Slender Man & the Collective Anxiety of the Information Age

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We didn't want to go, we didn't want to kill them, but its persistent silence and outstretched arms horrified and comforted us at the same time…

— 1983, photographer unknown, presumed dead.*

Slender Man, a current internet folk-horror character, evokes three major concepts within modern media theory: Adorno and Horkheimer's "Concept of Enlightenment," Heidegger's "Angst," and McLuhan's "Cool Media" and "Retribalization." Within this essay, I will argue that the Slender Man character and his mere existence in the 21st century pop consciousness can be derived and justified by these longstanding media theorists. Both as an example and as a result, the following theories strengthen my belief that Slender Man is the personification of a collective anxiety plaguing the residents of the information age.

The Consequences of Enlightenment

In 1944, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer discussed "The Concept of Enlightenment" in their work of philosophical criticism called *The Dialect of Enlightenment*, which questions the positive outcomes of the Enlightenment. By this, however, they refer not to the European "Age of Enlightenment," nor any particular movement. Instead, they describe a generalized modern idea of the way things are: a society that has embraced technology and reason over longstanding myth and tradition.

Among many points, Adorno and Horkheimer submit that there are potential consequences of "enlightened" living. They see Enlightenment as advancement, which

in turn liberates and and empowers people from what was once mystical and unknown. "…the mind, conquering superstition, is to rule over disenchanted nature" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2). Ideally, people would be freed of trumped-up myths and replace those ideas with logic, reasoning and technology, which they called "the essence of knowledge."

But Adorno and Horkheimer postulate that in place of myth, technology can cause a greater disenchantment. The bursting of the "illusion" of superstition leads into a darker, theoretical reality:

> "In the authority of universal concepts the Enlightenment detected a fear of the demons through whose effigies human beings had tried to influence nature in magic rituals. From now on matter was finally to be controlled without the illusion of immanent powers or hidden properties. For enlightenment, anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion." (3)

> "The super-natural, spirits and demons, are taken to be reflections of human beings who allow themselves to be frightened by natural phenomena. According to enlightened thinking, the multiplicity of mythical figures can be reduced to a single common denominator, the subject." (4)

There is a new subject, perhaps borne from technology, that indulges the urges Enlightened thinking has left unsatisfied. Media theory, as with technology itself,

evolves. At the time, Adorno and Horkheimer believed that technology eradicates myth; it exists to dispel fear of the unknown, since empiricism and logical thought should clarify fear. Yet, things are still unknowable.

The character called Slender Man is a modern myth, created by one man but shared and developed across multiple platforms by countless contributors. Like Sasquatch or vampires, he is a horror figure who fills a niche in our paranoid culture. But unlike other ghost stories, Slender Man seems to have been created to fulfill a specific purpose: to represent the fear of the unknown. In an age where information, facts and theories can be proven and shared with such rapidity, what's left unknown can be truly unsettling. Just as Adorno and Horkheimer warned, the omnipotence of gods has been replaced with the infallibility of science, but we as people are still vulnerable to authoritative manipulation. The more we seek to rationalize and prove with empiricism, the more fearsome we become of the inexplicable.

Who Is Slender Man?

In the world of internet forums, *creepypastas* emerged as a format to share stories and images to frighten viewers. Unlike a written or oral story, *creepypastas* deliver spook through internet memes, either animated, digitally illustrated or woven into games. Slender Man rose in popularity among most other *creepypastas*, beginning in 2009, no doubt due to his fictional flexibility. Created by a contributor to the online forum Something Awful, Eric Knudsen (known online by his username Victor Surge), Slender Man is a supernatural entity known mostly by his appearance: freakishly tall and thin as his name suggests, with extra long arms and fingers, always dressed in a black tailored

suit. His most frightening attribute seems to be his white, featureless face, devoid of any emotion or human expression.

Slender Man began as an offering to a Something Awful forum simply titled "Create Paranormal Images." Knudsen posted two archival black and white photos in which he had inserted the first iteration of Slender Man, standing in shadows behind groups of children playing.

As a horror figure, Slender Man exhibits and embodies many characteristics. Not an aggressive character, Slender Man's mythos describes him as more passive; he stalks his prey rather than ambushing, he "enjoys" being seen or spotted by onlookers, and he usually seeks children as his victims. In addition to the victims' assumed fate of death, Slender Man has supernatural abilities, such as hypnosis, inducing insomnia or memory loss, and even the power to distort or interrupt audio and video transmissions.

There is a bridge that forms between the "Concept of Enlightenment" and the mythos of Slender Man. The Enlightenment expresses a great move toward rationality, to debunk superstition. With the Enlightenment, people can move toward the infallibility of technology and logic in order to overcome paranoid fears. But in the place of myth, knowledge becomes totalitarian. Instead of worshipping gods or adhering to folkloric tradition, we have become indebted to capital and the means by which to obtain it. If knowledge is power, and power is almighty, then knowledge is a commodity like any other. And for those living within a developed, capitalistic society, we are no stranger to the worship of our paychecks, the servitude to our bosses, the lack of sleep or

forgetfulness caused by stress, and the sometimes overwhelming duty to provide for our families.

Slender Man is a personification of digital-era paranoia, in ways both subtle and overt. An unnerving, faceless giant dressed in a suit: is he the autocrat of capitalism we fear and submit to? Is he a projection of ourselves, stripped of emotion and forced into the role of stalker, on-looker, pariah? Is Slender Man's preference of inhabiting woodsy areas a subconscious desire to escape the digital platform and return to our humanity? Does he distort audio and visual footage because we seek to hide from even the most pervasive forms of instantaneous media? Through knowledge, there is theoretically "nowhere else to hide." Slender Man is both a figure that terrifies us with his ambiguity, and the sad image we now see ourselves fitting into. Where once superstition (and adhering to such) gave us some comfort against a chill or fright, Slender Man forces us to gape at how scary things actually are.

Angst

Martin Heidegger once said, "Without light we see nothing, yet the feeling of dread arises precisely because things are present—somewhere out there, vaguely threatening, but without revealing any danger in particular."

"Being in Time" is Heidegger's 1927 philosophical text that has spawned some influence to 20th century existentialism. He describes *Dasein,* a concept of "being-there-in-time:" each beings' unique presence on their path– an their ultimate acceptance of their morality. Along this train of thought, *Angst* (otherwise referred to as "dread" or "anxiety")

intersects *Dasein.* As Heidegger sees it, fear in our *Dasein* is of tangible things (poverty, cockroaches, crime); anxiety is the dread associated with nothingness. He delves more into this concept:

> "The fact that what is threatening is nowhere characterizes what *Angst* is about. *Angst* 'does not know' what it is about which it is anxious.
> … what is threatening cannot approach from a definite direction within nearness, it is already 'there' – yet nowhere. It is so near that it is oppressive and stifles one's breath – and yet is nowhere." (186)

Throughout his chapter on *Angst,* Heidegger goes on to describe the feeling as a dread of something one cannot, in fact, describe. This, if examined, allows Heidegger to declare that *angst* is one's encounter with nothingness. He infers "drawing" or "slipping" away from the world, and that things once familiar can become remote and strange:

> "All things, and we with them, sink into indifference. But not in the sense that everything simply disappears. Rather, in the very drawing away from us as such, things turn toward us. This drawing away of everything in its totality, which in angst is happening all around us, haunts us. There is nothing to hold on to. The only thing that remains and comes over us--in this drawing away of everything--is this "nothingness."(2)

As he goes on, Heidegger's concept of anxiety is a somber stripping of superficial layers to reach one's authentic self. To "let go" and embrace nothingness is a path toward freedom. But, in a less theoretical vision, these feelings Heidegger speaks of evoke depression. In a more contemporary context, in our era of personalized avatars and finely-tuned online profiles, we have more to things to hide behind, to conceal our authentic selves, than ever before. In addition, heightened anxiety could not be more

predominant in an age where there is so much enabling us to detach from the *Daesin* world.

A more relevant truth of modern *Angst* is the mythos of Slender Man at its core. This perceived dread and emotional detachment is where Slender Men thrives. His stories were born and shared within the shadier confines of internet communities, but because as a folk character, Slender Man was built by those commenters filled with this anxiety. Slender Man's nearly universal elicited response by those in his *creepypasta* communities is that of an unnerving "wrongness." In her 2013 thesis "Digital Folklore: Marble Hornets, The Slender Man, and the Emergence of Folk Horror in Online Communities," Dana Keller reports excerpts of some of her findings on the reactions of forum-goers:

> "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)." (Keller, 51).

Slender Man is the representation of our 21st century horror: to be faced with something we cannot know or understand. Whether purposeful or subconscious, his very sinister supernatural abilities feed into our dread: where we seek comfort in our brightly lit homes, the threat of Slender Man will lurking in the shadows or hidden among the trees. In some of his online ghost stories, one will know Slender Man's presences if the TV set

dims or the radio loses communication– another passive act that can entice paranoia within our functional households.

But the most troubling powers Slender Man possess is his magnetism toward children and his use of "proxies," otherwise known as captives he hypnotizes and uses to do his bidding. In his folklore, Slender Man's seemingly gentle nature and adult-like appearance helps him lure children as his prey, often away from civilized areas in favor of more rural or forested privacy. Highly regarded as one of America's sensitive issues among people with children, fearing for our kids' safety has a media culture of its own. On the surface, things like bicycle helmets and carseats can monetarily appease a parent's *fears,* but their *angst* of an unknown danger is always around the next corner. No doubt commenters and contributors have woven the things that keep them up at night into their online fan fiction.

In the most extreme example that has seeped into the mainstream media was a highly-publicized violent attack, made by children, upon the behalf of appeasing Slender Man. In May of 2014, two 12-year-old girls from Waukesha, Wisconsin allegedly lured another 12-year-old friend into a wooded park and proceed to stab the girl 19 times. While the victim survived by crawling into a bike path, the two others were found "walking toward a national forest where they believed the specter lived in a mansion." (People, AP) While the alleged assailants have not yet been deemed fit to stand trial due to their psychological states, they could likely face adult sentencing if charged.

A spike in hysteria swarmed Slender Man, the Something Awful forums where his legacy lives and even the character's creator, Eric Knudsen. Even when Knudsen made public his condolences toward those affected in Wisconsin, Rhonda Brock-Servais, an English professor at Longwood University, had this to add to a Huffington Posts's article on the tragedy: "The horror characters that rise to the top and become the best known are speaking to contemporary cultural anxieties."(Anderson, Johnson, HP).

Cool Media and Retribalization

Marshall McLuhan, a founding father of media theory, put forth his ideas in this 1964 book "Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man." Most remember for him for his declaration that "The medium is the message," meaning that the medium used to deliver a message or content is as influential as the content itself.

He separates these "mediums" as opposites on a scale: "hot" media and "cool" media. Hot media is fine-tuned, high definition, inclusive to those who create and view it, and is ultimately a highly-controlled product. Cool media is in many ways the opposite: It is more raw in its presentation, shared and manipulated by many hands, and is ultimately more accessible than any hot media could be. If an artistic, limited-release motion picture viewing event is an example of "hot" media, then collective, public Youtube channel of user-generated videos exemplifies "cool" media.

Moving deeper into McLuhan's theories, he speaks of a "global village," where in the not-so-distant future, the people of the world will connected through electric technology.

While his own words lean toward the surreal, his hypothesis was proven true. With the internet, social spheres have become the pillars of our digital culture, where among all else, people can cluster in their own specific areas of interest. McLuhan has referred to this as retribalization: "…the simultaneous sharing of experiences as in a village or tribe, through telegraph, newspaper, radio, telephone and TV, creates a village or tribal outlook, and puts a premium on 'togetherness' and 'mediocrity' as a means of achieving togetherness'" (Carpenter, McLuhan).

Slender Man's mythos is built from the individual pieces of assorted cool mediums. As a message, Slender Man is a fearsome paranormal creature. But as he is portrayed in memes, the subject of Youtube series (*Marble Hornets*) and featured as video game villain (*Slender*). Even beyond his folk-horror character, countless parodies have popped up to poke fun at and demystify Slender Man, even reshaping his story to make him more of a lovable spook than a lurking threat.

The collective Slender Man community is made up of those who create, remix and share his stories with more swiftness than any of his internet-meme contemporaries. As McLuhan stated, cool mediums are collectives, marked by their use of peer-to-peer interaction. He believes that those participate to "fill in the gaps" of what we perceive missing. We may even see or use cool mediums to project an extension of ourselves– or rather, what we don't see in ourselves. In this light, Slender Man's purpose may be to express an undeniable desire to make meaning of things we do not understand. In humor, we can find examples of Slender Man satire, like a popular user-generated meme called "Trenderman," Slender Man's well-dressed brother (the depiction is of a faceless mannequin from a men's clothing store). In mainstream television, sci-fi cult series "Dr. Who" has raised some attention within Slender Man forums for presenting a character with a very similar look and backstory, but with much fanfare.

These signs and explanations point toward an argument that Slender Man was created by the people, for the people, and will be used however he is needed. We can pour into him our fears about money, privacy and safety, or mock him with silly cartooning to understand him better, or use him as a stimulus to create the internet's most frightening fictional monster.

The idea of Slender Man took shape as we started to share what we truly fear– nothingness and the unknown. Whereas we were once scattered and exposed by the rawness of Enlightened thinking, or drifting away from ourselves through anxiety, we have now been able to tackle the unknown not alone, but as a collective. When we come across questions, we invent our own self-soothing answers. Fear cannot be completely eradicated, but we now have the tools and the abilities to blanket ourselves from what frightens us the most. Slender Man represents a villain, an anti-hero, a mirror, or the thing that we just cannot comprehend.

*Fictitious quote created by Eric Knudsen for his original Slender Man *creepypasta* photos.

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