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Res Ipsa: Ostension in Semiotics and Folkloristics

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Abstract: This article attempts to reconcile the semiotic model of ostension with the markedly different folkloristic use of the term. In semiotics, as well as linguistics and philosophy, ostension may be glossed as showing, rather than telling. Yet in the field of folkloristics, most invocations of ostension have regarded it as a kind of interaction with traditional narratives. Despite the significant differences between these types of ostension, we suggest that both have at their heart a concern with *res ipsa*, the thing itself. We first discuss the historical breadth of the concept of ostension, before presenting a simple set of ostensive types, and one "ostensive context," building on existing scholarship on ostension. The categorical reorientation we propose here is important for several reasons. The concept of ostension in all its inflected forms pushes scholars to consider communication beyond the limits of language and into an ontological consideration of how communication and meaning can operate in the network of "things" and "objects" (rather than signs). For this reason, it also stretches the limits of semiotics, which generally deals with signs and semiosis (the action of signs). Reimagining the relationship of semiotic and folkloric ostension along these lines refocuses our attention on the communicative process that is at the heart of the earliest formulations of ostension itself. More broadly, ostension impacts cultural norms surrounding appropriate modes of communication (e.g., speaking aloud versus silently gesturing); verbal storytelling and its relationship to embodied experience; and perhaps most significantly in the 21st century, belief formation and the notion of evidentiary weight.

Keywords: ostension; legend-tripping; ontology; copycat crimes; narrative

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Introduction

This article attempts to reconcile the semiotic model of ostension with the markedly different folkloristic use of the term.[1] In semiotics, as well as linguistics and philosophy, ostension may be glossed as showing, rather than telling. Instead of referring to something in some indirect way, such as via language, ostension "directly presents ('offers to cognitive disposal') the communicated reality itself" (Osolsobě 1971:35). That is, ostension means showing someone a *cup* or a *book* or a *rock*, rather than saying or writing cup or book or rock (or using some other form of mediated communication). Yet in the field of folkloristics, most invocations of ostension have followed Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi (1983) in regarding it as engagement in the present with the narrated past. This approach to ostension sees it as "the patterning of real-life actions on a shared narrative model" (Ellis 2002:22). The major folkloric processes associated with this understanding of ostension are "copycat" crimes and other attempts to reenact established narratives, and the phenomenon known as legend-tripping, or visiting a site specifically because of the traditional narratives attached to it, which itself "normally involves the ostension, or literal acting out, of local supernatural legends" (Ellis 1996:167).[2] Yet we argue that narrative reenactments bear no direct connection to semiotic ostension at all; and while legend-tripping certainly contains some classically "ostensive" dimensions, it is at its core mostly unrelated to the semiotic understanding of ostension as communicating in a non-representational way. Folkloristic treatments have in nearly all cases failed to attend to the indexical gestures, the issue of physical co-presence (Osolsobě 1979:66; Engelland 2014:xxiii–xxiv), and the explicitly communicative function which are key to semiotic understandings of ostension.[3]

Despite the significant differences between these types of ostension, we suggest that both have at their heart a concern with *res ipsa*, the thing itself. Both name the immediate experience of interlocutors with some *thing*—"thing" here being deployed with all the breadth of the Latin word *res*, defined as "*a thing, object, being; a matter, affair, event, fact, circumstance, occurrence, deed, condition, case,* etc.; and sometimes merely = *something*" (Lewis and Short 1879, original emphasis)."[4] By focusing on the presence of the thing itself, we hope to arrive at a model of ostension which honors both folkloristic and semiotic uses of ostension, lays the groundwork for greater dialogue between these fields, and also recaptures some of the specificity lost in the concept's translation into new disciplinary contexts. We will focus especially on John H. McDowell's early concept of *virtual ostension*

(1982) which to date has been, we argue, the most effective deployment of semiotic ostension in a folkloristic context. Virtual ostension is the capacity of narrative performance to "[produce], *as if actually present*, a slice of detail belonging to the experiential substrate" (McDowell 1982:127, original emphasis)—that is, to the contents of the narrative. According to McDowell, a skilled storyteller can, through techniques of voice, gesture, and other strategies, create the feeling that the narrative's personae are present and that the narrated events are unfolding in real time before the audience's eyes (and other senses). The "thing" which is "shown" in virtual ostension, then, is the content of a narrative. This ostension, as McDowell notes, is illusory; but like semiotic ostension proper, it remains concerned with making the thing itself (the "experiential substrate" of the story being told) available to the perception of its audience.

Developing McDowell's model, we argue that folkloric ostension, tied as it has historically been to traditional narratives and attempts to interact with (or reenact) them, is always necessarily a form of virtual ostension. In folkloric ostension, the "thing" is not present, for the "thing" is the narrated past. However, in narrative performance, the affective impact of the virtual presencing of that past can be profound. It is possible, of course, to imagine instances of virtual ostension that are not folkloric (i.e., not included in the shared vernacular culture of a given group). Mediated forms of storytelling (novels, audiobooks, radio dramas) could encourage the affective experience of the presence of narrated worlds in precisely the ways McDowell describes without being folkloric. Video games, many of which after all are centrally concerned with the creation of "virtual worlds" (Boellstorff et al. 2012), may likewise create a sense of presence for their players—and logically so, since things and events in the virtual world are actually present to the players who are also inhabiting that world.[5] (In a perhaps unnecessary further wrinkle, the ostension of a virtual object in a virtual world—a character in an online video game, say—would not be virtual, because the virtual character is *actually present* to interlocutors in the virtual space. But we digress.)

What this all means is squares and rectangles: while folkloric ostension is always virtual, not every instance of virtual ostension is folkloric. In this article we present a simple set of ostensive types, and one "ostensive context," building on existing scholarship on ostension. Semiotic ostension, again, is the presentation of things (objects, actions, creatures, etc.) to communicate in a direct, unmediated way. Virtual ostension, following McDowell, is the affective experience of an absent thing in the present through skillful discursive performance (mediated or not). Folkloric ostension is our name for that type of virtual ostension that depends on skillful narration to create the affective experience of the presence of traditional characters, beings, settings, events, and lifeworlds which, again, are in fact remote from the present interlocutors.[6] Finally, legend-tripping, the folkloric concept most associated with ostension, is in fact a *context* for ostension, i.e., a context in which the different ostensive modes—folkloric as well as semiotic—may be utilized in the present in the service of creating an engrossing experience of narrated space.

The categorical reorientation we propose here is important for several reasons. The concept of ostension in all its inflected forms pushes scholars to consider communication beyond the limits of language and into an ontological consideration of how communication and meaning can operate in the network of "things" and "objects" (rather than signs). For this reason, it also stretches the limits of semiotics, which generally deals with signs and semiosis (the action of signs). As McDowell notes in his contribution to this issue of *Semiotic Review*, "Ostension as a counterpoint to iconicity, or as pathway to a transcending of it, plays an essential role in making communication effective – whether by validating a child's panorama or adding presence and verisimilitude to a storytelling performance" (McDowell, this issue). Reimagining the relationship of semiotic and folkloric ostension along these lines refocuses our attention on the communicative process that is at the heart of the earliest formulations of ostension itself. More broadly, ostension impacts cultural norms surrounding appropriate modes of communication (e.g., speaking aloud versus silently gesturing); verbal storytelling and its relationship to embodied experience; and perhaps most significantly in the 21st century, belief formation and the notion of evidentiary weight. This last point refers, of course, to the power of "seeing it for oneself." A story attached to a physical object transforms the nature of the object from inert matter to *proof*: a strange mark on a flagstone is the imprint of the Devil's hoof; an abandoned and presumably empty house is actually inhabited by other-than-human presences which may be experienced directly by those brave enough to enter. In a world of Qanon and science denialism, ethnonationalism and Donald Trump, truth claims and the concept of proof are clearly at the center of issues of far more than academic importance. Ostension provides one model for understanding how experiences in the world, whether "real" or "virtual," affect knowledge and belief formation and the subsequent relationalities of people to the worlds they inhabit.[7]

In the following discussion, we attempt to unpack the ways ostension has been deployed by scholars in various fields before advancing our own model that incorporates both semiotic and folkloristic approaches. We begin by outlining philosophical and semiotic understandings of ostension, attending in particular to theater scholar Ivo Osolsobě's work. We then discuss how ostension was brought into folkloristics through a landmark article by Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi, highlighting the important ways their use diverged from earlier philosophical and semiotic ones. We next move to a fuller consideration of McDowell's virtual ostension and its role in bridging the theoretical gap between semiotic and folkloric ideas about engagement with "the thing itself." This includes a reconsideration of legend-tripping, which becomes a context in which both folkloric and semiotic ostension may occur. Rather than rejecting folkloristic engagements with ostension, we ultimately argue for a more rigorous theorization of the various modes of ostension across disciplines.

In Philosophy

Ostension has a long pedigree in the history of philosophy (for a treatment of which, see Engelland 2014). Osolsobě notes that one of the first definitions of "showing" comes from

Plato, who writes in the Cratylus that by "showing" is meant "bringing [something] before the sense of sight" (Cratylus 430, in Osolsobě 2010:665). Yet in Osolsobě's view, "the first *theory* of showing comes from St. Augustine" (2010, 665, emphasis added). Augustine treated "telling" and "showing" as two different modalities of signification. In the *De Magistro*, a dialogue between Augustine and his son Adeodatus, the two interlocutors dwell at length on an essential question that is intertwined with ostension. As Gramigna (2020:57-58) has written elsewhere, "Augustine sets the essential question in these terms: is the recourse to signs for the purpose of showing something to someone an inexorable necessity, or can one do without the mediation of signs? In other words, can nothing be shown if not by means of words or other signs?" Is it possible, that is, to circumvent language entirely, and instead show the thing in itself, or show an action by doing, rather than through the use of words or other forms of signification? Augustine asks Adeodatus to do precisely this, to show the things themselves rather than using words to indicate them. They engage in a discussion and an in-depth analysis of a vast array of examples, such as pointing a finger towards an object in order to indicate that same object (*Mag*. 3.5); the question of whether a simple action such as walking can be shown ostensively to a person who does not know what the word "walking" means (*Mag*. 3.6); and teaching by means of showing, as in the hypothetical case of a bird-catcher who demonstrates his technique to an onlooker without the use of any signs (*Mag*. 10.32). Not coincidentally, Osolsobě (2002:363) explicitly refers to his theory of ostension as an "Adeodatean" semiotics, after Augustine's son.[8]

More recent philosophers than Augustine, including Russell (1948), Quine (1953, 1956, 1969), Wittgenstein (2009[1953]), and others, have pointed out the significance of ostensive definition, that is, saying the word that stands for a certain object while presenting the object itself. Wittgenstein explains the use of ostensive definition in tandem with language, when the meaning of a certain word is already known: "So, one could say: an ostensive definition explains the use—the meaning—of a word if the role the word is supposed to play in the language is already clear. So if I know that someone means to explain a colour-word to me, the ostensive explanation 'That is called "sepia"' will enable me to understand the word" (Wittgenstein 2009[1953]:18, §30). One point to ponder is whether ostensive communication needs an *a priori* code in order to decode the meaning of the communication. If we follow Juri Lotman (1973), "iconic signs" have precedence above "conventional signs" as they are grasped more intuitively because, in contrast to language, they do not require prior knowledge of the code to be understood and, thus, are a very basic form of communication.

In Semiotics

While the idea of ostension may seem intuitive showing the things themselves as a basic modality of communication—the concept still retains a halo of ambiguity. This is probably because the terminology used in the disciplines which treat it varies considerably—

apparent, for example, in the differences between Umberto Eco and Ivo Osolsobě's approaches, as we will see presently (Eco 1997a).

Understood as an explicitly semiotic concept, ostension is relatively new (Gramigna 2014).[9] It was introduced to semiotics in the 1960s and 1970s, *ex professo*, by Ivo Osolsobě (1967) in the Czech Republic and Umberto Eco (1975:294-97) in Italy. Although there is general agreement that ostension in its most basic and literal form means "the action of showing, exhibiting, displaying, presenting" (Osolsobě 2010:664), and the term "ostensive" means "accomplished by showing" (Osolsobě 1979:64), a range of related terms have been deployed with slightly differing meanings by different authors: "ostensive communication" (Osolsobě 1979; Elam 1989; Pavis 1980); "ostension" (Eco 1975:294); "ostensive signs" (Farassino 1972:50); "objectual message" (*messaggio oggettuale*) (Maltese 1970). Osolsobě (1979) effectively highlighted the ambiguity of ostension in outlining his theory of theatrical ostension, in which he sought to resolve this terminological quandary by distinguishing his usage of the term from previous authors who dealt with the subject (Russel and Quine) and from cognate terms, such as "indices," "deictics," "communication by objects," "face-to-face communication," "non-verbal communication," "token : token models," and "exemplification" (Osolsobě 1979:64). Figure 1 illustrates the basic act of semiotic ostension.

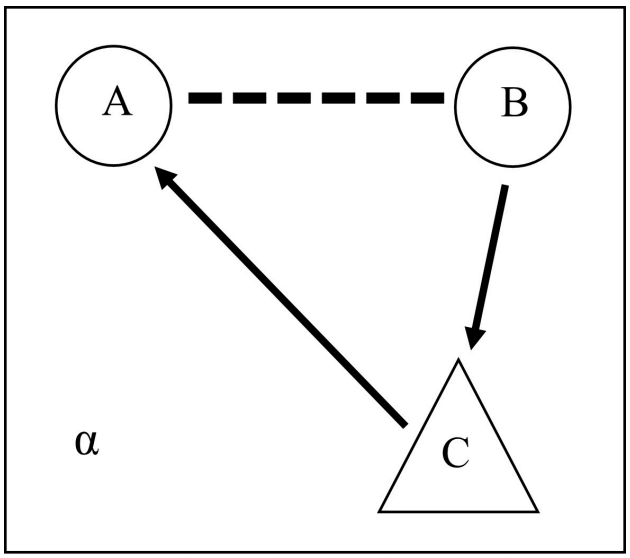

Figure 1. Semiotic ostension. A and B are interlocutors whose interaction is indicated by the dashed line. Through an ostensive act, B ostends (shows) the object C to interlocutor A. α is the shared present context (origo, represented by the rectangular frame) of the ostensive event in which B's deictic gestures are to be understood as pointing to C.

According to Eco (1976:4), ostension is "the most elementary act of active signification and it is the one used in the first instance by two people who do not share the same language."

For him, “ostension occurs when a pre-existing object is selected and shown as the representative of the class to which it belongs” (Eco 1985:79).[10] To use Eco’s own earlier example (1973:54), if someone communicates their desire for a pack of cigarettes by showing an actual pack of cigarettes in his or her hands, then the object itself becomes a signifier for the general class “cigarettes” in which that particular object is included. In other words, the pack of cigarettes becomes an ostensive sign, and it is used to indicate a general class. For Eco, there is not a complete overlap between the referent and the ostensive sign because only an element of the referent is selected and, therefore, becomes semiotized. That is, only certain relevant features of the object are selected and preserved while others are excluded as not relevant for the identification of the general class of objects to which it refers. In Eco’s example, it is irrelevant whether the cigarettes are Marlboro or another brand. In the selection of the pre-existing object, this aspect is not essential and is therefore disregarded. Moreover, there is an element that distinguishes ostensive signs from other types of signs, namely, the fact that the signifier of an ostensive sign is generally—but not exclusively—made of the very same substance as the things to which they refer. Thus, the signifier of the ostensive sign and the object are “homomaterial” (Eco 1975:225). For Eco, the phenomenon of ostension is framed within the more general context of the “production of signs” (Eco 1975).

Like Eco, Roman Jakobson views ostension in terms of the production of signs, and uses this criterion for dividing signs into different species (Gramigna 2014). Jakobson on several occasions points out the significance of ostension and ostensive communication (1971a[1967], 1971b,[1968], 1981, 1985[1980]). He also sees ostension as a member-class relationship, giving the example of “the exhibition and compositional arrangement of synecdochic samples of shop goods in show windows” (Jakobson 1971b[1968]:702). Notably, he includes ostension in his division of signs and points out a distinction between “signs ad hoc produced” versus ostension. The former category, “signs ad hoc produced by some part of the human body either directly or through the medium of special instruments,” is distinct from ostension, which refers to “a semiotic display of ready-made objects” (Jakobson 1971b[1968]:702). Understanding the rationale behind this division of signs means attending to the ways in which signs are produced. Jakobson (1971b[1968]:701) singles out two types of signs: “directly organic signs” and “instrumental signs.” Gestures, for example, fall into the category of “organic signs” inasmuch as these signs are directly produced through the human body. Paintings and sculptures, on the other hand, fall into the category of “instrumental signs” because they rely on an instrument (separate from the human body). Likewise, while speech and vocal music are thought of as *organic* auditory signs, music produced by a musical instrument is grouped among the *instrumental* auditory signs (Jakobson 1971b[1968]:701). Thus, for Jakobson, ostension is always defined by two specific processes: (i) the use of things as signs; (ii) the semiotic display of ready-made objects. Although clearly relevant to our discussion, Jakobson’s engagements with ostension are scattered and did not result in a fully-fledged theory of ostension.

Ivo Osolsobě's Theory of Ostension

As already noted, Ivo Osolsobě discussed ostension extensively, devoting a series of articles and books to this subject (1967, 1969, 1971, 1979a, 1979b, 1979c, 1980, 2002, 2010). His approach, however, did not receive the attention that it perhaps deserved, and has attracted some criticism (e.g., Sebeok 2001:89).[11] Despite this, Osolsobě's model merits special treatment here because of the influence it would have on folkloric ostension.

The cybernetic layer of Osolsobě's theory of ostension is apparent in the use he makes of the duplet "models"/"originals," an opposition that is recurrent throughout his work. An original is an object of interest to the subject or the receiver (if we want to use a more technical term) of a communicative situation. A model is a cognitive or informational surrogate of an original (Osolsobě 1977:553). For Osolsobě (1971:33), originals belong to the network of things, while models pertain to a different level, in which things are used to represent other things rather than simply presenting themselves. From this perspective, models and originals not only operate in a different fashion, but they also constitute "two logical types" (ibid.) that cannot be lumped together.

To support this thesis, Osolsobě discusses a thought experiment that revolves around an imaginary cave filled with stalagmites and stalactites, and an explorer who cannot remain indefinitely inside the cave and must find a way to bring the cave with him, as it were. This is referred to as "the situation" or "the problem of the non-present original" (Osolsobě 1971:34). In a case where the original is present and is cognitively available to the subject, it can be experienced directly through perception, and it is possible to acquire knowledge about it firsthand. This represents the most basic, simple, and elementary form of communicative situation or, to be more precise, of perception (Osolsobě 1979b:551). Needless to say, this represents an *ideal* situation. Its counterpart is what he refers to as the "situation of the non-present original," (Osolsobě 1986:98), and elsewhere, a "zero communicative situation" (Osolsobě 1979b:553). Between these two extremes there are, as we will see, several intermediate variants.

The case of the absent original presents more challenges, as the object lacks the essential quality of being cognitively at the disposal of the subject (Osolsobě 1971:35). He explains the roots of the "unhappiness" of this situation as follows:

> There are different reasons for, and different degrees of, this "unhappiness". The original may be missing, or unavailable, only *here*, or only *now*, or only *here and now*, although it was, or will be, or can be at our disposal somewhere else, or some other time. Or else, and this is a somewhat different case, the original is not at our disposal because it does not exist, although it existed a time ago, or will exist and can exist in the future. Or, again, the original is not at our disposal because it does not exist and cannot exist at all. What is absent, nonexistent, or even impossible, cannot of course either be observed or seen, heard, experienced,

> decomposed or otherwise cognitively approached by any one of the ways of *direct cognition*. (Osolsobě 1986:98, original emphases)

This case of the 'non-present original' is exemplified by the thought experiment of the cave explorers. The first explorers who discovered the cave, after having visited and admired this wonderful place, found themselves facing the problem of accounting for this experience, as they could not bring the cave with them when they departed. Osolsobě suggests two possible ways of dealing with this situation: a) the solution of fragments, which consists of taking fragments or parts of the cave to represent the whole (and compare with McDowell's discussion of synecdochical exemplars in his article, this issue); b) the solution of substitutes, or taking "at least a picture of it [the original cave], a diorama, a plan, a map, a series of photographs, drawings, sketches, etc.," or verbal descriptions of it (Osolsobě 1971:32). Elsewhere, Osolsobě used the term "cognitive surrogate" instead of "substitute" (1986:98). While he terms the first solution "quasi-metonymical" or "quasi-synecdochical" (following in the footsteps of Jakobson), the second solution is referred to as "quasi-metaphorical" (Osolsobě 1971:33). The first (quasi-metonymical) approach differs from the second (quasi-metaphorical) approach inasmuch as it "operates with things (or part of things) presenting themselves, giving information about themselves or about broader systems to which they belong," while the metaphorical approach operates "with things not so much presenting themselves as representing other things, giving information about other things: so we are dealing with metathings, metaentities" (Ibid).

This fundamental difference—the distinction between these two logical and epistemological levels of abstraction—represents one of the lynchpins of Osolsobě's theory of ostension, one which he claims then-current semiotic theories did not properly take into account (Osolsobě 1971:33). From this perspective, models serve the function of tackling the "problem of the non-present original" as they provide ways of accessing a reality that is no longer present and at the disposal of the subject, and for this reason are thought of as surrogates of the original. The other way to deal with the non-present original is by recourse to another human being who has at their disposal what is lacking to the first subject and is willing to share it with them through communication (Osolsobě 1971:35).

Having laid out "the situation of the non-present original," Osolsobě extrapolates from it what he takes to be two different and opposite types of communication. The first type he terms as "presentative (ostensive)," which "directly presents ('offers to the cognitive disposal') the communicated reality itself" (Osolsobě 1971:35). The second he terms, by negation and by opposition to the former type, as "non-presentative" or "representative," namely, the "communication by means of models" (Osolsobě 1971:35). Elsewhere, he recalibrates this terminology using the opposition "ostensive (presentative)" versus "non-ostensive (representative)" (Osolsobě 1979:71). In the 1971 article, ostension is defined as "a type of communication where the reality itself, the thing, the situation or event itself

functions in the role of message" (Osolsobě 1971:35). In other instances, he provides slightly different definitions, for example, "ostension can be defined as the GIVING OF SOMETHING TO THE COGNITIVE DISPOSAL OF SOMEBODY [sic]" (Osolsobě 1979:66). Elsewhere still, he writes:

> communication through the original is showing, presenting, that is, ostension, in other words, ostensive communication. It is a communication of the thing by means of the thing itself, a communication about an event through the event itself, a communication that is not mediated by a message, that is, communication in which the function of message is taken by the same reality presented, by the same original (Osolsobě 1979b:554-55).[12]

From this premise, Osolsobě aims at developing a typology of models that he will subsequently take up and elaborate as a classification of communicative situations, what he called "the 'algebra' of epistemic situations" (Osolsobě 1979:71-72). He elaborates a fourfold matrix that encompasses a division of different types of models and communicative situations. He argues, "there are models whose originals really exist; but there are also models whose originals do not really exist, whose originals exist only in their models; there are models of past, future, possible, even impossible originals, whose existing models nevertheless can be found in our lives, in our dreams, in our wishes, ideals, goals, threats, worries or hopes" (Osolsobě 1971:34). His four-part typology of communicative situations can be summarized as follows (Osolsobě 1979b: 555-56; Osolsobě 1979:72):

> 1. The situation of the present original (interaction between the receiver and the original) = direct experience;
> 2. The situation of the present model (the model functions as a cognitive surrogate, representing the original);
> 3. The situation of the presented original (receiver, sender, original) = ostension;
> 4. The situation of communication through the model (interaction between the receiver, the sender, and the model) = non-ostensive communication

Osolsobě's typology is more complex than this summary suggests, however, as he seems to indicate the possibility of intermediary cases. There are also three possible angles from which to view his typology: from the viewpoint of modeling, whose criterion is the use of a surrogate of the original; from the viewpoint of communication, that is, to assess whether or not there is a sender who initiates the communication intentionally; and from the point of view of the modality of knowledge, that is, to assess whether there occurs direct or indirect experience (Osolsobě 1979b:556). It is also important to note that Osolsobě distinguished ostension from "pseudoostension" or "antiostension" (Osolsobě 1971:35). As he puts it,

> the “language” of ostension is very poor, unable to express anything that is negative, fictive, future, past, ideal, general, a “language” capable of communicating only that which exists by means of that which exists itself. Ostension is even incapable of lying. “False fronts” are not ostension but pseudoostension or antiostension: their purpose is not to show reality as it is, not to offer it to our cognitive disposal, but, on the contrary to prevent such knowledge (Osolsobě 1971:35).

Eco would likely disagree, given that in his view, signs, including ostensive signs, are defined by the ability to tell lies as well as the truth (Eco 1975). In his *Trattato di semiotica generale* (1975) Eco famously defined semiotics as “the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used in order to lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot be used to tell at all” (Eco 1976:7). In Eco’s view the potential for lying is a criterion of all signs, including ostensive ones. This is in contrast to Osolsobě’s point that ostension cannot be used in order to lie. Both Eco and Osolsobě influenced Dégh and Vázsonyi in their foundational article on folkloric ostension, yet it was Osolsobě’s views on the truth or falsehood of ostensive acts that ultimately won out, with folkloric ostension ultimately embracing several ostensive modes, including “dishonest” ones (which therefore are not properly ostensive at all, according to them), as we discuss in the next section.

Folkloric Ostension

Understood by most contemporary folklorists as, first of all, a communicative mode (Ben-Amos 2000[1972]:14), folklore is now generally also recognized as ordinary, everyday culture, emergent in performances which help to situate individuals and groups within particular cultural contexts (Toelken 1996[1979]:19–22, 32). It extends beyond the purely communicative into the realms of belief and experience—that is, into epistemology and ontology. This dimension of folklore is perhaps most clearly illustrated by legend, a narrative folklore genre characterized by advancing truth-claims about the real world (Bascom 1984[1965]:9; Dégh 1996, 1997). Because such narratives make claims about things that (may have) really happened in the world, they can influence belief and experience in a number of ways, and their settings, their results, what we may call their *residues* are potentially experienceable by legend audiences. Here, *res ipsa* is what remains after the story’s conclusion. The potential connections between legends and personal experience have been at the core of folkloristic engagements with the concept of ostension.

This approach was initiated by Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi (1983), who in their classic article were chiefly concerned with showing how the transmission of legends could occur through means other than oral storytelling. *Ostensive action* was the name they gave to one such means, which they define as “the showing of an action by showing the action itself or by another action” (1983:8). Strongly influenced by Osolsobě, Dégh and Vázsonyi also reference Eco’s synecdochical model of ostension (Eco 1979[1976]:225). Ostensive action,

for them, occurs within this type of object-class relationship, with the ostended action (e.g., murder, a topic they linger on) connecting to its referent (a prior act of murder) through resemblance rather than shared identity: one cannot commit the *original* murder; one can merely copy it.

Dégh and Vázsonyi contrast ostensive action with stage acting, suggesting that the difference lies in *intent*. In their view, acting is "not the showing of reality, not presentation but representation, the imitation of a real or imagined reality" (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983:8). Ostensive action, on the other hand, entails a deliberate effort to "show" an action by actually carrying it out, not just pantomiming it as actors do. Discussing "copycat" murders, they argue that ostensive action is a form of folkloric transmission that communicates a narrative by re-creating it, using as examples the panics surrounding Halloween trick-or-treating and the supposed threat of poisoned candy (ibid.:11-13). The few documented cases of actual candy poisoning, they suggest, are instances of ostensive action: a killer, aware of the widespread legend about poisoned candy, actually performs it—that is, carries out a similar murder—and in so doing adds fuel to the proverbial fire, strengthening the legend and furthering the panic. For Dégh and Vázsonyi, what is ultimately being ostended —*shown*—in a "copycat" crime is the core event of the legend (that is, the traditionalized account of the crime): "People retell the story. Some folklore bearers, for example, retell it by word of mouth; some newsmen, for example, through the media; and others, mad killers, by a means of communication reminiscent of, but to be distinguished from, imitation—ostensive action" (ibid.:15).

Dégh and Vázsonyi then move away from the idea of ostensive action as recreation of a prior action to an entirely different set of putatively ostensive activities. They discuss a hypothetical visit to a location believed to be haunted, an example of legend-tripping (a term they themselves do not use). In this context, they outline four modulated forms of ostension. In addition to ostension proper, they name *pseudo-ostension* (and here they do not cite Osolsobě, who appears to have coined the term), *quasi-ostension*, *false ostension*, and *proto-ostension* (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983:18-21). For them, during a legend-trip to a haunted site, an encounter with a real ghost would constitute ostension proper, with the ghost "[telling] the story about its existence" through the simple act of appearance (ibid.:18). A deliberate hoax (e.g., someone pretending to be a ghost and successfully duping their victims) would constitute pseudo-ostension (precisely like the "false fronts" mentioned by Osolsobě). A sincere, but mistaken, belief that a ghost was witnessed—as by a "perhaps slightly neurotic" viewer, in their unfortunate wording (ibid.:20)—would be quasi-ostension. False ostension would take the form of a lie about a ghostly encounter that never actually occurred, perhaps aligning with what Osolsobě calls "ostentation" (1979:66).[13] Finally, proto-ostension (by far the opaquest of their ostensive modes) is the transformation of a third-person traditional narrative into a first-person experience by a storyteller.[14]

The thread that seems to link Dégh and Vázsonyi's understanding of ostension proper to ostensive action is the ontological "realness" of the thing or event being ostended. In a case of possible ostension, if you didn't see a *real* ghost, then at best you experienced pseudo- or quasi-ostension. Meanwhile, ostensive action involves showing an action associated with a traditional narrative by performing it with *genuine intent* to produce a *genuine result*, instead of simply narrating or pantomiming it (see also Tolbert 2016:30). By this logic, the intention of the performer that an action thus ostended be understood as "real" can be read from its results: a "copycat murder" would still be a *murder*.[15] This seems to be what Dégh and Vázsonyi mean when they discuss acting as distinct from ostension: the former generates the semblance of reality which is nevertheless false; the latter performs something into reality in a way that is also imitative, but not fictional.[16]

Despite the post-hoc ontological quandaries it introduces (who is the ultimate arbiter of the ghost's realness?), the value of Dégh and Vázsonyi's contribution to ostension lies in the connection it makes between experience and the legend genre. Legends posit that something occurred in the real world; as a result, their residue remains to be experienced by people in the present, whether by reenacting the story, or by experiencing some part of it (e.g., the ghost) directly. The contents of legends are, as Osolsobě might put it, available to the cognitive disposal of their audiences, albeit more as stalagmite fragments than as entire cave systems. And indeed, Dégh and Vázsonyi's approach to ostension has shaped virtually all subsequent folkloristic engagements with the concept. For example, Bill Ellis has defined ostension as "dramatic extension into real life" (2003:41). His work on ostension has focused in particular on crime, deviance, and panic (e.g., Ellis 1989, 1993, 1996, 2002, 2019). Julian Holloway (2010) has argued that ghost tourism uses ostension to enhance the feeling of supernatural possibilities among participants. Michael Kinsella has noted that supernatural legends "encourage ostensive reenactment of their content and inspire investigations of their veracity" (2011:x). Tolbert (2018) has (awkwardly) suggested "reverse ostension" as a mode of storytelling whereby fictional experiences are constructed in order to generate a plausible narrative corpus that resembles previously-existing legend. And Stephen Mitchell (2020) has discussed anti-witchcraft violence in early 19th-century England as a form of ostensive action in that it involved villagers acting according to an established "script" of witchcraft belief (Mitchell 2020:22). Taken as a whole, folkloric ostension depends on knowledge of a prior event or series of events, the setting where they occurred, and the actors who carried them out, represented by and expressed through traditional narrative; and on an intent by contemporary interlocutors not only to recount those events through narrative performance, but to actually experience them directly, whether by visiting the sites where they occurred, by performing specific actions or rituals associated with the legend, or by imitating their contents in a "real" way.

In the next section we consider ways to reconcile semiotic and folkloric ostension by first outlining a very different approach to the concept. This model, developed by a folklorist but

diverging considerably from Dégh and Vázsonyi's approach, also foregrounds the phenomenological dimensions of ostension, but in the specific context of storytelling, bringing together the communicative immediacy of semiotic ostension and the narrative focus of folkloric ostension.

Virtual Ostension and the Legend-Tripping Context

A year before Dégh and Vázsonyi published their article in English (it had been previously published, in Italian, in 1981), folklorist John H. McDowell (1982) introduced the concept of "virtual ostension" to describe a possible effect of skillful storytelling on audiences.[17] Like Dégh and Vázsonyi, McDowell begins with Eco's definition of ostension. But unlike Eco's model, which (in common with Jakobson's) assumes a synecdochical member-class scenario, McDowell privileges the experiential immediacy of ostension in a way that more closely resembles Osolsobě's approach. He situates his discussion in the oral performance of another folklore genre based on truth-claims, namely, myth, by storytellers of the Kamsá, an Indigenous people of Colombia. Writing of his field research in 1978-1979, McDowell claims that "the Kamsá community still encounters in this narrative corpus an exemplary experiential substrate centering on events located within the experience of the first ancestors of the present-day people" (1982:125). He argues that in storytelling performances, "[virtual] ostension produces, as if *actually present*, a slice of detail belonging to the experiential substrate. If artfully done, it may nourish in listeners or readers the illusion of presencing the actual experiential substrate" (McDowell 1982:127, original emphasis). In other words, skillful storytelling enables Kamsá storytellers to affectively bring the narrated past directly into the present. McDowell describes various techniques for effecting virtual ostension, including interjections by the narrator that appear to come from within the narrative itself, the use of hand gestures to provide a sense of scale and positionality, and the performance of dialogue by the storyteller in the precise moment when it is spoken by a character in the narrative (ibid.:128-129).[18]

Virtual ostension thus involves a shift of attention from our (the narrator and audience's) present context to a past one—or rather, as McDowell notes, it involves a collapsing or blending of these separate contexts into one another. Relevant to these (initially) distinct contexts is the concept of the *origo*, the "zero-point" or reference point within which a referential act takes place—that is, the point in space/time at which the speech event occurs in which reference is made to some other thing, location, event, etc. (Hanks 1992:51; Haviland 1993:5; Agha 2005:42). In a move that closely parallels McDowell's work on virtual ostension, Haviland (1993) discusses an Aboriginal Australian storyteller who, like the Kamsá narrators McDowell describes, used deictic words and gestures to anchor his narrative in a spatiality relative not to the context of the (present) speech event, but rather to that of the narrated past: these deictics were "transposed to a discursively established origo" (1982:13). For Haviland, in such narrative performances,

> *Narrated spaces* (i.e., narrated events seen from some narrated perspective) are laminated over the immediate interactional space, importing that space's cardinal directions but substituting for the here-and-now a narratable there-and-then … Such mapping produces both vividness and interlocutor involvement, as in the leakage between narrated and narrating spaces when JB invites his copresent interlocutor RH to imagine himself a protagonist, being narratively grabbed. (Haviland 1993:26)

The lamination Haviland describes of the narrated past onto the world of the present is identical to McDowell's virtual ostension. In storytelling events, the gap between the origo and the narrated past may become obscured by the affective experience of the presence of the story's contents in what McDowell calls "narrative epiphany, the provisional unification of the frames of narrative discourse and experiential substrate" (1982:134). This is the "leakage" that Haviland describes, with the audience able to imagine themselves witnessing (or participating in) the narrated events as they unfold. In virtual ostension the distinction between the origo of the present speech event and the transposed origo of the narrated event (potentially) merge, as interlocutors are *shown* the narrated past (see also Agha 2005:42-43) (Figure 2).

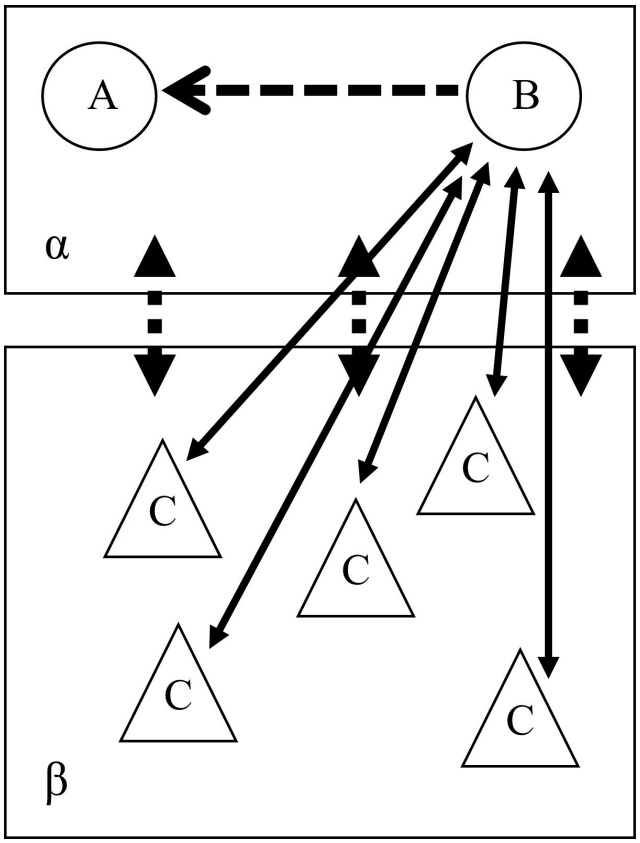

Figure 2. Virtual ostension. A and B are interlocutors in interaction within origo α. B, through skillful storytelling, is able to collapse the intellectual distinction between α and spatially/temporally remote context β (experiential substrate/transposed origo). This "lamination" of β onto α is indicated by the large bidirectional dotted arrows. Through B's performance, any number of remote referents C are ostended (shown) to A, indicated by the dashed arrow pointing from B to A, but this ostension is only possible through B's skillful narration. It is not a direct presentation of the ostended reality, but an imaginative act of showing. The arrows linking B to the ostended Cs are bidirectional to indicate that, while B is "showing" C to A, B does so through deictic strategies that involve embodied action and reenactment of narrated events in the present. The ostended objects C are in effect shown to A through the "filter" of B's narrative performance.

McDowell rightly emphasizes that this process is distinct from ostension proper, because the contents of the story are located in the past: "the experiential substrate, existing apart

from the discourse, remains in principle remote and untouchable" (1982:127).[19] Virtual ostension is only an *affective experience*, the *feeling* of the closeness of the experiential substrate, and not a genuine confusion of narrated events with experienced reality.[20] Yet if we examine the situations conventionally labeled as ostension within folkloristics, we find that they have far more in common with virtual than "actual" ostension. A "copycat" event is still not the *original* event, however much the copier might feel connected to the original perpetrator. A legend trip might reveal the setting of prior events, but not the characters (unless they happen not only to be actually-existing humans who are still alive and are conveniently at hand) or, indeed, the events themselves. Even seeing a ghost would not be the same as direct ostension of the original events and personages that led to the ghost's presence in the first place. The events of the narrative are over and done with, the characters long dead (if they ever lived) or at least absent, and there is no one to *show* us the original event in real time. (Unless we have a time machine.) But the feeling that the narrative's residue is still here in the world; the eeriness of the story and its setting; and the tendency of legend narrators to enhance experience with sound effects and jump-scares and other evocative techniques—these all resemble the mythic storytelling sessions McDowell describes.

So we have, then, things shown directly, as themselves, in the present, versus things talked about after the fact, experienced imaginatively through skillful performance or acted out in a way that creates a sense of continuity between past and present, infusing present actions with traditional meanings. One place where these different models of ostension may come together, as we've hinted at already, is within the context of legend-tripping. Here, folkloric (virtual) ostension may be (indeed, almost always is) accompanied by semiotic ostension. In common with the narrative performances McDowell describes, legend-tripping is characterized by two dimensions of experience: the events of the original narrative (i.e., the "experiential substrate"), and the participatory experience of the audience (the legend-trippers) in the present (Dégh 1969:77–78). The experiential substrate may be temporally distant, but legend-tripping makes at least some aspects of it both temporally and spatially proximate. Legend-trippers experience the physical place upon which the narrative backdrop is layered (or laminated, to borrow Haviland's term) *specifically in its association with a traditional narrative*; they may also point out (ostend) aspects of that setting to one another during the legend trip. In other words, the virtual ostension that often characterizes the performance of these narratives may be accompanied by "actual" (semiotic) ostension (Figure 3).

In the legend-tripping context, the storyteller, knowledgeable about the murders and the claims of ghostly apparitions that are their result, leads the intrepid teens to the cursed bridge, pointing out important objects or sites and locating them within the narrative: "It happened over there, by the water. There's where she did it. Here's the tree where they met. That's the place where he jumped." The group feels an eerie potentiality, perhaps a sense

that ghostly things are transpiring, that literal spirits are watching them, animating the landscape where the awful events took place years or decades or centuries ago. (Whether or not a ghost actually appears is, appropriately, immaterial.)

Dégh and Vázsonyi's approach to ostension, with its emphasis on the ontological status of the things being ostended, is critical here, though with an ontological caveat: legend-tripping depends on the shared idea of things which actually (supposedly, maybe, possibly) happened. Whether they "really" happened or not does *not* matter, from an analytical perspective: the possibility is what counts. More concretely, for a legend-trip and any forms of ostension it may entail to occur, a legend—a specific narrative that makes claims about what happened here, in the past—must exist. As Bill Ellis writes, "Some say it was the husband, not the wife, who was killed, and others say no murder happened at all—a truck accidentally ran a girl down. The point is, something must have happened there, otherwise no legend-trip would be necessary" (1982:63). The trip would not be necessary, and the ostension would not be possible: a storyteller cannot point out "where it happened" if nothing is believed to have happened there (see also Tolbert 2016:41).[21] Dégh and Vázsonyi's point that ostension may serve to perpetuate a traditional narrative is apropos, as individual experiences with a legend, and the forms of ostension they may contain, may themselves become part of the legend, inspiring future legend-trippers to experience it for themselves (see also Kinsella 2011).

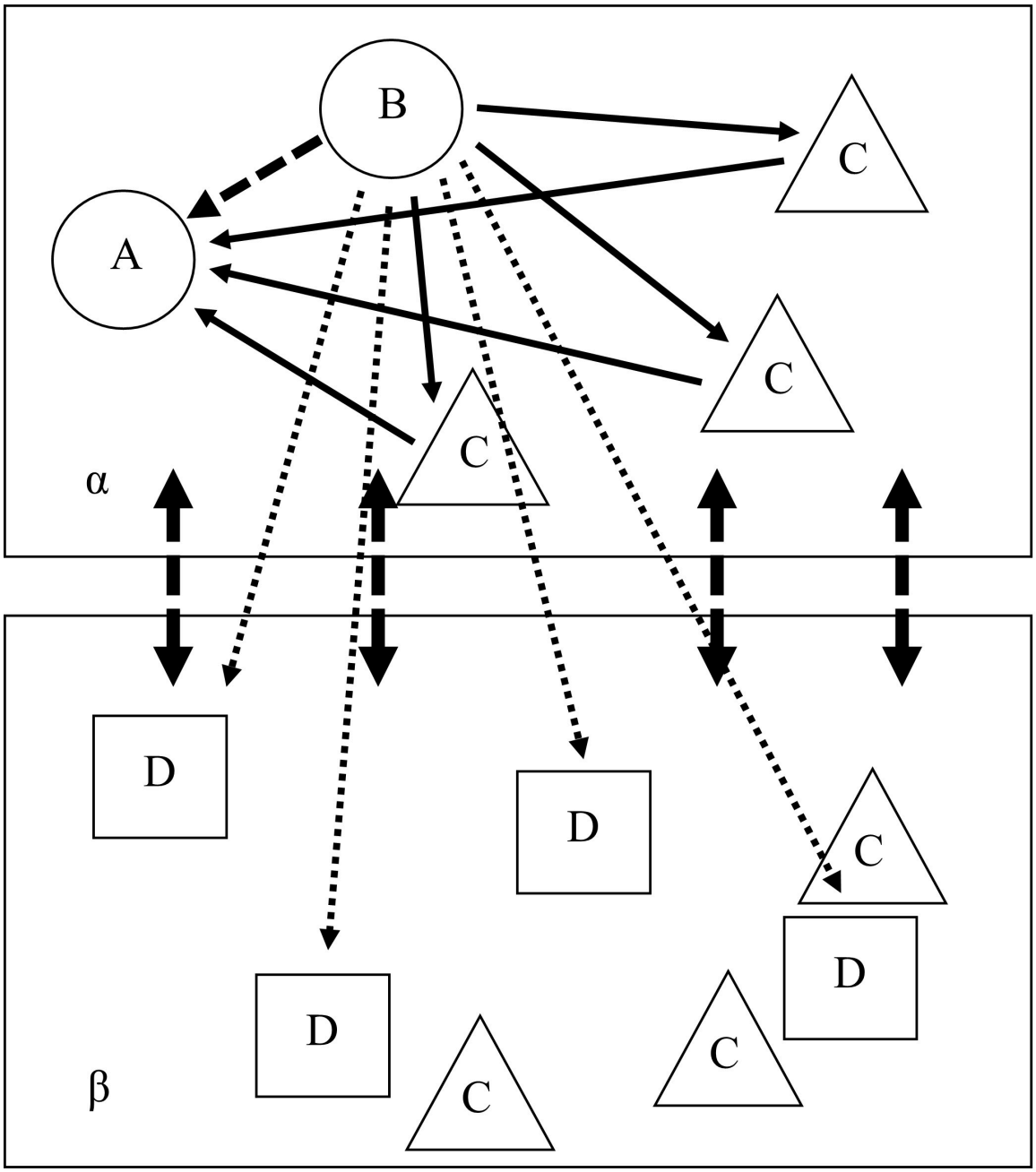

Figure 3. Legend-tripping as context for multiple forms of ostension. In origo α, the present ostensive event, narrator B shows interlocutor A the narrative residue of a traditional story (objects C), which may include landscape features, the built environment, etc., in an act of semiotic ostension. Simultaneously, the act of narrative performance (which may have preceded the legend-trip itself, or may occur during the trip, or both), may result in virtual ostension, the collapsing of present context α and remote context β, enabling B to additionally ostend remote referents D (characters, physical objects, events of the narrative, etc.) to A. Note that objects C are present in both origos, albeit potentially in different states/configurations/physical locations.

Conclusion

We have argued for a new understanding of ostension as comprising several types, all concerned with showing of some thing, *in* and *as* itself, to an interlocutor. (Note that we do not hedge our definition here with claims about "face-to-face" communication. Ostension as such can occur in mediated or virtual environments as well as in physically co-present ones.

All that is necessary is that the interlocutors inhabit the same origo, whatever it may be, and however briefly.) Semiotic ostension, the presentation of a thing in the present as a mode of communication, remains distinct from folkloric ostension, the interaction of human agents in the present with the narrated past. Osolsobě and earlier theorists of ostension foregrounded the role of *things* as essentially signs of themselves, in a mode of communication that bypasses ordinary signs completely in favor of presenting the thing itself. For these theorists, ostensive communication is something that happens in the present, with objects or actions "standing for" themselves in the eyes of contemporary interlocutors. Folkloric ostension, by contrast, has been primarily past-oriented, consisting of responses in the present to a narrated past. The ostensive scenarios that folklorists have described wherein people reenact or attempt to participate in traditional narratives are primarily instances of *virtual* ostension. Folkloric ostension uses present action to create an affective experience of connection to the narrated events, which themselves are not present and not experienceable directly. A copycat crime may contribute to a sense of continuity, an ominous feeling of history repeating itself, yet it is not identical to the original crime. Finally, legend-tripping is the creation of a *context* for both forms of ostension, semiotic as well as folkloric. A legend-trip may leave participants with a firsthand knowledge of the legend's setting and its results, as well as, perhaps, a sense of immanence, such as a keen awareness of the haunting that is the spiritual aftermath of a famous tragedy; but it cannot show them the original murders as they occurred. Nevertheless, the sense of the nearness of the narrated past may be enhanced by the experience of places, objects, living people who participated in the original events, and other elements familiar from the narrative—that is, by semiotic ostension—as well as by the narrator/storyteller's ability to spin an engrossing yarn. As an analytic model, folkloric ostension also offers a key heuristic for understanding human interaction with storied spaces (Tolbert 2016). Even when not legend-tripping in the strict sense, when we encounter spaces with dramatic or important (e.g., religious, historical, whatever) associations, the feeling of being in the presence of the thing itself can be profound.

Reframing ostension as a communicative act centered on *res ipsa*, the thing itself, calls our attention to both its ontological dimensions (contemporary interlocutors interacting with actually existing things or events in the "real" world) and its epistemological implications (the formation and articulation of belief in things that might actually exist, or in events that actually did, or might, occur). This reorientation also corrects for scholarly biases that may unfairly override the perspectives of the people doing the ostending. It is not for scholars to declare that the ghost was or was not real. What matters is that someone claims to have seen it, and that they eagerly pointed it out—*ostended* it—to their friend. Importantly, for McDowell, the virtualness of virtual ostension is purely analytic, and does not override the fact that "in spiritually rich settings, the logically virtual can acquire a more-than-real reality" (personal communication). In religious and magical performances (as well as other spiritual/metaphysical experiences like ghost hunting), the ostension which appears virtual in

a scholarly sense may be *actual* to the participants, and ideas about immanence and presence clearly complicate the analytically "virtual" quality of ostension in such contexts. For example, as David Frankfurter (2019) has argued, certain narratives, deployed in particular ritual contexts, have the power to "[create] a situation through its ritual description." Frankfurter describes "the speech act called the *historiola*, a brief or protracted narrative recited (often in past tense) in the course of ritual (e.g., for healing, cursing, protecting, empowering), to bring into being a potency in the mythic narrative that can be applied to the situation at hand" (2019:611). The capacity of virtual ostension to affectively bring the past into the present is echoed in the power of *historiolae* to affect change in the contemporary world by bringing the magical forces of myth into lived experience:

> But across all examples of *historiolae* in ancient, medieval, and modern ritual speech, the common dynamics involve (a) an actual oral-performative setting, in which (b) a ritual specialist *articulates* a mythic situation in which a crisis parallel to 'our' crisis is resolved through the interaction of gods or heroes. And from this articulation (c) the mythic powers of resolution are *mediated into* the performative situation through (1) the recitation itself and (2) the introduction of materials, names, or charms in the narrative, present in the mythic world. (Frankfurter 2019:612, original emphases)

Such magico-religious invocations clearly also parallel the type of ostensive action that Mitchell (2020) describes in the anti-witchcraft actions of 19th-century English peasants that we noted above. "Virtualness" as an analytic category ceases to function reliably here: again, what is virtual to the scholar is very much "actual" to the participants in such events. Simultaneously, the ontological claims of magical traditions are different from those outlined in Dégh and Vázsonyi's model of ostension, where "realness" is a function of scholarly judgments on intent and corporeal (or ghostly) presence. Magical ontologies, by contrast, are emic ontologies. It may be ultimately necessary to propose a new category—"magical ostension"?—to account for the presencing of referents which are not discernible equally to all possible percipients, but which are nevertheless powerfully present for certain participants in ritual/magical events.[22]

The implications of ostension far exceed the disciplinary boundaries of both semiotics and folkloristics. Chad Engelland, in his book-length study of ostension as the basic means of language learning, has argued,

> Children learn language principally by eavesdropping or overhearing the conversation of their parents and caregivers as those parents and caregivers go about their everyday routines. The actions of the speakers show children what the parents and caregivers have in mind, and often they will be speaking about the items made manifest by their actions. The human way of life, specified by the dynamic inclinations of our nature, constrain the natural ambiguity of such

> showing. Phenomenology provides the means for its analysis. (Engelland 2014:216)

Engelland is clearly correct that ostension is critical in language learning. More pertinently, his phenomenological approach seems to us exactly right, in both the narrow communicative context in which he deploys it as well as the broader use we are calling for here. Future research into the phenomenological aspects of ostension could highlight further connections between the semiotic process of presenting a thing directly to an interlocutor and the folkloric process of interacting with a traditional narrative. Specifically, ethnographic research focusing on participants in legend-tripping and related phenomena; professional storytellers and their audiences; and traditionalized/ritualized actions intended to affect change in the world through the invocation of extra-human forces (magic and religion) stands to highlight both the semiotic dimensions of ostensive behaviors (the ways in which particular indexical gestures or actions call out/mark as separate/sacralize or desacralize the world) and the cultural frameworks that imbue such behaviors with meaning beyond their immediate performance and referents. In language learning, communication within a particular cultural/linguistic framework, ghost stories, and magical rites, *res ipsa* emerges as the thing on which human attention is focused and without which no ostension could occur.

Endnotes

1. Tolbert and Brodie treated this topic in brief in a recent encyclopedia entry (2019). The present article continues and expands the comparison of semiotic and folkloristic ostension begun in that piece. The authors are grateful to Mary Ellen Cadman, Todd Suomela, and Catherine Tosenberger for their thoughtful input. Special gratitude is due our two anonymous reviewers, whose thoughtful comments were invaluable in developing our thinking about the “virtual” distinction and its relation to other linguistic/semiotic concepts, particularly in the area of reported speech. ↩

2. On ostension in the sense of narrative reenactment, see especially Ellis 1989. For an overview of folkloristic approaches to legend-tripping, see McNeill and Tucker 2018.↩

3. As with the noun *semiotics* and adjective *semiotic*, *folkloristics* and *folkloristic* are used here in substantive and descriptive ways, respectively. *Folkloristics* names the academic discipline that studies vernacular culture (folklore); the adjective *folkloristic* thus labels things pertaining to or emerging from that discipline. The adjective *folkloric*, on the other hand, describes something which is itself an example of, or has some connection to, vernacular culture.↩

4. For an historical overview of *res*, see Courtine 2014.↩

5. Chad Engelland (2023) makes a closely related point in his recent elaboration of Quine's notion of deferred ostension. For Quine, "[Deferred ostension] occurs when we point at the gauge, and not the gasoline, to show that there is gasoline" (1969:40). Describing dinosaur bones as the "vestiges" of living dinosaurs, Engelland extends this idea of deferred ostension, or ostension through an intermediary: "An extinct natural kind such as a dinosaur is an example of what I call an ineluctably absent referent. It is ostended through mediation without the possibility of directly pointing to the ultimate object of reference; it cannot be ostended in the flesh" (ibid.:507). In contrast to extinct natural kinds, Engelland continues, "A second class of ineluctably absent things, namely, artificial kinds such as unicorns and centaurs, are likewise ostended through mediation (a picture, a statue, and so on) without the possibility of directly pointing to the ultimate object of reference" (ibid.:508). On one level, deferred ostension, as a communicative act in which the thing ultimately being communicated *about* is not actually present, resonates with McDowell's location of the "experiential substrate" in the inaccessible past. (Importantly, McDowell also notes that the experiential substrate may be fictional in his contribution to this issue.) But the ostension McDowell describes is not deferred in the same way as happens with a fuel gauge indicating liquid gasoline in the tank, or a fossil pointing to a living dinosaur. In deferred ostension, the gas gauge or the fossil is the thing which is ostended: as physically present objects, both are ostended (shown) directly to an interlocutor. It is only through a secondary act of reference or association that attention is drawn to an absent referent (liquid gasoline in the tank, or a living dinosaur). In virtual ostension, on the other hand, the narrative's status as icon is lost, and the performance affectively *becomes* the events it relates (McDowell 1982:128). That is, the absent past is brought affectively into the present: it is no longer absent, and no intermediary (gauge, fossil, or whatever) stands between it and the audience. However, Engelland's "ineluctably absent referent" is clearly in play here; compare to Osolsobě's treatment of the "non-present original," discussed below. ↩

6. Importantly, as McDowell argues, virtual ostension relies on a *skillful* narrative performance (see also Haviland 2000:32–36). It is not difficult to imagine narrators attempting to virtually ostend the content of their narrative but failing to do so, through lack of skill or audience inattentiveness or whatever. Not every performance of a folk narrative, then, succeeds in becoming an instance of virtual ostension. But when folkloric ostension happens, it is virtual.↩

7. A related theme is that of *immediacy*, discernible in a range of contexts, from ideas about the immanence or presence of the gods (e.g., Webster 2013; Orsi 2016) to the Benjaminian "aura" (Benjamin 1968) and the "affecting presence" of certain works of art (Armstrong 1971). We touch again on these issues in the concluding section. ↩

8. For a detailed analysis of Augustine's theory of showing, see Gramigna 2020:40-97.↩

9. For a fuller discussion of the concept of ostension in semiotics, see Gramigna 2016. Schmid (2008) also offers some very useful insights for conceptualizing ostension within semiotics, with special attention to

theatrical semiotics.↩

10. The idea of communicating solely by means of things is not new. We discuss Augustine's engagement with what is now called ostension below. It resurfaces in literature, as for instance, in *Gulliver's Travels* (Swift 1997[1726]); Osolsobě 1979:66, 2010:665). Dégh and Vázsonyi also discuss the appearance of ostension in *Gulliver's Travels* in their foundational article "Does the Word 'Dog' Bite?," which we also consider below.↩

11. Eco (1997a) also notes that he had a lively debate on the concept of ostension with Osolsobě.↩

12. Original Italian: "La comunicazione attraverso l'originale è il mostrare, il presentare, ossia l'ostensione, in altre parole, la comunicazione ostensiva. Si tratta di una comunicazione sulla cosa mediante la cosa stessa, di una comunicazione su un avvenimento mediante l'avvenimento stesso, comunicazione non mediata attraverso un messaggio, cioè comunicazione in cui la funzione di messaggio viene assunta dalla stessa realtà presentata, dallo stesso originale." Translation by Gramigna.↩

13. Osolsobě mentions, but does not develop, the idea of "ostentation." It refers to a type of communicative sign that is emitted intentionally, geared toward generating a false impression. As Eco pointed out, "an individual may show [*ostentare*] signs of warrior virility (military uniforms, weapons, horses: these are signs produced as functions and used as signifiers of secondary functions) and yet *betray* or *express* an excess of female hormones" (Eco 1980: 38). Ostentation is, thus, a form of pretense, a conscious form of deception.↩

14. It is worth noting here a parallel with Umberto Eco's typology of "saying what is not the case" (Eco 1997b). Eco distinguished between lying, saying what is false, and falsifying. Lying is saying the contrary of what one believes to be the case, principally accomplished through language. It is, for Eco, a question of ethics: lying differs from saying something false. One can say something false—like Ptolemy, who claimed, erroneously, that the sun revolves around the earth—without lying. There are also non-verbal deceitful acts that can still be regarded as lying in Eco's view. He collectively names such acts "simulation." Fakes and forgeries constitute yet another type. For Eco, "a semiotics of the lie is undoubtedly of paramount importance but when dealing with fakes and forgeries we are not directly concerned with lies. We are first of all concerned with the possibility of mistaking one object for another because they share some common features" (Eco 1987:6). The case of a deliberate hoax, as in Dégh and Vázsonyi's discussion, would probably constitute, for Eco, a case of simulation, since it involves a deliberate attempt to dupe someone else. (For a discussion of Eco's thinking on these issues, see Gramigna 2020a, 2022).↩

15. This reading, that copycat murder consists of essentially "ostending" the *idea* of murder, was suggested in conversation by Mary Ellen Cadman.↩

16. Presumably the issue of “realness” is also what distinguishes ostensive action, in Dégh and Vázsonyi’s, sense from *demonstration*. If a demonstration is essentially *unreal*, serving to communicate an action in a diminished, incomplete, or purely illustrative manner, functioning precisely as models do for Osolsobě, it would seemingly not count as ostensive action. But if someone actually undertakes an action—a martial arts instructor breaking a board before having their students perform the same task, say—this, apparently, *would* fit their definition of ostensive action. For a complicating perspective on the issue of *realness*, see Koven on “cinematic” and “mass-mediated ostension” (2008:139).↩

17. See McDowell, this issue, for more on the relationship of his original article to Dégh and Vázsonyi’s.↩

18. This aspect of virtual ostension in storytelling—the syncing of the narrator’s voice with that of a narrated character—resembles what Deborah Tannen (2004, 2010) calls “ventriloquizing,” in which speakers claim to be deploying the voices of others, and in so doing also adopt and perform characteristics associated with those others. Yet the ventriloquizing Tannen describes does not *actually* represent the words of others but is instead a method by which speakers convey their own meanings indirectly (2010, 310).↩

19. But see Quine (1950) on the complex relationship of ostension to temporality. ↩

20. But contrast this with the metaphysical experiences of immanence or presence (see note 7 above, and further discussion in the concluding section). ↩

21. While legend-tripping in the strict sense cannot happen in the absence of a legend narrative, Paul Cowdell (2014) has argued that the folkloric phenomenon of *haunting* can be associated with particular types of places and experiences even when historical details (such as legend narratives) are lacking. Specifically, he argues, built environments with long histories of occupation may be understood as more likely sites of haunting. A bidirectional relationship therefore exists between particular kinds of experience and particular vernacular understandings of history: “Ghosts can be used to explain a historical context or to create one. Historical context can also be used to predict or generate ghost narratives” (Cowdell 2014:90). Thanks to Catherine Tosenberger for noting this important connection. See also the related discussion in Manning 2017.↩

22. We are again grateful to Catherine Tosenberger for pointing out the parallels between ostension and magic, and for calling our attention to Frankfurter’s and Mitchell’s work in this area. The idea of “magical ostension” arose in conversation with her. McDowell, in his contribution to this issue, discusses the related topic of material objects used ostensively in ritual and the powerful affective states they can conjure. In such cases, he argues, “ostension combines with iconicity and indexicality to generate powerful fields in which the process of semiotic reference moves through cosmic evocation to spiritual invocation.”↩

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