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.