MEME – A NOVEL

&

IN SEARCH OF DIGITAL GOTHIC

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ABSTRACT

This doctoral thesis comprises a novel, *Meme*, which I consider to be in the new genre of *digital gothic*, and a piece of contextualising research, *In Search of Digital Gothic*. *Meme* tells the story of Scarlett, a PhD student in Digital Anthropology who stumbles across the existence of an ancient folk tale that is so disturbing, frightening or dangerous that it has always been forbidden from being shared. Scarlett comes to believe that the tale was leaked onto the internet, and sets out to track it down. In doing so, she discovers it may have played a role in the death of her brother Nathan, whose suicide some years before has left her traumatised and unable to connect with the world around her.

In my contextualising research, I explain how I was drawn to the "digital gothic" as a way to express the sense that, beneath the perfect sheen of our twenty-first-century digitally mediated lives, there are troubling and ambiguous forces that border on the uncanny. The Gothic as a genre is a natural correlative or container for such ideas, and my project explores existing manifestations of the digital gothic in both prose fiction and multimedia works.

In Part II, "Infectious Media", I examine the behaviour of *memes*, and analyse their unsettling features as *uncanny replicators* that display *uncanny metalepsis*. I draw comparisons with Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), arguing that Dracula is in essence a meme; and with the ghost stories of M.R. James, in particular "The Mezzotint" (1904), where multimedia objects repeatedly breach their protective frames.

Part III, "Digital Masks, Digital Ghosts", explores *presence* in the digital age, with a focus on the haunting possibilities inherent in social media and communications, anonymity and trolling. I use the recent cinematic subgenre of webcam horror (*Unfriended*, *Cam*, *Host*) to examine the notion of the digital ghost.

Finally, in Part IV, "Haunted Mazes", I discuss the manifestation of *uncanny time* and *interactivity* in the digital gothic, utilising the metaphor of the maze or labyrinth. I use the Jacques Derrida/Mark Fisher concept of *hauntology* as a frame to examine these themes in the M. R. James ghost story "Mr Humphreys and his Inheritance" (1911), and Charlie Brooker's interactive television episode, *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018).

Taken together, the novel and the contextual research offer an innovative creative–critical undertaking that nonetheless draws upon an existing tradition of literary work, and resonates meaningfully with the wider culture beyond it.

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Introduction

I wrote the novel that makes up the creative portion of my PhD, *Meme*, in part to express, or maybe exorcise, a feeling or intuition about early twenty-first-century living. We live – most of us – in a hyper-connected age, where our always-on devices allow us unparalleled opportunities to connect with each other, and provide easy access to information and experiences undreamed of even a generation ago. Yet there is a shadow side to this digitally-mediated world. Versions of our "selves" now have an existence well beyond the bounds of our personal control, beyond our bodies, beyond even death itself. Human interactions are mediated by the invisible hand of algorithms and deliberate gamification. New moral choices are presented in the age of anonymity and identity slippage; and every time we wake them from sleep, we are confronted by technological black boxes and unsettlingly hybrid media objects whose nature we do not fully comprehend. While the internet and our host of digital devices present at first glance a rational, glossy surface, under more careful scrutiny they represent a locus of growing anxiety, an "uncanny realm" we do not fully understand or know how to process, a liminal membrane through which objects and behaviours which are illogical, morbidly curious, and morally uncertain repeatedly break through. In short, we are living in a digitally uncanny age, and one that would seem to demand a response from storytellers that is attuned to that uncanniness.

It seemed to me that there was a *narrative space* in which these ideas had yet to be fully explored, especially in the realm of literary fiction. My *aesthetic hypothesis* was that the preoccupations of this space, with the imagery, atmosphere and story possibilities it suggested to me, were powerfully resonant with an existing and much older genre: the Gothic. Gothic fiction is replete with tropes and concerns that productively overlap with my wish to explore the dark side of the digital. According to Fred Botting, the Gothic has long displayed a "fascination with transgression and the anxiety over cultural limits and boundaries". Gothic narratives are obsessed with "objects and practices that are constructed as negative, irrational, immoral and fantastic". Uncanny threats drive "tortuous, fragmented narratives" filled with "uncanny dualities" where "imagination and emotional effects exceed reason". Technological and cultural change unleash monsters. The symbiosis

of Gothic horrors and terrors "activate a sense of the unknown and project an uncontrollable and overwhelming power which threatens not only the loss of sanity… or social standing but the very order which supports and is regulated by the coherence of those terms". (Botting, 1996, pp. 1-13) It is a genre of cultures in flux, categories crashing together, individuals disintegrating.

The uncanny and the Gothic seem inextricably bound together, to the extent that it is hard to imagine one without at least substantial traces of the other. For the purposes of this thesis, I'm broadly accepting Freud's articulation of *the uncanny* (or *the unhomely*) as explored in his famous essay, *Das Unheimliche* (Freud 1919). Any discussion of the uncanny is, however, complicated by the fact that Freud's own definition is a moving target, manifold and evolving – firstly being concerned with pure emotional tone or reaction ("all that arouses dread and creeping horror"); secondly being about the return of the repressed more generally ("everything is uncanny that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light"); and most convincingly articulated as an effect that arises when our modern-day, rationalistic disregarding of pre-modern, superstitious, animistic beliefs – "omnipotence of thoughts, instantaneous wish-fulfillments, secret power to do harm and the return of the dead" – is tested and appears to fail:

> We—or our primitive forefathers—once believed in the possibility of these things and were convinced that they really happened. Nowadays we no longer believe in them, we have *surmounted* such ways of thought; but we do not feel quite sure of our new set of beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation. As soon as something actually happens in our lives which seems to support the old, discarded beliefs, we get a feeling of the uncanny; and it is as though we were making a judgment something like this: "So, after all, it is true that one can kill a person by merely desiring his death!" or, "Then the dead do continue to live and appear before our eyes on the scene of their former activities!", and so on. (Freud, 1919, pp.247-248)

Freud's essay has been comprehensively critiqued by, amongst others, Mark Fisher, who argues that the notion is more productively unpacked into *the weird* (that which does not belong) and *the eerie* (that which has questions of agency, things missing) (Fisher, 2016). However, while *Das Unheimliche* has its problematic obsessions with "repressed infantile complexes", as suggested above it actually contains a more nuanced discussion of the

pragmatics of creating uncanny *effects* in fiction than e.g. Fisher allows. For example, Freud explicitly acknowledges that it works best where the writer at least "pretends to move in the world of common reality", grounding their fictional world with at least one foot in realism, before wheeling in the mechanisms that then undermine and challenge the apparent rules of that reality. This is, perhaps, one useful way of distinguishing Gothic sub-genres from those rooted in straight-out fantasy.

With typical authorial hubris I believed I had invented a new, hybrid genre wholesale: the *digital gothic*, which I would define as any work that utilises tropes, themes and conceptual elements inspired by classic Gothic fiction, and its descendent media, to address the preoccupations and concerns of the contemporary digital age. My assumption that it was untrod ground turned out inevitably – and helpfully – not to be the case. When I was first conceiving the novel in 2014-2015, the putative digital gothic was arguably a relatively small field. The revised Palgrave Macmillan *Handbook of the Gothic* for example, contains no entries for anything adjacent to the digital, the closest being the very 80s-inflected "Cyberpunk" (Grant, 2009). But as my book developed, the research area evolved into a burgeoning sphere of academic inquiry, and with it, increasingly sophisticated definitions and analyses.

In a chapter on "Gothic Digital Technologies" in *Twenty-First Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, for example, Joseph Crawford identifies the internet itself as a "deeply Gothic environment", characterised by "persistent anxieties of infection, deception, exploitation and surveillance", a natural place to give birth to media which deliberately "draw upon anxieties regarding corruption and contagion in order to exploit the potential of online technologies to unnerve their users and unsettle their sense of reality". (Crawford, 2019, p. 72) In a paper on one subset of these media, online scary stories or "creepypasta", Jessica Balanzategui (2019) gives an essentially hauntological analysis of the digital gothic, seeing it as defined by "cultural tensions underlying the relationships between contemporary digital cultures and dead or residual media, in particular analogue media," (p. 188). For Balanzategui , those tensions stand as a correlative for personal and cultural fears of obsolescence and collapse, and are connected to the Gothic's "fluid, shifting boundaries between memory and history, the past and the present" (p. 204). She also points out the way the viral spread and re-imaginings of these media across multiple forums "extend the long-standing Gothic tradition of crafting a troubling, ambiguous impression of authenticity

out of spurious origin claims" (p. 192), as evidenced by Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) (see also Part IV).

Joseph Crawford even argues that new media are *inevitably and inescapably* Gothic in nature:

> …such forms are always going to provoke a certain level of anxiety, precisely because their potential is still unknown, and because they do not yet fit comfortably into any established formal hierarchy... It should thus not surprise us to find that the fictions expressed via such new media forms frequently circle around the themes of monstrosity, disruption, illegitimacy, and disintegration, because these are what they enact, by their very existence. Every new form of popular media technology is a kind of monstrous birth. (Crawford, 2015, p. 2)

Crawford, like the others, presents a cogent analyses that describes many of the tropes I deploy in my own novel. But I would add to them an explicitly *bidirectional hypothesis*: that is, that while digital texts frequently behave like Gothic ones, particularly in their deployment of uncanny tropes, Gothic texts unsettlingly often seem to display a sort of nascent *proto-* or *pseudo-digitality*. That is, they appear to act *like* digital texts, behaving in ways that appear eerily contemporary, operating like objects from the twenty-first century rather than the eighteenth, nineteenth or twentieth, with a technological and cultural prescience in their themes, tropes and techniques – as if the two are echoing back and forth across a canyon of time.

My *bidirectional hypothesis* was partly inspired by a reading of Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), which seemed to me to operate often like a piece of software in need of a patch update. It displays fascinating multi-media and multi-modality (is it a novel? A travelogue? A commonplace book of paintings and poetry, cut and pasted into the text? A series of Instagram posts, with the Sublime filter set permanently on? A Tumblr?). Certainly, it is full of glitches and elisions (the explanation for Emily's horror at the veiled portrait, first seen in Volume 2, Chapter 6, which does not come for 400 pages), pop-ups (Emily's dog, which disappears for the span of half the book then suddenly blinks into existence when authorially required, Chapter 6 again), and re-used assets (the same castle shell being used for Udolpho and Chateaux-de-Blanc; the same sail-boats and mountain ranges repeating infinitely in the background). As a piece of narrative software, it is prone to continual crashes (Emily's repeated swooning), and even reboots itself completely two

thirds of the way in (the apparent replacement of Emily, her family and associates in Volume 3, Chapter 10 with Blanche and family, a set of re-spawned lookalike protagonists). It usefully suggested some of the likely tropes and territory of the nascent genre for me. Where Radcliffe's heroine would find sublime danger in ruined castles and shattered mountain passes, mine would find them in dead websites, broken code, the platters of crashed hard-drives. Virtual topographies and archaeologies replace physical ones (cf. Reinhard, 2018). This *protodigitality* is obviously historically impossible, and no doubt a by-product of the metaphorical frames with which one approaches the texts. But to make such an ahistorical act of appropriation is actually a tremendously Gothic thing to do. What mattered to me in the end was not whether this bidirectional hypothesis was literally *true*, but whether it was creatively *productive*.

For purposes of concision in this contextualising analysis, I have confined myself for the most part to a small group of works. On the Gothic side, I have drawn on Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and the ghost stories of M.R. James. On the digital side I have mostly utilised webcam horrors – *Unfriended* (2014), *Cam* (2018) and *Host* (2020) – and the interactive episode of Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* series, *Bandersnatch* (2018). This focus on multimedia rather than prose fiction for the contemporary corpus is in part because they display obvious digitality, bringing it to the foreground. But it also reflects the openness of the specific prose fiction space I wanted to write in.

II: INFECTIOUS MEDIA

Slender Man & Creepypasta – The Tale – Memes as Uncanny Replicators – *Dracula* – Memes and Uncanny Metalepsis – M. R. James and 'The Mezzotint'

On 31st March, 2014, two twelve-year-old Wisconsin schoolgirls lured their best friend into nearby woods and stabbed her nineteen times, leaving her for dead. The victim survived, crawling out of the forest where she was found by a passing cyclist. When questioned by police, the perpetrators revealed their motivation for this shocking and seemingly incomprehensible act: both girls had become obsessed with the supernatural entity Slender Man (Mar, 2017). A fictive paranormal figure, abnormally tall and thin and with a blank face, Slender Man began life as a series of faked photographs on the online forum Something Awful, before becoming a viral internet phenomenon ('Slender Man', 2021). Spreading and mutating from its origin point, Slender Man became a multi-authored mythos, replicating across multiple media forms – prose stories, video series, tribute images, fan fiction, video games, TV documentaries and ultimately movies (Greene, 2018). The girls had committed the attempted murder in the hope of gaining favour with Slender Man, to demonstrate that they were worthy of becoming his host or "proxy". When apprehended, they were trying to walk to his mansion – which they believed to be located somewhere deep in the Chequamegon–Nicolet National Forest, 200 miles away – where they would live with him and serve him. While at one level this is clearly the tragic story of two adolescents with severe mental health issues, it is also a tale that feels straight out of folklore. In a way, it is. Slender Man is a prime example of the phenomena of online spooky tales known collectively as *Creepypasta* (copious examples can be found at *Creepypasta.com* (2021), *r/creepypasta* (2021), *Creepypasta.org* (2019), *r/nosleep* (2021), *Creepypasta Wiki* (2021)).

Creepypasta are *memes* – units of cultural transmission – and their mimetic nature is foregrounded even in the terminology used to denote them. Originating on internet forums such as 4chan, the phrase is a portmanteau of "creepy" and "copypasta", with the latter term being used to refer to things that are *copied-and-pasted* on the web ('Creepypasta', 2021). That is, creepypasta are *scary things that are shared online* – replicated from site to site, user to user. Creepypasta such as Slender Man take various digital forms and typically address anxieties and preoccupations of the internet era, with tales of haunted video game

cartridges ('Majora's Mask Creepypasta (BEN DROWNED)', 2020), jpeg images that drive people insane ('Smile.jpg', 2020), and faux-online forum discussions of half-forgotten kid's TV shows that lead to the disclosure of traumatic shared memories ('Candle Cove', 2020). Nonetheless, creepypasta have been described as drawing on "folkloric storytelling traditions, particularly the ghost story and urban legend" and are "produced and consumed according to folkloric practices" (Balanzategui 2019, p. 187). It is as if they are poised eerily between the digital world of instant hyper-connection, and the ancient world of oral storytelling. I wanted to root my novel *Meme* at the nexus of these two worlds, and for inspiration was drawn to Gothic texts that displayed similar liminal qualities. As a consequence, I made my protagonist Scarlett a PhD candidate in digital anthropology, studying creepypasta in particular. Scarlett begins the novel virtually embedded in the online forums that are dedicated to these stories, studying the tales and the community that generates and consumes them. At some level she is concerned with trying to understand why people delight in scary stories; why we are drawn to creating and consuming things that disturb, alarm or frighten us.

The story of the Slender Man stabbings crystallised for me the notion that it is not merely the explicitly frightening tropes of any particular creepypasta that lends the tales their uncanny charge. Instead, there is something inherently uncanny about *memes themselves*, a dark and troubling undercurrent to our interactions with them. The uncanny behaviour of memes became for me a central trope of the putative digital gothic, standing in for a whole world of unsettling experiences of the hyper-connected age. The central narrative trope of *Meme* the novel aims to evoke the disruptions and anxieties inherent in this relationship. As part of her researches into creepypasta, my protagonist Scarlett becomes aware of the fabled existence of a much older story – an ancient folk tale or *Urmärchen* that is too frightening, disturbing or dangerous to ever be shared. It is in essence a sort of *ur*-creepypasta, a pre-digital meme (or even *antimeme*). Originating in oral folklore and somehow making its way into print, this Tale has allegedly been destroyed or deleted whenever it has surfaced in history. Nonetheless, it seems to have escaped its repeated erasures and re-emerged into the digital age, passing through various hands with deadly effect. It begins to "infect" the novel, with the book effectively becoming an extended creepypasta itself, Scarlett finding herself living out the plot of the types of stories she researches. The Tale is implicated in the suicide of a number of characters in the novel,

including Scarlett's own brother Nathan. Any sort of exposure to it appears to be dangerous, leading people to become obsessed with it and their reality fractured, leaving them stranded in a state of permanently suspended disbelief, a fugue of sublime terror that cannot be escaped from. Readers of fragments are left with a desperate compulsion to complete the Tale, distraught by *narrative interruptus*. If you go far enough back in history, the Tale appears to have been spread from village to village by travelling storytellers, leaving whole areas devastated, adults and children having sewn their own mouths and eyes shut. The ultimate implication is that the Black Death of the mid-fourteenth century was caused not by a plague bacterium but by a *meme plague*, the spreading of this terrible tale. The core myth of the book, though frequently occluded, is that the Tale is – or contains inherent in it – a *meme entity*, a thing with some kind of terrible and malevolent unlife of its own, repeatedly trying to express, manifest or recreate itself via uncanny influence, to disastrous consequences for those who become its vehicles. It is an object of destruction and desire, a manifestation of *thanatos*, the death drive.

The unsettling behaviour of memes seemed to me to reside in two primary factors: firstly, that memes are *uncanny replicators*; and secondly, that memes display *uncanny metalepsis*. While both factors expressed themselves in the first instance in the digital realm, both manifestations also have deep echoes with the much older classics of the Gothic corpus I wanted to invoke in the novel; in particular *Dracula*, and the ghost stories of M.R. James, where replicators and haunted media abound.

Memes are Uncanny Replicators.

The term "meme" has its origins in Richard Dawkins's *The Selfish Gene* (1976), where he declares the need for "a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit *of imitation*" (p. 189). Memes, like genes, are essentially *replicators*. In fact, both are specific classes of replicator – a hierarchical levelling which has the alarming implication that biological life may be no more or less "authentic" than the memes it coexists with. Dawkins later elaborated that

> the real unit of natural selection was any kind of *replicator*, any unit of which copies are made, with occasional errors, and with some influence or power over their own probability of replication… the gene was only a special case… its role

> in the play of Universal Darwinism could be filled by any entity in the universe answering to the definition of Replicator. (1999, xvi)

Dawkins originally intended the term to apply to all imaginable types of culture – "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches" (1976, p192) – but in subsequent years the phrase has tended to become more narrowly and explicitly associated with the internet. From keyboard-playing cats ('Keyboard Cat', 2020) to sea shanties on TikTok (BBC News, 2021) , viral "Bird-box" challenges on YouTube (Andriani, 2020) to conspiracy theories about COVID-19 (Binder, 2021), anyone who spends a significant proportion of their life online is bombarded by an ever-evolving stream of viral stories, video clips, reaction gifs, image macros, hashtags and other fragments of swiftly-moving culture. Such is their penetration of digital day-to-day life, I would argue that the humble meme may even be the defining cultural form of the early twenty-first century.

In order to propagate, replicators need "vehicles" or "interactors": "A vehicle is the entity that interacts with the environment… Vehicles or interactors carry the replicators around inside them and protect them." (Blackmore 1999, p. 5) In the case of memes, the vehicles are us: as if they are viruses and we are the hosts. This viral relationship frequently has unsettling consequences. In Dawkins's model, memes are in essence a form of *life*, though unlike any life we would normally recognise, being devoid of physical form beyond their vehicles – code rather than hardware. Memes can spread with astonishing rapidity, birthing phenomena seemingly out of nowhere. Per Dawkins, memes achieve this by hijacking our need to imitate as social animals, ensuring their survival by manipulating, exploiting or altering our social behaviour. The memes that do this best will be the ones that survive. When observing something as benign as a viral "Ice Bucket Challenge" (Levin, 2004) this may seem innocuous, even though the action often appears to lose its original meaning through semantic satiation and repetition, ending up a strangely reflexive, ritualistic gesture. However, virality and irrationality seem bound up together, tending towards extremes. Viral internet games based on the power of imitation have led to disturbing and self-destructive behaviours, from eating Tide Pods (BBC Newsbeat, 2018) to alleged suicide or self-harming games among teens and preteens, such as the notorious "Blue Whale Challenge" (Adeane, 2019), "Momo Challenge" (Sakuma, 2019) or "Choking Game" (Agence France-Presse, 2021). Even though many of these turn out to be myths, their propagation into a kind of mimetic reality reveals another uncanny facet of mimetic

replication: the collapsing together of the fictive and the factual, a dangerous entwining already seen with Slender Man. Widely-reported studies have shown that false stories – so-called "fake news" – spreads farther and faster online than true stories, owing to novelty and the tendency to invoke the stronger primal emotions of fear, disgust, and surprise (Vosoughi, Roy and Aral, 2018). They are, in essence, "better" memes. Even those who deliberately create memes find that, once loosed into the world, they are out of their control, taking on a dangerous life of their own: as with artist Matt Furie, whose creation Pepe the Frog became appropriated as a mascot for the online racist alt-right (Serwer, 2016). You think you're drawing a winsome frog; in fact you're creating a Frankenstein's monster. You may operate under the apprehension that you are in charge of the memes you consume and pass on; however, from another perspective, you are *possessed* by them, acting as their servants or familiars, mindlessly labouring under their influence to propagate their strange un-life, their apparent "desire" to replicate. Memes enter your mind and they change you. This commingling or confusion of primal categories, and inversion of control, is purest Gothic.

The "replicator" is not a new idea. If Dawkins had posed the question as to whether there was "any entity in the universe answering to the definition of Replicator" in 1897, an answer would have been presented to him almost immediately, in the form of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Dracula is, to my mind, the archetype of the uncanny replicator, and as such a resonant precursor of the digital gothic, displaying a kind of nascent digitality through multiple elements of the novel. Dracula is, in essence, a meme, propagating himself not through sexual reproduction, but through corruption, mutation, possession of the host. The story that contains him is profoundly mimetic as well, as evidenced by the seemingly endless repetition, replication and recreation of the Dracula myth across multiple media (allegedly more than 200 film versions alone, second only to Sherlock Holmes in popular culture ('Count Dracula in popular culture', 2021)). The Count is a lifeless thing that nonetheless operates like a living organism, possessed of an uncanny existence that defies categorisation – the classic Gothic trope of disturbing commingling of categories. Though possessed of his own distinct body, Dracula's form is mutable, sometimes man, sometimes wolf, sometimes an atomised, disembodied shape: "a whole myriad of little specks seemed to come blowing in through the broken window, and wheeling and circling round like the pillar of dust that traveller's describe when there is a simoom in the desert" (Stoker 1897, p.

154). He is more miasma than man, and may perhaps be more properly considered a *virus*, with substantial portions of the novel (much of Chapters 5 through 17) reading essentially as epidemiological fiction, as his presence and influence spreads through the group of protagonists with deadly effect. This infection, though, is not one that can be driven out through normal physical methods. He "enters" his hosts through virtual, non-physical means, recruiting their faculties either supernaturally or through social engineering, for his continuance and replication. Both their life force and their knowledge and skills are bent to his will – in the case of Jonathan Harker, his correctly intonated English, which the Count requires in order to become a more effective parasite in London, mutating so he can "pass" locally: "I am content if I am like the rest, so that no man stops if he see me, or pause in his speaking if he hear my words, to say, 'Ha, ha! a stranger!'" (p. 27). It is not just Harker's blood and freedom that Dracula seizes, but his idioms: his memes.

Dracula makes new versions of himself, copies like his Brides or chosen victim Lucy Westenra, that endlessly repeat his vampiric cycle of unlife and unbiological reproduction. But it is the seizure of the minds of his victims that disturbs as much as the drinking of their blood, creating the obsessive and repetitive behaviours of the asylum patient Renfield and the somnambulistic, eroticised wanderings of Lucy. For all his supernatural powers, it is significant that Dracula has to act primarily through this series of *proxies* – vehicles, vessels or "interactors" in the Dawkins sense. Especially in England, he has to proceed almost through a chain of associations, a succession of forms. He is forced to possess a "great, gaunt grey wolf" (p. 154) simply to get in through Lucy's bedroom window. His influence is very often *virtual*, an action-at-a-distance, affecting people hundreds of miles away with no apparent means of direct contact, meddling with strict delineation of space and time. Both Lucy and the madman Renfield fall under the influence of the Count *before* he arrives; seemingly just his *intention* to be in a particular place sending reverberations which affect them preternaturally. Renfield is housed in the asylum next to the estate that Dracula has bought; clearly his falling under the Count's sway is a causal event, but it is a non-contiguous causality, akin to the operation of a mathematical attractor ('Attractor', 2021), or maybe its more obvious social media equivalent: the *influencer*. As a novel, *Dracula* is a tightly woven web of communications – a multi-media set of documents employing all the communicative technologies of the day to allow its characters to tell their stories and connect with each other, whether utilising letters, telegrams, recordings on wax cylinders, boat or train

timetables. As with the brand new, untried searchlight (Stoker 1897, p. 87) that picks out the vampire leaping from the doomed ship *Demeter* in the form of an immense dog – "it disappeared in the darkness, which seemed intensified just beyond the focus of the searchlight" (p. 89) – technology in the book seems to emphasise that darkness and unknown just beyond its reach, perhaps even enabling it. The Count appears to operate through a parallel network of communication and influence to the one employed by the human protagonists, but one that is disembodied, freed from the limitations of physical media. Through images and impressions, information making its way across an ether that knows no geographical boundaries, Dracula makes things happen, brings himself followers and "stans" such as the Slovaks and Gypsies who would do anything for him, spreading a net within which he is the central node. It is almost as if he has conjured up a putative internet, distributing himself across its points. He would no doubt clean up on Instagram.

It is in the moral universe that the effects of Dracula's mimetic nature operate most intriguingly. Injected into the metaphorical and literal bloodstream of late Victorian society, Dracula alters not merely the physical nature of his hosts, but their entire conceptual set. His "infection" rewrites their codes of behaviour in a way that challenges social and sexual mores, and exposes the moribund contradictions and hypocrisies they live by. Obvious examples of such include Mina's concern for her sleepwalking friend Lucy's reputation over and above her physical health, a stifling propriety emphasised by Lucy's need to daub her own feet with mud, "using each foot in turn on the other, so that as we went home no one, in case we should meet any one, should notice my bare feet" (p. 102); or Dr Seward's outrage at Renfield dropping the conventional distinctions of social hierarchy between the doctor and his employees: "in his sublime self-feeling the difference between myself and attendant seemed to him as nothing" (p. 111). The slavish victims of Dracula's influence are, perversely, forced into a strange kind of liberation. The most striking example is the perversely erotic scene where the presence of Dracula's infection or "essence" inside Lucy requires her to be filled with the fluids or "essences" of an entire coterie of her male friends. These men are all in some way love rivals for her fiancé, partaking in a kind of therapeutic orgy: "No man knows till he experiences it, what it is to feel his own life-blood drawn away into the veins of the woman he loves." (p. 138) As Van Helsing warns, "Mind, nothing must be said of this. If our young lover should turn up unexpected, as before, no word to him. It would at once frighten him and enjealous him too." (p. 139) It is as if Dracula

has enabled all of their repressed desires, the meme as liberator of what you truly, dangerously want.

Memes display Uncanny Metalepsis.

As well as replicating in an uncanny fashion, memes have an unsettling propensity to display the quality of *metalepsis*. Originally a trope from classical rhetoric meaning "a jump across", it was developed by Gérard Genette (1980) into a theory of "narrative metalepsis", which essentially boils down to "the transgression of the boundaries of the fictional world" (Kukkonen 2014, p. 2). It includes tropes such as authors entering or addressing the fictions they have created, but also characters within fictions following trajectories in the opposite direction, whether "glanced, travelled or transported across" entirely (Kukkonen 2014, p. 1). It also includes devices such as texts embedded within texts, and effects such as *mise en abymes*, the "placing a copy of an image within itself, often in a way that suggests an infinitely recurring sequence" ('Mise en abyme', 2021) – literally *placed into the abyss*. For my definition of *uncanny metalepsis* I would also include any breaking, leaping or warping of the narrative, aesthetic or conceptual frame, with objects from one layer or level wrenched or liberated into another.

Memes do this continually. Part of this is owing to the fact that we are often not simply passive consumers or transmitters of them, but potential co-authors or "prosumers" (Toffler, 1980; Lessig, 2008), remixing and repurposing, reframing memes to give new context: changing the text on a viral image, inserting ourselves into an existing video (Munya Chawawa, 2021). In doing so, our selves become complicatedly entangled with them, breaking the protective frames of conventional media, complicating such notions as reader/author/character, provenance, responsibility, and private/public. As already evidenced by Slender Man, memes are not just static reflectors of the external world, bound to stay within the realm of the virtual: they have the power to alter the cloth of reality entirely. Whole political movements are memed into life by denizens of internet forums, in a process analogous to *hyperstition* (Dixon, 2018), a jumping of the frame from online jokes and shitposting to civic actuality (Ohlheiser, 2016). Proponents of the alt-right have dedicated themselves to altering public consciousness by "red-pilling" people, bombarding them with political memes, creating such phenomena as the denial of the US 2020

presidential election results, and the misinformation and myths of QAnon (Dafaure, 2020). The notion of "red-pilling" is itself a meme, a concept and image cut-and-pasted from a single scene in *The Matrix* movies (Thomas, 2020). This is an instance of the power of memes to appropriate and regurgitate existing culture, atomising media to a few seconds wrenched out of their frame, or a single image that stands in for the whole: a metonymic process of dizzying recursion. People too are made into memes without their consent, their images ripped from other media and imparted with an uncanny life of their own, violently wrenched into fictional and archetypal frames not as themselves, but as "Overly Attached Girlfriend", "Disaster Girl", or "Bad Luck Brian"; doppelgängers or simulacrums they have no control over (BuzzFeedVideo, 2020). The media object and the frame exist in an unstable configuration, filled with tension.

At the core here is the idea of the *uncanny text or media object*, the potentially malevolent media that does not behave as it should, refusing to respect the safe frame around it, prone to disgorging its contents, which slip out and infect the world. The master deployer of this trope in the Gothic tradition is arguably M.R. James, whose ghost stories repeatedly turn on the behaviour of uncanny media. Sometimes these are *texts*, as with the runic phrase on a slip of paper used to pass on a curse in 'Casting the Rune*s*' (James, 1911a), which is concealed like a virus or steganographic message inside seemingly innocuous "vehicles" – a music programme handed to a negative reviewer (p. 158) or a "missing quire" of a research paper (p. 153). The curse strikes its victims with a kind of uncanny disease, a pall which mutates into a haunting, and which can only be escaped by turning the curse back again on its originator before a "deadline" of three months is up – almost seeming to form the blueprint for a modern classic of infectious media, the Japanese horror movie *Ring* (1998). Sometimes they are *hybrid media*, things that have been tampered with, messed with, added to, altered or reframed. One example is the cut-and-paste collection of images and texts "plundered [from] the Chapter library of St. Bertrand" (James 1904a, p. 8) which make up 'Canon Alberic's Scrapbook', from which the terrible beast of "black and tattered drapery" (p. 11) depicted in a drawing emerges to haunt the book's possessor. Another is 'The Tractate Middoth' (James, 1911b), which turns on a volume of the Talmud in Hebrew that nonetheless has an English will hidden inside it, disguised in Hebrew characters. The latter is essentially a *trap*, a puzzle box set for the potential inheritors of the estate of an undead clergyman. Reading it seems to unleash a dark shadow on one of the would-be

exploiters of the claim, who is killed in the moment he seeks to triumphantly use the decoded document to alter the terms of the will, leaving only "black dust… found on the face and in the mouth of the deceased" (p. 142). Often, though, these malevolent artefacts are intriguingly *multimedia* objects, forms that seem to be pushing beyond the technological and ontological boundaries of the time, as with the "magic lantern slides" shown by alchemist Mr Karswell to local children in 'Casting The Runes'. These slides "showed a great mass of snakes, centipedes and disgusting creatures with wings, and somehow or other he made it seem as if they were climbing out of the picture and getting in amongst the audience; and this was accompanied by a sort of dry rustling noise which sent the children nearly mad, and of course they stampeded." (James 1911a, p. 148)

The most fascinating story in terms of its foreshadowing of the behaviour of uncanny memes in the digital age is perhaps 'The Mezzotint' (James, 1904b). Mr Williams, who presides over an art museum at an unspecified university, is sent the titular object – a mezzotint or print of a country house. At first it seems an "indifferent" work of art, but each successive time Williams views the print, it *changes*, first revealing a dark figure looking towards the house, glimpsed only by the back of its head; and then, on a subsequent viewing the same figure further into the frame, horrifyingly "crawling on all-fours towards the house" (p. 28). The more disturbing and threatening the scene becomes, the more successful it appears to be as a work of art, with new viewers among Williams's friends and colleagues remarking on the striking night-time scene, and the quality of the moonlight being captured – an *entropic tendency* we will see again in Part IV. The effect is, clearly, impossible. A mezzotint is a static image from a fixed plate, scraped in metal – but what Williams is witnessing is an *animated* image, something acting more like a *gif*, a series of glitches, or a movie slowed down to its individual frames. Williams and his friends realise that what they are seeing, in fact, is a horror movie. The figure is glimpsed disappearing into the house through a window that has been opened ("Is it really? My goodness! he must have got in."), with what they realise is malevolent intent ("And if I don't mistake there'll be the devil to pay in one of the rooms upstairs." p. 30).

Williams tries to fix the image in place, suspend the procession of the narrative by photographing it, getting his colleagues to write signed and sealed descriptions of each successive scene they have witnessed, and researching to try and find the original location of the house, a fixed reference point that is cryptically obscured by missing information: "—

ngley Hall" in "*—ssex*" (p. 26). But he realises that he is dealing with an object displaying its own uncanny time, which moves inexorably forward only in the gaps between observations, in saccades or syncopes, like some awful game of *What's the Time Mr Wolf?*, or the observation of quantum states. It is almost like seeing a cancer metastasise, growing and mutating in photographic plates, moving towards some terrible end. The relationship between the observers and the object is darkly complex, with them uncertain of their roles. The scene only advances when they watch, so are they enabling what is happening? Are they witnesses of an active, high-jeopardy moment that demands intervention? As Nisbet explains, "…it looks very much as if we were assisting at the working out of a tragedy somewhere. The question is, Has it happened already, or is it going to come off? You must find out what the place is." (p. 30) Or are they passively watching something that is already concluded, sucked into it almost as a piece of entertainment? As Nisbet asks Williams, "'Now what do you mean to do?' he said. 'Are you going to sit and watch it all day?'" (p. 31)

The resolution, when it comes, is suitably horrifying, as the figure with "horribly thin" legs emerges from the house, carrying the body of a child, "whether dead or living it was not possible to say". As the embedded narrative reaches its climax the interloper gains in confidence: "the figure was once more on the lawn: but not this time crawling cautiously on hands and knees. Now it was erect and stepping swiftly, with long strides, towards the front of the picture." It is as if it is coming for us; and for the observers; the implied trajectory of the threatening figure with "black drapery hung down over its face" (p. 32) clearly taking it up to the frame and breaking through, out beyond it into the space of the observers. The effect is strikingly reminiscent of the moment in *Ring* (1998) where Sadako, the ghost girl with long dark hair captured on the cursed VHS tape, crawls out of the television and enacts her vengeance on the tape's viewers. For the mezzotint, it becomes clear, is a *recording*, of events long since past – a disaster that occurred to the engraver of the scene three years before he made it, when a disgruntled poacher whose death by hanging he had overseen apparently came back from the dead to take the engraver's infant son and end his line.

It is a recording in the way that *all* ghost stories are recordings; and explicitly an object that requires observation, perhaps in the way all hauntings demand an audience. Importantly, the mezzotint is a *copy* of the original – an "impression" (p. 33), of which there are several. Like all memes, it wants to be watched; to be re-experienced, re-interpreted,

replicated, even if only in your head – haunting as a kind of performance. Once its mystery is resolved, the print then becomes inert, apparently never changing again. Interestingly, though, it still needs to be *shared*. Williams communicates his experience to a chain of people, and ultimately to the author of the story – "The facts were communicated by Williams to Dennistoun, and by him to a mixed company, of which I was one, and the Sadducean Professor of Ophiology another." (p. 34) – almost like a block-chain giving the provenance of the narrative. But the *origin* of the story also contains an unexplained pressure to share. Williams's art dealer *recommended* this thing to him, without explaining why or what it was, yet with a strangely high price –

"DEAR SIR,--

We beg to call your attention to No. 978 in our accompanying catalogue, which we shall be glad to send on approval.

Yours faithfully,

J. W. BRITNELL." (p. 25)

The catalogue itself refers to the item only as "interesting". The dealer's motivations for "sharing" are left obscure – were they innocent or malevolent? To a modern-day reader it is strikingly reminiscent of being sent a *link* in an email: click this, it's of interest! Check it out! *Share me*.

What is ultimately being shared in 'The Mezzotint' is a unit not just of culture, but of *trauma* – a re-enactment of a dreadful primal scene, seemingly unknowingly captured by the engraver himself, burning the haunting of his loss into the engraving, and the impressions subsequently struck from it. *Meme* contains a similar object; a second meme that haunts its protagonist at a more personal level than the legendary Tale, which in a way is a mythic elaboration of its more prosaic analogue. Scarlett's brother Nathan committed suicide while live streaming online. A recording of the clip was then widely circulated on the internet, becoming a horrible object that strangers nonetheless shared, either through morbid fascination, the desire to shock others, or the simple need to "know" (a real life phenomena – cf. Coldeway, 2020). Scarlett herself learned of her brother's death through clicking on such a link, not knowing where it would take her. The rest of the novel is in a way a coded expression of this central personal horror, a uncanny working through of that primal moment, with Scarlett needing to either resolve, re-experience or exorcise the thing

that is haunting her. The academic question she is asking about memes is at core a personal one: why do we do this? Why do we share? Why did this happen? Why did I look?

III. DIGITAL MASKS, DIGITAL GHOSTS

Presence & Absence – Digital Traces – Webcam Horror – Displaced Identities – Streamed Suicides – Trolling & Anonymity – Connection & Disconnection

In the always connected, digitally mediated world, ideas of presence and absence become complicatedly entwined. Advances in communications technologies often seem to push us into the realms of the spectral and uncanny – whether soundwaves of absent orchestras etched onto waxed cylinders, words spelling themselves out via a telegraph, or disembodied voices drifting down a primitive telephone line, the act of communicating and interacting with people who are *not there* overlaps with experiences that could be considered supernatural, ghostly, séance-like. *There-but-not-there*. In 2021, when multimodal representations of ourselves and those we interact with are literally to hand – on your phone, on your laptop, on WhatsApp or webcam – the issue of where the self, the *presence* lies in this communicative field becomes ever more fraught. Social media, in particular, is rich with these anxieties. One is always connected; one is never connected. We're on all the time, but arguably we're never really there.

It's worth considering the word for a moment. *Presence* always carries with it more than a simple factual query, a 1/0, yes/no state of "being in a place or not". It implies qualities that are perhaps not easily quantifiable or able to be verbalised; the "demeanour, carriage" or air of a person ('presence, n.', 2020). When we talk of the "presence of something" in an area, we are not specifying that the *something* in question is *there right now*, able to be observed; instead it is around, leaving traces, just out of reach, inchoate, a potential. Specifically in regards to the supernatural, the double-nature of the word appears up-front: "presence, *n.* 6: A person or thing that exists or is present in a place but is not seen, esp. a divine, spiritual, or incorporeal being or influence felt or perceived to be present" ('presence, n.', 2020). The "presence" is defined by a simultaneous absence, speaking to senses beyond the obvious, cutting across modalities, setting them against each other.

In digital studies in particular, the term *presence* is used to talk about the subjective feeling of *being inside, or involved with, a virtual world* – whether communicating with others ("telepresence") or being in a fictive space. It is analogous to notions of "immersion",

"transportation" and "absorption" that are often used interchangeably to try to get at how and why people become absorbed in media or literary objects. Numerous competing scales have been developed to try to quantify this experience of "being there" digitally and fictionally (Lee, 2004; Schubert, 2009; Kuijpers et al., 2014); having used some of them in experimental studies myself (Thompson et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2020), none are exactly satisfying. The sheer number of studies implies that there is something fraught, problematic, hard to pin down regarding the notion of presence in the digital age – *there but not there*. When connections and communications are so thoroughly disembodied, there are cracks, through which other anxieties can slip and assert themselves.

In *Meme*, I wanted to get at this feeling of uncertainty and anxiety about the source, nature, and disruptive effect of digital communications as a constituent part of the digital gothic. In particular, after an early crisis the protagonist Scarlett begins to receive emails in her Junk folder from a contact – Matthew Osier, AKA TheWithyKing – whose dead body she found, surrounded by wrecked computer servers. The mails she receives from his apparently still live address are built from the text of actual junk emails I either received or found online. In them, the odd, mangled language of bots and scam artists trying to get you to give your credit card details or click dubious links is stretched and turned as if some *presence* is trying to express itself through them, using the clumsy matter at its disposal to communicate with the living.

> From: matthew.osier@osirisbooks.net
> Subject: TERPSICHOREAN DARKNESS
> To: scarlett.lockwood.15@ucl.ac.uk
>
> Scarlett
>
> Just couple hours ago I saw a thing that helped me realize what I want to do with my life. Why not send me letters? I am very sad one in Russia, write to me necessarily, it is waiting for your Matthew. Hello my dear. I want to be with you again, write me or call, come with me. How? Lets check it together. Check everything there and register…

… I've had a web camera with good quality - write me - and I'll do what you want for you, long time not seen you in a web camera…

… I've got some reports for you, please read it, this really issues a lot! Please read here…

… If I find that you have shared this message with someone else, the video will be immediately distributed.

Matthew

Both the presence and its attempted messages exist in the gaps, in the incongruities and alternate meanings of these hack phrases and badly spelled sentences. Signal and noise are bound together. The idea appealed to me in particular because it had that classic Gothic aspect of being poised between states – between terror and horror, explicable but disturbing (it could just be bots), or supernatural and dangerous (it could be a digital ghost). The Junk folder itself seemed to me to be a liminal place – messages that appear but are rendered invisible by filters, swept out of sight, unless you go and seek them out. Junk mail is more than just "rubbish" in the everyday sense. It exists in a kind of limbo, its contents doomed for a certain term to be stuck there until they are eventually deleted beyond recovery. It's the zone of neither the living nor the dead; a natural place for digital ghosts to gather.

Our digital selves have the potential to live beyond us through the plethora of traces we leave behind – photos, video clips, emails and text messages. These can be wrestled and wrangled through dumb algorithms or the manipulations of others. In other words, digital communication itself might carry an inherent danger, leaving us open to access by malevolent forces against which there is no firewall. Such risks have arguably been addressed most directly by the cinematic subgenre of *webcam horror*. Also known as the "Computer screen film", "desktop film" or "screenmovie" (Bekmambetov, 2015), the subgenre has its origins in both surveillance thrillers and found footage horrors. What, for example, is James Stewart doing in *Rear Window* (1954), other than shifting his attention, or "clicking" between the different windows – literal and virtual – of a "desktop" comprised of his and the opposing apartment building? It seems fair to say that he is watching information stream in from a number of "cameras", places that he can observe but can only

interact with through remote means, by telephoning their inhabitants. Even *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), with its multiple first-person cameras wielded by the actors/characters, implies the notion of simultaneous "streams" that you can cut, choose, click between.

The webcam horror formalises this notion more explicitly. Timur Bekmambetov, the producer of *Unfriended* (2014), arguably the first widely watched computer screen film, set out his rules for "Unity of Place" in an article published online for the MovieMaker website. The title is worth repeating here for emphasis: "Rules of the Screenmovie: The *Unfriended* Manifesto for the Digital Age" (Bekmambetov, 2015).

> The setting is virtual reality in general and one specific computer screen, belonging to one character. The action never moves outside of the screen, unraveling on the display of one character's gadget. The size of the screen (i.e. the frame boundaries) remain a constant. The appearance of new visual elements has a rational explanation and corresponds with the formats of life in a virtual space: The viewer must constantly be aware of where exactly the action occurring at any given moment originated. The camerawork is stylized to resemble the behavior of a digital gadget's camera.

Unfriended, which received a traditional theatrical release in 2015, follows a continuous Skype chat between American teenager Blaire and a group of friends with whom she has various emotional, sexual/romantic, and dramatic entanglements. The "location" of the film is her computer screen; with the exception of a jump scare at the end, everything else we see is mediated through the windows on her digital device. As she joins a group chat with her friends, they find there is an extra chat window "attached" to their conversation; labelled only as a "DEFAULT USER", and with a blank Skype icon in place of a person, this "uninvited presence" keeps reappearing in their conversations, despite their repeated attempts to get rid of it. As the film proceeds, it becomes apparent that this uninvited guest may be someone who has taken on the identity of a dead classmate of theirs, Laura Barns, who committed suicide on-camera after cyberbullying following the release of a humiliating video in which our protagonists are implicated. Another possible explanation is that DEFAULT USER is the disembodied and vengeful spirit of Laura herself, now set loose in the connections between the teenagers' always-on devices.

Unfriended is arguably at its best when it is dealing with the minutiae of digital anxieties, before devolving into broader horror moments as the spirit revenges itself upon each of them in turn. The *persistence* of the extra webcam window is actually its most effective device, and one that is universally relatable – the pop up you cannot squash, the app that won't close down properly. It is the anonymous thing you cannot get shot of, "haunting" you and defying the apparently logical structure which computers are meant to run on, but which, we soon realise, we are utterly ignorant of. As a metaphor for the "buried but continuously unearthed sins" of its characters it actually carries more psychological weight than the various mutilations and murders that follow. *Unfriended* is also straight-up brilliant on the patina of digital interactions, the actual tactile *qualia* of the moment-to-moment expression of our inner selves via these flat machines.

Bekmambetov (2015) is again helpful:

> A screenmovie is unique in that it enables the author to explore the psyche of a character in a new way via their interaction with virtual reality. The user writes a message to a conversation partner, the cursor freezes, as if hesitant; the viewer is able to observe the emotional transitions of the character and his actions through the way the character's cursor moves, to understand his background and motivation. This revolution in cinematographic narrative is comparable, for instance, to the invention of the stream of consciousness in literature, which enabled the reader to look inside the mind of a character rather than simply observing their actions.

This may be wildly over-stating the case, but it is productively embedded in the texture of the film. In her first interaction with the newly resurrected account of "Laura Barnes", Blaire's uncertainty is communicated through her repeated attempts to formulate the right message to respond with, which we see playing out in real time in the chat box:

[*Blaire types*] "who is this???"

[*Blaire deletes the message*]

[*Blaire types*] "who's doing this – this is super messed up."

[*Blaire's cursor hovers over REPLY, then changes her mind and deletes the message*]

[*Blaire types*] "who's doing this?"

[*Blaire clicks REPLY*]

[*The chatbox shows*] "Laura is typing…"

This latter phrase – "Laura is typing…" – becomes a repeated refrain in the flow of text messages between the protagonist and her apparently deceased interlocutor, and serves as a useful suspense device that also smacks of the digital uncanny. "*X* is typing…" lets us know that *someone is active* at the other end – in whatever space they are constituted, invisible to us – and that a message is *imminent*, that something is about to appear. The waiting builds import, making us hang on those three pulsing dots. Frequently, though, it just stops, the phrase vanishing, leaving you with nothing; aware only that something *might* have happened, but didn't come to fruition; meta-communications, a dropped call, a disturbance in the universe. Again, traces – present but absent.

Even more simply, the movement of the cursor on the laptop screen, between the various windows and between elements within windows, serves as a visual shorthand for the character's thought process, for what they are paying attention to – and by extension, what we should be too, in both the interior and exterior frame. When Blaire pulls up an article headlined "Cyberbullying: Suicide of Laura Barns linked to anonymous online attacks", the cursor repeatedly hovers between those two words "anonymous" and "online", suggesting to us that *these* are the bits that are most salient for Blaire – and setting us off on an interrogative spiral as to *why*. The implication, in context and confirmed as the film develops, is that the "anonymous" bullying wasn't anonymous at all, at least as far as our protagonists are concerned – it was them, and the moving cursor is the equivalent of a guilty glance, a thing you can't look away from, even if you want to. It's effectively *digital body language* – unspoken aspects of how we interact with our devices that express inner states without dialogue, revealing states of mind to us, making us infer thoughts and intentions in an otherwise invisible "user".

This detailed "digital body language" is something that is really difficult for prose fiction to articulate. It certainly isn't possible to replicate *in real time*, in the same visually rich field, without laboriously spelling out things that would be fluid and obvious to an observer of visual media. It raises the question of how the "texture" of those digital interactions can best be expressed in prose fiction; whether there are limits to aspects of the digital gothic as it operates in novel form.

Unfriended displays narrative problems: despite the richness of its patina and the appeal of its high concept, it struggles to sustain its story, devolving mid-way into a lengthy game of "Never Have I Ever" which is used by the spirit of Laura to reveal the mutual betrayals of its protagonists. As their confessions spill out in turn, the reveals push the film into a series of melodramatic confrontations, perhaps an unfortunate by-product of its locked-down aesthetic. The characters are finally despatched by the "ghost" forcing them to commit violent acts against themselves: shooting themselves in the face, shoving hot curling irons down their throats, and stabbing themselves in the eye.

En route this raises a salient question about "digital ghosts" and narrative jeopardy. Can a "ghost" that stays purely in the realm of 1s and 0s can ever be truly threatening? Or is it a narrative requirement that, at some point, the spirit "cross over" into the analogue, physical realm in order to represent a material harm those who interact with it? To be fair, this is a question that could be asked of ghost stories more generally – to query whether the *digital* can be truly threatening is a close analogue to asking whether the *spectral* can be. It asks us to consider whether the "true" locus of threat is *interiority* or *exteriority*; and what the dance between the two might be. In *Unfriended* the threat is firstly to group cohesion, and then to its protagonists' shallow sense of themselves as "good people" – the social and self-reflexive worlds – but the film decides these are dramatically insufficient, hence its climactic spiral of physically self-destructive acts. Ultimately it raises the question of whether a digital haunting is substantially different from any other kind of haunting; or whether they are ultimately very traditional stories simply given a digital makeover.

One attempt to answer these questions is represented by the movie *Cam* (2018), a film that is arguably a webcam horror, and whose aesthetic, narrative and thematic concerns place it even more squarely in the digital gothic. Released by Netflix, *Cam* tells the story of Alice, a camgirl who streams sexually provocative webcam shows from her home studio under the name "Lola_lola" for an army of internet fans. Alice is desperate to increase her ranking, an index of her popularity versus rival camgirls on FreeGirlsLive, the site that hosts her broadcasts. Despite a similar setup, *Cam* differs from *Unfriended* in two important aspects. Firstly, it moves beyond *Unfriended*'s furious focus on a single computer screen, mixing up its depiction of digital interactions with a more traditional "continuity style" mise-en-scene. Secondly, unlike *Unfriended*, *Cam* mostly eschews gross physical

threats in favour of a focus on *interior* jeopardy – threats to identity and sanity, to sense of self, loss of control. It couples these anxieties with a set of broader themes that are thoroughly gothic in flavour: transgression, obsession, excess and repetition, splitting and doubling, most notably in its presentation of a digital *doppelgänger*.

Even before these more explicitly genre elements are introduced, Alice's core situation borders on the uncanny, with unsettling undercurrents inherent in its interactions. Written by former camgirl Isa Mazzei, *Cam* is richly aware of the tensions and ambiguities of its complicatedly interconnected world. Relationships in the film are virtual, parasocial, asymmetric and transactional, with Alice presenting herself on video with moving picture and sound, but her image obsessively stage-managed and curated via camera position, props, backgrounds and outfits; a manifest version of the framing, cropping and editing of self-images displayed more widely in the world of social media, Instagram and Facebook. By contrast, the legion of men she talks to are mostly unseen and unheard, reduced to usernames and text appearing in a scrolling chatbox, tipping her with virtual currency for requests, or as reward for particular acts. This multiheaded "group entity" of the chatbox is alarmingly fluid and protean, a *Gestalt*, uncanny entity, composed of many voices – neither quite singular nor quite separate. It acts as a kind of chorus for the film, marking the twists and turns of Alice's fortunes but also directly affecting them for good or ill. Individuals exist, but they are conglomerated into a crowd; emerging like waves and then disappearing again, allowed to subsume into a faceless, anonymous mass.

Sex and relationships in *Cam* are a series of simulacra, ghostly, haunting images on a screen – Alice can be seen but she can never be touched or reached out to. A select few are allowed to videochat face-to-face with her, or even meet her in real life; but even then Alice is clearly wearing a mask, putting on a differently coded performance depending upon how favoured her "client" is. With one follower, Tinkerboy, she is sisterly and asexual, fobbing him off and "friendzoning" him, cutting his video call off in favour of a reliably higher tipper, BarnacleBob. With Bob, Alice is practically a different person: flirtier and more provocative, she takes the performative bath "with" him that she denied Tinkerboy, Bob tipping her all the while. Out in the real world, shorn of her digital mask, Alice is less sure of who she is, lacking in confidence, with few real friends. Like the "feed junkies" and "long-term session-heads" of creepypasta *_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9* (2016) pulled untimely from their internet-enabled hygiene beds, who lose all skills for normal social interaction, for Alice,

relations outside of the ritualised frame of the webcam are full of tension and uncertainty. The apparatus of connection has also become the apparatus of disconnection. Disconnection and multiplication: Alice/Lola's identity is already fractured into a series of poses and performances, a situation brought home through a striking shot of her sitting in front of a vanity, repeatedly trying to compose a video message for her fans (reminiscent of Blaire's attempts at messaging in *Unfriended*). Alice's face is shown four times over in the single frame, each simultaneously present but slightly altered by the device: her original image, her reflection in the mirror, her face in the webcam on her laptop, and on the screen of her phone in selfie mode. She's everywhere, but where is she? Lost in the endless self-reflexivity of digital existence, with this iterating multiplicity of selves, it is perhaps not surprising that one of them should "get loose".

Right from the start Alice has begun to play disturbingly with the bounds of the webcam format and the trust her viewers have in the reality of the images of her they are seeing. In the opening sequence an anonymous guest – Visitor003123 – appears to derail her planned vibrator show by tipping her and asking "How much for you to use a knife?" Alice repeatedly tries to remove and ban the guest from her chatroom, but – as with DEFAULT USER in *Unfriended* – he appears again and again under different permutations of his name, each time with a more disturbingly sadistic set of demands. As he does so, the tenor of the room shifts, as other viewers get swept up in it, joining in the calls for Alice/Lola to harm herself. In the climax of the scene it appears to have got too much for her – Alice defiantly brandishes a dagger, says "Is this what you want?" and cuts her own throat, to the mingled horror and delight of the room. Moments later Alice sits up again, unharmed, and reveals that this was all a stunt – a fake knife with fake blood – and is rewarded for her theatrics by an increase in her rankings. The supposedly "malevolent" anonymous viewer was actually Tinkerboy doing a pre-arranged favour.

The moment is striking for a number of reasons. Firstly, there is a sense in *Cam* that in this heavily virtualised world, the body is almost *gone*, regressed to a spectre itself; that physicality can only be rendered, or reminded of itself, through shocking or once-transgressive acts – public masturbation, self-harm. Yet even these are fake, performance; yet more masks. Secondly, the obvious disturbance here is the trope of the *streamed suicide* – as with the recorded video of Laura shooting herself in *Unfriended*, or *Meme*'s streamed clip of Scarlett's brother killing himself by setting his room on fire. For Scarlett, the Nathan

video represents the second obvious "digital haunting" in the book, the equivalent of a repressed memory, it keeps asserting itself, however much she tries to delete it from her consciousness.

The streamed suicide would seem to be a quintessentially digital gothic trope. A death is "captured" onscreen; something was alive, now it is not; a transaction has occurred, a crossing over from one state to another. Presence has violently given way to absence. Something terribly private and transient has been transgressively wrenched into the public sphere, made a permanent record. Motivations for the act are obscured, or difficult to fathom. It is a moving death-mask, a taboo moment doomed to be repeated forever; a ghost captured on film. It is also a phenomenon that challenges existing categories in a very Gothic fashion. Anthropologists Annamaria Fratini and Susan R. Hemer have identified "cybersuicides" or "deathcasting" with other "violent or disruptive events" that are posted and streamed via the internet: "homicides, school shootings, terrorist bombings." However, they acknowledge the difficulty of approaching the phenomenon via pre-existing concepts: "As ephemeral acts, but acts which are remediated publicly and globally, cases of livestreamed cybersuicide require new forms of conceptualization and analysis" (Fratini & Hemer, 2020). Monstrous and morbid, disruptive and novel, hybrid and chimeric – we're back to Joseph Crawford's "monstrous birth" of new media (Crawford, 2015, p. 2).

The notion of the streamed suicide brings up complex, conflicted notions of materiality, agency, observation. Even though it is self-inflicted, the implication lingers that the death was somehow not only *mediated through* but in some way potentially *caused by* the digital medium on which it is captured, bringing up notions of uncanny influence. Something reached out from the intangible realm, entered the psyche of the one being recorded, infected them through the open lens; penetrated the firewall and rendered in them a glitch too violent to be recovered from. The digital ghost enters meatspace, recruits it and turns it against itself: a possession, whether literal or metaphorical. However, perhaps of more interest is the effects the forces involved have on the other agents in the exchange. Cybersuicide is an inherently *social* phenomenon; and its technologies seem to warp human relationships into almost pre-determined, ritualistic forms.

Theoretic approaches to streamed suicides have tended to be dominated by psychiatric and public-health frameworks, with concerns about contagion and "the Werther

effect" among audiences (eg. Westerlund, Hadlaczky and Wasserman 2015). However, a small but growing body of work has attempted to understand cybersuicide through the lens of "critical suicidology", using "qualitative, mixed methods and ethnographic studies". In an analysis of three case studies, Fratini and Hemer use dramaturgical concepts drawn primarily from Erving Goffman (eg. Goffman 1956), seeing streamed suicide as in essence a theatrical "performance", complete with front and back stages, setting, props and appearances: elements which are integral parts of its "success" or "failure" for an audience, both in the moment and in its afterlife online (Fratini & Hemer, 2020). This is both literally and figuratively what is being dramatised with Alice's faux-suicide enactment in *Cam*.

As with *Cam*, though, the status of a streamed suicide as a mode of *performance* inevitably brings up the fraught question of *authenticity*: another inescapably Gothic theme. In a nuanced analysis focussed on a single streamed suicide, "*Dora"*, Yukari Seko (2016) parses the shifting sympathy of the online audience, as the apparent suicide moves from a chat forum to a webcam in order to capture his last moments. Per Seko, the "decision to switch from a cue-impoverished asynchronous forum to a cue-rich livestreaming website did not contribute to the reduction of uncertainty, but instead increased viewers' skepticism toward the sincerity and authenticity of *Dora*'s testimonial." The nature of the media itself would seem to encode a complex, fraught set of power relations, dynamic and prone to violent shifts, in which both broadcaster and audience are inevitably caught up. In *Dora*'s case, "the irony here is that while the cue-impoverished textual dialogue [of the chat room] helped *Dora* establish a rapport with anonymous interlocutors and come out from the veil of anonymity, his self-performance on the cue-rich Webcam environment turned out to be a one-way broadcast, wherein [he] exercised exclusive control over information flow, while few opportunities were provided for the audience to be seen and heard." The shift embodied a move from a relatively democratic dialogue with his viewers, to a Debordian "mediated spectacle", with strictly enforced divisions between the spectacle, the spectators, and each other (Seko, 2016). Trapped on one side of a screen, *Dora*'s viewers egged him on to prove he was "authentically suicidal": that what they were watching was not merely a simulacrum or hoax.

Interactivity implies collective culpability; the possibility that one might have reached out and *stopped* the terrible event; or worse, enabled it. Even when Alice's "suicide" in *Cam* has been revealed as an artifice, a concoction – another implicitly Gothic

trope – the *interactions* around the act remain alarming. The crowd in the chatbox, ostensibly Alice's fans and virtual friends, are easily "infected" by the apparently rogue element of Visitor003123. Liberated from social constraints and empathy by their relative anonymity in this asymmetric exchange, they switch from an appreciative audience, reflecting a positive image of Alice and her performance back at her, to a baying horde more excited by the possibility of her harming herself than giving herself pleasure. Eros glitches out into Thanatos, desire into the death drive. This appears to be true to life – in the case studies examined by Fratini and Hemer, supportive comments by the self-appointed "Life-Savers" were "usually drowned out by the influx of comments from The Trolls and Suicide 'Experts'", whose modus operandi was to "encourage as many people as they can to copy their approach which can quickly monopolize a chatroom", each displaying "toxic disinhibition" through their virtual masks and pushing towards the "spectacular death" (Fratini & Hemer, 2020). What is especially disturbing in the context of *Cam* is that Alice instinctively *knew* this, and was banking on exploiting it for her career ambitions. It feels as if she has tapped into some entropic force inherent in the medium, something coded into its interactions, just waiting to be unleashed.

This sense of unleashing a force you don't quite understand is made literal when, halfway through the film, Alice discovers that an exact replica of herself is broadcasting from her account, doing her webcam shows without her being present. She initially wonders if her old streams are being repeated, a glitch in the system; but these are new broadcasts, by something seemingly wearing her face and body. This replica does not appear to have any corporeal reality – they are repeatedly shown existing virtually in the same spaces she is in physically, the two selves split into the digital and material realms, incommensurable: *there-but-not-there*. This "other her" is distinguishable from Alice only by the occasional glitch and its willingness to act out scenarios she herself previously refused to contemplate. Interacting with her fans and broadcasting non-stop, Alice 2.0 slowly proves more and more popular than Alice 1.0. The original Alice, meanwhile, is locked out from both her source of income and the markers of her identity – her name, password, PIN number and fanbase. She has been replaced, upgraded, and a slow spiral into psychological crisis follows.

This phantom version of Alice again raises the question of the jeopardy represented by a "digital ghost". The literalisation of Alice's sundered selves is a potent digital gothic trope, but Alice rarely seems at risk in any profound way. The "other Alice" continues

streaming, but it remains a nagging enigma, more of a professional inconvenience than an existential threat. The differences between Alice 1.0 and Alice 2.0 are arguably not that significant or narratively productive – *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* this is not, with no descent into transgressive hell for either image or self. Alice's investigations into the origin of the figure briefly point towards a more literal ghost story – the number one ranked girl on the site, it transpires, passed away several years earlier, despite still broadcasting a show with Alice's avatar – but these hints are mostly abandoned with an explanation about "algorithms", an AI stream constructed from the traces the real Alice left behind. The more implicitly interesting explanation is that the "ghost" is herself; that it is a self-haunting, or a *selfie*-haunting, the ultimate expression of the uncanny in a solipsistic age. Alice finally "defeats" her other self in a streamed challenge, and once more her victory involves embracing her audience's desire to see self-harm, as she smashes her face onto her vanity table; but this is coded as a triumph, rather than a disturbing index of her lack of autonomy. Having regained her account, Alice deletes it and starts over – made over with a new face, a new self, a new name, and a new identity on the site. If identity is digitally mediated, what is to stop us rebooting and reinstalling?

In terms of a fully satisfying deployment of the trope of the *digital haunting*, the most resonant example is arguably one that most fully and explicitly embraces its Gothic credentials: *Host* (2020). Written and produced under conditions of lockdown and social distancing due to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, *Host* has a particularly social-media-inflected gestation due to its origins as a meme: a prank Zoom call carried out by director Rob Savage on unsuspecting friends in a group chat, where his investigation of "strange sounds" in his loft ends with a terrifying jump scare (Munday, 2020). The prank went viral online, allowing Savage and collaborators to "trade up" the idea into a full-blown feature released on digital horror platform *Shudder* – albeit one that is mercifully only an hour long. *Host* depicts the unfolding of a "Zoom séance" – that is, a group of bored 20-something friends, led by the overly-serious and responsible Hayley, who have gathered "together" in their separate locked-down houses via the video chat platform Zoom, to host a professional medium who is going to lead them in the attempt to contact some departed spirits. Presented as a continuous Zoom stream, *Host* sticks to *Unfriended*'s "Manifesto for the Digital Age" almost to the letter; but manages to present a far more naturalistic,

compressed, thematically rich, and ultimately affecting story, built around a resonant series of connections and disconnections.

Hayley's polar opposite is the character Jemma, apparently her best friend but also an instinctive trickster and troublemaker. Sardonic and refusing to take anything seriously, Jemma is crucially the only character we see "breaking out" of the digital frame she is contained in – appearing at Hayley's actual window at the start asking to be "let in", not to Hayley's house itself (lockdown rules implicitly preventing this), but to the chat that has just started. Jemma is almost too much for the frame – we see her image double as she unwittingly streams on her iPhone and her webcam at the same time, as with Alice in *Cam*; but Jemma is pointedly uncurated, gleefully aware of the problems she is causing as her image and sound become out of sync, laughing ruefully as a frustrated Hayley tries to get her to contain the overspill. Throughout the film Jemma is the only person to be obviously mobile, willing to leave her locked-down abode and thread together the different "streams" of the narrative. This breaching of the frame, the unwillingness to be constrained by the "rules" of the digital and social milieus comes at a cost. With the séance underway, when the medium asks if any of the group feel they have made contact with a spirit, Jemma unexpectedly claims to have felt the presence of "Jack", a school friend who committed suicide. When the medium goes offline, Jemma cheerfully confesses that she made this all up because she was bored – only for supernatural events redolent of a genuine haunting to start occurring in the discrete, but virtually connected, spaces of those taking part in the séance.

On the return of the medium it transpires that through inventing this "Jack", Jemma has put them all in jeopardy, by "inviting in" a spirit that in turn is no longer bound by the rules or formalities of the séance, or by the separation of place, space and causality represented by the neat boxes of the Zoom call. The medium explains that having invented an identity, Jemma has unwittingly created a "mask" for the malevolent ghost to wear, giving it form: "By making it up and creating a mask, anything can come through wearing that mask." It proceeds to do so, causing violent manifestations for each participant in turn. These manifestations are a trick-or-treat bag of both familiar and startlingly inventive home-made effects, necessarily achieved by each actor themselves, given the socially-distanced remote circumstances of filming. What is striking is how many of them render *digitality itself* as source, transmission medium, and constitutive substance of the supernatural threat

– *glitch horror* made manifest. One participant, Caroline, has made a looping background of herself walking across her room; inevitably this becomes stuck at some point, with Caroline's *doppelgänger* walking across the room over and over, while seemingly random characters appear typed in her chatbox. The explanation when it comes is striking and horrific – Caroline's face erupts, glitching through her background, to reveal it is being smashed repeatedly into her keyboard. Even more effectively, Emma, the youngest character who has been playing with Snapchat-style face filters all the way through the séance, is confronted by a digitally rendered face hanging in an appallingly disembodied manner in her living room. The sound of a phone signal trying to connect gets overwhelmingly louder as she approaches it, terrified. Given the backstory of "Jack" supposedly "hanging" himself, and our awareness that Emma has the filter switched on, the viewer is left deliciously uncertain as to whether what we are seeing is what Emma herself sees – a digital mask, a digital ghost – or whether within her unmediated frame, she is viewing something far more visceral and appalling, which the digital filter of her app has tried its best to cover and render as a disturbingly featureless "novelty" face.

Past its cookbook of digital uncanny effects, Host's smartest trick lies is the nature of its ghost. Unlike *Unfriended*'s tortuous backstory, the malice of the spirit in *Host* seems utterly motiveless, unmoored, inexplicable. At one level this both confirms and conforms to Stephen King's (2019) adage that "nightmares exist outside of logic, and there's little fun to be had in explanations; they're antithetical to the poetry of fear". The characters never know why what is happening is happening; there is no comfort to be had in a narrative frame of logic and explicable psychology. At another level, though, it is a perfect manifestation of, and metaphor for, a threat that is specific to the persistently connected age of social media: the *troll*. As characters explain (somewhat unconvincingly) to Blaire in *Unfriended*, a troll is "someone that just harasses people online … They just wanna get reactions out of people." A troll doesn't need motivation: its actions and its purpose are unified, just being out to cause harm and havoc by any means possible. The "masked", anonymous spirit of *Host* embodies this perfectly: it is both a traditional ghost, and a digest of our ever-developing anxiety about the faceless, nameless "other" who can at any moment come crashing into our Zoom calls and invade the apparent security of our digital lives (BBC News, 2020).

What gives *Host* depth is its unexpected undercurrent of emotion. This is in part because of the context of both its production, and likely consumption by early audiences – that we are still, as of time of writing, under a mass lockdown due to the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Viewers have themselves been through the cycles of attempted socialising via digital media: "Zoom parties" that often leave you more enervated and emotionally disconnected than when you began, due to the cognitive dissonance involved in trying to "have a drink" with people who are not actually there (Jiang, 2020). We are all stuck in our boxes, reaching out to others and not quite being able to touch hands, even if we can see those hands represented by 1s and 0s – an acute and painful manifestation of the intertwined notions of presence and absence in the digital age. As the protagonists meet their fatal ends, one by one their screens are left as empty windows, with their deserted rooms left almost as a roll call for the departed. These empty windows are a literalisation of the social-media and video-games-culture notion of being "AFK", or Away From Keyboard ('AFK, adv. colloquial', 2020): in normal times, this just means that you have stepped away from your device, and are unavailable for communication or "play"; but in the context of *Host* (and implicitly, the pandemic), to be AFK is to be dead, to have succumbed to the motiveless threat.

One of the most thrilling moments of *Host* turns this notion on its head. In the climactic sequence, Jemma – the one who caused the trouble in the first place, trickster-style – realises she has to go and help Hayley, who has vanished whilst under attack by the spirit. Jemma abandons her laptop and reverts to her iPhone, donning a paper mask – this time to protect her from potential exposure to COVID-19 – and retraces her initial steps through the streets to get to Hayley's flat. Entering the frame of Hayley's webcam, Jemma manages to locate her, and we see the two of them on the same window at the same time, "present" together in actuality. Unable to hug due to social distancing, they reach out and do the "elbow bump" equivalent of a handshake – a gesture that is both comic and absurdly moving in context. Connection: disconnection. Although it seems Hayley and Jemma have been granted the status of "final girls" (Clover, 1992), escaping the spirit together, the film enacts a last-minute twist, having the Zoom call "run out" just as the pair are attacked by the ghost, leaving us uncertain of their fate.

That undercurrent of isolation and the haunting yearning for connection was as important to me in *Meme* as any of the more supernatural aspects of the digital gothic.

There are spirits of ambiguous origin, apparently trying to make themselves known through Junk Mail and the dead traces of social media; there is a Shadow following Scarlett, arguably trying to download itself into reality; there are unexplained, digitally mediated suicides; and ultimately there are archetypal, supernatural figures apparently crossing over from one world to another in the climax, summoned by arcane rituals. But Scarlett, above all else, is haunted by *loneliness*; unable to share or express her ongoing trauma and anger at her brother's suicide; chided by the cooling of old friendships with Adnan and Zara, as marked by messages on her mobile; disconnected from her peers on her PhD. In this aspect the character of Bethlehem shares DNA with Jemma in *Host* – the disruptive, larger-than-life, uncontainable other who crashes into your life, gets you into trouble, and drives you mad; but also holds the promise of friendship and genuine connection. Ultimately whether that fragile connection pulses and survives, or bleeds out into an empty nothing, is the jeopardy the novel's finale turns on.

IV. HAUNTED MAZES

Uncanny time – Fake history – Labyrinths – Hauntology – *Bandersnatch* – Entropy – Interactivity

Although set in the present, and mediated through current technologies and concepts, *Meme* is a book haunted by the past. Scarlett and her University peers are *digital* anthropologists, examining the world through the lenses of at least ostensibly new disciplines and paradigms (e.g. Horst and Miller, 2012); but the topics they are concerned with – folk tales, beliefs, rituals, the social dynamics of tribes – stretch back into prehistory. This complex comingling of the present and the past extends to the spine of the narrative. Scarlett is pursuing a mythical Tale that supposedly has its origins in the far distant past, but has remade and remodelled itself throughout history – or *been* remade and remodelled – evolving to mimic, appropriate, or express itself through current technological and cultural forms.

As part of her attempts to track down the Tale and ascertain its origins, Scarlett slowly pieces together a meta-narrative of its transmission through different eras. This turns out to be a branching, complex maze of history, full of dead-ends, overlapping paths and self-contradictions, with multiple alternate origin stories reaching back into the past, and stretching forwards into the future. Where the "centre point" of the here and now actually lies, the place where things originate and meaningfully occur, becomes increasingly unstable and occluded as the narrative proceeds. In order to figure all of this out I ended up going "right down the hole" (as per frustrated game designer Stefan Butler in *Bandersnatch*, 2018), assembling a massive document showing alternate histories for the Tale, with five colour-and-symbol-coded strands denoting competing and overlapping sources of transmission (Figure 1):

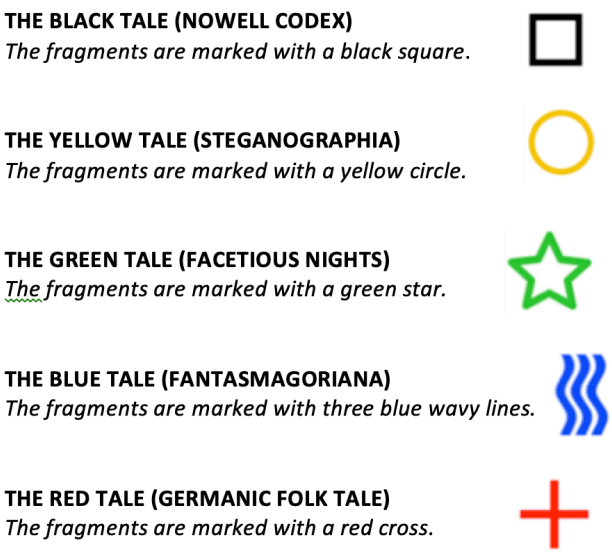

Figure 1: A Partial Chronology and Cryptophilology of the Tale

In the novel, this is represented by a box of research fragments entitled "A Partial Chronology and Cryptophilology of the Tale": scraps of writing from a series of potentially deluded and obsessed researchers that have to be physically assembled by Scarlett and Bethlehem into some sort of order. The sequence is intended to give the flavour of the bizarre ends of pseudo-academia they have arrived upon, and to subtly elicit the feel of aleatoric or ergodic literature after the model of e.g. B.S. Johnson's "book in a box" *The Unfortunates* (1969). In the actual writing, this involved my essentially engaging in "imaginary research", composing pseudo-histories, embracing the uncanny experience of apophenia/pareidolia and forging non-existent but plausible connections between people and events, while appropriating lacunae in literary history in order to "insert" the Tale into pre-existing narratives. The grandest version of this saw it asserting itself through the lost original copies of the oral folk tales recorded by the Brothers Grimm (Zipes, 2002), via Dr John Dee's transcription of medieval cryptography/spirit-summoning manual *Steganographia* (The National Library of Wales), in a volume of Italian folk tale anthology *Facetious Nights* (Ziolkowski, 2010) that was part of the library of King George III, and through *Fantasmagoriana*, the French collection of German folk tales borrowed by John Polidori from a circulating library that inspired the famed "ghost story contest" of 1816, which sparked Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to life (Mercer, 2016). Even the most "direct"

route of all the ones I had planned out followed the supposed journey of the text from its discovery in the walls of an unnamed English monastery, as an appendix to the Nowell Codex that also contains Beowulf, to near-destruction in the Cotton library fire of 1731, and subsequent dispersal into fragments in the British Museum (Infinite Text, 2019). The timeline alone ran to 32 pages and 19,000 words. Inevitably, there was insufficient space in the novel for most of this material, and in practice it was reduced to a couple of pages of hopefully atmospheric fragments. Electing for a shortened route through this maze, I still hope to be able to use the other historical meta-narratives in potential future volumes.

However, all of this is only one strand of the "history" that draws Scarlett through *Meme*. Twined alongside it, double-helix style, is a "historical narrative" with a much more recent focus: the death of Scarlett's brother Nathan via suicide, an event that she has not fully processed, and whose meaning and motivation are a mystery to her. Nathan's suicide has left Scarlett fragmented and traumatised, lost and dislocated in her own story, unable to confront her buried and occluded reactions to the event. She is thus left open to the dangerous psychological and/or uncanny forces at play in the novel, blinkered as to the routes she is taking. It has also left her haunted by memories of her childhood with Nathan, including the complex "story games" they used to play together and the breakdown of the family unit. One strand, then, is intellectual, academic and rarefied, concerned with traditional repositories of past time: libraries, books, museums, objects appropriated from other cultures. The other is emotive, personal and visceral, concerned with memory scattered in unconventional and uncontained traces, either as partial digital artefacts or as scars in the body and psyche, expressed in disruptions such as Scarlett's somnambulism.

Scarlett's navigations of the proximal history of Nathan's suicide and the distal history of the Tale become inexorably wound together, as she discovers that Nathan was searching for the folk tale himself, a quest that apparently led directly to his death. The closer she approaches the centre of this maze, the more the two stories become one. The ultimate collision of these histories occurs when Scarlett finally gets her hands on the mythic "forbidden folk Tale" – only to find it is one of the stories she and her brother came up with as children. This is at first glance a seemingly impossible answer to the mystery, one which throws the chronology of the book into disarray and narrative entropy. But getting lost is kind of the point. The book is meant to be a labyrinth.

This admixture of the present and the past, of "uncanny time" and wraparound chronology, where the past asserts itself into the present, and vice versa, has been part of the DNA of the Gothic since its origins as a literary form. Famously, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) begins with an act of historical appropriation, originally claiming to be a manuscript that had surfaced multiple times in earlier ages, fortuitously discovered in a library. As Fred Botting (1996, p. 32) puts it:

> The first edition had a preface that became a crucial device in Gothic narratives: it was itself a fiction, a fiction, moreover, with pretensions to historical authenticity and veracity. The antiquarian tones of the preface declare *The Castle of Otranto* to be a translation of a medieval Italian story printed in 1529 and written at the time of the Crusades. Everything, from the Gothic script in which it is printed to the feudal customs and miraculous incidents it presents, conspires to give it an air of truth as a production of the barbarous and superstitious dark ages.

This dual time frame operated not merely as a cloak of anonymity for the author, but also created a productive dialectic between chronological frames for its readers:

> The historical distance that is opened up by the device of the discovered manuscript returns readers to the neoclassical strictures and produces an uncomfortable interplay between past and present that both displaces and confronts contemporary aesthetic and social concerns.

Narratively, *Otranto* also roots the genre in the primal crime, trauma or sin located in the *nearer* past, relative to the action of the novel; the repressed event in recent history that must burst forth into the present moment – here the reveal of the usurpation of the royal line of Otranto by the grandfather of the villain, Manfred. As Botting (1996, p. 32) generalises: "Its moral […] that 'the sins of the fathers are visited on their children' – also establishes a foundation for later stories."

The literary Gothic is bound up both with the past, and with these uncannily entwined, vertiginous double histories; from whatever point in time the author is working, they seem continually to be looking backwards, over one shoulder, with both fright and fascination. Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is distanced in time and space from its publication in London in 1794, being set more than two hundred years earlier in southern France and northern Italy. Its heroine Emily, meanwhile, is haunted by an occluded history

more recent and pressingly personal, a literally buried historical narrative. Following her father's final request that she locate a secret compartment, a "hollow place" under a floorboard which contains "a packet of written letters" that she must burn, "solemnly I command you, *without examining them*" (p. 77), her eyes are caught by a "sentence of dreadful import" which "roused equally her curiosity and terror" and "inflamed her imagination"; a "terrible and mysterious subject" (p. 103) that leads her to believe for a great span of the book that there is a "horrible secret, a concealed crime, buried in her family history" (Botting 1996, p. 41). In fact, she is mistaken: as with many of Udolpho's apparent "hauntings", Emily has created a false history in her head, but one that has all the power of actual chronology.

Even when Gothic novels are set contemporaneously, the past tends to assert itself with dreadful, haunting power. For all of the technological paraphernalia of their "scientific, matter-of-fact nineteenth century" (Stoker 1897, p. 254) – telegrams, railway timetables and phonographic cylinders – the protagonists of Stoker's *Dracula* are almost overwhelmed by an entity that represents as much as anything else the inescapable presence in the here and now of boundless ancient time itself. As Van Helsing puts it, "he is known everywhere that men have been. In old Greece, in old Rome […] He have follow the wake of the berserker Icelander, the devil-begotten Hun, the Slav, the Saxon, the Magyar" (p. 254). Dracula himself embodies an uncanny, warped chronology that, unlike our linear path through time, does not have a clear beginning and ending; it is a thread zig-zagging violently through history, a trajectory of reiteration, reinvention, loops.

M. R. James is an especially self-conscious purveyor of the Gothic as a locus for uncanny time. His protagonists, frequently antiquarians and academics, would seem to be well equipped to frame and contain the past through intellectual endeavour and scholastic classification, being able to retreat to the comfort of the "Select Manuscript Room of the British Museum" and fill up "tickets for Harley 3586" (James 1911a, p. 153); or consider, as with the protagonist of 'Mr Humphreys and his Inheritance', that the "drawing up of a *catalogue raisonné*" of a library of ancient books would be "a delicious occupation for winter" (James 1911c, p. 208). But their familiarity and fascination with the past, whether professional or gentleman amateur, seems merely to render them easier vessels for ancient malevolence to express itself through; their charts and chronologies do nothing to prevent them getting disastrously lost in time.

Like many of his stories, though only 24 pages long, 'Mr Humphreys and his Inheritance' (James 1911c) is thick with multiple timeframes pressing in, intertwining in terms of their presence and complex causality in the tale. The "present moment" of the narrative, as established by the opening line, is "About fifteen years ago," (p. 197) – we are pushed back into the "near past" before we have even begun. The protagonist, Mr Humphreys, inherits a country house from an uncle he has never met – thus giving us our second implicit timeframe, the lifespan of this older relative, who is present in the traces he leaves behind; specifically the living retainers, who regale Humphreys with stories about him. They are also the keepers and observers of the transitions between the Uncle's period and the present moment – Calton the butler waxing lyrical about how "the village shop in particular had greatly improved since the year 1870". While he talks with apparent pleasure about how it is now "possible to procure there pretty much anything you liked in reason", versus the earlier period where "it would have been useless to pursue such a course in respect of anything but candles, or soap, or treacle, or perhaps a penny child's picture book" (p. 207), the era being conjured up most vividly is actually that "wanting" past, with the lingering sense of material nostalgia for the goods of this just-departed era, its odds and ends, ephemera – things lost to time.

The house itself belongs to an earlier era still, being built by the grandfather of the recently deceased uncle: "Humphreys guessed its probable date as 1770 or thereabouts" (p. 202). This grandfather also built a temple and a walled garden maze, now locked and inaccessible, which becomes central to the story; Humphreys is the first person to enter it and reach its centre, with its strange metal globe, in "thirty to forty years" (p. 205). But the maze is prefigured disturbingly in a book that Humphreys finds in the house's library after his initial expedition into the labyrinth, a collection of sermons or meditations missing the front sheet that would presumably date it, but which he figures belongs "to the latter end of the seventeenth century" (p. 208). Each step forwards in the story pushes us further and further back in time. The book gives an account that remains ambiguous as to whether it is meant to be an actual history, or as its title suggests, merely "*A Parable of this Unhappy Condition*". It tells of a man who enters a legendarily dangerous maze in pursuit of a priceless jewel apparently kept at its centre; while he is initially able to penetrate to the middle point of the labyrinth with the same ease Humphrey experienced in the garden maze, things start to go wrong for him on his way back.

It is worth considering the maze for a moment. The labyrinth is one of the core "stock features" of the Gothic as described by Botting (1996, p. 2), where the "tortuous, fragmented narratives" of the genre feature it in different, evolving guises. "The major locus of Gothic plots, the castle, was gloomily predominant in early Gothic fiction. Decaying, bleak and full of hidden passageways", it is later replaced by the modern city, which consists of "dark, labyrinthine streets suggesting the violence and menace of Gothic castle and forest". Far from being confined to older literary narratives, though, the maze is also a central constituent of many digital forms. In his classic study, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Espen J. Aarseth (1997) uses it as a central metaphor to talk about interactive literature of all forms, including video games, text adventures, cybertexts, and hypertexts. He draws comparisons between different paradigms of labyrinths, from the "Borgesian structure of 'forking paths', the bewildering chaos of passages that lead in many directions but never directly to our desired goal", to a more detailed model introduced by Penelope Reed Doob (1990), who,

> in her excellent discussion of physical and metaphorical labyrinths of classical antiquity and the Middle Ages […] distinguishes between two kinds of labyrinthine structure: the unicursal, where there is only one path, winding and turning, usually towards a centre; and the multicursal, where the maze wanderer faces a series of critical choices, or bivia. (Aarseth 1997, p. 5-6)

Both Humphreys, in the frame story of 'Mr Humphreys and his Inheritance', and the unnamed maze walker of the embedded *Parable* seem to suffer a *shift* from one kind of labyrinth to another: that is, they start off experiencing a unicursal maze that takes them directly to the centre with no apparent effort, only to find the paradigm has changed on their way back, leading them to lose their way. Interestingly, this shifting maze would seem to correspond more to the paradigms suggested by Umberto Eco (himself an obvious purveyor of Gothic mazes in e.g. *The Name of the Rose*, 1983), which Aarseth (1997, p. 6) summarily dismisses:

> Umberto Eco […] claims that there are three types of labyrinth: the linear, the maze, and the net (or rhizome, cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1987). The first two correspond to Doob's unicursal and multicursal, respectively. To include the net seems inappropriate, since this structure has very different qualities from the other two. Especially as the net's 'every point can be connected with every other

point' (Eco 1984, 81); this is exactly the opposite of the fundamental inaccessibility of other models.

Whichever model of labyrinth you are considering – unicursal, multicursal or net/rhizome – a maze is necessarily an entanglement of space and time. The twists and turns of its pathways and branches mean that normal spatial progression is impeded; but not in the predictably linear way that, say, a steep incline or muddy terrain would create. The combination of choice, dead-ends, and multiple pathways create in the maze a kind of quantum state, a locus of spatio-temporal uncertainty where the normal rules of topography do not apply. You might strike it lucky and head straight for the centre, covering the distance in minimum time; or you might never get out at all, trapped in a bounded space for all eternity. It is almost as if there is an Einsteinian spacetime vector involved: as in special relativity, successful motion through space implies less motion through time; more motion through time implies less motion through space (Greene 2004, p. 38). We see this play out in the *Parable* – the explorer goes in "while the Sun was bright", but on his return "the Night fell, *wherein all the Beasts of the field do move.*" It is not clear to us whether night has fallen, and time passed, because of the frustration of his movement through space, causing him to waste hours; or whether it is the movement of time itself, the shift into darkness that has created this impedance and dislocation, leaving him prey to new uncanny dangers – time as an independent dimension, with a causality of its own. Did Night fall because he was lost; or is he lost because Night falls? Either way, things get weird: the explorer finds himself pursued all through the night by a disturbing "Companion", a "Creature keeping Pace with him, and, as he thought, *peering and looking upon him* from the next Alley to that he was in". This monstrously ambiguous presence dogs him step for step, matching his movements precisely – "when he should stop, this Companion should stop also, which put him in some Disorder of Spirits" – then multiplies itself – "he would cast himself flat on his Face, and hope that his Pursuers might over-run him in the Darkness, but at such a Time they would regularly make a Pause." (James 1911c, pp. 209-210) It is almost as if it is not monsters haunting him but his own self, chasing his own tail; a series of echoes, offset in time, in an uncanny, parallax error.

When Humphreys, in the frame story, finally manages to make a plan of the labyrinth, its true horror is revealed. An "ugly black spot" appears at the centre of his drawing, which extends impossibly into an actual hole that seems to go "not only through

the paper, but through the table on which it lay. Yes, and through the floor below that, down, and still down, even into infinite depths." Out of this impossible, vertiginous hole begins to crawl, with "the odious writhings of a wasp creeping out of a rotten apple", a black form with a "*burnt* human face". The movement is "upwards" – orthogonal to the dimensions Humphreys believed he was working in. Though never expressly identified, this monstrous apparition is implicitly something ancient, out of the past, or perhaps a timeless place; and connected to the "ashes" found in the maze's central globe, which are identified with the otherwise missing corpse of the great granduncle. Even to represent the past, to mark its topology in the abstract, is to risk being clasped by its "waving black arms" (James 1911c, pp. 218-219).

James was deliberate and explicit in his use of time, its role in the genre, and his assumptions about its effects on the reader. He states (James 1924, pp. 407-408),

> The detective story cannot be too much up-to-date: the motor, the telephone, the aeroplane, the newest slang, are all in place there. For the ghost story a slight haze of distance is desirable. 'Thirty years ago,' 'Not long before the war,' are very proper openings.

Going back any further becomes problematic, and requires specific, pragmatic strategies to render uncanny effects maximally:

> If a really remote date be chosen, there is more than one way of bringing the reader in contact with it. The finding of documents can be made plausible; or you may begin with your apparition and go back over the years to tell the cause of it; or (as in 'Schalken the Painter') you may set the scene directly in the desired epoch, which I think is hardest to do with success. On the whole (though not a few instances might be quoted against me) I think that a setting so modern that the ordinary reader can judge of its naturalness for himself is preferable to anything antique.

The reason for this is expressly to do with *identification* – or to put it another way, the *presence* of the reader in the story.

> For some degree of actuality is the charm of the best ghost stories; not a very insistent actuality, but one strong enough to allow the reader to identify himself with the patient; while it is almost inevitable that the reader of an antique story should fall into the position of the mere spectator.

James's ideal era, then, is the near-past: close enough to the reader's presumed present moment that the paraphernalia of the world being presented is not alienating, perhaps still resonant in the reader's own memories; but which still has that "slight haze of distance", the chronological gap through which the dreaded thing is allowed to creep. In actuality, this gap is usually doubled in the stories – something *ancient* channelled through something *not-quite-present*.

Even twenty-first-century novels that are identifiably Gothic tend to follow one of these two strategies, observe the same conventions of chronological distancing, or double-time. For example, Sarah Perry's multiple award winning *The Essex Serpent* (2016) is set two centuries earlier in 1893; while Andrew Michael Hurley's *The Loney* (2014) doubles a contemporary frame with darkly transformative events that occurred in the childhood of the narrator thirty years earlier, both being rooted through that central Jamesian "hole" – the implication of much more ancient powers and myths that reach up through each timeframe to the present moment.

So far, so Gothic; but have we lost the digital en route? I would argue not; it's been there all along, keeping pace with us, *peering and looking* from the next alley. One of the most productive ways of thinking about the strange intertwining of the present and the past so manifest in the Gothic has found its fullest form as an explicitly digital-era concept – that is, *Hauntology*. The term was first coined by Jacques Derrida, in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1994, p. 202), where it was presented as a "concept, or puncept" playing upon the overlap between the notion of the spectre, and "the philosophical concept of ontology, the philosophical study of what can be said to exist" (Fisher 2014, p. 38). In its initial form it was "the successor to previous concepts of Derrida's such as the trace and *différance*" (Fisher 2014, p.39), the intertwining of everything that has presence with the necessary absences that surround it. It was then developed into a theory that more fully embraces the contradictions of the digital age by, among others, Mark Fisher, in *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (2014).

As articulated by Fisher, hauntology became explicitly concerned with "*the agency of the virtual*, with the spectre understood not as anything supernatural, but as that which acts without (physically) existing" (Fisher 2014, p. 40). These agents can vary depending upon

context, from Marxism and capital to psychoanalysis, but their agency is inextricably bound up with the notion of *time*; in particular that of "broken time" (p. 39) – the notion that, as in *Hamlet*, "the time is out of joint". Merlin Coverly (2020, p. 11) summarises helpfully:

> In both Derrida and Fisher's conceptions of hauntology, the crucial element is that of time. For Derrida, the return and repetition of the past in the present is manifested through the figure of the revenant, that which returns each time as if it were the first, unchanging and insistent, demanding a reckoning for a message that went unheard or was ignored. For Fisher […] there are two opposing temporal currents intrinsic to hauntology: the *no longer* and the *not yet*.

This notion of two streams, two simultaneous directions of travel, is important. In Fisher's own somewhat tortuous tenses,

> The first refers to that which is (in actuality is) *no longer*, but which *remains* effective as a virtuality (the traumatic 'compulsion to repeat', a fatal pattern). The second sense of hauntology refers to that which (in actuality) has *not yet* happened, but which is *already* effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behaviour). (2014, p. 40)

That is, "the former haunts the present from the past […] The latter haunts the present from the future." We end up facing a "temporal disjuncture or 'dyschronia'", which leads us to doubt "whether we truly experience time in so straightforward a manner as the linear model suggests." (Coverly 2020, p. 11)

These ghostly, virtual agencies reach their point of maximum capacity to haunt in both an era and a medium where, as with the maze of antiquity, space and time have become impossibly entangled: that is, cyberspace. For Fisher, the digitally mediated era of cyberspace is suffused with a terrible, inescapable melancholy, and a cultural obsession with the near-past and its ephemera, seen through James's "slight haze of distance". On one level this is to do with materiality, with a sort of ache or mourning, a pained longing of the digital for the analogue. In music, for example, "The artists that came to be labelled hauntological were suffused with an overwhelming melancholy; and they were preoccupied with the way in which technology materialised memory – hence a fascination with television, vinyl records, audiotape, and with the sounds of these technologies breaking down." – glitches, again. "MP3 files remain material, of course, but their materiality is

occulted from us, by contrast with the tactile materiality of vinyl records and even compact discs." (Fisher 2014, pp. 43-44). More profoundly, though, this sense of being haunted is political; a pained longing for lost futures, things that never came to pass. The lost future is a wound, a phantom limb that always aches. In parallel to the historical appropriations of the Gothic, "by placing the present in conjunction with the recent past, hauntology highlights the shortcomings of the former, identifying the political failings of the present by returning to those moments when a different path might have been taken, turning points whose promise remains unfulfilled and which continue to offer us hope for the future." (Coverly 2020, p. 10)

Taken together, these quotations sound like nothing less than an explicit design brief for what I would argue is, for good or ill, one of the most fully realised examples of digital gothic: *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018). *Bandersnatch* is an interactive episode of Charlie Brooker's acclaimed anthology series *Black Mirror*, famous for its dystopian explorations of digitally mediated life – the "black mirror" of the title being the screened digital devices, phones and tablets, which we all carry around with us and reflect ourselves back darkly. *Black Mirror* is often described as satirical, but its focus on topics such as identity and reality, its explorations of extreme emotional states, and its tones of threat and uncanny transgression are profoundly reminiscent of the Gothic. Released in 2018 on digital streaming platform Netflix, *Bandersnatch* is the most formally experimental episode of a series already prone to labyrinthine setups. It follows the story of Stefan Butler (Fionn Whitehead), a budding video game designer, who is attempting to adapt a cult novel – the titular *Bandersnatch*, a kind of *Choose Your Own Adventure* book with multiple endings – into a game. Stefan becomes obsessed with his task and, depending upon the "choices" made by the player, slowly loses his mind.

Notably, *Bandersnatch* is not set in the here and now – it is set in 1984, perfectly deploying James's "slight haze of distance", but more importantly placing its narrative in an era that is practically Year Zero for hauntological tropes. We are in the near-past of heavy cultural and especially technological nostalgia – the bridge from the analogue era to the emerging digital age, which is about to usurp it, the snake eating its own tail. The story displays a longing for the time of bedroom auteurs, teenage geniuses who could knock off hit games on their own, coding in their garrets – unlike the megateams of AAA game

development in the twenty-first century. These figures are simultaneously familiar and within reach, but as alien to us now as monks who make illuminated manuscripts. *Bandersnatch* is replete with era-specific ephemera, and the objects of resonance are not simply presented in the background as passive wallpaper – one's attention is drawn to them via *choices* the viewer is asked to make on the protagonist's behalf. For, importantly, one does not simply watch *Bandersnatch* – although intriguingly, one could if one wanted to – instead, one is invited to *play* it. Much like the source novel Stefan is trying to adapt and the game he is making, *Bandersnatch* offers the viewer a series of branching choices at key points in the narrative: the *bivia* or forking paths of Borges and Aarseth, represented by paired options on either side of the screen that can be chosen with the TV remote, and which determine – at least to begin with – what Stefan does. At the start of the film these choices are trivial, the "tutorial level" for the film, if you will. Which breakfast cereal does Stefan eat – Frosties or Rice Krispies? More pointedly, which music does he listen to – Thompson Twins or Eurythmics? Tangerine Dream or Tomita? Either way, it is the sound of electronic music, analogue and early digital synthesisers, a musical field that is already synonymous with nostalgia for imagined futures, horizons that will never be reached.

As the story moves on, the choices become more and more consequential – and the interrelation between them, with the attendant sense of causality, more complex. It is worth taking a look at the various attempts of viewers to map out the structure of the drama online (Figures 2-5):

[this image has been removed from the digital version of the thesis - it is available at https://digitalfilms.wordpress.com/2019/07/20/black-mirror-bandersnatch/]

Figure 2: A Fan's Map of Bandersnatch, Version 1 (Peters 2019)

[this image has been removed from the digital version of the thesis - it is available at https://www.theverge.com/2018/12/28/18159516/blackmirror-bandersnatch-interactive-choice-maps-endings-easter-eggs-netflix-charlie-brooker]

Figure 3: A Fan's Map of Bandersnatch, Version 2 (Robinson 2018)

[this image has been removed from the digital version of the thesis - it is available at https://www.polygon.com/2018/12/29/18159525/black-mirrorbandersnatch-all-endings-guide-netflix]

Figure 4: A Fan's Map of Bandersnatch, Version 3 (Radulovic, 2018)

[this image has been removed from the digital version of the thesis - it is available at https://www.reddit.com/r/blackmirror/comments/aatz76/a_bandersnatch_flowchart_i_made_i_cant_even_go/]

Figure 5: A Fan's Map of Bandersnatch, Version 4 (pablo_alab 2018)

What should be blatantly apparent from even a cursory viewing is that *Bandersnatch* is not a linear drama; nor is it even a series of branching choices, extending ever-outwards. *Bandersnatch* is a *maze*; with dead ends, overlapping paths, and loops, leading to a number of "exit points" or endings, some of which are merely cessations of the drama, and some of which might more reasonably considered "true" endings. Crucially, it is a maze of *time*, haunted by the uncanny forces lurking in the novel that may be real (horror Gothic) or the product of the game designer's increasingly fractured psyche (terror Gothic), but more profoundly by the presence of the viewer themselves.

Central to *Bandersnatch* is the idea of *loops*, and by extension obsession and repetition. In true Gothic fashion it has a series of layered chronologies that play out, carrying personal stakes and then more mythic weight and danger. In the distal history, the original author of the *Bandersnatch* novel, Jerome F. Davies (a Philip K. Dick-type stand-in) murdered his wife, possibly possessed by an ancient demonic figure made manifest in the book (Pax the Thief of Destiny), and certainly obsessed with the notion of multiple worlds and parallel timelines: "multiple worlds render free will meaningless", and therefore "you are not ultimately responsible for your actions." In the proximal history, Stefan feels obsessively responsible for the death of his mother when he was a child, in a primal event where his refusal to leave the house because he could not find a favoured toy led her to take a later train, which then derailed, killing her and leaving him with his Dad, whom he resents. Stefan is invited to revisit and reframe this event by his psychiatrist, Dr Haynes (Alice Lowe): this revisiting, re-enacting, and reversioning of events becomes the central experience for the viewer, and it is an increasingly destabilising one.

It is highly unlikely that a viewer would ever get to one of the "true" endings on a first-time trajectory through *Bandersnatch* – because the obvious decision at the first significant choice point offered is, counterintuitively, the "wrong" one. Given the chance to work on his game in the offices of publishers TuckerSoft, with the full support of a team of coders, sound designers and the advice of Stefan's hero, hotshot in-house designer Colin Ritman (a brilliantly mannered performance by Will Poulter), if the viewer makes Stefan says 'yes' – which the vast majority of the audience would seem likely to do, given that the successful delivery of the game has been established as Stefan's motivation – Colin gives Stefan an apologetic look and says "Sorry mate. Wrong path." We cut forward to the game's release, and it is reviewed on technology magazine programme *Tomorrow's World* (itself a

hauntological trope, a programme from the past that continually depicts futures that never come about). The boy reviewer gives the game zero stars, saying it was clearly designed by committee. A defiant Stefan declares that he's going to try again – and uncannily, the story loops back to the beginning.

It's startling, not least because presumably most viewers thought they were making the "best" decision for Stefan. And here the film begins to teach us its ways. Firstly, the "endings" we are trying to reach are implicitly more "good" or "bad", as evinced by the quality of the review the game gets in *Tomorrow's World*. Secondly, we can be sent back at multiple points in the drama to "try again", leaving us with a looping, non-linear experience where we repeatedly retrace our steps, re-experience events and try out different paths. Thirdly, and crucially, *the game is not going to "reward" us for choices that increase order*. The maze here is explicitly *entropic*. It *wants* us to make *bad decisions* for Stefan – ones he later is even unsure how to justify, but which push him further and further into extremes, psychic danger and chaos – which the show "rewards" by making Stefan's game better and better. Every time we could make a "sensible" decision which would protect Stefan's wellbeing – talk to his psychiatrist, take his medication – the show "punishes" us by having his game be at best mediocre and the ending *boring*. It is pushing us, step by step, into embracing the myth of the tortured artist, the frustrated genius driven mad by his endeavours, who is ultimately going to kill the ones he loves. It is also making us, at some level, like the chatbox entity in *Cam* – cheerleading, whether we like it or not, for the worst possible outcome at every turn. In *Bandersnatch*, the "best" review for the game comes when Stefan not only murders his father, but chops his body up. Are you not entertained?

It might be worth noting, given the context, that *time* and *entropy* are closely bound together. In both Newtonian and Einsteinian physics, time does not have an inherent direction – there is famously no "time's arrow", and fundamental equations can be run backwards just as well as they can forwards. The only real *marker* for time is the increased prevalence of entropy in the universe (Greene 2004, p. 143) – that things tend towards the chaotic, the broken, the run-down. The universe itself, according to physics, is a Gothic structure – an abbey, castle, or mountain range, continually collapsing, haunted by its past, telling us of its own ruin.

Perhaps the most interesting element of this initial "breach" in the continuity of the story, though, is that *Bandersnatch* does not simply dump you back at the start as if nothing

has happened. Instead, the show *remembers* what you did first time around – and subsequent scenes and sequences change accordingly. There are traces in the universe, or the metaverse, that your actions have left behind. Sometimes these are presented as "quality of life" adjustments – rather than make you sit through entire sequences again, the show truncates certain ones, giving tighter editing or reducing them to montage, skipping the initial unimportant decisions. But more alarmingly, characters in the show – specifically the two game designers, Stefan and Colin – now seem to know things they could only have known from living through the first loop, even though in *this* trajectory, they have never taken place and they are unaware of it. Stefan knows the error that crashes Colin's game, without knowing how he knows it (he witnessed it first time around); Colin now seems to be an expert on the *Bandersnatch* book, whereas first time around, he hadn't even read it. When asked in this second loop which ending he got, he answers, "All of them." It's as if he's gone off between takes and done his homework, boning up in some other pocket of time. The effect is startling – comic, unnerving – the dyschronia of hauntology; the present affected by a past that hasn't happened yet.

Bandersnatch's other major trick is to make its narrative about agency itself. The viewer, with their ability to select options for the protagonist, represents very explicitly the hauntological "*agency of the virtual*, with the spectre understood not as anything supernatural, but as that which acts without (physically) existing" (Fisher 2014, p. 40). The film deals with one of the inherent problems of giving choice over to viewers or readers – that of ludo-narrative dissonance, where traditional dramatic and narrative structures collapse because the agency of the viewer and the expressed nature of the characters in the story do not align – by making Stefan increasingly aware of the viewer's agency over him, as if they are an uncanny force in his head, either paranormal or psychiatric. As the story pushes towards its possible climaxes, he starts to resist, fighting the invisible force we represent. At the same time, though, the film slyly turns on us, revealing the limitations of our own agency as well. The more time one spends in *Bandersnatch*, the more one realises that choice is, as the film repeatedly tells us, an illusion. We have been appropriated as part of the story's metaphoric structure, playing a part that is in many ways as scripted as Stefan's. For all its branchings and double-backings and endless permutations, there are arguably only two real choice points of significance in the whole film: namely, whether we choose to follow Colin rather than visit the psychiatrist, the former of which leads to an LSD

trip and Colin's suicide to prove the existence of multiple timelines, an extended sequence that can simply be missed; and what answer we give when Stefan asks us about our true nature, leading either to a meta-reveal that Stefan is an actor in the production of *Bandersnatch* himself, or the full-on father-slaying. The viewer, ultimately, is the one who is haunted – left with a continual sense of "what if?", drawn back again and again by the path just not taken, the immediate past that has just vanished, the possibility of achieving the "true" route through time.

V: BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES

I set out in this thesis to "prove" the existence, or perhaps the viability, of a genre for my novel, the *digital gothic*. As I've argued throughout, one of the unexpected side-effects of the increasingly hyperconnected, digitally mediated culture that most of us in the developed world inhabit is a growing shadow-side, the unnerving sense of *terra incognita* just beyond the bounds of the map. One is reminded again of the vampire dog bounding from the crashed ship *Demeter* in *Dracula*, that "disappeared in the darkness, which seemed intensified just beyond the focus of the searchlight" (Stoker 1897, p. 87) – an ancient and primal shadow perversely made sharper and thicker, amplified by the blazing light of new technology. This is obviously not a new phenomenon – as pointed out by Fred Botting and others, it was arguably the rise of "Enlightenment rationalism" and scientific values in the eighteenth century, that created the cultural and conceptual negative space that gave rise to the Gothic in the first place: a post-religious void where our atavistic fascination with the unknown, the barbaric, irrational and supernatural, primitive fears and taboos of all stripes – in short, the constituent elements of the Gothic – could thrive, coalesce, and give birth to a new genre (Botting, 1996, p.15).

In the post-internet era this iteration of the process has arguably been amplified and accelerated by two factors already articulated – firstly, the fact that the change is driven by technological "black boxes" that laypeople have essentially zero understanding of beyond the polished surfaces of their user interfaces; and secondly, the sheer *speed* of technological and consequent social change. Many fundamental building blocks of mediated culture in 2021 – YouTube, Twitter, Facebook – are barely fifteen years old. Even something as foundational as Google has only existed for a couple of decades. This has made it extremely difficult for technologically rich societies to adapt their interpersonal and ethical protocols at pace with the dynamic, chaotic forces at large; and for us to adaptively predict what new cultural, political or psychological phenomena will emerge in response to them. Here, arguably, is one of the "uses" of notions of the digital gothic. Tools, whether technological or conceptual, change; human nature, it seems, does not. The phenomena I have discussed – memes, with their uncanny replication and metalepsis; masks and ghosts, with their disruptions of presence and identity; labyrinths, with their complex choices and time-

bending properties – all have their counterparts in the fictive culture of the Gothic era and the present moment, the same archetypes but inflected by differing forces and contexts. Much like an uncannily enchanted eyepiece from M.R. James's 'A View from a Hill' (James, 1925), to engage with the digital gothic is to have two lenses in front of you, welded into one apparatus: one eye on the past, one on the present, the joint field perhaps giving you a glimpse of the future. Literature, and its conceptual and critical apparatus, can give meaningful insights into future phenomena, and shed light on rapidly changing paradigms. On a less grand and utilitarian level, these twin lenses of the digital gothic – the "bi-directional hypothesis" as described in Part I – also allow novel ways to view on the one hand an existing and extensively analysed body of literature, and on the other, new texts and emerging forms that can be productively contextualised.

Like any concept, the "digital gothic" is of course open to criticism. If the digital is inescapably Gothic, and the Gothic ineluctably digital, does the notion actually carry any real meaning? Are the two things simply identical? Or does the one contain the other as a subset, with no further investigation being required, or found creatively and conceptually productive? Does "digital gothic" not in fact just mean "Gothic", or at best "Gothic that happens to be modern or contemporary" – with that prefix being wasted, an unnecessary carving out of a redundant subgenre? If *everything* is digital gothic, surely *nothing* is? At one level these are valid criticisms – however, I would argue against them both from the point of view of the insights demonstrated throughout this thesis, and also by counterexamples in the culture. The television series *Hannibal* (2013), for example, the extended re-imagining/prequel to the series of popular novels by Thomas Harris, would appear to be as clear a contemporary manifestation of the Gothic as one could imagine, with its taboo subjects – serial murder, madness, cannibalism, perverse and repressed sexuality, the entanglement of death and desire, art and violence – matched by self-consciously baroque stylings, and a knowing, winking sensibility. I would argue it doesn't contain more than a trace of the digital gothic, almost stubbornly remaining pre-technological. Similarly the gaming storefronts of Steam and the Playstation Store, and their lists of best-sellers, contain plenty of titles – *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013), *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2019) etc – that do not betray more than the slightest awareness of a Gothic shadow being dragged along in their wake. The picture, then, is one of regions of overlap –

digital gothic – and regions that remain usefully distinct – digital, Gothic – even if the boundaries between them are fuzzily uncertain.

In contrast to this more contextual and cultural speculation, my personal experience of the "digital gothic" in this doctorate has been much more about creativity and pragmatism, praxis and possibility. In setting out to write a novel in a specific genre, I was also unwittingly asking a question: what is genre for? Where does it reside? Is it essentially the business of writers or readers, academic researchers, or marketers and publishers? From my perspective as a first-time novelist, I kept returning to that notion of *narrative space*. Genre for me was essentially a *structural device* for the novel: a containing space that tells you what the story is and what it is not, what its boundaries are.

As such, a "new" genre, even one with such a storied history, presented challenges. My boundaries turned out to be dangerously permeable. One of the aspects I struggled with in the writing process was that my central device – the Tale, an infectious text or story – seemed to be one that was *iteratively* productive, rather than *linearly*. That is, it kept creating for me versions and reversions of essentially the same central trope – the infection of a set of people by exposure to an uncanny story – in infinite variation, rather than creating a straightforward narrative throughline. As such, the world of the novel grew much like the infection, outwards and sideways rather than forwards, and I ended up having to quarantine great chunks of it, preserving them for future outings. Ambition, in effect, outran experience. My current intention is that this is potentially the first volume of several set in the "world" of *Meme*, a Digital Gothic Trilogy, with further volumes continuing from the first book's climax; expanding out the fictional universe to include an online cult obsessed with the text, an addiction that takes over those exposed to it, and a video game and "reality" game that are both connected to its mythos. They may also stretch further back into the historical past; an instinct that is revealing as to the limits and problems inherent in self-consciously cleaving to a genre.

One of the things I really struggled with was the "rules" of the fictional world I had established, in particular a decision early on that everything that happened to the characters, however uncanny and seemingly supernatural, had to have some sort of potential real-world explanation – the unstable, traumatised psychology of the narrator Scarlett, for example, or untrustworthy documents and faked accounts. Part of this instinct

was an unconscious echo of Freud's insistence that the uncanny worked best when the fictional world it erupted into was grounded in the real; but I think it also betrayed a lack of confidence in my central premise. My two primary Gothic models, after all – *Dracula* and the stories of M.R. James – show no compunction about leavening their well-conjured realistic worlds with the outright supernatural.

As the writing proceeded I did find myself wondering if I had unnecessarily circumscribed my "narrative space" – did this story not want, perhaps, to push out into the more blatantly phantasmagorical? Or was it not perhaps more honestly classified by an existing, if recent genre, the New Weird (Weinstock, 2016)? For a while I considered having the story take place over two volumes, each of which would operate in a different Gothic subgenre or mode – Terror, and then Horror. That is, the story would begin with feet clearly grounded in the real world, and the primarily psychological terrors remaining, at least in theory, ultimately explicable by rational forces, as per Ann Radcliffe's preferred mode of Terror, outlined in her posthumous essay 'On the Supernatural in Poetry' (Radcliffe, 1826). After a climactic hinge point at the end of the first volume, these same terrors would then erupt into more out-and-out, unapologetic, reality-bending Horror in the second volume. Traces of that plan still remain, in the possibility of the middle volume of the putative trilogy (*The Unfinished*) translocating the premise to 1816, with the protagonists being Mary Shelley and her fellow Romantic poets, plunged into unalloyed, supernatural Gothic horror when they jointly read the Tale at the Villa Diodati. The appeal of "taking the brakes off" in this narrative manner is revealing; and it is perhaps no coincidence that it involves an M.R. Jamesian chronological distancing action, taking the horror into the not-now.

Yet by its nature the Gothic is a hybrid genre, and one that evolves in syncretic steps – the third volume (*Game*)'s likely focus on games and gaming still seems of a piece to me. That notion of gaming and gamification in particular is one I would also wish to explore in future research, both in academic and creative contexts. Despite the *Grand Theft Auto*s and *Call of Duty*s mentioned above, a substantial corpus of video games and their related media are replete with Gothic elements. Entire theses could clearly be written on *Bloodborne* (From Software, 2015) as an exemplar of the digital gothic and its connection to its literary forbears, in particular its utilisation of elliptical narratives and sublime terror. Space, time, and a focus on more conventionally narrative-based forms sadly precluded this for the

current thesis; it is my hope that the future brings forth more of these “precious nightmares” (Robson, 2015).

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MEME

A NOVEL

BEN TEASDALE

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[the creative section of the thesis - p82 to p381 - has been removed from this digital version at the author's request]