traveling; moving across time, they run into new semantic networks, new ways of imputing meaning. What Wai Chee Dimock calls "resonance" is this potential to signify and change across time, to accrue new meanings and associations, to trigger unexpected echoes in unexpected places. (2015: 160)

Furthermore: "Reading, in this light, is a matter of attaching, collating, negotiating, assembling – of forging links between things that were previously unconnected" (ibid: 173). Whereas Pressman's networked reading strategy focuses on narratives, which might be regarded as networks in some way, Felski's ANT-inspired reading practices instead demand that any text be read as an actor-network: accruing new meanings in new contexts, invoking new interpretations, and acting on its readers. The network becomes not only the structure to be studied, but also a method to be adopted, something very befitting of this study's topic.

This discussion has, until now, only foregrounded key characteristics of *the* supernatural media virus, postulating the existence of a singular, uniform, and easily identifiable trope. Of course, this is something of a generalization and simplification. As the following chapters intend to show, the trope is highly changeable in terms of both its appearance and its key themes. Every analysis in the subsequent sections, therefore, highlights different aspects of these supernatural media virus*es*, discussing the topics and anxieties negotiated through the trope.

2. *Ghostwatch* and the Advent of the Network Society

> "Who do you trust? Do you trust the information you're being given? Do you trust… Is that person really an expert?"
> *Richard Lawden, Ghostwatch: Behind the Curtains*

> "[T]he collapse of the media is by definition a collapse of the social."
> *Jeffrey Sconce, Haunted Media*

2.1 The Ghost Story as a Critique of Society and its Media

On October 31, 1992, BBC One broadcast *Ghostwatch*, the live investigation of a suburban home supposedly haunted by a poltergeist. The famous TV interviewer Michael Parkinson, one of the BBC's most trusted faces, hosted the event from the comfort of a BBC studio and was aided by television presenter Mike Smith as the studio's telephone operator. Television presenters Sarah Greene, Smith's wife and one of the nation's most popular hosts of children's television shows, and Craig Charles were live at the house in Northolt, supported by a well-equipped camera team. The team of four – all well-known TV personalities at the time – were further supported in their venture by the paranormal researcher Dr. Lin Pascoe, who joined Parkinson and Smith in the studio.

At first, *Ghostwatch* appears to be exactly what the television viewer would expect: for the first half of the program, nothing unusual happens; then, a few "hauntings" follow – but these are quickly debunked

as being the work of one of the two children living in the house. The entire investigation is seemingly a wild goose chase based on an elaborate hoax planned by the residents – mother Pamela Early and her daughters Kim and Suzanne. Suddenly, however, the tables turn: as the investigatory team researches the house's gruesome history, they begin to observe manifestations that cannot be explained. Simultaneously, more and more viewers call the studio hotline to report that they are witnessing increasing transmission interferences or are even experiencing inexplicable phenomena in their own homes. During the program's final minutes, Dr. Pascoe realizes that the live investigation triggered a massive séance, due to the large number of television viewers, thereby allowing the malevolent poltergeist "Pipes" to grow stronger than ever before and to travel through the tuned-in television sets. While Suzanne Early and Sarah Greene are dragged out of sight by Pipes at the house, the studio reports violent poltergeist manifestations throughout the entire country. Finally, Pipes invades the studio itself, tearing the place apart and possessing Michael Parkinson. The playful, family-friendly live show turns into a horrifying catastrophe.

Of course, *Ghostwatch* was *not* a live broadcast, but rather a prerecorded, carefully scripted television film. However, a significant number of viewers did not detect those clues that indicated the true nature of the program.[1] Soon, the BBC was flooded with accusations of the program inducing post-traumatic stress disorder and, in one case, even causing a teenager to commit suicide (Heller-Nicholas 2014: 77; Leeder 2013: 174). It took several years for the uproar to dissipate; even in 1995, the Broadcasting Standards Council – a subdivision of the Independent Television Commission who was responsible for the monitoring of the moral content of television programs in the UK – stated: "The BBC had a duty to do more than simply hint at the deception it was practicing on the audience. In *Ghostwatch* there was a deliberate attempt to culti-

1 In this respect, *Ghostwatch* garnered reactions similar to Orson Welles' 1938 radio adaptation of H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* as well as the found footage film *The Blair Witch Project* (dir. Daniel Myrick/Eduardo Sánchez, 1999).

vate a sense of menace" (qtd. in Lawden 2013: 33).[2] Consequentially, the BBC banned *Ghostwatch* from being rebroadcast in the UK. Nonetheless, the mockumentary quickly achieved cult status, inspiring the short story sequel "31/10" penned by Stephen Volk (2013 [2006]), the making-of documentary *Ghostwatch: Behind the Curtains* (dir. Rich Lawden, 2012), as well as a 2013 companion book of the same name.

Ghostwatch uses the Gothic mode to thematize the relationship between television and its reception, as well as the transformation of society and its media at that time. The show plays with the ambiguous meanings of the term "transmission": it is not only images and sound that are communicated, but also viral ghosts. Pipes is the supernatural media virus that grows more powerful with each person tuning in to the program. The mockumentary is still firmly grounded in the logic of the mass society; yet, it also anticipates issues of interconnectedness that pertain to the imagination of today's network society in many ways, most dominantly by depicting those anxieties regarding trust and trustworthiness in times of seemingly unchecked media content, as well as the evolution of uncanny media, increasingly invading the space of the home and everyday life while becoming ever more complex and uncontrollable. Volk has referred to *Ghostwatch* as "a critical analysis of TV through the prism of a ghost story" (Volk qtd. in Leeder 2013: 176). The BBC broadcast questions the media, their function, and their cultural reception by narrating one of the most conventional Gothic tales – the investigation of a haunted house – with a terrifying twist. *Ghostwatch* reflects on the influence of mass media such as television in a changing society through this subversion of expectations, where the ghost is *not* bound to a specific house, but is instead able to infect and exploit

2 While the controversy surrounding *Ghostwatch* remains unique until this day, this incident was not the first time that the BBC was criticized for the morality of its programming. The early postwar production of television ghost stories in particular came under attack, claiming that viewers might be negatively affected by the images of fictional horror and death (Wheatley 2006: 30). For more information on this, see Chapter 1, "Showing less, suggesting more: the ghost story on British television," in Wheatley (2006).

those technologies that were supposed to empower the paranormal detectives.

This chapter concentrates on three Gothic tropes that are used and modified in the film by approaching the mockumentary as a representation of the supernatural media virus: its self-reflexive focus on media technologies, the haunted house, and the paranormal researcher. While the broadcast features many more conventions of the Gothic, these closely interrelated tropes resonate with the key features of virus narratives found in *Ghostwatch*, thereby yielding insight into the supernatural media virus' vector, environment, and host population, respectively.

The following subsection explores the broadcast's self-reflexivity and mediality. *Ghostwatch*'s self-reflexive concern with its own mediality finds expression through the excessive display of technologies, as well as the blurring of fictionality and factuality. Self-reflexivity is a key feature not only of Gothic fiction in general, but of Gothic television specifically. Television provides the "ideal medium" for this type of narrative, given that television is a domestic medium, and since the Gothic is predominantly concerned with domestic themes (Wheatley 2006: 1). As Helen Wheatley explains, Gothic television constantly reminds its viewers "that this is terror/horror television which takes place, and is *viewed*, within a domestic milieu" (ibid: 7, original emphasis). *Ghostwatch* not only utilizes this self-reflexive parallel between its domestic story content – the haunted house – and the domestic reception context – the audience watching the program from their living rooms – but further destabilizes its own narrative medium by portraying the television itself as the source of ultimate horror. The broadcast suggests that viewers watching the program at home are not safe from this perilous medium, given that television is the viral vector of the supernatural media virus.

In order to examine the self-reflexivity of both *Ghostwatch* and its sequel "31/10" in detail, the section builds on Dorrit Cohn's "signposts of fictionality" (1990) and provides a discussion of another, equally controversial narrative: Orson Welles' 1938 radio adaptation of H. G. Wells' *The*

War of the Worlds (1897).[3] Scholars have discussed Welles' radio drama extensively, in contrast to the scant attention paid to *Ghostwatch*. These insights can be used to gain a deeper understanding of the *Ghostwatch* phenomenon, taking the medium-specific affordances of each broadcast into consideration. In particular, the parallels of both narratives in terms of story, format, and their surrounding controversy indicate that each new broadcast medium induces similar fears.

The chapter's final section, "Gothic Conventions in Times of Increasing Interconnection," centers on the tropes of the haunted house as well as on the occult detective. *Ghostwatch* modifies the haunted house tale by portraying a ghost that is not confined within the house, but which can move beyond these confines. This trope is tied directly to the preceding feature: it is because the researchers do not understand the impact of modern media technologies that the investigation goes awry. In the age of television, households are no longer isolated units; instead, they are linked to the outside world at all times. The Early household is merely the initial environment of the supernatural media virus from which the infection spreads. The house, therefore, functions as a symbol of society at large: once the virus emerges at some point within the network, it is expected to spread everywhere as a result of the growing connectivity enabled by news and communication media.

The occult detective or paranormal researcher, Dr. Pascoe, corresponds to the biologists and medical experts researching a disease in outbreak narratives, as discussed by Dougherty and Wald: she collects information pertaining to the case, she uses up-to-date methods and her specialization's technologies, and she attempts to contain the threat. In the end, however, she fails to eliminate the ghost and instead aids in the spread of the infection. Her portrayal and her function to the narrative resonates strongly with the narrative scheme of dangerous disease outbreaks.

3 In order to avoid confusion, I refer to Wells' novel in italics and to Welles' radio broadcast in quotation marks.

2.2 Blurring Fact and Fiction: Uncanny Mass Media

Ghostwatch displays its awareness of the Gothic tradition that it draws upon from the very beginning of the program. The film opens with a voice-over given by Michael Parkinson in the role of the rational, matter-of-fact host:

> The program you're about to watch is a unique live investigation of the supernatural. It contains material which some viewers may find to be disturbing. No creaking gates, no Gothic towers, no shuttered windows. Yet for the past ten months this house has been the focus of an astonishing barrage of supernatural activity. (*Ghostwatch* 1992)

After a brief video offering a glimpse at the goings-on at the house in question, the broadcast moves to the BBC studio itself which has been lavishly decorated for the Halloween-themed occasion: dark colors, a fireplace flanked by carved jack-o'-lanterns, the portrait of a bedsheet ghost, and some other mock-Gothic bric-a-brac (see Fig. 2.1). It is through this voice-over introduction and the visual representation of the studio that the viewer can already gather information about the kind of show that *Ghostwatch* intends to be: perhaps a bit scary, but not all that serious. This expectation is shattered once the well-known and beloved television presenters of the "live" broadcast are either possessed, killed, or are otherwise imperiled.

Volk's short story "31/10," first published in 2006 and set exactly ten years after the BBC broadcast, flags its status as a Gothic tale in a similar manner. A new investigatory team, consisting of people that were either involved in the original investigation, such as Volk himself, or were otherwise somehow affected by the show in 1992, is sent into the BBC studio that has been abandoned ever since it was invaded by Pipes. Whereas the original initiators of *Ghostwatch* are reluctant to participate in this new investigation, the BBC hopes to satiate viewers' "wolfish hunger for so-called reality TV after three mega-successful series of *Big Brother*" and thereby to increase its ratings (Volk 2013 [2006]: 222). Entering the studio on the same date and at the same time that the broadcast was transmitted ten years previously, things appear to be

Fig. 2.1 The Gothicized BBC studio

Source: *Ghostwatch* (1992)

calm and ordinary at first. The Halloween decorations from the original broadcast are still present; however, the elapsed time of ten years has added a certain sense of authenticity in the form of cobwebs (ibid: 227). After roughly an hour – corresponding to the timing of the original *Ghostwatch* investigation – the team is confronted with Pipes and the ghostly remnants of Suzanne Early and Sarah Greene. The short story once again takes place in a haunted house, namely the abandoned studio, and portrays a paranormal investigation. Like the original broadcast, it foregrounds the complex technologies used in the investigation, thereby displaying a self-reflexive interest in both media and mediality. The most obvious parallel, however, is the ambivalence regarding the narrative's ontological status. This effect is achieved by featuring (mostly) real-life people as fictional characters, such as author Stephen Volk as the autodiegetic narrator. In the story, Volk tells his readers how the lives of those people involved in the investigation changed after Pipes broke loose from the studio; it is even claimed that the public appearance that Sarah Green made in order to reassure the audience

that *Ghostwatch* was, in fact, a television hoax, was performed by a look-alike in order to conceal the true horror that took place (ibid: 224). The short story self-reflexively comments on the aftermath of the broadcast through this narration of "what truly happened," purporting that the only true hoax about the program was the claim that it had been a pre-recorded, scripted television film. Like *Ghostwatch*, "31/10" blurs the line between fact and fiction, albeit not as elaborately as the broadcast did.

The mockumentary is much more successful at hiding its fictional status than Volk's short story. Every text has certain markers that identify it as fiction or nonfiction; these are what Cohn calls "signposts" (1990: 800). Cohn focuses exclusively on the signposts of fictionality that exist on the textual level of an object, such as the bi-level story/discourse structure, narrative modes such as the presentation of consciousness, and the separation of author and narrator (ibid). "31/10," for example, attempts to undermine this latter point, given that both the author and the narrator are Stephen Volk. Obviously, however, the narrator is possessed and presumably killed at the end of the tale; therefore, author and narrator must represent two distinct instances. Moving beyond Cohn's focus on fictionality, it is equally useful to consider the signposts of factuality, and to take contextual and paratextual indicators into consideration as well (Nünning 2009a: 25). Doing so reveals why the 1992 broadcast is much more successful at hiding its true ontological status than "31/10" is. While *Ghostwatch* bears several of Cohn's signposts of fictionality, it glosses over these textual, paratextual, and contextual clues by referring to the conventions of nonfictional television.

Like any other film, *Ghostwatch* ends with closing credits that list the cast and crew involved in its creation; these involvements were even disclosed in television and radio guides made available beforehand (Heller-Nicholas 2014: 77). The very fact that the show was broadcast on Halloween might have tipped viewers off. Such clues, however, are paratextual and contextual details, respectively, and are easily missed. Of course, viewers turned to the television pages and magazines such as *Radio Times* more often in the 1990s than they might do today. Still, not every television consumer carefully reads a program guide ahead of tuning into a show. Likewise, only those viewers who waited for and

carefully read the closing credits could recognize *Ghostwatch* as a television film. Instead, these hints are occluded by exploiting the viewer's broader contextual knowledge and expectations, namely by featuring well-known television personalities from nonfiction formats, among other things.

Ghostwatch was not the first program to blur the divide between fact and fiction, but was instead inspired to some extent by Welles' infamous "The War of the Worlds" radio drama (Lawden 2014: 7).[4] This radio broadcast allegedly caused a similar stir more than five decades previously and is regarded as a fascinating phenomenon even today.[5] Like the BBC film, the radio broadcast pointed out its fictional nature several times. For instance, Welles' addressed his audience repeatedly throughout the broadcast, telling them that they were listening to a dramatization of Wells' science fiction novella. Yet, the broadcast was accused of misleading unsuspecting radio listeners, nonetheless.

Originally an 1897 tale penned by H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds* tells its audience about a Martian invasion of Earth; it is merely due to the aliens' susceptibility to terrestrial microbes that their invasion ultimately fails – however, this occurs only after wreaking havoc on Earth with their advanced warfare technologies. Narrated as a retrospective first person narration of the attack, the novel is presented as a factual

4 Now that a complete, official transcript of the documentary *Ghostwatch: Behind the Curtains* has been released, I quote directly from the transcript when discussing the documentary.

5 The supposed panic caused by the radio broadcast has been debunked. As Sconce writes: "Indeed, civilization is completely destroyed by the half-hour break in *War of the Worlds* – even the most gullible listeners could have ended their fright simply by looking out the window" (2000: 116). The decisive factor in the mythologization of the event was probably that the broadcast caused just enough panic for it to be subsequently exaggerated in newspapers (Johnston 2015: 88). This does not, however, diminish the impact of the broadcast. In *Found Footage Horror Films*, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas even goes so far as to claim that the broadcast laid the groundwork for the defining features of the contemporary found footage horror film (2014: 37).

account given by an unnamed Englishman who witnessed the invasion from beginning to end.

In his 1938 radio adaptation of the novel, Welles not only copied Wells' story, but also borrowed and expanded upon its style, transposing the retrospective written account by a witness into a present tense emergency radio broadcast, thereby using the conventions of nonfiction radio. Significantly, this broadcast revolves not only around the destruction of human civilization, but also around the destruction of the media (Sconce 2000: 114): while the regular program is merely interrupted by news bulletins initially, the broadcasting system itself begins to fail as the population of New York City succumbs to the invasionary force. Initially, on-site reports are merely cut off mid-sentence as radio connections are lost; eventually, the entire station falls into silence as the last journalist has been suffocated by toxic smoke. This silence is only briefly interrupted by an amateur transmission: "2X2L calling CQ. 2X2L calling CQ…New York. Isn't there anyone on the air? Isn't there anyone on the air? Isn't there anyone…2X2L" ("The War of the Worlds" 1938). The call is never answered; radio, so it appears, has gone dead.

Ghostwatch utilizes a narrative form and story similar to that of the "The War of the Worlds" broadcast. In the 1992 mockumentary, the destruction of the media is a central theme, with the broadcast becoming increasingly faulty and fragmented. In the end, society collapses as the medium is completely destabilized. It is precisely this particular conception of their respective narrative media that makes these two broadcasts comparable: the radio and television, respectively, are not merely used for narration, but instead their very nature and relationship with society are called into question during the storytelling process. Both broadcasts feature similar narrative formats. Both are framed as journalistic reports. As such, they build upon very particular media conventions. As Sconce explains in his discussion of Welles' broadcast, it is only because the audience has some preconception regarding the medium's working mechanisms that such a narrative achieves its full effect:

> The terror could be realized only if the listener understood how electronic news gathering and dissemination operated, realized the social

> significance of disrupted network transmissions, and, above all else, invested in the radio's new sense of presence as both a national authority and a means of social surveillance. (Sconce 2000: 112)

In other words, it is only when listeners – or viewers in the case of *Ghostwatch* – have some knowledge and expectations about how the medium is supposed to work that the portrayal of its breakdown appears to be authentic. Each story is told through a narrative medium that is associated mainly with nonfiction contents and exploits what may be referred to as these media's signposts of factuality.[6] The fragmented, seemingly unplanned structure of "The War of the Worlds" not only thrives on radio's characteristics of simultaneity and presence – "disaster as an instantaneous, mass experience" (ibid) – but furthermore places the story in a familiar, authentic setting and includes expert interviews. It is thus precisely because "The War of the Worlds" is *not* a polished, well-structured, and seamless narrative that it evokes a feeling of authenticity.

Similarly, *Ghostwatch* adheres to the conventions of television's live reportage through four key strategies: first, by featuring renowned television personalities predominantly associated with nonfiction programs and "experts" such as Dr. Pascoe, who are impersonated by mostly unknown, and hence unrecognizable, actors. Second, the broadcast follows a seemingly spontaneous and unplanned plot. As the making-of documentary reveals, *Ghostwatch* was written deliberately to defy the conventional narrative structure of a 90-minute movie (Lawden 2014: 8, 24). Indeed, the narrative is extremely slow and unspectacular for the first half of the movie – as the unsuspecting audience might expect from such a program. Third, the mockumentary copies styles and conventions of TV that were becoming more popular at the time. As Volk explained in an interview on BBC 5 radio, "drama was starting to resemble documentary" through the use of, for instance, handheld cameras to create the illusion of realism (Chiles 2017). Last, viewers

6 Of course, television has long since established itself as a formidable narrative medium, especially with regard to the ongoing transmission of TV series; nonetheless, however, the core of programming is comprised of news reports, talk shows, reality shows, documentaries, and so on.

are twice removed from the action at Foxhill Drive for large parts of the film: first, by staring at their own television set at home, and, second, by watching the on-site team through another set of screens situated in the BBC studio. Paradoxically, it is precisely this visibility of the mediation process that gives the broadcast its aura of immediacy, while reminding the audience that they are safely watching the goings-on from their living rooms. Together, these four aspects function as signposts of factuality and gloss over those clues that might otherwise reveal the mockumentary's fictional nature.

It is vital to consider the broader historical context in which each of these broadcasts and their narrative media are placed. "The War of the Worlds," transmitted via US radio at the end of the 1930s, is grounded firmly in the logic of mass society, characterized by its infrastructure composed of communities or "masses." These are relatively large, homogeneous, and localized collectives (van Dijk 2012: 43). Broadcast media are the predominant type of media in mass societies. As the number of available media is relatively low compared to today's standards, every household and/or community can usually access only a few of these types of media: a small number of radio and television channels; a limited selection of local and national newspapers (ibid: 45). These media attempt to cater to as many people as possible at the same time; hence, the name "*broadcast* media." The interruption of regular program by news updates was not unusual at the time. Living in the aftermath of the Great Depression and facing the reality of a probable American involvement in the looming war in Europe, Welles' drama reached its listeners at a time of significant cultural unrest (Heller-Nicholas 2014: 40). The play's topical focus struck a nerve of the time, centering on an invasion by a superior and ruthless military force. Its presentation fit the nature of its broadcast medium perfectly.

Ghostwatch similarly portrays some form of invasion, although the threat here is not some external alien force, but rather an entity that has already infiltrated the domestic space of the living room: television. What should be a peaceful suburban house is terrorized by the spirit of a child molester and murderer, and it is through the television transmission of Pipes' assaults that the poltergeist liter-

ally invades living rooms throughout the entire country. Like radio, television is a broadcast medium. However, the BBC mockumentary indicates how a "broadcast mentality of one-to-many communication" (Jenkins/Ford/Green 2013: 7), in which a small number of official, authorized, and trustworthy media instances produce media content for the masses, is beginning to crumble in the network society. Whereas mass media used to be organized vertically, with a few authorities such as the BBC determining which contents would be broadcast, the network society increasingly introduces horizontal structures of media sharing.

The real threat in *Ghostwatch* is not a military attack, but rather media violence and its effect on families in general and on children in particular: watching such violence on television will invite it into the viewer's home. This suggestion hinges on the perception of a television audience as a passive collective, where networks such as the BBC control what viewers watch. In his analysis of the broadcast and its cultural impact, Rich Lawden expands on this idea of television as a manipulative force and as a gateway to mindless consumption:

> The show/programme/film remains a historical touchstone – a perfectly-preserved time capsule which epitomises our culture at a certain point in time. It is the closest to *TV: The Movie* that we'll ever likely get to see – a fair and vivid depiction of the hideous machinations that so often give birth to detrimental, throwaway media, which in turn, attempts to squeeze every last drop of processed emotion for vast, remorseless consumption. Cunningly, *Ghostwatch* was also a stark warning of what was then, just appearing over the horizon: low-rent documentary programming – the worst of Reality TV. Pointless, asinine diatribes that seem only to serve in manipulating participants and viewers alike, both trapped in an increasingly apathetic, virtual community. (Lawden 2013: 198-200)

Ghostwatch is a self-reflexive commentary on the waning control of media authorities such as the BBC. The short story "31/10" goes into detail about how such a broadcast is supposedly conceived and planned by the network: trying to copy the success of shows such as *Big Brother*, putting

young and inexperienced producers in charge, and moving ahead with the plans without the explicit consent of the people involved (Volk 2013 [2006]: 222-223). Both *Ghostwatch* and "31/10" suggest that the BBC fails in its function as a trustworthy gatekeeper, repeatedly spreading the violent poltergeist to the living rooms of its viewership. The BBC mockumentary does not merely depict the destruction of media, as "The War of the Worlds" does, but instead portrays the media themselves as turning into the source of danger.

This divergence illustrates a significant difference in plot conventions regarding the radio and the television: whereas the radio was conceived predominantly as a medium that could enable the communication between two worlds in popular fiction – the world of the living and the spirit world; Earth and alien civilizations; and so on – the television was instead imagined as an uncanny mediaspace within which ghosts reside (Sconce 2000: 127). In Welles' broadcast, the radio establishes a link between listeners at home and the sites of Martian attacks, confronting human civilization with the "reality" of two clashing worlds. *Ghostwatch*, on the other hand, explicitly portrays the television set as a gateway to the spirit world, with the poltergeist Pipes using it as a viral vector and exploiting its presence in most households to attack and possess human beings. Thus, a major difference between both programs is that the BBC broadcast builds upon a literal understanding of television "transmission": the ghost traveling through an entire nation as a viral electronic signal.

The controversies surrounding both narratives illustrate the inextricable bond between a medium and its social context. It is this powerful relationship that constitutes the source of fear in each text. As Sconce writes:

> The broadcast's power as a source of panic and as an enduring parable of media studies resides in its ability to evoke a usually disavowed connection between the order of media networks and the ordering of the social body. […] *War of the Worlds* continues to fascinate by reminding us of the repressed potential for panic and disorder that lies just behind the normalizing functions of media technology […]. As it stands,

> the play remains the most famous public lesson in an uncomfortable political reality: the collapse of the media is by definition a collapse of the social. (2000: 117)

The radio provided an ideal narrative medium for Welles' project due to its status as a medium fit for information dissemination. Building on Jean Baudrillard's concept of "noncommunication," which points out how some media deny any reciprocal exchange of information, Sconce explains how vivid the broadcast made the unidirectionality of the information flow and, thus, became "a cogent reminder of the American public's inability to intervene in anything through the mass media" (ibid: 113). It is only in the terrifying moment of the medium's failure that this unidirectionality is revealed.

Ghostwatch, while portraying the breakdown of both the media and the social body in a similar way, does not adhere to this model of unidirectional communication, at least not completely. Unlike Welles' broadcast, viewers are not incapable of intervening in the goings-on – they simply realize, all too late, what influence their viewership has had. The simple act of tuning in to the program affects how the events play out; theoretically, if nobody were to watch the program, then Pipes would remain confined to Foxhill Drive. Television ratings, it is suggested, are the most powerful means of controlling the medium. Unquestioningly and even voyeuristically gawking at the misfortune of the Early family yields a similar fate for society as a whole. Television is so efficient as a viral vector in *Ghostwatch* because of the viewing practices that have built up around it.

The social practices and the unquestioned beliefs regarding media technologies are foregrounded in the broadcast through the investigator's heavy reliance on modern technology. The complex camera technologies that are used to capture and make visible the ghost in the house are explained at length: multiple cameras have been mounted to the walls in each room; a thermal imaging camera is employed; an alarm system has been set up that reacts to sudden drops in temperature. Likewise, the BBC studio has similarly sophisticated devices to review the material gathered by the on-site team. There is: a large video

wall comprised of twelve screens; a reel-to-reel tape machine for audio recordings; a light pen used to write on a small television's CRT display, with the edited images being directly projected onto the wall of screens (see Fig. 2.2-2.5). As it appears, the idea behind the investigation is that the more and the better the technologies used in the ghost hunt, the higher the chances of success are.

Fig. 2.2 Thermal imaging camera

Source: *Ghostwatch* (1992)

However, the poltergeist Pipes utilizes these technologies for his own purposes, endangering both the investigatory team and the viewer at home. At first, his meddling with the transmission results in the broadcast becoming increasingly riddled with glitches and interferences. He inserts false footage into the transmission in order to keep up the appearance that everything is normal at the house, even as the spirit prepares to invade the entire nation via its television sets. All too late, Dr. Pascoe realizes that the live transmission from Northolt has somehow been tampered with. Face aghast, she exclaims: "It's in the machine. […] We've created a séance. A massive séance" (*Ghostwatch* 1992). At this point, any control over the "sophisticated technology,"

Fig. 2.3 A peek into "Ghostwatch"'s on-location outside broadcasting (OB) truck

Source: *Ghostwatch* (1992)

which might have empowered the investigators, is already lost. In "31/10," the ghost performs the same trick a second time: while the investigators in the haunted BBC studio hear a loud banging noise, the team at the safe control room cannot pick up these noises through their microphones (Volk 2013 [2006]: 235). Once again, these technologies work to the advantage of the malignant spirit, rather than for the investigators. *Ghostwatch* suggests that those pervasive technologies that should aid us and improve our lives may instead be autonomous agents outside of human control by resonating with the technological determinism implicit in Castells' elaborate theory of the network society, as well as more general, mundane anxieties regarding today's technologized life. The narratives examine these media technologies in general and television in particular as uncanny media, both haunted and haunting.

Consequently, the supposedly secure reception space of the living room comes under attack. The cameras do not capture the ghost, but

Fig. 2.4 Reel-to-reel tape machine at the BBC studio

Source: *Ghostwatch* (1992)

Fig. 2.5 Video wall and mobile television set with light pen

Source: *Ghostwatch* (1992)

instead set it free. This possibility was hinted at previously by Kim Early, the younger of the two sisters, but none of the researchers took her warnings seriously. As the interferences with the broadcast increase and things at the house become increasingly strange, Kim exclaims that "Pipes wants to see everybody" while pointing directly at the camera (*Ghostwatch* 1992). While both the investigators and the audience think of television as a one-way channel, merely allowing viewers to see the ghost, it soon turns out that Pipes can use this vector to look back at his audience. The safe distance between viewer and poltergeist, established by the multiple levels of mediation, collapses.

This idea of "looking back" through the camera can be interpreted in two ways. First of all, it voices a criticism of the passive, mindless voyeurism enabled by television. When the Earlys are first introduced, it is revealed that the family has been called out as liars by the media and the children have been harassed at school. Arguably, the BBC ghost investigation first and foremost zooms in on the media attention surrounding the Earlys, making money out of their misery, while it may also be a sincere attempt to help the family and to research the existence of ghosts. This investigation, however, opens up a window that works both ways: not only do viewers watch the misery of the Early family, but they also invite similar misfortune into their own homes by letting Pipes "see" them. In this broadcast, the mindless "couch potatoes" – the stereotypical image of passive television viewers – become hosts to the virus, facilitating its spread throughout the nation by unquestioningly tuning in their TV set.

This already hints at the second implication of the ghost looking back through the camera, asking for a reconsideration of media in the age of growing digitalization and connectivity: the broadcast problematizes the notion of media technologies as vertical informational one-way streets. As Murray Leeder puts it in "*Ghostwatch* and the Haunting of Media": "*Ghostwatch* […] flirts with questions about whether the camera is simply documenting something that eludes the naked eye, or whether it is facilitating the haunting through its very presence" (2013: 177). The camera empowers Pipes by allowing him to surveil everybody who is sitting in their supposedly safe, comfortable living room in front of

the television, and furthermore by enabling him to spread through the medium's broadband network into those domestic settings.[7] Significantly, *Ghostwatch* plays with the fourth wall by blurring fact and fiction, and by conflating its narrative medium and the vector of the supernatural media virus,[8] thereby implicating the audience in this dangerous ghostly transmission as well.

By foregrounding its own mediality, *Ghostwatch* poses central questions regarding the function and reception of media in society. Significantly, the mockumentary was shown only a few years after the implementation of the 1990 Broadcasting Act; in many regards, the *Ghostwatch* controversy resonated with worries that accompanied that particular piece of legislation. The 1990 Broadcasting Act opened up ownership of ITV companies to the highest bidder; the guiding principle was that competition and increased consumer choice could be stimulated through deregulation. Even if the impact of the 1990 Broadcasting Act had not yet truly hit home, television was in turmoil when *Ghostwatch* was broadcast in 1992. While the Act granted an expansion in viewer choice and marked the beginning of satellite television, fears of decline in entertainment and news standards, commercialization, and Americanization in particular abound.[9] Eleven million viewers – circa 19% of the nation's population at the time – watched *Ghostwatch*

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7 In his discussion of narratives of the "haunted TV," Sconce discusses how the television has oftentimes been envisioned as both a means of surveillance and as a gateway to another realm: "The unique electronic presence bound to this new medium suggested that even after a program was over and the receiver was turned off, the television set itself still loomed as a gateway to oblivion simply by sitting inert and watchful in the living room" (2000: 166). A typical example for this is the film *Poltergeist*: the television set here functions as a portal to the world of the dead. A nonsupernatural example is George Orwell's novel *1984* (1949), which features a bi-directional television screen. These devices, called "telescreen" (2008 [1949]: 4), enable the ruling Party to surveil their subjects, while also working as conventional television, broadcasting propaganda.

8 It is due to this conflation that *Ghostwatch* only "works" properly when viewed in a specific way: at home in front of the television.

9 For a detailed account of the history of the 1990 Broadcasting Act, as well as the resulting media dynamics, consult Barnett (2011).

on Halloween 1992 (Woods 2017). Of course, it is impossible to say how many of these were truly duped by the mockumentary. Nonetheless, these high viewership numbers illustrate the show's immediate impact. *Ghostwatch* embodied the fears of the effects of the 1990 Broadcasting Act: a reduction in quality and loss of trustworthiness. As Volk explains in the documentary, one of his main motivations in writing the script was the issue of trust and believability: "*Who do you trust? Do you trust the information you're being given?* […] *Is that person really an expert?*" (Lawden 2014: 39, original emphasis). Likewise, producer Ruth Baumgarten revealed in an interview how one inspiration for the mockumentary was the language of the news coverage of the First Gulf War, which catered to the audience's growing wish for dramatic storytelling. According to Baumgarten, *Ghostwatch* explores "what happens if this appetite […] becomes unhinged and if you can't trust the news anymore" (Chiles 2017). At the time of the broadcast, television had become an omnipresent medium; *Ghostwatch* questions the uncritical belief in those things that are being transmitted by proving that merely watching something happen on television does not necessarily make it real and that the line between fact and fiction is easily blurred. Instead, truth and knowledge are complicated, oftentimes ambiguous things that evade a definite interpretation.

In particular, the role and influence of the BBC, perhaps the nation's most-watched and best-respected broadcaster, is being scrutinized:

> The BBC makes and shapes us as a nation in a way no other institution can. For many it is an ever-present companion; from breakfast time to bedtime, from childhood through to old age, there it is telling us about ourselves and the wide world, amusing and entertaining us. (Aitken 2007: 1)

This trustworthy authority comes under attack, as Pipes transgresses beyond the boundaries of the house on Foxhill Drive and into the apparently safe space of the studio. The reception of the broadcast indicated how audiences react to such an authority abusing the trust invested in it.

2.3 Gothic Conventions in Times of Increasing Interconnection

Ghostwatch was broadcast during a time of profound societal changes: the transition from mass to network society. The mockumentary should, therefore, not be regarded as a critique of mass media exclusively, but also as an anticipation of the potential effects of growing connectivity and interactive media. The relationship that this medium has with a changing society is the reason why television is such an efficient viral vector for the supernatural media virus in *Ghostwatch*.

The larger collectives of mass society are made up of smaller groups. The nuclear family is a central social unit in the mass society, which, in turn, is embedded in the larger collective of the local community. *Ghostwatch* features several of these embedded groups: on the smallest level, there is the Early family living at the haunted house on Foxhill Drive. The Earlys, in turn, are part of the Northolt community in North London – a small suburban town on the outskirts of the largest metropolis of the country.[10] During the broadcast, well-acquainted neighbors gather at the house to observe the investigation, eager to offer their own stories with both the house and the family on camera. On the topmost level, there is the collective of the BBC audience, which stands in for the British nation at large. The top-down broadcast media, which are typical of mass society, are a central aspect in constructing such collectives. However, there is no or only a limited opportunity for the reader, listener, or viewer to react to the information received. Thus, the broadcast media of mass society create what Catherine Covert has referred

10 Significantly, almost all of the fictions I discuss in this book take place in urban settings, usually in one of the largest and most significant metropolises of the respective country: *Ghostwatch* is set near London, parts of *House of Leaves* take place in Los Angeles, the Japanese installments of *Ring* and *Kairo* feature sprawling images of Tokyo, whereas the American adaptation *The Ring* is set in Seattle. The only exception to this focus on urbanity is the adaptation *Pulse*. The relationship of an urban setting to imaginations of the network society is explored in greater detail in Chapters Four and Five.

to as the "atomized mass" (1984: 210): large communities consisting of isolated, alienated individuals.

This one-to-many type of communication is not abolished completely, but is at least softened up in the network society, where the communities and networks are not governed by physical proximity and where they can be highly heterogeneous (van Dijk 2012: 43). These media are increasingly interactive, allowing consumers to react to the content received in different ways. Thus, information travels in multiple directions in the network, disassembling the clear hierarchies of collectives and information control present in the mass society.

In *Ghostwatch* – as in most haunted house tales – the house on Foxhill Drive functions as a symbol for society and prevalent societal topics. The house haunted by a malevolent spirit is a staple element of Gothic fiction – it is no accident that Craig Charles jokingly refers to the investigation as "England's answer to Amityville" (*Ghostwatch* 1992).[11] The poltergeist Pipes viciously haunts the Early family in what should be a peaceful suburban home, directing his attacks specifically at the two girls. It appears as if the key to these ghostly manifestations at Foxhill Drive – and in particular, why most of the hauntings concentrate on the Early daughters – is to be found in the dark past of the house, something befitting the conventional Gothic tale and the haunted house story in particular. Whereas Dr. Pascoe initially believed that she had gathered all of the essential information, it is through information conveyed by the Northolt community as well as the calls of several audience members at the studio that these horrifying secrets are revealed. Finding out the truth about the house is a collective effort, where viewers

11 Some examples of the haunted house tale include Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), Jay Anson's *The Amityville Horror* (1977), and Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977), to name only a few. Most of these fictions focus on families or similarly tight-knit groups and give shape to societal issues regarding gender, class, and race, to state only some examples. For an in-depth discussion of haunted house narratives, consult Bailey (1999) and Mariconda (2007).

of the broadcast "talk back" at the program they are watching by calling the studio. The investigation of the haunted house itself is, in this way, an example of how the one-to-many communication structure is disassembled in the network society.

The first clue is provided when the Earlys' neighbors explain how children have disappeared or even died under horrific circumstances at the local playground; it is at this same playground that a butchered, pregnant dog had been found recently, with its fetuses scattered all over the place. It soon turns out that these tales from the playground are only the tip of the iceberg. As the events at the house itself grow more and more suspicious – Suzanne's face has been severely scratched, while she does not have fingernails long enough to inflict the damage herself – a woman calls, describing how her mother would scare her and her siblings when they were little if they did not behave well: "Mother Seddons will come to get you" (ibid). She goes on the explain how she found out only later that Seddons really existed in the Victorian era, and that she lived in the area that today would be Foxhill Drive. Seddons was a "baby-farmer" who would drown the children she took in (ibid). The theme of infanticide, already introduced with the story of the butchered dog, is developed further.

Shortly after this call, the situation at the house in Foxhill Drive escalates and the television transmission is increasingly riddled with glitches: ominous cat screams can be heard from the boarded-up storage space beneath the staircase; a mirror suddenly drops onto the soundman; Suzanne screams: "He's touching me. He's hurting me. He's hurting me. Get off me. Get away, get off me! No, go away!" (ibid); suddenly, the entire screen turns black, and the words "NORMAL TRANSMISSION WILL BE RESUMED AS SOON AS POSSIBLE" appear (see Fig. 2.6-2.7). Apparently, the link to the on-site team has been lost. However, the interruption lasts only a few seconds; the image cuts back to Foxhill Drive, where everything seems to be normal once again – no traces of the unsettling images transmitted only seconds previously are to be found.

It is during this seemingly calm phase that another person calls with further information about the backstory of the house and about Pipes.

Fig. 2.6 Glitches disrupting the broadcast as the manifestations at the house increase until…

Source: *Ghostwatch* (1992)

The anonymous caller reveals that in the 1960s, some of the previous tenants sublet a room to a psychologically unstable man called Raymond Tunstall. As the caller explains:

> I worked as a social worker when he came out of the psychiatric hospital. He had several convictions for molestation, aggravated abuse, abduction of minors. He should never have been let anywhere near any community. He was a very disturbed man in my opinion. […] From the time he moved to Foxhill Drive, he developed paranoid fantasies. He used to tell me there was a woman on the inside of his body, taking over his thoughts and actions, making him do things he didn't want to do. He started to wear dresses. The delusions got so bad; there was only one way to escape them. He took his own life. (ibid)

This last clue adds a distinctly sexual nature to the horrifying events, implying that the poltergeist's interest in the girls may originate in Tun-

Fig. 2.7 …the television signal collapses completely

Source: *Ghostwatch* (1992)

stall's history as a child molester.[12] However, the call also reveals that Tunstall himself was possibly haunted and possessed by Mother Seddons, the baby farmer. The anonymous person further claims that Tunstall hanged himself under the stairs and that his corpse was partially devoured by his pet cats. Taken together, these historical details hint at why the house on Foxhill Drive appears to be a paranormal hotspot that attracts and accumulates ghostly manifestations, and why Pipes'

12 The cross-dressing killer is a figure well-known from horror films such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Murder!* (1930) and *Psycho* (1960), Roman Polanski's *The Tenant* (1976) and Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), based on Thomas Harris' novel of the same name. Like these films, *Ghostwatch* uses the trope of cross-dressing to denote otherness and perversion. As must be emphasized at this point, the figure of the transvestite criminal is an extremely problematic trope that oftentimes conflates transvestism with transgenderism, and furthermore vilifies persons engaging in transvestism and/or identifying as transgender. In addition to his deviant gender presentation, Tunstall's monstrosity is further emphasized by his pedophilia.

attacks are focused especially on the Early children. So far, this seems to be a conventional investigation of a haunted house; the only thing that is somewhat unusual is the fact that the researchers are crowdsourcing the knowledge from their audience by enabling them to call the studio.

However, this ghost is *not* restricted to the house, or at least not anymore; Pipes becomes spatially unbound through all of the cameras and recording devices installed at the house. Significantly, the mysterious incidents at the playground indicate that the poltergeist has never been as restricted to one locality as is typical of such tales. Yet, Pipes can only extend his reach beyond the immediate community through the massive amounts of recording and transmitting devices, establishing a link between Northolt, the BBC studio, and the viewers in their supposedly safe homes. Had the researchers carefully interpreted this information, as well as Pipes' behavior and backstory, they could have discovered the risk of setting free the supernatural media virus before the critical event. The more people watch the program, the more powerful the ghost becomes and the farther he travels. In the end, it is not merely the Early family that is haunted, but supposedly the entire nation. The closed-off, atomized units of the mass society, as well as its top-down hierarchies, are not applicable to *Ghostwatch*; smaller units, such as the house, can have a great impact on larger units. The supernatural media virus, infecting all tuned-in television sets, thrives in the emerging interconnected social structure that is no longer comprised of singular, isolated groups of people. *Ghostwatch* portrays the dissolution of the nuclear family as the core symbol of the mass society and of its communities: not only is the family lacking a father/husband,[13] it is also no longer a contained, discrete unit, as their hauntings concern everybody who is watching the investigation.

Further subverting the typical societal structure of the mass society, *Ghostwatch* destabilizes the idea of top-down broadcast media and

13 As in most haunted house tales, gender and family roles both play significant parts in *Ghostwatch*. However, a discussion of these aspects would go beyond the scope of this chapter.

deconstructs the one-to-many communication model. Instead of being a means of unidirectional, vertical communication in which a respected, official channel provides its audience with suitable programs, television in *Ghostwatch* suddenly allows for the dangerous, uncontrolled multidirectional flow of information – or ghosts – through the connections provided by a horizontal network. As the BBC transmits its programs to television sets all over the country, tuned-in homes such as that of the Early family transfer something back to the studio. Every tuned-in household both feeds into and reinforces the "massive séance" created by the broadcast. By adding this twist to the tale of the haunted house, *Ghostwatch* draws an image of a mediasaturated society that no longer consists of atomized masses, but rather of increasingly networked communities. The structure of the mass society, comprised of discrete groups of varying sizes, is slowly giving way to the individualized, yet interconnected network society. It is this environment of growing interconnectedness that Pipes exploits in his function as a supernatural media virus, implying that the larger and tighter the network, the more dangerous and untrustworthy the mysterious things traveling through these links.

The mockumentary further explores these false assumptions regarding media communication by means of another trope typical of the Gothic, namely the occult detective. Significantly, *Ghostwatch* establishes a narrative scheme remarkably similar to that of the outbreak fiction through this figure and fuses it with a deep fascination with the impact of media technologies. As Pipes exploits the television's broadcast capabilities to recreate the spiritualist ritual of a séance, the rules of spiritualism and electronic transmission become blended.[14] While the pairing of detective fiction – marked by rationality and

14 Volk has admitted in an interview that one of his inspirations for writing *Ghostwatch* were the Fox Sisters (qtd. in Leeder 2013: 176). In what came to be known as the "Rochester Rappings," Kate and Margaretta Fox claimed to be able to communicate with ghosts by knocking on the walls. Possibly, the name of the fictional street where the Earlys live, Foxhill Drive, pays homage to this milestone of spiritualism. For more information about the Fox Sisters, see Chapter 1, "Mediums and Media" in Sconce (2000).

nonsupernatural crimes – with the trappings of spiritualist thinking seems contradictory, the trope of the psychic investigator emerged in its current form as early as the mid-19th century. As Chris Willis explains:

> [T]he rise of the fictional detective coincided with the rise of spiritualism. Both began in the mid-nineteenth century and were widely popular in Britain from the turn of the century until the 1930s. Both attempt to explain mysteries. The medium's role can be seen as being similar to that of a detective in a murder case. Both are trying to make the dead speak in order to reveal a truth. (2000: 60)

This coinciding of detective fiction and spiritualism has permitted the hybridization of both genres. Srdjan Smajić even goes so far as to claim that "detective fiction always had one foot in the occult," and that, in specific, it always bore a "repressed family resemblance with ghost fiction" (2010: 136).[15] As Smajić continues to explain, detective fiction was finally able to fuse with occultism due to the "scientification" of spiritualism: as late-Victorian science began to turn towards phenomena imperceptible to the human senses alone, it also drew attention to spiritualism as a field that had been examining these invisible phenomena for a long time already (ibid: 137). Thus, modern scientific methods and research were adapted to spiritualism.

15 Early examples of the psychic detective are Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's Dr. Martin Hesselius, the physician appearing throughout the short story collection *In a Glass Darkly* (1872), Dr. Abraham Van Helsing in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and Algernon Blackwood's *John Silence, Physician Extraordinary* (1908). M. R. James often modified the trope in his ghost stories, casting a somewhat naïve academic, chancing upon a mysterious, antiquarian object in the role of the occult detective. On television, the occult detective achieved fame through figures such as Carl Kolchak, the journalist who appears in the US television movies *The Night Stalker* (1972), *The Night Strangler* (1973), and as the ABC TV series *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* (1974-5), as well as FBI agents Dana Scully and Fox Mulder in the television series *The X-Files* (1993-2002, 2016, 2018). The short story "31/10" specifically refers to *The X-Files*, likening the investigation of the haunted studio to those of Mulder and Scully in the series (Volk 2013 [2006]: 227).

This coupling of science and spiritualism is on full display in *Ghostwatch* as well: "Tonight, television is going *ghost hunting* in an unprecedented *scientific experiment* where we hope to show you for the first time *irrefutable proof* that ghosts really do exist" (*Ghostwatch* 1992, my emphasis). The role of the psychic detective is here taken on by the entire BBC team, with Dr. Pascoe leading the investigation. She personifies the scientification of spiritualism as a parapsychologist with standardized research methods and a barrage of technological devices at her hands.

The trope of the paranormal investigator is taken a step further by pairing it with the idea of a viral ghost. A closer look reveals that the narrative structure of the broadcast can be compared to the three-step scheme – initial outbreak, activation of specialists, and (failed) aversion of threat – of the outbreak narrative as described by Dougherty as well as Wald.[16] In a strict sense, the broadcast is not about a haunted house, but rather about the *investigation* of that house. The initial infection has already occurred, with the haunting of the innocent family already in full swing. Befitting their name, the Earlys are merely the first of a large number of people to be infected by the viral ghost – they are this outbreak's index cases. Viewers are introduced to the goings-on at the second stage of the outbreak narrative: specialists are activated in order to document, and hopefully to contain, the danger. Dr. Pascoe is the disease expert or epidemiologist leading the attempts to eliminate the infection. Following what may be called a "trace, study, neutralize" motto typical for epidemiological narratives (Schmitz 2020a: 205), this investigatory team attempts to prove the existence of the invisible danger, identify its origin, and finally eliminate – or rather, exorcize – it.

16 Just as the ghost story could easily be blended with the detective story, so too do epidemiological narratives – whether fictional or factual – often borrow from the conventions of the detective narrative. Epidemiologists become "disease detectives"; as Wald explains, the 1950s even saw the formation of the Epidemiological Investigation Service (EIS), which called public attention to the dangers of disease transmission by publishing articles in broadcast media with provocative titles such as "The Case of the Camp Sewage" or "The Case of the Carrot Salad" (Wald 2008: 23-24).

Ghostwatch explicitly introduces biological terminology befitting the outbreak narrative when describing the ghost infestation at the house. When Craig Charles discusses the hauntings with the local priest, he asks him whether or not he believes that evil places exist. To this the priest responds: "I think that, just as we are the products of our mothers and fathers and their mothers and fathers, I think that places, somehow, inherit the genes of their past too" (*Ghostwatch* 1992). The house on Foxhill Drive is, therefore, likened to a biological entity, a product of its genes – deciphering these genes of its history is a vital step in finding a cure for the ghostly disease. By employing metaphors derived from genetics and biology, the film once again implies that minute scientific research with advanced technologies can uncover the true and definite origin of the harmful spirit, can isolate it, and thus can contain it.

However, it is only through this scientific intervention that the danger is finally unleashed; the prime time, live investigation transmitted on the BBC has triggered a large-scale séance, allowing the poltergeist to become truly viral. Had it not been for this live footage from the location, there could not have been such a séance and Pipes would never have been given the ability to infect homes all over the nation. As is the case with all forms of disease, virulence depends on a society's organization and technological progress; viruses can provide useful information regarding its host population's structure (Parikka 2007: 289). The culture of the 1990s, in which television occupied the seductive "epicenter" of society (Castells 2010b: 361), provides the ideal environment for a supernatural media virus such as Pipes.

These parallels between spiritualism, detective fiction, and the outbreak narrative emphasize the intersection of *Ghostwatch*'s supernatural elements and its scientific, technology-driven investigation, while further foregrounding the profound, large-scale, and potentially dangerous effects of media technologies in modern society. If outbreak narratives are the result of a growing fascination with the complex mechanisms that determine a disease's spread – where it travels, the channels through which it moves, and how quickly it disseminates –, then the BBC mockumentary expresses a similar obsession with the pervasiveness of media and the content they communicate. At the same time,

Ghostwatch illustrates that both these media and the emerging network society are complex and obscure: neither Dr. Pascoe, one of the leading paranormal researchers, nor the media professionals at the BBC could have anticipated the effect that the live investigation would have. The crisis of this virus outbreak could not be averted.

Ghostwatch's portrayal of a supernatural media virus is comparatively weak in comparison to the narratives that are discussed in the following chapters. For instance, the virus' hosts – in this case, the television audience facilitating the séance – are represented as passive recipients by and large. They are not active agents in the spread of the virus, but instead only influence it unknowingly by means of their remote control. Likewise, Pipes has only little control over his audience's conduct, whereas some of the supernatural media viruses examined elsewhere in this monograph enforce a certain behavior in their hosts. Additionally, *Ghostwatch* does not feature a physical corruptive manuscript that is passed on from one infected host to another as *Ring* and *House of Leaves* do. While it is implied in "31/10" that the second investigation of Pipes, this time at the BBC studio, once again facilitates the supernatural media virus' dissemination, the infection hinges on grand, singular events of dissemination, rather than on a continuous spread of contagion.

That notwithstanding, *Ghostwatch* qualifies as an early example of the supernatural media virus that specifically foregrounds the transition from mass to network society. In particular, its self-reflexive treatment of media and mediality is insightful in examining the trope's development. The poltergeist Pipes exploits the characteristics of both the broadcast medium television as its viral vector and an increasingly interconnected society as its environment, deconstructing the idea of broadcast media and the top-down, one-to-many communication model in the process. Information no longer travels in one direction exclusively in this changing media environment and it is not necessarily being provided by a trustworthy authority either. Today, these issues of unchecked media content and the questionable reliability of media producers are more important than ever. *Ghostwatch* anticipates some of the key topics and anxieties regarding growing interconnectedness and the advent of the network society.

3. *House of Leaves*, the Network Paradigm, and the Abstract Supernatural Media Virus

> "Old shelters – television, magazines, movies – won't protect you anymore. You might try scribbling in a journal, on a napkin, maybe even in the margins of this book. That's when you'll discover you longer trust the very walls you always took for granted."
> *Mark Z. Danielewski, House of Leaves*

> "And so, when it comes to the relationship between wholes and networks, it is not always clear which form will dominate. Some networks can be contained; others thwart containment."
> *Caroline Levine, Forms*

3.1 Lost in the (Textual) Labyrinth: The Multimodal Transmedia Narrative

Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves* (2000a) is a fascinating, highly complex text that confronts its readers with not one network, but with a multitude of different overlapping networks: networks pervade every aspect of the novel at both the thematic and the structural levels. *House of Leaves* shares significant characteristics with the BBC broadcast *Ghostwatch* in terms of its focus on the nuclear family in the haunted house, its satiric treatment of scholarship and scientific investigation, and its blurring of fact and fiction. As with the aforementioned mockumentary, Danielewski's narrative explores ongoing

changes concerning society, the personal relationships between people, and the understanding of information, knowledge, and of reality. There are, however, significant differences between these two narratives with regard to their portrayal of the network as well as the representation of the supernatural media virus, as this chapter shows.

Whereas the haunted house in *Ghostwatch* serves mostly as a symbol for society at large, *House of Leaves* introduces the house metaphor to explore the loss of homeliness and familiarity caused by the seeming omnipresence of networks everywhere. Danielewski's novel is preoccupied less with the concrete implementation of the network society than it is with the shift towards the network paradigm, where networks of all kinds are unquestioningly regarded as the prime organizational principle in all matters, and where the networking process is perceived as a natural imperative. The narrative emphasizes that the network paradigm does not introduce one, all-encompassing network; this was a major point of critique voiced by Levine in her discussion of Castells' technology-focused approach to the network society (Levine 2015: 114). Instead, *House of Leaves* encompasses the implementation of numerous intersecting networks: communication networks, transportation networks, information networks, social networks, technology networks, and media networks.

House of Leaves is a labyrinthine novel that continuously asks its readers to interact physically with a book that has been composed as a multilayered, multiperspectival, and multimodal text featuring at least four interlinked narrative levels: these interactions include leafing back and forth in search of hidden clues and lost footnotes or turning it on its head as sections of writing might be upside down, to name two examples. These footnotes often take up as much space as – or even more than – the supposed main text, thereby destabilizing the distinction between main narrative and subplot, text and paratext, center and margins. The use of color coding to accentuate certain words and passages as well as the use of diverse encryption ciphers, such as Morse code or acrostic code, imply that seemingly every page of the novel may offer some deeper, secret meaning. Further complicating the mystery, the novel was released alongside two companion pieces: the novella *The*

Whalestoe Letters (2000b), written by Danielewski himself, and the music album *Haunted* (2000a) by the artist Poe, Danielewski's sister Anne Decatur Danielewski; parts of the narrative's meaning, therefore, lies outside of the novel. Reading *House of Leaves*, in other words, resembles detective work.

Readers find not only written text within the book, but also numerous photographs – many of which, in turn, portray drawings or handwritten letters. These photographs allow the reader to investigate how well the "original" artifact – a letter, a scrap of writing on a napkin, and so on – has been transposed into printed text.[1] The novel emphasizes the process by which a book comes to be through such multimodality, illustrating that a book page never presents an unmediated version of such a handwritten letter – somebody deliberately created the novel's confusing typography. Additionally, the novel provides a musical staff of the song "Johnny Comes Marching Home" (Danielewski 2000a: 479). This inclusion further underlines this process and emphasizes the extent to which mediation always depends on conventions: only readers who can decipher Western musical notation can recognize the song to which the novel is alluding.

As N. Katherine Hayles points out, none of the techniques used in *House of Leaves* are truly novel (2002: 112). For instance, similar strategies can be found in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), the latter of which was released merely a year before the first online release of *House of Leaves* by Danielewski himself. Furthermore, *House of Leaves* has by no means remained the last of this

1 Wolfgang Hallet discusses the multimodal novel's capacity to portray "deviant forms of world apprehension" (2014: 153). In other words, novels tend towards multimodality when they feature focalizing characters with unusual cognitive skills, such as the narrator in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, who might be autistic (ibid). Such texts go beyond the conventions of the monomodal novel by featuring a range of nonverbal forms making the experiences of the character accessible. A similar claim could be made for *House of Leaves*, as this novel features a large number of characters suffering from some form of mental disorder. However, such a discussion would go beyond the scope of this chapter.

brand of experimental literature to achieve cult status in popular culture: most novels published by Danielewski are known as examples of visual writing, in which the complex typography mirrors the events of the story. As an additional example, the 2013 novel *S.*, written by Doug Dorst and conceived by J. J. Abrams, presents itself not only through a series of handwritten comments to be found in the book's margins, but further features loose supplementary materials such as postcards, photographs, newspaper cutouts, and so on, inserted at specific points throughout the novel. What sets *House of Leaves* apart from these texts is the fact that it is a distinctly Gothic network narrative that explores anxieties relating to networks, the networking process, and the potentially harmful and contagious information that might travel through these connections. Networks function as both thematic focus and discursive strategy in this novel.

Like *Ghostwatch*, Danielewski's Gothic narrative blurs the boundaries of fact and fiction by both telling the tale of a mysterious, fragmented, and madness-inducing manuscript, and by presenting itself as that specific piece of writing. What appears to be the initial text is actually an unfinished scholarly manuscript written by a man named Zampanò, in which he provides a detailed analysis of a documentary film called "The Navidson Report."[2] This film portrays the Navidson family, and tells the story of how their life is turned on its head as they move into the uncanny house on Ash Tree Lane, which constantly transforms its inner layout, growing and shrinking spontaneously. After his death, Zampanò's increasingly confusing and extremely fragmented monograph is retrieved by the young tattoo artist Johnny Truant, who edits the text and adds his own footnotes, introduction, and appendix to the already vast body of text. As his footnotes reveal, there are several inconsistencies in Zampanò's tale: not only is Truant unable to locate either the mysterious house or the documentary film, but he also, and more importantly, explains

2 In order to avoid confusion, the documentary film is here identified as "The Navidson Record" with quotation marks, whereas Zampanò's monograph is denoted as *The Navidson Record* in italics.

that Zampanò "was blind as a bat" and therefore could not possibly have watched "The Navidson Record" (Danielewski 2000a: xxi). Truant continues editing the manuscript nonetheless. However, his writing eventually becomes incomprehensible as well, increasingly diverging from the task of finishing Zampanò's monograph and instead writing about his own mental struggles. While Truant's exact fate remains unknown, his manuscript somehow gets into the hands of a group of unnamed editors who add a third set of footnotes to the text as well as some additional documents scattered throughout the manuscript's three appendices that reveal detailed information about Johnny Truant's life and family relations. The implication is that it is this version – edited multiple times by different people – that the reader of *House of Leaves* is holding in their hands.

Further complicating its ontological status, the novel fictionalizes its own publication history. The book's title page claims that the reader is holding a second edition in their hands, whereas the copyright page features the struck-out words "First Edition." Additionally, the edition notice claims the existence of four editions: Full Color; 2-Color – which can be either the "red" edition or the "blue" edition; Black & White; and Incomplete. Significantly, even scholars writing about *House of Leaves* come to no definitive conclusion as to which of these editions truly exist: Michael Hemmingson has discussed the differences in color coding in the two versions of the 2-Color edition (2011: 285), yet he fails to discuss the other editions; Pressman even claims that only the 2-Color and Black & White editions actually exist, whereas the Full Color and Incomplete versions are a hoax (2006: 124); however, in this study, it is precisely this Full Color edition that I refer to.

In contrast to *Ghostwatch*, which focuses predominantly on television and its reception in order to reflect on the evolution of the network society, *House of Leaves* expands this focus to encompass a variety of media, thereby negotiating the general prevalence of the network paradigm, instead of only the specific case of the network society. Multiple networks overlap in the novel, be it the growing house on Ash Tree Lane and the annotated monograph, which both resemble networks in their tendency to grow new links/hallways and to connect an increasing

number of nodes/rooms, the invisible network through which the documentary film and Zampanò's manuscript circulate, or even the novel itself, which comprises only one part of a larger transmedia network. The novel, therefore, reflects on the omnipresence of such networks and its consequences.

Furthermore, *House of Leaves* does not feature a clearly identifiable creature as a supernatural media virus. Of all of the narratives discussed here, *House of Leaves* provides the most abstract portrayal of a supernatural media virus; instead of a vicious monster or an unruly ghost, the text itself functions as a virus – growing, spreading, mutating, infecting, and consuming other media. Fred Botting writes: "*House of Leaves* introduces a significant shift in horror, ghost and gothic genres. It locates monstrosity elsewhere, unseen, an elsewhere associated with, but not confined by, an allusive, ludic and elusive movement of texts, forms and media" (2014: 199). It is precisely through this abstract portrayal of the supernatural media virus that *House of Leaves* exemplifies the extent to which the network and the virus have become co-constitutive.

Analyses of *House of Leaves* usually focus on its postmodernist aspects (Hayles 2002; Graulund 2006; Belletto 2009; Hemmingson 2011), its commentary on a post-print, digitalized media environment (Hayles 2002; Pressman 2006), or its treatment of scholarship, authority, and authenticity (Hayles 2002; Graulund 2006; Belletto 2009; Hemmingson 2011). Pressman, for instance, views *House of Leaves* as "the central node in a network of multimedia, multiauthored forms that collectively comprise its narrative" (2006: 107). The novel's readers are encouraged to engage in a "networked reading strategy" (ibid: 116). It no longer makes much sense to speak of a linear plotline when discussing *House of Leaves*; instead, readers must develop new approaches to this particular "house of leaves," actively seeking out the links and pathways it offers.

Hayles focuses specifically on the novel's postmodernist perspective, claiming that the text is "[c]amouflaged as a haunted house tale" in order to question the notions of reality and mediation (2002: 110). In *House of Leaves*, according to Hayles, the unreliable narrator has been supplanted by the "REMEDIATED NARRATOR, a literary invention foregrounding a proliferation of inscription technologies that evacuate con-

sciousness as the source of production and recover in its place a mediated subjectivity that cannot be conceived as an independent entity" (ibid: 117, original emphasis). In other words, the novel self-reflexively emphasizes that the characters it represents exist only because they have been recorded and mediated.

In a similar manner, Rune Graulund explains how "Danielewski's tale of the haunted house is […] a parable for the postmodern realization that the concepts of the real, the authentic and the true – once stable and familiar concepts – now ring uncannily hollow" (2006: 387). Harking back to Gérard Genette's concept of the paratext[3] – textual and typographic elements framing the published main text, such as page numbers, footnotes, publishing information, and so on – Graulund discusses how *House of Leaves* deliberately foregrounds these usually unobtrusive features in order to unsettle the balance between authenticity and fiction (ibid: 379). In this novel, the boundary of what belongs to the main narrative and what is mere paratext is constantly challenged; even the edition notice and the publishing information already appear to be infiltrated (see Fig. 3.1).

Johnny Truant and the anonymous Editors hence become the "creepy evil things down below" in this interpretation, destabilizing what would otherwise appear to be the central narrative level of the book and oftentimes intersperse Zampanò's already dubious research with false references and incorrect information.

It is this play with paratext, in which the footnotes oftentimes take up as much space as the apparent main narrative, that inspired Hemmingson to read the novel as an architectural building:

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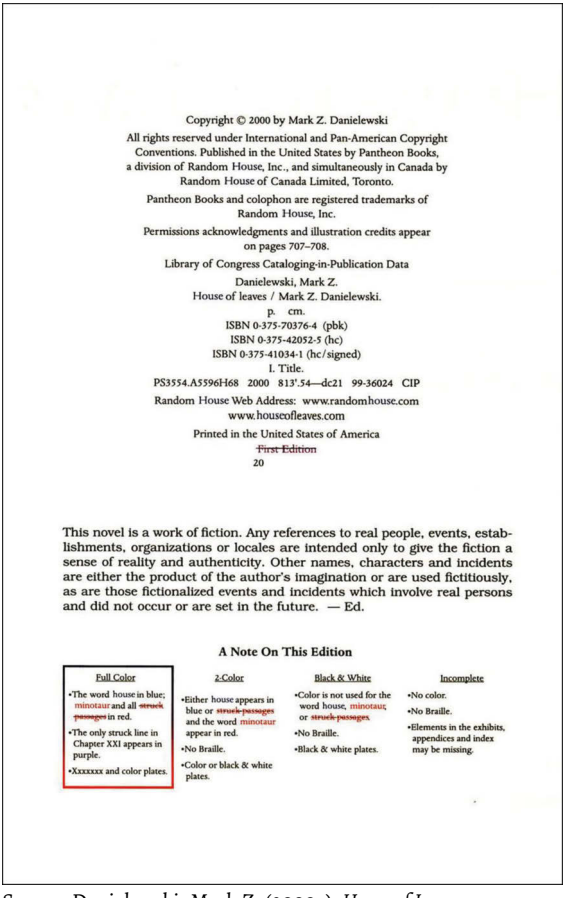
3 Genette divides paratext into two subcategories: peritext and epitext. The former exists within the book, whereas the latter consists of instances outside of the book, such as marketing campaigns or author interviews (Genette 1997: xviii). Strictly speaking, Graulund discusses the peritextual features of *House of Leaves* exclusively. However, since the distinction between peri- and epitext may prove difficult at times – for instance, epitexts such as interviews might at some point be included in a book as bonus material, thereby becoming peritexts – this chapter, too, uses the broader term of the paratext.

Fig. 3.1 The novel's edition notice



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This novel is a work of fiction. Any references to real people, events, establishments, organizations or locales are intended only to give the fiction a sense of reality and authenticity. Other names, characters and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, as are those fictionalized events and incidents which involve real persons and did not occur or are set in the future. — Ed.

A Note On This Edition

Full Color	2-Color	Black & White	Incomplete
•The word house in blue; minotaur and all ~~struck passages~~ in red.	•Either house appears in blue or ~~struck passages~~ and the word minotaur appear in red.	•Color is not used for the word house, minotaur, or ~~struck passages~~.	•No color.
•The only struck line in Chapter XXI appears in purple.	•No Braille.	•No Braille.	•No Braille.
•Xxxxxxx and color plates.	•Color or black & white plates.	•Black & white plates.	•Elements in the exhibits, appendices and index may be missing.

Source: Danielewski, Mark Z. (2000a): *House of Leaves*

> Taking the metaphor of the book as a house, with each chapter working as foundation, walls, doors, windows, and rooms, the footnotes, then, are found underneath the floorboards, in the crawlspace or basement. In some haunted house tales, the creepy evil things live down below, so it is fitting that the other voices separated from the main text reside here. (2011: 276)

House of Leaves is a Gothic haunted house tale in which the book itself turns into that house. In this chapter, I examine how the house metaphor and its diverse connotations – homeliness, familiarity, safety on the one hand and functionality and structure on the other – are used throughout the novel. Significantly, these metaphorical mappings pertain not only to the mysterious house on Ash Tree Lane, but to the monstrous text as a whole. In order to demonstrate this claim, the following section "enters" the narrative by focusing on its use of the house metaphor. *House of Leaves* reflects on the consequences of the network paradigm by interweaving metaphors of the house and the network: a sense of familiarity and safety is exchanged for confusion, alienation, and uprootedness.

Subsequently, the final section of this chapter draws attention to the portrayal of the supernatural media virus. The network and the virus are inseparable in the novel: an infectious information overload is an inherent part of the network itself. People subjected to the diverse networks inevitably become virus hosts, forced to expand upon and further circulate the corruptive film and manuscript. This section further analyzes how the virus always threatens to break beyond its boundaries: not only does the virus continuously evolve new viral vectors, but *House of Leaves* is also riddled by multiple metalepses and presents itself in the form of a transmedia narrative, indicating that the virus cannot be contained within a singular narrative layer or even within the print novel itself.

3.2 Alienation, Homelessness, and the Instability of the Text

For the Navidsons, the horror at the house on Ash Tree Lane begins after they return from a trip to Seattle. During their absence, an additional door has appeared in the bedroom upstairs, opening into a small closet space with smooth, black walls. Will Navidson, family father and photojournalist, attempts to fathom this "strange spatial violation" (Danielewski 2000a: 24) by acquiring the blueprints of the house and measuring its dimensions. Not only do his measurements fail to correspond to those of the plans, but he also discovers that the inner dimensions of the building exceed its outer length by a quarter of an inch. The investigation into the house begins with this unsettling discovery. Navidson calls in his brother, Tom, as well as the engineer Billy Reston, hoping that together they will be able to eliminate what at first appears to be a mere measuring inaccuracy. Instead of solving the riddle, however, they soon discover that a new hallway has emerged in the Navidsons' living room. Whereas the outer walls of the house remain unchanged, this hallway leads into a seemingly unending labyrinth of black rooms and hallways within the house. Navidson eventually contacts a small group of professional explorers – Holloway Roberts and his two assistants Kirby "Wax" Hook and Jed Leeder – hoping that they will be able to uncover the supernatural house's mystery.

It is through the tale of the Navidson family, and through the Holloway expedition in particular, that a key theme pervading all layers of *House of Leaves* becomes most apparent: the motif of scientific analysis, of taking measure and of gathering as much information as possible – and the failure to establish control through such knowledge. Navidson's attempts at eliminating the discrepancy of the house's dimensions cause him to acquire ever more sophisticated tools in the hope that such technology will solve the mystery. Yet, even those high tech devices only offer a more precise measurement of the ontological impossibility: "The interior of the house exceeds the exterior not by 1/4" but by 5/16"" (ibid: 32). Likewise, while the explorers approach the maze as a scientific puzzle – collecting wall samples, measuring distances, monitoring temperatures – the data that is collected is confusing, rather than

enlightening: the wall samples indicate that the house must be older than the solar system, whereas a sonar logging of a staircase within the maze implies that the depth of the house exceeds the circumference of the Earth. The gathering of knowledge becomes an attempt at familiarizing oneself with the rules and functions of the house; however, the endeavor always fails.

Zampanò, too, proves to be obsessed with analyzing and interpreting data. His main object of study is not the house, but rather the question of how it is represented in the documentary film. His monograph is annotated extensively in an attempt to cover every possible angle of interpretation,[4] thereby often foreclosing the reader's approach to the text:

> Fans of poststructuralism, for example, might conceive of the house as having a center that is not a center, so perhaps a judicious use of Derrida would be helpful when writing an essay on *House of Leaves* for a journal like *Genre*. But Zampanò has already provided a footnote, "strictly as an aside," that quotes liberally and in French from "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" […]. In this way, then, *House of Leaves* offers numerous pre-emptive readings: that is, it folds in various interpretive acts that would make sense to those coming to the novel from differing theoretical perspectives. (Belletto 2009: 107-108)

Once again, the knowledge gathered does not make the house, the film, or even the monograph itself easier to comprehend. After all, how does a Derridaean reading solve the mystery of a house that continuously morphs its interior structure? Instead, these numerous approaches unhinge *The Navidson Record*, which in the end is too detailed, too complex, and too unfocused to advance a clear reading of the film.

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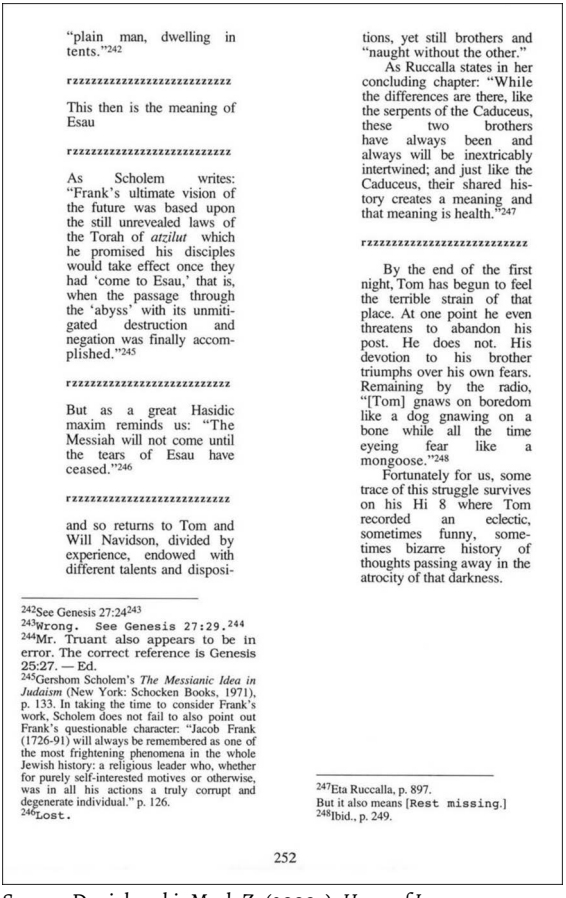
4 One extreme example of Zampanò's treatment of footnotes can be observed in footnote 75, which spans two pages and simply consists of a list of photographers' names without any comment about their relevance (Danielewski 2000a: 64-67).

Fig. 3.2 Three sets of competing footnotes



"plain man, dwelling in tents."[242]

rzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz

This then is the meaning of Esau

rzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz

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

rzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz

But as a great Hasidic maxim reminds us: "The Messiah will not come until the tears of Esau have ceased."[246]

rzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz

and so returns to Tom and Will Navidson, divided by experience, endowed with different talents and dispositions, yet still brothers and "naught without the other."

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

rzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz

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

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

[242]See Genesis 27:24[243]
[243]Wrong. See Genesis 27:29.[244]
[244]Mr. Truant also appears to be in error. The correct reference is Genesis 25:27. — Ed.
[245]Gershom Scholem's *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 133. In taking the time to consider Frank's work, Scholem does not fail to also point out Frank's questionable character: "Jacob Frank (1726-91) will always be remembered as one of the most frightening phenomena in the whole Jewish history: a religious leader who, whether for purely self-interested motives or otherwise, was in all his actions a truly corrupt and degenerate individual." p. 126.
[246]Lost.

[247]Eta Ruccalla, p. 897.
But it also means [Rest missing.]
[248]Ibid., p. 249.

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Source: Danielewski, Mark Z. (2000a): *House of Leaves*

As Truant is drawn into *The Navidson Record*, he exhibits a similar obsession. At first somewhat detached from the text, his comments and follow-up research eventually become increasingly detailed, providing translations of foreign phrases that were used by Zampanò or by correcting his mistakes (see Fig. 3.2). This work affects his mental health severely: he eventually nails measuring tapes to his apartment's floor and walls as if he were scared that these walls might also begin to shift. In *House of Leaves*, taking measure and gathering knowledge turn into a means of establishing familiarity, defining borders, and hence staying in control – at the same time, however, both the house on Ash Tree Lane and the fragmented monograph constantly evade any attempts at measurement and interpretation. In this case, knowledge neither reveals the underlying structure of the object, nor does it establish control over it – instead, it always remains alien and otherworldly.

This impotence of knowledge and instability of structure are due to the continuous transformations that the house on Ash Tree Lane undergoes. Any floorplan of the house is ultimately useless, given that it can only portray the labyrinth's pattern with temporary validity. This house is more than merely a maze: structurally, it resembles an evolving network, continuously changing its shape and size, thereby making any form of definite representation of its underlying design impossible. It can create new rooms and hallways – a network's nodes and links, respectively – but it can also destroy them in an instant. This overlapping of the house and the network metaphor is merely one of several mappings performed in Danielewski's narrative, where supposedly stable forms are contested by means of the network. As Levine phrases it, "networks usefully confound containing forms" (2015: 112); a house that resembles an expanding network lacks the central features of a building: it no longer offers a clear separation of inside and outside; its structure is not fixed, and the distinct rooms do not necessarily follow clear rules and functions anymore.

In a similar manner, the narrative also extends the network paradigm to written text. The network has not only become a cultural key metaphor, but also a behavioral paradigm: the process of networking is paramount (Friedrich 2015: 382). *House of Leaves* is an excellent

example of this network's dual function, because not it just the house, but also the text itself that behaves like a network. With its numerous footnotes and appendices provided by multiple authors as well as its multimodality, *The Navidson Record* is not a linear monograph, but rather a fragmented, interlinked manuscript. Through its complex structure, *House of Leaves* fits Mousoutzanis' definition of network fiction, where multiple narratives are interlocked (2014: 95, 223). Readers wishing to access the narrative, therefore, must engage in a nonlinear, "networked reading strategy" (Pressman 2006: 116). They have to choose which approach they want to use, which links of the network they want to follow, and which they wish to ignore.

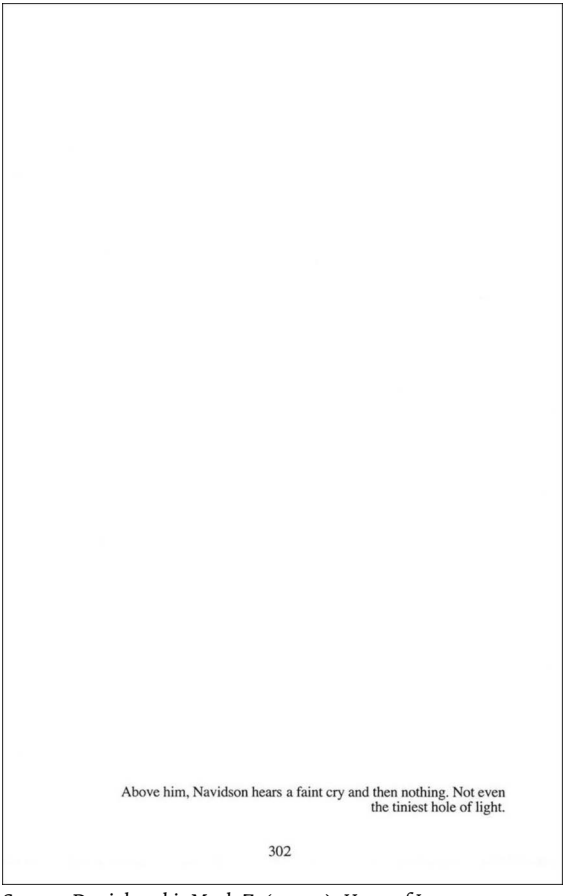
Significantly, the networks established by *House of Leaves* extend beyond the confines of the book; the narrative consists of multiple media texts. Readers in search of the entire story necessarily need to read the companion novella *The Whalestoe Letters* as well as listen to Poe's music album *Haunted*. The novel invokes the networks established by new media through this transmedialization and the frequent use of remediation. *House of Leaves* is reminiscent of digital media, due to its multimodality, and it specifically simulates properties such as interactivity and networking capabilities – key properties of digital media (Ryan 2004b: 338). While the novel cannot rewrite itself in the same way that a website can be updated, it is nevertheless composed in such a complex manner that it offers numerous possible interpretations. As Pressman puts it: "in a digital age, wherein information can be easily altered and updated, the book is never a discrete and complete object but always a node in an ever-changing network of information, interaction, and potential or 'virtual' readings" (2006: 120). Readers of *House of Leaves* will discover something entirely new to them with every read-through, depending on which paths of the narrative network they explore, and how deeply they enter the (trans-)media network.

Using a media-conscious narratology to discuss the interplay of narrative and medium is indispensable in any discussion of Danielewski's novel. A key logic at work in the novel is remediation, the refashioning of one or multiple media within another medium (Bolter/Grusin 2000: 273). Significantly, media differ in their expressive

power; when it comes to narration, "different media filter different aspects of narrative meaning" (Ryan 2004a: 17). For instance, whereas a novel is ideal for representing a character's inner thoughts, a film can offer a visual portrayal of the goings-on, but it probably features less inwardness. This remediation fulfills several functions: first, *House of Leaves* utilizes it to foreground its own mediality, illustrating the extent to which any media artifact is always grounded in a set of conventions. Second, by remediating diverse media within the confines of a print novel, it emphasizes how new media can create new networks, and how these interconnections affect analog media. Third, as this chapter's final subsection illustrates, remediation in *House of Leaves* reveals the supernatural media virus' evolution, which deploys multiple media as vectors of transmission.

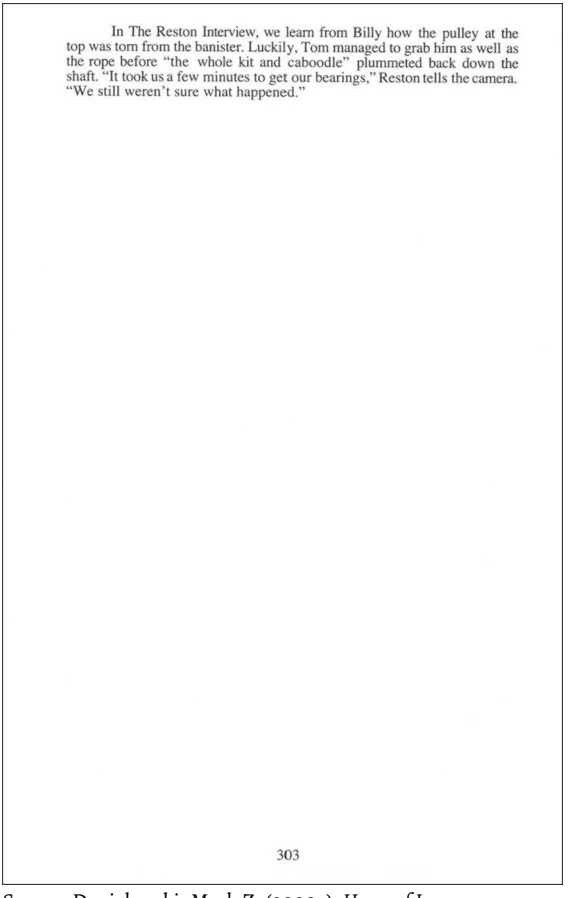
This self-reflexive emphasis on mediality is further underlined by the novel's remediation of film and its invocation of the found footage horror genre in particular. The blue color of the term "house" is reminiscent of the blue screen used in film production (Hayles 2002: 123). Through its topical focus on the documentary film and its creation, *House of Leaves* provides what Irina Rajewsky has termed *explizite Systemerwähnung* ("explicit reference") to film, meaning that film and the filmmaking process are reflected upon in the literary text (2002: 159). In addition, the novel features an implicit reference to film by engaging in filmic writing at many points, borrowing from the conventions of film by recreating cinematic techniques – such as jump cuts, montage, or quick changes in points of view – in the written text. For instance, the positioning of the text visually portrays the events described at several points. When the expeditionary team is separated, due to one of the house's unforeseeable shifts, the text is alternately positioned at either the very bottom or the very top of the page, depending on whether the focalizer is Will Navidson, who is stuck at the bottom of an incredibly long stairwell, or his brother Tom and Billy Reston, who are at the top (see Fig. 3.3 and 3.4).

Fig. 3.3 Navidson at the bottom of the stairwell...



Source: Danielewski, Mark Z. (2000a): *House of Leaves*

Fig. 3.4 ...and Reston at the top


In The Reston Interview, we learn from Billy how the pulley at the top was torn from the banister. Luckily, Tom managed to grab him as well as the rope before "the whole kit and caboodle" plummeted back down the shaft. "It took us a few minutes to get our bearings," Reston tells the camera. "We still weren't sure what happened."

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Source: Danielewski, Mark Z. (2000a): *House of Leaves*

This scene not only explicitly refers to film through its allusion to "The Reston Interview," but also simulates that medium: first, by alternating quickly between viewpoints over the course of several pages and, second, by visually portraying this alternation. *House of Leaves* specifically invokes the genre of the found footage horror film through the utilization of filmic techniques and the conceit of the discovered manuscript. Scott Meslow defines found footage as a genre "built on the conceit that the movie was filmed not by a traditional, omniscient director, but by a character that exists within the film's world – and whose footage was discovered sometime after the events of the film" (qtd. in Heller-Nicholas 2014: 16). Films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Paranormal Activity* (dir. Oren Peli, 2007), and *Cloverfield* (dir. Matt Reeves, 2008) are, therefore, marked by their authentic, observational, and amateur style, which oftentimes denies a crisp, well-framed portrayal of the horrific goings-on. As Alexandra Heller-Nicholas explains, found footage films derive their power from an inherent paradox:

> On one hand, the formal construction of these films encourages a sense of verisimilitude and suggests that what is being shown is raw, unprocessed "reality." At the same time, however, it does this by making it impossible to forget that we are watching a film: If the shaky camera and the regular glitches in sound and vision fail to remind us of this, then the appearance of and references to filmmaking technologies in many of these films makes it inescapable. (2014: 24)

House of Leaves can be regarded as a textual take on the found footage horror film. In place of handheld camera footage and video glitches, the novel presents itself as a manuscript, of which several parts are missing or too confusing to be comprehensible. Furthermore, the novel continuously reminds readers of how this manuscript came into being through the explicit reference to the writing processes that have created the book. The found footage genre is a modern take on one of the oldest Gothic tropes: the discovered manuscript. While this trope features prominently in early Gothic texts, more modern fictions tend to represent these manuscripts, and the reading thereof, as dangerous. By remediating a film genre that in itself is already a remediation of a lit-

erary trope, *House of Leaves* fuses this implied danger of reading, as it can be observed in Gothic texts such as Chambers' *The King in Yellow*, with the tension established by the found footage genre, in which the concept of "raw, unprocessed 'reality'" (Heller-Nicholas 2014: 24) stands in stark contrast with the obvious mediation process.

In addition to film, *House of Leaves* remediates the Internet's central properties. As Pressman points out, the novel resembles an analog hypertext: footnotes lead the reader throughout the entire book and even outside of it, asking them to perform further research or to discuss their interpretation of the text with fellow fans via Danielewski's official online forum. The blue coloring of the word "house" is, therefore, reminiscent of an active hyperlink (ibid: 108). Indeed, the novel mirrors the rhizomatic structure of the Internet, lacking a stable center and providing the reader with more information than they can process. In remediating such a vast and complex medium, the narrative rejects the conventions of the print novel and instead transforms the text into a network as well.

Further exploring the affordances and constraints of the print novel in comparison to new media, text here also functions like an architectural structure, as a "house of leaves," with "leaves" denoting the pages of a book. The novel does what no digital text could ever do: it exploits the three-dimensionality of the physical object that is the book *House of Leaves*. Similar to the characters walking for miles through the labyrinth without ever making much progress, or even ending up back where they started, readers who attempt to read every footnote and follow every cross-reference offered in the manuscript will have to leaf back and forth through the book, oftentimes skipping several hundred pages in the process. The most extreme example of this can be found in Chapter IX, which tells of the experiences of the Holloway expedition. Mirroring their endeavors, this chapter presents itself as the most labyrinthine section of the entire narrative, with footnotes oftentimes leading the reader into dead ends or sections that they already have encountered. Of particular interest here is footnote 144 (Danielewski 2000a: 119-144): spanning more than 20 pages, this footnote is set in a small box with a blue outline – the same color used for the word "house"

– that is always placed in the same position on the subsequent pages. Significantly, when the reader turns the page over, the box sports exactly the same text as on the previous page, only in mirror writing. This footnote thus "calls into question an assumption so commonplace we are not normally aware of it – that book pages are opaque, a property that defines one page as separate from another" (Hayles 2002: 123). However, the novel does more than challenging the assumption of the opaque page: this box bores through several book pages, layers upon layers of three-dimensional text that only become meaningful if presented in a physical book, thereby self-reflexively foregrounding the materiality of the medium.

The novel not only reflects upon the increasing prevalence of networks and on how they affect our perception of reality, but also specifically identifies any form of engagement with these networks as dangerous, as both Navidson's documentary and *The Navidson Record* are detrimental to their consumer's minds. Mirroring this, attempting to come up with a final interpretation of *House of Leaves* is extremely difficult for the reader, because the multiple narrative layers of Danielewski's novel make it impossible to define the central narrative: the Navidson family and their experiences at the house? Zampanò's attempt at writing a scholarly monograph? Truant's everyday struggles? Maybe even the story of his mother's mental demise? Simultaneously, its form makes it difficult for the reader to decide how to engage with the book. They can read it cover to cover, focus on one of the narrative voices exclusively, or instead leaf wildly through the pages in an attempt to follow every footnote. Importantly, each reading approach will yield a different interpretation of the novel. Danielewski's novel is an excellent example of Levine's idea of the ideal representational mode for networks (2015: 129-130): it refuses totality in favor of undecidability, constantly confounding the reader's expectations of the narrative form. The supernatural media virus, thus, becomes a metaphor for the seeming instability of these networks. Reading *House of Leaves* appears maddening and, to some extent, this effect is viral.

Danielewski's narrative establishes a web of metaphors in which every term resonates with, reflects upon, and ultimately affects each other

term. Significantly, the novel does not foreground the presence of networks or the network society by portraying a house as well as a text that resembles a network. Rather, it emphasizes the prevalence of the network paradigm: it does not matter whether these diverse networks truly exist or whether society today really has become a network society; the relevant thing is that networks are *seen everywhere* – they are imposed on all life matters. The novel illustrates this obsession with connectivity by likening diverse concepts such as "house" and "text" to a network.

In *House of Leaves*, the consequence of the network paradigm includes the loss of any sense of familiarity and safety. People living in this paradigm are increasingly alienated from their social environment; like the Navidsons, they are lost in the labyrinthine network. The more characteristics the "house" – be it the literal house on Ash Tree Lane or the "house of leaves" in the form of written text – shares with the network, the more it becomes detached from the notion of "home." The networked house, hence, becomes unfamiliar and unhomely, or rather: uncanny.

With its focus on supernatural, terrifying domestic spaces, *House of Leaves* continuously evokes the concept of the uncanny. While discussed by a variety of scholars, it is predominantly Sigmund Freud's notion of the *Unheimlich* ("uncanny") that is inferred when discussing the concept in the context of Gothic studies. The uncanny exists in opposition to the homely, and is paradoxically part of it – it is the familiar defamiliarized: "this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (1981 [1919]: 241). The haunted house, in which what is supposed to be a safe and familiar place is transformed into a locus of horror, is another excellent example of the uncanny – hence, *House of Leaves* appears to lend itself to such a reading.

However, the reader's expectations are thwarted in Danielewski's novel: when the uncanny nature of the Navidsons' house becomes apparent, Zampanò cites Heidegger's concept of "Unheimlichkeit" rather

than Freud's.[5] Unlike the Freudian uncanny, which is an aesthetic concept first and foremost, Heidegger's notion of "Unheimlichkeit" is of ontological concern. It describes an indeterminate anxiety that is closely related to "Dasein" as a continuous state of "not-being-at-home" (Danielewski 2000a: 25). Our being-in-the-world, according to the Heideggerian uncanny, always entails a sense of homelessness: "Dasein's way of Being-in-the-world is that of being not at home in the world" (Mulhall 2005: 115). Therefore, "Unheimlichkeit" is an "existential condition of mankind" (Masschelein 2011: 139). Whereas the Freudian uncanny is usually connected to specific objects or to people that evoke a feeling of uncanniness, the Heideggerian uncanny is an unspecific, generalized fear that accompanies mankind's very existence.

It is these existential implications of Heidegger's uncanny that make the concept so apt for critical application to the novel. The moment that the first, comparably small, change at the Navidson's house occurs, it no longer functions as a home. Significantly, this is also the moment at which the house begins to demonstrate its networking capabilities, creating new rooms and new hallways between existing rooms. For the Navidsons, the result is certainly a feeling of not-being-at-home and a profound anxiety that eventually even causes physical symptoms of disease; feelings of homelessness only increase the more the house comes to resemble a network. Johnny Truant points to this anxiety and the loss of familiarity in his introduction, linking it specifically to the function of media. He writes:

> Old shelters – television, magazines, movies – won't protect you anymore. You might try scribbling in a journal, on a napkin, maybe even in the margins of this book. That's when you'll discover you no longer trust the very walls you always took for granted. Even the hallways you've walked a hundred times will feel longer, much longer, and the

5 The Freudian uncanny is only alluded to in Chapter XV, which presents itself as a transcript of a series of interviews conducted by Karen Green with a variety of scholars, authors, artists, and others. One of those is Harold Bloom, who quotes from his *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), in which he devotes a section to the uncanny (Danielewski 2000a: 359).

> shadows, any shadow at all, will suddenly seem deeper, much, much deeper. (Danielewski 2000a: xxiii)

The house metaphor is mapped onto media in this passage and with it, the notion of the home. It is specifically *old* shelters – that is, old media – that cannot maintain a feeling of security, familiarity, and, hence, homeliness. This type of home is lost with the rise of the network society and with digital media. "House of leaves," thus, might also be understood as a "house of leave-taking."

Indeed, the deeper that the characters of the novel immerse themselves in their respective networks – Navidson wandering into the labyrinthine house; Zampanò attempting to make sense of "The Navidson Record" and tying it to valid scholarly interpretative approaches; both Truant and the Editors delving into a manuscript cobbled together out of many fragments that need to be connected in a coherent manner – the more the notions of homeliness, familiarity, and safety are lost to each and every one of them, and the more alienated they become. The network paradigm's detrimental effect is a recurring theme in portrayals of the supernatural media virus; *Kairo* in particular centers on the disintegration of personal relationships and feelings of alienation in a similar manner, as I explain in Chapter Five of this book.

The Navidson family begins to break apart alongside the initial changes to the house. As Navidson cannot stand the fact that his partner Karen Green does not want him to explore the maze, he grows increasingly distant from both her and their children, until he eventually decides to walk into the labyrinth after all. Likewise, Karen, who suffers from claustrophobia and is terrified by the house's ashen walls, neglects their two children and who, in turn, develop their own problematic habits. Finally, the Navidsons' two pets are simply never mentioned again at any point of the narrative – their fate remains unknown. It is only when Navidson suffers severe physical injuries, during his last expedition, that he can finally let go of the house and put his family together again.

This loss of the homely and the familiar is a central theme in *House of Leaves*; this theme is brought to the fore by the network paradigm.

According to Levine, networks may confound confining forms, but they do not necessarily override them: "networks and enclosures are constantly meeting, sometimes sustaining and reinforcing one another, at other times creating threats and obstacles. It shows that neither form has the final organizing word – neither always regulates the other" (2015: 119). Globalization may have enabled multinational corporations, the worldwide flow of capital, and similar far-reaching, networked ventures, but it has also reinforced the interest in national boundaries and the walls that protect them. Danielewski's narrative similarly pits networks against enclosures; here, however, the walls can hardly be sustained and crumble under the influence of networks. This becomes apparent in Zampanò's attempts to "contain" his apartment:

> All the windows were nailed shut and sealed with caulking. The front entrance and courtyard doors all storm proofed. Even the vents were covered with duct tape. That said, this peculiar effort to eliminate any ventilation in the tiny apartment did not culminate with bars on the windows or multiple locks on the doors. Zampanò was not afraid of the outside world. […] My best guess now is that he sealed his apartment in an effort to retain the various emanations of his things and himself. (Danielewski 2000a: xvi)

With his work on *The Navidson Record*, Zampanò's home – his apartment, in the material sense, but also his life and identity, in a more abstract sense – is no longer safely encompassed within enclosures. Networks also affect his very identity, which is no longer primarily defined by his personality and personal relationships, but instead is comprised of various documents and raw data. Little is known about Zampanò by the time of his death: he has no family relations and, therefore, nobody to claim his belongings. It appears as though he was completely isolated from other human beings, with the sole exception of the women who typed up his monograph for him – and even they all lost contact with him after a short while. Instead, his identity – his being a person – is solidified by a network of documents:

> He called himself Zampanò. It was the name he put down on his apartment lease and on several other fragments I found. I never came across any sort of ID, whether a passport, license or other official document insinuating that yes, he indeed was An-Actual-&-Accounted-For person. (ibid: xii)

There is also the possibility that Zampanò's name is fake, inspired by a character of the same name from the 1954 film *La Strada* directed by Federico Fellini. The identity of Johnny Truant's mother, Pelafina Lièvre, is expressed in a similar manner in *The Whalestoe Letters*. Walden D. Wyrhta explains how he saved Pelafina's letters from a fire in his introduction to the collection of letters:

> [T]hat spring much of that "furniture" […] found itself curling into ash on a large fire spilling sparks and smoke into the blue. But for the slender wisp of her Js and Ys, she too – or part of her at least – would have slipped permanently into that unrecoverable sky.
> Fortunately while rounding the perimeter of that large pyre […] I caught sight of her and retrieved her and kept her.
> She has been for all these years mine. (Danielewski 2000b: xiii)

Through this personification, Pelafina's entire identity is represented as something consisting solely of written documents.[6]

Johnny Truant's demise is the clearest portrayal of the relationship between the network and homeliness. As he starts work on the manuscript, Truant gradually begins to neglect his personal life: he becomes inattentive at work, goes out with his friends less often, stops paying his rent, and is eventually thrown out of his increasingly decrepit apartment. Now literally homeless, Truant turns into one

6 In its portrayal of human identities as networks of information, *House of Leaves* also predicts the increasing quantification of the human being as it is occurring at the moment: smartphones reveal our position on the planet at any given moment; fitness trackers monitor everything from calorie intake to heart rate and sleeping behavior; our everyday behavior – leisure time activities, purchases, political views, and so on – is the focus of so-called data miners, who transform these data into a marketable profile of the individual.

of those characters described by Mousoutzanis in his discussion of narratives of interconnectedness, who are "often in a constant state of travel and mobility as they find themselves involved in or affected by incidents from a distant time, place or storyline" (2014: 223). Truant moves through yet another network, namely the transportation network of the United States, all while trying to illuminate the truth of the manuscript and to rediscover his own past. He crosses the country by train in search of the mysterious house on Ash Tree Lane, revisits his old home as well as the mental hospital in which his mother was institutionalized. His search remains fruitless: the house he grew up in has been demolished and replaced by a lumberyard; the Whalestoe Institute has been closed for several years; the existence of the house on Ash Tree Lane remains a mystery. There is no longer any home to be found.

The network paradigm's effects reveal themselves on the level of the Editors as well. Arguably, their involvement in the network is the deepest, given that they are working on a version of *The Navidson Record* that has been annotated multiple times already. These Editors remain completely anonymous and identity-less throughout the entire narrative. Unlike Navidson, Zampanò, and Truant, they are never even associated with anything such as a home or a personal identity from the beginning. It appears as if feelings of homeliness and familiarity are eliminated entirely once the network is in full effect; instead, anonymity and alienation prevail.

Danielewski's narrative gradually detaches the house metaphor from the notion of homeliness, familiarity, and safety by interweaving it with the network metaphor, introducing alienation, chaos, and instability instead. The text of *House of Leaves* is rendered chaotic and unstable as well in the process of representing the house's transformation. The novel negotiates a changing view of the world through this intersection of house, network, and text: networks are everywhere. Networks of diverse kinds restructure our very understanding of the world around us to the point where even a person's identity is reduced to a web of documents. What used to be familiar and comprehensible now appears to be in a constant state of disorienting flux, evading any

means of comprehension, prediction, and control. Truth itself becomes irrelevant: "it makes no difference that the documentary at the heart of this book is fiction. Zampanò knew from the get-go that what's real or isn't real doesn't matter here. The consequences are the same" (Danielewski 2000a: xx). Hence, what belongs to the "old" world – the "old shelters" that Truant writes about – offers no stability, because the very access to reality is transformed by the network paradigm.

One additional consequence of the network paradigm is its focus on function and efficiency within its diverse networks. This is what Castells hints at when he asserts that "everything, and *everyone*, which does not have value, according to what is valued in the networks, *or ceases to have value*, is switched off the networks, and ultimately discarded" (2010b: 134; my emphases). Johnny Truant has to be a part of some kind of a social or communication network in order to be able to pass on the corruptive manuscript; yet, by the time that his edition of the text is published, he himself is both homeless and uprooted. Both Zampanò and Truant either die or disappear after having ensured that the corruptive manuscript will be passed on to somebody else. With that, their function is fulfilled.

A third effect of the network paradigm in *House of Leaves* is an obsession with collecting data: almost every character in the novel is driven by the need to record every piece of information and to attempt to embed these data in a preexistent network of information. However, the information provided is seldom organized in a meaningful manner and never reestablishes familiarity or control. Instead, information in the narrative illustrates David Shenk's pessimistic prediction that is explicated in his book *Data Smog* only a few years before the publication of Danielewski's novel: "the glut of information no longer adds to our quality of life, but instead begins to cultivate stress, confusion, and even ignorance" (1997: 15). Indeed, as I show in the next section, this information overload is viral in *House of Leaves*.

3.3 The Supernatural Media Virus as Inherent Network Accident

While the term "virus" is used explicitly only once in *House of Leaves*, virality is the key logic at work in the narrative, pervading all its narrative layers. On the one hand, as discussed in the previous section, the relationship between connectivity and virality illustrates that networking, as a behavioral paradigm, might constitute a dangerous objective in itself: each person who explores such networks becomes increasingly alienated from other people, drawn into delusions, and, thus, loses their grip on reality.

On the other hand, this interrelation exemplifies the fact that the virus is an inherent part of any network. According to Paul Virilio, each type of innovation always brings about its own failures and accidents. He terms this the "*prospective of the accident*: […] the accident is invented at the moment the object is scientifically discovered or technically developed" (1993: 212, original emphasis). Train accidents came with trains; the boat introduced boat accidents; computer technology gave rise to computer viruses (Parikka 2016: xiii). By transposing this idea of the inherent accident to *House of Leaves*, we can see that the supernatural media virus is the inevitable consequence of the network paradigm – it is the built-in accident. This is the reason why, in comparison to the other fictions discussed here, this supernatural media virus' particular portrayal is so abstract. Whereas the supernatural antagonists in *Ghostwatch*, the *Ring* franchise, and *Kairo*/*Pulse* are all ghosts – or at least ghostlike – *House of Leaves* refrains from making the nature of the supernatural media virus explicit and focuses instead on the processes of infection and mutation, and on the channels through which the virus spreads.

Danielewski's narrative exploits a narrative technique of the outbreak narrative through this abstract portrayal of the supernatural media virus. As Kirsten Ostherr explains, a key paradox in visually representing any disease lies in the invisibility of the microbe (2005: 2); it is only through complex technologies, such as electron microscopes, that the pathogen becomes visible. Thus, many representations of

disease instead relocate the problem elsewhere: they portray dangerous locations where disease lingers, such as train stations or dingy bars (ibid: 135-136). Significantly, these locations are tied directly to presumptions regarding behavior: potentially unhygienic travelers making physical contact with the innocent uninfected; unsavory nightly activities, from heavy drinking and drug use to promiscuous sexual practices. Truant's lifestyle makes him part of what such representations classify as a disease risk group: he is an apprentice at a questionable tattoo shop, engages in heavy partying, frequent promiscuous sex, and regular drug use. Paradoxically, it is not those dangerous behaviors and environments that bring about his demise, but rather a written manuscript. In *House of Leaves*, it is impossible to pinpoint the virus. Instead, the disease becomes tangible only through portrayals of dangerous locations (the house on Ash Tree Lane; both Zampanò's and Truant's apartments) and the practices associated therewith (entering the labyrinth; reading and perpetuating the manuscript).

The consequences of seeking out such danger spots and with engaging in these problematic behaviors provide yet another means of portraying the pathogen: symptoms of infection. Each person to enter the house on Ash Tree Lane, even if it is only for a short visit, suffers from diverse postexposure symptoms. While some of these symptoms are exclusively of a psychological nature – anxiety, insomnia, and obsessive behavior, for instance – others are physical symptoms, such as migraine attacks, ulcers, fever, and persistent coughing (Danielewski 2000a: 396). The bodily symptoms in particular strongly resemble those of a pathogenic infection. However, the risk of infection appears to vary from person to person. Whereas some people grow obsessed with the house, others instinctively flee. This becomes apparent in the respective reactions of Billy Reston and Will Navidson, both of whom have already wandered through the labyrinth by this point of the narrative:

> While Reston continued to remain curious about the properties of the house, he had absolutely no desire to return there. […] "Sure I was obsessed at first, we all were," he says in The Reston Interview. "But I got over it pretty quick. My fascination was never the same as Navy's. […]

> After we escaped, going back to the house just didn't interest me." Navidson had a completely different reaction. He could not stop thinking about those corridors and rooms. The house had taken hold of him. (ibid: 384)

Whereas Reston appears to have developed some kind of immunity, Navidson is compelled to explore and document the labyrinth again with his film equipment, almost dying in the process. It is only after this experience, which costs him his right hand, his left eye, and shatters his hip, that he can let go of the house. Of course, by this time, he has already amassed enough film material to create "The Navidson Record," a powerful viral vector.

This film comprises the first of several mutations through which the supernatural media virus evolves new vectors of transmission: the virus, residing only in the house at first, eventually propagates through film and finally written text, exploiting the advantages of each medium. Both the documentary and the manuscript make it increasingly simple to pass the virus along. They are examples of the unofficial circulation of media artifacts in today's society, as discussed by Jenkins, Ford, and Green in *Spreadable Media*:

> This shift from [top-down] distribution to circulation signals a movement toward a more participatory model of culture, one which sees the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who are *shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content* […]. And they are doing so not as isolated individuals but within larger communities and networks, which allow them to spread content well beyond their immediate geographic proximity. (2013: 2, my emphasis)

The documentary film is a mobile, easy-to-spread viral vector, which eventually causes a spiral of infection that will befall Zampanò, Truant, and the Editors. *The Navidson Record*, in turn, is a literally corruptive manuscript that infects every person that spends too much time in its company. Like the documentary, this manuscript can be copied and passed on easily. However, unlike film, it is significantly easier for every

person to continue the editing process on the manuscript – no technical equipment is needed. Hence, the monograph can be read as a nondigital analogy of the digital "spreadability model" heralded in *Spreadable Media*: it is mobile, easily reproducible and changeable, and consequently spreadable with little effort. In the process, this textual vector blurs the distinction between producer and audience by allowing every consumer to reshape its contents according to their own interests.

Yet, this evolution affects the form of each medium. This already becomes apparent through the mode of circulation of a small section from "The Navidson Record": "Dissemination of 'The Five and a Half Minute Hallway' seemed driven by curiosity alone. No one ever officially distributed it […]. Rather, VHS copies were passed around by hand, a series of progressively degenerating dubs of a home video" (Danielewski 2000a: 5). Circulated as a copy of a copy, this section is a true "viral video," but this mode of dissemination also implies that the vector is deteriorating with each new copy. In *The Navidson Record*, this degeneration is even more apparent. As Hayles writes, Danielewski's novel "in a frenzy of remediation attempts to eat all the other media, but this binging leaves traces on the text's body, resulting in a transformed physical and narrative corpus" (2002: 112). The result is a book that does not behave like the conventional print novel; at points, it must be turned around, read backwards, and so on. However, as is explained below, it is precisely this "frenzy of remediation" that makes it highly virulent: its chaotic, degenerate appearance only increases its allure, entrapping potential hosts the moment that they come into contact with the virus.

The corruptive manuscript not only invites, but also actively forces its readers to propagate it by affecting its hosts' behavior towards the supernatural media virus' vector. While we can assume that something similar must have happened to Zampanò before his death, this enforced behavior becomes most obvious through Johnny Truant's mental and physical demise. As his introduction reveals, he is infected almost immediately after stumbling upon the manuscript and soon begins to lose his grip on reality:

> At first only curiosity drove me from one phrase to the next. Often a few days would pass before I'd pick up another mauled scrap, maybe even a week, but still I returned, for ten minutes, maybe twenty minutes, grazing over the scenes, the names, small connections starting to form, minor patterns evolving in those spare slivers of time. I never read for more than an hour. […]
> And then one evening I looked over at my clock and discovered seven hours had passed. Lude had called but I hadn't noticed the phone ring. […] That wasn't the last time I lost sense of time either. In fact it began to happen more often, dozens of hours just blinking by, lost in the twist of so many dangerous sentences. (Danielewski 2000a: xviii)

The longer he works on the manuscript, the worse its effects on him become. Eventually, Truant experiences not only such mental lapses, but suffers bodily symptoms as well – yet, he is compelled to continue working on the monograph: "Maybe I have an ulcer. Maybe I have a tumor. Right now the only thing that keeps me going is some misunderstood desire to finish The Navidson Record" (ibid: 297, original emphasis). Truant is not only driven to finish the manuscript, but also to protect it, if necessary, as becomes clear during a visit by his longtime friend Lude:

> "Throw it away, hoss" Lude said and started to cross to my desk for a closer look. I sprung forward, ordered by instinct, like some animal defending its pride, interposing myself between him and my work, those papers, this thing.
> Lude backed away – in fact that was the first time he'd ever backed away […].
> "Get rid of it Hoss, it's killing you." (ibid: 324)

At this point, Truant already is isolated from his social environment due to his infection; he has both neglected his friend and stopped mingling with other people at bars and parties. Replicating and propagating the manuscript has become his sole goal in life.

Despite this alienation, however, he can pass on the virus and must, hence, still be part of some kind of network; this exemplifies that it is

specifically *personal* relationships that suffer. Truant finds out that he must have released his edited version of *The Navidson Record* to a publisher during one of his mental lapses (ibid: 513). It seems as if Truant is compelled to finish the monograph and to pass it on to more people, even though his bodily and mental health has already been severely affected by the corruptive manuscript. Unlike the passive "couch potatoes" of *Ghostwatch*, hosts in *House of Leaves* function unknowingly as active disease spreaders, ensuring the viral vector's continued circulation.

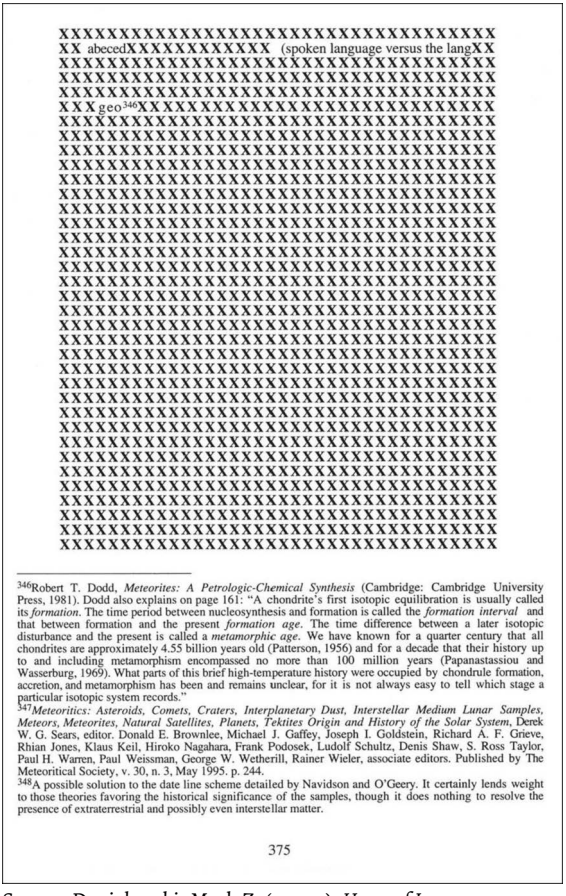
Truant frequently uses biological metaphors to describe the corruptive manuscript with the increasing manifestation of bodily and mental symptoms. This becomes apparent shortly after the encounter with Lude, where Johnny describes what is perhaps the strongest reaction that he has had to *The Navidson Record*:

> I wash the sweat off my face, do my best to suppress a shiver, can't, return to the body, spread out across the table like papers – and let me tell you there's more than just The Navidson Record lying there – bloodless and still but not at all dead, calling me to it, needing me now like a child, depending on me despite its age. After all, I'm its source, the one who feeds it, nurses it back to health – but not life, I fear – bones of bond paper, transfusions of ink, genetic encryption in xerox; monstrous, maybe inaccurate correlates, but nonetheless there. (ibid: 326, original emphasis)

In this passage, the manuscript is infused with a parasitic, even vampiric force. This textual vampirism is described by means of medical terminology: "*bones* of bond paper, *transfusions* of ink, *genetic encryption* in xerox." Truant here describes the transformation of written text into a biological entity, in which the supposedly inanimate manuscript is infused with the capacity for mutation and infection.

This theme of transformation into something biological is already present in the novel's ambivalent title. Reading the titular element "leaves" as the leaves of a tree, the novel's title evokes notions of growth, but also of decay. Like a tree, The Navidson Record grows larger and more complex with each editing. Significantly, while some

Fig. 3.5 Illegible text as evolution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sections of the treelike monograph grow and branch out, others simply die off as they are struck out or otherwise tampered with during the process of editing (see Fig. 3.5). Textual and biological degeneration go hand in hand in *House of Leaves*: Truant is already experiencing strong symptoms caused by his mysterious illness while he is reading those sections of the manuscript that are almost illegible because parts of the text have been obscured by ash or ink.

However, the presumed degeneration of the vector does not weaken its effects; instead, it is a form of evolution. The supernatural media virus bypasses one of the model of spreadability's central problems: the "ongoing tension between durability and mobility" (Jenkins/Ford/Green 2013: 38). It is precisely the limited durability of its vectors that upholds the virus' allure. A biological virus is constantly undergoing genetic variation in response to its host's immunity. Such random mutation might increase or decrease a pathogen's virulence (Wagner/Hewlett/Bloom/Camerini 2008: 5-6). Transposing this logic to media studies, and to so-called viral media in particular, it is specifically those artifacts that fascinate their audience that are passed on and reproduced innumerable times. Deliberately engaging in the use of virus metaphors, Rushkoff claims that, by being interesting, such a media object bypasses a society's "immunity": "Media viruses spread rapidly if they provoke our interest […]. The more provocative an image or icon […] the further and faster it will travel through the datasphere. […] Our interest and fascination is a sign that we are not culturally 'immune' to the new virus" (1996: 10). In *House of Leaves*, each mutation of the supernatural media virus – that is, each editing process which might clarify some aspects of the monograph while obscuring others – keeps the text interesting. Both readers of and characters in the narrative alike attempt to fathom the truth behind the viral manuscript and attempt to discover the story behind this supernatural media virus. By denying them a clear, straightforward answer, this virus encourages its hosts to spend long periods of time on it and to spread it to other potential carriers. The only time that the virus is explicitly referred to in the novel, it is immediately linked to the impossibility of any immune reaction. During Karen Green's interviews, the British playwright

Byron Baleworth claims: "You've created a semiotic dilemma. Just as a nasty virus resists the body's immune system so your symbol – the house – resists interpretation" (Danielewski 2000a: 356). Using the virus as a metaphor for the house, the fictionalized Baleworth specifically compares the process of interpretation to an immune reaction. However, no interpretation can tie all of the loose ends together – the text remains fatally fascinating.

Importantly, the reader is implicated in this perpetual loop of infection, mutation, and spread as well; this supernatural media virus always threatens to break out of its confines. This already becomes apparent when picking up the print novel: mirroring the uncontrollable growth of the house on Ash Tree Lane, *House of Leaves* is literally bigger on the inside – the book jacket is slightly smaller than the book's pages. The novel's transmedia extensions are an additional indication of this, given that the narrative cannot be contained within a singular novel. Finally, increasingly frequent metalepses and the fact that *House of Leaves* conflates its narrative medium and viral vector (both written text), signify that the virus has the capacity to break the barrier between the distinct narrative layers and might even be able to move beyond the book to infect the reader.

The most extreme example of metalepsis occurs when Will Navidson reads a novel called *House of Leaves* while lost in the labyrinth. His book has 736 pages (ibid: 467) – exactly the same number of pages as the novel *House of Leaves* that the reader is holding in their hands. In other words, not only is Navidson reading a book about himself, but he is also reading the same book as the reader. Yet, there are also more subtle examples of metalepsis in the novel. For instance, the color purple features prominently in Johnny Truant's memories of his mother. References to the color within Zampanò's monograph could be further proof of Truant's unreliability as an editor, implying that he has changed the original text. However, the color also appears on the narrative level of the Editors, which logically should be one step above Truant.

The reading process of the manuscript challenges and confuses the reader as well with its monstrous, chaotic structure. Trying to find one's way through this narrative is the Gothic reading experience, where it

becomes impossible to determine which clues are relevant, which are misleading, and what information is omitted from the text (Brewster 2012: 485). Both Zampanò and Truant have already succumbed to this process; their work becomes unfinishable on the basis of their inability to propose a final interpretation to either the documentary or the monograph. Additionally, it appears as if this state of mind is truly contagious, and as if it might also infect the reader of the novel, because such a final reading is impossible for them too. To make matters worse, *House of Leaves* extends the Gothic reading experience beyond the print novel through its use of transmedia storytelling.

According to Jenkins' theory, a transmedia narrative is a tale that "unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best" (Jenkins 2006: 97-98). Consumers of such a narrative are invited to actively seek out each transmedia extension in order to experience the entire narrative. This results in what Jason Mittell has referred to as "forensic fandom": fans of a franchise are encouraged to "drill" into a narrative in order to uncover its complexities and to make sense of even the smallest details (Mittell 2012). Arguably, transmedia storytelling provides an ideal basis for the Gothic's obsession with mystery and secrecy, with its excessive style which cannot be confined to a singular medium and its extensive use of narrative fragmentation. Consumers of a transmedia tale such as this are invited to piece the story together like a puzzle, scrutinizing and interpreting each text that belongs to the overall narrative. In the case of *House of Leaves*, readers are encouraged to seek out *The Whalestoe Letters*, *Haunted*, and the official online forum in order to collect further clues. Yet, while all of these extensions reveal more details, they also further destabilize the narrative. It becomes impossible for the reader to decide which of these clues are relevant and which are not – in the end, they all lead to different interpretations of the narrative.

For instance, these transmedia extensions unhinge the supposed narrative hierarchy of *House of Leaves* by focusing explicitly on Johnny Truant's mother, Pelafina Lièvre. She is a literal "madwoman in the at-

tic":[7] she has been institutionalized at the Three Attic Whalestoe Institute due to severe mental illness. In the novel, she only makes an appearance in Appendix II-E in the form of a selection of letters that she wrote to Johnny. Other than that, Truant gives insights into memories he has of her at some points in his narration. Thus, in the novel, Lièvre seems to have only minor importance; her centrality is foregrounded in the novella and in the music album, however. The novella is a collection of Lièvre's letters, featuring some additional letters that are not present in the appendix of *House of Leaves* as well as a foreword by the "Information Specialist" Walden D. Wyrhta, who worked at the institute during Lièvre's hospitalization (Danielewski 2000b: xi). The novella destabilizes the narrative layers of the main novel with its emphasis on Truant's mother, implying that Lièvre might be of greater importance to understanding *House of Leaves* than it first appears – after all, of all minor characters appearing in the novel, it is *her* tale that deserves its own novella. It does not seem to be coincidental that "Whalestoe" is an anagram for "whose tale," begging the question of whose tale this narrative is truly telling.

This focus on Truant's mother is further elaborated on in the companion music album *Haunted* by Poe.[8] The music album "removes the privilege of Truant's position" (Evans 2011: 69); instead, it emphasizes previously marginalized perspectives and themes, such as the focus on Pelafina Lièvre. Only attentive readers will notice parallels between Poe's music and Danielewski's novel in some of the songs. With other tracks, their intertextual relation to the narrative is already easily identifiable through their titles: "Exploration B," "House of Leaves," and "Dear Johnny." Some titles uncannily fuse several narrative levels of the novel together:

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7 This phrase was coined by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their feminist study *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, first published in 1979. As Gilbert and Gubar explain, their title is an allusion to Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* and its portrayal of Bertha Mason (1979: xii).

8 For more information on the intertextuality of novel, novella, and music album, consult Pressman (2006) as well as Evans (2011).

> Johnny dear, don't be afraid.
> I will keep your secrets safe.
> Bring me to the blind man who
> Lost you in his house of blue. ("Dear Johnny" 2000b)

This song might be one of Lièvre's letters, in which she refers to Zampanò directly and to his "house of blue" – yet, she could not possibly know either the man or his manuscript, let alone the house on Ash Tree Lane. Equally unsettling, the song "5&1/2 Minute Hallway" is played by a band in *House of Leaves* (Danielewski 2000a: 512). Almost all of these songs either subtly refer to or outright quote directly from Lièvre's letters and, thus, shed new light on Truant's memories.

The transmedia extensions of *House of Leaves*, therefore, imply that central parts of its meaning lie outside of the confines of the novel itself. Depending on how readers approach the narrative – whether they decide to consume these extensions as well, or whether they focus solely on the novel instead – they will arrive at different, incommensurable interpretations of the text. Consumers are faced with an information overload similar to that of Johnny Truant through the networkedness of the narrative, which in itself is reminiscent of digital media and of the Internet. This overload bears two implications: first, no narrative is a discrete text in itself in the age of interconnected and mobile media, but it always exists in a network of other media objects. This is exemplified by the proliferation of transmedialization as a key marketing strategy in today's culture. Even if few fictions truly live up to Jenkins' top-down image of a transmedia narrative, it has become common practice to add subordinate transmedia extensions to a main text. Such extensions might be a short web series to cover the season hiatus of a television show, an online minigame, or even a marketing campaign that allows fans to buy products that are available in their beloved storyworld, thereby playfully blurring the distinction between fiction and reality.[9] In most cases, these extensions are not necessarily of vital im-

9 Such transmedia techniques are discussed in detail in Mittell (2014) and Ndalianis (2012).

portance for following the main narrative. However, the inherent narrative instability of *House of Leaves* makes it impossible to decide what the "main" narrative truly is; it is up to the consumer to decide whether these transmedia texts are of any relevance to their own reading of the novel or not.

Secondly, and consequentially, the resulting information overload implies that even for the supposedly safe reader Zampanò's corruptive manuscript has not lost its infectiousness, forcing its "victims" to continue scrutinizing the narrative. The frequent metalepses further indicate that the virus can move upwards through the narrative hierarchy with little difficulty. This impression is intensified through the conflation of viral vector and narrative medium; when picking up the novel, the reader supposedly holds the dangerous corruptive manuscript in their hands. Thus, similar to *Ghostwatch*, the fourth wall does not protect readers of *House of Leaves*: this virus continuously threatens to break out of the book's bindings.

Through the intermingling of metaphors, *House of Leaves* reflects on the implications of the increasing pervasiveness of the network paradigm. Personal relationships come under attack as the network becomes the cultural key metaphor – shaping both our view of the world and our behavior towards it. Individuals, such as Johnny Truant, are subsumed by the paradigm's diverse networks; if they move too deeply into it, they will become homeless and uprooted. The supernatural media virus is itself an inherent part of this network paradigm – it is an inevitable result of the growing information overload and the urge for greater connectivity. In the end, the readers of the novel are implicated in this loop of infection; even they are not safe from the viral network's detrimental effects.

4. The Moral Dimension of the Supernatural Media Virus in the *Ring* Franchise

> "In order to protect my family, I am about to let loose on the world a plague which could destroy all mankind. Asakawa was frightened by the essence of what he was trying to do. A voice was whispering to him. If I let my wife and daughter die, it'll end right here. If a virus loses its host, it'll die. I can save mankind. But the voice was too quiet."
> *Kōji Suzuki, Ring*

> "In many societies, epidemics are viewed as unnatural events brought on by various taboo violations. Even in modern Western cultures, victim blaming and viewing disease as punishment from God are frequent. Throughout history, disease has often been blamed on 'outsiders,' as defined by race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality. In Western cultural concepts, disease is considered unnatural, and the genesis of disease is best placed as far from 'people like us' as possible."
> *Susan C. McCombie, "AIDS in Cultural, Historic, and Epidemiologic Context"*

4.1 *Ring* as a Cross-Cultural Example of the Supernatural Media Virus

"Seven days," a childlike voice tells the journalist Rachel Keller after she has picked up the phone. The implication of these words: in a week, exactly seven days after watching a mysterious videotape, Rachel will die. After this, a quest for the origin and meaning of the confusing tape be-

gins, the contents of which are made up of a juxtaposition of disorienting and unsettling images. The stakes are raised significantly after her son, Aidan, also watches the tape. Rachel traces the tape back to the supernaturally gifted girl Samara Morgan, who went missing decades previously, while supported by her ex-boyfriend and Aidan's father, Noah.

This is the premise of the 2002 US blockbuster horror movie *The Ring*, directed by Gore Verbinski. A remake of the Japanese horror film *Ringu* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 1998), Verbinski's film was not only financially highly successful, grossing more than $230 million worldwide, but furthermore kicked off a wave of American remakes of Asian horror films (Lacefield 2010b: 1-2), which included the films *Kairo* and *Pulse*, which I discuss in Chapter Five. *Ringu*, in turn, is an adaptation of a 1991 novel written by Kōji Suzuki, entitled *Ring*.[1] While Suzuki's novels are available in English today, they were translated only after the movies' success. Over the years, *Ring* has grown into an incredibly large and complex franchise, which has been adapted to diverse media (novels, comics/manga, films, television series, video games) and cultures (Japan, the US, South Korea) and which continues to grow to this day. As recent as 2019, the film *Sadako* (dir. Hideo Nakata) once again unleashes the curse of the evil spirit – this time in the form of a viral YouTube video.

Of all of the narratives discussed here, *Ring* provides the most explicit portrayal of the supernatural media virus. Unlike the other fictions discussed, this franchise explicitly ties the virus to a moral dilemma, one in which selfish behavior threatens to induce the apocalypse. While each of the narrative's numerous installments adds its own twists and innovations, the premise of most texts stays true to the original novel's plot: an evil ghost creates a supernatural media virus that threatens to wipe out all of mankind, its spread being facilitated by the omnipresence of media and the selfishness of human beings.

1 This complexity necessitates that the terminology used in this chapter to discuss the franchise be specific and unambiguous. Hence, Suzuki's novel, as well as the franchise at large, are referred to as *Ring*; the Japanese film adaptation is referred to as *Ringu*, whereas the US adaptation is labeled *The Ring*.

The only means of surviving the curse is by copying the corruptive medium and passing it on to another human being. The infected are forced to become complicit in the virus' spread if they want to survive.

In this chapter, I examine the moral dilemma that lies at the center of *Ring*, and how it connects to two focal points: first, the city as a tangible representation of the network society. Metropolises, such as Tokyo or Seattle, feature broadly in each installment. These cities comprise networks, consisting of streets, buildings, institutions, businesses, and people. It is within such networks that *Ring*'s supernatural media virus poses the greatest danger, exploiting both the city's anonymity and population density, in which people might not think twice about infecting another person in order to survive themselves.

Second, a theme of interest is the affordances of the corruptive medium as well as the social practices elicited by these media technologies and *the* media. Videotapes are easily copied and passed on to other people. It is important to consider the production and consumption mechanisms that are enabled by such a medium. Significantly, the institutions behind such content – the news and entertainment media – are implicated in the viral process as well. In most texts of the franchise, it is their desire for better and more dramatic stories that lets the virus loose on society.

Considering its complex, vast structure, the franchise has often been regarded as a virus in itself: spawning numerous copies in the forms of sequels, prequels, adaptations, and remakes, all spreading from one culture to the next. While originating from the same novel, many of these installments are unrelated, stand-alone entries: for instance, the sequels to the Japanese and US American film adaptations are not related to the novel's sequels. Hence, the franchise has branched out to "evolve" multiple narrative strands. These strands, in turn, have mutated to fit their cultural and historical contexts: in later installments, such as the abovementioned *Sadako* (2019), the curse can exploit digital technologies as well.

Ring offers insight into the changing perceptions of the network society over the years, as well as across distinct cultures, precisely because it is such a large franchise. It is useful to view the franchise through

the lens of Hutcheon's theory of adaptation: the "original" text is by no means superior to its adaptations (2006: 9). Instead, these adaptations reveal the cultural context of the narrative and should be regarded as a form of "evolution" (ibid: 31). In the case of *Ring*, the metaphor of evolution must be applied not only to the numerous adaptations within the franchise, but also to its sequels and prequels. It is this value of adaptation and franchising that Valerie Wee builds upon in her analysis of Japanese horror ("J-horror") films and of their remakes: "acts of repetition, copying, adoption, and adaptation can be appreciated as activities that, far from merely diminishing the artistic and cultural value of each subsequent iteration, can actually contribute to the text's and the medium's richness, sophistication, and intricacy" (2014: 24). Readers and viewers are invited to read between these texts and to engage critically with their differences. Tracing these mutations can yield insight into how the texts "trigger unexpected echoes in unexpected places," as Felski phrases it (2015: 160). *Ring* would not be so successful or continue to fascinate a global audience almost thirty years after its original novel was published if it did not resonate with this audience's interests and concerns.

However, this analysis focuses primarily on the original novel *Ring* (1991) as well as its highly successful Japanese and US American adaptations, *Ringu* (1998) and *The Ring* (2002), given that a discussion of the entire franchise, with its more than twenty entries, would go far beyond the scope of this chapter. These installments present *Ring*'s supernatural media virus' *modus operandi* most clearly. The discussion touches upon some of the franchise's other entries only where it is fruitful to do so. This way, it is possible to trace the mutations of the *Ring* franchise and the supernatural media virus represented therein, taking the diverse facets of its evolution – cultural, historical, and media-related – into account.

Critics have discussed the franchise extensively. The diverse contributions in Kristen Lacefield's collection *The Scary Screen: Media Anxiety in* The Ring (2010a), for instance, predominantly explore the complex interrelations of technology, sexuality, and gender throughout the entire franchise. Some analyses in the collection discuss the theme of mon-

strous motherhood and uncanny reproduction (Jackson 2010; Tomlinson 2010; Haque 2010; Brooks 2010); others engage in a Baudrillardian reading of Sadako's/Samara's "birth" from the television into the real world (Tirrell 2010; Jackson 2010). Another approach to the franchise singles out the dynamics of adaptation that guided the transformation of *Ring* across media and cultures (Wright 2010; Wee 2010; Rawle 2010). Wee in *Japanese Horror Films and Their American Remakes* (2014) analyzes not only how ideologies and cultural values are changed during the adaptation process, but also how each of the story's iterations is guided by culturally specific narrative structures and aesthetic conventions.

A discussion of the Japanese horror tradition and its intersections with Western Gothic conventions is essential to any detailed analysis of the *Ring* franchise. Therefore, I outline some of the basic differences between the entries into the franchise in terms of plot, storytelling, and aesthetics in the following subsection. Subsequently, building on the notion of Globalgothic, this section introduces the central features of J-horror narratives and their cultural contexts.

This chapter's third section, "The Metropolis as a Figuration of the Network Society," focuses on the representation of the network society by taking the lingering threat of apocalypse in each installment as its starting point. Social interactions and interpersonal contact are of great importance in the narratives. Whereas *Ghostwatch* and *House of Leaves* can be read as a Gothic haunted house tale, *Ring* shifts the focus from the singular house to the city at large. Densely populated, mediasaturated urban spaces take on a central function and become a tangible representation of the network; *Ring*'s supernatural media virus finds its ideal breeding ground in these megacities. Significant differences between the distinct texts reveal unique insights into the network society and about its implications. *The Ring*, for instance, Orientalizes its antagonist and, in so doing, tells a conventional tale of dangerous, exotic outsiders and the worrisome permeability of hitherto stable boundaries. In this regard, the adaptation closely follows the outbreak narrative's formula. Exploring the virus metaphor's full potential and its use in such narratives of disease, the evil spirit in *Ring* cannot be contained by binary categories, but instead comprises a messy disruption of di-

chotomies, exploiting the affordances of the network society to spread everywhere.

In the final section, I discuss the virus' viral vectors and its hosts. Each medium comes with unique technical properties and social practices: for example, some media are easy to copy and share whereas others are not; these features motivate different ways of interacting with the medium. The centrality of this relationship between the technical and behavioral trajectories is underlined by the mutation of the supernatural media virus throughout sequels as well as the "evolution" of the franchise itself down through the decades. The significance of the interaction between virus and host in *Ring* becomes approachable by analyzing these media's distinct features throughout the franchise. A moral dilemma resides at the heart of the franchise: a person must infect another human being in order to survive. Hosts spread the infection knowingly, endangering the network society and possibly inducing the end of mankind. In the Japanese iterations of the story in particular, the responsibility that each individual has for the community at large is foregrounded.

Significantly, the evil spirit's origin story, as well as the eventual spread of its curse, is intricately connected to the news and entertainment media. The narrative centers on the practices and habits tied to their production (journalists seeking out a new story at all costs) and consumption (an audience that continuously needs to be entertained). *Ring* underlines the implication that news media capitalize on sadistic voyeurism, consuming the pain of others for entertainment, and that spectatorship makes one potentially complicit in the acts of violence that are performed. This becomes apparent through the curse's infection mechanisms: the tape is an account of Sadako's/Samara's suffering; those who dare watch it become its victims. Significantly, the curse forces its victims to victimize others by exposing them to the corruptive medium if they wish to survive. Carriers of the virus are no longer passive recipients, but instead become agents of the virus' continued circulation.

4.2 Japanese Horror Traditions: The *Kaidan* and Globalgothic

There are significant differences between each version of *Ring* in terms of both storytelling and aesthetic presentation. In the novel, the protagonist is a male reporter, Kazuyuki Asakawa, who must save both his wife Shizuka and daughter Yoko from the tape's deadly powers with the aid of his high school friend Ryūji Takayama. In *Ringu* and *The Ring*, the protagonist is a woman, Reiko Asakawa/Rachel Keller, struggling to save the life of her son Yōichi Asakawa/Aidan Keller with the help of her ex-lover Ryūji Takayama/Noah Clay. Furthermore, there are substantial differences regarding the backstory of the evil spirit Sadako Yamamura/Samara Morgan – the only thing common to all versions is that she was killed by being thrown into an old stone well. In the novel, Sadako is a young woman at the time of her death, which occurred thirty years prior to Asakawa's discovery of the tape. She is intersex and, having been raped shortly before her violent death, she is also a carrier of smallpox. In Suzuki's novel, the Ring virus is hence the fusion of the smallpox virus with her supernatural abilities. Neither the woman's "[t]esticular feminization syndrome" (Suzuki 2007 [1991]: 224)[2] nor her rape and resulting smallpox infection were included in either of the two film adaptations, where Sadako/Samara is instead a young girl. The news media are central to the narrative, albeit to different degrees, in all three versions of the tale. In the novel as well as its Japanese adaptation *Ringu*, the news media played a significant role in Sadako and her family's demise. *The Ring*, by contrast, details how Samara was studied as a scientific object for most of her life. In the American version, the potentially detrimental impact of the news media on a person's life is introduced mainly via Rachel's job as a journalist in search for her next big story. Lastly, whereas the spirit's victims die of "sudden heart failure" in the novel (Suzuki 2007 [1991]: 22), both movies portray a virtual

2 Today, this condition is referred to as "androgen insensitivity syndrome" (Haque 2010: 191).

Sadako/Samara climbing out of a television set into reality at their respective climax, literally breaking through the fourth wall and killing her victims by looking at them.

Each version is shaped by its cultural contexts, particularly in terms of aesthetics and narrative strategies. Whereas the Japanese tradition oftentimes privileges "decentered positions and fragmentation" (Blouin 2013: 122) and "emotion over reason, mood over coherence, form over narrative, and presentation over representation" (Wee 2014: 82), American storytelling instead tends to favor goal-oriented protagonists, a cause-and-effect progression, and narrative linearity (ibid: 34; Blouin 2013: 121).[3] For instance, *Ringu* largely leaves the videotape's precise meaning unexplained; *The Ring*, in contrast, offers explanations for the contents of the tape as well as the mechanisms behind the curse by adding an in-depth backstory for the entire Morgan family. During her investigation, Rachel repeatedly comes upon images and objects mirroring shots from the tape, which add another piece of the puzzle to her research into the Morgans. The curse's incubation period amounts to seven days because Samara survived for a week in the well. Samara is subjected to intense scientific research in *The Ring*; this fits alongside the attempts to explain every aspect of the cursed videotape.

It is fruitful to regard *Ring* in terms of the "Globalgothic," a conceptualization of the Gothic that considers the cross-cultural influences of narrative traditions, instead of restricting the mode to either a British or American context (Byron 2012: 373). The tale of the vengeful spirit of a wronged woman/girl haunting the world of the living from beyond her grave is not a convention exclusive to the Western literary canon; instead, it has a long tradition in the Japanese supernatural story, the *kaidan*,[4] as well. While each of these traditions has its unique traits, cross-pollination continues to shape them to this day. Whereas Gothic

3 Wee explores this argument in her comparative close reading of the videotape in *Ringu* and *The Ring*. For more information, consult Chapter 3 in her study *Japanese Horror Films and Their American Remakes* (2014).

4 The term is sometimes transliterated as "*kwaidan*" instead. However, I refer to the terminology as used by scholars such as Wee (2014) and McRoy (2005), denoting Japanese ghost stories as "*kaidan*."

fiction has been discussed in detail in the Introduction, it is necessary at this point to discuss Japanese conventions and to illustrate their connection to the Globalgothic.

The *kaidan* has been a popular genre in Japanese culture since the Edo period (1603-1867) and achieved global fame during the 20th century through Japanese horror cinema. As Jay McRoy writes, J-horror films

> draw on a multiplicity of religious traditions (Shintoism, Christianity, etc.), as well as the plot devices from traditional literature and theatre (including Noh theatre's *shunen-* [revenge-] and *shura-mono* [ghost-plays], and Kabuki theatre's tales of the supernatural [or *kaidan*]). (2005: 3)[5]

The *kaidan* – both its literary and cinematic examples – usually focuses on an unquiet and vengeful *onryō* ("spirit" or "ghost"), which in most cases is a female, haunting the world of the living and seeking revenge on those who wronged her (Wee 2014: 29). These supernatural creatures are not evil by nature, but are rather made evil by other peoples' wrongdoing or neglect. The relationship between the individual and the community, as well as the responsibility each carries for the other, thus comprise important elements of the Japanese ghost story.

The notion of evil constitutes a central difference between the narrative conventions of the Japanese *kaidan* and the Western Gothic tradition. Whereas the latter tends to conceive of good and evil as two forces battling for dominance, the former instead favors a dualistic view grounded in balance and symmetry (Wee 2014: 58-59). The equilibrium is disrupted by the actions of irresponsible individuals:

> The Japanese perspective is […] founded on notions of morality that are determined by questions of responsible, dutiful, and honorable behavior, which are most commonly equated with honoring one's social and communal responsibilities. Consequently, Japanese cultural

5 For a detailed discussion of Japanese traditional theater and its influence on film, consult Balmain (2008).

> narratives are less concerned with evaluating characters and their actions in terms of any prevailing notions of good and evil, and more interested in examining them in the light of right/socially acceptable behavior or wrong/socially irresponsible behavior. (ibid: 60)

Harmful spirits are the result of a person neglecting their social duties. It is those communal responsibilities that are especially important in traditional Japanese narratives, defining the relationship between the individual and its community – the family, the corporation, and the community at large.

With the Allied Occupation after World War II, however, these social values began to change, as Western ideas were imposed through legislative rulings to suppress what was seen as premodern Japanese traditions. Hence, emphasis was laid on democracy instead of imperial supremacy, on individualism instead of collectivism, and the Japanese patriarchal *ie* system was supplanted with a more liberal view, enabling a greater degree of gender equality (ibid: 40). This forced modernization, and the fact that the former colonial power was now being colonized itself, had profound effects on Japan's sense of nationhood and identity (Balmain 2008: 8, 21). The arising tension between tradition and modernity has shaped Japan's cultural landscape significantly, including Japanese horror narratives. In a small, easy to miss instance, Suzuki's *Ring* directly ties Sadako's mother's supernatural abilities to the Allied Occupation. As part of their modernization policies, the Occupation forces throw a religious statue into the ocean near Shizuko's home; it is after diving for this statue of the mystic Ascetic En no Ozunu that the woman first exhibits her supernatural abilities. Later, she passes these powers on to her daughter and these eventually enable Sadako to create the supernatural media virus after her death (Suzuki 2007 [1991]: 191-3). Without the Occupation forces' intervention in centuries-old Japanese traditions, Sadako and her curse might have never been born.

The 1990s in particular proved to be a decade of great change and turmoil in Japan, and it was during this decade that the horror tradition changed most notably. While the country was undergoing rapid

modernization, Japan also suffered from a wide range of political, social, and economic problems, such as governmental inefficacy and domestic terrorism, as exemplified by the Aum Shinrikyo attacks on the Tokyo subway in 1995 (Wee 2014: 16-17). Social problems were alarming, ranging from death by overwork and "classroom collapse," to isolation and alienation, all of which resulted in the loss of shared communal responsibility and in individuals' complete withdrawal from society, and finally to rising gender tensions and familial dysfunction (ibid: 17). Children and young adults were regarded as being at risk of developing the inability to participate in meaningful human relationships and communication; accordingly, there was a growing anxiety that these factors might spawn "warped children who eventually emerge as either vulnerable victims or vengeful villains" (ibid: 57). In the wake of these developments, an increasing number of Japanese horror narratives, including the film *Ringu*, feature uncanny or even monstrous children. This concern with "warped children" may also be the reason why the Japanese film adaptation casts Sadako as a girl, instead of a grown woman.

This juxtaposition of the modern and the premodern continues to shape Japanese narratives even today. Ramie Tateishi describes J-horror's treatment of this rupture as a kind of layering: "Considered in terms of the framework of modernity discourse as it relates to the horror film genre, every such step in the process of modernisation might be seen as the addition of another 'layer' that further distances the past from the present" (Tateishi 2003: 295-296). As he goes on to explain, there are two possible reactions to this layering: cultural nostalgia or an active destruction of the premodern. It is particularly this latter response that appears most frequently in J-horror:

> This response entails a form of *active destruction*, insofar as it involves a wiping away of the previous foundation in order to construct a new one. […] [T]he elements that characterized the past are (re-)defined as chaotic and/or monstrous, embodying the spirit of primal irrationality that is supposed to have threatened and worked against the new, modern way of thinking. (ibid: 296, original emphasis)

In an attempt to vindicate new and modern perspectives, the past must be rendered primitive, even though it may be the very foundation upon which this supposedly progressive world is built. Significantly, such representations of the past, as a chaotic force encroaching upon the present, are not exclusive to Japan, but can also feature in the anglophone Gothic tradition. In fact, closer inspection reveals that the *kaidan* and the Gothic are highly compatible.

One possible reason for J-horror's rise in global popularity during the second half of the 20th century might be its potential for introducing fresh ideas to the then highly conventionalized and tired Hollywood horror, which was largely constructed around predictable, well-known plots and long-established characters. To give an example, the franchises *Friday the 13th* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* had released their ninth and seventh installments, respectively, by the time *Ringu* was released in Japan. Wes Craven's meta-horror slasher film *Scream* (1996) was regarded as a highlight of the decade, simply because it self-consciously commented on the genre's predictable conventions; ironically, this meta-horror film itself had spawned its third, highly formulaic sequel by the time *The Ring* was released.

While J-horror films such as *Ringu* added new blood to the Hollywood heritage, they also resonated with Western audiences in that they featured recognizable issues and topics. The situation in Japan at the close of the 20th century may have been unique, but tensions between tradition and modernization in general are a recurring source of anxiety in fictions from many diverse narrative traditions. Due to "its conceptual universality (fear of tech)" as well as the simple, recognizable premise of the supernatural curse, *Ring* is "translatable across cultural divides" (Lee 2020: 191). While there are certainly wide variations in cultural-historical contexts and narrative modes across cultures, there are also "continuities and commonalities between imaginary supernatural, spectral and monstrous forms in fiction, film, fashion, media, music and culture" (Botting/Edwards 2013: 12). In fact, there are numerous narrative modes and genres which are comparable to the Gothic:

> Not only has Western gothic travelled but one of the effects of the increasing mobility and fluidity of people and products in the globalised world has been a growing awareness that the tropes and strategies Western critics have associated with the gothic, such as the ghost, the vampire and the zombie, have their counterparts in other cultures, however differently these may be inflected by specific histories and belief systems. (Byron 2013b: 3)

Remaking *Ringu* and other Japanese horror movies for an American context, therefore, required only a few changes to be made in terms of storytelling and aesthetics in order to create films that, while introducing new and unexpected elements, were nonetheless comprehensible to a Western audience. For example, with their portrayal of the vengeful spirit as the ghost of an innocent female, bearing long black hair and a distorted face, disfigured features, long white robes, and unnatural movements, both Nakata's and Verbinski's films explicitly build on the conventions of the *kaidan* and the cinematic representation of the *onryō* (Wee 2014: 36; McRoy 2005: 3; Balmain 2008: 47). While Samara is recognizable to a Western audience as a ghost, her distinct appearance, inspired by Japanese imaginations of the *onryō*, introduce some degree of novelty to the film.

This is not to say that J-horror can or should be read using concepts developed for the Anglo-American Gothic exclusively, nor is it true that J-horror is a narrative form that is culturally disparate from and entirely unrelated to other cultures. Claims to a "national cinema" are highly problematic in that they essentialize a multifaceted range of films as one coherent category (Balmain 2008: 26). As Baryon Tensor Posadas explains, this line of argumentation is especially controversial when it comes to the topic of J-horror:

> The irony here is that J-Horror is perhaps an exemplary transnational form, made possible precisely through the processes of globalization. Thus, contrary to any claims as to their supposed cultural particularity, the genre of J-Horror from the outset already imbricates the production and commodification of nationality through the circulation of images. (2014: 450)

J-horror and globalization are interwoven, with the former often intentionally being produced for an international market. This certainly holds true for movies such as *Ringu*, but also *Kairo*, which I discuss in the next chapter, counts as an example of J-horror's deliberate transnational appeal. Cross-cultural influences between these distinct narrative and aesthetic traditions need to be acknowledged.

Japanese narratives not only exploit the affordances of globalization to reach a wider audience, but they often also have globalization and its effects as their central theme. As the world is growing ever more complex, with information and capital moving from one space to another instantly and invisibly, it is no surprise that archaic magical beings are once again being invoked in the Globalgothic (Botting/Edwards 2013: 11). Globalization's most valuable commodities are ghostlike and detached from material confinements. Fictions such as *Ring* illustrate the horrors of a "technology-based Global Village" (Edwards 2015b: 5), in which technology and humanity are pitted against one another. Inhuman technologies threaten to initiate the ultimate demise of mankind and to make humans complicit in the process. Kimberly Jackson identifies this interest in apocalyptic, self-determined technology as typical of 21st century horror in general:

> Anxieties about the end of humanity are intimately linked in these films with the perception that technology, particularly media technology, has begun to take on a life of its own and that the human subject is no longer the determining factor in how reality is constructed or experienced. (2013: 4)

The ghost of Sadako/Samara regains aspects of her corporeality through the media technologies that she exploits. In other words, *Ring* portrays not only the Gothic return of the past into the present, but specifically portrays a return made possible by the affordances of modernity. The technologies that the spirit uses – *tele*-phones, *tele*-visions, *mass* media, and even *networked* digital media in later installments – expand her powers significantly, allowing her to haunt not only the individual responsible for her death, but rather cast her supernatural media virus over vast distances and to wreak havoc on a global scale. *Ring* ex-

plores the fears regarding the costs at which such modern media are produced and consumed by entertainment industries and thrill-seeking audiences, respectively.

4.3 The Metropolis as a Figuration of the Network Society

Japanese popular culture has been dominated by apocalyptic imagery since the second half of the 20th century (Posadas 2014: 430). One famous example of this predominance is the 1954 film *Godzilla* (dir. Ishirō Honda). Since then, there has been a continuous stream of fictions featuring end of the world fantasies. Of course, this trend is not limited to Japan alone, but can be witnessed in other cultures as well. For several decades, pop culture has been repeatedly overrun by zombies, killer viruses, aliens, and evil technologies.

At first glance, *Ring* is a traditional ghost story: an unrightful, brutal murder causes the vengeful spirit of the victim to haunt its perpetrators, even after death, until the victim's sad demise is revealed and her remains are buried properly. However, by fusing this well-known, conventionalized type of monster with media technologies, as well as the logic of viral infection and the network society, she is imbued with great apocalyptic potential. The spirit's powers are directly tied to the modern world's affordances. While *Ring* does not engage in large-scale destruction explicitly, it does continuously carry apocalyptic undertones, implying that the supernatural tape may endanger the entire globe, due both to the nature of the curse as well as the conditions of modern society.

The threat of apocalypse becomes most tangible during each installment's ending. In each version, the protagonist consciously decides to pass the cursed tape on to another human being in order to save their child's life. Expressing the potential impact of this decision, every narrative concludes on a foreboding note. The novel *Ring* ends with its protagonist Asakawa on his way to meet his wife and daughter. Since both are infected, Asakawa intends to have them copy the tape and to show

it to his parents. During the ride, he imagines the consequences of this plan:

> *What effect is this going to have? With my wife's copy and my daughter's copy, the virus is going to be set free in two directions – how's it going to spread from there?* […] It really wasn't very difficult to make a copy and show it to someone – so that's what people would do. As the secret traveled by word of mouth, it would be added to: "You have to show it to someone who hasn't seen it before." And as the tape propagated the week's lag time would probably be shortened. People who were shown the tape wouldn't wait a week to make a copy and show it to someone else. How far would this ring expand? […] [D]riven by fear, people would start to spread crazy rumors. Such as: *Once you've seen it you have to make at least two copies, and show them to at least two different people*. It'd turn into a pyramid scheme, spreading incomparably faster than it would just one tape at a time. In the space of half a year, everybody in Japan would have become a carrier, and the infection would spread overseas. (Suzuki 2007 [1991]: 280-281, original emphases)

Asakawa realizes how, as rumors and fears regarding the tape grow, the number of deadly copies will increase – this will result in a "pyramid scheme" of infection. Ultimately, once Japan is infected with the curse, carriers will take copies overseas to find salvation there. The journalist's journey on the transport network as he ponders this potentially catastrophic spread is highly symbolic: not only does this scene foreground the channels through which the contagion may spread across far distances, his journey also proves that he is willing to ensure the continued existence of the supernatural media virus, even though Asakawa is fully aware of the consequences. He is a carrier of the virus in the literal sense, an agent of the disease's geographic dissemination.

This symbolic meaning of the highway is further developed in *Ringu*. The movie copies the ending of the novel, portraying the female protagonist Reiko Asakawa traveling in her car on the highway as well. As the camera cuts from a shot of Reiko's car on the highway to a close-up of a VCR and the tape on the passenger seat and finally to her face, voice-over dialogue between two undisclosed girls recapitulates the rules of

the videotape, hinting at the consequences Reiko's present decisions will have eventually. The film's final shot foreshadows the curse's future implications: Reiko's car travels on an empty highway towards dark, menacing storm clouds. A caption is displayed revealing the exact date; this extra-diegetic calendar caption is inserted into the movie multiple times, tracing the passage of time and Reiko's race against death (see Fig. 4.1). Inserting the date at this point, when the journalist supposedly is saved from the curse, implies that the Ring virus will continue spreading. Reiko might live, but time is running out for humanity.

Fig. 4.1 Foreshadowing at the end of "Ringu"

Source: *Ringu* (1998)

The Ring's ending diverges significantly from that of the novel and its Japanese adaptation, further emphasizing the moral implications of the curse. The final scene shows Rachel and her son Aidan duplicating the tape. The film cuts from a close-up of the VCR and Rachel's hands guiding Aidan's on the device, to them sitting in front of two TV screens, waiting for the duplication process to be finished. Aidan asks his mother about the effects their actions will have:

> Aidan: "It's going to keep killing, isn't it? She'll never stop."
> Rachel: "Don't worry, sweetie. You're going to be okay."
> Aidan: "What about the person we show it to? What happens to them?"
> (*The Ring* 2002)

The viewer never sees them taking the new copy to another person. Whereas the novel and the Japanese film imply that the tape still must be physically taken to a potential victim, *The Ring* instead focuses on media technologies and the copying process itself. The film thereby highlights the simplicity of passing on the curse due to the nature of its viral vector. A scene was deleted from the movie's final cut that illuminates the full amplitude of Rachel's morally questionable decision. This scene reveals the people to whom Rachel and Aidan give the tape: to potentially everyone, as they apparently have placed the copy in a busy video rental store. There is no need for the tape to travel anymore, as people flock together in the store. Forebodingly, the camera slowly moves through the crowded store, finally zooming in on a particular shelf. The cursed tape is placed on the "Employee Picks" shelf, being advertised as the next big entertainment for the customers (see Fig. 4.2 and 4.3). The deadly tape is dangerously inconspicuous among this flood of countless films. Rachel knows that one of the best ways of passing on the tape as quickly as possible is by introducing it into the cycle of such recommendations and word-of-mouth suggestions. In this regard, each of the endings of *Ring*, *Ringu*, and *The Ring* ties the supernatural media virus' apocalyptic potential to the social dimensions of media consumption: the curse's proliferation is aided by the rumors surrounding its existence.

These social practices are a central aspect of the franchise and its portrayal of the network society. Whereas *Ghostwatch*, for instance, concentrates on the uncanny aspects of television airwaves and mass medium viewership, *Ring* instead portrays a virus spreading due to the irresponsible actions of individuals. The focus shifts from largely passive masses and unknowing virus spreaders to active individuals. This intersection of social practices and the medium's properties is discussed by Sconce as well: "*The Ring* anticipated that the mediated horrors of the future would be less about the superstitions attending technological devices than *emerging social practices of networked circulation*" (2010: 216, my emphasis). In his discussion of the narrative, Sconce expounds an intricate link between social conditions, networks, and (viral) circulation. In *Ring*, the investigation is kicked off after

Fig. 4.2 Deleted scene from "The Ring"

Source: *The Ring* (2002)

Fig. 4.3 Close-up of the video tape

Source: *The Ring* (2002)

rumors surrounding a mysterious death, spread by classmates of the deceased person, come to the protagonist's attention. Sadako/Samara and her videotape are an urban legend and, as Tateishi points out, the protagonist's job revolves around the evaluation of such hearsay, rather than the discovery of any definite conclusions (2003: 299). Reminiscent of the social contagion theory which was common at the end of the

19th century, *Ring* thus plays with the idea that the network society, enabling both faster flows of information and social fragmentation into groups of interest rather than proximity, provides the ideal breeding ground for rumors. In most of the franchise's installments, protagonists encounter rumors about the supernatural media virus before they encounter the virus itself. Significantly, its "contagious narrative" (Schmitz 2020b: 342) – those shared tales surrounding its existence – constitutes a central feature of the virus' reproductive mechanism; it is this hearsay that initiates the protagonists' investigation and hence sets off a loop of infection.

This distinguishes *Ring* from the other narratives examined in this monograph, which display the network society as a type of environment in which physical interactions become negligible. *Ghostwatch* conceives of television viewers as atomized masses, with large numbers of people sitting in front of the TV set in isolation at home; in *House of Leaves*, characters end up homeless and detached from one another; likewise, in *Kairo* and *Pulse*, the network society causes feelings of alienation and isolation long before the supernatural media virus begins to spread. In *Ring*, however, the virus gains a foothold precisely because the everyday social interactions of people living in close proximity are essential: the restructuring of society and the rise of densely populated megacities affect the social ties between human beings, determining with whom and what they may come into contact.

The novels and its adaptations are all set in large urban spaces for the most part: Suzuki's work and Nakata's movie take place in Tokyo, whereas Verbinski's version of the tale is set in Seattle. These cities function as networks in themselves in each narrative. In her discussion of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, Levine claims that the city of London as portrayed in the novel can be read as a network:

> "London." is the famous first sentence of the novel, and the city can itself be understood as a network, a set of interconnected streets and buildings, linked largely by sheer contiguity. And because of the larger networks of transportation and communication that crisscross it, London is always linked to adjacent sites: its streets prove contiguous with

> rural roads […]. Importantly, too, the city does not work *only* as a principle of adjacency: it also fosters connections between characters and institutions. […] The city emerges in this example as a kind of meta-network, linking and assembling other principles of interconnection. (2015: 123-124, original emphasis)

The diverse installments of the *Ring* franchise utilize their metropolitan setting in a manner comparable to *Bleak House* – Suzuki's novel even starts with a similar, precise description of setting and date. The megacities in the franchise comprise the "meta-network"; in this way they become a symbol of the diverse social crises tied to the modernization process and the rise of the network society.

Each city – Tokyo in *Ringu* and Seattle in *The Ring* – fulfills a specific function in each of the films. The Japanese movie is set not just in any city, but explicitly in the densely populated capital, conveying "a sense of Tokyo urbanity" through its images (Wada-Marciano 2009: 18). Tokyo serves simultaneously as an image of the world that once was, featuring numerous archaic and derelict spaces, "a relic of disappearing history," and as a symbol of modernization, technologization, and urbanization (ibid: 19). Through this discrepancy, itself representative of the central tension found in J-horror narratives more generally, the city becomes a kind of labyrinth:

> The metropolitan area of Tokyo is today ever more a non-place, hailing less from architecture and the traditional definition of spaces than from the ubiquitous, labyrinthine presence of telecommunications networks, intelligent buildings and machines, plants for the accumulation and diffusion of energy and water, waste removal and recycling, and diverse, interconnected transport systems. (Sacchi 2004: 228-229)

Sacchi's argument entails an intriguing paradox: Tokyo appears as a "non-place," yet, at the same time, it is precisely its labyrinthine, complex structure which makes the city so unique and recognizable. The particular architecture and urban structure of Tokyo mirror the confusion and alienation arising from the city's rapid growth and modernization.

This tension between the archaic and the futuristic becomes apparent in the novel *Ring* as well. The story's metropolitan context constantly lingers on in the background:

> *September 5, 1990, 10:49 pm*
> *Yokohama*
> A row of condominium buildings, each fourteen stories high, ran along the northern edge of the housing development next to the Sankeien garden. Although built only recently, nearly all the units were occupied. Nearly a hundred dwellings were crammed into each building, but most of the inhabitants had never even seen the faces of their neighbors. The only proof that people lived here came at night, when windows lit up.
> Off to the south the oily surface of the ocean reflected the glittering lights of a factory. A maze of pipes and conduits crawled along the factory walls like blood vessels on muscle tissue. Countless lights played over the front wall of the factory like insects that glow in the dark; even this grotesque scene had a certain type of beauty. The factory cast a wordless shadow on the black sea beyond. (Suzuki 2007 [1991]: 2, original emphasis)

Ring begins with a detailed description of its urban setting, establishing a Gothic atmosphere early on. Tokyo is introduced as a metropolis buzzing with people living in close proximity, but also suffering from anonymity. This portrayal of the megapolis resonates with van Dijk's observations regarding the consequences of increasing connectivity. The network society's implementation causes a fragmentation of social environments as people no longer necessarily form their social ties according to proximity, but can do so according to personal interests instead (2012: 175). This leads to growing individualization and anonymity among neighbors, with people withdrawing into their self-created environments – trends which stand in stark contrast to the Japanese sense of communal responsibility.[6]

6 In Japan, these developments are described in specific terms. *Otaku* are young people, predominantly male, who withdraw into virtual lives and appear to pre-

This new social environment is increasingly perceived of as a natural environment with widespread symptoms of alienation, due to its complexity and seeming uncontrollability (van Dijk 2012: 175). Crises of diverse kinds come to resemble natural disasters in that they are too vast and intricate for human understanding. Paradoxically, it is precisely its industrialization and technologization that elevate Tokyo to such complexity that the city and its buildings resemble a living organism in *Ring*. Through this biologization, the texts not only give shape to the network society as a natural environment. More importantly, Suzuki's novels foreground the threat of viral infection: the city as organism is prone to infection after all. A quote from the second novel makes this particularly apparent:

> Ando […] found himself looking down on houses and the neon signs. At six on a late-November evening it was already nearly pitch-dark. Turning his gaze toward the harbor he saw the Yashio high-rise apartments straddling the canal, their lit and unlit windows forming a checkerboard pattern. A surprising number of the windows were dark for a weekend evening. Ando found himself trying to find words in the patterns of light and dark; he'd had codes too much on the brain lately. On one among the forest of buildings he thought he saw the phonetic syllable *ko* – child? – but of course it meant nothing. (Suzuki 2005 [1995]: 162)

While "*ko*" may mean "child" in Japanese, it is also the last syllable of Sadako's name. Undetected among this "forest of buildings," Sadako has already written part of her name across the buildings of Tokyo. Sadako is the virus that burrows deep into the city, slowly infecting everything and everyone. Unnoticed, the infection has already reached a dangerous level by this point.

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fer virtual (romantic) relationships over real-life experiences. *Hikikomori* ("shut-ins") are youths who completely detach themselves from society and from their own families (Wee 2014: 77-78). These developments are directly linked to the rise of digital media and it is mostly young, middle class people engaging with these media that are affected (Wetmore, Jr. 2009: 75).

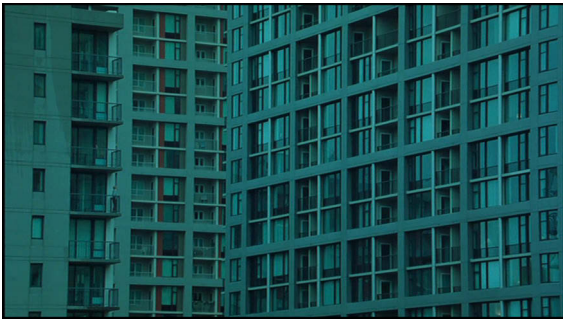
Detailed descriptions of the public transport networks contribute to the sense of Tokyo's urbanity in Suzuki's novels. Key scenes, including the novel's ending cited at the beginning of this section, are set either at those network's nodes, such as train stations, or on its links, with characters traveling from one node to the next. Asakawa commutes to work via subway; the effort in terms of time and money that it takes for him to travel between his home and his workplace is stated in the minutest details (Suzuki 2007 [1991]: 12-13). Significantly, these descriptions of the diverse transportation networks also mark the city as a network of choices: it is only due to Asakawa's decision to treat himself to a taxi ride, instead of the usual subway journey, that the events of the story are set off. This choice is the first link in a disastrous chain of cause and effect: "If he had taken the subway home, however, a certain pair of incidents would almost certainly never have been connected" (ibid: 13). On this taxi ride, Asakawa learns of a mysterious death, which will ultimately be revealed to have been caused by Sadako's curse. The few occasions on which Asakawa does travel outside of Tokyo, he does so by rental car. His reasons for taking the car and how he obtains it from the company are described in detail in the novel, once again foregrounding the relevance of transportation and mobility. Using the car, Asakawa travels to the "Villa Log Cabins" resort in South Hakone, where the videotape originated, and to the volcanic island Izu Ōshima, where Sadako grew up. While these locations stand in contrast to the crowdedness of Tokyo, they are not truly disconnected from the metropolis. It only takes a few hours for Asakawa to reach Izu Ōshima, and Villa Log Cabins is regarded as a popular retreat for Tokyo dwellers in the text. Through this preoccupation with mobility, the novel *Ring* represents the network society as consisting of both invisible, immaterial information networks and physical networks of transportation and interpersonal interaction. Asakawa's taxi ride exemplifies the fact that such transport networks connect more than just trains and people: they also connect choices and fates.

In *The Ring*, by contrast, Seattle does not serve as a recognizable, unique metropolis, but instead as a large, anonymous, and unrecognizable urban space crowded with people: "What the film creates with

its locales is not a simulation of an urban dweller's actual topography, but only a geographic plot device for the narrative development" (Wada-Marciano 2009: 19). In fact, the movie was not filmed in Seattle, but in Vancouver (ibid). The implications of large megacities or global cities for the network society are discussed by Castells in dramatic terms: "they are the nodal points connecting to the global networks. Thus, in a fundamental sense, the future of humankind, and of each mega-city's country, is being played out in the evolution and management of these areas" (2010b: 440). The megapolis is reduced to its essential function as a central hub in a larger network here: a space with a high population density, high levels of anonymity, and high media saturation. A media-based infection can take hold quickly under such circumstances, where irresponsible individuals might not think twice about sharing the virus with their unknown neighbors. This threat is visually foregrounded shortly after Rachel begins her investigation into the tape and asks her ex-lover Noah for help. While he watches the tape in her high-rise apartment, Rachel steps outside onto the balcony, surveying the neighboring houses and apartments. Her eyes wander from one apartment to the next – in almost every window, she spots a television set and a lonesome person in front of it. The shots of these balconies are visually fragmented and overloaded with the repeating pattern of the rectangle: single windows vertically and horizontally aligned to form the fronts of boxlike apartments, which in turn are stacked on top of and next to each other to create the façade of right-angled, highly function-oriented, yet ultimately aesthetically boring high-rise buildings. These visually powerful images underline how these people exist right next to each other, separated merely by thin walls. Yet, while they literally are sitting on top of each other, they dwell in complete isolation (see Fig. 4.4-4.9).

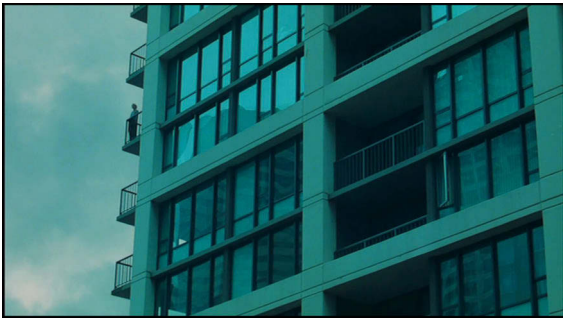
Whereas *Ring* and *Ringu* offer some insight as to how Sadako was turned into an evil entity and why she seeks revenge on society at large, *The Ring*'s Samara simply is inherently evil. Rachel's investigation on Moesko Island leads her to a doctor, who tells her that Anna and Richard Morgan "wanted a child more than anything," yet had troubles conceiving (*The Ring* 2002). How they eventually conceived Samara remains unclear, the doctor only knows that someday, the Morgans went away for

Fig. 4.4 Disorienting shot of high rises



Source: *The Ring* (2002)

Fig. 4.5 Rachel steps out onto her balcony



Source: *The Ring* (2002)

some time and came back with the girl. Soon after, however, the people on the island, and Anna Morgan in specific, began suffering from horrible visions when in the vicinity of Samara. Even the horses of the Morgan farm were afflicted by these visions, until they collectively drowned themselves in the sea. It is only after the girl was taken away to a psychiatric hospital that the islanders recovered. A videotape taken at the

Fig. 4.6 Rachel gazes into apartments in neighboring buildings

Source: *The Ring* (2002)

Fig. 4.7 The camera pans from one window to the next...

Source: *The Ring* (2002)

institute reveals Samara's own take on her mental influence over other persons:

> Doctor: "You don't want to hurt anyone."
> Samara: "But I do, and I'm sorry. It won't stop." (ibid)

Fig. 4.8 …displaying the physical proximity of the inhabitants

Source: *The Ring* (2002)

Fig. 4.9 Rachel as part of the overcrowded, fragmented metropolis

Source: *The Ring* (2002)

The Ring's Samara is evil to begin with, needing no motivation or explanation as to why she torments the people and animals around her.

This is, arguably, because Samara as a person is not as important to the narrative as Samara as a supernatural media virus. The island doctor explicitly compares the girl to a disease: "when you live on an

island, you catch a cold, it's everybody's cold." (ibid). For the doctor, the problem is done away with after Samara leaves the island, in full knowledge that this "cold" will now infect other people. Reinforcing an us/them mentality, the easiest solution to this disease lies in keeping it as far away as possible and in shutting it out from the community. The islanders' strategy corresponds to how disease continues to be viewed and treated. This is vividly illustrated by Susan C. McCombie in her discussion of cultural reactions to disease and epidemics. To reiterate this chapter's epigraph:

> In many societies, epidemics are viewed as unnatural events brought on by various taboo violations. Even in modern Western cultures, victim blaming and viewing disease as punishment from God are frequent. Throughout history, disease has often been blamed on "outsiders," as defined by race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality. In Western cultural concepts, disease is considered unnatural, and the genesis of disease is best placed as far from "people like us" as possible. (1990: 15)

As a disease, Samara signifies such taboo violations and their punishment. Significantly, the choice to expel her from society is not only morally questionable, but outright dangerous in *The Ring*. Society becomes vulnerable to outside forces as older social values decay in favor of media and interconnection.

In line with such outbreak narratives, *The Ring* inscribes these anxieties onto Samara's foreignness. When Noah discovers Samara Morgan's birth certificate at the psychiatric hospital in which Anna Morgan – and later her daughter – was a patient, he discovers a sheet of paper with Japanese *kanji* on it (*The Ring* 2002). Samara is cast as an external, Oriental threat that is brought upon an unsuspecting and vulnerable island community by the Morgan's willingness to obtain a child by any means necessary. Whereas both Japanese versions of the tale concentrate on the topic of communal responsibility, *The Ring* instead tells a

tale of Oriental Othering and a society vulnerable to foreign threats.[7] Globalization and the network society have made it possible for such an external force to invade the hitherto clean, modern, and sanitary realm of the United States.

Just as she cannot be kept on the outside by any boundaries, Sadako/Samara does not adhere to the general logic of binary categories. This blurring of dichotomous categories is one of the virus metaphor's central features. In *Ring*, the ability to disrupt opposing categories arises at the intersection of the virus' biological, technological, and media-related aspects. Oppositions such as biological/technological, dead/living, material/immaterial, and real/virtual are constantly contested. Sadako's medical condition in the novel is one instance of such boundary breaking. The most powerful instance of her disruption of binary categories, however, can be found in the climaxes of *Ringu* and *The Ring*. The now iconic scene that appears in both movies visualizes her powers by having her literally crawl out of the television screen. As Steffen Hantke writes: "This is the moment when technology comes alive, when the infrastructural networks of mass communication reveal that they are possessed, haunted, eerily and uncannily animate" (2016: 17). Sadako/Samara is biologically reborn from the technological realm: the inanimate becoming alive; the virtual becoming the real. It is no surprise that the movies have been discussed extensively in terms of Baudrillard's simulacrum. Through his famous anecdote of a tale by Jorge Luis Borges, which features a map that is created in such scale and detail that it mirrors the represented territory, Jean Baudrillard illustrates how representations can become the real:

> Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory – *precession of simulacra*. (1988: 166, original emphasis)

7 For more information on racial stereotyping in *The Ring* and US adaptations of J-horror films more generally, consult Balmain (2009).

Simulacra appear to refer to real phenomena. In truth, however, they mark the absence of these referents. Hence, "the map […] precedes the territory." The notion of the simulacrum is tied to technology and identity in both *Ringu* and *The Ring*:

> The two films propose that information technology induces a shape-shifting fluidity of identity by installing a culture of simulacral proliferation in which contagious shards of personality infect anyone who comes into contact with them, reconstituting those thus touched as no longer quite themselves. (White 2005: 45)

In the sequels of all versions, Sadako/Samara aims at being reborn into the world through possession (*Ringu 2*, *The Ring Two*, *Rings*) or through literal rebirth (*Spiral*). Like a virus, she respawns endlessly, perforating the boundaries of dichotomous categories in the process.

Sadako's/Samara's emergence from the TV can also be read in terms of Castells' notion of real virtuality (2010b: 404). As he states in a bold claim regarding media in the network society: "in urban societies media consumption is the second largest category of activity after work" (ibid: 362). Significantly, such media interaction is not an exclusive activity, but rather a

> constant background presence, the fabric of our lives. We live with the media and by the media. […] [T]he media, particularly radio and television, have become the audiovisual environment with which we interact endlessly and automatically. Very often television, above all, is a presence in the home. (ibid)

It is this "constant background presence" which constitutes the demise of Sadako's/Samara's victims: they are always surrounded by those devices that will eventually kill them.

The Ring further emphasizes Samara's boundary-disrupting seepage through her visual representation. On the one hand, her appearance flickers like television static; on the other hand, she carries over

muck and brackish water from the virtual well into reality.[8] Her representation gives shape to the paradoxical relationship of biologization and debiologization, in which biological bodies are conceived of in terms of informational code. Dougherty sees this as an "ontological shift whereby the corporeal body is turned into an information system, a purely discursive network of signs" (2001: 2). The boundaries delineating the human being become increasingly leaky and ill-defined. For Samara, the confluence of the biological and the technological as represented through her bodily appearance is an empowerment.

Her victims, however, disintegrate when visited by this biotechnological ghost. The infected die at the very instant she looks at them. Both *Ringu* and *The Ring* prominently feature a close-up of the girl's eye as she looks at Ryūji/Noah. In *Ringu*, the film images turn into negatives at the instant of death while Sadako's victims grimace in shock and pain. The film explicitly associates death with photography, as Sadako's victims "are literally negated" (Lacefield 2010b: 10). In *The Ring*, by contrast, a quick montage of shots from the cursed tape suggests that the victims experience Samara's own death within the blink of an eye and die instantly. Each victim's face is contorted into a grotesque visage and shows signs of advanced decomposition. Both versions portray death at the hands of the biotechnological spirit as a hybrid experience of biological and technological decay.

4.4 The Evolution of *Ring*'s Viral Vector: The Media's Moral Dilemma

Discussing the supernatural media virus' viral vector necessitates an analysis of a given medium's intrinsic properties, and how these properties affect the information and narratives that can be communicated via this medium/vector. Such a media-conscious narratology requires

8 *The Ring*'s Samara is an example of the "technoghost" (Wetmore, Jr. 2009: 73), a trope I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Five: "The Digital Supernatural Media Virus and the Network Apocalypse in *Kairo* and *Pulse*."

that the semiotic, technical, and cultural dimensions of the medium be taken into consideration (Ryan 2014: 30). In the context of *Ring*, it is especially the latter two that are of interest: the technical approach

> explores such issues as how technologies configure the relationship between sender and receiver – for instance, one to one, few to many, many to many, and close or remote in either space or time – how they affect dissemination, storage, and cognition […]; and what affordances certain types of material supports bring to storytelling. (ibid)

The cultural dimension underlines the relationship between consumers, producers, and the institutions that governs the media as well as the production and/or consumption practices of each of these instances (ibid). Any discussion of *Ring*'s supernatural media virus warrants an examination of the corruptive medium's technical properties, as well as the cultural practices of media production and consumption that surrounds it.

From today's vantage point, *Ring*'s tale of a haunted VHS cassette seems outdated. Reading the story in its historical and cultural context, however, reveals the significance of the choice to use this medium as the vehicle of doom. US audiences have consumed the majority of their movies on a video platform at home, rather than at the cinema, since 1988 (Benson-Allott 2013: 1). From roughly 1986 to 2001, VHS was the most successful of these home media (Benson-Allott 2010: 115). Nearly 70% of videocassette recorders (VCRs) worldwide were produced in Japan (Tateishi 2003: 298-299).[9] It was only with the launch of the DVD that the popularity of the videocassette dropped. The DVD was legally licensed in Japan in 1996 and launched on the North American marketplace in the following year (Wada-Marciano 2009: 31; Benson-Allott

9 *Ring* can be read as an example of "techno-Orientalism" in light of Japan's leading position in the entertainment technology industry (Roh/Huang/Niu 2015: 2). Whereas Orientalism portrays the East as premodern, techno-Orientalism casts the East as hypermodern and futuristic instead. This is a direct effect of globalization and technological innovation. Both perspectives exoticize Asia, casting the East as both spatially and temporally removed from the West.

2013: 14). By 2001, DVD sales exceeded those of videocassettes for the first time; by 2006, DVD players were more common in US households than VCRs (Benson-Allott 2013: 14). When Suzuki published *Ring* in 1991, he did so at the height of the VHS era. Similarly, when Nakata's *Ringu* was released, the DVD was licensed, but could not compare in any way to the continued popularity of the videocassette. When Verbinski's *The Ring* was filmed, in contrast, VHS was already on the decline and it features as an anachronistic element in the movie. Paradoxically, not a single DVD features in the film. Even *The Ring Two* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 2005), in which digital technologies like computers and camcorders play an important role, does not depict any DVDs. *The Ring* uses this absence of DVDs as a journey into the past of media technologies. As Rachel researches both Samara and the Morgan family's pasts and she must dive into those technologies that were modern at the time. Thus, her research begins in high-tech media labs and ends in dusty archives and libraries. The videocassette represents Samara Morgan's era and it proves to be a surprisingly powerful viral vector.

In a sense, the videocassette empowered its viewers. Central properties of the videocassette include its reproducibility, alterability, and shareability. As Caetlin Benson-Allott puts it, VHS granted viewers "the pleasures of pausing, fast-forwarding, rewinding, and recording. From time-shifting to tape dubbing, VCRs radically increased viewers' access to film" (2013: 102). Copying the tape and passing it on to another person is easily done; from this vantage point, similar to *House of Leaves*, *Ring* is also a cautionary story about illegal bootlegging practices.[10] More importantly, the videotape is a social medium, inviting people to share and to enjoy its contents together. It is through these viewing and sharing habits that the supernatural media virus' social dimensions in the narrative becomes apparent.

In each version, the Ring tape itself is the symbolization of the medium's affordances: a chaotic, jarring juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated images. The tape is composed of a glut of information that needs

10 For more on this, consult Benson-Allott (2013) as well as Wright (2010).

to be decoded to be understood. Essentially, *Ring* is a paranormal detective story in which the characters try to "read" the story behind the videotape by deciphering its cryptic fragments so as to find a cure to the supernatural media virus. Sadako's/Samara's entire tragic history is encoded within the tape. As the protagonists follow the clues on the tape, they – and the reader/viewer along with them – piece together this backstory and the origin of the virus from a confusing deluge of facts.

Their journey to discovery is similarly nonlinear and fragmented: when Asakawa tries to decode the tape, he initially attempts to identify the people shown, which leads him to Izu Ōshima, where Sadako lived as a small child, and then back to Tokyo again, where she briefly joined a theater troupe after her departure from the island. After Sadako left the group, however, her trail goes cold. Asakawa then returns to where it all began for him and, as he eventually learns, where it all ended for Sadako: Villa Log Cabin. It is here that Sadako died and the tape carrying the viral curse was first created. The ending and beginning of both Sadako's life and the narrative itself become connected – they form a ring. Like the videotape, the narrative structure of *Ring* is nonlinear, a collection of facts and instances that must be connected in the right way to form the big picture.

Numerous acts of reproduction do not leave the tape unchanged. While such bootlegging does not lead to a deterioration of the tape, as should be the case with the medium (Tirrell 2010: 147), there are modifications to its contents. In the novel, the teenagers staying at the Villa Log Cabin have taped over the most important part of the cassette; Asakawa only finds a recording of a random commercial where the instructions for how to evade Sadako's curse should be. It is precisely due to this lack of knowledge that Asakawa begins his investigation, uncovers the fate of Sadako Yamamura, and ultimately facilitates the spread of the virus. In *Ringu* as well as *The Ring*, Ryūji's/Noah's copy runs longer than Reiko's/Rachel's – instead of ending with a brief shot of the well, this version of the tape depicts Sadako/Samara slowly crawling out of the well, towards the camera, and finally out of the television set into

reality. Each change comprises a kind of mutation, leading to the virus' empowerment and extended reach.

As an analog medium, VHS is not determined by the binary logic of digital code, of either/or. Instead, *Ring* "taps into themes of separation and mingling, replication and degradation" (Tirrell 2010: 142). Messy seepage and chaotic disruption are key markers of VHS technology; it is those properties that enable the mutation of the supernatural media virus. In the novel *Ring*, the cursed tape's contents suggest that Sadako was about to give birth, even though her biological condition renders that impossible. Therefore, "What did Sadako give birth to?" is the question the novel's protagonists ask repeatedly (Suzuki 2007 [1991]: 257). The answer is: herself. It is through the technological device of the videotape that the spirit regains aspects of her former corporeality and infects biological bodies. The supernatural tape is the womblike vessel through which the spirit is reborn (Benson-Allott 2013: 123).[11] In every sequel of *Ring*, she uses technology to regain a physical, biological body, being reborn into the world of the living again.

The Ring draws a far darker image of the perilous consequences of living in a modern, mediasaturated, and interconnected world than either *Ring* or *Ringu*. In most shots, at least one television lingers in the background. This uncanny presence of the screen not only foreshadows the supernatural media virus' apocalyptic potential, with Samara emerging from televisions potentially everywhere, but further expresses the fear of growing anonymity and loneliness that is tied to the rise of the network society. In the Japanese versions of the tale, the contagious videotape predominantly travels through channels of interpersonal contact, passed on among friends in school, or from parent to child. Both the novel and its 1998 film adaptation end by having the protagonist save their child by passing the tape on to their own parents. Metaphorically, the curse is passed on through shared

11 As Benson-Allott explains elsewhere, the well itself already functions as a metaphor for the womb and for supernatural (re-)birth (2010: 125). In each version of *Ring*, the protagonists unknowingly help Sadako/Samara escape the confinements of this womb.

blood, like a biological infection. The 2002 American film ends with the tape anonymously being placed in a video rental store instead. Therefore, while the virus is initially passed on from Rachel to her ex-lover and then her own child, the virus' mode of dispersal eventually evolves beyond such familial relationships and spreads among strangers. *The Ring* explores new types of interpersonal contact and different channels of infection.

With the aid of media such as the television and videotapes, notions of time and space are transformed considerably by Samara's uncanny abilities. The retrieval of the girl's corpse from the well empowers the spirit, instead of appeasing her:

> Aidan: "What happened to the girl? […] Is she still in the dark place?"
> Rachel [smiling]: "No. We set her free."
> Aidan [shocked]: "You helped her?"
> Rachel: "Yeah."
> Aidan: "Why did you do that?"
> Rachel: "What's wrong, honey?"
> Aidan: "You weren't supposed to help her."
> Rachel: "It's okay now. She's not going to hurt you. She…"
> Aidan: "Don't you understand, Rachel? She never sleeps." (*The Ring* 2002)

Samara's escape from the well marks the moment at which the supernatural media virus truly learns how to go global. Aidan's terrified remark that "[s]he never sleeps" uncannily points out how Samara has become the ultimate ghost of globalization and of the network society: she was never restricted by human biological rhythms of sleep and work, life and death to begin with, but at least she was confined in terms of location. Since her powers of image projection are limited, the tape first appears in the cabin directly above Samara's well. She depends on humans to watch the tape and to pass it on so that she can travel beyond her spatial limitations. However, Rachel sets Samara free, as her attempt to appease the spirit is based on an incorrect premise: she assumes that the girl wants to be laid to rest, but Samara will never rest. She is the supernatural media virus that demands to be copied over and

over again, dispersed to every last corner of the modern world. The victims of the virus, in contrast, are entirely subjected to time and space as determined by Samara: she controls their exact moment of death and she forces her victims to relive her seven-day death struggle. Every place is still within Samara's reach, provided that there is a television screen to project her image. The television becomes a symbol of the global, interconnected world, and of how the network can control the individual.

The curse develops more efficient viral vectors that enable it to exploit new communication and entertainment practices, as the franchise's diverse sequels reveal. In *Spiral*, the virus learns how to infect written text, including Asakawa's newspaper report on the investigation. It is revealed that this published report was such a hit that the rights to a movie adaptation have been sold – and the film is only the beginning: "Just as that videotape mutated into a book, it's going to get into every stream: music, video games, computer networks. New media will cross-breed with Sadako and produce more new media" (Suzuki 2005 [1995]: 276). Not only does the 1995 novel uncannily prophesy the franchise's later success in adapting to new media and "infecting" new audiences, but it also makes explicit how, even though videotapes are a popular medium easily shared, they do not spread fast enough when compared to media which can be dispersed to a large number of people simultaneously, such as newspaper publications and cinema movies.

The franchise installments released after 2010 center on viral videos spread via the Internet and on mobile devices. The 2012 Japanese film *Sadako 3D* as well as its 2013 sequel *Sadako 3D 2*, both directed by Tsutomu Hanabusa, have the supernatural media virus travel through digital technologies such as computers and cell phones. In this mediasaturated world, it is impossible to escape those technologies that Sadako can use for her own propagation. Characters attempt to escape from the evil spirit, but seemingly every surface in this modern world has been turned into an LCD screen. In these films, Sadako is no longer a single antagonist; multiple incarnations of her can appear at once (see Fig. 4.10 and 4.11).

Fig. 4.10 Multiple Sadakos in a shop window at an electronics retailer

Source: *Sadako 3D* (2013)

Fig. 4.11 Truck with LCD screen as symbol of the mediasaturated world

Source: *Sadako 3D* (2013)

In *Rings* (dir. F. Javier Gutiérrez, 2017),[12] the third installment of the US trilogy, the cursed videotape has been digitized for online shar-

12 *Rings* is the feature film adaptation of a short film of the same name (dir. Jonathan Liebesman, 2005). The short film was included as bonus mate-

ing by a group of university students calling themselves the "Sevens." They study and experiment on the virus by watching the video clip, experiencing as many of the horrifying seven days as they can stand, and then passing the footage on to their consensual "tail." While *Rings* continues *The Ring*'s preoccupation with the scientific examination of Samara and her tape, the movie also returns to the emphasis on word-of-mouth communication and close-knit communities of young people as the ideal breeding ground for the cursed video.

These films focus on the idea that humans increasingly structure every aspect of their everyday life around mobile devices: work schedules, entertainment options, social interactions, and most forms of communication are controlled and performed through smartphones and tablets. Television screens are already present in most key scenes in *The Ring*; in the movies since 2010, however, screens of all kinds – television, smartphone, advertising boards, and others – are truly omnipresent and inescapable. What is more, digital media in these films of the smartphone era exemplify the bottom-up participatory model of culture (Jenkins/Ford/Green 2013: 6-7): how content will be modified, spread, and shared, is unforeseeable as there is no longer a controlling instance, such as the producer or author. In an analogy of this media-sharing culture, the villain's attempt to reproduce more Sadakos in *Sadako 3D* created a legion of flawed, yet equally terrifying copies of the ghost instead.

Undergoing the "evolution" discussed by Hutcheon, these later films have adapted to new media technologies and the emerging social practices that come with these formats. A mysterious link sent to a smartphone is all it takes to spread the virus; "catching" the disease becomes very easy in the age of omnipresent technology, risk, and peer pressure to stay up to date. With Internet technology, the video no longer depends on a physical storage medium, but can be shared over vast distances within an instant. *Rings*, for instance, foregrounds the issue

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rial on a re-release of *The Ring* launched shortly before *The Ring Two* was made available, and it functions as a bridge between these two feature films.

of trust arising from the easy shareability of media content in the digital age. When the film's protagonist investigates her boyfriend's strange behavior, one of his supposed friends attempts to trick Julia into watching the video clip in order to save her own life. The film suggests that such selfish and irresponsible behavior is simplified by digital media. New technologies entail new, potentially problematic, social habits.

The supernatural media virus' diverse mutations illustrate how the entire *Ring* franchise has evolved over the decades, introducing some novelties, but largely staying true to the original formula. Importantly, this evolution has led to the convergence of viral vector and narrative medium: except for the original novel, every installment of the franchise plays with the fourth wall, indicating that readers/viewers might also become infected by the Ring virus.

Spiral performs this convergence by modifying the viral vector: the supernatural media virus learns how to infect written text. The novel copies several phrases and sentences from its predecessor *Ring* word for word, thereby indicating that the initial novel might be the cursed written report: "In *Ring* it was written, 'In a lane in front of Kinomiya Station was a small, one-story house with a shingle by the door that read *Nagao Clinic: Internal Medicine and Pediatrics*.'" (Suzuki 2005 [1995]: 227). The readers of *Spiral* as well as *Ring* are thereby implicated in the contagious reading process, reading the cursed report along with the protagonist Mitsuo Ando.

One particularly insightful example of the franchise's treatment of the fourth wall is the film *Sadako 3D 2*, which was released in Japan along with an app for mobile devices. This app – an example of so-called "second screen technology" – was intended to expand viewers' cinematic experience by having them interact with their devices at key moments of the film. Usually, second screen technology attempts to enhance the viewing experience by synchronizing the film screen – the "first screen" – with the viewer's mobile device – the "second screen" (Atkinson 2014: 79). Second screen technology is not restricted to film and television, but has also found application in the video game industry and in other fields besides. The second screen usually provides bonus information, commentary, or options for personalization, to list just a

Fig. 4.12 Corrupted paratext

Source: *The Ring* (2002)

few examples. In the case of the *Ring* franchise, however, such second screen concepts "blur boundaries between cinematic and spectatorial space by imagining the user's mobile device as infected by the same malevolent spirits plaguing the characters in the films onscreen" (Svensson/Hassoun 2016: 171).[13] The diegetic world is expanded and seeps into the world of the viewer/user. In the case of *Sadako 3D 2*, the second screen technology came with a nasty surprise:

> [H]ours after finishing *Sadako 3D 2*, at midnight in our time zone, we received a disturbing phone call from "Sadako" herself […]. In this moment, the app tested the limits of our control in ways beyond those experienced during the actual film. It does not matter if the film and

13 This blurring of the diegetic and spectatorial space is not a new phenomenon in horror film. In particular, the films directed and/or produced by William Castle during the 1950s and 1960s were known for their imaginative special effects. The "Emergo" gimmick in *House on Haunted Hill* (1959), was comprised of a skeleton flying over the cinema audience at key moments throughout the film. Other movies made use of vibrating seats (*The Tingler*, 1959), special polarized viewing glasses (*13 Ghosts*, 1960), and multiple other resourceful techniques.

> app are synced, nor does it matter if you have the app actively running on your mobile device; Sadako can still reach you […]. (ibid: 187)

Of course, viewers of horror films volunteer for frights and scares. The *Sadako 3D 2* app, however, creates frights that the audience cannot anticipate, acting while supposedly deactivated. It is through such experiments with the fourth wall that the *Ring* franchise has achieved its long-lasting popularity.

Through this evolution of the supernatural media virus as well as the narrative itself, readers/viewers/users become aware of the medium with which they are interacting. They are invited to pose the same questions that the characters of the story have to ask themselves: who created this content, and for what purpose? How are these media consumed, and by whom? How do these media shape our lives and perception of reality? In other words, just like the fictional characters within the story, readers/viewers/users are invited to question critically those media they interact with on a daily basis. These inquiries resemble those pertaining to the formula of the outbreak narrative. Wald examines the networks through which an infection spreads in detail, as well as the epidemiological work which attempts to contain the crisis:

> As epidemiologists trace the routes of the microbes, they catalog the spaces and interactions of global modernity. Microbes, spaces, and interactions blend together as they animate the landscape and motivate the plot of the outbreak narrative: a contradictory but compelling story of the perils of human interdependence and the triumph of human connection and cooperation, scientific authority and the evolutionary advantages of the microbe, ecological balance and impending disaster. (2008: 2)

Ring's "epidemiologists" are media-savvy people such as Asakawa/Reiko/Rachel and their sidekicks. Their experiences as news reporters provide them with the necessary knowledge to understand the deciding factors in the curse's spread: the easy accessibility and reproducibility of the corruptive medium as well as human proneness to curiosity and fear-mongering. These journalists are well-acquainted with the "ecological

balance" – the mediascape – endangered by the supernatural media virus.

So far, the discussion has centered largely on the technical properties of these media, as well as the social habits they inspire more generally. Through the moral dilemma coded into *Ring*'s supernatural media virus, it is the behavior of the virus' host in particular which is brought to attention: it is their selfishness and irresponsible behavior which ensures the virus' continued existence. Like the viral manuscript in *House of Leaves*, *Ring*'s supernatural media virus enforces certain behavior in its victims. The only possibility of surviving the curse is by creating another cursed tape and by having another person watch the video. This comprises the most important difference to Danielewski's novel: whereas the infected in *House of Leaves* slowly descend into delusions, oftentimes spreading the manuscript without realizing it, the victims of *Ring* pass the virus on in full knowledge of what they are inflicting on other people. The central exception to this is Asakawa/Reiko/Rachel, as they initially perform the task that saves them from the curse accidentally. However, their ignorance does not free them from the moral implications of the Ring virus.

With regard to Japanese culture, these moral implications of the host/virus interaction in *Ring* can be read as a clash of communal responsibility (*giri*) with selfish individualism. Placing one's personal interests over the duties to the community bears terrifying consequences. In the end, Asakawa/Reiko are given the choice of whether they value the life of their child over humanity's continued existence. They decide to copy the tape and thereby become complicit in the potential apocalypse to come. The actions of few individuals such as Asakawa/Reiko suffice to destroy the entire community. As Steve Jones has it: "Sadako is not the real threat: it is self-interest that plagues *Ring*'s populace" (2012: 214). Whether or not Asakawa's/Reiko's parents also pass on the cursed videotape, or whether they take it upon themselves to stop the growing infection by choosing their own death, is left unclear. Issues of communal responsibility as well as differing esteem of these duties between older and younger generations are foregrounded.

Many J-horror films also warn of the results if a community fails its members: "just as the individual is expected to place communal interests first, the community is also expected to bear the burden of guilt if the social system fails to protect the interests of vulnerable individuals" (Wee 2014: 64). Suzuki's *Ring* and Nakata's *Ringu* represent Sadako as a person that, while always supernatural and otherworldly, was turned into an evil entity by a community that failed her. Both she and her mother are rejected by society for their unique telekinetic powers. Whereas her mother eventually commits suicide, Sadako instead is killed by persons who should fulfill a caregiving function: in the novel, she is raped and killed by a doctor at a tuberculosis sanatorium; in the film, her own father throws her down the well. The Japanese versions of the tale center on the decay of traditional values of communal responsibility.

The Ring deemphasizes these communal aspects in favor of the moral implications of VHS technology itself. In comparison to the novel *Ring* and the film *Ringu*, *The Ring* showcases diverse technologies to an extreme degree. Photographs reveal whether a person has been infected with the supernatural media virus, as their faces appear blurry in the image – hence, digital cameras with their ability to display the photograph that was taken instantly play a central role in verifying the existence of a curse. Rachel discovers hidden imagery while analyzing the tape at an elaborate electronic media lab. With the help of an Internet search, she is able to match that imagery to the island on which Samara was brought up. These are only some examples of the heavy focus on media technologies in *The Ring*. This obsession ultimately culminates in the detailed portrayal of Rachel helping Aidan to produce another copy of the tape. Discussing this scene in detail, Benson-Allott regards the US adaptation as "a horror movie that depicts videocassettes as lethal weapons and video piracy as murder" (2013: 102-103). The curse forces its victims to engage in illegal copying and distribution practices; people who watch such a pirated tape will either die or perform the crime themselves. Thus, the means of production of such media are called into question.

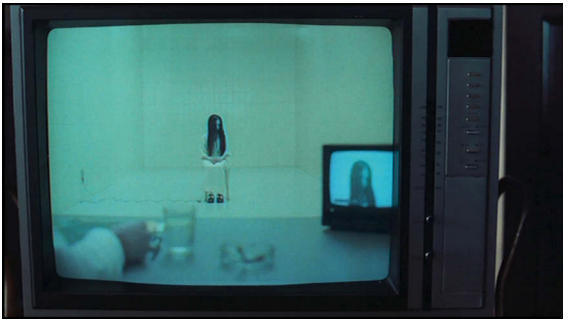
The moral implications of spectatorship are problematized as well. Watching the cursed tape is a dare among entertainment-seeking teenagers: "*Consider yourself warned: you'd better not see it unless you've got the guts*" (Suzuki 2007 [1991]: 70, original emphasis). Keeping in mind that the cassette holds the key to the gruesome crimes committed against Sadako/Samara, the playful handling of the myth appears horribly insensitive. Watching the tape means engaging in a kind of sadistic voyeurism: the girl's suffering becomes a form of entertainment for others. In a way, this can be read as a meta-comment about the horror genre writ large: gaining pleasure form watching horrifying, violent, yet fictional content. In *Ring*, however, spectators are eventually subjected to the same ordeal themselves – either living with the fear of nearing death (*Ring*, *Ringu*), or even experiencing the girl's painful death struggle themselves (*The Ring*) – even becoming complicit in the crime. The protagonist of *Spiral* realizes that he is no longer an observer, but rather a participant (Suzuki 2005 [1995]: 229). He is part of the ring that ensures the circulation of the virus.

In particular, news and entertainment media – the institutions responsible for creating or at least disseminating such contents – are implicated in this problematic voyeurism. In this regard, *Ring* closely resembles *Ghostwatch*, where the paranormal investigation – driven by the wish for good audience ratings primarily – releases Pipes from the Early house. Significantly, *Ring* and *Ringu* tie Sadako's tragic backstory directly to how horribly she and her mother Shizuko were treated by the media: Shizuko was ostracized by the media after failing to showcase her telepathic powers in public. In *Ringu*, it is at this public performance that the little girl Sadako first displays the true extent of her own powers, killing one of the journalists. Here, the news media are endowed with communal responsibility as well, yet they utterly fail in their social functions. In their greediness for profit, and for the next big media hype, they thrive on the suffering of helpless individuals.

In *Ringu* and *The Ring*, Sadako's/Samara's dehumanizing treatment by the media is implicitly voiced through the motif of effacement. The faces of both Sadako and Samara are covered by her long hair. Every infected person's face appears blurred in photographs, making their fea-

tures unrecognizable. *The Ring* adds further levels of effacement: the infected begin unconsciously to scribble out depictions of faces in magazines and photographs. The only time when Samara's face is not hidden behind her hair, her image is twice removed: this is at a research facility where the girl is studied, treated as little more than a scientific curiosity (see Fig. 4.13). Just as Sadako/Samara is dehumanized by such institutions who turn her into a faceless object, she also imposes the same fate on her victims.

Fig. 4.13 Samara's appearance twice removed from reality



Source: *The Ring* (2002)

As journalists working at a large newspaper, Asakawa/Reiko/Rachel personify these immoral (media) institutions. Their relentless journalistic impulses eventually let loose a virus of apocalyptic dimensions upon the world. Throughout Suzuki's *Ring*, Asakawa repeatedly justifies his questionable behavior towards his own family and the lengths he is willing to go in order to bring his investigation to a successful end. Asakawa's true motive for spending time with his extended family is not grief, but rather curiosity as is revealed at his niece's funeral:

> Asakawa slipped out of the room and listened to see what was going on downstairs, and then entered Tomoko's bedroom. He felt a little guilty about invading a dead girl's privacy. Wasn't this the kind of thing

> he abhorred? But it was for a good cause – defeating evil. There was nothing but to do it. But even as he thought this, he hated the way he was always willing to seize on any reason, no matter how specious, in order to rationalize his actions. (Suzuki 2007 [1991]: 42-43)

Asakawa's job at the newspaper does not depend on writing sensational reportage about the mysterious deaths; he investigates his niece's death mostly due to his boredom with his current journalistic projects (ibid: 25-26). Aware of his problematic moral standards, Asakawa tries to excuse his behavior even when Ryūji states that it is exactly this kind of media ethics that created the supernatural media virus in the first place:

> "Imagine how Sadako must have felt when her mom threw herself into Mt. Mihara."
> "She hated the media?"
> "Not just the media. She resented the public at large for destroying her family, first treating them like darlings, and then when the wind changed scorning them. […] She had first-hand knowledge of the vagaries of public opinion."
> "But that's no reason to arrange an indiscriminate attack like this!" Asakawa's objection was made in full consciousness of the fact that he himself belonged to the media. In his heart he was making excuses – he was pleading. *Hey, I'm just as critical of the media's tendencies as you are.* (ibid: 198, original emphasis)

His actions make Asakawa complicit in Sadako's death as well as her deadly vengeance, and they will bear grave consequences for the entire society. Not only have news media failed their duties to the community through the treatment of the Yamamuras, but years later they also aid Sadako in her revenge, once again in search of the perfect media spectacle.

On a smaller scale, the implications of Asakawa's actions for the community at large can be observed in the dynamics of his own family. He constantly disregards his duty as a loving family father in favor of selfish interests. Most times, Asakawa appears to be annoyed by his

wife and daughter, as they restrict him in his freedom and demand his attention (ibid: 41-42). In a similar manner, Reiko and Rachel, both single mothers working fulltime jobs, neglect their only child in favor of work. Yōichi and Aidan are not only exceptionally self-reliant for their age, walking to school by themselves and preparing their own meals, but at times the roles of child and parent are reversed when they take care of their mothers. In both *Ringu* and *The Ring*, it is Yōichi/Aidan who picks out an adequate gown for his mother to wear at the funeral, since Reiko/Rachel is once again late from work.

Ring is a story about media and *the* media, and how they affect lives in numerous ways. They can enforce specific behaviors and destroy human lives. They confront human beings with troubling moral dilemmas. How individuals interact with (the) media can have frightening consequences for the network society at large. It is stunning how successful the franchise has remained over the course of several decades. One reason for this might be that the themes and anxieties voiced in *Ring* continue to resonate even today, and across diverse cultures. Hantke writes something similar with regard to the iconic shot of Sadako/Samara stepping out of the television screen:

> The shot has been imitated countless times as a sign of earnest admiration and parodied as a sign of the moment's rapid affective, generic and, ultimately, cultural exhaustion. […] And, yet, the cultural life of this emblematic shot marks a period in which cultural unease with digital technology was, quite obviously, not the provenance of any particular nation and its idiosyncratic relationship toward digital technology but a general phenomenon closely linked to highly technological cultures around the globe and, thus, to modernity itself. (2016: 17)

Of the narratives discussed in this book, *Ring* perhaps comprises the most intricate interweaving of virus, host, environment, and vector. It is its urban setting particularly, in which the physical proximity of many people plays a significant role, which distinguishes *Ring* from *Ghostwatch* and *House of Leaves*. As the next chapter claims, both the J-horror film *Kairo* and its Hollywood adaptation *Pulse* assign an equally important function to physical places. Whereas *Ring* only implies that the end

of mankind might be the inevitable consequence of the spreading supernatural media virus, *Kairo* and *Pulse* render this apocalypse explicit.

5. The Digital Supernatural Media Virus and the Network Apocalypse in *Kairo* and *Pulse*

> "Do you have any idea of the amount of data that's floating out there? The amount of information we just beam into the air? We broadcast to everyone where we are and we think we're safe?"
> *Jim Sonzero, Pulse*

> "The infectious scenario is one wherein the body is besieged by a glut of information that threatens not only to overwhelm the immune system, but at the same time to transform the nature of what it means to be human. The virally infected and desecrated body thus becomes a metaphor for the fate of the human in the information age."
> *Stephen Dougherty, "The Biopolitics of the Killer Virus Novel"*

5.1 Media Anxiety in 21st Century Digital Gothic

Ghosts escape the realm of the dead and haunt the digital networks of the world of the living. Mysterious webcam feeds flood the Internet, displaying forlorn figures, some of whom commit suicide in front of the camera. Ghosts begin to materialize in the vicinity of cell phones and computers. Everybody who meets such a ghost has their will to live sucked from them: they eventually either kill themselves or simply dissolve into ash. What initially begins with a series of strange deaths and disappearances finally turns out to be a slow and quiet apocalypse.

This is the story of *Kairo*, a Japanese film directed by Kiyoshi Kurosawa and released in 2001. *Kairo* received an American adaptation in 2006, directed by Jim Sonzero. Both films vary vastly in terms of aesthetics, storytelling, and even plot. *Pulse* transports the narrative into a university setting and most characters, including protagonist Mattie Webber, her boyfriend Josh Ockmann, and other friends, are young college students. The action is restricted to this confined setting, except for a few shots off campus which do not offer any real information on the location of the surrounding city. In comparison, *Kairo* is recognizably set in Tokyo; as in *Ringu*, the metropolis assumes a central function in the film. The city is the connecting point between the lives of the film's protagonists, who otherwise do not have much in common: Michi Kudo works at a plant shop; Ryosuke Kawashima is an economics student; Harue Karasawa is a computer specialist and lab assistant. The portrayal of the ghosts in each film also differs: *Kairo*'s spirits are barely discernible from humans in terms of appearance, whereas the ghosts in Sonzero's film are striking examples of computer-generated imagery (CGI), easily identifiable as monstrous and Other. The protagonists' motivations and intents are perhaps the most significant difference between these two films: *Kairo* provides a calm portrayal of the end of mankind, with the protagonists being onlookers struggling to survive. *Pulse*, conversely, presents the story as a race against time, infusing its protagonists with the will to save humanity from the growing infection – even though they fail in the end.

Despite all of these differences, the movies also have a lot in common. Most significantly, a depressing atmosphere already pervades both narratives before the supernatural media virus spreads: people appear detached from one another, going through the motions of their everyday lives without much passion. Furthermore, the films share digital media and their effects on society as the central theme. None of the narratives discussed in the previous chapters are grounded so firmly in the logic of digitality as *Kairo* and *Pulse*. The supernatural media virus exploits the key characteristics of digital media: connectivity, multiplicity, dynamic fluidity, and seeming omnipresence. As with *Ghostwatch*, these films portray media as a gateway to "the other

side," a portal enabling spirits to haunt the living. However, it is not merely one ghost that intrudes upon the world of the living through one medium – a multitude of spirits invades this world, using every digitally connected device available to humankind. This dangerous confluence of the supernatural media virus with networked digital media lies at the heart of this chapter.

As in the previous chapter, this discussion takes Hutcheon's theory of adaptation as well as Felski's ANT-inspired approach to literature as its foundation. The analysis refrains from reading the films merely in terms of Japanese "original" and US "derivative." It is precisely their differences that make these narratives so valuable, revealing distinct perspectives on the network society, on digital media, and on how these aspects influence humankind. Therefore, this chapter moves repeatedly from one film to the other and back again, illuminating similarities and differences between these two texts, examining closely how the films portray the supernatural media virus and its intersection with its hosts, the network society, and viral vectors.

Both *Kairo* and *Pulse* are examples of the growing interest of Gothic fiction in digitality. Digital media and virtual spaces have become a popular means of telling Gothic stories in the 21st century, and they additionally provide the thematic focus of such narratives, giving rise to "digital Gothic" (Piatti-Farnell/Brien 2015: 2). As Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Donna Lee Brien write:

> In this liminal, digital space, technology – often in the form of the Internet and its cybernetic manifestations – acts as the connecting agent between perceived worlds and dimensions of existence, where identities become blurred and matters of life and death collide in the periphery of digital networks. (ibid)

The themes of such digital Gothic, as put forward by Piatti-Farnell and Brien, are only partially new; to a significant extent, digital technology instead offers a novel perspective on the centuries-old topics of Gothic fiction. In fact, the Gothic has always had a penchant for uncanny technologies. Today's technologies cast ghosts that are no longer revenants of the past, but rather messengers of the future: of how digitality, arti-

ficial intelligence, and other technologies will affect human nature and society (Edwards 2015b: 6). Such ghosts give shape to the impression that humanity neither fully controls nor understands the technologies that it produces. Jackson regards these suspicions regarding the potential impact of digital media as a driving force behind 21st century horror:

> The situation of the mediatization of society in the horror genre suggests two things: (1) there is a collective suspicion that its impact may not be entirely positive, and (2) there may be hidden or repressed elements of our relation to media technology we have yet to reveal or figure out for ourselves. (2013: 6)

Technological potential surpasses the comprehension of these devices. Therefore, media comprise a dangerous connection to the unknown and the unexpected in such tales. Haunted digital media are imbued with agency and a will of their own in 21st century Gothic and horror.

In their introduction to *Digital Horror*, Linnie Blake and Xavier Aldana Reyes explicitly link the implications of digitality, as presented in horror, to surveillance and media violence. They define "digital horror" as "both an aesthetic and a narrative preoccupation":

> Digital horror […] is more than vaguely connected to the digital techniques inherent to its production and the stylistics commanding its look. In fact, digital horror often exploits its own framing and stylistic devices to offer reflections on contemporary fears, especially those regarding digital technologies themselves. This makes for an exceptionally anxious cinema, preoccupied with the dangers of digital technology, specifically its proliferation of mediated images of real-world violence, its capacity to bring surveillance societies into being, its exposure of the user to the uninvited attentions of strangers 'from beyond' and its impact on human identity, which, being transient and mutable, is consistently counterpoised to the virtual immanence of the digital. (2016: 3)

All of the following anxieties are negotiated in *Kairo* and *Pulse*: how digital media not only allow us to connect to other people, but may also

enable someone or something to stare back at us through our technologies; how humankind is changing for the worse, possibly even devolving under the influence of digitality; how digital technology erodes the borders between worlds. These movies critically question the belief that these media will inevitably improve and optimize all aspects of life – a trend which Evgeny Morozov terms technological "solutionism": "Silicon Valley's quest to fit us all into a digital straightjacket by promoting efficiency, transparency, certitude, and perfection – and, by extension, eliminating their evil twins of friction, opacity, ambiguity, and imperfection – will prove to be prohibitively expensive in the long run" (2013: xiii-xiv). The costs of such solutionist thinking are immense in *Kairo* and *Pulse*. In its attempt to improve every aspect of everyday life through digital technologies, it causes the disintegration of interpersonal relationships, human bodies, as well as society at large, and invites permanent surveillance.

Building on the virus metaphor's biological, social, and media-related connotations, the supernatural media virus evokes the disintegration of the human on all levels in both films: relationships fall apart; bodies are visibly affected until they finally dissolve into ashes; society crumbles, and the entire world is thrown into chaos as the networked systems it came to depend upon start to fail. It is the communication networks established by media technologies – the Internet first and foremost – that enables mankind's downfall. As Sprenger and Engemann write in their introduction to *Internet der Dinge* ("Internet of Things"), computing today has become "invisible, smart, miniaturized, spatially dispersed, and omnipresent" (2015: 7, my translation). Under these circumstances, a viral infection in such networked systems is inescapable. The terror of connectivity as well as the deep permeation of digital media and its consequences are already apparent in the titles of each of the films. In the anglophone context, the title of Kurosawa's film often is translated as "pulse." The Japanese term "kairo," however, bears multiple meanings, as Kurosawa explains in an interview:

> The literal translation of the original title *Kairo* would be "circuit" but in Japanese that would mean both an organic and an inorganic circuit,

> whereas in English circuit tends to have a more inorganic nuance to it. So I was interested in getting a sense of life itself and the larger circuitry of life, that would include, of course, the beating of the heart and the pulse. (Alexander 2005: 33)

The Japanese title, therefore, deliberately plays with both the term's biological and technological connotations: circulation and circuitry. Kurosawa's film explores these trajectories through the theme of (dis-)connection. It becomes increasingly difficult to disentangle these diverse dimensions as biological bodies become infected by the supernatural media virus transmitted via digital devices. Thus, in *Kairo*, none of these (dis-)connections ever work exclusively on a technological, biological, or social trajectory.

As is apparent even in its title, the US adaptation concentrates more closely on the supernatural media virus' biological implications. Significantly, *Pulse* expands on the mininarration inscribed into the virus metaphor; this film adheres to the formula of the outbreak narrative from beginning to end, in terms of narrative structure as well as representational conventions. Victims affected by the virus already show strong bodily symptoms before they dissolve into nothingness. The infection's organic dimension is introduced as early as in the film's opening credits, which juxtapose images of diverse media technologies with interactive epidemiological maps displaying the growing spread of infection throughout the entire globe. These images suggest that digitally infected devices can dissolve both individual human bodies and societies at large.

These diverse portrayals of disconnection and disintegration are one of this chapter's focal points and are discussed in greater depth in the following subsection. I explore how the network society is changing the very essence of what it means to be human by building on Steen Christiansen's notion of the network subject and on Florian Sprenger's ontology of addressability. While each movie features disintegration on all levels – bodily, interpersonal, and social – they do so with different emphases. Kurosawa's narrative emphasizes the dissolution of the community. Set in a curiously deserted Tokyo, people are already ghost-

like in their listlessness long before the supernatural media virus breaks loose. The virus amplifies and speeds up developments which seem to precede its existence and that are detrimental to both interpersonal relationships and the social body at large. The US adaptation, in contrast, foregrounds the bodily symptoms of infection with the supernatural media virus, thereby buying into the conventions of the outbreak narrative as described by Wald and Ostherr. In particular, the use of animated epidemiological maps in *Pulse* is revealing: these maps comprise a trope well-known from both factual and fictional tales about microbial infection.

I discuss the supernatural media virus' vectors in greater detail in this chapter's final section, using Neal Kirk's concept of networked spectrality as well as Ryan's analysis of digital media in particular as points of departure. Not only do the communication networks established by digital media affect human individuals and their interpersonal relationships, but they even transform the nature and appearance of the attacking ghosts, who bear characteristics of digital media in both films. To make matters worse, ubiquitous digital technologies allow these specters to appear anywhere and anytime, watching humanity's moves. Each film represents the danger of surveillance as enabled by digitality, expressing this fear on both the thematic and the aesthetic levels. In *Kairo* as well as *Pulse*, digital media not only allow human beings to come into contact with one another more easily, but they also allow somebody or something to look back at us through these technologies, all without our knowledge.

5.2 Disconnection, Disintegration, Disembodiment: The Human Individual in the Digitalized Network Society

Fragmentation and disconnection are central themes in both movies, and they are linked intricately to the conditions of the network society. In these texts, digital media erode the very essence of what it means to be human: communication media have had a severe impact on human identity, even before the supernatural media virus spreads through so-

ciety. Both films conceive of the network society as endangering some of humanity's key values, most notably real-life relationships. The supernatural media virus merely tips the scales in this development, causing death and destruction. Each of these two films emphasizes the growing detachment's different causes and consequences, and they do so by means of varying discursive, aesthetic, and thematic strategies.

Any new technology or medium brings with it the suspicion that it might have a grave impact on human nature. As Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin write, "we see ourselves today in and through our available media. […] This is not to say that our identity is fully determined by media, but rather that we employ media as vehicles for defining both personal and cultural identity" (2000: 231). These available media affect the perception and, hence, understanding of ourselves and our surrounding world. Their impact even increased towards the end of the 20th century and alongside the emergence of ever more complex digital media:

> Where there was once the "real," there is now only the electronic generation and circulation of almost supernatural simulations. Where there was once stable human consciousness, there are now only the ghosts of fragmented, decentered, and increasingly schizophrenic subjectivities. (Sconce 2000: 170-1)

Kairo and *Pulse* portray these fragmented subjects and subjectivities; their nature and identity have been altered dramatically through media technologies. The presumed stability of human identity becomes unbalanced with digital media. The introduction of *networked* digital media significantly, reinforces and intensifies these tendencies. The result is what Christiansen terms the "network subject":

> As network technologies take on prominence, we find a transformation of contemporary subjectivity which challenges the sense of bodily unity we have often assumed we have. Instead, it becomes evident that our perception is distributed across network technologies rather than through a centred bodily perception. This distribution of sense

> perceptions is what produces the network subject, a subject which is plural and heterogeneous. (2016: 42)

Everyday life is increasingly supported and shaped by technologies; the perception of the world and of human identity is structured around networked media as well.

The consequence is the generation of a new understanding of the self: "Network media create a subject who understands itself from without, through the perceptions of others, and regards this condition as a positive state" (ibid: 50). If this new type of subjectivity – the network subject – provokes detachment from a sense of bodily unity, then participation in the network presents a metaphorical disembodiment. The supernatural media virus induces these developments as a literal disembodiment in *Kairo* as well as *Pulse*: human beings and entire societies are fragmented to such an extent that they cease to exist.

One indication of this growing detachment is the listlessness of the characters in both films. People complete their everyday tasks with neither much joy nor reluctance. They are isolated from one another, unable to form deep connections. Digital technologies, the films suggest, have disconnected humans from one another instead of aiding their relationships. When the group of friends around *Pulse*'s protagonist Mattie spends an evening together at a dance club, they constantly have their cell phones in their hands. At some point, they even converse via text messages with each other – while sitting at the same table. Not only does this scene stress the apparent decrease of face-to-face communication – Mattie complains during the conversation that her relationship with her boyfriend "has been reduced to text messaging" (*Pulse* 2006) – but it also creates an uncanny doubling. Each and every member of the group is both a real and a virtual presence, communicating verbally as well as digitally. This scene plays with one of the most common conceptions regarding the network society, namely the idea that virtual communities will replace real communities at some point, thereby drawing people increasingly into the digital realm (van Dijk 2012: 46-47). Computers and mobile phones are repeatedly accused of depleting human relationships and of causing escapism from reality. Lives are structured

increasingly around communication devices so that they themselves become distributed, plural, and virtual presences, as the everyday lives of people such as Mattie shows.

The virtual existence of human beings and the centrality of networked technologies to their lives are shaped by what Sprenger calls the "ontology of addressability" (2019: 89). He claims that the Internet of Things, equipped with means such as Radio Frequency Identification (RFID),[1] cellular triangulation, and other networked tracking technologies, introduces a new kind of ontology in which only those things that are part of a network exist:

> [E]xistence equals addressability. […] [T]he position of every object is constantly registered and objects that do not have an address do not exist. The solution implemented in such technologies is to make objects relay their movement and to transform this information into a network in which the position of every object is constantly traced and tracked. Such networks, for which the surrounding cellular networks with their advanced addressing system are the dominant example, consist of relations between objects, whose position and movement are registered, rather than of coordinates in geographical space. (ibid: 79)

Sprenger's "ontology of addressability" implies not only the observation of the spatial position of objects, but also their temporal tracking. Features such as the route guidance system provided by Google Maps exemplify how closely space and time are tied to one another: by continuously tracking the spatial relation between units, their progression over time can be determined. Significantly, anybody wishing to use such services can only do so if they allow their own devices to be identified and tracked as well.

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1 RFID chips, which can be as small as a grain of rice and as thin as a sheet of paper, are attached to most wares nowadays, making it possible to identify and track these objects. Many countries also equip passports and ID cards with such chips.

While obviously hyperbolic, Sprenger's claim is nonetheless a recurring thought in theories about networks and the network society. It expresses the supposed importance of connectivity and networking, where any object's existence is defined predominantly in terms of its participation in a network. The ontology of addressability resembles van Dijk's law of network articulation, according to which the relations between objects within a network become increasingly important (2012: 37-38). Similarly, the ontology resonates with Castells' claims that "no place exists by itself, since the positions are defined by the exchanges of flows in the network. […] [P]laces do not disappear, but their logic and meaning become absorbed in the network" (2010b: 442-443). In the era of the network society, the pressure to participate in these networks increases significantly. This pressure proves to be fatal in both *Kairo* and *Pulse*.

It is fruitful to read the ontology of addressability as a "hauntology", in the sense intended by Jacques Derrida, in relation to these two films. A French pun on "ontology," Derrida's concept of hauntology describes an ontological and historical disjunction. The concept is founded on Derrida's previous work on the deconstructive method; he advances "hauntology" in *Specters of Marx*, in which he discusses Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto*. Derrida begins his analysis with a quote from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – "The time is out of joint" (Shakespeare qtd. in Derrida 2006 [1993]: xxi). The figure of the ghost acts as a central element in his argument. It is its resistance to temporal linearity that makes the specter so significant: "A question of repetition: a specter is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*" (Derrida 2006 [1993]: 11, original emphases). The ghost represents an intrusion of the past into the present, and it simultaneously inhabits a state of being and nonbeing. As such, Derrida's specters have the potential to deconstruct the ontology of addressability: they challenge the assumed stability of temporal progression, destabilize the distinction between past, present, and future, and disrupt the possibility of temporal and spatial tracing.

Derrida's hauntology has been discussed extensively in the field of Gothic studies. One example of this is Isabella van Elferen's concept of

"sonic Gothic," which is built upon four dimensions of sound and music in Gothic: spectrality, hauntology, hauntography, and transgression (2014: 429). Van Elferen examines not only the sonic elements in audiovisual media, such as film or television, but also emphasizes the centrality of sound to other media: most literary instances of the Gothic feature creaking doors, howling winds, and similar unsettling noises. Novels such as Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* or Danielewski's *House of Leaves* even feature uncanny noises, whose source cannot be located and which cannot be heard by everyone. In such cases, embodiment becomes a central dimension of sonic Gothic: "disembodied sound renders audible the temporal dislodgement that is inherent to spectrality: it unlocks present sound from past origin, leaving that origin unheard, unsignified, non-existent" (van Elferen: 430).[2] Disembodied sound unsettles the linear, temporal progression of cause and effect, given that it does not have any origin from which sonic waves travel.

Kairo disrupts the uncanny relation between traceable technology and embodiment of the network subject through its cunning, hauntological use of sound. Kurosawa utilizes acousmatic voices and technology-related noises to a degree that is extreme (Brown 2018: 29; Schmitz 2020b: 347). The term "acousmatic" refers to sounds that can be heard without seeing their cause or source (Chion 1994 [1990]: 71). Common examples of acousmatic sounds in *Kairo* include phone calls in which the interlocutor remains unseen and in which only their electronically filtered, heavily distorted voice can be heard. Here, technology in the form of cell phones creates disembodiment by conveying voices over large distances, albeit in an altered form. The technologically distorted sound conveys an ambivalent perspective on placement and embodiment, tying these uncanny impressions directly to communication technology.

The sonic hauntology of addressability comes to the fore in *Kairo*, particularly through the use of acousmatic voices whose diegetic status remains unclear. As van Elferen explains, noises that apparently lack a specific physical origin are key elements of sonic Gothic (2014: 430).

2 For more information on the use of sound and music in Gothic, consult van Elferen (2012).

Examples of these types of acousmatic voices in *Kairo* are the repeated cries for help ("*tasukete*") audible throughout the film – it is never revealed whether these cries stem from ghosts or the living. Uncannily, it is not only their origin, but also the diegetic status of these voices that remains unclear; it is impossible to determine whether the film's characters can hear these cries as well, or whether they belong to the extradiegetic level. When watched on a 5.1 surround audio system, these disembodied whispers at points move through the audio channels (Brown 2018: 46-7). As a result, the visual is detached from the auditive: the movement of sound does not correspond to what is seen on screen.

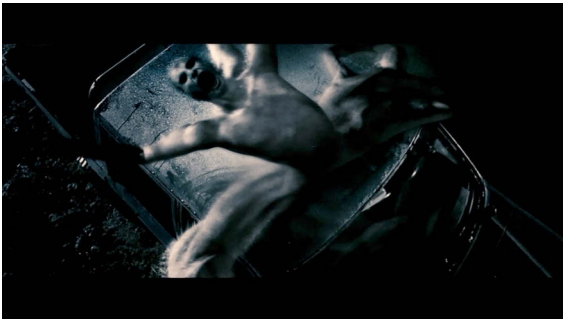
In contrast to *Kairo*'s sonic features, *Pulse* portrays spectrality and the hauntological aspect of addressability visually. The film's undead flicker into and out of existence, appearing to be in multiple places at the same time (see Fig. 5.1). The spirits are "technoghosts" as defined by Kevin J. Wetmore:

> Technoghosts are spirits that display the physical properties of electronic or technical media, in other words, their physical appearance involves static, appearing blurry, featuring interference, as if they are being broadcast, rather than haunting, and whose manifestation is both made possible by technology and mediated through it. (2009: 73)

It is impossible to trace or track these ghosts: no progression or linear movement can be established between their flickering appearances. They can exist in multiple places at the same time and disappear entirely within the blink of an eye. If their unique position and movement cannot be registered, then these technoghosts also deny the possibility of establishing relations between the objects on the net. Through this process, the ontology of addressability becomes a hauntology.

The issue of (dis-)connection in *Kairo* and *Pulse* resonates with this hauntology of addressability. Not only do the ghosts haunt the ideal of addressability, but they also force the few human survivors to evade addressability by dropping off the network. The only possibility of escaping the supernatural media virus is by fleeing to a "dead zone" without any digital devices – pun intended. Worrisomely, from the vantage

Fig. 5.1 One (techno-)ghost occupying multiple locations simultaneously



Source: *Pulse* (2006)

point of the network society and digitality, "existence equals addressability" (Sprenger 2019: 79). Thus, regardless of whether they are killed by ghosts or move to a dead zone: metaphorically, humanity ceases to exist. While there may be human survivors, technological progression comes to a complete halt.

Christiansen's concept of the network subject as well as Sprenger's notion of the ontology of addressability express the centrality of networks and the importance of connectivity. *Kairo* and *Pulse* voice anxieties regarding this network paradigm: how the diverse networks surrounding us today at all times – communication networks, transport networks, media networks, financial networks, and so on – affect what it means to be human. Digital connectivity leads to social and/or bodily disintegration in both films. This developing disconnection already sets in before the ghosts invade the network society; the supernatural media virus amplifies and exploits a trend that predate its existence.

Kairo foregrounds the fragmentation of the community as the direct result of modernity and digital media technologies. Similar to *Ringu*, Kurosawa's film displays the loss of Japanese traditions and communal duties. The key issue portrayed in the movie is the failure of people

to connect with one another; instead of forming strong, interpersonal bonds in real life, the characters of the film seek solace in their virtual lives. Posadas claims that encountering the spectral invaders in *Kairo* evokes "extreme ennui" (2014: 431); in truth, however, lethargy is an omnipresent, constant state well before the ghosts appear.

This alienation is ingrained in Kurosawa's portrayal of the network society in general, and of the metropolis of Tokyo in particular. As is the case with *Ring*, the metropolis serves a central function in the film: it is a tangible representation of the network society. However, whereas *Ring*'s and *Ringu*'s Tokyo is bustling and hectic, *Kairo*'s setting is eerily lifeless. The first scenes of the movie display a city that is remarkably empty and uncannily artificial. Michi works on a rooftop in Tokyo, overseeing the vastness of the metropolis. Ironically, it is on this rooftop of a modern high-rise building that a plant shop has been established. According to Wee, "*Kairo* shows an urban environment in which nature has been contained and diminished, hinting at an already existing disconnection and distance from the natural" (2014: 158). As the film progresses, shots of nature and plants become increasingly rare, thereby emphasizing the artificiality of the network society. Alienation is the inevitable consequence as network technology increasingly permeates society, creating an artificial environment in place of a real one. This sense of isolation – both from nature and from people – is transported visually through the portrayal of the metropolis:

> *Kairo*'s Tokyo differs from more stereotypical depictions of the city as a busy, teeming, overcrowded metropolis, bustling with energy and direction. Instead, Tokyo is predominantly represented by dark, dingy, empty spaces and abandoned industrial factories and buildings, and most of the film is dominated by stark images of solitude and loneliness. (ibid)[3]

3 Brown regards such "aesthetics of architectural decay" as typical of Kurosawa's work (2018: 49). As he claims, such depictions of the city "may serve as spatial metaphors for the decaying state of Japanese modernity following the collapse of the bubble economy, evoking double-edged connotations in the form of both a nostalgia for the past and an ambivalence over what has taken its place" (ibid).

Fig. 5.2 Michi alone on the bus

Source: *Kairo* (2001)

Fig. 5.3 Michi, getting off the bus, is almost indiscernible

Source: *Kairo* (2001)

These portrayals of the metropolis and its inhabitants stylistically convey the isolation and alienation created by, and experienced within, the network society. *Kairo* makes extensive use of the "detached style" oftentimes found in Japanese horror cinema:

Fig. 5.4 Geometrical patterns dominate Kurosawa's detached style

Source: *Kairo* (2001)

> It is a style that understates the dramatic, refrains from explanation, refuses to psychologize, and in general makes the viewer work hard to understand what is going on. […] In addition, the detached style is defined in part through its rejection of the styles of dominant cinema and television, styles that take narrative clarity as their priority and thus make an extra effort to explain what is going on – even to the point of letting the audience know what the characters are thinking and feeling when that is narratively important. The detached style rejects the emphasis on explanation and thus creates a world that is, on the one hand, more opaque and uncertain and, on the other, populated with people who gain a certain freedom from their detachment from others. (Gerow 2002: 6)

The detached style does not direct the viewer's gaze in order to enforce a predetermined interpretation, something recognizable through its utilization of long shots, long takes, and obscure perspectives (Posadas 2014: 453-454). Indeed, as is visible in Fig. 5.2-5.4, *Kairo*'s shots are often unbalanced; the audience has to view these images carefully in order to identify their central features and to decode the goings-on. In this way,

the film's visual style expresses the detachment and listlessness of the characters: "Kurosawa places his characters in small rooms, isolated in space and in the frame. The characters are always isolated, and though they fear being alone, they also seek it out, withdrawing socially until they become ash" (Wetmore, Jr. 2009: 74). Perhaps the most striking aspect of *Kairo* is its calm, drab atmosphere, in which the events are neither sufficiently explained nor resolved. The apocalypse in the movie is empty in that it is a growing nothingness, rather than a fulminant explosion. More importantly, the end of the world has already begun before the infection – the ghostly invasion merely seems to be the final nail in mankind's coffin.

The inability to form deep bonds with other human beings is an omnipresent issue throughout the film. Two conversations foreground this struggle particularly strongly. The first takes place early on in the film, shortly after Michi Kudo's coworker commits suicide. Michi and her remaining two colleagues process the events together during their lunch break. They appear detached and numb throughout the entire conversation. While it may be the case that they are just in shock, it seems as if this kind of detachment is more indicative of their everyday life, rather than a state brought about by grief. At the end of the conversation, Toshio Yabe claims that he has contemplated suicide several times already:

> Junko: "He never said anything, so what could we have done?"
> Toshio: "Maybe…he suddenly just wanted to die. I get that way sometimes. It's so easy to hang yourself." (*Kairo* 2001)

None of the other two characters react to Toshio's shocking statement – as if they had not heard him at all. Presumably, they all simply go back to their work after their break is over.

The second conversation takes place between computer science student Harue Karasawa and Ryosuke Kawashima. By this point of the narrative, the supernatural media virus has already taken a firm hold on society. Harue visits Ryosuke in his apartment to help him to identify a viral website targeting his computer – the mysterious webcam feed

induced by the virus. While doing so, she inquires after his interest in the World Wide Web:

> Harue: "What got you started on the Internet?"
> Ryosuke: "Nothing in particular…"
> Harue: "You don't like computers, right?
> Ryosuke: "No."
> Harue: "Wanted to connect with other people?"
> Ryosuke: "Maybe…I don't know. Everybody else is into it."
> Harue: "People don't really connect, you know."
> […]
> Harue: "We all live totally separately." (ibid)

Throughout this entire conversation, the two characters do not look at each other directly. Ryosuke roams about his apartment, cleaning away some personal items, and talks to Harue with his back to her. Furthermore, this dialogue also reveals a frightening lack of motivation: Ryosuke invested time and money to acquire the equipment necessary to set up the connection – yet, he can only explain his reasons for going to these lengths with the words "[e]verybody else is into it." His wish to become part of the virtual world is due to a form of peer pressure, as described by van Dijk's law of network externality: the more people are using the Internet, the more others are likely to join in (2012: 38). Thus, connecting to the Internet is not motivated by Ryosuke's own interests, but rather by his copying of other people's actions. This wish to partake in the virtual community ultimately turns out to be deadly.[4]

Both conversations feature characters that drift through their everyday lives, lacking any inherent drive and who are incapable of forming deep friendships. The Internet appears to be the solution to this lack, offering the possibility of building up relationships and of fighting off

4 Elsewhere, I discuss *Kairo*'s fatal media trends by using the concept of the "contagious narrative"—stories, beliefs, and even jokes that spread virally and which affect the decisions we make as human beings. For more detail, see Schmitz (2020b).

ennui. This, however, proves to be a false hope in *Kairo*. Instead of filling up the emptiness and melancholy of people such as Ryosuke, the Internet lets loose a deadly infection, only deepening their lethargy. It is almost impossible to distinguish the ghostlike living from the dead in *Kairo*.

The network society's digital technologies and conditions induce this ghostliness in the film. In this regard, *Kairo*'s supernatural media virus resonates with growing fears regarding such media, the Internet and its effect on human interaction in particular. Crawford reads the film's infection as "a literalised metaphor for the anxieties which have beset the users of online communication since its popularisation in the late 1990s" (Crawford 2019: 77). Ghosts and Internet users are interchangeable and indistinguishable in the film: alienated, isolated, (self-)destructive. Wetmore reads *Kairo* in the light of *hikikomori*, a concept coined by the Japanese psychologist Saitō Tamaki and describing the phenomenon of growing disconnection between people and their withdrawal from society:

> Those who suffer from *hikikomori* are, more often than not, young, middle class, and heavily involved in electronic media […]. The shrinking economy and rapidly changing society causes [sic] these individuals to withdraw from society, seeing no future for themselves. Locked away in their homes, communicating only through electronic means, these individuals become the ghosts on the screens in Kurosawa's film. (2009: 75)

Alluding to *hikikomori*, *Kairo* portrays virus hosts that fall into numb inactivity. In contrast to *House of Leaves* and *Ring*, the infected in Kurosawa's film neither facilitate nor halt the spread of the supernatural media virus. As more people connect to the Internet – many of whom possibly do it for the same peer pressure as Ryosuke – the virus can travel through these myriads of links. At this point, the infection does not depend on the behavior of its hosts for further dissemination, given that the channels through which it spreads have already been implemented.

The full degree of disconnection becomes apparent when comparing *Kairo*'s ghosts to that of more traditional *kaidan*. As Colette Balmain

explains, debts or responsibilities to other people are a central theme in the conception of ghosts and haunting:

> [O]bligations do not end with death but continue afterwards, both in terms of people who have died without fulfilling their obligations or paying their debt, and those left behind who have an obligation to the departed. For the Japanese, the world of the living and the world of the dead are therefore intimately bound together. (2008: 48)

The traditional *kaidan* centers on the guilt of individuals and on how they provoke the haunting by vengeful spirits through their neglect of their social obligations. Haunting tends to be a private thing: ghosts visit the living in their own homes. More recent tales, such as *Ring*, have broadened this scope and focused on a guilty community: Sadako was not only failed by specific individuals, but by an entire society enabling certain types of abuse. This is why her viral curse haunts society at large. Nonetheless, Sadako is an individualized ghost, one that bears a discoverable backstory and a recognizable human identity. Retaining a sense of private haunting, victims of the curse in *Ring* oftentimes find their death in their supposedly safe homes. *Kairo*, in contrast, no longer features this type of individualized spirit, decodable backstory, and private haunting: these ghosts do not possess distinguished personalities and they frequently appear in public spaces. Their motivation for invading the world of the living is not tied to neglect, but has a far simpler reason, as an acquaintance of Harue explains to Ryosuke: their realm is full and overflowing (*Kairo* 2001). Even the connection established through communal responsibilities between the living and the dead has been torn apart. Human beings not only fail to connect with one another – they cannot even connect to their own ghosts anymore.

The narrative structure of *Kairo* conveys the theme of disconnection as well. Its storytelling resists being conceived of in terms of cause and effect. Instead, *Kairo* is a network fiction as described by Mousoutzanis (2014: 95, 223) and Bordwell (2006: 100), mirroring its thematic preoccupation with connectivity through its storytelling structure. Kurosawa's film consists of two disparate narrative strands that are only drawn together during the final third of the story: the first strand focuses on

Michi Kudo, working at a rooftop plant shop in Tokyo, whereas the second storyline centers on Ryosuke Kawashima. For most of the movie, how and whether these two stories belong together remains unclear. Through this ambiguity, the film builds upon one of the most important strengths of the network as a narrative form: it rejects the rule of causality, instead concentrating on the links between individuals, events, and experiences. Only two aspects connect the narratives of Michi and Ryosuke: first, they both reside in Tokyo. This metropolis functions as a figuration of the network society in the film. Second, both are confronted with the infection that is creeping through that network. Michi and Ryosuke are constantly on the move, traveling through Tokyo in search of their friends. When they finally meet in a chance encounter, they flee the city and seek refuge on a large boat. Instead of presenting goal-oriented characters working together to stop the apocalypse, the film is a portrait of two previously unrelated metropolitans that only become connected once they are both affected by the crisis.

Disconnection in Kurosawa's film is predominantly communicated through its portrayal of Tokyo, the relationship between humans, ghosts, and nature, and the narrative structure in the film. However, *Kairo* does not restrict itself to immaterial aspects of disconnection, but also portrays the physical effects of the supernatural media virus. A case in point is the disintegration of infected biological bodies into black stains on walls.[5] Another example is the red construction tape, with which survivors establish safe zones into which ghosts cannot intrude. While it is never explained why this tape prevents ghosts from entering a room or how knowledge of this safety measure spreads, people throughout Tokyo begin to seal up their homes and rooms using it. The red tape is a feeble attempt to fortify the breached boundaries between

5 Several scholars interpret these black stains as a reminder of the nuclear warfare and the cultural influence of the atomic bomb in Japan: "the black stain […] evokes the trauma of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the intense thermal rays that literally burnt human shadows into stone, which could clearly be seen for ten years after the explosions" (Brown 2018: 47). Likewise, Wee refers to these human shadows as "images that explicitly recall (other cinematic) images of nuclear devastation" (2014: 167).

realms. While the supernatural media virus exploits the immateriality of the information highway to spread throughout the physical world of the living, the ghostly invaders are uncannily tangible. In a moment that seals his fate, Ryosuke is forced to realize that these spirits *can* be touched. They have a corporeal body, infecting humans with the virus through mere touch. Furthermore, warnings of a "Forbidden Room" appear throughout the city, never clarifying whether this is a physical place or the virtual Internet chat room featuring the webcam feeds. Through such aspects, the film destabilizes the notions of materiality and spatiality.

In comparison, *Pulse* dwells much more heavily on the bodily disintegration of the victims infected with the supernatural media virus. While social disintegration is an important element of the US adaptation as well, the narrative pays much more attention to the messy desecration of the biological body. In Sonzero's movie, the viral infection is easily spotted, and healthy people can be differentiated clearly from affected carriers. Those who encounter ghosts bear visible symptoms of the infection, as the veins on their skin turn an inky black (see Fig. 5.5 and 5.6).

Fig. 5.5 The supernatural media virus leaves visible traces...

Source: *Pulse* (2006)

Fig. 5.6 …turning the skin of its victims an inky black color

Source: *Pulse* (2006)

Close-ups dwell on the debasement of their skin. Where *Kairo*'s style favors understatement, obscure perspectives and long, calm takes, *Pulse* employs graphic and visceral images to express the dramatic intrusion of the supernatural media virus. Fusing the technological with the biological, the digital supernatural media virus attacks one of the most vital networks of the human body: its blood vessels. The symptoms evoked are reminiscent of those of severe diseases such as the bubonic plague: chills, feverish sweating; severe pain; blackened skin resembling gangrene. In the film, these symptoms are absolute proof of fatal illness. In line with Dougherty's observations, *Pulse* focuses viscerally on "the loathsome disintegration of the organic body beset by infection" (2001: 4). Today's technologies offer a new perspective on the biological aspects of bodies and microbes alike:

> By focusing so obscenely on the materiality of the flesh and the blood, by lingering so perversely over the human experience of pain and suffering, and by insisting so unrelentingly on the reality of its embodiment, the killer virus novel promotes the organic frame of reference. But as soon as the virus arrives on the scene, it induces a perspectival shift that threatens to dissipate the organic frame and to force the reader instead to consider the body in the manner of cyberpunk: as a postorganic (postmetaphysical, posthuman) entity whose being is merely a function of the fetishized code. […] The infectious scenario is

> one wherein the body is besieged by a glut of information that threatens not only to overwhelm the immune system, but at the same time to transform the nature of what it means to be human. The virally infected and desecrated body thus becomes a metaphor for the fate of the human in the information age. (ibid: 10)

Significantly, in these narratives the body as "a function of the fetishized code" is not merely a metaphor: first and foremost, *Kairo*'s/*Pulse*'s supernatural media virus is a computer virus that can kill biological bodies. The deaths of Mattie's friends Izzie and Stone, whose infection with the virus is clearly visible, are examples of the horrifying (no-)thingness of the human body in the digital information age. One moment, Izzie is standing in Mattie's apartment; the next moment, she explodes in a cloud of ashen pieces, nothing but a chaotic flurry of bits that could have previously been assembled into one coherent body. Stone, in comparison, slowly merges with the wall that he is standing in front of. It becomes impossible to delineate his biological body from the artificial structure of the wall. In the end, there is nothing left but a dark stain.

Pulse closely adheres to the conventions of Dougherty's killer virus novel and Wald's outbreak narrative. The narrative structure of the film follows the formula, beginning with the identification of the goings-on as a diseaselike outbreak, followed by the presentation of the digital networks and social habits that enable the extremely fast spread of the supernatural media virus. The visceral depictions of how the supernatural media virus not only infects a person's mind, but also desecrates the integrity of their biological bodies is a significant part of these conventions. Enacting the third step of the formula, Mattie attempts to contain the epidemic with the help of the computer expert Dex. As true epidemiologists, they create a counteragent against the infection in the form of another computer virus. However, the antivirus is ineffective, and the two can only flee to save their own lives.

The film's opening credits play with the conventions of the outbreak narrative as well. The film's first few minutes consist of the visual juxtaposition of shots of digital technologies – cell phones, computer

screens, chat rooms – with shots of animated epidemiological maps (see Fig. 5.7-5.9).

Fig. 5.7 The opening credits of "Pulse" juxtapose images…

Source: *Pulse* (2006)

Fig. 5.8 …of animated epidemiological maps…

Source: *Pulse* (2006)

Since the second half of the 20th century, such maps have become a recognizable convention in cinematic representations of disease (Ostherr 2005: 127). They perform a sleight of hand in order to visualize the invisible:

> On animated maps of the global spread of disease […], the actual contaminant (whether bacterium or virus) remains invisible. What is made visible is not an indexical image of invisible contagions but,

Fig. 5.9 …and diverse digital technologies

Source: *Pulse* (2006)

> rather, a socially legible – albeit entirely artificial – collapse of the invisible onto alternate forms of representing disease. (ibid: 129)

Epidemiological maps represent the disease by focusing on infected bodies and regions. In this way, they suggest that the threat can be neutralized by tracing an outbreak and identifying unsanitary danger zones – an outbreak's "hotspots." According to Ostherr, this delimitation of sanitary and unsanitary zones is a central function of epidemiological maps. It is through the visual charting of the infected on a geographic representation that disease-ridden areas can be identified (ibid: 123). Usually, such a delineation is achieved through what Wald refers to as "thirdworldification" (2008: 45). Unsanitary zones are represented as primitive, poor, and predominantly nonwhite, whereas sanitary areas appear as modern, rich, civilized, and predominantly white (ibid; Ostherr 2005: 129). These principles are turned around in *Pulse*. Highly technologized and modernized areas are the first to succumb to the supernatural media virus, whereas so-called dead zones – areas in which signal transmission is impossible – are now safe, sanitary regions. The consequence: "Safety is bound to a technological regress, in which survivors can no longer depend on long-distance calls, but instead have to revert back to mouth-to-mouth communication" (Schmitz 2020a: 205). If they wish to survive the virus, humans need to escape the comforts of digital networks.

The film's setting reflects the contagiousness of its unsanitary areas. Playing with the idea of biological infection, numerous scenes take place in dirty rooms and run-down buildings that look alarmingly unhygienic. As in *Kairo*, however, the sense of materiality and spatiality conveyed through these images is misleading. Visible, tangible dirt is not the true danger in *Pulse* – instead, it is the invisible contaminants floating through the digital information highway that endanger humanity. For the most part, *Pulse* is set on an unidentified university campus. This choice of location bears significance: first, it is a reminder of the initial development of the Internet, in which universities played a significant role. It is from this symbolic birthplace of the Internet that the supernatural media virus begins to spread, ultimately bringing the ideal of connectivity and digitality to an end.

Second, the campus is equipped with complex technological devices and the media-trained people to operate them. Reckless people such as Mattie's boyfriend, Josh, are responsible for setting off the fatal infection. Prior to his death, he had hacked into Ziegler's computer, thereby accidentally spreading the virus which Ziegler had been attempting to contain on his system. In *Pulse*, irresponsible individuals such as Josh, who unknowingly took an active role in facilitating the virus' spread, can cause the breakdown of the entire network society. While it cannot be said that the virus' hosts in *Pulse* are more active than those in *Kairo* – as in the Japanese film, the infected in Sonzero's movie fall into deep lethargy – the US version assigns a significant role to reckless behavior for letting the supernatural media virus loose in the first place. The 2006 film engages in what may be called "hacker demonization" (Parikka 2016: 147): some people may engage in hacking for fun; others do so because they cannot help themselves, and yet another set of people simply wish to harm the system through digital vandalism. In all cases, hackers like Josh pose a great danger to the functioning system. As early as the 1960s, hacker culture emerged at universities such as MIT (ibid: 145-146). The university campus becomes a symbol of this irresponsible hacker culture.

Third, by not specifying where this campus is set exactly, Sonzero's narrative becomes a fictional portrait of both Sprenger's ontology of

addressability and the small world phenomenon: it is not their absolute geographic location, but rather the relative position of objects to each other within the same network that is of relevance. *Kairo* dwells on the decline of a recognizable metropolis, namely Tokyo. In contrast, *Pulse* foregrounds the fact that geographic positions become irrelevant in times of networked technologies. It does not matter whether the university is located in a large metropolis or in a rural area. With its advanced equipment and technologically apt students and staff, a campus will always be a large hub with a multitude of strong ties within the network.

By identifying safe and unsafe areas, epidemiological maps suggest that the disease can be contained and eventually neutralized. However, they are also a frightening reminder of the infection's spread:

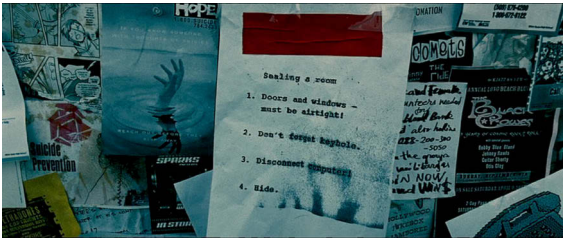
> Maps of geographical areas, often dotted with pins or, in films, with colored lights, represent epidemiological work in progress […]. These maps evoke both fear and reassurance. Dots or lines signal a spreading infection, often following the routes of trains, planes, buses, cars, and trucks as they transport carriers and their viruses rapidly around the globe. But the maps also help the epidemiologists solve the puzzle of the disease and thus represent evidence of experts on the case, a materialization of the epidemiological work that generally gets the threat under control. (Wald 2008: 37)

On the one hand, epidemiological maps establish expertise and suggest that the outbreak can be contained eventually; on the other hand, they also visualize how quickly and how far the infection already has spread. Such attempts at medical cartography, according to Ostherr, always implicitly carry a dismal truth: "the impossibility of ascertaining the precise location of the virus until after the fact" (2005: 1). The existence of the epidemiological map itself confirms that the outbreak is already in full swing.

By depicting such animated epidemiological maps in its opening credits, *Pulse* not only positions itself within the tradition of the outbreak narrative and foreshadows the eventual scope of the infection, but also suggests that the struggle against the ghostly infection is already

lost at this point in the narrative (Schmitz 2020a: 205). This is further emphasized by the underlying paradox of these maps: such complex animated epidemiological charts can only be created using the same digital, networked technologies that facilitate the spread of the supernatural media virus (ibid). Humanity, it appears, has become so dependent upon technology that, even when faced with the deadly dangers of these devices, it cannot do without digital media. Leaflets are passed around on campus, giving details on how to avoid being infected, first explaining how to seal off a physical room using red tape, and only afterwards advising people to disconnect any computers (see Fig. 5.10).

Fig. 5.10 Leaflet with safety instructions



Source: *Pulse* (2006)

Ironically, these flyers were obviously printed using a computer. Thus, even though it is established knowledge that digital devices are a gateway for the infection at this point, they are the last thing to be discarded in an attempt to counteract the growing spread in spite of this. The animated epidemiological maps are a visual reminder of this deadly dependency. For humanity, it has become impossible to grasp the goings-on without networked technology; yet this is the very same technology that seals its fate.

The desire to map and thereby visually trace the progression of a microbe adheres to the obsession with permanently monitoring objects, as dictated by the ontology of addressability. In addition to epidemio-

logical charts, diverse types of maps are a recurring feature throughout *Pulse*. A news report on television covering the "suicide epidemic" is broadcast along with a map of Ohio (*Pulse* 2006); when Dex tracks down Ziegler's location, a street map displaying the route to his apartment is shown on Dex's screen (ibid). Viewers are repeatedly reminded that knowing the exact location of people, objects, and events is key to survival. However, this belief eventually proves to be misleading. While these maps underline the drama and scale of the apocalypse visually, they do not truly aid attempts to contain the supernatural media virus.

Kairo and *Pulse* both dwell on the network society's impact on human nature and identity, negotiating the nature and scope of the influence that the network might have on the individual person. Human beings are transformed into network subjects and are subsumed under the ontology of addressability. Kurosawa's narrative represents the supernatural media virus as an amplification of developments predating its existence. Similar to *House of Leaves*, *Pulse* conceives of the virus as an accident inherent to the network in the sense meant by Virilio (1993: 212): at the very moment of their inception, digital network technologies also brought with them the threat of a virus exploiting their capabilities.

5.3 Permanent Surveillance and Networked Ghosts: Digital Media as Viral Vectors

One of the most notable aspects of Sonzero's *Pulse* is the omnipresence of communication media throughout the film. Almost every shot features some sort of digital device – cell phones, computers, PDAs, and so on. Mattie might not be capable of advanced hacking, as Dex is, but the handling of these devices for their daily needs is natural to her and her friends; these digital technologies have become an extension of their biological bodies. Viewers cannot doubt even for a second that this is a world in which technology has become part and parcel of everyday life. *Kairo*, in contrast, displays a world in which such media have not yet reached their full potential. Ryosuke is everything but a tech-savvy

protagonist. Not only does he depend on Harue to solve his computer issues for him, but even the usage of the computer keyboard appears to pose great difficulty for him. Nevertheless, the growing popularity of cell phones and Internet devices is already apparent here, indicating how digital media are about to change society and human identity drastically.

The main problem is that the pervasion of digital media throughout society – and the capacity and extent to which they are used – far outstrips the understanding of the technology. Again, Ryosuke's struggles with his computer are a strong indication: he wishes to use such devices, yet he can barely set up his systems by himself, let alone solve the problems that arise therefrom. In *Pulse*, this discrepancy between knowledge about and availability of technology is dramatically underlined when Ziegler explains the project that enabled the supernatural media virus to enter the world of the living:

> It was a telecom project! It was my baby. It was super-wide band. We found frequencies that we didn't even know existed, and they came through. […] We didn't know what it was at first. We thought it was like a radio wave interference. Then, we realized that there was a pattern to it. Every time that we'd try to monitor them, they would stop, or they would change frequencies. I mean, they were smart. They were reacting to us, and then…we started seeing things around the lab. (*Pulse* 2006)

It is the desire for better and faster telecommunication that attracts the ghostly invaders. Neither Ziegler nor the technicians working with him truly comprehended their technology's full potential, nor were they able to identify the virus in a timely manner. Their only aim is to provide better, faster, and more efficient connectivity at all costs. Thus, they are outsmarted by the "super-wide band" project – or, more precisely, by what lurks within. Ziegler's concession is applicable to technology interaction throughout the film: everybody uses their cell phones and computers – even when it is known that these devices can have fatal influences – without understanding their full potential. Accordingly, *Pulse* closes with a voice-over by Mattie. She calmly states, as their car

can be seen driving through the apocalyptic world, that: "We can never go back. The cities are theirs. Our lives are different now. What was meant to connect us to one another instead connected us to forces that we could have never imagined" (ibid).

It is precisely the supposed advantages of these communication technologies that the supernatural media virus exploits. Ryan discusses the qualities of digital networks, examining the intersection of digitality and narrativity. She claims that digital media can be delineated by means of five sets of properties: First, their reactivity and interactivity, which enable these media to react to changing conditions. Second, their multimediality, in that they may combine a wide range of semiotic channels. Third, their capacity for networking, which connects both machines and people across space. Fourth, digital media's use of volatile signs: these technologies appear to be highly fluid and dynamic, given that computer memory can be written and rewritten effortlessly. Finally, their use of modularity, as one digital work can involve the compilation of multiple autonomous objects (2004b: 338). It is these properties of new technologies that shape both films.

In terms of storytelling, the networked narrative structure of *Kairo* mirrors digitality's features of reactivity, connectivity, and modularity. While not nearly as complex as *House of Leaves*, Kurosawa's film nonetheless emulates the structure of the network to present its story. The film's narrative strands appear to be disparate and autonomous at first, but they do belong to the same web of events and eventually even influence each other as characters begin to work together. Thus, multiple characters and narratives are all affected by the same incidents to some degree. Significantly, of the fictions I examine here, *Kairo* comprises the most explicit realization of Mousoutzanis' network apocalypse. In *Kairo*, new media's all-embracing connectivity causes this apocalypse: since everything is connected via the Internet and cell phone signals, the supernatural media virus spreads everywhere once it has infiltrated the world of the living. The film's structural composition mirrors its thematic focus on the level of discourse.

While *Pulse* does not bear the structural properties of the network narrative, it does carry the idea of the network apocalypse considerably

further than Kurosawa's film does. Sonzero's movie presents one clearly identifiable cause for the creeping apocalypse: the attempts by Ziegler and his coworker to develop better broadband technology. It only takes one careless hacker – Josh – to release the supernatural media virus from Ziegler's system and to ensure the unstoppable escalation of the infection. The epidemiological maps used in the film underline the significance of this comparably small, yet ultimately fatal event.

The specters in *Pulse* are faceless masses of technoghosts, visibly bearing the characteristics of those digital media they use to multiply and defying the ontology of addressability. Discussing the representation of such ghosts in 21st century digital horror films, Kirk coins the concept of "networked spectrality": "networked spectrality aims to account for representations of ghosts that are transitioning from the singular, linear, personal and analogue to ghosts that are digital, multiple, nodular and distributive" (2016: 55). These ghosts no longer have an individualized identity. The confluence of specters and networked technologies affects the notion of haunting as well:

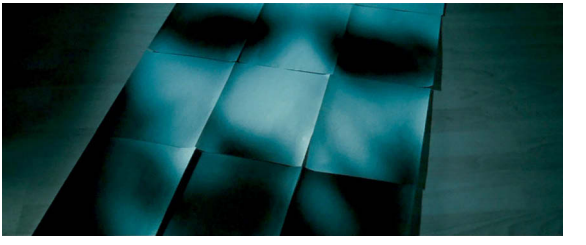
> When ghosts are coupled with new media technologies, haunting is not merely a singular, personal, temporary occurrence of the supernatural but an endemic threat to an increasingly networked and globalised contemporary society. Today's phantoms take on the unbounded, multiple, distributive and participatory qualities of our digital networks. (ibid: 57)

New media are not merely the vector for the supernatural media virus; they imprint their properties upon these specters.

Both films feature networked spectralities in that their ghosts are not the revenants of individual, identifiable persons, but instead comprise a large collective. Haunting appears as a public invasion, rather than a private visitation. In comparison to *Kairo*, Sonzero's *Pulse* heavily dwells on the digital nature of its ghosts – possibly because the film, created five years after the Japanese original, portrays a society in which digital media have become much more ingrained. Their digitality is most obviously signified through their appearance. As technoghosts, the specters haunting Mattie and her friends bear the visual mark-

ers of technical interference. These ghosts are even less individualized than those that appear in *Kairo*: their appearance is modified heavily through CGI effects and it becomes impossible to distinguish the ghosts from one another. Instead, Sonzero's film concentrates on portraying the large number of ghosts as one complex, yet coordinated, network. When Mattie is pulled into the realm of the dead, she is pinned down and held in place by numerous ghostly hands. The camera zooms out, revealing that, together, these hands form one giant face. Similarly, even though she has disconnected her computer, Mattie's printer prints page after page of sheets filled with unidentifiable smudges at one point. It is only when she arranges them in the correct order that Mattie, along with the film's audience, realizes that these smudges form a large, ghostly face spread across all those pages (see Fig. 5.11).

Fig. 5.11 Multiple pages forming a single image



Source: *Pulse* (2006)

Significantly, these printouts do not form the face of any recognizable or identifiable person – even at this moment, the film refrains from imbuing its specters with any individualized personality. Instead, these ghosts are multiple, modular, and networked, in accordance with the logic of digitality. Mattie and Dex realize that it is impossible to stop such digital ghosts once they have infected the Internet: "It's no system to shut down. They are the system" (*Pulse* 2006). Numerous small components drawn together form one large system; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Whereas the pervasion of digital media into all aspects of life causes the deterioration of personal relationships in both films, these technologies comprise the ideal viral vector for the supernatural media virus. They are extremely dynamic and, therefore, support the virus' continuous mutation. Furthermore, they function within widely established networks, which provide new channels of infection, and which have begun to dissolve the "immune system" that a society might have against this virus: real-life social interaction. Whereas digital media disconnect human beings from one another, they allow for the compilation of numerous autonomous specters into one incredibly powerful and complex invasive force.

Significantly, the dangerous omnipresence of digital communication media comes to the fore through the continuous feeling of surveillance pervading both films. Hantke identifies surveillance as a recurring theme in digital horror and traces its genealogy back to films from the 1950s (2016: 20). Networks' greatest threat lies in their reciprocity: "information is flowing in both directions at once. As observers […] we are observed; someone is listening in on us. Acting upon others by way of the network, we are being acted upon" (ibid). Similarly, Jackson points out how 21st century horror is obsessed with the idea that all of the comforts and luxuries afforded by digital media might eventually forge a dangerous, bidirectional connection to an unknown world:

> Everything that makes such devices and signals so light and portable, so seemingly normal and insignificant, is shown to be a façade; all the time, something has been watching us through our TVs and computer screens, very near and waiting to be released, wanting to make contact, literally. (2013: 33)

Digital media's properties are not only advantageous for human beings; the supernatural media virus benefits from them as well by utilizing them as vectors for transmission.

The theme of surveillance presents itself in *Kairo* and *Pulse* through the fact that ghosts always know where another living soul is waiting to have its life force sucked from it. In Kurosawa's and Sonzero's films, ghosts attack people in the most banal places. Ghosts jump out of wash-

ing machines, lurk in restroom stalls, and even search under sofas for their victims. It is precisely this mundanity that makes the supernatural media virus so terrifying: no place is safe simply because every victim is always carrying a tracking device in the form of cell phones and other portable media.[6] Mattie and Dex are warned of this danger by a stranger at a diner: "Do you have any idea of the amount of data that's floating out there? The amount of information we just beam into the air? We broadcast to everyone where we are and we think we're safe?" (*Pulse* 2006). Even though she is aware of the threat posed by digital devices, Mattie fails to throw away her cell phone after escaping the city with Dex. This almost proves to be their downfall, as they are suddenly attacked by ghosts while sleeping in their stolen car on an abandoned road. They barely survive the attack, throwing the fatal device out of the window and taking off to the nearest dead zone. The constant addressability of these devices, revealing the location of their users at all times, leads to humanity's demise.

Visually, both films convey the feeling of surveillance through unusual camera angles and suspicious image interferences. Many motion pictures attempt to make their medium and the techniques of film as invisible and natural as possible, simulating the gaze of an unseen observer. Kurosawa's and Sonzero's films, in contrast, deliberately draw attention to both the medium and to the filmmaking process. The beginnings of each film are particularly revealing in this regard. *Kairo* opens on a boat, where the few remaining survivors have fled after the supernatural media virus has spread. During a voice-over by Michi – "It all began one day without warning, like this…" – the camera switches from a medium shot of Michi's back as she leans against the ship's rail to a long shot of the boat from above (see Fig. 5.12).

6 Morozov strongly criticizes this omnipresence of ever smaller technologies. These "self-tracking devices" are camouflaged as powerful weapons against the fight against maladies such as obesity (2013: x). In the end, however, these technologies enable a permanent and potentially dangerous form of surveillance – of the own body, of peers, and of complete strangers.

Fig. 5.12 A feeling of surveillance pervades "Kairo," evoked by long shots…

Source: *Kairo* (2001)

This shot conveys both utter loneliness, as the ship is a tiny speck in the vast ocean, and introduces the theme of surveillance, as the image resembles those created via satellite technology. The next shot is unrelated to the boat and instead functions as the initiation into the flashback of the slow apocalypse. A deserted, cramped room appears, with several computer screens visible through a transparent plastic curtain (see Fig. 5.13). The image is distorted and flickers several times (*Kairo* 2001). This kind of interference along with the obscured perspective, which obstructs a clear view of the room by means of the curtain, are reminiscent of videos created by surveillance cameras. Several scenes utilize such points of view throughout the film, in which large sections of the shot are occluded by screens, doors, and other obstacles (see Fig. 5.14). These images, which do not correspond to any person's point of view, all evoke the feeling of the characters being watched by someone or something without their knowledge.[7]

7 Such points of view are an established convention to create unease in a film's audience. Well-known examples are Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) or Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980). The popularity of such perspectives continues to grow in the 21st century. Now, horror video games utilize similar perspectives

Fig. 5.13 ...and obstructed, distorted perspectives

Source: *Kairo* (2001)

Fig. 5.14 Obstructed perspectives remain a common feature throughout "Kairo"

Source: *Kairo* (2001)

to create an uncanny dissonance: in games such as *Until Dawn* (2015), *Man of Medan* (2019), or *Little Hope* (2020), players see and control their character from a third person perspective; oftentimes, they have to do so while viewing the

Some of these scenes have been adapted almost directly in *Pulse*. In comparison, however, Sonzero's film features fewer shots in which other elements obstruct the action framed within the image. For its surveillance aesthetics, *Pulse* instead depends more heavily on the use of a bird's-eye view as well as telephoto lenses with extremely long focal lengths. Sonzero uses the former several times to portray the university campus, where fewer and fewer people are moving about in each shot. Uncannily, the camera is positioned slightly differently each time, suggesting that this surveillance lens is moving about the campus of its own volition (see Fig. 5.15 and 5.16).

Fig. 5.15 Bird's-eye view of the campus

Source: *Pulse* (2006)

The telephoto lens is especially significant in the film's first scene: Mattie's soon-to-be-dead boyfriend Josh walks to the library, looking around him nervously several times. In this shot, Josh almost vanishes in a crowd of people. Adding to the feeling of surveillance, he is out of focus every now and then, as if an unidentified observer has had to readjust their camera. Each element of this scene's composition draws attention to the camera itself and to how somebody – or something – is watching Josh.

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character from the unsettling, oftentimes obscure perspective of an unknown and potentially dangerous observer.

Fig. 5.16 Camera position changes between such surveillance shots

Source: *Pulse* (2006)

The third and perhaps most important instance of surveillance in both films is the mysterious webcam feed. In *Kairo* and *Pulse*, this feed appears without any explanation; computer users suddenly find the words "Do you want to meet a ghost?" written on their screens (*Kairo* 2001; *Pulse* 2006). This question represents the doorway into the digital Forbidden Room, in which recordings of webcams – most of them only a few seconds long – appear to loop continuously. Gruesomely, many of these shots display figures, presumably human beings infected by the supernatural media virus, committing suicide in front of the camera.[8]

Ryan discusses the narrative potential of webcams by starting from the assumption that "[e]ach medium has particular affinities for certain themes and certain types of plot" (2004b: 356). Since these cameras are usually aimed at a specific setting and remain permanently in a fixed

8 The idea of dangerous individuals encouraging people to engage in self-harming behavior online is a recurring topic in discussions about the potential impact of the Internet, oftentimes resembling discussions of media violence in relation to television. A very recent example is the so-called "Momo challenge," which caused a considerable media stir in July 2018. Allegedly, an anonymous person instructed children via their smartphones to commit suicide. The Momo challenge, as well as the reports of suicides connected to it, were a hoax (Sugiura/Kirby 2019).

position, the images that they provide differ vastly from other types of videos:

> Webcams do not tell stories, since all they do is place a location under surveillance, but they provide a constant stream of potentially narrative material. Their capture is the visual equivalent of what Hayden White calls a chronicle: a chronological list of events that presents neither the closure nor the causality nor the formal organization of a plot. It is up to the viewer to construct a story out of this material. (ibid: 353)

As she goes on to explain: "in this dramatically impoverished environment […] the smallest change of state becomes a narrative event: a shadow stroking a linoleum floor, a car leaving the office parking lot, or a change of pattern in the sand of the cat box" (ibid). The narrative strength of the webcam medium lies in its networking capabilities and its utilization of volatile signs: they can be set up and accessed anywhere as long as there is an Internet connection, and by their very nature, provide an unedited stream of real time images; they do not require a long-term storage medium.

In the films, the webcam feed proves to be disorienting and disorganized, indeed a "stream of potentially narrative material." The protagonists struggle to identify the meaning behind the Forbidden Room. Is this truly a live feed, or is it prerecorded? Are the images looping, or is there variation to the recordings? Who are the people being depicted? Are they people at all, or are they ghosts? The meaning behind the question: "Do you want to meet a ghost?" is dangerously ambiguous. It suggests either that the portrayed figures are spirits or that will draw the ghosts' attention upon entering the chatroom. In the end, both interpretations turn out to be true, as the connection to the Forbidden Room is reciprocal. Not only are the infected ghostlike, but the connection to their webcams also reveals the position of the observer:

> Mattie: "How long have you been watching this?"
> Dex: "No, I think the question is how long they've been watching me." (*Pulse* 2006)

Indeed, in both films, characters suddenly find themselves featured on the webcam feed, without ever being able to find out where the camera filming them is positioned. They have unwillingly become part of this virtual world. By entering the Forbidden Room, observers will eventually be found out by ghosts as well and will become part of the looping feed themselves.

The Forbidden Room foregrounds perhaps the most controversial aspect of webcam feeds: users become voyeurs, peeking into a set location from the outside. They watch silently as people commit suicide in front of the camera. However, such voyeurism is punished, given that this chatroom opens up a reciprocal link to the other side. The horrifying mediated images of violence presented on the webcam feed seep into the real world as the apocalypse develops; scenes well-known from the feed become part of real life for the characters. In front of their eyes, people jump off towers or walk in front of buses; a burning airplane crashes in the middle of the city.[9] The infected Harue even reenacts a section from the webcam feed: a man pulling a plastic bag from his head and subsequently shooting himself. When Ryosuke and Michi find Harue in an abandoned factory towards the end of the film, she wears a similar bag over her head at first. Like the man from the Forbidden Room, Harue shoots herself after removing the bag.

In many regards, *Kairo* and *Pulse* build a bridge to the concerns that were already being voiced in *Ghostwatch*. Technology opens the door to another world, not only allowing a human audience to watch this realm on their television sets or computers, but also enabling this other world to watch back at, and even enter, the realm of the living. In these more recent films, however, the supernatural media virus reaches truly apocalyptic potential; once these boundaries have been breached, the

9 Building his argument on this portrayal of the crashing plane, Wetmore reads Sonzero's *Pulse* as an allusion to the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001 (2009: 76). While this argument is somewhat problematic and highly focused on the American perspective – especially considering that Kurosawa's *Kairo* features a similar scene –, it is true that mediated images of such violent catastrophes have become a common practice in times of television and social media.

infection can no longer be contained. Whereas Pipes could only travel through the channels established by network TV broadcast in the UK, the digital ghostly invaders can use every digital communication device as their viral vector, spreading throughout the entire world within an instant. *Kairo* and *Pulse* conceive of the network as a self-expanding, omnivorous entity that has reached such high degrees of complexity and connectivity that the entire world is affected once it becomes infected with the supernatural media virus. The result is disintegration, chaos, and death; both films do not specify the state of the world at their close. Instead, they conclude with their protagonists traveling the postapocalyptic world, not knowing what awaits them.

While Kurosawa's and Sonzero's films each negotiate anxieties arising with every new medium, as the fictions discussed in the previous chapters do – the fear of constant surveillance and of how (digital) media affect human nature – they go a step further by featuring a supernatural media virus that, without any doubt, has succeeded in bringing about the apocalypse. Whereas *Ghostwatch*, *House of Leaves*, and *Ring* all carry apocalyptic undertones to varying degrees, implying that their respective viruses could wreak havoc on society at large, if not even the entire world, they do not make the end of the world explicit. There are several reasons why the supernatural media virus is so powerful in *Kairo* and *Pulse*: first, digital technologies prove to be the best vector so far, having reached hitherto unknown degrees of pervasion and offering more efficient dissemination mechanisms than other media. Second – and more importantly – society is already suffering from a weakened "immune system" once the virus attacks, because the very same technologies have begun to disintegrate interpersonal relationships and social integrity. The supernatural media virus merely needs to exploit and amplify these trends in order to succeed.

Conclusions: Future Mutations of the Supernatural Media Virus

This book began with an unusual poltergeist in a small Northolt household and ended with the global apocalypse. This is the destructive power that the supernatural media virus has displayed in Gothic fiction since the 1990s. As a recurrent trope that comes in many different shapes in such fiction, the supernatural media virus couples the idea of dangerous corruptive media, as they have appeared previously in earlier Gothic texts such as Chambers' *The King in Yellow* or James' "Casting the Runes" with two phenomena emerging as cultural key metaphors at the close of the 20th century: the virus and the network. In fictions that feature the trope, a supernatural entity inscribes its evil powers into modern media technologies and, similar to a virus, is able to spread its influence across vast distances in virtually no time, due to the networked nature of today's society.

Metaphors are worldmaking devices that structure and narrativize our perception of diverse cultural phenomena. Closely analyzing their use, therefore, offers insight into how these metaphors shape culture and how they, in turn, are shaped by culture. I sought to cast light on the metaphorical potential of each term and to uncover the ideological "baggage" they carry by discussing how they conjointly appear in Gothic fiction in the form of the supernatural media virus. Both the virus and the network are seemingly omnipresent terms at the moment that are used to describe a broad range of phenomena. To state a few examples, most people engaging with popular culture of the 21st century will have come across the notions of "viral marketing" and "viral videos";

"networking" is the key strategy of getting to know the right people in order to get the ideal job for young professionals in diverse occupational fields. In many cases, these metaphors are accepted unquestioningly and sometimes even solidified as theoretical concepts. The "World Wide Web" is one of the best examples of this. While the term is used synonymously with the Internet and applied accordingly in a variety of scholarly, political, and cultural discourses, its metaphorical meanings are seldom considered. It does not take an IT specialist to realize that this web is in fact everything but "world wide": insufficient technological infrastructure, social inequality, and censorship are only a few of many factors testifying to the contrary. It is highly important to examine and discuss the implications such terms carry by considering the power of metaphor to function as political and cultural tools and to impose specific views and opinions.

The trope of the supernatural media virus results from a simplified understanding and an uncritical application of the virus and the network metaphors. Gothic fictions featuring the trope give shape to fears of villains that might lurk in our media technologies and the costs at which the insatiable wish for greater connectivity might come. The fictions that I have examined here imagine how technology and connectivity might affect human nature and what detrimental effects they can have on society at large, especially once infiltrated by an unforeseen, malevolent force. These texts imply that our networks – especially our media and technology networks – are prone to cataclysmic events. The supernatural media virus constitutes precisely the catastrophe that festers in the network society and which spreads everywhere. As these fictions claim, it becomes difficult to predict exactly how our increasingly complex, pervasive media and our wish for greater connectivity might affect us one day. Each portrayal of the supernatural media virus foregrounds different aspects and anxieties of life in a technologized and interconnected world, projecting distinct images of what to expect under such circumstances.

By building on and subverting some of the Gothic's most conventional tropes, the BBC mockumentary *Ghostwatch* contemplates the shift from mass to network society: how previously exclusively passive audi-

ences are slowly gaining the ability to play an active role in shaping the media contents that they consume; how the media producers providing such content now need to be scrutinized because previously trustworthy institutions may come under attack; and how, as a consequence of this, audiences should critically question both these media institutions and the contents they provide. The self-reflexive narrative hinges on the idea that a supernatural media virus – the poltergeist Pipes in this case – secretly piggybacks on the regular TV signal. The unwanted transmission is discovered too late to contain the contagion; the fictive investigators of the haunted house in Northolt did not consider that information might travel in multiple directions through the media channels they use.

The corruptive medium in *Ghostwatch* is not a physical medium for data storage, but is instead the live television transmission. Consequently, infection is, in principle, a onetime occurrence only: all television sets tuned into the BBC broadcast supposedly catch the supernatural media virus at the same time, which causes chaos and violence all over the country and which festers in the BBC studio. Significantly, the short story "31/10" by Volk implies that the media creators at the BBC have not learned anything from the incident: they repeat the investigation – this time at the haunted studio – and release the virus once again. The franchise foregrounds people's responsibility in facilitating the disease's spread.

The very fact that the supernatural media virus spreads from a small Northolt home throughout the entire nation hints at the emergence of a media model that represented a novelty in the early 1990s. Information no longer travels in one direction exclusively. The supernatural media virus can travel from a single household back to the BBC studio. The top-down, one-to-many communication model typical of mass society dissolves as potentially harmful information flows in multiple directions. It is these implications of the transition from mass to network society that constitute the core of *Ghostwatch*'s portrayal of a supernatural media virus.

Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves* and its transmedia extensions, the novella *The Whalestoe Letters*, and Poe's music album

Haunted, instead explore the broader implications of the network paradigm emerging at the turn of the century – the dubious tendency to think of everything in terms of networks and invisible connections. Itself structured as a multimodal transmedia network that defamiliarizes the conventions of the print novel, *House of Leaves* draws attention to the growing suspicion that some form of abstract network might be structuring all aspects of life today. The narrative performs this exploration by mirroring the labyrinthine house on Ash Tree Lane in the printed and disorienting text.

Thus, similar to *Ghostwatch*, Danielewski's narrative is a variation of the Gothic haunted house tale. *House of Leaves* uses the metaphor of the house with its implications of homeliness and familiarity to explore the network paradigm. Both the text and the house, in turn, resemble a network without a stable center. It is impossible to identify the main narrative in *House of Leaves*, given that multiple levels of footnotes, in addition to transmedia extensions, constantly usurp the supposed main text's dominance. Readers attempting to follow every clue and every footnote will inevitably leaf wildly through the pages of the print novel, oftentimes inadvertently circling back to where they started. Likewise, the explorers investigating the house on Ash Tree Lane find that the house can form new hallways and new rooms in the blink of an eye, making it impossible to ever reach its core or to pin down its exact dimensions. Through this interweaving of the house and the network metaphor, the house loses its function as a place of safety and homeliness and instead becomes a locus of terror and disorientation.

Significantly, *House of Leaves* illustrates the extent to which the virus and the network metaphor have become co-constitutive. In this narrative, the supernatural media virus is an inherent part of the network. Danielewski's narrative never reveals what the nature of the entity haunting both the house and the text itself is; instead, the novel foregrounds how the mysterious, continuously evolving virus infects new hosts, and explores the channels through which it spreads. In other words, instead of portraying the metaphorical pathogen, *House of Leaves* depicts the visible traces left by that microbe. This abstract portrayal of the trope is due to the fact that the supernatural media

virus in *House of Leaves* is essentially pure information. The manuscript becomes more confusing, and therefore more virulent, the more people add their own footnotes to it. Danielewski's text implies that the network paradigm inevitably causes a harmful information overload that confuses and overwhelms those people confronted with it. The characters of the novel – and, arguably, even the readers themselves – inadvertently turn into agents of the supernatural media virus: they compulsively expand on the corruptive manuscript by adding their own comments and footnotes, and they further circulate the manuscript in an attempt to find its core meaning.

Whereas *House of Leaves* is an exploration of the abstract network paradigm, the *Ring* franchise shifts the focus to the specific conditions and consequences of life in the network society, foregrounding its impact on social responsibility in particular. Each installment is set in a large metropolis which provides a tangible representation of the network society, where institutions, businesses, and transportation services, to give only a few examples, make up its diverse networks. The franchise introduces a strong moral dimension to its representation of the supernatural media virus: if people wish to survive the virus, then they need to infect other human beings. In such a densely populated and highly technologized urban setting, in which people hardly seem to know their direct neighbors, victims of the virus might not think twice about infecting another person in order to survive themselves. These narratives suggest that the network society fosters selfish and immoral behavior. Further investigating this moral dimension of the supernatural media virus and the network society, *Ring* casts a critical light on the social practices elicited by media technologies as well as the news and entertainment media in general. In the Japanese versions of the tale, it is the insatiable wish for entertainment that creates the supernatural media virus in the first place, as journalists pounce on the supernaturally gifted Sadako Yamamura and her mother without any regard for their personal well-being; in all installments, it is a similar quest for the next big story that causes the narratives' protagonists – all of them working for news agencies – to hunt down and decode the videotape, facilitating its further spread in the process.

Ring is both the oldest and the most recent narrative examined in this monograph: while the original novella was published in Japan in 1991, the franchise continues to grow even today. The tale of a corruptive medium induced with a deadly virus by the ghost of a wronged woman/child still resonates with audiences across the globe. One of several possible reasons for this continued interest is that, with its intricate interweaving of virus, host, environment, and vector, *Ring* paints a frightful picture of how our media technologies might develop their own agency at our expense. Significantly, this agency endows the supernatural media virus with the power to induce the apocalypse, exploiting human beings as its pawns in the scheme: each installment suggests that the infection will keep spreading, forcing its human victims to partake actively in the destruction of society by passing the corruptive medium along.

Going one step further, *Kairo* and *Pulse* play out the apocalypse brought about by the supernatural media virus in full. There is nothing left of human society except for a handful of survivors at the end of these films. Significantly, human society and especially interpersonal relationships are already disintegrating in both films before the ghostly infection begins to spread. Technologization and urbanization appear to bring great comforts, but they also cause grave troubles by disrupting meaningful social interaction. The supernatural media virus merely amplifies a detrimental trend that precedes its existence.

It is digital technologies in specific that are explored in *Kairo*/*Pulse*, pairing the conventions of the outbreak narrative with the affordances of digitality. Digital, networked technologies create subjects that are dispersed across a virtual network in these films; existence on these communication and media networks is pivotal. Even the ghostly invaders bear the characteristics of digital media: no longer individual, identifiable ghosts, these specters are instead multiple and networked. They constantly surveil their human victims, who are made vulnerable by the digital devices that they depend on in their everyday lives. Each film's setting – the densely populated metropolis Tokyo in *Kairo* and an unidentified university campus in *Pulse* – visually illustrates the risks posed by an Internet-based contagion that can infect human minds

and bodies. Both the metropolis and the university campus comprise the ideal breeding ground for the supernatural media virus to emerge and spread.

Each of these four franchises builds on and shapes the meanings implied in the virus and the network metaphor. In most texts, the supernatural media virus carries features of biological, digital, and media-related viral phenomena, fusing the diverse connotations of each of these fields into one terrifying villain. This virus targets society at its weakest spots; while the exact nature of that Achilles' heel differs in each fiction, they all suggest that the uncritical, careless interaction with media technologies can wreak havoc on society. These narratives cast an equally suspicious glance at the growing interconnection in all spheres of today's society. Were it not for the omnipresence of networks, these texts imply, the supernatural media virus could not have thrived and spread.

Importantly, these four narratives must not be regarded as shallow claptrap aimed at exploiting vague fears regarding technology. It would be simplistic to claim that such Gothic narratives representing the supernatural media virus merely voice existing anxieties regarding the network society and its media technologies. These fictions are never a simple reflection of cultural fears. Rather, they are always active forces that not only shape and foster these anxieties, but also question them. To quote David Punter:

> Pest, pester, pestilence: Is the Gothic, to engage in a little etymological arabesque, pestifugous, or is it pestiduct? Does it spread contamination, or might it provide a channel for the expulsion of contaminating materials? (2012: 7)

Gothic fiction both amplifies existing preconceptions and uncovers flaws within them when exploring the darker implications of increasing connectivity and technologization. It is both "pestifugous" and "pestiduct," simultaneously spreading and containing the ideologies that it thematizes.

Ghostwatch, for instance, asks its viewers to engage critically with what they are watching and to reflect upon the mechanisms behind

media production and consumption. It is precisely the absurd conceit behind the narrative that invites critical debate. Fictions such as *Ghostwatch* fulfill an important function in shaping the ways in which we view the media technologies that we engage with and in demonstrating how they both affect and are affected by society. Even today, the significance of the mockumentary remains evident: while *Ghostwatch* may be one of the oldest portrayals of the supernatural media virus discussed in this work, its key issues of unchecked and untrustworthy media content still comprise a hot topic, perhaps now even more than ever before in today's times of fake news.

In a similar manner, *Ring* presents a gross oversimplification of media pervasion: Sadako/Samara and her curse are so dangerous because televisions and VCRs are supposedly omnipresent. The narrative suggests that there is no possibility to escape these media, an assumption that is refuted as easily as the claim to a "world wide" web. Deserts and dead zones *do* exist on our planet, and they might provide a refuge from the Ring virus; however, their safety comes at the cost of a comfortable, technologized life. Additionally, the franchise implies that the emergence of the cursed videotape could have been prevented. It is the selfishness of thrill-seeking audiences, accustomed to easily accessible entertainment anywhere and anytime, which creates the virus and ensures its continued existence. The franchise invites its viewers to question critically how we take our media technologies for granted and to review the costs incurred. Instead of being afraid of and eschewing these media technologies, *Ring* suggests that we should keep a watchful eye on how we interact with them.

Each franchise discussed here fulfills this double function; they are all both pestifugous and pestiduct. This is because each of them thrives on *assumptions*, rather than on objective *facts*. One indication of this is how the franchises examined here all utilize the highly conventionalized narrative structures of factual and fictional outbreak narratives, albeit to varying degrees, in order to give narrative shape to the danger of the supernatural media virus, to state only one example. On the one hand, these stories evoke the horrors of the perceived threats posed by the network society and modern media. On the other hand, the fic-

tions inevitably also illustrate the shortcomings and fallacies of these assumptions. Analyzing texts featuring similar dynamics and concerns, therefore, comprises a strategy for uncovering the meanings encoded in those tropes and metaphors. It also reveals the "evolution" of the supernatural media virus over the decades; at the very least, it shows a shift in concern over the years.

Comparing the representation of the virus' host yields the recognition that all narratives dwell on the role played by the individual person in facilitating the infection. These fictions imagine how the actions of a single person might affect the network society as a whole. In doing so, they tend to either portray the host as a passive person, as *Kairo* and *Pulse* do, or they feature hosts that actively spread the infection, as is the case in *House of Leaves* and *Ring*. In the latter case, the hosts can aid the virus either inadvertently, as in Danielewski's narrative, or in full knowledge, as they do in *Ring*. These differences in the host's function tie back to the virus' vector, foregrounding the specific types of media interaction promoted and legitimized by that medium. Both *House of Leaves* and *Ring* feature a physical medium as viral vector that readers/viewers easily can modify, edit, and copy. The print novel and the videotape invite active engagement. The deadly technologies featured in *Kairo* and *Pulse*, on the other hand, are digital and networked; their key properties reside not in their physicality, but in their ability to span a virtual space. In both films, the more people interact with these devices and, hence, are drawn into these virtual communities, the more passive they become in the real world.

Ghostwatch provides a sort of middle ground between the passive and active hosts. Here, the supernatural media virus depends on a large number of people tuning in the BBC program in order to spread it. The virus could not spread if enough viewers were to switch channels or to even turn the television off. Therefore, while individual viewers can do little to contain or to set free the poltergeist Pipes, *Ghostwatch* suggests that audiences at large are gaining an agency in controlling the types of media contents transmitted via their remote control.

The second feature that recurs in all of these fictions is the relevance of setting, giving insight into the extent to which these narratives con-

ceive of society as a network, and into how this network functions as the virus' environment and breeding ground. In both *Ghostwatch* and *House of Leaves*, houses are an integral part of the narrative. In these stories, the house functions as a place of familiarity and safety that eventually comes under attack. It loses its protective properties and instead becomes the locus from which the supernatural media virus spreads. The haunted house functions as a metaphor for the consequences of the network society. Significantly, the respective haunted house explicitly exists in close proximity to a larger city such as London or Los Angeles in both narratives; this constellation indicates that the infection of the house might quickly expand to that metropolis. This particular setting signifies the far-reaching influences that the individual person might have on the network society as a whole; the cataclysm threatens to spread from the minuscule house to the vast city.

Ring and *Kairo*, conversely, are set in large, sprawling metropolises. There no longer is any question of whether the network society has arrived when considering the sheer vastness of these technologized, mediasaturated cities, in which human beings dwell right next to and even on top of each other in towering high-rises. Further strengthening this impression, both fictions obsessively dwell on the diverse networks that the characters encounter in the city, most importantly the mass transit and communication networks. Whereas the first two narratives almost appear as a careful consideration of what may happen once these (haunted) houses are connected to a larger, multidirectional web, *Ring* and *Kairo* are explicitly set right in the middle of the network and portray characters living therein.

Released in 2006, *Pulse* provides another mutation of the use of setting: with its unidentified campus setting, it foregrounds the fact that absolute geographic location is losing its significance in the era of the digitalized network society. The supernatural media virus does not rely on cities with a high population density in order to spread; it can thrive in any area that is well-connected to the Internet. Hence, in contrast to *Ring* and *Kairo*, the film foregrounds the social media networks used by the characters. While the small campus is set somewhere in Ohio, it

is nonetheless a central hub in the digital network and is, therefore, a breeding ground for the supernatural media virus.

The most obvious evolutionary development across the narratives is the viral vector or corruptive medium. *Kairo*, *Pulse*, and the latest installments of the *Ring* franchise all feature digital media as viral vectors, whereas *Ghostwatch*, *House of Leaves*, and the earlier *Ring* fictions restrict themselves to analog media. Of course, this shift towards digitality does not come as a surprise, given that narratives are bound to keep up with the latest technological developments. It is obvious that deadly videotapes would simply no longer pose a believable threat considering the obsolescence of VCRs in today's average household. However, the evolution towards digital media in portrayals of the supernatural media virus touches upon new topics and concerns: the shift towards virtual communities, possibly at the expense of face-to-face, personal interactions; the Internet as an opaque, seemingly self-expanding network; increasing pressure to connect to that "World Wide Web"; continuous surveillance; and the suspicion that "smart" technologies may develop an agency of their own and, in times of artificial intelligence, might truly become smarter than their human users. These are only some of the emerging concerns with digital technologies, and most of them center on how digitality might one day come to affect human identities and relationships. These concerns resonate with a suspicion already voiced by Morozov: "the most banal everyday objects have acquired tremendous power to regulate behavior" (2014). Small and handy as they may be, digital devices already affect our everyday lives tremendously.

This shift towards digital technologies also provides the first of several exciting avenues future discussions of the trope of the supernatural media virus could explore. Fictions featuring this trope continue to be written today, yet the technologies they feature are very different from most of those discussed here. These narratives from the last few years increasingly feature "smart" technologies. Media devices grow smaller and more intelligent at an incredible pace, aiding us in our everyday struggles and offering solutions for diverse problems. Every technology released today is seemingly "smart": smartphones, smart homes, smart speakers, smartwatches, and so on. These devices claim to provide com-

fort and ease, from setting the alarm clock and regulating the room temperature to picking out the right dinner music and even monitoring our health. Considering the omnipresence of these technologies in our everyday lives, their connectivity to other devices, and the amount of personal data they can access in particular, the thought of these media developing independent agency along with a malevolent will of their own is utterly terrifying.

Two recent films exploring the viral potential of smart technologies include the Italian film *You Die: Get the App, Then Die* (dir. Alessandro Antonacy/Daniel Lascar/Stefano Mandalà, 2018) and the US motion picture *Countdown* (dir. Justin Dec, 2019).[1] In both films, a supernatural media virus spreads via smartphones, haunting them wherever they go. What seems like a fun, harmless pastime at first – an augmented reality app that allows users to see ghosts in the case of *You Die* and a simple countdown app predicting a person's time of death in *Countdown* – eventually turns into pure horror. Both films explore the dynamics of smartphones that mark them as excellent viral vectors.

You Die centers largely on the imprudence with which people hand off their smartphones to complete strangers. The only possibility of surviving the film's supernatural media virus is by installing the app "You Die" on another person's phone every 24 hours. All it takes to spread the virus is to borrow a stranger's phone under the pretense of having to make an important call. *Countdown*, in contrast, centers on the carelessness with which people follow smartphone trends. Suddenly, this new app is available, and everybody needs to have it for some reason. Only a few of its users care to read the fine print. This is punished severely, as they are haunted by the literal "Terms and Conditions" from hell. Both films illustrate how easy it is to get used to smart technologies, and how difficult it can be to steer clear of them. *You Die*'s and *Countdown*'s supernatural media viruses target many fears concerning the emergence and popularity of smart technologies by considering how uncritically most users engage with their smartphones, sharing incredible amounts of

1 For an in-depth discussion of these two films, consult Schmitz (2020b).

personal data and downloading apps without affirming their trustworthiness or reading the fine print.

Smart speakers are another example of networked smart technology that could soon make an appearance in Gothic fiction through the trope of the supernatural media virus. Like all smart technologies, devices such as Alexa or Google Assistant depend on an Internet connection to exploit their complete range of functions, and most of them only live up to their full potential if their user allows them to be monitored constantly. The only possibility of using a smart speaker is by allowing it to eavesdrop at all times, waiting for the correct cue – "Alexa" in the former, "Hey Google" in the latter case – signifying that its services are being requested. The concern with continuous surveillance voiced in *Kairo* and *Pulse* only deepens in light of such devices. Increasingly, smart speakers are combined with other technologies: they are installed in cars, headphones, television sets, and so on. None of these speakers themselves are truly "smart"; in truth, they are little more than audio speakers equipped with a microphone and an Internet connection. The entire intelligence of these systems resides in their cloud services. The smart speaker sends every request made by the user to the cloud, where the request is decoded, processed, and a suitable reaction is implemented. Significantly, these cloud servers are essentially black boxes: it remains a mystery what exactly happens with the incoming data, how and whether it is stored, and how personal information is treated. The fact that this private information might not be handled in a way that users would like it to be is a proven fact by now: every company producing smart speakers is also employing staff to analyze and interpret large amounts of incoming requests in order to improve the AI, a practice that is in direct opposition to privacy and data protection laws (Bleich 2019: 74). Even today, thus, the abuse of smart speakers has already become a reality; from there, it is a small step to fictions focusing on the misuse of and the harm inflicted by smart speakers. A specifically Gothic exploration of these devices having become haunted by a supernatural media virus is a fascinating prospect and may be expected in the near future.

Beyond smart technologies, it is especially virtual communities and social media that currently inspire narratives that feature the supernatural media virus and that will probably continue to do so. Three filmic examples of this include *Feardotcom* (dir. William Malone, 2002), *Unfriended* (dir. Leo Gabriadze, 2014), and *Friend Request* (dir. Simon Verhoeven, 2016). The supernatural antagonists in these films do not qualify as supernatural media viruses, in the strict sense of the term, because they do not aim to perpetuate themselves endlessly and do not seek to spread throughout society at large. However, each of these narratives is concerned with information that is either harmful or detrimental to someone's reputation going viral on the Internet, and how such content might literally come back to haunt us.

Feardotcom revolves around the eponymous web page featuring voyeuristic torture murders. Everybody visiting that website in search of violent imagery dies after 48 hours. Eventually, it is revealed that the website was created by the ghost of a girl, Jeannine, who was tortured for two days and murdered in one such online dungeon. The supernatural media virus targets those voyeurs watching atrocities and, like Samara's curse in *The Ring*, subjects them to the same suffering experienced by Jeannine before her death.

The two latter films, *Unfriended* and *Friend Request*, revolve around social media and cyberbullying. *Unfriended* is shot entirely through the image of a computer screen; instead of filming real-life people, the film exclusively displays the on-screen interaction via platforms such as Skype, Facebook, and Instagram. In the film, the Skype chatroom of a group of teenagers is suddenly joined by an account belonging to a dead girl. This person, Laura Barns, committed suicide after a debasing video of her went viral. Everyone in the chatroom is somehow connected to Laura's demise. The ghost now plays them off against each other by taking control of their social media accounts, and, for instance, by publicly revealing private information on their Facebook pages. The evening ends in death for all of the teenagers, because Laura's ghost can not only harm them in their virtual lives, but also force them to commit suicide in real life.

Friend Request similarly features the ghost of a girl who killed herself after being "unfriended" on Facebook. The deceased teenager, Marina Nedifar – an anagram of "a friend" – takes control of the Facebook profiles of those people who removed her from their friend lists. Disturbing images and videos appear on those social media pages, and the owners of these accounts find that they cannot remove them. In the end, the protagonist Laura is attacked and presumably possessed by the demonic Marina, which suggests that the ghost of the girl can slip into other people's skin and that its vendetta might continue.

These three films share several aspects, many of which are at least partially present in this study's four narratives. First, each of them implies that the Internet and its virtual, impersonal communities cause a desensitization where the most horrible crimes and most debasing videos are accepted and turned into a form of entertainment. Second, they portray ways in which the virtual and the real blend into one another; performing harmful actions or releasing sensitive information in one realm will have an effect on the other as well. Third, similar to *Kairo* and *Pulse*, these films suggest that these virtual networks might establish an unexpected opportunity for surveillance by unknown persons – or ghosts. It does not remain a secret which websites the characters visit or with whom they share what data; it is this very information that the ghosts use against their victims. Finally, all three films link their focus on cyberbullying and online violence to the topic of gender, a direction of research that has been left unexplored entirely in this monograph: it is always young women who are the victims of these practices, and their vengeance from beyond the grave is terrible.

Moving beyond the potential thematic variations of the supernatural media virus, a third desideratum of research is the appearance of the supernatural media virus in media other than literature, television, and film. Each medium has its distinct characteristics and offers unique possibilities to construct and distribute a narrative. The Slender Man myth discussed in the Introduction of this book is a case in point. The myth originated as a so-called "creepypasta" – a user-generated horror legend that is passed around the Internet through the process of copying and pasting, with many users adding their own elements to the

myth. Slender Man exemplifies that independent, even crowdsourced storytelling with little or no financial resources can create compelling and complex stories featuring the trope.

Additionally, interactive narrative media such as video games are further promising objects of research. One key feature of digital games is that they assign their players an active role in experiencing and sometimes even shaping the narrative. This agency, and especially the disturbance thereof, is the key to a compelling Gothic video game. As Tanya Krzywinska explains: "'To act' (and to act in a timely and correct manner) is the leading currency of interactive games and 'to be unable to act' is Gothic articulation, or perversion, of this currency in games" (2015: 71). Players are both empowered and disempowered through the friction of player agency, where players can make meaningful choices and see the results thereof, and game predetermination, where certain elements of the game cannot be modified and so lie outside of the user's control. This design element in video games is what Chad Habel and Ben Kooyman refer to as "agency mechanics" (2014: 1). Video games constitute an exciting medium for such tales considering that the host's agency and conscientiousness in spreading the supernatural media virus is a central theme in representations of the trope. Players either become agents of the virus' spread or epidemiologists attempting to contain it; yet, the consequences of their actions might be unforeseeable. Nevertheless, there is a suspicious lack of such titles portraying the supernatural media virus. Instead, there are numerous games featuring something similar to, but not quite like the supernatural media virus. These games can be broadly grouped into two categories.

In the first category, there are those games that fail to embed the supernatural media virus in the broader context of the network society. Two examples of this type include the action-adventure *Pony Island* (Daniel Mullins Games 2016) and the visual novel *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (Team Salvato 2017), both horror games developed by small, independent studios. Both titles are highly metafictional and self-reflexive, each portraying an antagonist that rewrites the code of the very game that the player is playing. For instance, the villain directly addresses the player or disrupts their gaming by corrupting save games and other

game data. In *Doki Doki Literature Club!*, players even have to access the game's directory on their computers and delete or rename elements from the installed game. In this way, the villains in both games come to resemble sentient computer viruses that break out of the game's source code and infect the player's computer as well. In that sense, they are media viruses, and – at least in the case of *Pony Island* – are even supernatural. However, the infection is contained to that singular device; the virus might destroy that system, but it does not pose a threat beyond that. Thus, one key feature of the trope of the supernatural media virus is lacking in these games: its concern with the network society. Instead, these games envision computers as opaque, complex black boxes that might magically spin out of their user's control at any time.

The second category consists of games that – despite depicting viruses and their effects on the network – feature only viruses that are neither supernatural nor necessarily media-related. There is a plethora of games portraying the global apocalypse induced by a virus. The highly successful *Resident Evil* franchise, comprised of multiple survival horror games with strong action elements, is one example of this. In these games, players fight zombies and other monsters created by various genetically modified viruses. Another, very different example is the real-time strategy simulation *Plague Inc.* (Ndemic Creations 2012). Players create their own deadly plague by controlling the pathogen's evolution and by taking a broad range of variables, such as economic, cultural, and political factors, into consideration. Because a wide range of game scenarios are available, these can include all types of both real and fictional diseases: smallpox, biological weapons, a vampire disease, computer viruses, and even fake news. Each of these demand unique strategies in order to win the game. Titles such as *Resident Evil* and *Plague Inc.* foreground the ways in which the growing interconnection between people, countries, institutions, and businesses on a global scale affects the spread of diseases. These games explore the reciprocal influence of virus and network, and they do so without necessarily deploying a supernatural, media-based entity; they imply that both the disease and the channels it travels through are man-made affordances of globalization and technologization. It is telling that *Plague Inc.*, a

game that currently has more than 130 million players worldwide, was pulled from the app store and later from Steam as well in China amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in February and March 2020, respectively. The game was declared to feature "content that is illegal in China as determined by the Cyberspace Administration of China" (Ndemic Creations 2020). Whether those illegal contents relate to the real-life pandemic or to the fact that *Plague Inc.* lets its players test out the dynamics of fake news is unclear: the Chinese Administration never stated their reasons for the decision. Either way, this particular incident of censorship is a vivid illustration of the cultural and ideological significance that can be attributed to pop culture artifacts such as video games.

Nonsupernatural viruses provide a fourth topic for further research; namely, the supernatural media virus' adjacent tropes. There already is ample research on the representation of biological epidemics in fiction. However, there is a significant research gap when it comes to fictional representations of technology-based diseases, such as computer viruses that can infect biological bodies. Yet, there is a multitude of fictions that portray such technological viruses, which are not necessarily supernatural. The present book focuses explicitly on supernatural entities; such supernatural elements suggest that it is impossible to understand, let alone defeat the virus by means of science; that both the virus and the network are too complex and obscure to be grasped by the human mind. Yet, texts such as Cronenberg's film *Videodrome* and King's novel *Cell* feature viral media without any supernatural element. In the film, a hallucination-inducing broadcast signal called "Videodrome" is part of a mind control conspiracy; in the novel, a viral audio signal transmitted via the cell phone network causes everybody using their phone at the time of transmission to mutate into zombielike creatures. Both narratives portray a media virus that directly targets the human body and mind, even though it is created by and transmitted through technology. Similar to the aforementioned games, these narratives suggest that the viral media confronting their protagonists are the result of careless or even outright malevolent scientific endeavors. While they cast a critical eye on media interaction and creation as well, they also imply that it is possible to fight the virus with its own weapons. Indeed, *Cell* concludes

with the protagonist Clayton Riddell attempting to cure the infected by transmitting a countersignal. It is not revealed whether his experiment succeeds, but the novel ends on a hopeful note, nonetheless. Hence, the dynamics and concerns of such fictions featuring a nonsupernatural media virus are very different from those discussed here and constitute a worthwhile avenue for future research.

These are only some examples of many different directions that the discussions of the virus and network metaphor, the supernatural media virus, and its related tropes might take in the future. I did not seek to provide a complete, final examination of the supernatural media virus – such an undertaking would go beyond the scope of any single book and would not benefit the discussion. This study gauges the implications, meanings, and transformations of the supernatural media virus and the metaphors it utilizes within its cultural contexts and offers strategies for engaging with them, instead of a simple "mapping" of occurrences of the trope in Gothic fiction.

The 21st century is the age of virus anxiety, where we constantly expect the next big virus outbreak. The COVID-19 pandemic, the increase in computer virus attacks, and the proliferation of fake news all illustrate the omnipresence of viral phenomena that are spreading through diverse types of networks today, regardless of whether they are biological, digital, or media-related in nature. Today, we truly live in a viral network culture, where viruses and networks appear to shape every aspect of our reality. Therefore, we must pay careful attention to the confluences of these cultural key metaphors. We must be mindful not only of the respective phenomena in themselves, but also of the imaginations, ideas, and discourses that emerge around them which exercise a fundamental impact on how we understand our world, how we interact with it, and how we cope with these diverse virus outbreaks. The supernatural media virus is one of these manifold confluences of the metaphors that give narrative shape to anxieties regarding emerging media technologies.

The real task at hand, then, is to continue discussing such tropes and the metaphors they use. Media, technology, and networks – just like biological viruses – are all part of life and will continue to emerge

and thrive in the future as well. Likewise, Gothic fiction will continue to explore these trends. Yet, this does not mean that we should neither cast a critical eye on these developments, nor that we should accept the narratives told about them unquestioningly.

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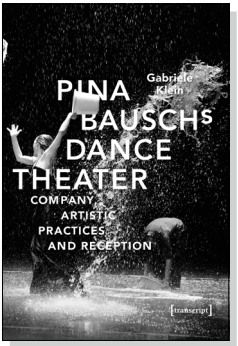

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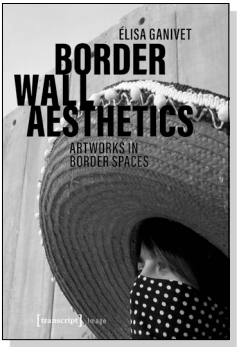

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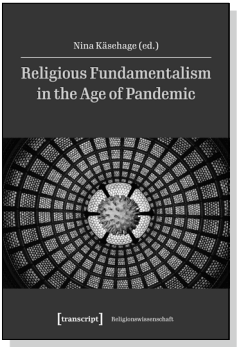

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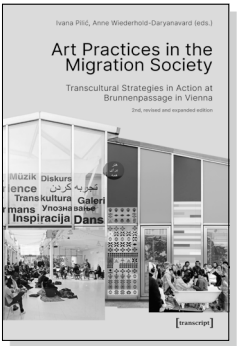

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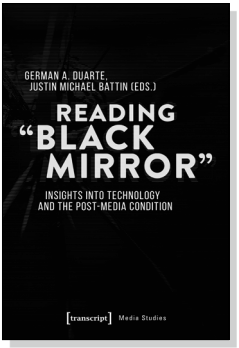

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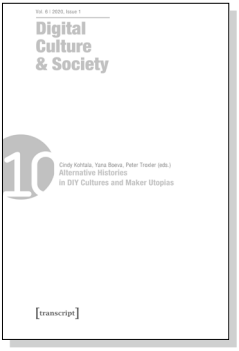

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