Powers of the False:
The Slender Man and Post-Postmodernism

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Abstract

This essay brings recent work surrounding the internet phenomenon of the Slender Man into conversation with emerging work in critical literary theory. Specifically, the Slender Man is considered alongside Jeffrey Nealon's Post-Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism *(2012), his diagnosis of contemporary cultural logic, and his consideration of Gilles Deleuze's "powers of the false" in art and literature after postmodernism. This essay explores the ways in which the Slender Man phenomenon reifies these powers, and ultimately argues that the Slender Man helps to elucidate Nealon's vision and definition of "post-postmodern" cultural expression.*

Keywords: Slender Man, critical theory, Deleuze, film, postmodernism, capitalism, Nealon

Introduction

By now, most readers recognize the "Slender Man," an urban legend that first originated on internet forums in 2009 and slowly metastasized into popular culture. Fewer, however, may be aware of the frightening amount of real-life violence that has become associated with the figure. In the summer of 2014, in a startling example of cyberspatial activity turning inside-out, two 12-year-old Wisconsin girls stabbed a classmate 19 times, claiming that they were attempting to attract the attention and approval of the Slender Man. Nine days later, a 13-year-old in Ohio stabbed her mother while wearing a white mask and, still later, a Las Vegas couple shot and killed three people, including two police officers, before committing suicide. In one way or another, each of these acts of violence was ultimately traced back to associations with the Slender Man (Tolbert 2015). Reflecting on the cases, media critics Anne Gilbert and Aaron Trammel commented that what began as "horror at play" had mutated into something much different: "An internet meme created with no nefarious purposes, as part of an agenda of leisure and entertainment…turned gruesome, bloody, and nightmarish"(Trammell and Gilbert 2014, 392). Despite beginning its existence as an internet-bound phenomenon, these recent events surrounding the Slender Man have demanded answers from an increasingly wider audience.

The question of how an internet legend with a fully documented online history

could transgress its boundaries in such widespread ways has recently caught the attention of many scholars, resulting in thorough treatments of the case from a number of disciplines. As comprehensive as these accounts are, I believe that there is still more to be said about the Slender Man's relevance in contemporary culture by bringing these studies into conversation with ongoing work in critical literary theory. As a step toward mapping those connections, I here examine the Slender Man phenomenon through the diagnostic lens of Jeffrey Nealon's *Post-Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Nealon 2012). Specifically, I will be focusing on Nealon's deployment of Gilles Deleuze's "powers of the false," by which contemporary art and literature swerve around the postmodern work of subversion and critique and instead act as "deployments of force" in their own right. By bringing Nealon's theoretical vocabulary alongside the work that has already been done on the Slender Man, particularly in the field of folkloristics, I want to make the case that Slender Man, as a contemporary legend and as a product of "reverse ostension," (Tolbert 2013) provides an example of the powers of the false at work in the contemporary literary imagination as broadly defined by Nealon, recovering for that imagination "a series of other jobs" beyond the postmodern (Nealon 2012, 165). Given that Nealon's excursus is deeply rooted in Deleuze's work on film, I will also be exploring the ways in which the powers of the false extend into the web-series *Marble Hornets* as one of the most "formative" developments in the Slender Man mythos (Tolbert 2016, 3). Ultimately, I argue for the Slender Man's relevance in validating many of Nealon's pronouncements on contemporary art and culture, and for its potential to help identify and further clarify the sorts of shifts that he characterizes as "post-postmodern."

Defining Post-Postmodernism

Following a multi-work trajectory that explores theory's relevance for the twenty-first century, Nealon's project in *Post-Postmodernism* brings the methodology of Fredric Jameson into contact with Nealon's recent work on Foucault and bio-power (Nealon 2008). In the spirit of Jameson's landmark work, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Nealon attempts to provide what he calls a "hermeneutic of situation" for the new millennium, as well as a revised role for critical theory in exploring that same situation. Nealon begins the project with his own take on Jameson's methodological starting-point: "[O]ne logic, smeared across a bunch of discourses," leading into a "transcoding dialectical demonstration" that "you can't unproblematically say that the logic of one of those things...somehow subverts or resists the logic of the other" (Nealon 2012, 23). Specifically, Nealon insists on re-examining the state of critical theory from within the economic logic of the twenty-first century rather than from within the "linguistic turn" of postmodernism, believing that the logic of the former has come to dominate the latter. Among Nealon's main contentions is that, having failed to keep up with this shift in "cultural dominant," the current tools of literary and cultural criticism are no longer adequate to the objects, phenomena, and dynamics that they purport to diagnose and study. Steeped as they are in the liberationist political logic of a previous generation, such discourses

as "poststructuralist poetics" are liable to blunt the "sinister claims of economic theory," whereas "when one dialectically overcodes the liberated cultural effects of postmodernism with the substantially more dire economic realities that rely on the same concepts, one can no longer assess the cultural effects in quite the same way" (Nealon 2012, 23). Nealon's, then, is a counter-assessment, both of cultural logic after postmodernism, and of the futures of literature and theory from within that logic.

Front and center in Nealon's analysis is the notion of *intensification*, "the (non)site where the logic of the individual subject overlaps with the logic of globalization." (Nealon 2012, 42) By intensification, Nealon not only means the increasing speed, efficiency, and saturation of various systems of power, but also the types of exchanges in which these systems traffic. For example, "One might argue that contemporary [Las] Vegas doesn't primarily produce either goods or services," Nealon says, suggesting instead that Vegas produces the "virtual 'intensities'" described by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari: "the thrills of winning, the aches of losing, the awe of the spectacle," in settings where "you don't so much *consume goods* as you *have experiences* where your subjectivity can be intensified, bent, retooled" (Nealon 2012, 27-31). Where the individual subject overlaps with the logic of globalization, then, is the point at which a global economy becomes capable of directly manipulating subjectivity via various intensities. Ironically, reifying such a system also means reifying the sort of pluralism that was at one point the hallmark of postmodern artistic resistance to a politics of the "same." Contrary to a Fordist, cookie-cutter economy which encouraged conformity and sameness, the new socioeconomic logic encourages and commodifies difference in all its forms. As Nealon puts it, "Under an economic logic that is in fact dedicated to the unleashing of multifarious individual desires and floating values, the role of social 'normalization'…needs to be rethought from the ground up" (Nealon 2012, 21). If difference has become complicit in the economic project of normativity, Nealon suggests, then the functions of art and criticism also need to be reconsidered.

A related effect of this capitalist appropriation of postmodern pluralism is that the logics of cultural production have collapsed into the processes of economic production. The implication of this collapse is that previously subversive forms of artistic expression, identified as "postmodern," are now operating within the same capitalist logic that has overcoded them. Nealon's project, as he moves away from economics and towards the humanities, is to examine what all of these changes mean not only for postmodernism, but also for the myriad disciplines touched by these effects, and to answer the question of "what nodes of resistance and/or critique are locatable within such an altered diagnosis of the field itself?" (Nealon 2012, 24). Foremost, Nealon says that this shift in philosophical horizons has universalized our attention to the processes of mediation and interpretation which were the hallmark of postmodern theory. Interpretation and mediation are no longer things to be foregrounded in a subversion of dominant cultural narratives; rather, they are now taken for granted *as* the dominant cultural narrative, leaving the humanities in an odd place after deconstruction:

> One might say that if 'fragmentation'…was the watchword of postmodernism, then, of course, reading follows as postmodernism's linchpin practice, largely through synecdoche: the hermeneutic conundrums of literature…functioned as the *part* that stood in for the *whole* postmodern world of piecing together undecidables. Post-postmodernism, on the other hand, seems to take 'intensification' (an increased spread and penetration) as its paradigmatic ethos, with globalization as its primary practice—all access all the time. (Nealon 2012, 50)

This weakness of institutional obsessions with *meanings* is paradoxically demonstrated by postmodernism's constant performance of readings which only *demonstrate*, or gesture towards, the multiplicity of meaning—a maneuver which our culture no longer requires—without mobilizing or deploying it in any relevant way.

Thus, Nealon argues that a return to a more robust sense of the "literary" involves overcoming what he reads as the postmodern obsession with *meaning* (or lack thereof). To this end, Nealon proposes refocusing on what literature and other cultural products *do* within a given context and how they accomplish their work, rather than approaching literature and other narrative arts myopically from the question of what or how they mean (or don't). Nealon sees this as a rejection of the linguistic turn, disregarding the now-taken-for-granted layers of cultural mediation and instead shifting "from a focus on *understanding* something to a concern with *manipulating* it—from (postmodern) *meaning* to (post-postmodern) *usage*, one might say" (Nealon 2012, 148). Quick to say that this is not a naive return to an essentialist past, Nealon clarifies that this is instead a recognition and acceptance of mutations and evolutions in modes of power.

The implication here is that literature (broadly defined) and its place in the cultural paradigm must shift as well; it cannot be relegated to the role of an "other" outside of cultural forces whose only purpose is the deconstructive work of hollowing out truth claims. It must be rethought as imbricated *within* those forces and capable of telling us something about them more directly. Therefore, literature needs to be reconsidered through what Nealon, again drawing on Deleuze, terms the "powers of the false": "a 'strong' power of the false that lies in its direct ability to create the new, understood specifically as the abnormal or the error—rather than (or at least in addition to) the false's traditional philosophical, 'weak' job of subverting the true" (Nealon 2012, 160). This "error" does not involve the postmodern operation of pointing out inconsistencies in normalizing cultural forces, but rather signals a real epistemological mutation that must be navigated, a challenge to how categories of "true" and "false" are separated out in the first place. In *Cinema 2* (1989) Deleuze himself defines this as an outworking of the Nietzschean legacy, being a powerful artistic demonstration of "truth" as a regime of signs that might yet be navigated otherwise (Deleuze 1989, 133-34). If the work of postmodernism was to undercut and hollow out the canonical and the obligatory, then, Nealon says, the work of post-postmodern art is to demonstrate what else might be done with the "mobile army of metaphors" that is left to us (Nietzsche 1976, 46-7). As Nealon puts it: "One might say that the performative in Deleuze doesn't succeed by failing to be a constative; rather, it succeeds the old-fashioned way—as a direct deployment of force, as a provocation" (Nealon 2012, 160). Here, the privilege is given

to the empirical effects of art's potential to elicit reactions, rather than the success or failure of its constituent speech-acts.

Nealon's primary example of these powers at work is the genre of Conceptual Poetry, specifically the works of experimental poets such as Kenneth Goldsmith and Bruce Andrews. Nealon explores the banality of Goldsmith's collection *The Weather* (a year's worth of transcribed weather reports) hoping to draw attention back to poetry's "monumental" functions, denoting works which are not primarily meant to be read, but rather serve more direct social purposes such as archiving times and places or enshrining memories (Nealon 2012, 144). What interests Nealon about Goldsmith's work is its deliberate refusal to produce new or novel texts. Instead, he gleans the abundance of material and online textual archives and directly manipulates that abundance, recombining it into something else. Additionally, Nealon explores how the "strong" power of the false in Andrews's work might also act as a site of resistance in the post-postmodern moment by seeking out further examples of the "old-fashioned," of artistic forms which "return to poetry a series of other jobs, the functions it had years, even millennia, before poetics became linked inexorably to the question of meaning and its discontents," jobs focused on creative practices and the provocative powers of artistic expression (Nealon 2012, 165).

To sum up Nealon's diagnosis: the increasingly dire economic and social realities of the twenty-first century have made it so that the devices of social critique provided by postmodernism—the slow, the subversive, and the "weak" literary capacity for hollowing out totalizing truth claims—have been deadened by a cultural moment that takes subversion as a given, such that the powers-that-be no longer aim to totalize, but rather to "territorialize" subjects on as many levels as possible (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). If literature, and creative expression more broadly, is to keep up as a relevant cultural force, then it must make a proactive move in its own right to chart new regimes of truth through the powers of the false. In these respects, Nealon's turn towards the "old-fashioned" jobs of fiction and poetry are based on the belief that, before the work of literature became sutured to the question of meaning and its failure, literature was capable of acting as a provocative deployment of force in its own right, one which had the capacity for real social effects.

The terms Nealon uses to discuss literature and its powers of the false lead me directly to my interest in the Slender Man as an object displaying many such powers, and which promises to be useful for clarifying some of the finer points of Nealon's position. The consensus that the Slender Man exists as a contemporary example of a "legend cycle" (Peck 2015; Tolbert 2013) makes it salient for analysis as part of Nealon's claim that the post-postmodern future of literature lies in its resuscitation of "old-fashioned" expressions. My argument proceeds as follows: first, I examine the Slender Man's creation, arguing that the process of "reverse ostension" (Tolbert 2013) strongly reflects the power of the false, which Deleuze identifies in the character of the "forger" (Deleuze 1989). I will then examine the actual social life which the Slender Man has achieved, including the complicated discussion of "belief" that surrounds its mythos, arguing for the Slender Man's capacities as a post-postmodern provocation against

existing regimes of the true rather than as an example of postmodern subversion. Finally, I will continue exploring the Slender Man's powers of the false as they are adapted for the internet-based video series *Marble Hornets* (Delange and Wagner, 2009-2014).[1]

Slender Man and the Powers of the False

Slender Man was first created in 2009 as part of an image-making contest on the internet forum Something Awful. The creator, Eric Knudsen (posting under the username Victor Surge), was inspired by an amalgamation of pop-culture references, psychological tropes, and traditional fairy tales (Chess and Newsom 2015). Following its initial posting, images of the Slender Man proliferated until the creature became a pervasive ghost in internet culture, spreading most commonly via image postings or "creepypasta"—scary stories told in short, easily-copyable text that are quickly disseminated throughout the internet. Despite having an origin in a single user, media scholars Shira Chess and Eric Newsom refer to it as a crowd-sourced entity, a product of internet culture with its narrative bearing an overwhelming number of meanings and trajectories (Chess and Newsom 2015). In some installments, for instance, it stalks young children to kidnap them, or, as in the case of the *Marble Hornets* series, it is implied to stalk these children into adulthood. Sometimes it has limbs like a human, other times it has tentacles; sometimes it kills its victims, other times it merely whisks them away forever; sometimes it brainwashes people into "proxies" to do its work; sometimes it causes disease; sometimes it sets fires; in some cases it disrupts electronic equipment. The Slender Man is anything but schematable.

Chess and Newsom argue that this crowd-sourced, polyvalent nature of the Slender Man, formed around "digital campfires," makes it perhaps the first true folktale of the Internet (Chess and Newsom 2015, 77ff). But folklorists Jeffrey Tolbert and Andrew Peck have argued that the Slender Man represents something more specific, namely that "the figure's backstory deliberately and explicitly mimics the generic conventions typically ascribed to legends" (Tolbert 2013, 2; Peck 2015). Tolbert's definition of a legend, which he takes from Michael Kinsella, is that it is a "communal effort to adapt old customs and beliefs to new situations" by locating the activities of the present and the past along the same historic continuum (Tolbert 2013, 2). Drawing on precedents set by folklorists Bill Ellis and Linda Dégh, Peck suggests that, as a legend, the Slender Man is a "discourse on belief" involving the "communal exploration of social boundaries" which "place[s] events in the group's conception of the real world while also challenging the boundaries of that world" (Peck 2015, 335). So defined, the Slender Man's status as a legend opens it for analysis as an "old-fashioned" function of the narrative and the poetic, which Nealon argues operate through more direct deployments of force than those observed in most contemporary literature.

However, the difference in the Slender Man is that it is not an organically emergent legend, but rather carefully crafted in order to mimic the motifs and patterns of the legend genre. Tolbert defines this as a mutation in the act of "ostension," or the reification of a legend through direct performance and presentation rather than through

narration or representation (Koven 2008, 137).[2] The mutation of this process which Tolbert identifies in the Slender Man is that of "reverse ostension," the act of creating a new iconic figure through the direct manipulation and recombination of existing materials in the folklore genre, "weaving together diverse strands of 'experience' (in the form of personal encounters with the creature, documentary and photographic evidence, etc.) into a more or less coherent body of narratives" (Tolbert 2013, 2-3). In reverse ostension, representation is privileged over direct presentation, insofar as the "experience" of the legend in its various materials comes first, with a narrative logic only emerging later and as the ultimate goal of the project. "By sharing, discussing, and commenting on these artifacts using participatory media," says Peck, "users create legendary narratives and audio/visual 'evidence' that presents researchers with a new kind of digital folk practice…[offering] the opportunity to observe this process of legend creation, negotiation, and circulation from its inception" (Peck 2015, 333-34). Essentially, the process that Peck describes is the reverse-engineering of an urban legend, from the inception of an idea to the creation of evidence supporting its veracity.

This process is similar to what we find in postmodernist fiction, but with several crucial differences. Postmodern fiction has long been recognized for making use of existing narratives and interrupting their cultural power by methodically re-deploying them in subversive ways. Angela Carter's short-story collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), for example, is rooted in the assumption that fairytales and folklore exist to install certain normalizing cultural assumptions in their readers and listeners, and the text therefore offers re-tellings of several familiar stories that subvert and hollow out those assumptions (Carter 1979). Carter demonstrates that re-tellings of fairy-tales, such as the Red Riding Hood story, re-inscribe dominant social codes but also remove their foundations, as Lorna Sage describes: "Fairy tale has here a two-faced character…more often than not as a supporting strand in a realist or sentimental bourgeois narrative. But you can tease out the sub-text… Fairy tale relies on repeated motifs, multiple versions and inversions, the hole in the text where the readers insert themselves" (Sage 1998). Nealon, of course, argues that the myopic attention to "versions and inversions" and "holes in the text," part and parcel of postmodernism, represents the "weak" end of literature's power which has become increasingly irrelevant in the twenty-first century. If the Slender Man is to give credence to the idea of post-postmodernism, and literature's ability to keep up with it, then it must demonstrate a different use of the materials that undergird it.

While postmodern strategies such as Carter's identify the totalizing truth-claims of folktales and then hollow-out those claims through retellings, the Slender Man's use of the same materials leads to something markedly different. For one, the deliberate production of the Slender Man using motifs of the legend genre gives it a more precise function than simply that of general folklore (Tolbert 2013, 2).[3] In fact, the process of reverse ostension which created the Slender Man is comparable to the genre of Conceptual Poetry discussed by Nealon. Just as Goldsmith and Andrews directly manipulate pre-existing texts into new forms in order to create their poetry, so the

Slender Man emerged as a similar treatment of existing motifs from folklore, fiction, and popular culture. Tina Marie Boyer lists several of Knudsen's initial inspirations for the character:

> Among them were H.P. Lovecraft, Stephen King, William S. Borroughs, and games such as *Silent Hill* and *Resident Evil*. Slender Man shares the internal psychological struggles, alienation, and fragmentation of the subjects in Borroughs's work, along with Lovecraft's themes of insanity, mind control, and monstrous hybridity on a grand scale—the idea of evil lurking in the shadows with no distinctive features lending itself to multiple new artistic interpretations. (Boyer 2013, 245)

The cobbling together of these initial inspirations led to further, more deliberate attempts to imitate the legend genre through the manipulation of pre-existing materials. Chess likens this process to the use of Open Source software, involving "reuse, modification, sharing of source code, an openness (and transparency) of infrastructure," and a clear attention to usage over meaning which, Nealon says, characterizes the post-postmodern (Chess 2011, 383).

This "Open Source," or re-combinative logic which produced the Slender Man, the use of reverse ostension, and the deliberate intent to mimic the legend genre while re-deploying the Slender Man back into that genre all serve to support the creature as an example of the powers of the false that Nealon describes. Jason Wallin, elucidating Deleuze's original use of the term through the commentaries of Brian Massumi and Jean Baudrillard, refers to these powers as "an encounter between the virtual and the actual" which might be constituted as "a working simulation injected into society," or "evidenced when life does not aim at the representation of reality, but produces real effects through play and artifice" (Wallin 2011, 107-8). Either description may apply to the project behind the Slender Man's origin, and quickly identifies the monster's creators with the filmic character that Deleuze calls the "forger."

Deleuze sets the forger apart from the stereotypical liar by again recalling the Nietzschean move at the heart of the powers of the false: whereas the liar attempts to subvert or distract us from an existent "truth," the forger creates a new regime of truth which calls the previous one into question, himself becoming the "*creator of truth*" in a process that Deleuze himself likens to legend-making (Deleuze 1989, 150-52) The powers of forgery can be observed in the online conversations which led to the Slender Man's development, insofar as the interactive community ultimately arrived at the decision to create a narrative that "people would believe that people believed" (Tolbert 2013, 9). In a most telling example, one user calling themselves "H.P. Shivcraft" went so far as to offer up a personal narrative in which they discovered the story of the Slender Man within an actually existing folkloric text (Tolbert 2013, 9-10). H.P. Shivcraft's account brings multiple threads of the powers of the false together: first, there is the act of reverse ostension which conjures up a narrative precedent for the Slender Man. Second, H.P. Shivcraft acts as a forger by directly manipulating a real-world text and identifying it as an origin for the Slender Man story. Though the user did not actually have any access to the text, nor did they in fact alter it, the act

of locating the Slender Man back within the materials on which it is based still lends the story a further air of authenticity, serving to destabilize the regimes of truth that would easily dismiss it as simply a fantasy.

The work which went into the creation of the Slender Man should also preclude its easy dismissal as nothing more than an act of internet play or leisure; as Tolbert says, the very deliberate nature of the Slender Man's construction means that it "moves beyond its immediate purpose of entertainment to provide an ongoing commentary on what constitutes a particular type of folklore" (Tolbert 2013, 7). Folklore itself, then, is one of the regimes of truth which the Slender Man is designed to question, and one major part of that regime is the status of the monster. Many author-comments on the Something Awful forums and other platforms dedicated to the creation of Slender Man lore involved direct commentary on "conceptions of monsters and the monstrous" (Tolbert 2013, 6). Through the process of reverse ostension, Tolbert argues that the community drew from multiple elements which they individually found frightening in order to produce the Slender Man as an aggregate, "a fearful symbol, a monster that, according to its own emic standards, is frightening in virtually any context" (Tolbert 2013, 17). But what stands out about this reading is that, as an aggregate, the Slender Man also mobilizes its own powers of the false to interrogate the regimes of truth where the monster typically lives. Boyer helps define this regime, arguing that monsters are typically installed by social attitudes and defined by the functions they serve: "The monster can defy, uphold, or break cultural norms, it can serve in a variety of ways, but most often it represents fear, functioning as threshold guardian and prohibitive figure" (Boyer 2013, 240-41). In Deleuzian terms, monsters operate with an entire regime of truth behind them, a set of assumptions about their logic and function.

In his landmark study, *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990), philosopher Noel Carroll argued that the typical trajectory of horror narrative introduced the monster as a disruption of the commonplace which needed to be overcome in order to restore normativity, such that the monster invariably acted as an "agent of the established order" (Carroll 1990, 196). Monsters, then, typically serve to re-inscribe normative beliefs by first disrupting them, by functioning as a "trial" through which the narrative subject passes in order to arrive back at a more powerfully constituted sense of the True (Deleuze 1989, 148). However, by serving as a discourse on beliefs that are undefined and over social boundaries that have not been explicitly laid, the Slender Man ambiguates the traditional social function of the monster: "He is a prohibitive monster, but the cultural boundaries he guards are not clear. Victims do not know when they have violated and crossed them. At times it is enough to have seen the creature to become its victim" (Boyer 2013, 252). Despite being the deliberate aggregate of a number of existing and traditional monstrous tropes, the Slender Man itself emerges without a clear function as part of a traditional horror narrative. As a result, its powers of the false question the entire regime of narrative "truths" which give rise to monsters in the first place. Again, this describes the Slender Man not as subversive, in a postmodern sense, but as doing the stronger work of exploring boundaries that have not yet been

established, and negotiating those sociocultural dimensions which are rapidly and constantly shifting in the Internet age.

At this point, it is tempting to suggest that the Slender Man's polyvalent meaning simply repeats the postmodern logic, which Nealon says has become obsolete, of drawing attention to the dialectical tension between endless interpretation and interpretation's ultimate failure (Nealon 2012, 142-43). Here, however, I would argue that the Slender Man's multiple possible meanings are not an effect of endless interpretation, but rather a function of the Slender Man's existence as a sort of sign-post, as an archive of and a monument to the disparate elements that went into its creation. Andrea Kitta further explores the Slender Man's polyvalent meaning and, rather than concluding that the monster means many things at once, suggests the inverse: "[H]e does not represent any one thing, but rather fills in for anything frightening, anything that could be watching the individual… Slender Man not only gives us a place to assign value to…unacknowledged common experiences, he is standing there, acknowledging these experiences" (Kitta 2015, 72-73). While Kitta explores the many powers of "perhaps" in the Slender Man, her main concern is not how the Slender Man empowers or frustrates the search for meaning, but rather how it provokes the assignation of meaning through the myriad ways in which it is deployed. For Kitta, as for Nealon, the Slender Man's *meaning* is overcoded by what it can be "*used* to express," giving voice to latent modern anxieties which may as yet have no other articulation (Kitta 2015, 72-73). Far from making meaning on its own, the Slender Man serves as a sort of "hinge or 'torque'" through which it is capable of indexing multiple uses and expressions (Nealon 2012, 165).[4]

Still, some of those expressions—especially violent expressions, even against children—have been inarguably horrific. Similar to Carter's postmodern deployments of the folklore genre, the Slender Man also has a certain social logic embedded within its creation. However, rather than dialectically installing/subverting cultural norms, the Slender Man's social effects are much more provocative. The degree to which the Slender Man is a "discourse on belief" has become a more challenging issue in light of the recent acts of violence that have been traced back to Slender Man, or wherein the Slender Man has been invoked as an explanation. In his analysis, Peck explains that the reverse-ostensive practices which created the Slender Man have ultimately circled back towards ostension, with those familiar with the monster seeking ways to act out the story in real life. While many of these practices are benign, the recent acts of violence have also caused the creative community to backpedal and reassert the fictive nature of the Slender Man and the playful nature of their own activities, a move which appears to be directly at odds with the original intention of making a legend that was believable (Peck 2015, 31). Tolbert suggests a mistranslation between the intentions of the community, who desired their legend to be believable *as a legend*, and the reception of the public, where some have been tempted to believe that the Slender Man is based in fact (Tolbert 2015). In other words, while the Slender Man is created by Deleuzian forgers who are aware of the constructed nature of their "truth," their creation has been received by many who, still operating in a realist paradigm of truth, began to confuse play and reality.

Kitta's analysis of this situation proves especially interesting, as she identifies that there is, in fact, an even larger social regime of truth being pressured by the Slender Man's powers of the false:

> As [David] Hufford (1982) has shown, American society has a "tradition of disbelief"'; while it is traditional to believe in certain things, it is also traditional to *not* believe in certain things. Additionally, individuals regard the experiences of others to be up for questioning, while our own experiences are treated as dogma. (Kitta 2015, 63)

Kitta argues that the Slender Man stories carry a "double stigma" since they are both about the supernatural and based on the internet, two elements which remain suspect in the American "tradition of disbelief." In overcoming that stigma, the creators of the Slender Man worked to root their legend in forms which lent it credibility as an experience, including modeling it on extant legends and fabricating material "evidence." Furthermore, the "empty" nature of the Slender Man which allows it to index multiple expressions has also allowed it to ventriloquize personal experiences and anxieties that are otherwise impossible to articulate, to the point that those experiences feel "real" in retrospect. The result has been that, while not proving the Slender Man as real by any means, the creators still managed to upset the "tradition of disbelief" at a fundamental level. By troubling the existing regime of truth to the point of making certain epistemic slippages possible, the Slender Man became a hinge in how truth and falsehood were separated out, thus becoming "a part of the experience of life in the modern world" (Kitta 2015, 70).

Just as Nealon says the logics of production and consumption have become muddled in contemporary culture, the Slender Man also demonstrates these confusions along traditional lines of belief and disbelief. Between the intensity of the powers that produced it, as well as its status as a hybrid of archive and narrative elements, the Slender Man achieved such momentum that it ultimately escaped its own systems of production in an astounding display of what strong powers of the false may be capable of. The Slender Man emerged as an epistemological challenge working its power by proliferating at such breakneck speed that it even began to collapse the logics of its own production and consumption. It accomplished this through forging strong fictive error, historically grounded and across a decentralized and only loosely-policed authorial community. Chess and Newsom observe:

> During the weeks when the story construction [first] took place...there is a constant slippage between those who are creating (and open sourcing) the conventions of the Slender Man, and the audiences who are consuming it. Because many of those on the forum were both designers and consumers of the mythology that was being constructed the forum contributors and audiences often became terrified by their own tales. (Chess and Newsom 2015, 63)

The Slender Man, then, does not terrify through "weak" postmodern powers of interruption. Rather, it follows the twenty-first century cultural logic of intensification

identified by Nealon and pushes it to its limit, challenging existing regimes of truth to the point at which even its producers become terrified consumers of their own product.

Marble Hornets and Post-Postmodernism
My analysis of the Slender Man's creation history and reception has foregrounded the ways in which it operates through the Deleuzian powers of the false, making it a candidate for what Nealon might call a post-postmodern cultural expression. But though powers of the false may be observable in the figure of the Slender Man itself, there is little to tell us about its actual capacity for *resistance* to the cultural logic which Nealon says has become dominant. However, the Slender Man has not only proliferated through image forums or texts, but also through film. Within these filmic adaptations, we can possibly begin to see ways in which post-postmodern art can further clarify Nealon's cultural diagnosis, and what new modes of resistance or critique might be available.

Though it is far from the only filmic adaptation of the Slender Man mythos, *Marble Hornets* is certainly the most iconic and impactful.[5] Beginning as a spinoff of the Something Awful forum narratives, and emerging only days after the initial posts went live, *Marble Hornets* launched when a student calling himself Jay uploaded the introductory video to his YouTube channel, "MarbleHornets," on 20 June 2009.[6] In "Entry #1," Jay explains that he was given a series of video tapes by his friend Alex shortly before Alex disappeared without a trace. From there, the series progresses in a first-person "found-footage" style as Jay documents his search for Alex while he and other characters attempt to evade an entity known as the Operator—a tall, thin, faceless man styled after the Slender Man—and the human "proxies" which act on its behalf. The series includes 92 videos on the primary YouTube channel, 39 videos in which an antagonistic channel operated by a human proxy, "totheark,"[7] interacts with the content of the primary channel, and 582 Tweets in a real-time Twitter feed.[8] As of this writing, MarbleHornets and totheark share an excess of 100 million views between them.

Marble Hornets capitalizes on processes of intensification and proliferation through its use of multi-media deployment. While the majority of the footage in *Marble Hornets* is presented after events take place, whether the tapes are salvaged or uploaded by characters, timestamps and cross-platform interaction contextualize the videos as playing out in real-time, with audience interaction on the Twitter feed reinforcing this. This cross-platform interaction foregrounds one of the ways in which *Marble Hornets* itself operates in a post-postmodern way, namely through its variations on Deleuze's "time image," which Nealon identifies as a "direct mode of manipulating filmic time." (Nealon 2012, 158) Nealon identifies such modes as post-postmodern because of the ways in which they ostensibly eschew mediation in favor of direct presentation, or privilege use over meaning. Deleuze's take is more specific: the time-image, or the "crystalline regime" of the image, eschews a particular realist regime of truth in which the image traditionally operates. The realist regime arranges objects within a

narrative space, whereas the powers of the false only provoke a story through the direct presentation of images and objects (Deleuze 1989, 139). While Deleuze's notion here is very close to what Tolbert calls "reverse ostension," which is definitive of the Slender Man mythos as a whole, *Marble Hornets* provides the clearest presentation of it. Each entry is short, often presented as a single shot, and when the main channel begins to interact with totheark, the viewer is often forced to interpret codes or make judgments in terms of how to order the entries in a cohesive way. Several times over, the entirety of *Marble Hornets* has been arranged into various playlists which guide new viewers through multiple channels and tweets, but in each case all but the most rudimentary narrative structures are imposed upon the work by third parties after the fact.

Furthermore, the reliance of the Slender Man mythos upon the Deleuzian character of the forger is also subtly foregrounded in *Marble Hornets*. In the most intense expressions of the powers of the false, Deleuze says that forgery (which is to say the act of creation itself) is carried to the "nth power" by "chains of forgers" who reveal that, in contradistinction to the old regime of Truth, all "truthful men" are really "no less false than [the forger]" (Deleuze 1989, 134). *Marble Hornets* brilliantly displays this by presenting a cast of characters that is, in reality, a series of forgers: the character Alex, an aspiring filmmaker, is in the early tapes seen ordering his cast and giving directions. Presenting Alex as director foregrounds him as a creator, and as the cast gets larger we see that all of the characters are connected through their mutual love of acting and creating. The ultimate irony, then, is that despite a documentary style which purports to be an objective recording of real events, *Marble Hornets* is created by a cast of characters who are trained in the production of narratives and the manipulation of narratives into falsehoods: they are actors playing actors, artists playing artists playing victims in a "chain of forgers" which aids in producing a new regime of "truth" in their films.

At this point, it is worth considering what distinguishes *Marble Hornets* from other films in the genre of found-footage horror. Tolbert, for instance, personally attests to the power of fiction to confuse reality which he experienced when first viewing *The Blair Witch Project* (1999).[9] In fact, he cites *Blair Witch,* Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds,* and other works as precedential of *Marble Hornets* and the Slender Man mythos as a whole, presented as they were "in ways that mimicked real media conventions and were therefore *convincing*." (Tolbert 2015, 38-39) Mikel J. Koven cites *Blair Witch* and the more recent *Paranormal Activity* (2007) as grounds to dissent from the position that Slender Man or *Marble Hornets* bring anything unique to the table (Koven 2015, 105-11). But by following Nealon's lead and shifting the angle of analysis, I hope to demonstrate that *Marble Hornets* differs from these other works in precisely the ways which make it interesting from a post-postmodern perspective.

In his analysis of *Marble Hornets*, Adam Daniel attempts to use the work to give further credence to the "third" and "fourth" screens of media theory, i.e. the cinematic capacities of the smartphone and the tablet—the technologies for which *Marble Hornets* was designed (Daniel 2016). Daniel's analysis goes a long way towards demonstrating

that, just as there is a regime of truth under contention in the Slender Man phenomenon itself, *Marble Hornets* also operates not by hollowing-out a particular regime of truth but by actively contesting it with another set of potentials. In this case, it is the logic of horror cinema itself, which Daniel calls "ocularcentric," that is under pressure, focused as it is on the response of the eye to images, and therefore based around the image of "the monster and what it represents," or, in Carroll's terms, what the monster *means* as the narrative disruption of an *a priori* order of things (Daniel 2016, 5). This regime, Daniel contends, creates a set of formulations and expectations which limit what the horror genre is capable of: "[W]hen the appeal of horror film is constrained to the potentialities of a sharply defined central monster or a narrative drive to know the unknowable, it neglects to consider that horror cinema engages with us at a level that goes beyond cognitive evaluation of potential threat and impurity" (Daniel 2016, 6). Daniel takes *Marble Hornets* as his object of analysis because, in his estimation, the work manages to look for potentialities beyond the ocularcentric while other found-footage films such as *Blair Witch* have only managed to repeat them. By only rarely showcasing its monster and using the camera as something other than an "eye" (e.g. through the use of chest-mounted cameras during running shots), Daniel argues that *Marble Hornets* mines the other experiences of the body for new possibilities in producing believable horror film for a medium and audience that is decidedly removed from traditional cinema: "Through the process of implicating the body of the spectator in a palpable way, cinematic new media such as *Marble Hornets* may have effects that overpower [the] drive to cognitive rationale" (Daniel 2016, 8-9). As a result, *Marble Hornets* offers potentially new artistic approaches which have been occluded by the pervasiveness of traditional filmmaking.

It is precisely on this last point—that of overpowering the logic of traditional cinema—that I believe Nealon's perspective becomes especially useful. The economic preoccupation which runs through *Post-Postmodernism* offers a unique lens through which to view *Marble Hornets* in relation to other works in its genre, and taking this perspective helps to elucidate the ways in which *Marble Hornets* also manages to engage in a certain kind of resistance, giving credence to the sort of analysis that Nealon is trying to promote. Just as Daniel says there is a certain narrative logic which dominates in horror cinema, so too is there an *economic* logic that also dominates those considerations. The cinema remains an industry, supporting and being supported by certain ways of doing things. The success of *The Blair Witch Project*, while still innovative and exciting, remains a success which occurred firmly within the potentialities afforded by the film industry. From this perspective, the decision to release *Marble Hornets* via YouTube (before the platform was itself territorialized by the film and television industries in the forms of ad revenue and YouTube Red) becomes much bolder (Milner 2016).[10] Daniel suggests that this allows the work to pursue potentialities other than those afforded under a specific economic model, freeing it up to deploy the powers of the false: "*Marble Hornets*, as an outlier to the Hollywood system in its independent production and release, is more freely able to transgress the limits of this 'rational' system in favour of images and sounds that are counter or excessive to a 'seamless'

presentation" (Milner 2016, 13). These modes of expression are available to *Marble Hornets* precisely because of its freedom from the artistic/economic expectations which make up the logic of traditional cinema.

This economic logic trickles down from the production of *Marble Hornets* and into the actual specifics of the filming. Daniel points out that the tight budget of the work requires deeper considerations of camera mobility and price, a constraint which "allows for an entirely new world of images"(Milner 2016, 10). Furthermore, the economic realities of the project are also foregrounded in the narrative: several times, we observe Jay or Alex purchasing new equipment such as tapes, SD cards, food, even phones or hotel rooms. Because the Operator is apparently warded off by video and recording technology, filming becomes a ceaseless job for the characters which keeps them perpetually on the move, lest they be tracked down by a monster that they rarely see. *Marble Hornets* does not shy away from the economic reality of such a situation, presenting the enormous amount of resources such a lifestyle requires. Not only this, but in a further deviation from ocularcentric logic, the project of constant filming is actually performed in the hopes that the monster will be warned off and therefore *never* presented on the camera. Compared to *The Blair Witch Project*, which utilizes the logic of the cinema in pursuit of its monster and in pursuit of Truth—what "really" happened—*Marble Hornets* instead presents the very act of recording and uploading as an act of *survival* which runs counter to the ocularcentric; any question of meaning or truth is sublimated by the need to remain alive long enough to upload another entry in a bizarre ritual for avoiding the monster while hoping that anyone watching might be able to help.

The decision for *Marble Hornets* to operate outside the Hollywood production logic also draws new attention to the potentialities of its chosen platform. Just as the traditional cinematic industrial logic is often confounded on YouTube, media critic Ryan Milner also notes that the platform's capacity for both fictitious/farcical content and authentic, personal exposure often leave audiences with a certain ambivalence towards the ways in which media should be received (Milner 2016, 209). This ambivalence inherent in the YouTube platform allowed the creators of *Marble Hornets* to extend the powers of the false already operative in the Slender Man mythos even further, into a territory where they would be further exacerbated. As Daniel argues, the YouTube platform is capable of creating a space of "hyperawareness" of our relationship to technology—suspended in the cinema but heightened through more accessible screens such as the smartphone and the computer—which thus "denies the kind of spectatorial disbelief that is more easily summoned in standard horror genre films."(Daniel 2016, 9) The use of budget, handheld cameras for instance, served a particular function within the world of the *Blair Witch Project*, but one which was still overcoded by the expectations of a cinematic industrial logic. On YouTube, the documentary nature of *Marble Hornets* rubbed shoulders with other "authentic" uses of the same tools and platform, where the camera could still largely be perceived as a recording device presenting unmediated images (Daniel 2016)[11] and where the economic concerns noted above could further contribute to the sense that viewers were

watching amateurs who were acting in earnest. Further, in the careful manipulation of the filmic images themselves through rupture and decay, the creators of *Marble Hornets* not only minimized the actual presentation of the monster but also heightened the sense of ambiguity, and instances of technological failure also lent authenticity to the videos by further distancing them from the seamless (or what Deleuze would call the "organic") image-logic of the cinema. As a result, just as occurred in online forums about the Slender Man, many users came to the *Marble Hornets* videos aware that they were observing a fiction, and yet they could not help but (partially) wonder if what they were seeing was real (Tolbert 2015, 51-52).

In sum, *Marble Hornets* utilizes the powers of the false which are already operative within the Slender Man mythos and extends them through the medium of film. However, *Marble Hornets* does not operate on the same cinematic logic as other works in the found-footage genre, and its alternative approaches to technology, image, and narrative all draw lines of flight (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) away from a logic which has been territorialized by specific industry concerns. As a result, *Marble Hornets* not only adds to the authenticity of the Slender Man mythos as a whole, it also more locally manages to resist the economic logic that has restricted the artistic potentialities of other films. While not a work of "literature," per se, the artistic strategies of *Marble Hornets* dovetail closely enough with Nealon's work in *Post-Postmodernism* to give further validation to his instincts that future work in the arts and humanities has the capacity to keep up with and respond to contemporary cultural logic—if, of course, they are willing to resist the concerns which currently overcode them and activate new potentialities.

Conclusions

At the end of *Post-Postmodernism*, Nealon argues that "[i]nnovation these days consists of putting existing things together in stark and productive 'new' ways; and the humanities are (or should be) a key laboratory for such a transformed practice of innovation…producing a kind of cartography that can diagnose and respond to the post-postmodern present" (Nealon 2012, 194). It is in this laboratory spirit that I set out to examine the Slender Man phenomenon as a product of a post-postmodern culture. As has been demonstrated, the Slender Man phenomenon, especially as it is remediated through the *Marble Hornets* series, takes on new relevance as a cultural artifact when understood through Nealon's account of post-postmodernism and as a response to contemporary cultural logic. The Slender Man, as one such act of innovation, not only validates Nealon's cultural diagnostic in many ways but it also helps elucidate which art forms might best be able to engage with that logic in the contemporary world.

While the forms and purpose of such engagement and resistance may yet be difficult to predict, the Slender Man's creators themselves provide a major trajectory. While posing a series of questions to members of the original creative community via the SlenderNation web forum, Jeffrey Tolbert asked how important it was that the Slender Man be viable or believable as a legend. In response, a user called Voidmaster

posted:

> So much of our desire for knowledge and experience can be immediately placated by things like the internet these days, that it seems we've finally found the boarders [sic] of the map. That there are only a few remaining dark areas left on the map, all of which are so extremely esoteric and complicated that, to the common man, they might not as well be there at all. … And so without any apparent black spots on the map, we seek to draw our own. (See Tolbert 2013, 14-15)

Voidmaster's comments reflect precisely the sort of attitude that Nealon expresses in *Post-Postmodernism*. Faced with a cultural logic that no longer cares about having the "right" map, preferring instead to have as many maps in as many places as possible, the potential for artistic resistance lies not in critiquing a given map as wrong or as totalizing, but in creating "black spots" where there seemingly are none. This is what Nealon means by deploying the powers of the false: the creation of new spaces which have not yet been territorialized, or the disruption of spaces where only one logic appears to dominate. "Now, as we hover between modern and postmodern worlds," says Boyer—or, to revise her situation, between postmodern and post-postmodern worlds—"we encounter once again the demand for new cartographies" (Boyer 2013, 256). Such is the language with which Voidmaster articulates the Slender Man project, and with which Nealon ends *Post-Postmodernism*, challenging humanistic and social studies to devise new ways of critiquing culture not merely through deconstructively subverting it, but through the more Deleuzian process of mapping, diagnosing, and indicting it. The Slender Man encourages us to think of what art and imagination might yet offer to that process, and demonstrates that sometimes, rather than coming after us and re-inscribing our norms, our monsters may indeed go before us, charting and settling territories of which we are not yet fully aware.

Notes

1   The YouTube channel name has since been updated to "Clear Lakes 44 | Marble Hornets" to denote the continuing projects of the *Marble Hornets* creators and their production company, THAC LLC.

2   Koven himself draws on the work of Linda Dégh for his definition of "ostension," though many of the works cited in this paper defer to Koven's use of the term.

3   Tolbert here cites Lynne McNeill, who notes that the Internet community has "adopted the concept of *memes* to identify what folklorists would call folklore," and that the resulting equivocation has occasionally caused problems in studies where the meaning or genre of folklore under discussion is more precise.

4   "Torque" is a word that Nealon borrows from Bruce Andrews to describe the sorts of operations experienced in Language Poetry: "Andrews speeds up language as a series of creative practices, rather than primarily slows it down and territorializes it on one function, language's meaning (or lack thereof). It's the confrontation of performative or inventive force that you see on every line; in every 'gap' there's not meaning waiting to burst forth

(or not), but a kind of hinge, linkage, movement, intensification—what Andrews calls 'torque.' And this torque returns to poetry a series of other jobs, the functions it had years, even millennia, before poetics became linked inexorably to the question of meaning and its discontents: here, we see poetry function as discourse that's ceremonial, aggressive, passive, communal, seductive, repulsive, humorous, persuasive, insulting, praising, performative, and lots more. But one thing it doesn't do—or even really attempt—is to 'mean' something" (165).

5   Other examples include *EverymanHYBRID* and *TribeTwelve*, both starting as YouTube-based series before expanding to include Twitter, blogging platforms, and geocaching as part of their interactive approach as Alternate Reality Games (See Tolbert 2015, n.15). Notably, *EverymanHYBRID* began to incorporate other urban legends and "creepypasta" ideas into its overall narrative, also sharing a narrative "universe" with *TribeTwelve*, while *Marble Hornets*, in said universe, is considered a fiction.

6   THAC LLC, "Entry #1," *Clear Lakes 44 | Marble Hornets* video, 1:59. 20 June 2009.

7   totheark, YouTube user.

8   @marblehornets, Twitter (website). As with the YouTube channel, the @marblehornets Twitter feed continues to update with a new narrative, *Clear Lakes 44*.

9   See Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez.

10   Milner contrasts the "many-to-many" mode of digital communication to the "one-to-many" gatekeeping model of broadcast and cinematic media (112), while also noting that the distinctions between professional and amateur, commercial and community are "industrial logics" that do not always hold up on platforms such as YouTube (207). See also Wallin's comments on the double-articulation involved in the production of certain media and other artistic logics when different juxtapositions are at work ("Mobilizing Powers of the False," 110).

11   See also Wallin on the ability for differently-articulated uses of technology to open up "escape routes from under the laws of *use-monopoly*" ("Mobilizing Powers of the False," 107, emphasis in the original).

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