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.