"The Sort of Story That Has You Covering Your Mirrors": The Case of Slender Man

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Abstract: As a monster, Slender Man epitomizes the simultaneous alienness and familiarity that characterizes the uncanny. Created by users on the Something Awful forums, the Slender Man's most common depiction is as a preternaturally tall, skinny humanoid with a white, faceless head, dressed incongruously—given his tendency to lurk in forests—in a black business suit and tie. A potent symbol of fear, Slender Man simultaneously serves as a flexible rhetorical tool, used variously to critique popular trends, instill fear in its audiences, and as a self-referential "in-joke" whose significance is only intelligible to those already familiar with the phenomenon itself. Thus the figure of the Slender Man indexes at least two separate intellectual strands, two distinct but related conceptual frameworks: first, Slender Man is a sign of abject fear—the ultimate Other, the final evolution of radical alterity. Secondly, Slender Man subtly references the self-conscious communicative processes that gave rise to the tradition itself and are, in fact, the reason for its continued existence as an internet icon. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how, as an iconic figure produced through a collective effort and deliberately modeled after an existing and familiar folklore genre, Slender Man represents what might be thought of as reverse ostension. Building on folkloristic work on the concept of ostension, the Slender Man mythos is shown to encapsulate important semiotic processes that are self-consciously employed by its creators to make a new narrative tradition that deliberately mimics established ones.

Keywords: legends; ostension; Internet memes; fan culture; horror; Slender Man

Figure 1. A fairly typical Slender Man encounter.
Art by *Alheli-delaGarza. http://alheli-delagarza.deviantart.com/

Introduction

In keeping with the theme of this issue—the monster as sign of radical, insurmountable, and terrifying Otherness—this article considers one contemporary permutation of monstrousness, the Internet phenomenon known as the Slender Man. As a monster, Slender Man epitomizes the simultaneous alienness and familiarity that characterizes the uncanny. Created by users on the Something Awful forums (Tomberry n.d.), the Slender Man's most common depiction is as a preternaturally tall, skinny humanoid with a white, faceless head, dressed incongruously—given his tendency to lurk in forests—in a black business suit and tie. Sometimes he has tentacles or multiple insect-like limbs, and sometimes not. He kills, he causes insanity; his presence never bodes well for those who see him. As a self-conscious Internet construct whose backstory has been built up over several years by a massive community of online participants, Slender Man functions metadiscursively to reveal precisely those elements that are popularly conceived of as constituting *monstrousness*. In simplest terms, Slender Man is a distillation of the most frightening images and trends present in contemporary popular culture (primarily, if not exclusively, those of the horror genre) and supernatural folklore. A potent symbol, Slender Man serves as a flexible rhetorical tool, used variously to critique popular trends, instill

fear in its audiences, and as a self-referential "in-joke" whose significance is only intelligible to those already familiar with the phenomenon itself. Thus the figure of the Slender Man indexes at least two separate intellectual strands, two distinct but related conceptual frameworks: first, Slender Man is a sign of abject fear—the ultimate Other, the final evolution of radical alterity. Second, Slender Man subtly references the self-conscious communicative processes that gave rise to the tradition itself and are, in fact, the reason for its continued existence as an internet icon.

Slender Man stands alongside countless similar phenomena in an area of growing interest for scholars: Internet memes. As Lyne S. McNeill has noted, "The emergence of traditional expressive forms on the Internet, and the observation and re-creation of them by other people in new contexts, has not gone unnoticed by the Internet community itself, which has adopted the concept of *memes* to identify what folklorists would call folklore" (2009:84, original emphasis). However, a particularly fascinating aspect of the Slender Man meme is how the figure's backstory deliberately and explicitly mimics the generic conventions typically ascribed to legends (Peck n.d.:1). Michael Kinsella has recently argued, "Legends as a folklore genre represent communal efforts to adapt old customs and beliefs to new situations. Simultaneously, legends frame emergent customs and beliefs by placing them in a historic continuum, thereby connecting the activities, behaviors, and beliefs of individuals and communities in the present to those in the past" (2011:8). The Slender Man mythos, as it is called by fans, certainly functions in the ways Kinsella describes.[1] It goes further, though, by containing within itself, from the very outset, a metadiscursive space wherein participants can comment not only on the Slender Man figure but on the nature and significance of the entire legend genre as well.

The present study considers Slender Man from a folkloristic perspective; however, in light of the monster's semiotic potential, Slender Man's interest extends beyond folklore's disciplinary confines. Building on folkloristic work on the concept of ostension—the showing of a thing or experience directly, as opposed to representing it through signs or sign systems such as narratives—I demonstrate how the Slender Man mythos encapsulates important semiotic processes that are self-consciously—often winkingly—employed by its creators to make a new narrative tradition that deliberately mimics established ones. Ostension has been famously defined in a folkloristic context as "showing the reality itself instead of using any kind of signification" (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983:6), and *ostensive action* as the direct performance of an action, or its representation through another action (with the assumption that the ostensive act itself is somehow "real") (ibid, 8). Ostension, in folkloristics, is the acting-out of narratives in reality, sometimes harmlessly, sometimes in ways that promote deviant or even criminal behavior (Ellis 1989:202)—in short, the act of referencing a narrative by providing an explicit, real-life example of it. Ellis gives perhaps the most stirring example of the troubling potential

for legend as a model for action, discussing such violent acts as cattle mutilations and human murders potentially patterned on legends of satanic killings (ibid).

My primary purpose in this article is to demonstrate how Slender Man represents what might be thought of as *reverse ostension*, in that it is an iconic figure produced through a collective effort and deliberately modeled after an existing and familiar folklore genre. If ostension involves the privileging of experience over representation (e.g., acting out the content of a legend text, rather than simply listening to the recitation of a traditional story), Slender Man's creators are effectively reversing this process by weaving together diverse strands of "experience" (in the form of personal encounters with the creature, documentary and photographic evidence, etc.) into a more or less coherent body of narratives. Simultaneously, these narratives are consciously modeled on existing, established, "real" ones (specifically, again, the legend genre). Reverse ostension is therefore, in fact, two processes in one: it involves the creation of new objects, new disconnected examples of experience; and it involves the combination of these elements into a corpus of "traditional" narratives, modeled on existing folklore (but not wholly indebted to any specific tradition).

In considering the Slender Man phenomenon, I examine three of the mythos' major permutations. The first of these is the original Internet forum thread that gave rise to the Slender Man and from which it rapidly spread, the "Create Paranormal Images" thread on the Something Awful forums (Create Paranormal Images 2009). The forum provides the clearest example of the semiotic process of reverse ostension as a conscious effort to create a specific type of folkloric sign. I also consider the YouTube video series *Marble Hornets* (DeLage, Wagner, and Sutton 2009a), which began in the Something Awful forum as a spinoff of the emerging Slender Man narrative. *Marble Hornets* depicts the ongoing encounters of a group of individuals with the monstrous Slender Man and is widely regarded as a formative work in the mythos. And third, to participate directly in one form of ostension set in the Slender Man universe, I played the video game *Slender: The Arrival* (Hadley 2013). The video game represents a move away from reverse ostension back toward a more direct ostensive experience, exemplifying the high degree of adaptability of this contemporary Internet phenomenon.

I supplement this material with an interview I conducted with Amanda Brennan, the meme librarian for the website Know Your Meme and self-professed Slender Man fan and participant in the mythos. Finally, I include responses from members of the Slender Nation forum (The Slender Nation n.d.) to a series of questions I posed about the Slender Man mythos.

These sources represent only a small fraction of the entire Slender Man mythos, which is expanding every day, but they aptly demonstrate the communicative processes at work among Slender Man's many fans. By emphasizing the experiential, ostensive qualities of these primary sources, I attempt to highlight the workings of reverse ostension and demonstrate its significance as a semiotic process particularly suited to contemporary Internet-based fan culture.

Two recent scholarly works have also examined the Slender Man phenomenon. In the first, Shira Chess argues that Slender Man represents "an 'open-sourcing' of generic horror conventions" (2011:375). Chess rightly emphasizes the communal, collaborative nature of the Slender Man mythos. She writes, "Like Open Source software, the open-sourcing of storytelling involves reuse, modification, sharing of source code, an openness (and transparency) of infrastructure, and the negotiation and collaboration of many individuals" (383)—precisely the concepts with which folklorists have long concerned themselves. Chess goes on to suggest that the nature of online communication makes it possible for scholars to witness the creation and spread of a new tradition like Slender Man in its entirety, something which would have been impossible previously (390).

The second work to consider the Slender Man phenomenon is Andrew Peck's forthcoming article (Peck n.d.). Peck argues that Slender Man comprises a "digital legend cycle that combines the generic conventions and emergent qualities of oral and visual performance with the collaborative potential of networked communication" (1). Like Chess, Peck emphasizes the Slender Man mythos' collaborative dimension. He goes further, though, arguing that "[Something Awful] users engaged in performance by referencing existing frameworks which, in turn, gave rise to further shared expectations" (12). This aspect of the early stages of Slender Man's development—its tendency toward collaboration and its appeal to established, recognized genres—is a major component of the process of reverse ostension.

Making a Monster

To make my argument—that Slender Man offers critical commentary on the legend genre by enabling individuals to participate in the creation of a legend through reverse ostension —I draw on semiotic theory as filtered through the lens of folkloristics. Since the genre being invoked and imitated by Slender Man's users is legend, it is necessary to turn first to that genre and the way it has been conceptualized by scholars.

Scholars differ as to what constitutes a legend, but an influential definition has been that offered by William Bascom, who saw legends as prose narratives taken as true by their tellers and audiences (1984:9). The issue of belief, however, is a contentious one. Discussing the ostensive dimensions of legend narratives—that is, their potential to

influence reality—Bill Ellis has suggested a more cautious approach: "[I]t seems more accurate to describe legends as normative definitions of reality, maps by which one can determine what has happened, what is happening, and what will happen" (Ellis 1989:202). Similarly, Michael Kinsella, in his study of legend-tripping on the Internet, argues, "Through legends—both supernatural and otherwise—the synergies between narrative and performance can sometimes result in the legend coming to life" (2011:11).

Regardless of scholarly understandings, the Slender Man mythos is composed of a number of narratives which, while avowedly fictional, are framed within the narrative tradition as "true" experiences—and the "truth" of the tradition is established in various ways, including by likening it to "real" legends. Peck notes that the Slender Man mythos "drew upon an existing matrix of belief … This demonstrates that the Slender Man was not an entirely new creation and was influenced by the vast network of performances that had directly and indirectly preceded it" (13).[2]

The Slender Man mythos began with a post in the Something Awful forums. Something Awful is a site that hosts a wide range of media, from current events to flash animations to reviews of roleplaying games (Kyanka n.d.). The site also features forums where users discuss an equally wide array of topics, one of which gave rise to the Slender Man meme. Two pictures posted by user Victor Surge on June 10th, 2009 depicted a tall, vaguely monstrous figure looming in the background of otherwise mundane photographs of children. These pictures were accompanied by the following text:

> "we didn't want to go, we didn't want to kill them, but its persistent silence and outstretched arms horrified and comforted us at the same time…" (http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/33182-slender-man)
>
> 1983, photographer unknown, presumed dead.
>
> "One of two recovered photographs from the Stirling City Library blaze. Notable for being taken the day which fourteen children vanished and for what is referred to as "The Slender Man". Deformities cited as film defects by officials. Fire at library occurred one week later. Actual photograph confiscated as evidence. (http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/33183-slender-man)
>
> 1986, photographer: Mary Thomas, missing since June 13th, 1986. (Victor Surge 2009).[3]

Victor Surge's original post provides tantalizing hints of a larger narrative involving a terrifying creature—it suggests the being's unique power to induce violence, and indicates that the photographers responsible for the images are missing or dead—and thus sets the stage for the processes that would lead to the communal construction of an entire narrative tradition. Notably, though, the original post leaves the reader with more questions than answers; it points to an underlying story without overtly narrating one. Taken alone, the post is a clear example of ostension: Slender Man is not represented abstractly, but presented photographically and "factually." Viewed as the first step in a series of ostensive acts, however, Victor Surge's post represents the beginning of reverse ostension: using fabricated "facts" to create a narrative where none previously existed.

Though the thread in which these images appeared was dedicated to creating fictional "paranormal" images, the Slender Man soon became the primary focus of thread participants. Over the next eight months, forum members continued adding to the emerging Slender Man mythos, posting their own pictures, videos, audio recordings, and narratives. The creature that emerged from the frantic activity of the Something Awful forum posters is a lanky, black business suit-wearing, faceless monster, sometimes depicted with writhing tentacles sprouting from its back, whose mere proximity is enough to cause insanity in his victims (Slender Man, as the name suggests, is most often gendered as a male). In some of the narratives supplied by forum members, Slender Man removed the organs of his victims, placing them in plastic bags before replacing them in their owners' lifeless bodies. In others, he would impale his victims in the branches of trees. He is frequently associated with forests, though he appears elsewhere as well.

The monstrous, fearful quality of Slender Man is partly responsible for the massive popularity of the meme, a fact upon which users of the Something Awful forums frequently reflected. User TheRiffie wrote, "I'm not usually one to get all bandwagony [sic] but Slender Man is honestly one of the most inspiring and sinister things I've seen lately. Something about it seems to strike some sort of primal 'wrong' chord" (TheRiffie 2009). Likewise, Dove from Above posted,

> Oh, fucky fuck fuck, you people, I have to pee and I can't bring myself to walk through the living room (the only light switch is at the far end) to get to the toilet! Thank God I closed the curtains before it got dark.
>
> This is seriously the sort of story that has you covering your mirrors, and I definitely want to read more, even if I don't sleep well tonight. (Dove from Above 2009)

And user Soakie, in a post dated June 20, 2009, wrote,

> [Slender Man] is a satisfactory booger [sic] man, pressing all the right buttons. Even if we don't really believe in the supernatural, even if our rational minds laugh at such an absurdity...we are cutting him out and sewing him together. We're stuffing him with nightmares and unspoken fears.
>
> And what happens when the pictures are no longer photoshops? (Soakie 2009)

These posts offer explicit commentary on users' conceptions of monsters and the monstrous. But as a consciously-constructed sign, Slender Man also reflects important semiotic processes at work among members of the various internet communities in which his legend has appeared. The most significant of these processes, and perhaps the area that has seen the most fruitful overlap of folkloristic and literary semiotic investigation, is ostension. Perhaps the form of ostension most studied by folklorists has been the process of legend-tripping, the self-conscious appropriation and enactment of existing legend texts (Koven 2008:154; Kinsella 2011:x). Legend-tripping is well represented in contemporary Internet culture, and the Slender Man mythos is no exception; however, rather than taking an existing legend text and acting it out through legend-tripping, the countless individuals who have contributed to the Slender Man mythos have taken a wide array of disparate raw materials—often created from scratch and usually of a purportedly experiential nature (e.g., stories of encounters with supernatural beings, etc.)—and combined them to form a new narrative tradition that resembles the existing, familiar legend genre. If ostension effectively bypasses the sign (in this case, the narrative) by privileging the direct experience of the object of the sign, then what I'm calling reverse ostension implies that a sign is constructed, where none previously existed, by weaving together disparate strands of experience (as well as indexing and mimicking other signs). Reverse ostension is, then, an act of reverse engineering: *an effort to arrive back at the sign*, that is, to create a narrative tradition by correlating and connecting fragmentary narratives (themselves representations of experience, albeit fictional ones).

Although reverse ostension's aim is the construction of a new sign (in this case, a legend text), this would be impossible without the careful and deliberate privileging of—in fact, the insistence upon—the experiential dimension of narratives. Ostension (in either direction) necessitates experience. In his study of ostension in Kamsá myths, John McDowell argues for the existence of an "experiential substrate" underlying narrative genres (1982:122). The experiential substrate is effectively the assumption of the underlying reality of the experience being recounted, as well as the chronology of events

(as distinct from the chronology of the *telling*). I suggest that the experiential substrate can refer not only to the narrative content of a given text, but also, in the case of reverse ostension, to the collective experience of creating the story in the first place. This is particularly true of Internet phenomena such as Slender Man, which are from their inception participatory. As Kinsella argues, "Communication technologies allow us to see more clearly how the reciprocity between experience and tradition results in the ongoing construction of what we call the supernatural" (2011:147). But Slender Man's interest, and that of phenomena like it, extends beyond its capacity to reveal communicative processes. The experiential emphasis underlying the construction of Slender Man and the careful inclusion of generic markers that indicate its status as a legend enable the monster to remain dynamic, shiftable, and emergent, available to be redeployed by its creators or adopted and adapted by new users (Peck n.d.:2).

These qualities of the Slender Man figure—its carefully-maintained vitality and adaptability, and its unsettling capacity to enter, in various ways, into the lived experiences of its creators—merit further attention. By its nature, a sign such as Slender Man, consciously constructed through reverse ostension, moves beyond its immediate purpose of entertainment to provide an ongoing commentary on what constitutes a particular type of folklore (Peck n.d.:7–8). Put another way, it reveals what people think folklore is, and what it does, and what it looks like. S. Elizabeth Bird has noted that some forms of popular culture succeed specifically because of their resemblance to folklore (2006:346). Slender Man's continuing popularity can likewise be attributed to its folklore-like characteristics. Part of the process of constructing Slender Man out of whole cloth, as it were, consists of a working-backwards from established, known legend texts to create a new one. This is an ostensive act, but it begins where typical ostensive actions end: with experience. Here, the experiential substrate, to use McDowell's term, does not imply an assumed *reality* of experience (meaning an actual encounter with the Slender Man); as I will show in the sections that follow, Slender Man's creators made no such assumption. Instead, the experiential substrate underlying the Slender Man mythos is the collective action undertaken by its creators: their careful construction of narratives, documentary evidence, audio and video material (all of which relate fictional experiences with the Slender Man). From this basis the legend emerges, a sign ready to be redeployed in new contexts.

"Real" versus "Fake"

Ostension, in our sense, involves the intrusion of narrative into reality. Dégh and Vázsonyi give the example of staged haunted houses at Halloween, which rely to some extent on prior knowledge on the part of their audience about the legends being referenced (1983:25). They go on to note that even in the absence of an actual legendary

background, the resemblance of haunted-house imagery to known legends can be enough to imbue them with a sense of fear:

> Paradoxical as it sounds, there are also legends which do not exist but still have a similar effect as the existing ones. Dracula, the most popular among all monsters, has no real folklore. … The public seems convinced, nonetheless, of the existence of a lush legend realm. The term *fictitious legend* best describes the case of Dracula. Fictitious, not because the story is untrue and the hero of the legend nonexistent, but because the legend itself does not exist (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983:25, original emphasis)

What Dégh and Vázsonyi term a "fictitious legend" is precisely what has been constructed in the case of Slender Man. It is worth pausing here to address the issue of "real" versus "fictional" legends, however. By "real" I simply mean narratives which arise within a community and are accepted as parts of that community's culture (in their connection to places, events, and characters of special significance), regardless of whether they are literally believed. This is in contradistinction to those legends, such as Slender Man, which are consciously crafted as fictions. It is important to note, too, that the fictional status of Slender Man is an emic distinction, arising from within the group of individuals who originally constructed the Slender Man mythos. For example, in a post dated October 5, 2009, user rinski observed,

> The SM is fascinating to me, because he's such an ideal horror figure for so many different reasons. I mean, there's the whole "fear of the unknown" thing, and the "twisting the familiar into something unfamiliar" thing. There's also the genius of his subtlety: we've trained ourselves to see his general shape in every photoshop, so now we see him *everywehre* [sic].
>
> These factors aren't really unique, though. I think one of SM's more unique attributes is that he's fake. Not only is he fake, but we know, for a fact, that he came from a thread on SA. No one is trying to convince us he's real. (rinski 2009)

rinski's metacommentary—Slender Man is "fake," but still frightening—serves to emphasize the fictional quality of the mythos, and does so from within the community that

created it. The term "fake," likewise, subtly references Slender Man's *resemblance* to something *not fake*—i.e., something real, a real monster of real legend.

Regardless, then, of the "real" or "fictional" status which scholars and others may append to a given form of expressive culture, it remains exactly that: a conscious expression of a culture shared among a particular group of people, which bears special significances that depend in part on an understanding of the group context in which the expressive culture arises. In this sense the Slender Man legend is as "real" as any other.[4] And as we have seen, the explicit acknowledgement of Slender Man's fictional status is an important part of the legend. Koven (2008) coins the terms "cinematic ostension" and "mass-mediated ostension" to apply to the forms of ostensive action represented in popular culture texts, and suggests that these forms of ostension "implicitly [recognize] an audience by encouraging some form of postpresentation debate regarding the veracity of the legends presented. There is also an implicit recognition of the fictive form of this narration (a fiction film) but equally a recognition that the stories upon which certain films are based come from 'genuine urban legends'" (139). This last point—the perceived relationship of a popular work to "genuine" legend—is the element upon which the process I'm calling reverse ostension hinges. Creating a "fictional legend," to use Dégh and Vázsonyi's term, involves first of all an awareness of what "real" legends are like: both their structural and formal characteristics, as well as their thematic content, motifs, and other narrative elements. The process of selecting these elements from existing folklore, or creating new ones that resemble them, is precisely the inverse of the ostensive action that Dégh and Vázsonyi describe. Once the necessary elements have been assembled, the new legend text thus created is available for further ostensive action. In the case of Slender Man, expectations about legend-telling shape the Slender Man mythos (Peck n.d.:2), but contributors to the legend both adhere to and depart from these expectations in any given performance of the legend: "These emergent forms constitute the generic expectations of a legend cycle" (Peck n.d.:7). This process echoes that identified by Henry Jenkins in his now-classic study of television fan culture (2013), where he argues, "Meanings form the basis for the construction and maintenance of the fan community; the expectations and conventions of the fan community also shape the meanings derived from the series and the forms taken by the fan's own artistic creations" (88).

The significance of the real/fictional dichotomy does not end there, however. Some users attempted to impart a more conventional "reality" on the Slender Man mythos by explicitly connecting it to "real" folklore, simultaneously increasing its verisimilitude and frightening potential while remaining conscious of the legend's fictional status (they were, after all, its creators). These users hoped, effectively, to shape a legend so compelling that people would be convinced of its veracity *as a legend*. Reacting to other forum members'

creation of a Wikipedia page about Slender Man, on June 18th, 2009, user Leperflesh posted,

> Going with a wikipedia [sic] page up-front was probably a lot of fun... but not a good idea.
> The right thing to do is establish web resources about the Slender Man first - conspiracy-theory web pages, etc. Then, after there's some cross-pollination and even interest from people outside SA, create a stub Wiki page that just links a source or two, and treats the subject from a skeptical/fact-based standpoint (use words like "myth", "alleged", and "conspiracy theory").
>
> A page like that, that purports only to report on a fringe myth, would have been more likely to survive. An editing history with a lot of different editors, over a long period of time (rather than a goon rush), with multiple references added and removed and edited over time, would have made the page less likely to be deleted.
>
> Now, of course, that's closed off; even if we did all of this, the history of the original page's creation and fast deletion as vandalism will serve as evidence against any future incarnation of the page.
>
> ...which is OK. I'm thinking we (me?) register slenderman.org, work on it (make it the typical disorganized, slightly unbalanced ranting style typical of the genre - just take a look at websites promoting HHO, 911 Truthers, crop circles, etc. for ideas), and then gradually over time add a selection of stuff from this thread, sticking to the top-quality examples (probably not the supposed secret texts from agencies we've never heard of – don't require someone to believe in an additional conspiracy theory just to accept this one, as that is an implausibility-multiplier).
>
> You could even address the subject from a skeptical-believer point of view, showing "obvious forgeries and fakes" on one page and "unable to discount" stuff on another, etc.
>
> Do it very low-key for a while (a year or more) and eventually it'll creep into the 'net's culture, and even have a chance to attract the attention of lazy reporters who don't fact-check stuff. (Leperflesh 2009)

Leperflesh makes explicit the desire among some users to form Slender Man into a real legend (i.e., one people would believe that people believed). User H.P. Shivcraft took the manipulation of folkloric source material even further, creating a fictional tale situated (apocryphally) in a real work by a real folklorist. In a post dated July 1st, 2009, H.P. Shivcraft wrote,

> So once the Slender Man began popping up in this thread, I could have sworn something about it seemed familiar. I'm an amateur folklorist, so I had a few source books lying around. It took me a while, but I finally found something in W.K. McNeil's Ghost Stories of the American South. Most of the tales collected are transcripts of recordings other folklorists made, but McNeil compiles them and offers notes. A really handy book. So anyway, this particular story appears in the book's seventh section, "Other Supernatural Creatures." (H.P. Shivcraft 2009)

Where Leperflesh offered suggestions for making Slender Man seem real, H.P. Shivcraft acted directly to accomplish its realization, situating Slender Man alongside existing legend texts, literally placing it in a collection of "real" narratives. This introductory paragraph is followed by the text of a legend purportedly collected by McNeil, whose real book, *Ghost Stories from the American South* (1985), does not in fact contain any such text. H.P. Shivcraft even includes, following the legend text, an "analysis" of the legend supposedly written by McNeil himself, wherein the folklorist attempts to assign motifs to the narrative (a hallmark of older modes of folkloristic analysis, in which folklorists classified elements of narratives that appeared in multiple versions across time and space). In this way, the reverse ostensive processes that gave rise to Slender Man are at once emphasized (everyone knows the user is a user, and everyone in the forum knows the forum is about a fictional legend) and, conversely, hidden from view, assimilated into existing American folklore.[5]

An interview with Slender Man creator, user Victor Surge, posted on the website Know Your Meme, likewise demonstrates the tremendously reflexive, savvy and volitional nature of this meme, and the general awareness of its relationship to more conventional folklore genres:

> **T : What was your reaction when people started creating pictures and stories about your newborn myth, in parallel with yours ? Did you think it would get that much popular [sic] and spread to others websites (4chan,**

Kongregate, Facepunch…) as quickly as it did, gaining the status of "Internet Urban Legend" and a meme ?

VS : It was amazing to see people create their own little part of Slender Man in order to perpetuate his existance. [sic]
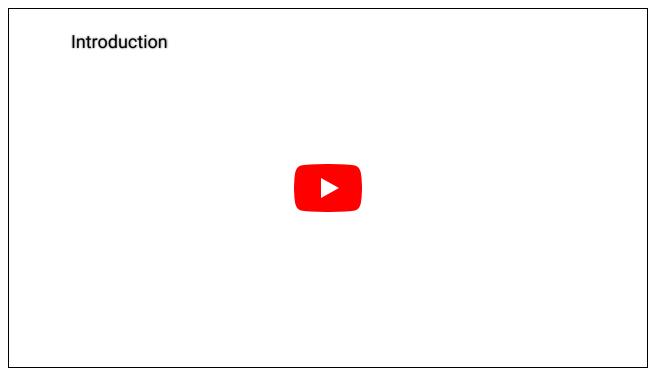
I didn't expect it to move beyong [sic] the SA forums. And when it did, I found it interesting to watch as sort of an accelerated version of an urban legend. It differs from the prior concept of the urban legend in that it is on the Internet, and this both helps and harms the status of the Slender Man as one. In my personal opinion, an urban legend requires an audience ignorant of the origin of the legend. It needs unverifiable third and forth [sic] hand (or more) accounts to perpetuate the myth. On the Internet, anyone is privy to its origins as evidenced by the very public Somethingawful thread. But what is funny is that despite this, it still spread. Internet memes are finicky things and by making something at the right place and time it can swell into an "Internet Urban Legend". (Tomberry n.d.)

Here Victor Surge both acknowledges conservative models of folklore (specifically, urban legends) as anonymous, collective works, and moves beyond those older models to suggest ways in which the Internet allows users to create new items inspired by well-known genres. Victor Surge's language perfectly reflects the concern, in reverse ostension, with generating a sign where there was none previously: to "perpetuate the myth," generating a meme with staying power, is the goal. Together with the preceding forum quotes, it plainly echoes Kinsella's assertion that "Supernatural legends and occult texts both illustrate attempts to become believable, or better yet, 'real,' by tying themselves to history through blending fiction with fact, infusing everyday reality with elements of the otherworldly and fantastic" (2011:60). This is the considerable signifying power of reverse ostension, as opposed to its straightforward predecessor: it moves away from reality by creating a sign, but simultaneously moves closer to (a version of) reality by making the sign as much like other, familiar, accepted signs as possible. Reverse ostension indexes a whole realm of preexisting signs (Slender Man exists in intertextual dialogue with other legend texts) and in so doing grants a new legend a different kind of veracity (Slender Man is *believable*).

Experiencing the Legend

One of the earliest offshoots of the original Something Awful thread was the YouTube series entitled *Marble Hornets*. The first video of the series, "Introduction" (DeLage,

Wagner, and Sutton 2009b), was uploaded to YouTube on June 20, 2009, just ten days after Victor Surge's original images were posted to the Something Awful forum. Presented as found footage, the introduction (in common with the rest of the series) features text captions inserted by protagonist Jay. Jay's narration explains that the footage was shot by his college friend Alex as part of a film project entitled *Marble Hornets*. During filming, Alex's behavior became strange, and he abandoned the project, but eventually agreed to give the tapes to Jay, who explains to the audience through captions that he intends to go through the tapes to determine what may have caused Alex's unusual behavior. Over the course of the series, Jay is pulled into a deepening mystery involving his friend Alex and the monstrous Slender Man (who is never identified as such in the series, but clearly represents the figure created in the Something Awful forum).

Introduction

(for the YouTube video "Introduction" from Marble Hornets:
https://youtu.be/Wmhfn3mgWUI)

Marble Hornets (http://www.youtube.com/user/MarbleHornets), and the related YouTube series totheark (http://www.youtube.com/user/totheark) (DeLage, Wagner, and Sutton 2009c), illustrate Koven's concept of cinematic ostension, as one Slender Man narrative is presented (albeit in fragmented form) through the videos that Jay collects and films over the course of the series. This is significant in the context of the present discussion because it implies the existence of a sign which can be ostensively experienced: that is, once the Slender Man mythos was begun by Victor Surge, it was available for direct participation in various forms, including the ostensive action depicted in the fictional *Marble Hornets* series. To complicate matters further, *Marble Hornets* and *totheark* together constitute an alternate reality game (ARG) (Tomberry n.d.) which invites users to participate even more directly in the Slender Man mythos. *Totheark*'s video entries—

uploaded by an unknown person or persons from within the *Marble Hornets universe*, though fan theories abound—often include coded text which fans have worked to decipher, deepening the mystery and enhancing the ostensive component of the *Marble Hornets*/Slender Man mythos (see Totheark n.d.).

Kinsella notes, "ARGs are open-ended gaming narratives that utilize transmedia storytelling and interweave the ideas and actions of both players and game designers (often called puppet masters) into an unfolding production" (2011:60). Interestingly, he goes on to argue that "what separates legend-trippers from alternate reality gamers . . . is that the latter are self-consciously aware of their performance and believe in the potency of their play. Legend-trippers, however, generally disavow that it is they who are the cause of the supernatural event. In order to ascribe a supernatural quality to an experience, agency must reside with the otherworldly" (62). Slender Man complicates this point. The mythos includes both a fan-created legend and a fan-made ARG, *Marble Hornets*, whose primary purpose is to interact with that legend—i.e., to legend-trip. This suggests that the ostensive action represented by legend-tripping is not necessarily undertaken in order to evoke the supernatural; rather, as a semiotic process in which fans consciously and willingly engage, its purpose is to provide direct access to the narrative regardless of its supposed supernatural associations.

Certainly, Marble Hornets is doing something right in terms of its portrayal of and interaction with the Slender Man mythos and the degree to which this approach resonates with Slender Man fans. At the time of writing, the first entry had 2,748,213 views on YouTube—and this is only the first in an ongoing video series currently on its seventy-first episode. The creators of *Marble Hornets* have received backing from a film production company to make a motion picture based on the YouTube series (McNary 2013), and also served as writers in the production of the video game *Slender: The Arrival* (Slender: The Arrival n.d.). The game displays yet another level of ostensive engagement with the Slender Man mythos, one which derives its efficacy from its adherence to the established rules of that mythos.

**Figure 2. Slender Man as he appears in "Slender: The Arrival."
Image used with permission.
(http://www.slenderarrival.com/images/gallery/forestfog.jpg)**

Slender: The Arrival in fact represents a further refining of the meme and, in a sense, its transition from a collective and participatory cultural form to a mass-produced commodity (albeit one developed by an independent studio). The game allows individual players to experience the collectively-produced Slender Man legend in a frightening, solitary adventure. The frightful images and "historical" knowledge established by the meme tradition are available, in this digital context, for direct engagement (for better or for worse). The game also offers what is arguably the best opportunity for ordinary fans of the mythos to legend-trip in the world of Slender Man.

The game is simple: you control the protagonist, who must navigate several isolated, dark and potentially dangerous (though essentially mundane) environments to uncover information about her own situation and elude the strange, monstrous figure that seems to be chasing her. The player has no weapons and cannot fight back against the Slender Man, whose unpredictable appearances in the game world increase the further you progress in each stage. His presence causes loud static noises, distortion in the game video, and, if you remain near him for too long, will result in a "game over."[6]

The ostension enabled by the Slender Man video game is perhaps unlike that envisioned by earlier generations of folklorists. Despite the obvious differences (it involves a digital "trip" rather than a physical one; the narrative thus explored has been known as a fiction since its beginning), the game nevertheless represents an opportunity for fans to participate directly in the mythos, and to experience the frightful Slender Man figure in a startlingly direct way. It is useful here to consider McDowell's notion of "virtual ostension," which he defines as a type of ostension which occurs during the telling of a narrative, and whose experiential substrate is not available for direct experience by its audience, even though it is invoked in the narrative itself (1982:127). Video game ostension—"virtual" in a different sense—complicates this, because, while a story is being told, the player has a high degree of direct influence over its unfolding. Playing the game itself constitutes the experiential substrate, even as it references *other* experiential substrates in the form of the wider legend genre, popular culture portrayals of legend-trips, etc.

Slender - The Arrival Launch Trailer

(For the video "Slender - The Arrival Launch Trailer" from Blue Isle Studios:
https://youtu.be/gSvZHD0TmbE?si=AXaJSThRD3xhDuGz)

Emic Perspectives on Slender Man

One of the first Internet sources I consulted for information about Slender Man was the Know Your Meme database. According to the KYM "About" page, "**Know Your Meme** is a site that researches and documents Internet memes and viral phenomena" (Know Your Meme: About n.d., original emphasis). After perusing the KYM Slender Man page, I contacted the website to ask about using materials from the site. Amanda Brennan, KYM's meme librarian, responded to my message. We conversed via email, and eventually I asked Brennan if she would be willing to be interviewed on the topic of

Slender Man, to which request she graciously agreed. We spoke via Skype; I present excerpts from our conversation here.

I asked Brennan if she felt that Slender Man's success was due to its interactive nature. She responded in the negative; instead, she felt it had to do with the issue of the mythos' semblance of reality.

> AB: The fact that there's a whole wiki dedicated to this mythos just kind of lets people, lets their imaginations run free. And the Internet is a big facilitator of that, because you have a platform—you can say, "Yeah, I saw Slender Man. Here. Let me tell you about it. Let me show you this picture." It might be—it's Photoshopped, but the person you're showing, or the blog you're putting it on—they don't know it's Photoshopped. [JT laughs] And it's just that question of, oh, is it real? Is it not real? What has science done? [JT laughs again]
>
> That definitely feeds into people's curiosity. (Brennan 2013)

Brennan's comments reflect the concern, noted above, that Slender Man fans have with the mythos' seeming realness. This point was reiterated by other Slender Man fans whom I questioned about their involvement with the mythos. In the course of researching the Slender Man phenomenon, I also decided to start an account on the Slender Nation forum (The Slender Nation n.d.). The users of this forum, as the name implies, are well-versed in the Slender Man mythos. I created a thread and asked a series of questions, to which a handful of forum users responded. Space prohibits the inclusion of all responses here, but the thread is viewable in its entirety at this link. My main reason for entering into discussion with Slender Man "experts" was to test my ideas about the legendary characteristics of the Slender Man mythos. In response to a post in which I asked if it was important that the Slender Man mythos resembled "real" legends, user Voidmaster posted the following:

> I'd never thought of that angle before, but now that you point it out, I would say that it is extremely important.
>
> So much of our desire for knowledge and experience can be immediately placated by things like the internet these days, that it seems we've finally found the boarders [sic] of the map. That there are only a few remaining dark areas left

> on the map, all of which are so extremely esoteric and complicated that, to the common man, they might not as well be there at all.
>
> Simply put, it feels to the layman as if we've learned all there is to know, and all the knowledge in the world is readily available to anyone without training or study via the internet.
>
> And so without any apparent black spots on the map, we seek to draw our own. (Voidmaster 2013)

Voidmaster goes on to discuss the etiological function of traditional folklore, and suggests that Slender Man represents "The idea that, despite all these thousands of years of study and observation, we still have no idea what is going on with this universe. That we are still as woefully in the dark as our ancient counterparts were" (Voidmaster 2013).

Voidmaster's response emphasizes the experiential nature of the Slender Man mythos. So does that of user sethlapod555, who writes, "The Slender Man mythos is one of the only myths that let's [sic] you create your own narratives with the story. There are tons upon tons of options that haven't been explored because the myth is so open to innovation and construction that literally anything can be made from it" (sethlapod555 2013).

I also asked forum members what they thought made Slender Man seem "real." User awkwardraptor responded,

> I think it's mostly because, there are just so many pieces of "evidence" in the Mythos (The numerus vlogs/blogs, the woodcuttings, photos, etc.) that makes it seem that Slender Man actually exists, when of course, in real life, Slender Man does not exist. The people who created Slender Man, and the people who continue to add to the legend of The Slender Man, and even a good majority (In my opinion anyway.) of the people who watch the vlogs/read the vlogs, know that Slender Man, in reality at least, does not exist.
>
> But for the people who do not know that The Slender Man is just a creation of somebody's mind, and actually take the "evidence" as fact, that's what makes it real.

> In my opinion at least. (awkwardraptor 2013)

awkwardraptor's response brings to mind Brennan's point about the slippery status of Slender Man's "reality."

When I asked about the video game, user timeobserver2013 told me that long-time Slender Man fans were unhappy with *Slender: The Eight Pages* (Hadley 2012), which was the predecessor to *Slender: The Arrival*, because it generated a great deal of interest in Slender Man, but the fans who initially encountered Slender Man via the game were unaware of the complexity of the established mythos (timeobserver2013 2013).

Brennan summed up the importance of the original mythos during our interview. She told me,

> I don't know if the original writers had any, like, experience with the mythos prior to writing the game. But—I think that is—I think—how do I phrase this nicely? [JT laughs] I think that the response to the first game caused them to bring on Marble Hornets. Because it was so well-received, they wanted someone who was way more knowledgeable about the whole thing. (Brennan 2013)

These responses, and the others I received in the Slender Nation thread, illustrate a number of important characteristics of the fans/creators of the Slender Man mythos: they are heavily invested in the participatory/experiential dimension of the mythos (by contributing to this dimension they are actively engaging in the reverse ostension process, ultimately facilitating the expansion of the legend); they possess, and pride themselves on, deep knowledge of the tradition itself; and they are protective of the mythos as they feel it should be, even as they are open to interpretation and variation. This last point underscores Peck's argument that "each performance is, in and of itself, a statement about what makes for a good performance" (n.d.:5). It also bears out—albeit in a slightly different context—Jenkins' claim that "Organized fandom is, perhaps first and foremost, an institution of theory and criticism, a semistructured space where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated, and negotiated and where readers speculate about the nature of the mass media and their own relationship to it" (2013:86).

Conclusion

Trevor Blank (Blank 2009) has suggested that folklorists have tended to avoid Internet-based study due in part to the infamous and unfortunate concept of fakelore (4). Despite this, Blank argues, "The Internet's proclivity for pseudonymous interaction and the ease with which texts can be transmitted makes it the ideal location, instead of oral and journalistic venues, for the resurfacing of narrative texts" (8). Happily, the situation Blank describes is slowly changing. Folklorists, in common with members of allied disciplines, are coming increasingly to recognize that the Internet does indeed provide a forum where processes very much like those attributed to more conventional folkloric media arise and flourish.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the Slender Man mythos' tendency to invite discussion, interaction and direct participation. As Andrew Peck has demonstrated, Slender Man constitutes a digital legend. Legends, in turn, offer opportunities to engage in "metatextual debate about whether such events are *possible*" (Koven 2008:156, original emphasis). It is interesting that this metatextual function is not diminished even though the process I outline here is the reverse of "ordinary" ostension. In the case of the Slender Man, the metatextual function of the text is not to enable debate about the legend's veracity as experience or historical fact—never in question here, since Slender Man was self-consciously created as a fiction—but its plausibility *as a representative of the legend genre*. To put it more succinctly, belief in the literal content of the legend is nonexistent and unproblematic; the issue is making the legend *seem like* a legend. This process, what I'm calling reverse ostension, *must* be participatory, because, as Peck and others have noted, the end result depends on the consensus of the community. The sign that is ultimately produced must live up to a set of shared expectations.

Reverse ostension, in the end, is simply another way to allow direct engagement with legends (or any other narrative genre). It could be argued that, following this model, any act of narration—that is, any conscious construction of a narrative—could constitute reverse ostension. I suggest, however, that this is not the case. Reverse ostension, first of all, is a self-conscious process. It relies on an awareness of the existence of a given semiotic system and a deliberate attempt to mimic or replicate that system, together with its attendant expectations of form, structure and content. When we narrate the events of a given day in our own lives, linguistic and social norms and expectations of course exert an influence on the form of our narration; but typically, in casual conversation, we are not *consciously* attempting to model our narration on a prior one. Our speech may follow regional patterns or contain idioms unique to our immediate folk groups, and we may alter the types of speech we employ based on our audience and the social context in which they occur; and of course, any such exchange takes place in the context of a mutually-intelligible language; but these elements generally do not reflect an explicit attempt, in

ordinary speech, to have our narratives be accepted as belonging to a particular class or genre. Reverse ostension operates on the shared understanding that the thing being constructed, the semiotic system being developed, has no experiential grounding: there is no connection to reality beyond the *resemblance* of the system to those already existing.

But then, we *could* label creative acts which construct sign systems based on existing models as reverse ostension. Filmmaking, fiction writing, etc. would clearly fall into this category. However, to do so would overlook the critical participatory nature of phenomena like Slender Man, which more conventional models of mass-mediated or popular culture tend not to exhibit (for the moment, at least). Slender Man became, as Peck demonstrates, an entire legend *cycle*, complete with variants detailing widely different individual "experiences" of the creature, precisely because of the efforts of numerous individuals to create a cohesive-but-flexible system of signs based on shared understandings of what such a system should look like.

If this insistence on the communal dimension of reverse ostension is reminiscent of early folklorists' insistence on folklore as collective, anonymous expression, it is deliberately so. Popular understandings of what folklore is and how it operates tend to reflect a less problematic, more straightforwardly functionalist orientation, akin to what Catherine Tosenberger has called the "traditionalist" perspective wherein folklore is viewed as something to be collected among conservative folk groups by educated outsiders (2010:2.4–2.10). Slender Man in particular reflects the desires of its creators to maintain a sign system that is both recognizable (i.e., relatively coherent and stable) and flexible enough to accommodate individual variation. The reason for this is, again, to enable members of the online Slender Man community to engage with the phenomenon on their own terms—something which popular culture often does not do. An important exception to this, of course, is the area of fan culture, which engages in precisely the interactive, communal construction of sign-systems that reverse ostension encompasses. Fan fiction, for example, might usefully be regarded as a form of reverse ostension, particularly in its relationship to and critique of established "canon" within a given fandom.

Through the complex and ongoing process of reverse ostension, members of the various internet communities who have staked a claim to the Slender Man mythos have created a fearful symbol, a monster that, according to their own emic standards, is frightening in virtually any context. The appearance of figures like Slender Man is of interest not only because it demonstrates the communicative immediacy of the Internet, which by now is old hat, but also because it demonstrates that the Internet—and indeed, any popular communicative venue—can serve as a vehicle for critical metacommentary from unexpected corners, on unexpected topics. As fan culture emerges around a popular media text, entirely new "standalone" texts are created by individuals to respond to

changing social trends and the immediacies of everyday life. But even such "new" texts may be carefully placed alongside established ones, wrapped up in the skins of familiar genres and imbued with an air of "traditionality," of continuity, of realness. The interest to scholars should be apparent, and is only increased when these metacommunicative practices are turned towards the areas we regard as part of our disciplinary jurisdictions. Slender Man not only reveals what his creators find frightening; he also demonstrates current trends in popular thinking about the nature of folklore, about how it can be used to achieve specific social ends in uniquely contemporary contexts, and about the kinds of representational strategies and communicative systems that give rise to monsters in the first place.

Acknowledgements

Endnotes

1 The relationship of texts in the "mythos" parallels similar intertextual relations noted by scholars in a range of disciplines. For instance, Otsuka Eiji (2010), discussing a popular anime series, writes, "The greater the number of settings prepared, the greater the sense among audience members that the drama of each episode is real. The ideal is that each one of these individual settings will as a totality form a greater order, a united whole. This accumulation of settings into a single totality is what people in the animation field are accustomed to calling the 'worldview'" (107). Otsuka coins the term "narrative consumption" to describe the viewing practices of fans (109), a term whose usefulness breaks down in the face of fan practices of active viewing and fanfiction (the latter of which clearly relates to the practices of Slender Man's creators I discuss below). Otsuka himself recognizes this, and anticipates the field of fan studies when he notes that narrative consumption "also bears within it the possibility of a new stage wherein consumers themselves begin to create commodities and consume them on their own terms" (113).↵

2 In addition to drawing on existing legends, Slender Man has also generally been assimilated into the broader Internet tradition of "creepypasta." Creepypasta are "short horror stories and urban legends that

are shared via message boards or e-mail" (Frketic n.d.). The larger creepypasta genre thus reflects a similar preoccupation with "looking like" legends.↵

3 The original images are no longer viewable on the Something Awful forums, but they may be viewed on the KYM Slender Man page, located at http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/slender-man.↵

4 But interestingly enough, the Wikipedia entry for "fakelore" (Fakelore 2013) includes Slender Man in its list of examples of this problematic concept: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fakelore#Slender_Man.↵

5 H.P. Shivcraft's name, a reference to horror author H.P. Lovecraft, is interesting in that it indexes (deliberately or not) the world-building strategies of that author (see Evans 2005). Consider Evans' point about Lovecraft's use of folklore: "The use of folk narratives and beliefs in his stories served to give them an air of verisimilitude; in the same way, Lovecraft's use of material culture, especially architecture, gave his stories a grounding in the real world" (117). Thanks to Paul Manning for pointing out the implications of the Lovecraft connection.↵

6 In the interest of full disclosure, it should be noted that the author was only able to complete the game's first and second levels as of this writing. It is not only a surprisingly difficult game: it is also terrifying, further testimony to the facility with which its creators adapted the Slender Man mythos.↵

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