DIGITAL FOLKLORE: MARBLE HORNETS, THE SLENDER MAN, AND THE
EMERGENCE OF FOLK HORROR IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES

by

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Abstract

In June 2009 a group of forum-goers on the popular culture website, *Something Awful*, created a monster called the Slender Man. Inhumanly tall, pale, black-clad, and with the power to control minds, the Slender Man references many classic, canonical horror monsters while simultaneously expressing an acute anxiety about the contemporary digital context that birthed him. This anxiety is apparent in the collective legends that have risen around the Slender Man since 2009, but it figures particularly strongly in the Web series *Marble Hornets* (Troy Wagner and Joseph DeLage June 2009 - ). This thesis examines *Marble Hornets* as an example of an emerging trend in digital, online cinema that it defines as “folk horror”: a subgenre of horror that is produced by online communities of everyday people—or folk—as opposed to professional crews working within the film industry. Works of folk horror address the questions and anxieties of our current, digital age by reflecting the changing roles and behaviours of the everyday person, who is becoming increasingly involved with the products of popular culture. After providing a context for understanding folk horror, this thesis analyzes *Marble Hornets* through the lens of folkloric narrative structures such as legends and folktales, and vernacular modes of filmmaking such as cinéma direct and found footage horror. The focus then shifts to the ways in which *Marble Hornets*’ digital folk context amplifies the classic horror conventions with which the series engages. Primary attention is given to three key components: the monster, the narrative, and the audience. Folk horror might be a new term, but it is an old concept, one that reflects the important role that community plays in the forging of fear. It has been suggested that the
Slender Man is a tulpa, a creature brought into physical existence by collective thought. As such he is truly a monster for the digital age as he reflects the many faces—positive and negative—of the increasingly “connected” individual. Through the lens of folk horror we may not only witness significant developments in the horror genre, but also those of storytelling on a broader scale.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Dana Keller.

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Dedication

To Mark Harris
Introduction

“It’s funny how the colors of the real world only seem really real when you viddy them on a screen.” - *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick 1971)

On June 8, 2009, a member of the popular culture website *Something Awful* with the username Gerogerigegege opened a discussion thread entitled “Create Paranormal Images,” in which he invited his fellow forum-goers to join him in fabricating realistic-looking paranormal images with a view to passing them off as actual, undoctored photographs. He explained: “I always wondered if it were possible to get one of my own chops¹ in a book, documentary, or web site [sic] just by casually leaking it out into the Web—whether they’d be supplements to bogus stories or not” (“Create Paranormal Images” 1). Gerogerigegege’s idea quickly captured imaginations; members of the website began posting all sorts of frightening fare to the thread, ranging from photographs containing unidentified flying objects (UFOs) to those depicting ghosts and other paranormal beings lurking within the depths of the image. On June 10, Eric Knudsen, under the username Victor Surge,² posted two photographs for which the thread later became famous: they depicted a tall, pale, faceless figure in black who stood out ominously amongst groups of people composed largely of youth and young children. The adjoining captions, which attributed the

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¹ Within the context of his post I expect that the word “chops” means a manipulated photograph, with “chop” being slang for “edit.”

² Please note that I will refer to Knudsen as Victor Surge throughout this thesis as that is how he is known to the Slender Man community.
photographs respectively to an unknown and presumed dead photographer from 1983 and a missing woman named Mary Thomas from 1986, read as follows:

Photograph 1: “[W]e 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…”

Photograph 2: “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.’ … .” (3)

Immense excitement and discussion quickly rose around the creature that haunted Victor Surge’s images, as articulated in a comment posted to the thread on June 13, 2009, by Nurse Fanny, who referred to the Slender Man as “the star of this thread” (5). In the months following Victor Surge’s post, a number of forum-goers contributed their own Slender Man-inspired photographs and stories to the thread; these led to the development of a rich transnational backstory that included personal anecdotes and news clippings, reports of Brazilian cave paintings dating as far back as 9,000 B.C., and convincingly constructed images of 16th century German woodcuts. In line with Gerogerigegege’s opening comments on the thread, each story and artifact posted about the Slender Man maintained that the events had actually occurred, and that the teller had either experienced them first-hand, or discovered them through research and/or a reliable source. From the many Slender Man stories framed as personal anecdotes emerged one accompanied by a video, with the promise of more to come: a documentary-style Web series titled *Marble Hornets* (Troy Wagner and Joseph DeLage 2009 - ).
Marble Hornets is only one of many elaborations upon Surge’s initial photographs, but it is the first to develop the Slender Man mythology cinematically; the series is also notable for its enormous popularity that stretches beyond the Something Awful thread to a broader audience of users on the international video-sharing website, YouTube. Writing in character as the series protagonist, whose name is J, creator Troy Wagner posted the following tale to the forum:

About two or three years ago, a film school friend of mine, Alex, was working on his first "feature length" movie. It was called Marble Hornets and I think it was about a twenty something returning to his childhood home and recalling events that happened there. It was pretty pretentious film student fare, but I helped out [on] a few … rare occasions … . . . . The set itself was about half a mile away from Alex's house . . . . It was a pretty heavily wooded area . . . . After about two months of off and on shooting, Alex dropped his pet project [abruptly] … because of the "unworkable conditions" of where he had picked to shoot. … A few weeks after he had stopped shooting, I finally convinced him to let me come over. … He had lost a good bit of weight, and looked pretty sickly. … Right before I left, I asked him about Marble Hornets and what he was planning on doing with all of his tapes of raw footage. With almost no hesitation, he simply said "burn them". … he just said he never wanted to work with the footage again. … I asked if I could take a look at [the tapes]. He agreed, but only under the circumstance that I never bring them back to him, and never discuss what was on them with him. He also highly discouraged me from showing any if [sic] it to anyone else. I laughed at this, and said that he must have accidentally made The Ring or something with the way he was talking. … He transferred to an out of state school soon after that and I haven't seen him since. I filed the tapes separately from my others, and was honestly too freaked out to look at them at the time, and eventually forgot about them. But reading about the Slender Man has peaked my interest again. Maybe it's what Alex was talking about that day. I've decided to begin going through the tapes later tonight. … If there's interest, I'll post anything that I find on here.

On June 20, 2009, two days after his initial post, Wagner produced a link to the first Marble Hornets video, entitled “Introduction,” which comprises clips taken from within a car driving down a highway accompanied by subtitles that relate an abbreviated version of the following tale.

3 I have edited J’s story for brevity’s sake, but it is available in its entirety in Appendix A.
above-noted story. Wagner, whose user name on Something Awful is ce gars, continued to provide links to his videos accompanied by brief introductions (for example, “new clue,” or “new video”) for two months, until August 31, 2009 (“Entry #12”), at which point forum-goers began posting links to the entries even before Wagner did. User comments are disabled on the series’ YouTube page, but that did not prevent forum-goers from discussing the videos on the original thread. Responses to the episodes ranged from congratulating Wagner on a job well done, to reviewing the narrative and meditating on clues, to accusing Wagner of working for a big corporation that was trying to sell something; the majority of comments, however, revolved around the mysteries presented by the videos, including Alex’s (Joseph DeLage) disappearance and the dubious aims of the tall, faceless creature that appeared to be stalking him. The paranormal images thread is now closed, but conversations about Marble Hornets continue on other popular websites, including the alternate reality gaming site Unfiction and the Slender Man fansite Slender Nation.

From its outset Marble Hornets was engineered to elicit an active viewership. J’s first fifteen entries present the audience with puzzles that need solving: clips from Alex’s tapes are accompanied by captions in which J theorizes about what he believes is evidence for his classmate’s strange behaviour and abrupt disappearance. Alex’s tapes are a combination of unedited scenes from the “Marble Hornets” project and videos in which Alex films himself while going about his daily activities such as working on the computer, sleeping, driving etc. J observes that Alex appears to be constantly filming himself, and by the fifteenth entry, J’s edited versions of Alex’s videos are interspersed with his own recordings as J tries to make sense of the oddities that are arising in his own everyday life. The series now comprises
eighty-four episodes (plus thirty-seven videos that feed into the storyline from *totheark*, an affiliated *YouTube* account), and new episodes are sporadically uploaded, generally at a rate of at least one per month. The story has continued along the same lines as when it started: *J* is still trying to solve the mystery surrounding *Alex*, and his investigation has captured the Slender Man’s attention.

There are many antagonists in the series, but the primary villain is the Slender Man, who in *Marble Hornets* is referred to as The Operator. The Operator’s appearance is always accompanied by a glowing light and severe audiovisual distortions—regardless of whether the creature is recorded onto a videotape or a hard drive. The audio distortions are the only sounds associated with The Operator, as he does not appear to speak—at least not in a way that is recognizable to human ears. Those who encounter The Operator suffer from what forum-goers describe as Slender sickness, an illness whose many symptoms include coughing fits, violent outbursts, and memory loss.

Memory loss might provide one explanation for why the characters of *Marble Hornets* never stop filming. For example, “Entry #71” depicts Alex violently attacking *J* moments after giving him the “Marble Hornets” videotapes, but *J* recalls nothing of the foray until he sees a recording of it. Up until that point, *J* remembers simply taking the tapes and leaving *Alex’s* house. In this way the mundane everyday footage recorded by *Alex* and *J* functions as a surrogate memory, not unlike the tattoos that the character Leonard (Guy Pearce) employs to recall important information in Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* (2000). Unlike Leonard’s tattoos, however, the images recorded to hard drives and videotapes are not so permanent, and are much more easily manipulated.
The malleability of photographic representations of reality is a common theme throughout *Marble Hornets*; it is an appropriate one considering the series’ birth on a discussion thread that revolved around the fabrication of realistic paranormal photographs. The several Slender Man-related Web series that emerged in *Marble Hornets*’ wake imitate its form and content, and thereby also engage with issues raised by film’s prodigious ability to convincingly pose as a reliable representation of reality. Some notable examples of such series include *TribeTwelve* (Adam Rosner 2010 - ), *The Abbey Diaries* (2011 - ), and *The Andersen Journals* (2011 - ). Each of these series exhibits a grassroots style that mirrors the video logs (“vlogs”) that are regularly posted to *YouTube* by everyday users that document anything from a new hair cut to opinions about popular issues in the news, to eyewitness recordings of natural disasters.

In mimicking vlogs, *Marble Hornets* and the other Slender Man series also recall the conventions of a contemporary trend in the horror genre that is popularly referred to as found footage. Cinema has long combined the conventions of horror and documentary, but three films that mark key moments in the development of found footage horror as we know it today are *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato 1980), *Man Bites Dog* (Rémy Belvaux et al. 1992), and *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez 1999). Much of the academic and popular discourse around found footage horror evaluates its ability to convincingly simulate the appearance of reality on film; indeed, *BWP* is renowned for its

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4 I was unable to find an official source for the actual names of the creators of *The Abbey Diaries* and *The Andersen Journals*—only their pseudonyms.

5 In chapter one I will discuss why I believe that “found footage” is not the most appropriate name for the subgenre of horror, but for simplicity’s sake I have decided to stick with popular usage throughout this study.

6 Please note that I will refer to *The Blair Witch Project* as *BWP* in future references.
multimedia promotional campaign that had many viewers convinced that the film depicted actual events. In the years since BWP’s release, the subgenre has become so prevalent that audiences have clued in to its conventions. Instead of causing audiences to gasp “What if?” found footage films now more commonly evoke the question, “What’s next?” If the myriad complaints on horror forums, blogs, and popular entertainment sites are any indication, the popularity of found footage horror has reached its peak and is now on the decline. Despite found footage horror’s dwindling ability to shock and terrify audiences, Marble Hornets maintains a freaked-out fandom, as evidenced by its YouTube video views and “likes,” as well as the ongoing discussions about the series that appear on multiple websites.

Marble Hornets’ continued popularity involves a number of factors: some viewers may feel that they have stakes in the series as they have been following it since its beginnings on Something Awful, while others may have found it through a different Slender Man fansite or by word of mouth (as I did); still other viewers may continue to watch the series not so much out of enjoyment, but simply because they feel they must always finish what they start. Whatever the case may be, this study considers Marble Hornets’ sustained

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7 For those unfamiliar with YouTube, viewers have the option to “like” or “dislike” a video by clicking on a “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” icon beneath the video.

8 Since its beginnings on Something Awful, Marble Hornets has garnered a YouTube following of 347,039 subscribers and 68,227,922 views at the time of writing (November 26, 2013, at 6:52 p.m. PST—please note that all of the statistics quoted in this paragraph were accessed on the same date). These numbers increase daily, but such increases are occurring at a much slower rate than they did within the first few months of the first episode. For example, “Introduction” and “Entry #1” (both of which were uploaded on June 20, 2009) currently have 3,096,122 and 4,486,001 views, respectively, but the numbers decline from there, dropping well below two million views per entry by “Entry #5” (uploaded on June 29, 2009), and then to well below one million views per entry by Entry #19 (uploaded on December 9, 2009—with the exception of entries 22 and 26). At the time of writing, Marble Hornets appears to have levelled out at well below 300,000 views per entry since Entry #66 (uploaded on January 23, 2013). “Entry #79,” posted four days ago on November 21, 2013, currently has 44,468 views, which will likely rise to around 150,000 views within three to four months’ time; if the previous entries are any indication, it could potentially rise to approximately 400,000 views within one year—a much slower rate of increase than that enjoyed by the initial entries in the series four years ago. While Marble Hornets still enjoys a large audience, its declining viewership suggests that although the series is still popular, its popularity has passed its peak.
popularity as a result of the way in which it reflects a dramatic shift in storytelling that has been in progress for more than three decades and is related to the transition from analog to digital technologies. Series like *Marble Hornets* address themselves to a number of popular issues with regard to such a change, but in line with the conventions of contemporary horror cinema, they do not provide any clear resolutions.

My purpose in this thesis is to examine how the digital context of *Marble Hornets* affects the way in which the series engages with the conventions of the storytelling modes that inform it, namely folkloric prose narratives\(^9\) such as legends and folktales, and found footage horror. Although the forms with which it engages are not new, *Marble Hornets* combines them in innovative ways that further the projects of films like *BWP*, which aim to bring the onscreen horror out of the cinema and into the everyday lives of the audience.\(^{10}\)

Located on a digital platform (i.e. *YouTube*) that readily exhibits the work of everyday people, *Marble Hornets* employs the conventions of folklore in a way that reflects and intensifies the sense of folk community that already exists on *YouTube*; this by extension amplifies the horrific events depicted onscreen as they are removed from the traditional production context that provides audiences with a relatively mediated experience of terror that is diluted by the conventional release trajectory of studio-backed films.

In the following pages I propose that we understand *Marble Hornets* and other such online videos as examples of a relatively new subgenre of horror that has grown with the Internet. I recommend that we call this subgenre “folk horror,” as its adherents combine conventions of folklore and horror. As I will discuss in chapter one, horror films have long

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\(^9\) “Prose narrative” is a term employed by Elliott Oring that I will discuss in more detail in chapter one.

\(^{10}\) I will briefly discuss the specific ways in which *BWP* did this in chapter one.
taken up folkloric content, but in order to be considered as folklore the stories need to come from a folk community, which in the following chapters is defined as a group of two or more people (Dundes, “What is Folklore?” 2) who are part of an unofficial culture (Dorson 46) that is in some way guided by tradition (Dundes, “What is Folklore?” 2; Dorson 46). In the case of Marble Hornets, its folk community consists primarily of the members of the “Create Paranormal Images” thread and its YouTube subscribers.

Chapter one provides a context for understanding folk horror. It begins by addressing the inaccuracies encompassed by the phrase “found footage horror,” which has become an umbrella term for any horror film that employs documentary aesthetics, regardless of whether or not such films are actually presented as the found footage of the generally missing, deceased, or —if they manage to survive—deranged diegetic film crew. Films such as Cannibal Holocaust and The Poughkeepsie Tapes (John Erick Dowdle 2007), for example, reference several modes of documentary—not just the cinéma direct mode that is aesthetically closest to found footage horror—and yet they commonly fall under the category of found footage in popular discourse. The result of such a misuse of the term is that the nuances of many films that employ documentary conventions are lost as they are loosely grouped with films that, were they more closely examined, would fall into completely different categories. From this loose grouping folk horror emerges as a specific mode of storytelling that approaches the horror genre from the particular standpoint of a digital folk community. The dynamics of such a community, as with any community, involve tensions between insiders and outsiders, and the rules of behaviour that can label people as such. The

Of course, folklore has long contained horrific content as well.
members of these folk communities are comparable with Henry Jenkins’s “new consumer”: grassroots, active, creative, socially connected, and keen to collaborate (Convergence Culture 18-9). Such communities break down the walls that exist in a conventional relationship between an audience and a work of art (in the case of this thesis, a film or Web series). The disruption of such a relationship is especially noteworthy with regard to horror since, as Isabel Pinedo argues in her discussion of recreational terror, the audience derives pleasure from horror films based on their knowledge that what they see onscreen is not real and therefore cannot hurt them (25). Presented on platforms (i.e. YouTube) that host authentic-looking videos of both actual and contrived events, folk horror blurs the lines between reality and fiction, challenging audience assumptions about the safety of their position on the other side of the computer screen. This challenge is embodied by the Slender Man, who in Marble Hornets appears to be closely connected to the use of a video camera.

Chapter two analyzes the ways in which folklore operates in a digital context by examining the Slender Man legend as it appears in the “Create Paranormal Images” thread and Marble Hornets. Vladimir Propp’s Morphology of the Folktale is employed to compare the narrative structure of Marble Hornets with that of a traditional folktale, suggesting that Marble Hornets adopts the age-old narrative form in order to emphasize the tension that exists between the past, present, and future in our contemporary culture. Such a tension is aggravated by our constant connection to digital devices such as smart phones, tablets, and computers, which afford us near-immediate access to both historical and current events. Contained within our digital devices is the notion of the future as it has been conceived of for decades in film and television (for example, the characters of Star Trek [Gene Roddenberry
1966-1969] and *The Jetsons* [Hana-Barbera Productions 1962-1988] used technology similar to Skype\(^{12}\) long before it was readily available to us on our home computers). Although smart phones, tablets, and computers exist in the present (as well as in the past, for that matter), they encompass a sense of the future because of such cinematic representations. In addition, such devices commonly evoke an anxiety—as articulated by countless cultural commentators, including Alan Kirby and Nicholas Carr—about a future in which humanity devolves into herds of mindless sheep led around by those hypnotic, glowing screens. Dorson observes that folktales commonly express the anxieties of their era (46-7); *Marble Hornets* examines anxieties about the future and our reliance on technology through its camera-addicted, forgetful protagonists, as well as through the figure of the Slender Man. The series tempers this negative outlook with a stereotypical American positivity—no matter how many times the characters of *Marble Hornets* are defeated, they always get back up and continue to seek answers.\(^{13}\) This reflects a key moral that is expressed in both the text and subtext of *Marble Hornets*, which encourages audiences to enjoy digital technology, but to always think critically about what that technology shows them.

Chapter three illustrates how *Marble Hornets* engages with the horror genre in three main regards: the monster, the narrative, and the audience. The theories of Noël Carroll, Robin Wood, and Isabel Pinedo are employed to explore the ways in which these three

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\(^{12}\) A program that allows users to make phone calls and video calls internationally, at little to no cost.

\(^{13}\) I refer here to the moral message typically contained in American action films that present national heroes as those who do not give up in the face of defeat. A popular example of such a convention is the everyman hero of the film *Die Hard* (John McTiernan 1988), John McClane (Bruce Willis), who, no matter how often he is knocked down, always gets back up, and in the end achieves victory over the “bad guys” (who of course are not American). It must be noted, however, that unlike in *Marble Hornets*, the stereotypical victories in American action films do not typically promote critical, individualistic thinking or questioning the generally accepted truths of society.
building blocks of horror have conventionally operated in cinema, and how their usage compares in the videos of folk horror. In *Marble Hornets* we see such traditional horror conventions at work, but they are amplified by the series’ location within a digital folk community that, as aforementioned, challenges Pinedo’s idea that audiences can experience pleasure and relief through watching fictional horrors that stand in for the real horrors that they face in everyday life. Presented as the actual videos of everyday *YouTube* users, the videos of folk horror blur the lines between reality and fiction, thereby encouraging viewers to consider their own vulnerability as they sit on the other side of the screen: according to Slender Man legendry, and in the diegesis of *Marble Hornets*, even fictional horrors are dangerous. *Marble Hornets* engages with the anxieties inherent to its online context by exploring the themes of knowledge and control. In *Marble Hornets* the themes of knowledge and control are connected with two key stages in horror narratives: disruption and confirmation. This connection reveals the darker side of humanity’s relationship with technology, which, like the Slender Man, contains the threat of mind control. While in the second chapter these darker tendencies are balanced by some of technology’s positive traits (for example, the camera’s ability to capture what our mind might forget), the third chapter envisions a less optimistic future—one that, like the characters of *Marble Hornets*, bears the symptoms of infection by some yet unknown virus that is directly related to our excessive use of, and reliance on, technology. Confirmation of this potential disruption does little to prevent it; unwilling to put down our electronic devices—or, in the case of *Marble Hornets’* characters, the camera—we will reap our own destruction.
In his essay entitled, “‘A Real Shocker’: authenticity, genre and the struggle for
distinction,” Mark Jancovich discusses the many, often contradictory, definitions of the
horror genre, arguing that given the myriad definitions of “horror” within academia as well
as amongst horror fans, attempts to define the genre are “not only impossible, but also
fundamentally ill-conceived” (23). I have approached this project with Jancovich’s words in
mind. While I acknowledge that genre is fluid and that to try to distill its essence would be to
misrepresent it, I also believe that it is important to observe and illustrate cultural trends as a
mode of historical documentation. My own purposes in this study are to identify a popular
trend in cinema, to document its transmutation to an online context, and to speculate on what
this might mean for the future of the horror genre specifically, and for storytelling in general.
Chapter 1: Contextualizing Folk Horror

“This kind of thing… it doesn’t start by one person telling a story. It’s more like everyone’s fear just takes on a life of its own.” - Ring (Hideo Nakata 1998)

Scholars have long struggled to find an appropriate name for what has become known as found footage horror. In his 2002 essay on the subgenre, Gary Rhodes referred to films such as The Blair Witch Project (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez 1999) as realist horror in the mockumentary tradition; in a 2009 essay on the topic, Jordan Lavender-Smith used the term parodic-doc horror; in their 2002 book, Janet Roscoe and Craig Hight called it mock-documentary; and more general labels that appear online identify the subgenre’s signature cinematography by referring to such films as shaky-cam and hand-held. The subgenre is now popularly known as found footage horror, and has become ubiquitous since Paranormal Activity’s (Oren Peli 2007) enormously successful release in 2009; despite the many available appellations, the subgenre has yet to receive one that is truly befitting.

The contemporary category of found footage, employed to describe those horror films that adopt the conventions of documentary realism in order to intensify scares, is

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1 For the remainder of this chapter I will refer to The Blair Witch Project as BWP.

2 Paranormal Activity was screened at two festivals in 2007 and 2008, but did not become well-known to larger audiences until late 2009, when the film’s marketing team created hype around it by representing it to audiences as a rare experience. This was achieved through the film’s trailer and its campaign on the entertainment social media website, Eventful.com. Paranormal Activity’s trailer comprised footage of audiences reacting in terror during preliminary screenings of the film, accompanied by the caption “Experience it for yourself.” In addition, the trailer directed audiences to demand that the film come to their city via Eventful.com, suggesting that if enough people did not demand to see the film, they would miss out on seeing it in theatre. These and other similar social media campaigns created a great deal of buzz around Paranormal Activity, resulting in an enormous profit ($107,918,810 domestic total) for the low-budget ($15,000) film (box office numbers according to BoxOfficeMojo, accessed on December 3, 2013).
inaccurate for a number of reasons. Firstly, films included in the category are stylistically and philosophically different from the avant-garde films of the late 1980s and early 1990s that originally inspired the name. Secondly, many of the films included in the contemporary grouping do not actually depict the found footage of some ill-fated film crew. For example, much like the pioneering found footage film *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato 1980), *The Poughkeepsie Tapes* (John Erick Dowdle 2007) combines the conventions of found footage and broadcast news footage, and *Ghostwatch* (Lesley Manning 1992) is presented as a live-televised paranormal investigation—again, not found footage. Despite such exceptions, the common themes of liveness and immediacy, articulated by conventions of documentary realism such as hand-held camerawork, location shooting, amateur actors, and improvised dialogue, have somehow translated to the general overarching misnomer, “found footage.”

In the past several years, the films to which the misnomer is commonly applied have enjoyed such enormous popularity that it is difficult to imagine them with another name. Indeed, “found footage” is the term most commonly used by fans and cultural commentators alike to refer to most horror films that feature a documentary aesthetic, regardless of whether such films are presented as found footage.³ In recognizing this problem of definitions my desire is not to argue for a renaming; rather I hope to demonstrate that there is room for change within our contemporary understanding of the subgenre. The films, television shows, and Web series that currently fall under the broad category of found footage horror can be

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³ I will retain the popular term “found footage” throughout this study for simplicity’s sake, but I would like to acknowledge that folklore and film scholar Mikel J. Koven has suggested a suitable replacement by calling such films that would fall under the category of found footage “legend films” (“Found-Footage Films” n. pag.).
separated into subgenres (or even sub-subgenres, perhaps) that more accurately represent the nuanced ways in which they combine the cinematic conventions of documentary and horror.

In the following pages I will explore an emergent style of storytelling that shares many conventions with found footage horror, but is distinct from it in a number of ways. The storytelling to which I refer appears on the public video-sharing website, *YouTube*. *YouTube*’s target user is revealed in its name: “you,” the everyday person, are encouraged to “[s]hare your videos with friends, family, and the world” (n. pag.). The stories that inform my study are paranormal videos that employ the aforementioned aesthetics of documentary realism, encouraging audiences to ask, “Is this real?” In some instances, as with my primary case study, *Marble Hornets* (Troy Wagner and Joseph DeLage 2009 - ), it takes little effort to discover that the videos are fictional creations; in other cases, for example in videos of “real exorcisms” and ghost sightings, it is less obvious whether the uploader believes that what he or she has shared is fiction or non-fiction. In both cases, the videos highlight the role of the everyday person as a storyteller, aligning such *YouTube* users with folklorist Richard Dorson’s understanding of folk as members of an unofficial culture, and Alan Dundes’s understanding of folk as “*any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor” that has its own “traditions which help the group have a sense of group identity” regardless of whether they all know one another (“What is Folklore?” 2).

The argument may arise that *YouTube* is too vast to be considered a single community; in this study I regard *YouTube* as a large community that houses smaller, distinct

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4 I am quoting this slogan from the *YouTube* website.

5 I will discuss this in more depth in the following pages.

6 Dundes defines a group as consisting of two or more people, but notes that “generally most groups consist of many individuals” (2).
communities. Like a subgenre to a genre, these smaller communities of YouTube users share similar traditions, but can be distinguished in myriad ways—for example through their popular topics, stylistic choices, and tones. The focus of my study, Marble Hornets, exists within a community of storytellers who participate in the legendry surrounding a fictional monster called the Slender Man. This is still a large community, and as a result I will limit my study to the website on which the Slender Man was first constructed (Something Awful) and the first Web series that arose from his legendry (Marble Hornets).

*Marble Hornets* employs many of the conventions of found footage horror, but it differs from the subgenre in a number of ways. In the following pages I suggest that we dub this specific form of storytelling “folk horror.” I believe that the term is more appropriate than “found footage horror” for multiple reasons, but the primary one is that it better reflects the production context of such videos, emphasizing the creative role of the everyday Internet user in producing and exhibiting his or her own videos.

The everyday user as creator is key to the context of folk horror, which emphasizes unmediated exchanges between members of an online community. Such an unmediated exchange necessitates a narrator from within the community: the person who uploads a story is also a narrator and often a participant or witness in the events shown onscreen—in contrast with films such as *Cannibal Holocaust* and *BWP*, which are presented as footage that was found and sold to a studio that edited said footage and then sold the paranormal property for distribution and exhibition. When compared with the telling of urban legends, the stories told to us by third parties are less believable than those that are directly related by someone who witnessed or even participated in the event first hand. In each case the stories are fabricated,
but the role of the storyteller, and the audience’s proximity to that storyteller, encourage a reception that aligns the tales told with the audience’s everyday reality: the stories come from a member of that audience’s community, as opposed to a nameless, faceless, potentially corporate, outsider.

A key distinguishing characteristic between an insider and outsider narrator of folk horror is the context in which his or her stories first appear: those that appear on YouTube are enriched by a context in which videos depicting the lives of actual people are uploaded on an hourly basis, from the adorable antics of an awkward puppy to first-person point-of-view cellular phone recordings of earthquakes and tsunamis. Conversely, although they may convincingly reproduce the roughness of reality, those stories that appear in cinemas and other corporate websites such as Netflix and iTunes, while potentially still of interest to the folk horror community, ultimately exist outside of it.

Folklorists and cultural commentators have been discussing the validity of mass media adaptations of folkloric narratives for decades. While many scholars have lauded popular cinema for its ability to renew interest in folktales (Thompson 461; Koven “Film, Folklore” 4) and reflect folkloric conventions to a modern audience (Bird 345; Koven “Film, Folklore” 7), others have argued that popular cinema destroys folklore, manipulating it for maximum profit. For example, some critics of mass media adaptations of folklore argue that studios such as Disney sap the originality and context from folktales by producing their own bland versions of them to sell to mass audiences, who, not knowing any better, take Disney’s version to be definitive; as a result, the cultural and spiritual truths exhibited in the

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7 For my references to Thomson, Bird, Russo and Dégh I am indebted to Dr. Koven, who provides an in-depth exploration of the discourse on mass media versus folklore in his chapter titled, “Folklore and Film,” in his book, Film, Folklore, and Urban Legends.
original tales are lost (Russo 19-21; Koven “Film, Folklore” 4). Linda Dégh contends that
such a process has a “homogenizing effect of uniform information and the mass-marketing
of stories to a mass society,” the result of which is the enculturation of the “citizens of the
world,” who become “consumers of identical cultural goods” (23; Koven, Film, Folklore 5).
Rather than arguing “about whether or not popular culture ‘transmits’ folklore,” S. Elizabeth
Bird suggests that we should instead consider the ways in which such media employs
folkloric conventions in order to resonate with audiences (345; Koven, Film, Folklore 7). In
this thesis I regard folklore as necessarily being communicated by a folk community. A
 corporate, mainstream film can adopt folkloric conventions, but as it is removed from the
grassroots context of a folk community, its stories do not constitute folklore. As Bird
maintains, however, it is still worthwhile to examine the ways in which such films employ
folkloric conventions.

Folk horror emphasizes its folk roots in a number of ways. Folk horror videos on
YouTube align themselves with the platform’s abundant eyewitness videos and home movies
by placing at their centre an everyday YouTube user—an insider of the community whose
goal is to communicate a strange event. The short films and Web episodes (“webisodes”)
discussed in this study employ YouTube’s close relationship with the actual world of the
audience in order to heighten the terror of the fictional events depicted. Documentary
conventions connect such videos with factual reality. This connection is strengthened by the
uploader’s position as an average person who, like many YouTube users, shares a notable
experience that he or she happened to catch on video. In the case of Marble Hornets, J (Troy
Wagner), the diegetic narrator, uploads videos to his account, treating YouTube like a
personal, though public, diary, and not once does he break character—not even when responding to the comments of other users. The entire YouTube account, not just the videos posted to it, is part of the Marble Hornets story world. In this way Marble Hornets mimics the realistic, amateur style of the eyewitness videos and home movies posted to YouTube; in doing so it locates itself within the everyday world of the viewer—a tactic that mirrors BWP’s infamous marketing ploy back in 1999, which included an interactive website, a television documentary, a printed police dossier, and missing posters of the diegetic film crew.8

Many found footage horror films employ the conventions of documentary, and in particular, those of cinéma direct, which include location shooting, amateur actors, and hand-held camerawork. Such conventions fulfill popular expectations about the quality of work produced by everyday people as opposed to professional filmmakers: films such as Cloverfield (Matt Reeves 2008) and BWP gain an air of authenticity by masquerading as the imperfect, unfinished amateur footage of traumatic events, stylistically more akin to home movies than feature films; however, despite their realistic appearance, the professional marketing and distribution of such films create a distance between the audience and the onscreen action. When similarly rough videos are uploaded to the Internet by a person who claims to have directly recorded the events, the lack of mediation between teller and tale infuses the story with an unmediated quality that, when effectively executed, locates the events within the real, everyday world of the viewer.

8 J.P. Telotte discusses the way in which BWP succeeded by making itself a part of the everyday world of the audience in his 2001 essay entitled “The Blair Witch Project Project: Film and the Internet.” I will discuss this further in the following chapter.
The direct connection between the storyteller and the audience is facilitated by the digital, online context on which the stories appear. In the case of this study, the context primarily comprises the “Create Paranormal Images” thread on the website *Something Awful*, and the video-sharing website *YouTube*. Such a context encourages a participatory audience, one that makes use of the comment buttons below the story posts and videos, which allow users to react and/or build upon the materials at hand. As I will demonstrate in the following pages, such a context is distinct from traditional modes of storytelling, via film or print, as well as traditional modes of audience reception; it is for this reason that I suggest differentiating between those artistic works that originate from a production team and wind up in theatres or pay-video sites, and those that originate online as part of an open community of grassroots co-creators.

Many worthwhile avenues exist whereby one might approach *YouTube* videos such as those composing the series *Marble Hornets*, which form the bulk of my study. Considering such productions as examples of a modern folklore is just one of many possible approaches, but it is a particularly appropriate one given its ability to encompass the aesthetics, structure, and context of the aforementioned videos. While traditional understandings of folklore limit it to the realm of verbal, face-to-face communications, scholars such as Dorson and, more recently, Trevor Blank, have recognized that “folk” do not have to be the members of small, niche communities in distant locales, but can comprise everyday people, members of an “unofficial culture” whose lives are in some way guided by tradition (Dorson 46). Within these unofficial cultures, the Internet behaves as “a communications facilitator” upon which “folklore [has] emerged as recognizably … as it [has] in ‘the real world’” (Blank 2). Folk
horror mimics the traditional folk context by adapting its visual style and narrative structure to match the vernacular storytelling techniques common to folk communities, as well as by locating itself within a communal context—in this case, YouTube.

*Marble Hornets* is a clear example of folk horror as it is defined in this thesis: it is based on a legend that was birthed by an unofficial community; its creators, Troy Wagner and Joseph DeLage, are not only part of that community, but they also worked outside of America’s film industry for most of the series’ production, with Wagner having only recently graduated from the University of Alabama’s film program (Miller n. pag.); and the series combines the conventions of folkloric prose narratives and horror. *Marble Hornets* is a worthwhile case study because of its wealth of videos (the series currently comprises well over one hundred episodes, including the entries of an affiliated account called totheark); its longevity (it has been ongoing for over four years); the depth of audience engagement that continues to surround it via various websites, including *Unfiction* and *Twitter*; and its dual roles in the development and distribution of the Slender Man legend.

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9 According to DeLage, he and Wagner financed the first 26 episodes of the series out of pocket, which afforded them a budget of $500 (Nolfi n. pag.). The series has now become so popular that, according to *StatSheep*’s *YouTube* statistics page, it is projected to earn $7,194 over the next four months (based on $2.50 per 1,000 views)—no huge profit, but enough to relieve Wagner and DeLage of the financial burden of funding each episode. The series may have had grassroots beginnings, but its popularity has drawn the attention of industry professionals. Besides recently working on *Slender: The Arrival* (Parsec Productions 2013), Wagner and DeLage recently collaborated on a film adaptation of the series entitled *Marble Hornets* (James Moran 2014). According to *IMDb*, the film is set for release in 2014, and it stars genre favourite (and Guillermo del Toro regular) Doug Jones as the Slender Man, who in the credits appears as “Slendrman.”

10 I employ the term “prose narrative” here with regard to folklore in abidance with William Bascom’s article entitled “The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives,” in which he describes myths, legends, and folktales as a subgenre of folklore called “prose narratives” (3).

11 On October 21, 2009, nearly four months after the first *Marble Hornets* video (“Introduction”) was posted to *YouTube*, an affiliated *YouTube* page called totheark was created. Totheark’s identity is unknown, but the videos posted are dark (both in colour and content), distorted, and often feature cryptic messages accompanied by strange, electronic sounds. While the comments section on the *Marble Hornets YouTube* page is disabled, viewers are welcome to comment on the totheark videos, and they do in abundance. Often user comments attempt to decode totheark’s videos and/or theorize on the broader *Marble Hornets* conspiracy.
Before I continue in my argument that we adopt the term “folk horror” to describe online, grassroots videos such as *Marble Hornets*, I must acknowledge that the term has already been used by the BBC’s Mark Gatiss to describe a “loose collection of films that … [emerged in the 1960s, which] shar[e] a common obsession with the British landscape, its folklore, and superstitions” (n. pag.). Gatiss’s examples of folk horror involve a combination of pagan rituals, witchcraft, and (often deviant) sexuality: *Witchfinder General* (Michael Reeves 1968), *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* (Piers Haggard 1971), and, what Gatiss describes as the ultimate folk horror film, *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy 1973). Gatiss’s definition of folk horror is not entirely incompatible with mine: the films of his and my suggested canons share an attention to landscape, folklore, and superstition, but while his list focuses on the content of the films, mine centres on the way in which such stories are told, namely, in a context that is less mediated than that of a conventionally produced film. Generally, the only forms of mediation between the viewer and folk horror videos on *YouTube* are the filmmaker and the platform itself. Such an unmediated viewing context stands in stark opposition to that of conventionally produced films, which require the efforts not only of a team of workers (i.e. a film crew), but the financial backing of some larger entity, be it private or public.\(^\text{12}\) My version of folk horror emphasizes the unmediated nature of the events displayed onscreen, with the filmmaker assuming multiple roles, including uploader, narrator, and actor/participant in the events depicted: the audience sees what the narrator sees, and by extension, the audience knows what the narrator knows—although the trope of the unreliable narrator is common in stories about the Slender Man, as his victims suffer from memory loss and

\(^{12}\) Such professionals arguably form a folk community of their own in that they are a niche group bound by tradition, but for the purposes of this thesis I would like to retain the notion of everyday, non-professional people in the term “folk.”
unpredictable behavioural changes. In short, my definition of folk horror revolves around the subgenre’s combination of, and experimentation with, the conventions of folklore (particularly legendary), horror (particularly found footage), and documentary realism. In presenting my own definition of folk horror I do not wish to discount Gatiss’s, but rather to suggest another way in which the term might be employed.\textsuperscript{13}

The content of the types of films that Gatiss and I describe is similar in that they both concern folklore and superstition. In addition, both focus on a source of evil that has existed as long as, if not longer than, human beings; however, while \textit{Witchfinder General} and the other films included in Gatiss’s canon focus on paganism and/or witchcraft, and their associations with the devil/evil gods, \textit{Marble Hornets} focuses on the Slender Man, a fabricated mythological entity that quickly grew into an Internet sensation after his initial popularity on \textit{Something Awful}. While witches (the kind that ride broomsticks, at least), devils, and the Slender Man are all impossible beings according to the laws of our physical world, witches and devils possess a longevity and history that the Slender Man lacks. The existence of witches and devils is rooted in religious discourse, and there are those who retain their ancestors’ beliefs that such beings actually reside in our contemporary world; the Slender Man, on the other hand, can be clearly traced by the astute Web surfer to his beginnings on \textit{Something Awful}.

\textsuperscript{13} I would like to note here that since starting this thesis I have been in contact with Dr. Koven, who, besides writing and/or editing several books that I found to be indispensable to my own project, also recently wrote an article on the legend film (“Found-Footage Films & the Visual Rhetoric of the Legend Film”) that, had I discovered it earlier, would have likely changed some of my terminology and ideas around the films and videos discussed in this paper. I plan to delve into the ideas he expresses in his article in more detail in my future research, and intend to engage with his ideas as I further explore the topic of this study.
In an (undated) interview with *Know Your Meme, Something Awful* user Victor Surge, creator of the Slender Man, described the proliferation of Slender Man stories that quickly grew from his original post as an example of an “Internet urban legend”:

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.

Victor Surge describes the Slender Man as an urban legend, which raises a significant issue in terms of folklore studies: that of definitions. One needs only a brief introduction to the study of folklore to realize that it is a minefield teeming with competing denotations. When I began this study I carelessly threw around three key terms: “myth,” “legend,” and “folktale.” While I was vaguely aware that each of these words had distinct definitions, I found it exceedingly difficult to pin down exactly what those were. For that reason, and to avoid any possible confusion, I have oriented my discussion around the definitions provided by William Bascom in his article entitled, “The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives.”

In his article, Bascom observes that the study of folklore has “long been plagued by inconsistent and contradictory definitions” (3); indeed “myth, legend, and folktale” are “three very basic terms in folklore [that] are loosely used and have sometimes been as hotly disputed as the nature of folklore itself” (Bascom 3). As a result of such inconsistencies, Bascom sets out to produce an authoritative set of definitions based on the findings of

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14 I am again indebted to Dr. Koven for generously advising me on sources to improve my understanding of folklore studies.
students of folklore that he has encountered in “some twenty years of teaching” (3). His article provides a systematic analysis of the terms, “myth,” “legend,” and “folktale,” including the common forms that each take in diverse folk communities around the world.

Bascom’s conclusive definitions endow each term with clear and specific identifying features. According to Bascom, we can understand myths, legends, and folktales as “subtypes of a broader form class” called prose narratives, “an important category of verbal art which includes myths, legends, and folktales,” which, he elaborates, “are related to each other in that they are narratives in prose” (3). Contrary to the popular definition that aligns them with invention, myths are considered to be truthful accounts of past events “in the society in which they are told”; in short, they “are the embodiment of dogma” (Bascom 4). Legends, “like myths, are regarded as true by the narrator and his audience,” but they are generally more secular than myths (4). Folktales, Bascom writes, “are prose narratives which are regarded as fiction,” although “they may or may not have happened, and they are not to be taken seriously” (4). Bascom notes that we must not conflate “folktales” with “fairy tales,” as the latter “are usually regarded as true, and because fairies do not appear in most folktales” (4).

Bascom does a laudable job distinguishing between the three terms, but the rigid guidelines by which he separates them based on whether the tales are considered to be fact or fiction require interrogation in order to yield results more appropriate to the ways in which folklore currently operates on the Internet. Such an interrogation is particularly worthwhile given contemporary preoccupations with realism and authenticity in both written and visual mediums, as are exhibited in the forum posts and videos that comprise this study: although it
only requires a quick Internet search to discover that the Slender Man and his accompanying lore are fabricated, there are those who claim to believe that he is real; the stories, images, and videos depicting encounters with the creature encourage these beliefs by employing stylistic conventions that align them with factual reality.

In an article entitled “Legendry and the Rhetoric of Truth,” Elliott Oring uses Aristotle’s categories of ethos, logos, and pathos to discuss the rhetoric of truth employed in legend-telling. At the conclusion of his article Oring considers the effect of removing the evaluative component of veracity from the definition of a legend, observing that should such a criteria be removed, “truth and falsity would simply vanish as relevant criteria,” and “all kinds of performances would immediately become eligible for legend status, from the truest of the true to the falsest of the false” (159). Perhaps most importantly, Oring points out that such a definition would relieve legendry of at least some of its cumbersome “ideological baggage,” such as “the beliefs of the folklorist,” for example (160). He goes on to argue that “[a] definition of legend in terms of its rhetoric would shift the assessment of legend from matters of belief to the performance of truth” (160). Oring’s ideas are valuable because they create space for an understanding of legendry that focuses on its rhetoric while maintaining the clear distinctions that Bascom identifies as being sorely needed in the field of folklore. Rather than regarding legends as tales that are considered true by their tellers as per Bascom’s definition, we can transfer that element of truth to reflect the way in which legends are told; as Oring contends, we can devote our attention to the rhetoric when we remove fact and fiction as criteria. If legends do not need to be considered true by their narrators in order
to be classified as such, but instead are defined by the rhetoric of truth that is employed in their telling, then we can consider the Slender Man stories as legends.

Oring’s study has previously been applied to film, notably by folklore and film scholar Mikel J. Koven, who, in his article entitled, “Found-Footage Films & the Visual Rhetoric of the Legend Film,” employs Oring’s ideas to discuss the ways in which “an extreme example” of the legend film, the found footage film, “constructs its own claims to veracity” (n. pag.). Koven addresses Oring’s description of ethos, renaming it “the teller” for simplicity’s sake. He points out that in the legend film, the teller shows the audience the events first-hand, providing them with “an immediacy of experience, of raw footage caught at the point of encounter rather than having the narrative retold after the fact or second hand” (n. pag.). In other words, we are dealing with “presentation of the event/experience rather than a representation of that narrative” (n. pag.). Oring writes that a tale is rendered more believable by a narrator’s closeness to the event depicted in the narrative (8); Koven translates Oring’s observation to a filmic context by contending that a lack of distance between the narrator and the narrative suggests that, besides the video camera, there is little to no mediation between the audience and the event—the viewer sees the onscreen action in much the same way as the narrator.

Both Koven and Oring argue that the greater the risk the narrator faces in order to capture an event, the more likely the audience is to believe in the event’s veracity; contrary to their claims, I would argue that some risks are so great that they might actually undermine a story’s authenticity—for example, a common complaint about found footage horror films such as *BWP* and *Cloverfield* is that the characters, who are often running for their lives,
seem to be more invested in filming than surviving. Rather than arguing about the validity of
cracter motivations, however, it is more worthwhile to consider the effect that such a level
of risk has on an event’s perceived level of importance: regardless of whether a story is true,
it must be important if people—either actual people or characters in a diegetic story world—
are willing to risk their lives in order to record it. When considered on a practical level,
infusing a legend with a level of risk is an effective method to position the legend as
important and deserving of audience investment.

According to Koven, another way in which legend films increase audience
investment is by adopting a sincere tone and “grounding the story in our own worlds”
through “lengthy introductions” that “link the film narrative within the lived experiences of
the intended audience” (“Found-Footage Films” n. pag.). Oring writes, and Koven
elaborates, that legends—and by extension, legend films—feel more authentic to audiences
when they are not framed within traditional narrative structures such as those that begin with
the phrase, “Once upon a time” (Oring 140; Koven, “Found-Footage Films” n. pag.). In other
words, to reiterate a point made above, a legend has more verisimilitude when it is presented,
rather than represented (Koven, “Found-Footage Films” n. pag.). To illustrate this
observation, Koven provides the example of *The Amityville Horror* (Stuart Rosenberg 1979)
versus *Paranormal Activity*: although both films are constructed, *Paranormal Activity’s*
“apparent presentation of actual occurrences” renders it more believable than the former
film, which is framed within a more traditional narrative structure that relies upon
representation (“Found-Footage Films” n. pag.).
On the topic of presentation versus representation, Koven, citing Oring, writes that the “apparent lack of artistry” in found footage films is yet another characteristic that supports their believability: “the cinematography is meant to convey prosaic truthfulness, not pretty pictures” (n. pag.). Viewers of found footage films are encouraged to believe that the events depicted within must not only have truly occurred, but they must have been quite important, as the story is privileged over artistic concerns such as composition and scripting: much like the trope of risk, a lack of artistry positions the film’s content as of the utmost importance, taking precedence over all other considerations.

Similar to found footage horror, folk horror incorporates an immediacy into both its style and context that aligns it with factual reality, which, as Oring and Koven observe, grounds its content in the audience’s everyday lives. Whether due to its low to non-existent budget or amateur creators, folk horror—even more than found footage horror—binds its events within the rules of the actual world in which the audience lives. Unexplainable events occur, but they remain within the realm of possibility through a lack of over-the-top special effects, unlike the sensational effects that, according to Koven, mar the realism of found footage films such as *Paranormal Activity* (“Found-Footage Films” n. pag.). In *Marble Hornets*, for example, the characters have regular run-ins with the Slender Man; although it seems that the tall, glowing, faceless creature is beyond scientific explanation, his humanoid appearance invites other theories—for instance, he could simply be a man in a suit who is part of a government conspiracy. One can apply similar reasoning to the ghost-sighting videos that are featured in abundance on *YouTube*: we see what appears to be a ghost, but it is presented in such a way as to leave viewers questioning how such an occurrence might have
been faked, all the while wondering at the possibility of it being real. Both Oring’s and Koven’s articles reveal that questions of belief lie at the heart of legends and legend films, respectively; such is also the case with folk horror, which, like legends and legend films, employs a rhetoric of truth designed to make audiences wonder, “Could it be real?”

Tzvetan Todorov identifies a similar type of uncertainty in his structural analysis of a literary genre called the fantastic, whose “text[s] must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described” (33). Stories of the fantastic genre take place in the world of the reader, “the [world] we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires” (Todorov 25), and yet the events that occur within such stories appear to clash with the “laws of this same familiar world,” thus causing the “person who experiences the event[s]” to question his or her knowledge of the world (Todorov 25). Given Todorov’s description of the fantastic, it is not difficult to see where horror narratives might fit, as horror often features beings that either bend or outright defy the laws of science such as vampires, werewolves, and other “freaks of nature.” Describing the fantastic as “a near neighbor to the horror genre” (144), scholar Noël Carroll observes a parallel uncertainty in many horror plots, in which “the play between supernatural and naturalistic explanation has a crucial role” (145). Todorov also acknowledges an affinity between the fantastic and horror, but a key difference between the two, as recognized by both scholars, is that, unlike with horror, although “fear is often linked to the fantastic … it is not a necessary condition of the genre” (Todorov 35). In addition, according to Todorov, at the end of a fantastic narrative the reader (and sometimes also the character with whom the reader may identify) “emerges
from the fantastic” with one of two solutions to the story (41): if the solution “derives from ‘reality’ as it exists in the common opinion,” the story falls into a genre called “the uncanny” (41); if the only possible explanation for the story demands “that new laws of nature must be entertained,” the story is part of the genre called “the marvelous” (41). Carroll only includes those stories that fit into the latter category in his definition of horror (145).

Folk horror’s location on an online platform (in the case of Marble Hornets, YouTube) in which both fiction and non-fiction stories reside without clear differentiation intensifies the above-mentioned element of hesitation between natural and supernatural resolutions. In addition, unlike the horror narratives defined by Carroll, the stories of folk horror need not end with a supernatural explanation: in line with the conventions of cinéma direct and postmodern horror—two genres that heavily influence folk horror—many folk horror stories are open-ended, providing audiences with opportunities for continued speculation and discussion of whether the events depicted might involve natural or supernatural explanations. Although it seems blatantly obvious that Marble Hornets is a work of fiction, the current top suggested Google search phrase for the series—“Is marblehorns real?”—suggests that at least some audiences experience the “fantastic hesitation” described by Todorov and Carroll, and a Google search of the Slender Man renders similar results.15 The majority of audience members realize that both Marble Hornets and the Slender Man do not represent actual occurrences in their everyday worlds, but it is important to acknowledge that such stories employ a rhetoric of truth that encourages

audiences to entertain such possibilities. In this way folk horror draws fantastic hesitation out from the realm of fiction and into the everyday reality of the audience, who not only question whether the solution to a fictional story is natural or supernatural, but might also wonder whether what they are seeing could actually occur in their own lives.

In her article on postmodern horror, which includes those films produced from 1968 onward, Isabel Pinedo describes the horror film as “an exquisite exercise in coping with the terrors of everyday life” (25-6). According to Pinedo, a trademark of the postmodern horror film is that it is not pleasurable in the traditional ways that films are. She argues that much of the enjoyment of postmodern horror comes not from the text, which features disappointing open endings and unlikeable protagonists, but from the seasoned horror audience’s ability to recognize in the film conventions and innovations of the horror genre. Viewers derive additional pleasure from horror in that it realizes onscreen the terror that they repress in their everyday lives, allowing them to experience it in a relatively safe way: through the effect of boundedness that Pinedo dubs “recreational terror” (25). Folk horror offers a similar experience, but amplifies it by encouraging audiences to doubt that what they are seeing onscreen is merely a fictional representation of terror. It thereby intensifies the familiar feeling of recreational terror by blurring the lines between fact and fiction, dragging the horror outside of the “safe” boundaries of the screen and closer to the borders of the viewer’s everyday reality.¹⁶

¹⁶ It is stating the obvious but I feel that I would be remiss in neglecting to acknowledge that cinema has always problematized the boundaries between reality and representation; this has been an issue, particularly in the case of visual art, since long before the advent of motion pictures. While discussing the problem of photographic realism is certainly an important and worthwhile endeavour, it would be an overly ambitious undertaking in this thesis. For the purposes of this study I hope that it is enough to observe that folk horror presents an intensification of the conventions of realism that we have long witnessed in cinema, from its birth through to the emergence of documentaries and mock-documentaries, to the relatively recent development of found footage horror.
The close proximity of the viewer to that which is viewed is an integral component of folk horror; popular writer Edward Docx and philosopher Alan Kirby weigh the positive and negative cultural developments giving rise to such a trend in their respective articles about the death of postmodernism. In his 2011 article, Docx describes the post-postmodern audience as one that is, influenced by the postmodern medium of the Internet, “more interested in social networking than social revolution” while at the same time “yearning for some kind of offline authenticity” (n. pag.). Noting the importance in contemporary Western society of specificity, values, and authenticity, Docx provides examples of local food movements and a growing interest in quality craftsmanship, and suggests that the era we are now entering might be named “the Age of Authenticism” (n. pag.). Whereas Docx correlates authenticity with high-quality products emphasizing a robust culture oriented around an ethos of self-sustainability, Kirby’s version of authenticity places far less faith in the everyday person, whom he describes as suffering from a “technologised cluelessness” (“Death of Postmodernism” n. pag.) that renders them useless at everything other than clicking a mouse, using a telephone, and watching television. In his 2006 essay, Kirby describes the age following postmodernism as pseudo-modernism, whose “cultural products cannot and do not exist unless the individual intervenes physically in them” (n. pag.). Such texts include Big Brother (Veronica 1999 - ) and American Idol (Fox Broadcasting 2002 - ), in which viewers’ votes are essential to the shows’ progress; contemporary news programs that are increasingly incorporating eyewitness videos and user comments into their broadcasts; and computer games, which require players to play. Kirby argues that in such instances the viewer enters, writes a segment of the program, and then
departs, returning to the more passive role of sitting on the couch and staring at the television screen. For both Docx and Kirby, the new ages that they theorize mark an end to the critical questioning of everything that defined postmodernism, but while Docx’s theory announces a “critical realism” as its replacement, Kirby describes a much darker development that might best be summarized as fatal fatuity.

Three years after calling “pseudo-modernism” a “cultural desert” in which “reality” is defined as “myself, now, ‘interacting’ with its texts” (“Death of Postmodernism” n. pag.), Kirby revised his claims in a book titled *Digimodernism*—a word he invented to represent our current age, which he defines as “the era of the hybrid or borderline text (*The Blair Witch Project, The Office, the Harry Potter novels*)” (2). In the introduction to his book Kirby admits that the movement he once described as vapid is now worth further investigation; his investigation is more in line with Docx’s in that it regards the current era as a “reaction against postmodernism” that values, among other things, earnestness and authenticity—albeit a type of fabricated authenticity that Kirby dubs “the apparently real” (2). Unlike Docx’s local food movements and handmade crafts, which rely upon an old-fashioned ideal of authentic products as being synonymous with high quality, the “apparently real” is a trivial, shallow mimicry of authenticity as imperfection: one that capitalizes on assumptions of what reality represented by “real people” looks like. Apparently real texts are intentionally constructed to fit the appearance of amateur efforts—astutely summarized by Kirby as “a textual expression of the social death of competence” (*Digimodernism* 150)—in order to convince audiences that the fiction presented to them may not be so fictional after all. Kirby also takes up the idea of the “death of competence” in his aforementioned 2006 article on
pseudo-modernity, and this philosophical idea continues to inspire him in *Digimodernism*, in which Kirby simultaneously laments the decreasing quality of art while celebrating the intriguing development of an increasingly active consumer.

Key to Kirby’s understanding of digimodernism is the “computerization of text” and the resultant enhanced opportunities for audience engagement. He writes, “in its pure form the digimodernist text permits the reader or viewer to intervene textually, physically to make text, to add visible content or tangibly shape narrative development” (1). Kirby’s ideas parallel Henry Jenkins’s in his 2006 book *Convergence Culture*, in which he describes a new type of consumer:

If old consumers were assumed to be passive, the new consumers are active. If old consumers were predictable and stayed where you told them to stay, then new consumers are migratory, showing a declining loyalty to networks or media. If old consumers were isolated individuals, the new consumers are more socially connected. If the work of media consumers was once silent and invisible, the new consumers are now noisy and public. (Jenkins 18-9)

Jenkins goes on to discuss the specific ways in which new consumers engage with corporate products across an array of media. To illustrate his claim that convergence is not just a technological phenomenon, but “a cultural shift [in which] consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (3), Jenkins analyses the corporation-consumer crossover in the following case studies: reality television shows *Survivor* (CBS All-Stars 2000 - ) and *American Idol*, transmedia productions such as the many works comprising *The Matrix* (Andy and Lana Wachowski 1999), franchise, participatory culture as exemplified by the respective fans of *Star Wars* (George Lucas 1977)

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17 Admittedly Kirby’s outlook is, though not wholly negative, certainly less celebratory than Jenkins’s.

18 In his chapter on transmedia, Jenkins devotes a sidebar to *BWP*, noting that the film and its innovative promotional materials introduced “the concept of transmedia storytelling” into public discourse (101-3).
and *Harry Potter* (Chris Columbus 2001), and a speculative chapter on the ways in which American democracy might be rendered more participatory. Notably, Jenkins is more focused upon the spaces in which “grassroots and corporate media intersect” (2), while my own research remains within the realm of amateur/user-created content; on a fundamental level, however, he and I are talking about the same demographic. The grassroots producers of folk horror can be included within the category of Jenkins’s new consumers: they are both active, migratory, socially connected, and willing to share their work with the general public via online platforms such as *YouTube*.

Examples of these new consumers can be observed in the development of the Slender Man legendry as well as the several folk horror Web series that it has thus far inspired. As I have previously noted, the Slender Man legend began as two digitally manipulated photographs on *Something Awful* that quickly evolved into myriad fabricated artifacts aimed at supporting the photographs’ claim to authenticity. In line with Kirby’s description of the apparently real, Victor Surge digitally manipulated the images to reflect imperfections coinciding with assumptions about the appearance of reality in vintage photographs. The images are degraded, slightly blurry and damaged, and in black and white, and they are accompanied by captions that align them with conventional print newspaper stories. Following suit, a horde of users inspired by Victor Surge’s creation produced a rich legendry around the Slender Man, ranging from personal anecdotes to professionally rendered newspaper stories to compelling images of 16th century German woodcuts. Desiring to build upon the legend in their own way, Wagner and DeLage ventured outside of the “Create Paranormal Images” thread to develop *Marble Hornets*, but continued to interact with fellow
forum-goers by posting links to the new video entries they had uploaded to their YouTube page. A Twitter account has also since emerged: it is presented as the account of Wagner’s character J, who mainly tweets about the latest episodes of Marble Hornets. In addition to the collaborations on the Something Awful thread and the Marble Hornets accounts, several other folk horror Web series have emerged that employ the same legend-telling conventions as Marble Hornets.

The Slender Man legend has developed in other ways and on other platforms as well, with online diary-style blogs such as Just Another Fool (July 2009-January 2010); fansites such as The Slender Nation and the forums on Unfiction; and video games for computers and smart phones, respectively, such as Parsec Productions’ Slender: The Eight Pages (2012) and Ammonite Design Studios Ltd.’s Slender-Man (2012). In addition, Marble Hornets has recently been adapted for film by Mosaic Media Group (McNary n. pag.). While my focus is on the grassroots productions of folk horror, it is worth noting that such works occupy spaces in which, as per Jenkins’s description, the efforts of everyday users and those of industry professionals intersect.

Given the Slender Man legend’s proliferation across multiple mediums, one might be tempted to describe it as an example of transmedia storytelling, and to include Marble

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19 I was unable to definitively locate the actual name of the author of this blog.

20 Interestingly, users of these sites openly celebrate the Slender Man and Marble Hornets as works of fiction while at the same time passionately participating in discussions of whether or not they might be real.

21 Please note that this is not an exhaustive list. For example, Troy Wagner, Joseph DeLage, and Tim Sutton recently participated in writing for the computer game, Slender: The Arrival (Parsec Productions 2013). The game is a sequel to Slender: The Eight Pages. In an interview with Marianne Miller of GamerFront, DeLage revealed that after playing Slender: The Eight Pages, he contacted its creator, Mark Hadley, via Twitter; as Hadley was a fan of Marble Hornets, he invited DeLage, Wagner, and Sutton to contribute.

22 According to Wagner, this film has already been shot and is set for release in 2014 (“So About the Movie” n. pag.).
Hornets as but one instalment in the vast story world that has developed around the Slender Man; however, there are important differences that would contradict this line of thought. According to Jenkins, a “transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole” (95-6). Transmedia texts are guided by the rule that “[e]ach franchise entry needs to be self-contained so you don’t need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice versa” (96). Jenkins’s primary example to illustrate transmedia storytelling is The Matrix (Andy and Lana Wachowski 1999) franchise, which includes three live action films, one anthology of short animated films, two video games, and a handful of comics (101). In contrast, the Slender Man “franchise” was not “conceived in transmedia terms from the start,” which is an important ingredient in the recipe for transmedia success that was articulated by Electronic Arts’ vice-president of intellectual property development, Danny Bilson, back in 2003 (Jenkins 105). Jenkins expands on Bilson’s comment, highlighting transmedia storytelling as a synergistic process that involves the collaboration—overseen by a “single creator or creative unit” (106)—of several artists, all working in their area of expertise: game developers would create games, filmmakers would create films, and so on. An important component articulated in both Bilson’s and Jenkins’s ideas about transmedia is the level of intention that guides transmedia storytelling, one that is not present in the myriad, often contradictory, Slender Man stories, which are mainly produced by a diverse group of people.
working independently of one another as opposed to co-operating to achieve a single creative goal.  

Considering the Slender Man’s great popularity both online and offline (it appears that the Slender Man is now attending conventions as well as haunting the Internet), one might be tempted to describe folk horror pieces featuring the lanky creature as akin to the fan productions described by such scholars as Jenkins and Janet Staiger, whose research presents “fans as not only consumers but also producers of culture, marking them out from just the general audience” (Staiger 102). While such fans certainly exist, there is something else occurring with regard to Slender Man legendry that cannot be described as transmedia or fan fiction; this relates to Kirby’s and Jenkins’s above-noted ideas about the new, increasingly active consumer. Marble Hornets is not just a one-time video made by a couple of fans riffing off of a corporate creation; it is a long-running series that emerged from the excited discourse of like-minded forum-goers who, inspired by Surge’s photographs, shared their own unique takes on the otherworldly creature depicted within. The creation of the Slender Man, and the folk horror series that have resulted from his birth, are not exactly transmedia storytelling, nor are they fan fiction. They are rather examples of a creative process specific

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23 That said, it is worth noting that many followers of the Slender Man legendry do communicate with one another, and, as was the case on the “Create Paranormal Images” thread, users hold onto popular ideas, recycling them in their own stories. Such a process could perhaps be understood as a loose, chaotic form of collaboration, in which the most popular, recyclable ideas start to stand out, and create general guidelines for the story world in which the Slender Man exists.

24 I personally saw someone dressed in costume as the Slender Man at Fan Expo Vancouver 2013 (April 20 - 21, 2013), but there are also a multitude of other examples available via the Google image search, “Slender Man cosplay.”

25 Another notable indicator of the Slender Man’s popularity, as observed by my supervisor Lisa Coulthard, is that he has moved into the realm of parody. Examples include the game Slenderpants (Digital Missile 2013 [also known as SpongeBob Slenderpants]), which is a play on the popular children’s cartoon, SpongeBob SquarePants (Stephen Hillenburg 1999 - ), and comedic YouTube videos such as “Slender Man vs Jeff the Killer - Epic Rap Battle Parodies Season 2” (Justin Buckner and Nathan Provost 2013).
to the loosely collaborative context facilitated by Internet forums: a context that allows for
individuals to share their distinct ideas and also join in co-operative efforts with other users
should they so desire, all the while maintaining distinct boundaries between the two. A basic
example of this is the format of public commenting, whereby a user can employ the
comment boxes that are popular to most websites to produce a single comment, or quote and
respond to other users, with all of this viewable by the entire community. Such a context
allows users to adopt a more free-form, spontaneous creative style than the intensive and
intentional collaborative work that ideally goes into a transmedia product, or the restrictive
environment of corporate created stories whose fans must “operate within the constraints of a
particular textual world” (Staiger 102).

The communal behaviour described above is essential to folk horror, in which the
everyday person as creator and contributor is of the utmost importance. These roles are
facilitated by folk horror’s digital context, which promotes user participation. Its open access
fells the wall that exists in a more conventional reception context, in which viewers sit
quietly in a theatre and watch a corporate creation, and then return home and engage in
conversations about it over coffee (or some other beverage or treat of choice), or perhaps
online, with such involvement possibly increasing to writing reviews or fan fiction, or
creating video mashups.26 Folk horror offers audiences the opportunity to directly participate
in the story world by becoming insiders in the online community that produces such stories.
Notably, becoming an insider still requires a level of skill—for example, becoming part of a
forum community necessitates learning the vocabulary, among other things—but it is

26 Online usage exhibits multiple applications for the term “mashup,” but the common thread is that works
referred to as mashups combine content from various works into a single piece of work, generally with a
particular message to impart.
relatively effortless compared with the work that would be involved for those same people to become insiders in the professional film industry: a difficult task even for professionally trained filmmakers.

Examining folk horror on a microscopic level through *Marble Hornets* and the Slender Man legendry is just one of many entry points into not only folk horror, but also the broader developments of contemporary digital storytelling. With digitization becoming increasingly popular amongst both consumers and producers, it is imperative that we continue to examine the effects that technology has on our culture. Importantly, we need to question whether our technological advancements are also advancing us as creative and compassionate beings. Despite its frightening contents, folk horror represents an uplifting trend in online behaviour that counters the common argument that the Internet is making us unfriendly and unintelligent; the ways in which it combines horror and folklore might be distinct, but the general behaviour of its populace can be witnessed in countless online communities (i.e. not just those pertaining to folk horror). I do not argue for an unquestioning embrace of the Internet as a creative utopia; I fully acknowledge its many pitfalls, but I also recognize that digital technology, and by extension, the Internet, are not going anywhere—if anything, with time they will only become more embedded in our everyday lives. If, as Marshall McLuhan popularly argued decades ago, the medium is the message, we must keep working to understand these new mediums lest we miss the message.
Ch. 2: Digital Folklore

As Bertrand Russell once said, “The only thing that will redeem mankind is cooperation.”

- *Shaun of the Dead* (Edgar Wright 2004)

Traditionally folklore has involved the study of the past via those ancient anecdotes transmitted orally from generation to generation. As folklorist Richard Dorson argues, however, it is possible to view folk studies in a contemporary light: while traditional methods of studying folklore focused on “antiquities and ‘primitive’ country folk” (Dorson 46), contemporary folklorists are widening their scope to include members of the “unofficial culture,” which Dorson defines in contrast to “the high, the visible, the institutional culture of church, state, the universities, the professions, the corporations, the fine arts, the sciences” (46). In Dorson’s updated understanding of the term, “folk” represents everyday people who adhere to some form of tradition, regardless of whether that tradition relates to their occupations, living spaces, prejudices, or any other number of variables. Such a revision creates space for a broader understanding of folk that allows us to consider the ways in which folk communities are influenced by the idiosyncrasies of our present age, in which digital technology occupies a key position in the collective consciousness of a society that both fears and embraces it.¹

In this chapter I will examine how folklore operates in an online context. Forming my case study is the community of Internet users that has developed around a creature called the

¹ For example, a popular topic amongst cultural commentators over the past several years is whether the Internet is making people antisocial and unintelligent; conversely, the Internet is lauded for its abilities to connect loved ones across oceans and to expose society’s ills so that they might be rectified.
Slender Man, whose birth can be traced to a discussion thread titled “Create Paranormal Images,” on the pop culture website *Something Awful*. The purpose of the thread was to encourage forum-goers to fabricate realistic paranormal images using digital editing software such as Adobe Photoshop. In an interview with *Know Your Meme*, the Slender Man’s creator, whose user name at *Something Awful* is Victor Surge, described the creature’s evolution as akin to an “Internet urban legend” (n. pag.); in the following pages I will examine it as such with a view to considering what an “Internet urban legend” looks like.\(^2\) The bulk of my study will contemplate the ways in which *Marble Hornets* participates in the Slender Man legendry, adopting its themes and motifs to produce a folktale for the digital age. In line with the folkloric context that inspired it, *Marble Hornets* adopts a narrative form that can be compared with a folktale, and combines it with the rhetoric of truth that folklorist Elliott Oring aligns with legendry.\(^3\)

The creators of *Marble Hornets*, Troy Wagner and Joseph DeLage, as well as the other forum-goers who codeveloped the Slender Man lore upon which *Marble Hornets* is based, belong to a folk community that operates within a specific tradition of online storytelling—one that breeds digitally savvy members practiced in simulating the physical world that exists beyond their computer screens. Many other websites are also governed by

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2 In my future work I wish to perform an in-depth comparison of the Internet legendry around the Slender Man and similar legendry that has been related in more traditional, oral modes of storytelling.

3 By associating legendry with a rhetoric of truth I am referencing an article written by Elliott Oring on the topic, which is discussed in more detail in the first chapter of this study.
such a tradition: for example, Creepypasta⁴ features a number of user-submitted legends, some of which involve the Slender Man, and another site called The SCP Foundation, whose motto is “To Secure, Contain, and Protect,” appears to be a database of weird occurrences (often involving otherworldly organisms) that are scientifically researched and documented in an Area 51-like research centre. On each of the aforementioned sites, contributors follow a specific format of storytelling that employs a rhetoric of truth to emphasize immediacy, actuality, and an unmediated connection between the tale, the teller, and the audience. Indeed, most often such stories are shared as though the narrator experienced them first-hand.

Acting in character as Marble Hornets’ protagonist J, Wagner observed a rhetoric of truth while posting the following tale to the Something Awful thread on June 18, 2009. An edited transcription of J’s story is included in the introduction to this study, and provided in full in Appendix A, but I will briefly summarize it below for those readers who desire a reminder. The story begins “About two or three years ago” (Wagner), when J helped his classmate Alex (Joseph DeLage) with a student film called Marble Hornets. Two months into the shoot, Alex began behaving strangely and then abruptly dropped the project. Concerned for his classmate, J visited Alex at his home with the hope of finding some answers, but all that he was able to get from Alex was the raw footage (bags of videotapes) from their project, which Alex warned him must never be shown to anyone else. In his post J

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⁴ Notably, Creepypasta.com has a separate page dedicated to Slender Man stories. According to Know Your Meme, the word “creepypasta” is a subgenre of “copypasta,” which describes “any block of text that gets copied and pasted over and over again, typically disseminated by individuals through online discussion forums and social networking sites” (n. pag.). Creepypasta “consists of short horror fictions and urban legends mainly distributed through word of mouth via online message boards or email” (Know Your Meme n. pag.). At the time of writing it appears that creepypastas have received limited attention from academia, but I expect that this will become an increasingly popular topic of study, particularly amongst those studying literature and folklore.
notes that shortly after their visit, Alex left town. J then goes on to tell his fellow forum-goers that he had forgotten about the videotapes for some time, but that “reading about the slender man has peaked [his] interest again” (14). He ends his post by saying that he will watch the tapes and upload anything of interest to YouTube. On June 20, 2009, Wagner, again posing as J, uploaded a video titled “Introduction” to YouTube, and posted a link in the paranormal images thread.

Much as the initial Slender Man photos did before it, Marble Hornets quickly became the primary recipient of the forum-goers’ attention soon after it appeared in the thread; in fact, by August 31, 2009 (“Entry #12”), forum-goers were posting links to the new Marble Hornets episodes even before Wagner managed to do so. Something Awful and YouTube are both open to the public; however, as its name suggests, Something Awful caters to a more niche audience than does YouTube. Rather than accusing Wagner of “selling out” by moving the Slender Man outside of Something Awful and onto a larger public platform (YouTube), many of his fellow forum-goers took great interest in each episode—a following that spilled over onto other niche websites such as Slender Nation and Unfiction.

Wagner and DeLage managed to retain their niche following while also building a more public, popular viewership in two key ways: they ascribed to a rhetoric of truth and

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5 Please note that the cited page number refers to a page within the discussion thread on the Something Awful forum.

6 The Slender Nation is an encyclopedic website devoted to everything Slender Man, including discussion forums, podcasts, and a wiki (a database created through collaboration by a community of users). Unfiction is an alternate reality gaming site that hosts a number of active campaigns in which members pool their resources in order to solve the riddles presented. Unfiction’s “History” page describes such behaviour as “beasting,” which “wouldn’t be possible without the community-building and networking power of the Internet,” without which “it would be nearly impossible for the diverse audience to coordinate the sheer amount of data, speculation, and solutions among players” (n. pag.). This echoes Henry Jenkins’s discussion of “collective intelligence,” a phrase coined by Pierre Lévy that Jenkins employs to describe “a collective process” by which individual consumers make meaning around the products of popular culture: “none of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills” (Convergence Culture 3-4).
exhibited a digital savviness that allowed them to stay true to the traditions of their folk community at *Something Awful* while also infusing their work with a level of (albeit contrived) authenticity that appealed to a broader audience of *YouTube* users. Their continued popularity across several sites mimics a trend of transnationalism that one can witness on online forums, in which people from all over the world are able to interact as long as they have a computer, an Internet connection, and the ability to speak the same language as the rest of the forum-goers (or translate what they write and read). A sort of transnationalism extends to the way in which the forum operates as a community in that its members are not limited to a single physical locale. Instead of being part of a community by default due to their location (as are those who occupy the small villages described by folklorists working in the field, for example), the members of the communities discussed herein are included based on their behaviour and interests.

A behavioural element key to the Slender Man stories, for instance, is the aforementioned regard for a rhetoric of truth. While the paranormal images thread posts are clearly not the oral forms of storytelling conventional to folklore, the way in which they are written simulates the immediacy of verbal storytelling. Of course, framed stories such as folktales and myths—for example, the practiced verses of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*—would be rehearsed for performance, but legends, as Oring notes, have more veracity when they feel unrehearsed and immediate (15). In the case of the majority of the Slender Man stories on the paranormal

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7 In saying this I recognize that I am omitting a large population of the world that cannot afford a computer nor an Internet connection; however the members of the community discussed in this paper necessarily have these things.

8 While many scholars have made similar observations about the dynamics of communication within online communities, Beth Coleman’s first-hand account of her experiences in virtual online worlds in her book, *Hello Avatar*, is particularly insightful.
images thread, the writing feels rushed and is full of grammatical errors and/or typos, as if the authors are inventing the stories as they type in the allotted forum comment box and then quickly submitting them. Indeed, many of the thread posts reflect a sense of immediacy that aligns the language of the authors more with speech than with the (ideally) more carefully crafted, published written word; it must be noted, however, that the forum- and Internet-specific slang, abbreviations, and emoticons punctuating the stories render them similarly incompatible with the spoken word. In a sense, the Slender Man stories are told in the specific, vernacular language of the forum-goers that could be likened to a dialect of the English language—a dialect local to the Something Awful community of which they are a part.

The vernacular language in which the Slender Man tales are told is translated to film—or rather, videotapes and hard drives—by the cinematic style of Marble Hornets. In his book titled La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film, Mikel J. Koven argues that vernacular cinema is much like the oral tradition of storytelling in which folktales are rooted. While there are certainly some differences between the gialli that Koven discusses and Marble Hornets, their similarities are worth noting in order to illustrate the way in which the vernacular works to attract audiences, particularly those on YouTube. Both rely on familiar spaces, “immediately experienced, and . . . recognizable sensations,” and a formulaic structure (36-7): familiarity is key. Koven notes that the audience must recognize the filmic world as their own, and “[t]he characters have to act like people the audience is familiar with—either in ‘real life’ or from previous encounters with those character types in other films” (39-40). Situated in small towns, suburban homes, long highways, and
expansive parks and their adjoining forests, *Marble Hornets* occupies locations that most viewers will find familiar, whether they occupy those spaces or are merely accustomed to seeing them in films or television shows. The familiar locations are complemented by the familiar sensations of curiosity, anxiety, fear, and the desire to make sense of a confusing situation, with which most people can sympathize. All of the show’s characters are awkward in front of the camera, have imperfect speech and communications, and make mistakes—these are everyday people, not professional actors reciting Shakespeare, or even the rehearsed inelegant dialogue of Woody Allen. Through such elements Wagner and DeLage construct in *Marble Hornets* a universe with which viewers can identify.

The series’ identifiability is further strengthened through its incorporation of themes that are relevant to the world that the viewers occupy. Both the Slender Man legendry and *Marble Hornets* examine themes that relate to the digital context that birthed them. Conventions of folkloric prose narratives such as legends and folktales are employed in order to contemplate a present that is overcrowded with spectres of the past and future. The traditional folkloric narrative forms that such stories employ serve to emphasize the non-traditional nature of their context, reflecting the old-new clash that creates a tension in our current age.

*Marble Hornets* blends tradition and invention in a way that speaks to contemporary audiences. The series combines traditional folktale conventions with cinematic traditions of cinéma direct and found footage horror, and presents them in a digital format. Despite its existence in the contemporary world, digital technology is still often associated with the future. For example, the computer features strongly in many films and televisions hows set
in the future, particularly science-fiction ones such as *The Matrix* (Andy and Lana Wachowski 1999), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick 1968), *Star Trek* (Gene Roddenberry 1966-1969), and *The Jetsons* (Hana-Barbera Productions 1962-1988). By combining traditional folktale conventions with contemporary filmmaking techniques and a futuristic digital context, *Marble Hornets* encompasses the past, present, and future not only in content but in its structure and context as well. Table 1 (below) outlines some of the key ideas explored by *Marble Hornets* that express modern tensions between the past, present, and future. The present is represented by the human protagonists of the series, including J and several other classmates who participated in Alex’s project, while the past and future are embodied by the Slender Man, who is cloaked in mystery and often described as timeless in the stories that appear on the paranormal images thread.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slender Man</th>
<th>Human protagonists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The woods/outskirts of civilization</td>
<td>Civilization—city, towns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No discernible language</td>
<td>Language, speech, text/writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypnotism/mind control</td>
<td>Lack of ability to control/recall actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telepathic communications</td>
<td>Cellular phones, <em>YouTube</em> videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inability to clearly capture on video</td>
<td>Clearly captured on video</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1

Elements of Past, Present, and Future as Represented by the Characters of *Marble Hornets*
Many of the words listed in the Slender Man column of table 1 articulate a sense of wrongness: of form, of mind, of time, and of space. This wrongness is directly articulated by the *Something Awful* forum-goers, who use the term “wrong” repeatedly in relation to the Slender Man’s appearance: he is humanoid, but exceedingly tall, with abnormally long arms and legs that are complemented by several tentacles protruding from his back; he is pale and lacks clear facial features, although he is sometimes given white orbs for eyes and an eerie, inhuman sneer. In addition, the Slender Man appears to wear a black suit and a tie, which some have described as not actually a suit, but an adaptable skin. Forum-goers note that although the Slender Man may appear human from a distance, even then witnesses will viscerally feel his wrongness. The vagueness of the word, “wrong,” reflects yet another one
of the creature’s key attributes as repeatedly identified by forum-goers: “He is what our minds do not want to conceive. We cannot conceive of him, or truly perceive him, but he delights in showing us the very limit of what we can handle. Enough to horrify us” (Chaos Hippy 16).

The theme of unknowability not only underlies most Slender Man tales, but also much of *Marble Hornets*, whose characters are on some level unknowable even to themselves due to their constant struggles with memory loss. All of this reflects an anxiety about the present that, though not unique to our era, is in its nuances distinct from the disquietudes of those that came before: the past and the future coexist uneasily in a present that, much like the characters of *Marble Hornets*, struggles to understand itself and its place in time. In this digital age a “convergence culture” (to borrow a term from Jenkins) has developed in which the myriad opportunities available to us to create and participate are simultaneously exciting and overwhelming; just as a song played too loudly can decrease one’s listening pleasure, so too can the volume of information, with which the average Internet user is faced on a daily basis, become a source of confusion and anxiety rather than inspiration. In other words, many of us might feel restrained by the vastness of our own freedom. By employing the conventions of traditional folktales and the found footage format that references the cinéma direct mode of documentary, Wagner and DeLage look to a less complicated past in order to navigate a dubious present and future—a process that Gillian Helfield describes as “continuity through tradition” (25).

In her essay on Québécois cinéma direct, Helfield argues that cinéma direct filmmakers in Quebec employed the following folktale conventions in their work to
reformulate and strengthen their national identity in the face of a rocky present and uncertain future in the 1950s and ‘60s: “contextualization; the presence of a conteur, either in the form of an onscreen character or folk performer who narrates the action as well as provides eyewitness authentication of the event; and the use of certain narrative devices and structuring patterns, such as cycles” (20). Contextualization “is one method that makes the folktales and films more accessible: the more they are contextualized to a local, recognizable milieu, the more seemingly authentic their representations of surrounding social reality become” (Helfield 20). Helfield focuses on recognizable, specific landmarks as a key element of contextualization, but, in line with Koven, I would argue that this need not be the case: it is enough to provide the viewer with settings that feel familiar, that could be anywhere and that feel like home to many.

As a Web series that is freely open to the public on YouTube, *Marble Hornets* appropriately situates itself in a world that feels familiar to many audiences, regardless of whether they have physically visited such spaces, or know them only from the universe of television and film. Much of *Marble Hornets* takes place in the woods, parks, abandoned buildings, and along lengthy strips of highway. When the settings comprise the characters’ homes or hotel rooms, the rooms are devoid of distinguishing features: for example, both J’s and Alex’s bedrooms lack posters, figurines, trophies, clothing etc.—anything that would reveal something distinct about their personalities. The dearth of identifying features also emphasizes the ephemerality of their surroundings, as they must constantly change locations in their attempts to elude (often unsuccessfully) the various malignant forces that pursue them.
The conteur, or storyteller, is an equally significant element of contextualization: “he or she is the narrator who simultaneously describes the action, acts out the roles of the characters, and imparts the tale’s subtextual ideological message(s) as well as participating in the event being retold” (Helfield 20). Helfield argues that the storyteller’s participation is important because it places him (or her) in the position of an eyewitness, a member of the everyday people, or the folk, who is able to attest to the event’s authenticity: that the story comes from “one of us,” as opposed to, for example, a member of the establishment, renders it all the more believable. In Marble Hornets, J’s combined roles of participant and storyteller are expressed through the first-person point of view cinematography that constitutes most of his entries, echoing Helfield’s claim that cinéma direct’s aesthetic conventions, including

the mobile camera, movement within the frame and between frames … function in a way similar to the storytelling devices of the conteur—the gestures, colloquialisms, and intonations—which place the viewer/listener at the scene, while at the same time capturing a sense of its immediate social reality. (22)

Within the diegesis of Marble Hornets, when J is not behind the camera, he is still operating as a storyteller through compiling, editing, and commenting upon the footage he finds—effectively shaping it into a narrative. Other characters whose points of view are expressed through the camera lens include Alex, a classmate named Tim (Tim Sutton) who acted in Alex’s student film, and a mysterious hooded figure that followers of the series refer to as “Hoodie.” Regardless of which character is wielding the camera at any given time in Marble Hornets, J remains the series’ primary storyteller through his role as collector, editor, and exhibitor of the videos that he uploads to the Marble Hornets YouTube account: mirroring Wagner’s actual role as the series’ creator, within the diegesis, J is the one who decides what
to include in each entry, and his comments point to the chronology in which the entries should be viewed—which, notably, is rarely in the order that he has posted them (for example, the events of “Entry #71” occur long before those of “Entry #15” chronologically).

Although J’s entries do not depict events chronologically, from their progress one can discern a cycle of questioning/seeking, attack, and escape. In her description of French-Canadian folktales, Helfield emphasizes repetition, cycles, and the journey motif as important structural elements (22). In *Marble Hornets*, the story of J uploading videos to *YouTube* is linear, but the events depicted in the uploaded videos, including J’s own quest, are not. For example, after “Entry #26” J begins experiencing memory loss, blacking out over large chunks of time that span anywhere from a few days to several months; the only way he can recall his previous actions is by watching videos of them. In this way the videos, and by extension the camera and the act of recording, function as a surrogate, electronic memory for J’s faulty physical one. From the conflicting chronology two concurrent narratives emerge: a framing one in which J is working his way through the videos and posting them online, acting as a detective and trying to solve the mystery behind Alex’s abrupt change in behaviour, and another, told exclusively by the videos, in which J is a participant in a dangerous mystery that also involves Alex and several other characters.

As *Marble Hornets*’ narrative progresses, new evidence reveals the evolution of the series’ many multifaceted characters: Alex transforms from victim to confidant to villain; Tim’s state remains in flux as he suffers from an illness that changes him from a relatively easy-going, friendly person into a masked bandit on a violent rampage (whom fans call “Masky”); and although J remains the most consistent, he often lies and steals in his attempts
to make sense of the mystery developing around him, and his struggles with memory loss suggest that the viewer cannot fully trust his narration. All of that taken into consideration, the primary narrative cycle of *Marble Hornets*, in which J is the hero, is as follows: J finds a clue, follows it to a location/person, is attacked/threatened but narrowly escapes (often with the consequence that he has lost his memory), edits and uploads a video of his experiences and/or thoughts to *YouTube*, and details his next steps (also on *YouTube*), which he has planned due to more recently discovered clues. Variations on this cycle follow:

1. J encounters a clue, follows it to a location/person, feels like he is being followed/threatened but is not actually attacked/threatened, meets another clue, and returns home (or to whatever temporary location he is occupying) to make sense of it;

2. J encounters a clue, follows it to a location/person, is attacked/threatened in some way but narrowly escapes. Frustrated and frightened, J vows to permanently end his quest as the risks taken are not worth the potential knowledge to be gained by solving the mystery.

Such cycles repeat themselves at least every few entries, and in many entries the full cycle occurs from beginning to end.

As the narratives flow through the aforementioned cycles, a journey motif unfolds that parallels the narrative structure set out by Vladimir Propp in his 1928 book, *Morphology of the Folktale.*⁹ In an article titled “ApPropriations and ImPropprieties: Problems in the

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⁹ In his preface to the second edition of Propp’s book, Louis A. Wagner notes that contrary to the popular English translation, the correct translation of the book’s title is actually *Morphology of the Fairy Tale*—not folktale. David Bordwell also makes this observation in his article on the application of Propp’s analysis to films. In his introduction to the second edition, however, folklorist Alan Dundes acknowledges the mistranslation but then defines the fairy tale as a subgenre of folktale. In addition, he describes Propp’s project as being focused primarily upon Aarne-Thompson folktale types, and goes on to discuss other folktale types to which Propp’s analysis might be applied. I recognize that, as per Bascom’s aforementioned warning, folktales and fairy tales are not one and the same; however, given that the terms seem to mean different things to so many scholars, I have decided to limit my usage to the former for simplicity’s sake, as my thesis does not rely upon a distinction between the two. My aim is merely to show that *Marble Hornets* adopts a folkloric narrative structure.
Morphology of Film Narrative,” David Bordwell argues against the universal application of Propp’s structural analysis of the folktale. While Bordwell provides many compelling reasons to refrain from employing such a methodology, I have chosen to maintain my comparison as my key purpose in paralleling Propp’s findings with the structure of *Marble Hornets* is to show that the series, whether intentionally or unintentionally, is structured like a traditional folk narrative. In the aforementioned article Bordwell asks a question that my reader might also ask of me: “Why should we prefer Propp’s descriptions to others?” (11) I have chosen to employ Propp’s analysis because, despite Bordwell’s argument that film scholars should respect the self-stated “domain specificity” (Bordwell 12) of Propp’s study, “[m]any, if not all, of the tales are Aarne-Thompson tale types and thus Propp’s analysis is clearly not limited to Russian materials” (Dundes xiii). In his introduction to the second revised edition of Propp’s *Morphology*, folklorist Alan Dundes observes that Propp’s analysis is not limited to European tales, as “[a]ttempts to study African tales (Paulme) and American Indian tales (Dundes 1946b) suggest that parts of Propp’s *Morphology* may be cross-culturally valid” (xiv). Furthermore, Dundes suggests that Propp’s work might also be fruitfully applied to other cultural products such as “literary forms (novels and plays), comic strips, motion-picture and television plots, and the like” (xiv). Both Bordwell and Dundes make compelling points, but given Dundes’s more in-depth experience with the study of folklore, I am encouraged by his claims that Propp’s *Morphology* can be applied to a broader geographical range of folktales than merely Russian ones. As Propp’s analysis is applicable to a broad range of folktales, I find it to be an appropriate choice to illustrate the ways in which *Marble Hornets* adopts the structural components of a traditional folktale.
Dundes notes many positive results of Propp’s study, but identifies a key problem with it as well: “The problem is that Propp made no attempt to relate his extraordinary morphology to Russian (or Indo-European) culture as a whole” (“Introduction” xii). Dundes continues, “the form must ultimately be related to the culture or cultures in which it is found. In this sense, Propp’s study is only a first step, albeit a giant one” (xiii). Propp’s criticism is echoed in Koven’s warning against “motif spotting,” which he defines as “folklore scholarship [that] has explored those traditional narrative types and motifs when they appear in popular film and television” (Film, Folklore 3). What he writes a few pages later, quoting Bruce Jackson, clarifies his criticism as being more so against plucking certain themes and motifs “out of context otherwise lacking folkloric moment” (qtd. in Koven 9). I have sought to avoid motif spotting in this paper by situating my observations within their folkloric context. In his article “Four Functions of Folklore,” William Bascom emphasizes the importance of documenting context along with texts in folklore research. Quoting Bronislaw Malinowski, he writes, “The stories live in native life and not on paper, and when a scholar jots them down without being able to evoke the atmosphere in which they flourish he has given us but a mutilated bit of reality” (qtd. in Bascom 335). Throughout my study I have worked to provide a context along with my textual analysis to illustrate the ways in which the storytellers of folk horror are employing common folkloric motifs, themes, and structures to tell their stories, and thus can be considered as folk based on both their communal context as well as their storytelling techniques and structures.

To analyze *Marble Hornets* with the same depth that Propp allotted to his folktales would require another lengthy essay in itself, so I will limit myself to some of the more
pertinent details. Propp outlines manifold structural components of the folktale. After an “initial situation,” which he briefly explains could be any number of scenarios, the structural components of the folktale adhere to the following order: “absentation,” in which a member “of the family absents himself from home” (26); “interdiction,” in which the hero is forbidden from doing something (26-7); “violation,” in which “the interdiction is violated” (27-8); “reconnaissance,” in which “the villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance,” or conversely, “the intended victim questions the villain” (28); “trickery,” in which “the villain attempts to deceive his victim” (29); “complicity,” in which the victim is deceived “and thereby unwittingly helps his enemy” (30); “villainy,” in which “the villain causes harm or injury to a member of the family” (30); “mediation,” “counteraction,” and “departures,” in which the hero is brought into the tale and subsequently departs from home (36-9); the “hero is tested, interrogated or attacked,” and then receives “either a magical agent or helper,” to which he reacts either positively or negatively (39-42); “the hero acquires the use of a magical agent” (43-4); the hero switches locations (50); and “the hero and the villain join in direct combat” in the stage Propp dubs “struggle” (51). According to Propp’s model, combat is followed by victory, in which “the villain is defeated,” but thus far in *Marble Hornets* (the series is ongoing at the time of writing), the many combative encounters only result in temporary escape—never defeat.

Wagner and DeLage may not have purposely structured it like a folktale, but *Marble Hornets* follows a trajectory that is strikingly similar to the one outlined by Propp. The initial situation is that a group of film students are working on a project called *Marble Hornets* when their director, Alex, abruptly drops out (“absentation”). J visits Alex a few months
afterward and asks for the raw footage. Alex gives J the footage (bags of videotapes) but makes him promise that he will never show the tapes to anyone else (“interdiction”). After holding onto the tapes for some time, J begins posting them to YouTube (“violation”). J watches the tapes and begins questioning what happened to Alex, subsequently drawing the attention of several beings: Masky, Hoodie, the Slender Man, and Alex (“reconnaissance”). As J becomes more deeply involved in the unfolding mystery, he receives conflicting information and messages from various sources, including Alex and YouTube user totheark, an unidentified person who periodically posts cryptic videos in response to J’s entries.10 When J discovers that Alex is alive and (at least physically) well, he believes it when Alex tells him he is in trouble, and for a short time the two join forces (“trickery” and “complicity”). In the “trickery” stage, Marble Hornets complicates the structure laid out by Propp by installing several villainous characters and several victims of trickery: Alex may be tricking J, but it is unclear whether or not Alex is under the Slender Man’s control, and the same goes for Tim. Because of the lack of clarity over who is “bad” and who is “good,” and who is controlling whom, “villainy” is also a complicated stage in Marble Hornets, although it seems clear that the Slender Man is the primary villain, who uses his persuasive powers to control the other characters. Near the start of his investigation, J visits a cluttered, abandoned house in which Alex and another schoolmate, Brian, had reportedly lived before they disappeared. After several frightening run-ins with Masky and the Slender Man, J feels unsafe and leaves home in search of somewhere more secure (“departures”).

10 It is worth noting that the format of totheark’s videos closely resembles the cursed video that features in the film Ring (Hideo Nakata 1998). In the film it is suggested that the villain Sadako (Rie Ino’o) imprinted her curse onto a videotape through a method comparable to telepathy. The similarities suggest that totheark’s videos could also be from something non-human or superhuman, with the ability to transfer images telepathically to video.
Throughout his journey J collects many items that fit Propp’s description of “magical agents,” but the most notable one is the camera that he begins using regularly after his first visit to Alex and Brian’s abandoned home. In “Entry #19,” J notes that just as Alex did before him, he has begun recording himself at all times. “Entry #9” depicts Alex becoming irrationally agitated upon discovering that the cameraman has stopped rolling for a few minutes between takes while shooting a scene for Alex’s student film. That, combined with other videos in which Alex films himself going about the mundane activities of everyday life (talking on the phone, packing boxes, working on his computer, sleeping), suggests that Alex felt something bad would happen if he were to stop filming. Exactly what that bad thing would be remains unclear: the Slender Man often appears on camera, but his presence is always accompanied by severe audiovisual distortions. Perhaps the camera prevents him from killing, or, if killing has never been his intent, perhaps the camera’s usefulness as a magical agent is that it provides a surrogate memory for the broken, memoryless minds of the Slender Man’s victims (i.e. all of the characters of Marble Hornets); the audiovisual defects might represent the Slender Man’s unsuccessful attempts at erasing the camera’s “mind” as well.

The “struggle” stage of Marble Hornet’s journey narrative is complicated by the existence of various villains, but it can be simplified if we consider that they are all acting under the control of the Slender Man. Because J (and other characters, for that matter) has had several run-ins with the Slender Man, the struggle stage is often repeated, and will presumably continue to repeat until the series reaches its conclusion, which, as the building
narrative tension suggests, will likely involve a large “final showdown” with the Slender Man.

Beyond following the basic journey narrative outlined above, *Marble Hornets* is structured largely by its motifs, which, to use the metaphor of a puzzle, act as the edge pieces that tie the whole thing together. Although the videos are all of differing lengths and contents, they are linked together through several motifs, including the theme of memory loss; mental and physical illness; masks/hidden identities; pill bottles; surveillance; hand-held cameras; audiovisual distortion; drawings of a circle with an “x” through it; dark, claustrophobic spaces such as basements and tunnels; dilapidated buildings; and forests. These motifs reinforce the cyclical nature of the narrative itself, occurring at intervals that force the viewer (and J) to constantly reconsider the “facts” that have come before. Memory loss is a notable motif that complicates the story of *Marble Hornets* by rendering everyone in the series unreliable—even our hero/narrator, J. For example, entries 27 to 33 depict J trying to solve a mystery that we discover in “Entry #52” to be the result of his own forgotten actions. Chronologically, “Entry #27” depicts the morning after the events from “Entry #52”: J awakens in a hotel room and tells the viewer that the last seven months are a complete mystery to him; he doesn’t even know where he is. “Entry #52” shows J and a girl named Jessica (Jessica May) narrowly escaping being shot by Alex, who has brought them to an old rundown industrial building in a park called Rosswood. J and Jessica decide to leave their current locations and meet at a nearby hotel, where they will get some rest and then discuss their next steps. That night, the Slender Man visits them, and the next morning, as depicted in “Entry #27,” neither J nor Jessica remember one another, nor do they recall the events that
brought them to the hotel. Although the puzzle pieces ultimately fall into place and reveal a linear narrative, the motif of memory loss places importance on the viewer’s role of helping J solve the puzzle at hand; it also encourages the viewer to question the information provided by J since he clearly does not have complete control over his own mind. The motif of memory loss weaves into *Marble Hornets*’ journey narrative and cycles of search-and-escape outlined above, enhancing the mystery and conflict of the story itself; on a broader level this directs viewers to consider their own roles and think critically about everything they see.

Helfield argues that by employing “elements of folk ritual” such as those detailed in the preceding pages, the cinéma direct films “function[ed] like folktales” at a time when society was “longing for the comparative simplicity and purity of the past” (13). While definitions of folklore vary, they unite in the idea that folklore, much like visual art, literature, and film, reflects the culture that creates it. According to Helfield, the cinéma direct filmmakers of the ‘50s and ‘60s employed conventions of French-Canadian folktales in order to produce a clear model of their nation during a time in which it was experiencing an identity crisis; *Marble Hornets*, and the Slender Man legendry as a whole, are more focused on the concerns of the modern individual, although these concerns can also be extended to society in general as this is a problem that many individuals share. Instead of providing a model by which we might resolve society’s woes, *Marble Hornets* expresses the anxieties of the digital age: memory loss can be related to the common complaint that “the Internet is making us stupid” by lowering our attention spans and filling us with so much information that we fail to retain more than a shallow knowledge of most things (Carr n. pag.); that J’s video recordings are more capable of remembering events than his own brain
attests to the age-old fear that the machines we have created, over which we believe we have control, will someday control us—a fear that any Facebook or World of Warcraft addict will confirm has already been realized; the lack of close friendships and alliances in the series echoes the “planet man” imagined by Paul Virilio (Sans n. pag.), who sits suspended in space, isolated from all human contact, purposely alienated from friends and family, because everything he needs he (at least believes he) can get online. The cinéma direct filmmakers found hope for their current problems by looking to the past and tradition; with Marble Hornets, Wagner and DeLage take a less optimistic stance, and it is difficult to discern resolutions to the contemporary global issues that reside in its subtext.

Marble Hornets may turn to the past to tell its story, but the past is not significantly better than the present, nor is the future. The series holds a mirror up to a sick society but, as is suggested by the mysterious unmarked pill bottles that J discovers in Alex’s abandoned house, the cure is unclear. If one were to seek wisdom in J’s actions and experiences, it would be to trust no one, including yourself, and to record everything—advice that echoes the ethos of the world depicted in George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949), which, if the recent controversies surrounding the U.S.’s global surveillance practices are any indication, is not too far off. The one positive, not to mention characteristically American, message that pervades Marble Hornets is to never give up. The series is now eighty-four episodes along and J has yet to solve the mystery of Alex’s strange behaviour, but in spite

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11 This is also a fear that has been iterated throughout cinema’s history. Three notable examples include Metropolis (Fritz Lang 1927), The Terminator (James Cameron 1984), and The Matrix.

12 Accessed on November 28, 2013. This number does not coincide with the numbers in the entry titles, as the series features half entries and unnumbered entries as well.
of the aforementioned repetitive cycle that always ends with him narrowly escaping death, J continues to seek answers.

Dorson writes that although folklore belongs to society’s unofficial cultures, it “reflects the mood of its times fully as much as does [that of] the official culture, for both are anchored in the same historical period” (46). To illustrate his point he provides the following examples: the “Religious,” era, which spanned “from the beginning of colonization to the American Revolution,” whose “folklore revolved around the providences of God and the sorceries of the Devil and witches”; and the “Humane” era, which “emerged in 1964, the date of the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley,” whose counterculture “produced a teeming body of traditions featuring pill peddlers and draft dodgers as anti-heroes” (47). Published in 1976, Dorson’s work precedes our current era by four decades, but his mode of matching folklore to the contemporary zeitgeist remains useful. We might consider *Marble Hornets* as a folktale of the Digital era, in which there exists a marked anxiety about the diminishing quality of the human mind and the physical world (i.e. the environment, population overgrowth etc.), counterbalanced by a celebration of the myriad opportunities available to grassroots artists and the ever-expanding possibilities afforded to us by digital technology. This balance is apparent throughout J’s quest, in which his efforts are both thwarted and aided by technology. Although at times the series takes rather dark turns, J’s stubborn perseverance provides a model for the modern day Internet user who might feel similarly stuck in life. The message might be summarized as “stay curious,” which reflects the increasingly active role that many consumers are taking in the cultural products that they both consume and create.
Chapter 3: Digitally Enhanced Horror

“It’s Alive!” - Frankenstein (James Whale 1931)

3.1 Tradition

Marble Hornets (Troy Wagner and Joseph DeLage, 2009 - ) hails from a long tradition of combining documentary aesthetics with the horror genre. In 1922, Benjamin Christensen employed voice-of-god commentary (via intertitles), historical diagrams, and reenactments to recount the history of witchcraft in Häxan. Ten years later, Tod Browning’s Freaks (1932) employed real-life circus “freaks” to tell its story, the spectacle of its stars operating much like a travelling side show for many cinema-goers. In 1962, Paolo Cavara, Gualtiero Jacopetti, and Franco Prosperi presented their film Mondo cane as a document of the world’s many weird and wild wonders. In 1980, Ruggero Deodato’s Cannibal Holocaust drew from the mondo tradition by interspersing actual scenes of animal cruelty with the fictional “found footage” of a group of ill-fated documentarists who unwisely aggravated an Amazonian tribe. The 1992 film Man Bites Dog (Rémy Belvaux, André Bonzel, and Benoît Poelvoorde) similarly presented extreme violence as the found footage of a documentary crew that was murdered while following a charismatic serial killer. In the seven years before The Blair Witch Project1 (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez 1999), a small number of other documentary-style horror films were released,2 but none achieved the same level of

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1 I will refer to The Blair Witch Project as BWP for the rest of this chapter.

2 This includes the made-for-television feature, Ghostwatch (Lesley Manning1992), and the film The Last Broadcast (Stefan Avalos and Lance Weiler 1998).
box-office success; of all the films listed above, *BWP* is most commonly recognized for its role in unlocking the floodgates of the subgenre of horror films that has become popularly known as “found footage.”

If *BWP* unlocked the floodgates, films such as *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli 2007), *Rec* (Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza 2007), and *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves 2008) blasted them open; since then, the flow of found footage horror has been so voluminous that many fans and critics have dismissed new instalments in the subgenre as carelessly constructed rubbish just cashing in on the fad. Although the success of the recently released *V/H/S* (Matt Bettinelli-Olpin et al. 2012) films proves that quality found footage horror is still desirable amongst fans, the general mood around the subgenre, accompanied by a decline in the release of new found footage horror films, suggests that it is a dying trend. The same cannot be said for found footage-style horror on *YouTube*, which continues to flourish via Web series such as *Marble Hornets* and *TribeTwelve* (Adam Rosner 2010 - ), as well as less narratively inclined videos such as those that claim to document real-life sightings of ghosts and other paranormal occurrences.³

It was still near the beginning of the found footage horror boom when University of Alabama film students Troy Wagner and Joseph DeLage began shooting *Marble Hornets*. Since then, they have produced over 100 videos across two accounts (MarbleHornets and totheark), with their latest entry, at the time of writing, posted on November 21, 2013. *Marble Hornets* follows many of the conventions of the found footage horror films that

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³ My focus in this study is specifically on the Slender Man legendry and how it translates to the Web series *Marble Hornets*. As a result I will not spend time discussing other paranormal videos such as those claiming to document strange real-life events, although it is certainly another interesting area of research that I would like to pursue further at a later time.
preceded it: hand-held camerawork; long takes combined with choppy editing and jump cuts; amateur actors; location shooting; and scares derived from atmosphere, sound, and off-screen elements rather than from overt special effects. As I argued in the previous chapter, these conventions describe a vernacular mode of storytelling that aligns *Marble Hornets*, as well as the above-mentioned found footage horror films, with folkloric tradition.

*Marble Hornets* has much in common with found footage horror, but its production, exhibition, and reception are all specific to the online context in which the series is located. Writing on the ways in which digital technology has changed storytelling, Janet Murray describes the computer as “chameleonic. It can be seen as a theater, a town hall, an unraveling book, an animated wonderland, a sports arena, and even a potential life form. But it is first and foremost a representational medium, a means for modeling the world that adds its own potent properties to the traditional media it has assimilated so quickly” (284). In the following pages I will explore the ways in which *Marble Hornets* is distinctly shaped by its online context—one that intensifies the pre-existing conventions of found footage horror that exist within the series. In identifying some of the key characteristics of folk horror as they appear in *Marble Hornets*, I will first discuss found footage horror and then illustrate the ways in which its location within a digital context emphasizes the motifs of control and knowledge that are subsumed under the broader theme of technology that underlies all folk horror. In addition, I will demonstrate that the folk horror audience can be considered an amplified version of the conventionally active horror audience, thereby engaging with discourse surrounding the contemporary “convergence culture” (to borrow a term from Henry Jenkins) that enables such productions as *Marble Hornets*. 
Keeping in mind that “there is no simple, single ‘collective belief’ as to what constitutes the horror genre” (Jancovich 25), I primarily reference the theories of three notable scholars of the genre: Robin Wood, Noël Carroll, and Isabel Pinedo. My goal is not to undertake the difficult and, according to Jancovich, unnecessary task of identifying “a single ‘truth’ of a genre” (23), but rather to provide some observations and speculations about what I believe is an important trend in contemporary horror. I have modelled my approach after those of Carroll and Pinedo by limiting my analyses to three key elements: the monster, the narrative, and the audience.

3.2 The Monster

The monster is often the main attraction of horror films, and it is no different in the case of folk horror. Given the monster’s star status, it seems natural that it is also a key area of focus amongst those who philosophize about horror. In the following theories horror is defined by its monster—more specifically, the type of fear its monster evokes. According to H.P. Lovecraft, in his 1927 essay entitled “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” a “true weird tale” must create a “certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces” (4); the monsters of Lovecraft’s tales, abhorrent “shapes and entities on the known universe’s utmost rim” (4), do just that. While Wood does not explicitly state that the monster’s ability to horrify lies in this attribute, in his 1979 essay, “An Introduction to the American Horror Film,” he argues that the “dual concept [of] the repressed/the Other” is dramatized “in the figure of the Monster” (200-201). Wood illustrates his point with the example of James Whale’s Frankenstein (1931), whose monster, dressed in “labourer’s

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4 Lovecraft’s essay was first published in 1927. He later wrote a revised version for serial publication in a science-fiction fanzine called The Fantasy Fan, but was left incomplete after 17 instalments when the magazine was discontinued (Jones and Carson 449).
“clothes,” is aligned with a cultural other, the proletariat (201). According to Pinedo, writing in 1996, the monster of the postmodern horror film “signifies what Julia Kristeva calls the ‘abject,’ that which does not ‘respect borders, positions, rules’—‘the place where meaning collapses’”; the monster’s threat lies in its violation and dissolution of culturally accepted “binary differences” such as “me/not me, human/nonhuman, life/death” (21-2). Carroll incorporates elements of all the preceding ideas into his imagining of the monster as a supernatural being that “is regarded as threatening and impure” (28). According to Carroll, because the monster must be threatening and impure, fear and disgust are the necessary character—and by extension audience—reactions. The foregoing theories form the context for my own analysis of the monster of Marble Hornets, the Slender Man, a creature that nicely fits the mould for a traditional monster of horror, but that also is distinctly coded to a digital context in which knowledge and control are central motifs.

The Slender Man, who in Marble Hornets is called The Operator, is a monster in the ways mentioned in the preceding paragraph. Tall, tentacled, and driving to madness all those who have the misfortune of encountering him, the Slender Man recalls the hideous abominations of Lovecraft’s dark tales. Echoing the fictional eyewitness reports of Robert Louis Stevenson’s famous id-monster, Mr. Hyde, Something Awful forum-goer geekchic described the Slender Man as “really frightening [her], genuinely tapping into [her] primal ‘wrongness’ sense” (“Create Paranormal Images” 7). In the myriad comments that follow the Slender Man’s first appearance on the “Create Paranormal Images” thread at Something Awful, variations on the word “wrong” are among the leading adjectives employed to

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5 For the majority of this thesis I have referred to The Operator primarily as the Slender Man in order to preserve the continuity of the ideas expressed herein. They are the same being, so this should not present a major issue.
describe him: although the Slender Man has many definable frightening features, his victims are most terrified by the sense of wrongness that he evokes in them. As human as he may appear, the Slender Man, much like Mr. Hyde, blurs the boundaries between cultural binaries of “normal” and “deviant,” “civilized” and “savage,” and “human” and “not-quite-human.” While observers could spot Mr. Hyde’s deformity even at a distance, the Slender Man—tall, upright, and clothed like a wealthy businessman—is less easily identified as “other” at a glance, and this is what makes him truly threatening. Depicted by forum-goers as simultaneously soothing and terrifying, the Slender Man is both Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, man and monster, wrapped into one.

Common descriptions of the Slender Man as lacking discernible facial features suggest that he could be anyone and everyone—a particularly relevant quality given that in this digital age, the person online is virtually faceless, represented only by an avatar that may or may not accurately depict the person behind the screen. Marble Hornets presents the Slender Man as the symptom and/or cause of an illness that, much like the viral video in Hideo Nakata’s Ring [Ringu] (1998), spreads through technology. Within the story world of Marble Hornets and the broader Slender Man legendry, all of us who use technology are susceptible to the illness that results from being stalked by the Slender Man, which has been dubbed “the Sickness” or “Slender sickness” by his followers, and includes coughing fits, memory loss, and violent outbursts.

In Marble Hornets, the Slender Man first appears to Alex (Joseph DeLage) while he is shooting an autobiographical student film, haunting him until Alex quits the project and

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6 Such definitions are provided on The Slender Man Wiki, at theslenderman.wikia.com/wiki/The-Sickness and theslenderman.wikia.com/wiki/Slender_Man.
transfers to an out-of-state university. For whatever reason, Alex allows J (Troy Wagner) to
convince him to hand over the videotapes from the film shoot instead of burning them, and
in the three years that J holds onto the tapes—never watching them—it appears that the
Slender Man remains dormant. When J begins watching the tapes and sharing them on
YouTube, the Slender Man awakens, and a secondary narrative begins in which J becomes
more than just an archivist and exhibitor of Alex’s old videos: he becomes a direct
participant in the mysterious events.

The Slender Man seems to be simultaneously drawn to and repelled by the camera,
which, as I mentioned in my previous chapter, may be described as a magical agent.
Although the nature of its effects on him are unclear, the camera records severe audio and
visual distortions whenever the Slender Man is nearby. In addition, for reasons yet
unrevealed, the characters of Marble Hornets seem to believe that having a camera recording
at all times protects them from the monster, as is suggested by Alex’s sudden, anxious
tantrum when the camera operator stops rolling between shots in “Entry #9.” Such a belief is
also expressed in Alex and J’s insistence on constantly filming themselves, even as they
perform mundane daily activities such as sleeping or browsing the Internet. It is unclear
whether their obsessive filming actually protects Alex and J from the Slender Man; at the
very least, their recordings serve as surrogate memories that they often consult in order to
recall the events leading up to their encounters with the Slender Man, after which they
generally lose consciousness and significant chunks of memory. Recording everything
allows the characters to retain a modicum of control over their chaotic lives.

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7 This is not unlike Bilbo the hobbit’s sword, Sting, in the Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (Peter
Jackson 2001), which glows when in close proximity to orcs.
Alex’s and J’s obsessive need to record everything all the time serves as an allegory for contemporary culture’s dependence on technology. Indeed, common commentary on social sites such as Facebook and Instagram criticizes users for being more invested in documenting their lives, via photographs and status updates, than in living them to their fullest. As articulated by Alan Kirby in his 2006 essay on pseudo-modernism, the contemporary human being—much like J, who cannot remember his past without the help of a videotape—can use technology to “direct the course of national television programmes, but does not know how to make him or herself something to eat” (n. pag.). Not only are we helpless, but we are also losing the ability to think for ourselves. The Internet can be an invaluable tool, providing vast amounts of information on an infinite number of topics, but even a wealth of information can be damaging: as Nicholas Carr writes, “The computer screen bulldozes our doubts with its bounties and conveniences. It is so much our servant that it would seem churlish to notice that it is also our master” (Prologue).

There are few comforts in this world that we cannot derive from a connected computer: it cannot feed us, but it can help us order food; it cannot sexually satisfy us, but it can provide the material by which we might sexually satisfy ourselves; it cannot tuck us into bed at night, but it can tell us a bedtime story. It is not exaggerating to observe that, at the very least, the Internet has changed the way in which many of us experience the world, and with the growing popularity and affordability of smart phones, many of us are always connected—much in the same way that J is always connected to his camera. In Marble Hornets the Slender Man does not physically commit all of the violence in the series, but he appears to be the mastermind behind most acts of villainy through his ability to bend
characters to his will: *Marble Hornets*’s name for him, The Operator, is fitting. He embodies a warning for those of us who spend much of our days online. His ability to control the minds of his victims recalls the smart phone’s power to turn its devoted user into a mindless “zombie” “shambling through daily life” (Saidi n. pag.).

Begotten by humans through a combination of technology (the *Something Awful* forum) and the bits and pieces of innumerable famous movie monsters, the Slender Man is comparable with Frankenstein’s monster.\(^8\) The user name of his creator, Victor Surge, even sounds like an homage to Victor Frankenstein. Victor Surge may have stitched\(^9\) him together, but the Slender Man was given life by the *Something Awful* community, whose anecdotes, photographs, videos, and other artifacts were the lightning bolts that animated the monster. Like Frankenstein, Victor Surge lost control of his creation quickly after bringing it to life: his attempts at stifling the flood of responses to his now famous doctored photographs were completely ignored, and the Slender Man quickly grew into an Internet phenomenon that far surpassed Surge’s relatively humble goal of frightening his fellow forum-goers. Uncontrollability has always been an integral element of the Slender Man’s character, as evidenced by Surge’s image captions, one of which reads: “we didn’t want to go, we didn’t

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\(^8\) Notably, themes of knowledge and control also inform the many famous movie monsters that are combined in the Slender Man. Genre films often employ self-reflexivity and intertextuality as a means of engaging with their audiences. One way in which *Marble Hornets* refers to the cinematic tradition within which it operates is through the figure of the Slender Man. Though he is a relatively recent creation, the Slender Man has existed in some form in horror literature and film for a long time. Victor Surge himself cites the Tall Man (Angus Scrimm) from *Phantasm* (Don Coscarelli 1979) as the aesthetic basis for the Slender Man; other echoes include the pale, black-clad figures of *Dark City* (Alex Proyas 1998); the child-eating Pale Man (Doug Jones) of *Pan’s Labyrinth* (Guillermo del Toro 2006); the tentacled beasts of Lovecraftian lore; the lean, pale, hypnotic vampire of *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau 1922); the bandage-faced, besuited Invisible Man (Claude Rains) of the film of the same name (James Whale 1933); and the tall, lanky, faceless, black-draped Death himself.

\(^9\) The Slender Man is literally a combination of several bodies edited together using Adobe Photoshop. Victor Surge revealed on the forum that the Tall Man from *Phantasm* served as the primary template for the Slender Man.
want to kill them, but its persistent silence and outstretched arms horrified and comforted us at the same time” (“Create Paranormal Images” 3).

Much like Frankenstein’s monster and the Slender Man, “Marble Hornets,” the fictional student film that shares its name with the Web series, spirals out of the control of its creator. It is unclear where the Slender Man comes from, or why he is stalking Alex, but the diegetic events of Marble Hornets seem to have begun close to the time when Alex started shooting his film, in which a 20-something man returns home and remembers his childhood. In this way the Slender Man is linked to the past, or rather, the act of remembering the past through video—a theme that frames the entire series. Although Alex became aware of the Slender Man during his work on Marble Hornets, it is entirely possible that the Slender Man always existed in Alex’s life. Just as Frankenstein is ultimately undone by his unrelenting pursuit of forbidden knowledge (i.e. the science that allows him to break the laws of nature and reanimate the dead), so too is Alex. His ability to film events allows him to see the monster that has stalked him since his youth: if he could not capture such things on video, he might still be blissfully unaware of the Slender Man’s existence.

Wagner and DeLage have yet to provide a solution to the mystery of the Slender Man’s motivations, but it is possible that Alex’s accidental discovery of the creature aggravates a pre-existing problem, inspiring the Slender Man to more aggressively stalk his prey. Alex’s access to forbidden knowledge is accidental, but the majority of the episodes comprise J’s purposeful quest to discover the mystery that unfolds in Alex’s videotapes. Propelled by curiosity and a self-destructive desire to expose the truth, J documents his steps

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10 I was unable to locate a rule for citing a fictional film within a film, so I will distinguish between the two by referring to the Web series as Marble Hornets and the fictional student film within the Web series as “Marble Hornets.”
in solving the riddle of Alex’s strange behaviour, with Wagner acting in character as J to post the footage to YouTube for the general online public to see in the larger detective narrative that frames each entry. Ultimately it is Frankenstein himself, through his cruel and irresponsible treatment of his creation, that reaps his own destruction. The same might be said of J, who, in uploading Alex’s videos to YouTube, grossly disobeys Alex’s order to keep the tapes private, and in doing so spreads (to refer back to the Ring comparison) the Slender Man virus across the Internet.

At the same time that it expresses a fear of technology, Marble Hornets also suggests that we are lost without it. The camera, like the Slender Man, is both a source of comfort and horror for the protagonists of Marble Hornets: at the same time that it acts as a beacon that draws in danger (i.e. the Slender Man), it also brings a sense of safety to those who use it, as evidenced by both Alex’s and J’s obsessive camera use. Whether this sense of safety is real or imagined is still up for debate as, at the time of writing, the series is still running, and as of yet no explanations have been offered.

A possible explanation might be that the Slender Man means only to observe and/or control his human victims, much like an alien might do in an abduction narrative. In this imagining, the camera thwarts the Slender Man’s ability to cover his tracks by wiping the memories of his victims, since the victims need only look to their cameras to regain the lost data. It is also possible that the Slender Man purposely appears to the characters while they are filming in order to propagate through technology. Fans of the creature have described him as a tulpa—a “being created from the collective thoughts of separate individuals” (“The
Inherent to the notion of a tulpa is a fear of the power of the human mind, which, like technology, can simultaneously produce miracles and mass destruction. The fear of destructive knowledge, that we can be undone by our own minds, is salient in the stories of Frankenstein, and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, as well as in *Marble Hornets*: the more we think about the Slender Man, the stronger and more dangerous he becomes. As *Something Awful* user Soakie suggested shortly after the Slender Man’s birth,

> Even if we don’t really believe in the supernatural, even if our rational minds laugh at such an absurdity … we are cutting [the Slender Man] out and sewing him together. We’re stuffing him with nightmares and unspoken fears. And what happens when the pictures are no longer photoshops? (“Create Paranormal Images” 16)

The Slender Man shows us that our digital (online) and physical (real-world) lives are not as distinct as we may believe. *Marble Hornets* provides an extreme example of the negative consequences of living in the interstitial space between the physical world and the digital world, and, by extension, the past and the future. If digital technology, particularly the Internet, is Pandora’s box, the Slender Man is one of the demons that has emerged from it, and can be understood allegorically as a symbol for technology’s destructive effects.

Subsumed under the theme of technology in *Marble Hornets* are questions of knowledge and control. Knowledge leads to technological development, and technology helps us control the natural world in which we live through tailoring it to ensure our own comfort—for example, air conditioning helps keep us cool even though outside the sun is glaringly hot. In a sense, technology is humankind’s denial that we live in a world in which we have little control over the things that really matter, such as time, space, and natural

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11 A description of the tulpa effect appears in the Slender Man Wiki, but the first mention of him potentially being a tulpa appeared in the Something Awful forum thread, “Create Paranormal Images,” as a post by a user named Soakie on June 20, 2009.
resources. The Slender Man reminds us of just how little control we have. Although he references other literary and cinematic monsters, the Slender Man is first and foremost a monster of the digital age. In opposition, earlier monsters like Lovecraft’s come from our universe, causing us to confront our own limited knowledge about the world in which we live: we might feel safe on our little planet, but there are ancient, evil things writhing above and below us for which, in our self-centred ignorance, we have neglected to account. Over the past two decades the Internet has experienced its own big bang, expanding to create an online universe that parallels our own physical one in inhabitants, interactions, societies, and culture, providing yet another “space” in which monsters might develop; the Slender Man is one such monster.

3.3 The Narrative

While traditional horror narratives employ the “invisible style” of Classical Hollywood filmmaking, folk horror narratives favour realistic modes of filmmaking such as those referenced by found footage horror (i.e. documentary and cinéma direct). Its online context draws the content of folk horror outside of the bounds of a conventional cinema experience (that encourages passive viewership) and into the everyday world of the audience, bringing its content uncomfortably close to home. Folk horror’s realistic style amplifies this connection to the everyday life of the viewer, further intensifying the horror conventions that it employs to terrify audiences.

Two common themes that are particularly relevant to folk horror are disruption and confirmation. Scholars Robin Wood, Noël Carroll, Isabel Pinedo, and Daniel Barnes delineate a broad structure of disruption (of the norm) and confirmation (of the existence of
something abnormal within the norm) in their respective discussions of horror narratives. In his “Introduction to the American Horror Film,” Wood describes a formula in which normality, defined as “conformity to the dominant social norms,” “is threatened by the monster” (203). Although the structure provided by Carroll is more complex, it encompasses the same basic idea: an entity that is not natural to our physical world tears through its fabric and disrupts “normal” life in some way; this can occur over one or all of the following four steps, provided that they remain in the same chronological order: “onset, discovery, confirmation, and confrontation” (99). Isabel Pinedo’s exploration of postmodern horror also involves the themes of disruption and discovery. She notes that with the exception of the fourth point, her theory can be applied to most horror: (1) there is a violent disruption of the everyday world; (2) there is a transgression and violation of boundaries; (3) the validity of rationality is thrown into question; (4) there is no narrative closure; and (5) the film produces a bounded experience of fear (20). Violation is another key element of horror. It is explicitly stated in Pinedo’s structure, but is an implicit factor in Wood’s and Carroll’s analyses as well, in which it can be aligned with the way in which the monster disrupts (or violates the rules of) normality. In her article on traditional narrative elements of the horror film as they relate to folklore, Julia George cites Barnes’s definition of the horror narrative, highlighting a structure that places a great deal of importance on the violation of an interdiction, echoing Vladimir Propp’s analysis of the folktale as outlined in chapter two of this study: “(1) An interdiction, or warning against something forbidden; (2) A violation of the interdiction; (3) The consequence of the violation” (175). George argues that such a structure “function[s] to scare and to warn” (176). Such a purpose is also articulated in Wood’s description of the
reactionary horror film, which is aimed at reaffirming the status quo—a popular observation that has been taken up by several other notable scholars, including Carroll. One way in which horror films reaffirm the status quo, according to Wood, is by depicting a world in which the repressed emerges from society’s depths, breaking the superficially calm surface of civilization, only to be repressed once again by the end of the film. In found footage horror films, things rarely return to normal after the disruption has occurred; indeed, many of the found footage horror films listed above suggest, in line with the idea of the repressed, that things were never “okay” to begin with—our monsters are always with us, we just choose to ignore them until we are no longer able to do so.

Found footage films employ the devices of documentary realism in order to promote a critical investigation of the world in which we live, which is full of forbidden knowledge. Whether such knowledge involves the truth behind a local legend such as in BWP, a government cover-up such as in Trollhunter (André Øvredal 2010) or [Rec], or confirming the existence of an infamous tape full of snuff videos, such as in V/H/S, the characters of found footage strive to reveal the world as they see it, unmediated by the official explanations that seek to wrap everything into a tidy placating package.

The cinematographic style of found footage horror mimics the first-person point of view of a filmmaker caught in the midst of a traumatic experience. The diegetic filmmaker’s panicked state of mind translates to an immediate, shaky camera perspective in which an inexplicable and frightening stream of events move unpredictably across the screen. In this way found footage horror shows us things we cannot understand, and although the characters ask questions about such things, they do not waste much effort in attempting to comfort
audiences by providing a definitive explanation for the horrific events they manage to capture on film. Here the themes of knowledge and control collide: the fictional filmmakers of found footage horror eschew official control by refusing the information fed to them by professional news outlets and documentaries. Affordable filmmaking technology allows them to take control of their own knowledge and share their discoveries with the larger public. Presenting the world in such a way, these diegetic filmmakers “violate our assumption that we live in a predictable, routinized world by demonstrating that we live in a minefield” (Pinedo 21).

Once the characters of found footage horror realize that they live in such a world, horrified and repulsed as they may be by their immediate situations, they are first and foremost driven by curiosity. Thus in found footage horror, Carroll’s observation that, “to a large extent, the horror story is driven explicitly by curiosity” (182), finds its ultimate example: the fictional filmmakers of found footage horror are curious to a fault, and their inability to stop documenting a situation often results in their demise. Therefore, while found footage horror promotes a culture of critical thinking, it can also be argued that such films “scare and warn” against such curiosity. Warning against curiosity might be understood as a reactionary impulse, but it might also be regarded as a realistic acknowledgement of the dangers involved in seeking answers to the things we “should not” know.

The preceding observations about found footage horror can also be applied to *Marble Hornets*, but the series departs from found footage horror in ways that are specifically shaped by its online context. Given the statistically short attention spans of the average *YouTube* user, and the resultant brevity expected of *YouTube* videos (Jenkins, “*YouTube*” n. pag.;
Burgess and Green 53), *Marble Hornets* must accomplish a lot of horror in a little time, and on a non-existent budget. In order to achieve this, Wagner and DeLage produce their videos with the primary goal being not character or plot development, but scaring people by appealing to “the baser scares [such as] the fear of being followed, the fear of not knowing what’s out there … memory loss, not knowing where you were, losing large amounts of time —things like that, things that would freak out anyone regardless of the situation they were in” (“Marble Hornets Radio interview (3/5)”). It has been three years since the above-quoted interview, and in that time character and plot development has occurred; however, it is worth noting that these were not the primary concerns that informed the series at its conception.

In their book entitled *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, Jean Burgess and Joshua Green note “several observable aesthetic trends across the range of user-created content” that exists on *YouTube* (52). One such trend is an explicit “experimentation with the video form [and] foregrounding of the medium itself” that Henry Jenkins compares with “the technological and aesthetic experimentation of vaudeville” (Burgess and Green 52). Another is “a noticeable focus on video as a technology, and on the showcasing of technique rather than of artistry,” such as can be observed in “trick videos” in which the creators experiment with filters and other special effects (Burgess and Green 52). *Marble Hornets* exhibits both tendencies: its first-person point-of-view cinematography reminds us that we are viewing a reality constructed by the eye of a video camera, and its split screens, visual tears, and audiovisual distortions show us just how malleable that reality, and by extension, any reality is.  

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12 *YouTube* character totheark’s experimental, surrealist videos emphasize the technological aspect as well as the communicative and participatory properties of the *YouTube* platform even more than do the *Marble Hornets* videos.
Jenkins’s 2006 article, “Youtube and the Vaudeville Aesthetic,” compares the aesthetics of YouTube videos with those of the precinema entertainment medium of vaudeville. Designed with the primary goal of emotionally impacting audiences, the YouTube videos that Jenkins discusses are generally “short and streamlined,” actor/performance-focused (for example, high-risk stunts), and relatively unedited in that they feature long takes. Marble Hornets displays two of the three preceding characteristics, but whereas the performers of Jenkins’s YouTube videos are virtuosos demonstrating their mastery of a given skill, those of Marble Hornets are, with the exception of their extraordinary circumstances, rather ordinary: they are forgetful, clumsy, ill-tempered, illogical, and ill-prepared for the majority of the obstacles they face as the show progresses. In a sense, the characters of Marble Hornets, though fictional creations, are more “real” than the actual people performing fantastic stunts on YouTube, in that they are imperfect, average, and thus, theoretically, more easily relatable for the average viewer.

Imperfection and authenticity are correlated in the vernacular storytelling devices of found footage and folk horror; such a connection is present, on a broader level, in contemporary culture’s assumptions about what it means, metaphysically, to be human. Writing on authenticity, Regina Bendix observes that, while in the past, authenticity was bound to “the simple and pure,” “[t]he twentieth century has come to endorse the raw and ugly as a truer version of authenticity” (18). Diverse as the two may be, both notions of

13 Bendix talks about how our contemporary culture is enamored of “identifiable authenticities” (3) at the same time as being fascinated “with achieving the perfect copy” (3). She writes, “By submitting to the same processes of representation and commodification those things that were proclaimed to be opposites, the genuine and the spurious are converging, their identities separable only by their narratives (Baudrillard 1994: 9)” (3-4). Her observation articulates a philosophical undercurrent that greatly influences my topic, but that I have decided to leave be for the purposes of this thesis. I would like to explore the topic in another essay, but for the sake of space and time, I will refrain from directly discussing philosophical notions of real, authentic, true, fake, simulation etc. herein.
authenticity are deeply influenced by class stereotypes. Authenticity “implies a critical stance against urban manners, artifice in language, behaviour, and art, and against aristocratic excesses,” favouring instead the “pure, unaffected” manners of “the peasantry,” or everyday “folk” (Bendix 16-7).

With *Marble Hornets*, Wagner and DeLage build on the cinematic language of authenticity employed by found footage horror, tailoring conventional realist aesthetics to an online context that promotes communication similar to that of an Internet forum in the sense that users are able to communicate with one another via videos and/or comments. Wagner and DeLage present their own videos not as the found footage of some ill-fated film crew, but as ongoing documents of their own strange everyday reality. J’s edited compilations of Alex’s videos lack the framing of conventional found footage horror, which undermines the paranormal contents by locating them within a professional production context: the diegetic filmmakers of *BWP* and *Cloverfield*, for example, may have been everyday people, but their videos landed in the hands of a studio that edited, marketed, and distributed their work.

*Marble Hornets*, on the other hand, is unmediated by the usual third parties involved in the fictional process of finding and compiling that frames found footage horror; its framing narrative has J editing and narrating each entry, directly addressing audiences through subtitles and confessional-style videos (also known as video logs, or vlogs).

Wagner and DeLage employ vernacular modes of storytelling to present their entries as the unmediated, authentic experiences of everyday people; their real-life positions as grassroots folk artists strengthens the contrived authenticity that informs their artistic choices in *Marble Hornets*. By positioning each episode as an unmediated, authentic experience that
is directly uploaded to *YouTube* with little third party interference beyond *YouTube*’s filtering process, Wagner and DeLage promote an understanding of their series as existing outside of institutional control—for example, *Marble Hornets* does not show in theatres, and its distribution and exhibition are not subject to ratings or censorship. The series’ exaggerated lack of polish echoes and intensifies the immediacy and authenticity toward which industry-produced found footage films, including those mentioned at the start of this chapter, strive.\(^\text{14}\)

The unmediated way in which the stories of folk horror are presented recalls the folkloric tradition of the campfire tale. The computer through which Wagner and DeLage, as their characters J and Alex, relate their frightening experiences, resembles a modern campfire, its glowing screen illuminating the viewer’s visage; however, unlike the warm, soothing flames of the campfire, the cold blue glow of the computer screen holds no promise of safety. With a campfire tale, a group of people huddle around a fire, finding safety in their numbers and comfort in the purifying light of the flames: as long as they remain within the fire’s light, with everyone else, they are safe. With the computer there is no such comfort: a person might be part of an online community, but as computer use is commonly an individual activity, on a physical level that person is likely sitting alone in a room, and is therefore vulnerable according to traditional horror narrative conventions that depict the ideal victim as isolated. Films such as *Videodrome* (David Cronenberg 1983) and *Ring* associate technology with fatal, infectious disease, suggesting that the seemingly sterile blue glow of an electronic screen is not as harmless as it may initially seem. In both films, the diegetic viewers—of the snuff television show in *Videodrome* and the cursed videotape in

\(^{14}\) Jon D. Witmer has written an insightful article that discusses the ways in which director of photography Michael Bonvillain “simulate[d] the look of a consumer grade video camera” in the found footage monster film *Cloverfield* (36). Please see the works cited for more information.
—are rewarded with terrifying visions and ultimately death. The computer screen is also infectious—perhaps even more so, since with computer use comes the threat of contracting a computer virus. Horror narratives such as *Pulse* [Kairo] (Kiyoshi Kurosawa 2001) and *FeardotCom* (William Malone 2002) articulate the fear that our actions in cyberspace might evoke horrific real-world effects. The Internet’s prodigious ability to facilitate communication and the sharing of knowledge is cause for celebration, but also for circumspection, as such an ability can quickly transform into something dangerous. Knowledge and communication might be harmless in the hands of the average Internet user, but they can become formidable if such a user stumbles upon information that he or she should not know and/or attracts the attention of a malignant being. By sharing images of the Slender Man, *Marble Hornets* suggests through its diegesis that it is putting the regular Internet user at risk by showing them what they should not see, thereby potentially transmitting the Slender sickness. Each episode insinuates that as we stare into our computer screens, we cannot be entirely sure that something dreadful is not staring back at us. In this darker understanding of knowledge as dangerous lie the common horror narrative elements of disruption and confirmation.

*Marble Hornets* relates a story in which the disruption and confirmation common to the horror cycle lead not to resolution, but instead only aggravate the problem, implying that we have our own curiosity to blame. There is no cure for the virus that we have contracted—no return to normal. The cleansing flame of the campfire that once kept us safe in its warm glow has now transformed into the cool blue light of the computer screen, which, sterile as it

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15 This is also suggested in *The Matrix*, wherein a character who dies while connected to the Matrix also dies in real life.
may seem, is capable of infecting us with a deadly illness from which we may never recover. The comfort of confirmation—in the case of Marble Hornets, that the Slender Man exists—is no comfort at all. On the level of narrative in Marble Hornets, knowledge and control, including our own knowledge of whose control we are under, do nothing to alleviate the situation. Thus far the series shows that we can fight against this relationship as much as we want, but there is no winning.

3.4 The Audience

Just as a drive to gain knowledge propels found footage and folk horror narratives, it is also an element of audience engagement, particularly since folk horror is situated on YouTube, which, with its countless videos on any given topic, might be compared with an encyclopedia—at the very least, one might call it encyclopedic in scope. Anandam Kavoori opens his book, Reading YouTube, with the following quote from Geert Lovink: “We no longer watch films or TV, we watch databases” (vii). While films are commonly aligned with entertainment, databases are aligned with knowledge; this difference in exhibition platforms—the entertaining cinema and the informative database—affects the way in which viewers interact with what they watch. Kavoori writes that there is something more active about the viewing habits of YouTube users versus the average film/television audience, and part of this has to do with what he calls “‘Digital Play,’ which refers to a certain kind of narrative action—playing the medium, rather than watching it” (7-8). Kavoori notes that “[w]hile this is a defining feature of video games … it is also central to how people use YouTube” (8).

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16 Literally countless—YouTube does not provide current number of videos on site, I assume because “100 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute” (“Statistics”).
J.P. Telotte discusses the ways in which a similar playability contributed to the success of BWP in his essay entitled, “BWP Project: Film and the Internet.” Particularly applicable to this chapter is Telotte’s discussion of how Janet Murray’s three aesthetic principles of electronic narratives—immersion, agency, and transformation—worked to create the phenomenal buzz around BWP, arguing that the filmmakers employed the Internet as part of an innovative transmedia storytelling initiative designed to “sell and tell” the film (34). In BWP, Heather (Heather Donahue) and her film crew, Mike (Michael C. Williams) and Josh (Joshua Leonard), are shooting a documentary (as well as a “making of” home video) about a local legend in a patch of woods near Burkittsville, Maryland, when eerie events begin interrupting their work, forcing them to question whether the legend has more truth to it than they initially believed. The film is presented as a compilation of the real videos taken by the actual film crew that disappeared in those woods, who just happened to capture unexplainable events on tape as they recorded their relatively mundane reality. Lending further credibility to the film’s convincing verité style were a number of ancillary materials: missing posters for the lost crew, a printed police dossier, a television documentary, and, most famously, a website that provided background on the legend, the fictional filmmakers, and the ongoing rescue attempts. The film and ancillary materials were so convincing that people reportedly showed up in Burkittsville shortly after the film’s release offering to help in the search and rescue efforts for the missing filmmakers (Schreier 306; Breznican n. pag.). Presented as “one more artifact … which we might view in order to

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17 Telotte does not specifically write “selling and telling,” but to omit the quotation marks around that phrase would be to not give credit where credit is due. His exact words are, “I would go a bit further and suggest that the selling of The Blair Witch Project and the telling of that film, its narrative construction, were from the start a careful match or ‘project’…” (34).
better understand a kind of repressed or hidden reality” (Telotte 35), *BWP* was part of a compelling story world that inspired audience members to immerse themselves in an alternate reality that felt indistinguishable from their own.

*BWP* might have had viewers fooled, but its popularity did not rest solely upon this achievement. As Telotte observes, the film achieved popularity by providing its viewers with an unprecedented opportunity to immerse themselves in the story world. It provided this opportunity by employing elements of Murray’s three aforementioned aesthetic principles of electronic narratives (35-6): point of view cinematography and a hyperdetailed story world encouraged audience immersion; and viewers enjoyed a level of agency in choosing the way in which they received the story through navigating the website and other ancillary materials (Murray describes this as a navigational agency (129)). Although the website was weaker than the film in terms of the level of transformation it offered, viewers were still able to subtly experience transformation through the detective role they might play while navigating the ancillary materials (Telotte 36). In addition, the film’s first-person point-of-view cinematography provided a stronger level of transformation by allowing viewers to witness everything through the eyes of the diegetic filmmakers—as long as those eyes were behind a camera lens, that is (Telotte 36).

*Marble Hornets* is shot in much the same way as *BWP*, and it offers viewers many of the same pleasures, although on a different level. For one, *Marble Hornets* is not just one small piece of a complete story world created by artists working together to realize the same vision. For the most part, the *Marble Hornets* story is limited to *YouTube*, with any posts to
additional sites merely pointing viewers to the *YouTube* channel.\(^\text{18}\) *Marble Hornets* thus cannot be considered a transmedia story, although, as I noted in my first chapter, it is still fruitful to examine it under the lens of Jenkins’s convergence culture theory. *BWP*’s ancillary materials also ultimately directed viewers to the film, but, as per Jenkins’s rules of transmedia storytelling, each transmedial component was complete and could be enjoyed on its own (96).

Distinguishing the Slender Man legendry from transmedia storytelling is less simple. *Marble Hornets* is a small part of a story world in which the Slender Man resides, and the Slender Man is the creation of many Internet users via legends, anecdotes, blogs, vlogs, and so on; he occupies a story world that exists primarily online through social websites in which people share their “true stories” about their experiences with the creature. In this sense, Wagner and DeLage are but two small players in a large community of storytellers who all have their own, equally valid, anecdotes about the Slender Man. Some salient characteristics of the creature arise, but the people in the stories, and their basic situations, are diverse.

If we consider *Marble Hornets* and the vast Slender Man legendry together, we can surmise that audience immersion in the series, as well as in the legendry, is afforded not only by *Marble Hornets*’ vernacular style and folk context, but is even more so created by the myriad artifacts composing the Slender Man legend itself. Audiences of both the series and the broader lore can also enjoy an agency similar to that offered by the *BWP* website: they cannot change the course of the existing stories and *Marble Hornets* episodes, but they can

\(^{18}\) It is worth noting, however, that unofficial discussions and expansions of the *Marble Hornets* narrative exist on sites such as *Unfiction.*
influence their depth of immersion in the story world, and the form that their Slender Man experience will take.

Transformation operates in *Marble Hornets* in much the same way as it does in *BWP*. The *Marble Hornets* Twitter stream and totheark’s YouTube page are interactive spaces in which viewers can play the role of detective by discussing the series as though it is an actual, real-world case that needs solving.\(^{19}\) The episodes of *Marble Hornets* offer a higher level of transformation than the ancillary websites through their first-person point-of-view cinematography, which—as Telotte observes with regard to the *BWP* feature film—allows audience members to experience the story through the perspectives of the main characters, as though it were happening to them directly. Another way in which *Marble Hornets* encourages viewer transformation is by adopting the stylistic conventions of video games.\(^{20}\)

Of course, whereas player decisions in a video game will render observable changes in what they see onscreen, such is not the case with *Marble Hornets*, which plays out exactly the same no matter the actions of the person on the other side of the screen.

Viewers may not be able to tangibly affect the *Marble Hornets* storyline, but the series adopts many video game conventions that mimic an interactive experience. For example, in “Entry #27” and “Entry #28,” J wakes up in a hotel room and, unable to recall how he got there, he searches the room for clues. He finds a shoulder bag, and empties and lists the items inside of it. He holds each item up to the camera for a moment, and then

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\(^{19}\) I have previously discussed *Unfiction* as another website in which viewers discuss the mysteries presented in *Marble Hornets*; however, in this paragraph I am specifically referring to the materials produced by Wagner and DeLage that are officially connected to *Marble Hornets*.

\(^{20}\) This characteristic of the series has also been acknowledged by fans, many of whom refer to the series as an ARG (alternate reality game), despite it lacking the interactivity of an ARG: the actions of ARG players can alter the game, but the actions of *Marble Hornets* viewers will not change the preplanned events of the series.
presents his findings in the following list, which appears in white text on a black freeze-frame: “Some clothes, Flashlight, Painkillers, Key.” Such a list is similar to that provided in a video game, wherein the player is often able to push a button to bring up a screen that shows all of his or her belongings. In addition to the freeze-frame, *Marble Hornets’s* character and set design mirror that of the survival horror game *Silent Hill* (Konami 1999), in which “[p]layable characters are average individuals with no superpowers or military expertise,” and aesthetics include “claustrophobic and expressionistic camera angles … derelict locations scattered with broken furniture” (Kirkland 172-3). Much of *Marble Hornets* takes place in abandoned buildings; such an aesthetic is most obvious in the entries\(^\text{21}\) in which Tim (Tim Sutton) leads characters to an “old burned out hospital looking kind of place” (Tim) near his childhood home. Expressionistic camera angles are also a common feature of *Marble Hornets*, but they are particularly apparent when the characters encounter the Slender Man. *Marble Hornets’s* narrative structure also echoes that of *Silent Hill* and, by extension, other survival horror video games. Ewan Kirkland’s description of Silent Hill’s plot as consisting of “fighting monsters and solving puzzles” (172-3) accurately summarizes *Marble Hornets’s* plot as well, which centres around J trying to solve the mystery that begins with Alex’s strange behaviour and videotapes. Notably, J and the other characters of *Marble Hornets* do not “fight” monsters as much as they run away from them or black out in their presence, recalling Kirkland’s observation that the characters of survival games are average people.

\(^{21}\) These begin at “Entry #55.”
Video game conventions are common to many horror films, television shows, and Web series. Such conventions are intensified by the online context of *Marble Hornets* that satisfies viewer playfulness with the digital play invited by the *YouTube* platform itself. Digital play might be compared with exploring: in the case of *Marble Hornets*, playing the platform on which it appears is comparable to venturing into the creepy basement of an old, abandoned house or opening the box marked “do not open”; however, we pursue these frightening experiences without fear of direct physical danger as we experience the alternate reality mediated through a computer screen, which acts as a barrier between the horrors onscreen and our own physical realities. According to Pinedo, such an experience renders horror narratives “an exercise in recreational terror, a simulation of danger not unlike a roller coaster ride. In both, the conviction that there is nothing to fear turns stress/arousal into a pleasurable experience. Fear and pleasure commingle” (Pinedo 25).

Recreational terror, like digital play, is a mediated experience in which viewers participate to pleasurable ends. In found footage and folk horror, the first-person point-of-view cinematography, in which the camera operator is also a character in the film, invites speculation that the experience of recreational terror can also apply to people within the diegesis. Regarding *BWP*, the idea of recreational terror is addressed in Telotte’s suggestion that Heather “feels temporarily secure” behind the camera, which distances her from the terrifying events that she cannot otherwise escape (38). Although *Marble Hornets*’ cinematography is similar to that of *BWP*, the camera’s significance to the characters who

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22 Notably, video game conventions are also common to science fiction films—particularly those in which the conventions of horror and science fiction are blended together. The combination is also a popular one in video games (to name a few popular examples, *Resident Evil* (Capcom 1996) and *Doom* (id Software 1993), both of which have received film adaptations).

23 Although, depending on our mode of exploration, there could be moral and/or ethical consequences.
refuse to put it down is less clear. At times J and Alex wield the camera as if it is a shield that protects them from the Slender Man’s maddening embrace, but at other times, the camera seems to invite danger. In “Entry #26,” for example, Amy (Bethann Williams), who appears to be Alex’s girlfriend, finds Alex’s old camera. She turns it on, ignoring Alex’s repeated, anxious commands to turn it off. Within minutes the couple is attacked by the Slender Man, who up until that point seemed to have disappeared from Alex’s life.

Both BWP and Marble Hornets offer viewers the opportunity for recreational terror while simultaneously calling into question the assumed safety of such an experience. In the case of BWP’s Heather, the fact that her reality is mediated by a camera lens does not obviate the frightening things that are happening to her, nor does it abate their significance and danger. By relating Heather’s demise to her obsession with seeing the world through a camera, BWP challenges the claim inherent to recreational terror that there is no danger in simulation. Marble Hornets intensifies the challenge by suggesting that the danger lies in simulation itself. Whereas the Blair Witch is limited to one location—the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland—the Slender Man is a creature of the online universe, haunting a global platform that opens windows (via computer, tablet, and smart phone screens) into homes and thus potential victims around the world. The threat escalates when considering the aforementioned tulpa theory, which suggests that the more we think of the Slender Man, the more real he becomes. Early in the series, before he has begun watching the “Marble Hornets” tapes, J jokingly compares Alex’s project to Ring, suggesting that the Slender Man behaves like a virus, appearing to anyone who sees him. In doing so Marble Hornets repeats the message in BWP, and similar films such as Cloverfield and The Last Exorcism (Daniel
Stamm 2010), that “scares and warns” against curiosity and the pursuit of forbidden knowledge. *Marble Hornets* intensifies the warning by suggesting that the movie screen is no longer a fourth wall that contains the onscreen horror and protects the audience; in fact, it is not even a wall, but rather a porous, infectious membrane through which the diegetic events seep into the audience’s real world.

3.5 Conclusion

Contemporary culture generally promotes video-taking devices (such as smart phones and cameras) and the Internet as positive technologies that enable even the everyday person to expose society’s ills and celebrate its triumphs. In this sense, knowledge is positive in that it broadens our understanding of the world in which we live. *Marble Hornets* highlights the opposite side of such an outlook by relating a story in which modern technologies such as digital video and the Internet contribute to an illness that threatens to transform the world into a mass of paranoid, violent, mindless puppets (some pessimistic commentators might argue that we are already there). The themes of knowledge and control emerge in *Marble Hornets*’ negative outlook: J publicly shares forbidden knowledge about a being who could be controlling us at this very moment; the catch is that we might not even realize the Slender Man exists without capturing him on the very technology that gives him strength—the video camera. Either we risk infection or we continue in relatively blissful ignorance. It is a lose-lose situation.

Tied to the themes of knowledge and control are disruption and confirmation, which guide the narrative of *Marble Hornets*. When J discovers the Slender Man in Alex’s

24 While comic strips and comedy skits often ridicule people who cannot live without their smart phones or the Internet, the usefulness of these tools is commonly lauded in cinema: even in *The Matrix*, Neo (Keanu Reeves) must be “plugged in” to defeat the villainous machines that have enslaved humanity.
videotapes, he embarks on a journey that leads to a disruption of his understanding of the
world: according to the lore, the Slender Man is an inexplicable entity who does not conform
to the laws of nature as we know them. Confirmation that the being he sees in Alex’s videos
exists only results in further disruption, as J dissolves into coughing fits and unconsciousness
whenever he encounters the Slender Man—fits that lead to memory loss and irrational
behaviour. Marble Hornets scares and warns against curiosity and the pursuit of forbidden
knowledge by depicting J as being caught in a nightmarish, unending cycle of disruption and
confirmation: all that he ever learns is that everything he thinks he thinks he knows is wrong.

The Slender Man is a monster of the digital age, signifying the danger of combining
infinite information—such as that provided by the Internet—with voracious curiosity. Like J
and Alex, who are always connected to their cameras, so too are many of us constantly
connected to a technology that destroys as it delivers. Humankind has long been undone by
its inventions in both reality and fiction, and the tradition continues with the Slender Man,
whose roots in an online folk community align him with a new type of mad scientist. The
mad scientist is a popular trope, but generally he\textsuperscript{25} is an individual who spends most of his
time isolated from the rest of society; even when the mad scientist is charming, he is
depicted as an introvert at best, who ultimately spirals out of control (an example of such an
individual can be found in David Cronenberg’s The Fly (1986)\textsuperscript{26}). In Marble Hornets, it is
not a mad genius putting society at risk with his cutting-edge inventions, but the average,
everyday person.

\textsuperscript{25} I write “he” purposefully here as in fiction the mad scientist is more often than not a male.

\textsuperscript{26} Or in virtually all of Cronenberg’s films, for that matter.
Conclusion

“What is real? How do you define ‘real’? If you’re talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, what you can taste and see, then ‘real’ is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain.” - *The Matrix* (Andy and Lana Wachowski 1999)

Contemporary audiences have more opportunities than ever before to transform their viewing into virtual experiences. Their ability to do so entails considerable advantages as well as significant disadvantages. The trend in both professional and grassroots filmmaking is moving toward engaging with viewers who are more actively involved with the cultural products that they consume than those of even a decade ago. A common trend in many contemporary products of popular culture—including cinema, television and music—is to encourage audiences to interact with the works on a level that goes beyond traditional advertising campaigns such as, for films for example, merely watching a trailer or looking at production stills. Prolonged multiplatform marketing trajectories involve the release of small pieces of provocative information over several months before a film or album’s release date; these encourage audiences to develop a relationship with (and ideally a sense of ownership of) the work in question—before they have even fully experienced it, it has become part of their lives. When a cinematic work has the appearance of the physical reality in which we live, how can we tell that what we are viewing is a fiction? Does a screen truly separate us from the horrors that play out on it? Won’t memories of such horrors return to haunt us, as the Slender Man haunts the characters of *Marble Hornets* (Troy Wagner and Joseph DeLage
2009 - )? Folk horror indirectly addresses these questions by reflecting the changing roles of contemporary, Internet-savvy audiences who, constantly “connected” through their various wireless devices (i.e. smart phones, tablets, and computers), are able to immerse themselves in any text that invites such a reception.

In this study I have combined the approaches of several folklorists (including Trevor Blank, Richard Dorson, and Alan Dundes) to arrive at a broad understanding of “folk” as groups of people within unofficial cultures that are guided by shared traditions. My focus has been on the folk communities comprising members of the “Create Paranormal Images” thread on Something Awful, who created the Slender Man, and the larger YouTube community of folk horror creators, with particular attention to those videos engaging with the Slender Man legendry such as Marble Hornets. Inherent to my understanding of folk is the question of authority: who gets to define what is official (and therefore not folk) versus what is unofficial (and therefore folk)? For the purposes of my study I have distinguished between the two as artists who are creating works within the official film industry, versus grassroots artists who are not working within the industry, and whose works do not follow the traditional release trajectory of popular studio-backed productions. I believe that one can currently make such a straightforward distinction, but that as the trend of active audiences progresses, distinguishing between “official” and “unofficial” will become more difficult; as everyday people (i.e. members of the unofficial culture) become ever more engaged with the production of pop culture, it will become necessary to reconsider our definitions of unofficial and official culture. “Folk” will not disappear from our cultural discourse, but
understandings of it will change with the growth of new technologies that facilitate the birth of new communities and new forms of communication.

*Marble Hornets* is a strong example of how digital technology can influence the development of folklore. By examining the Web series as a modern folktale for the digital age, we can mark the ways in which the folk narrator has adapted to the contemporary context, in which the Internet plays a significant role in the everyday life of the average person. In addition, the development of the Slender Man legendry on *Something Awful* illustrates the growth of a folk community as well as a possible trajectory that folklore might take in a digital context.

In *Marble Hornets*, conventions of traditional folktale narratives are combined with the rhetoric of truth that is commonly employed in legend telling. As I argued in chapter two, *Marble Hornets*’ narrative structure mirrors that of traditional folktales as outlined by Vladimir Propp; however, the Web series lacks the formal framing phrases such as “Once upon a time,” or “In a far away land” that are common to folktales. Instead, creator Troy Wagner tells the story through his role as the series’ fictional narrator J, using techniques of legend-telling to present it as a true story that he experienced first-hand. Wagner enhances his story’s verisimilitude by employing a visual aesthetic that closely resembles the actual video diaries that *YouTube* users regularly upload, which document real-life events ranging from their baby’s first steps to horrific accidents. Such a style is strikingly similar to that described by Mikel J. Koven in his discussion of Italian giallo films (*La Dolce Morte*), in which he emphasizes the importance of the familiar: characters must be recognizable as either authentic types who could exist in real life, or as common film types; locations also
must call to mind either spots in the audience’s actual world, or places that they have visited via film. The familiar figures heavily into the construction of the *Marble Hornets* story world, in which the camera operator/narrator moves through an array of common spaces such as forests, parks, and suburban homes, recording these spaces in a way that looks more like a home video than a professional film. By combining age-old folkloric narrative structures with the relatively modern vernacular mode of filmic storytelling, *Marble Hornets*’ form emphasizes the themes of past and present that inform its narrative.

Blending the traditional tropes of folktales with the contrived immediacy and vernacular language of legendry, *Marble Hornets* illustrates how the past and present might coexist. A tension between the two rises when the series suggests that to chase the past is to court danger: for example, the character Alex (Joseph DeLage) is haunted by the Slender Man and falls ill only after he begins work on an autobiographical film in which a young man returns to his childhood home to recall his youth. In this way *Marble Hornets* suggests that, contrary to popular ideas about the past as a simpler, happier time, the past is actually quite dark, complex, and frightening—in *Marble Hornets*, unlike in most popular cinema, nostalgia is a dangerous inclination that can only lead to misery.

The future is also not a safe space, as is most strongly suggested in the figure of the Slender Man. Humanoid but not quite human, the Slender Man could very well be a reflection of humanity’s future. We cease to be the physically identifiable individuals behind

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1 In addition, the Slender Man is to some extent familiar to audiences, as he is a popular icon on the Internet who is well known even by audiences unaware of his roots on *Something Awful*. In this sense he is comparable with such horror movie icons as Michael Myers, Jason Voorhees, and Freddy Krueger—the famous monsters of the *Halloween* (John Carpenter 1978), *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham 1980), and *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven 1984) franchises, respectively. A line of inquiry that I have not yet pursued (but would very much like to), regards the effect that such familiarity has on the monster’s monstrosity: can a monster still be an abject other if it is received by an audience that knows and loves it?
the computer screen as we spend more time being our faceless online personas than we do in the physical world into which we were born. A key word here is “faceless”: surely we can create faces for our online personas through user pictures and avatars, but these are only representations of the person behind the screen. Generally these images do not change expressions as often as we do; the ripples of thought and emotion that move across one’s face have not yet met their virtual equivalent online. In addition to being faceless, we are stretched in many directions. For example, a user may have four tabs (or web pages) open on his or her Internet navigation program; while jumping between these pages—let us say these are e-mail, a social network, a local news website, and a discussion forum—this theoretical user may also be responding to text messages from his or her friends; at the same time, this user might be sitting in front of a television screen, watching his or her favourite show.

Given the scenario, it is not difficult to imagine the user’s diverse activities as represented by a body that is physically stretched to its limits. The Slender Man’s long, slender body and limbs echo the idea of a human being who is pulled in too many directions, stretched to the point of breaking—of becoming something that once perhaps was human, but is now no longer distinguishable as such.

*Marble Hornets* expresses concerns about the effect that digital technology is having on the everyday person, but proposes no explicit solutions. We may be past fixing our current situation in a world dependent on digital technology, but we might still be able to manage it so that it does not overcome us—so that we do not fall prey to the Slender sickness, so to speak. This solution is suggested by *Marble Hornets*’ form, content, and context, which work together to encourage viewers to actively and critically think about what they consume.
One key way in which *Marble Hornets* encourages audiences to think critically about everything they watch is through its realistic style that references both the found footage films that inform it as well as the cinéma direct films to which found footage horror owes a debt. By mimicking the appearance of filmed reality, *Marble Hornets* proves how easy it is to replicate the appearance of the physical reality in which we live, while at the same time exposing the inability of both fiction and non-fiction film to provide a complete, objective picture of that world due to the camera’s inability to visually capture an entire situation in time and space. In his article on *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez 1999), David Banash reflects this problem, arguing that the most frightening element of the film is that we rely too heavily on technologies of mimesis that are fundamentally unable to replicate the real world in which we live. To take his argument a step further, if we insist on viewing the real world through the lenses and/or screens of technological devices such as computers, tablets, smart phones, and cameras, we are forever doomed to exist within a false reality given that mimesis is impossible.

If mimesis is impossible, we must always take what we see with a grain of salt. *Marble Hornets* encourages us to ask questions through its content, in which J presents a puzzle that needs solving on a platform that enables audience participation. J’s shared progress invites viewers to comment on the mystery, putting together pieces that he may have missed, decoding videos posted to his account by the unidentified, antagonistic character that goes by the *YouTube* username totheark. J identifies as a member of both the *YouTube* and *Something Awful* folk communities, and actively engages with other members on those websites while respecting the traditions that guide such interactions. Quick to
support their fellow forum-goer, the members of *Something Awful* eagerly adopted *Marble Hornets* as an alternate reality game, discussing its content and sharing their theories as to the whereabouts, intentions, and identities of the series’ various antagonistic characters (including Alex, the Slender Man, Masky, Hoodie, and to theark). In this way audiences helped to further draw *Marble Hornets* outside of the boundaries of their computer screens and into their everyday, physical world.

Spilling out of the computer screen and into the actual world of the audience, *Marble Hornets*, and by extension, the Slender Man, behave similarly to the virus in Hideo Nakata’s *Ring* (1998). Once victims watch the video that carries the villainous Sadako’s (Rie Ino’o) curse, they are infected with a virus that will kill them in seven days, unless they copy the videotape and make someone else watch it. The viral element is directly suggested in *Marble Hornets*, in which J becomes haunted (and hunted) by the Slender Man after he begins watching the videotapes that he receives from Alex; by uploading clips of the tapes to *YouTube*, J effectively spreads the virus to an exponentially larger audience.

The Slender Man may behave like a virus, jumping into the lives of those unfortunate souls who come across him on the many mediums on which he appears (i.e. forum stories, photographs, cave paintings, wood cuts, and videotapes), but the symptoms that he evokes are at least not as fatal as those suffered by Sadako’s victims. The symptoms of the virus associated with the Slender Man (commonly called the Slender sickness) include memory loss, paranoia, and antisocial behaviour. Such symptoms might also be used to describe the behaviour of a person who spends too much time on his or her computer. Philosopher Alan Kirby and popular writer Nicholas Carr both observe that the contemporary Internet user,
changed by their obsessive Internet use, lacks life skills and experience, has a short attention span, and is unable—or at least unwilling—to think about things beyond a superficial level. Descriptions like these shed a different light on the term, “user,” which might also be employed to describe an addict.

By echoing such horror films as *Ring* and *BWP, Marble Hornets* engages with ideas of technology addicts. In the case of *Ring*, the group of teens that contract the virus at the beginning of the film do so because, although they are in a cabin and could be enjoying nature, they would rather sit inside and watch anything on the television—even an unlabelled videotape.\(^2\) In *BWP*, as well as in countless other found footage horror films (including *Cloverfield* [Matt Reeves 2008] and *Paranormal Activity* [Oren Peli 2007]), the camera operators exhibit an unhealthy obsession with capturing everything to video: it appears that they would sooner die than put down the camera, and more often than not, that is exactly what happens.

The characters of *Marble Hornets* are not much better than the dangerously devoted diegetic filmmakers of found footage horror. At times characters such as J and Alex (Joseph DeLage) seem to recognize that the camera appears to summon the Slender Man, and they might even put down the camera for a short while, but they always end up returning to recording everything they do. In addition, the characters never really question the camera’s ability to accurately represent reality; in fact, J has more confidence in his camera than he does in his own brain. Suffering from the Slender sickness, he frequently blacks out and forgets his actions over long periods of time, and then recalls them later with the aid of video

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\(^2\) This also mirrors the dangerous curiosity against which horror films commonly warn, which I discuss in chapter three.
recordings. The following question is never explicitly asked: what if the video recordings do not represent reality as it really happened, but are instead constructed to control the actions of those who watch them? J’s unwavering faith in the power of his camera to represent reality could very well lead to his demise.

*Marble Hornets*’ diegetic filmmakers’ unhealthy relationship with their cameras reflects a common theme in horror in which a distrust of technology is complicated by a simultaneous dependence upon it. The characters of *Ring*, for example, cannot escape the curse unless they copy the tape; and the characters of *BWP*, even when they are running for their lives, cannot seem to put down their cameras, which not only film the terrifying events as they occur, but also light the way as the characters run through the forest at night. In *Marble Hornets*, when J loses time, his only recourse is to watch what he has done via his video recordings (or those of others who have recorded him). These all illustrate a contemporary problem that will only worsen with time: digital technology is becoming increasingly integrated into the lives of the average person, and if we do not already depend on it, it is likely that soon we will regard it as indispensable to our everyday lives.

Thus far I have presented a fairly negative outlook of humanity’s rocky relationship with technology. Beth Coleman, in her book *Hello Avatar*, suggests an alternative mode of regarding technology—one that acknowledges our obsessive usage and, instead of fighting it, seeks to merge the actual and virtual experiences of the physical and digital spaces that we inhabit into one. Given the large number of people who are connected to the Internet on a daily basis, we need to rethink the borders of what we classify as reality. Coleman suggests that the distinction between “real” and “virtual” is not black and white, with much of our
daily experiences existing instead on an actuality continuum that she refers to as “X-reality” (19-20)—a reality that encompasses both physical and virtual experiences. Coleman argues that we might view our online experiences as augmenting, rather than fragmenting, our everyday lives (43; 83; 124). Citing scientific studies in which simulated and real-life events provoked identical reactions in the brains of participants, she suggests that even virtual experiences can have actual, real-life consequences (134). These observations reflect the words of the character Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) from The Matrix, who identifies the problem of defining what is real in the lines quoted at the top of this section. Do we limit our reality to only the physical one in which we sit as we type away at our computers? Or can we incorporate our online experiences into our everyday reality? If we choose the latter, are we doomed to become the slumbering human batteries depicted in The Matrix, whose lives are but dreams constructed by the machines to distract them?

Coleman’s X-reality suggests a balance between two extremes, one that emphasizes maintaining one’s humanity regardless of whether one is “plugged in.” One way in which we can do this is by ensuring that we are responsible and respectful in both our online and offline communications. Instead of hiding behind the relative anonymity afforded to us by a computer screen, we can humanize our online personas by remaining at all times authentic to who we are in our everyday lives. Such a mode of living is already at work on some online communities, and is particularly recognizable in the folk communities discussed herein.

The videos of folk horror address some frightening themes, but regarding them as part of a folkloric practice reminds us that for all of its faults, the Internet has potential as a communications facilitator, and thus a community builder. Although Marble Hornets does
not directly engage with the ideas of X-reality, its creators, Wagner and DeLage, encourage community building behaviour by posting their videos to an interactive platform as well as by engaging with viewers directly on forums and through Twitter, treating their audience as friends and fellow community members rather than a generic mass of consumers from whom they might gain a profit.

Folk horror is but one of many trends that illustrate the ways in which the everyday person is becoming increasingly involved in the products of popular culture. This trend is also reflected in professional film industry productions that employ multiplatform marketing (The Dark Knight [Christopher Nolan 2008], The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo [David Fincher 2011]) and transmedia storytelling (The Matrix, The Last Exorcism [Daniel Stamm 2010]) to connect with an audience that is increasingly demanding more than just the traditional tools of marketing such as trailers, posters, film stills, and interviews. Folk horror’s content may be disquieting, but the subgenre as a whole exhibits an exciting trend in storytelling that will only become more prevalent with the continued integration of digital technology into the lives of everyday people.

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3 There are countless articles about the innovative campaigns of The Dark Knight and The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, but the best that I have read appear on the blogs of fellow artists and scholars of media. Asmedia hosts an in-depth discussion of The Dark Knight’s campaign; and Mentorless has provided a strong analysis of The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo’s multiplatform marketing campaign. In most cases articles refer to these campaigns as transmedia, but I choose to refer to them as multiplatform marketing as I am not entirely convinced that the ancillary stories fit Henry Jenkins’s definition of transmedia storytelling.
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Appendix

Appendix A: J’s First Thread Post, Uncut

About two or three years ago, a film school friend of mine, Alex, was working on his first "feature length" movie. It was called *Marble Hornets* and I think it was about a twenty something returning to his childhood home and recalling events that happened there. It was pretty pretentious film student fare, but I helped out for a few days before my summer classes started, and a few rare occasions after that. Everyone on the set seemed pretty excited to be making it, especially Alex. The set itself was about half a mile away from Alex's house, roughly a thirty minute drive away from where I lived at the time. It was a pretty heavily wooded area, I guess to give it a sparsely populated small town feel. Most of the movie took place outside.

After about two months of off and on shooting, Alex dropped his pet project completely. It was really sudden when he let me know about it. When I asked him why, he told me it was because of the "unworkable conditions" of where he had picked to shoot. Which struck me as very odd since he had been living around that area since he was eight, and never seemed to have a problem with it. What's even stranger is that he acted incredibly distant when telling me this news. Soon after, he started avoiding me and from what I hear, everyone else. All he did was sit around his house.

Being a film student as well, I hated to see his work go to waste and decided to talk to him about it a bit more. A few weeks after he had stopped shooting, I finally convinced him to let me come over.
Something about him was worse than I'd originally thought. He had lost a good bit of weight, and looked pretty sickly. I pretended like I didn't notice and we just hung out for awhile. Right before I left, I asked him about *Marble Hornets* and what he was planning on doing with all of his tapes of raw footage. With almost no hesitation, he simply said "burn them".

This caught me off guard. When I asked why he didn't just archive them for B-roll in future projects, he just said he never wanted to work with the footage again. He was completely serious about this. I couldn't understand why he'd just want to get rid of it completely. Surely it wasn't all that useless. So I asked if I could take a look at them.

He agreed, but only under the circumstance that I never bring them back to him, and never discuss what was on them with him. He also highly discouraged me from showing any if it to anyone else. I laughed at this, and said that he must have accidentally made *The Ring* or something with the way he was talking. He didn't acknowledge this and brought me up to his attic, where he was storing the pile of tapes.

There were tons of them. He grabbed a couple of plastic shopping bags and piled the tapes in and gave them to me, then shooed me out of the attic. Right as I was walking out the door, he said, in the most serious tone I've ever heard from someone, "I'm not kidding, don't ever bring this up around me again."

Alex's comment was so sudden that I didn't have time to react before he had closed the door on me. He transferred to an out of state school soon after that and I haven't seen him since.
I filed the tapes separately from my others, and was honestly too freaked out to look at them at the time, and eventually forgot about them. But reading about the slender man has peaked my interest again. Maybe it's what Alex was talking about that day.

I've decided to begin going through the tapes later tonight. If I don't do it now, I probably never will. I'm hoping all I find is an unfinished student film and nothing else. That would sure put me at ease now that I'm thinking about it again.

If there's interest, I'll post anything that I find on here.