

The Bye Bye Man and Peeping Tom: Slender Man's Cinematic Siblings

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Hollywood films have a long tradition of appealing to verisimilitude. The genre of “found footage” horror films gained international prominence with the success of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and spawned countless imitators (including the *Paranormal Activity* franchise). Claiming or suggesting that a film is “based on a true story” has a long history in American lore, from the classic Bell Witch ghost story to *The Exorcist* and *The Conjuring* films. Such appeal to—and veneer of—truth is of course a hallmark of urban legends. I interviewed the writers behind two recent films featuring “real” menacing urban legend-inspired figures: The titular *Bye Bye Man* (dir. Title 2017) and Peeping Tom of *Butterfly Kisses* (dir. Myers 2017). Both figures can be seen as Slender Man siblings. While Slender Man was never claimed to be real by its creator, in both *The Bye Bye Man* and *Butterfly Kisses* an effort was made to intentionally blur the lines between fact and fiction, placing their nightmarish narratives in the twilight between folklore and fakelore—along the lines of the “folkloresque,” as described by Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey A. Tolbert: “popular culture’s own (emic) perception and performance of folklore [...] creative, often commercial products or texts that give the impression to the consumer that they derive directly from existing folkloric traditions” (Foster 2016:5). By examining how horror genre filmmakers and writers commodify and draw upon existing legends— informed by their creators’ motivations and methods—we may gain insight into the process by which some legends, especially those promoted as “based on a true story,” are disseminated in popular media.

Introduction

Though horror films often borrow elements of folklore, as Paul Smith notes, “while such films as *Candyman* (1992) recognize the role of the folklorist as collector of contemporary legends, very little attention has been given by folklorists to the role of the film and television industry as

users and disseminators of contemporary legends”—with a half-dozen or so notable pre-1993 exceptions (Smith 1999:138). Smith offers several examples of contemporary legends being used as the basis for films, including *When a Stranger Calls* (1979), *The Diplomatic Corpse* (1957), and *So Long at the Fair* (1950).

Since that time dozens more have been released; in his survey of folklore studies and popular film and television, Mikel Koven (2003) includes others including *Carrie* (1976) and the horror-comedy *Leprechaun* series (1993-2018), which have folktale-like narratives, as well as the legend-themed horror films such as *Scream* (1996), *Urban Legend* (1988), and the *Final Destination* franchise (2000-present). Tales of organ theft and child snatching have also appeared in films such as *Coma* (1978), *The Harvest* (1992), *Central Station* (1998), and *Turistas* (2006).¹ In her book *What Happens Next? Contemporary Urban Legends and Popular Culture*, Gail de Vos adds others including the film *Cropsey* (2009) and the television shows *Supernatural* (2005-present) and *The X-Files* (1993-2002). Regarding *Cropsey*, de Vos notes that many reviewers claimed that the documentary was evidence that “proves some urban legends are real” (de Vos 2012: 42).

One common approach, discussed by Koven, is “motif spotting” which often involves identifying specific folkloric themes in films, for example symbolic representations of social concerns (war, racism, etc.) in popular entertainment. Indeed, Koven notes, “Studies that identify folkloric motifs and tale types in popular (fiction) films and television have tended to dominate the research” (2003: 190). However, among legend scholarship there remains a relative paucity of research examining how horror genre filmmakers and writers draw upon existing legends and tropes for specific characters. Informed by their creators’ motivations and methods, we may gain insight into the process by which “based on a true story” legends are disseminated in film. Per Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith (2007: xix), for whom “What interests us here is not what the stories ‘mean,’ but how they have been retold, by whom, and in what form, when, and where,” I focus here on examining the emergence and dissemination of two recent additions to the genre.

Specifically, I describe recent “folkloresque” (Foster and Tolbert 2016) film characters the Bye Bye Man and Peeping Tom, and their relation to Slender Man, the tall, thin menacing figure created in 2009. With an online crowdsourced mythos, the Slender Man figure was widely circulated and reinterpreted, appearing in many media. Originally mostly confined to teen audiences, Slender Man came to international attention in 2014 when two troubled teens stabbed a friend on behalf of the figure. Slender Man has been the topic of considerable in-depth folkloric analysis recently, not only in this journal—which devoted a

2015 special issue to it—but also in 2018 with *Slender Man Is Coming: Creepypasta and Contemporary Legends on the Internet* (Blank and McNeill 2015, 2018). For this reason I will discuss Slender Man primarily in the context of the two other characters.

Slender Man, Peeping Tom, and the Bye Bye Man

The 2017 horror films *The Bye Bye Man* and *Butterfly Kisses* both feature urban legend-inspired supernatural villains. Like their higher profile (and more notorious) sibling Slender Man, both characters were created specifically—albeit perhaps at least partly subconsciously in one case—to be frightening folkloric figures. The characters of Slender Man, the Bye Bye Man, and Peeping Tom are characterized by more menace than mischief; unlike, for example, the jokey, slasher/stalker villains in Wes Craven’s *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise (1984-2010) or *Scream* (1996-2011), any humor in the films is not derived from corny quips from these stalkers. Slender Man and the others are, for the most part, deadly serious. Though various low-budget video and film treatments have featured Slender Man in recent years, the character got the full Hollywood treatment in 2018 with the Sony Pictures release of *Slender Man*.²

Unlike Slender Man, both film characters in the 2017 films *Butterfly Kisses* and *The Bye Bye Man* make a bid for historical authenticity, much in the way that television pseudocumentaries such as *Mermaids: The Body Found* (2012), *Ghostwatch* (1992), and others have (for more see Tolbert 2015). Determining the historicity of many “based on a true story” events decades or longer after they occurred is often a fruitless task, but the recency of both films—as well as the availability of the writers for interviews—provides insight into fictionalized Hollywood depictions of ostensibly true events involving urban legend-inspired figures.

To understand the genesis of the Bye Bye Man and Peeping Tom figures, I interviewed their respective creators, Robert Damon Schneck and Erik Christopher Myers. Schneck is a New Jersey-based historian and author of several books on strange and mysterious stories including the Edgar Award-nominated *Mrs. Wakeman vs. the Antichrist: And Other Strange-but-True Tales from American History* (2014) and *The President’s Vampire: Strange-but-True Tales of the United States* (2005), which included a chapter that first introduced the Bye Bye Man. Myers is a Maryland-based filmmaker whose writing, directing, producing, editing, and other credits include a half-dozen feature and short films including *Butterfly Kisses*.

A full consideration of whether or how the attempts by Schneck and Myers to imbue their characters with legends correspond with actual

folkloristics falls outside the purview of this study; my interest here is to help illuminate not only the process by which screenwriters and filmmakers have used contemporary legends (in films and marketing) but also to some degree their understanding of those processes.

Don't Think It, Don't Say It: The Bye Bye Man

The Bye Bye Man film, written by Jonathan Penner and directed by his wife, Stacy Title, was released January 13, 2017. The cast of mostly newcomers included Carrie-Anne Moss and Faye Dunaway, and despite generally dismal reviews (a 20% “fresh” rating on review aggregator RottenTomatoes.com as of February 2019) earned over \$26 million against a budget of about \$7 million, making it a modest financial success.

The title character is an evil spirit or entity who causes people to kill others. His victims are not random; like a meme, he is spread through a form of social contagion in which he stalks those who say his name or think of him, hence the tagline “Don’t think it. Don’t say it.” The film is based on “The Bridge to Body Island,” a chapter in Robert Damon Schneck’s nonfiction book *The President’s Vampire*, later reissued as a tie-in to the film, retitled *The Bye Bye Man*.

Inspired by 1950s and 1960s authors of “the unexplained” such as John Keel, Frank Edwards, Bernard Heuvelmans, and others, Schneck made a name for himself as a writer of strange history. During his career he had observed first-hand the process of folklore being made in the context of UFO group members who related to him their personal stories of abductions and encounters—often influencing each other’s accounts in the process.

The Bye Bye Man began as a story pieced together by three people Schneck knew (Eli, John, and Katherine) around 1990 when they experimented with a Ouija board. Schneck offers few details about Katherine but describes Eli and John: “both enjoy horror as entertainment... Both are writers, and Eli is especially prolific, producing books, stories, and plays with macabre themes. He has a degree in folklore, is well read on the subject of serial murder, took part in the Goth subculture, and spent many years involved in parapsychology.... He has spent long hours in graveyards, haunted houses, and Satanic churches [and] worked with psychics, Wiccans, and sorcerers... John studies philosophy, mysticism, and the works of Joseph Campbell. He has a special interest in...the how and why of what makes things frightening, and a history of paranormal experiences” (Schneck 2016a: 152-153).

At first the trio of occult explorers got typical New Agey “love everyone, isn’t the spirit life grand?” messages, but, Schneck notes, “that wasn’t what Eli wanted, he wanted something grittier, he loves scary

stuff.” They had to go through one spirit, dubbed “The Spirit of the Board,” to contact another set of eight or so spirits, Schneck explains. “The Spirit of the Board said that there was a living being, a person trying to get in contact with them, but that he was evil, and The Spirit of the Board said it didn’t want to let the communication go through.”³³

Eli insisted, however, and The Spirit of the Board eventually relented, and thus the Bye Bye Man was born. “They kept fooling with the Ouija board... Eventually they started to get messages, and they got this terrifying story about this child that ...came out of the Ouija board in bits and pieces, but they finally put it together and this is essentially the story they got: That a child had been born who was an albino outside of New Orleans in the 1920s in a place called Algiers. He was put into an orphan asylum, he kept trying to escape, because he was an albino he lost his sight over time and eventually he was blind. Finally he attacked a nurse with a pair of scissors and escaped. He began to ride the rails and something happened: He became involved with black magic because he was killing people and leaving their bodies by the rails. He was taking their eyes and their tongues and he was sewing them together into a little monster called Groomsinger. Together they were going around killing people, and the way they killed people was—well, the Bye Bye Man was of course blind. But he had psychic powers, and anyone who thought of his name became a kind of a psychic beacon, he was able to hunt them down. Groomsinger, who could see, would help the Bye Bye Man go in for the kill, and he would do so by whistling.”³⁴

When the story was mostly complete—and notably interpreted by all three as referring to real, verifiable historical events—Katherine refused to continue. Eli “wanted to keep going because the Bye Bye Man was supposedly getting closer and closer and closer the more they thought about him.” Katherine and Jonathan were less enthusiastic about the possibility of summoning a murderous spirit, and so the séance project was abandoned. The trio experienced nightmares and odd occurrences, as Schneck (2016a) described in his book. “Finally one day Eli and Katherine were on a train bridge at Wausau Wisconsin,” Schneck said, “and she was walking across this bridge and she began to hear a whistle. She said it wasn’t a train whistle, it sounded like a human whistle. Eli couldn’t hear it. [Taking the whistle as a sign that the Bye Bye Man was near] she panicked and ran off the bridge and spent the entire day in a panic attack.” (The setting of a train bridge where the film’s boogeyman is encountered also appears in *Butterfly Kisses*.)

Schneck first heard Eli recount the story on Halloween as a first-person ghost story. This might be akin to a camp horror legend, which as Bill Ellis (2001) notes, is “an intermediate form of folk narrative, presented *in terms of* reality, but implicitly recognized by both performer

and audience as fantasy” (29). Schneck (2016b) told me “It started with these three people; Eli has always been telling it to his friends, so it’s been told to a few hundred people. I got ahold of it, and a few thousand people then heard about it on the radio and in my book. And now it’s going to be a movie. Millions of people are going to hear about it...This could literally become a part of our culture.”

Unlike a script written specifically for the screen (or a story written for a book), the Bye Bye Man existed for at least a decade as memorate, “a personal-experience narrative about an encounter with the supranormal [...] allegedly true reports of an actual experience that the narrator had” (Sweterlitsch 1996:472). The word “true” appears multiple times on the cover of Schneck’s book (the full title is *The Bye Bye Man and Other Strange-But-True Tales*, the back cover copy begins with the phrase “The TRUE STORY Behind the Terrifying Movie,” and for those who failed to get the message, it’s once again referred to as a “true-life story” on the back cover).

Nevertheless, when pressed Schneck acknowledges that “There was no reason for thinking that the story, as told, was true.” Eli, his primary source, “is the first to admit that when he tells the story on Halloween, he embellishes it. He tries to make it a better story, he will exaggerate things—he’s a storyteller, and he’s the first to admit it...he’s not even sure what’s been embellished anymore.... I think he probably shaped the story, I think he gave it that folkloric quality of, if you think of the name he will come for you, and keep in mind he’s also interested in parapsychology, so you’ve got that psychic angle too.”

De Vos, summarizing Floyd (2011), notes that “commodification, the marketing of folklore, has two major qualifiers: the object must have ‘folk antecedents’ and be mass produced to sell or promote” (de Vos 2012: 30). When Eli related his experiences regarding the Bye Bye Man in the 1990s he was acting in the role of storyteller; it wasn’t until later that the legend was commodified (by Schneck, and later by screenwriter Jonathan Penner in adapting Schneck’s book chapter).

Schneck suspects that part of the narrative’s inspiration came from a film: “In the movie *Angel Heart*, which came out around 1988, there is a town of Algiers. Algiers is not presented in that movie as a part of New Orleans, it’s presented as this wild town out in the countryside of Louisiana, with voodoo and things like that. And I think that supplied the idea of Algiers as this small town where voodoo-type things happen.” Whether motifs in *Angel Heart* influenced the Ouija-bound Spirit of the Board-mediated ghost who seemingly originated the Bye Bye Man tale—or the lore-infused trio who assembled and interpreted it—is of course another question.

Don't Blink: Peeping Tom Is Looking for You

Butterfly Kisses combines humor, horror, found footage, and mockumentary themes. The story, told in documentary format by writer/director Erik Kristopher Myers (who appears as himself in the film), follows a filmmaker (Gavin York) who has discovered a box of videotapes of a disturbing film project about two students' investigation into a local horror legend, Peeping Tom. (This theme also appears in the Slender Man-related video series *Marble Hornets*, discussed below.) Peeping Tom is said to appear at the end of a railroad tunnel and can only be seen by staring into the darkness for an hour without blinking. York attempts to determine whether there's any truth to the legend and subtly begins co-opting it into his own documentary about finding the footage. *Butterfly Kisses* plays with the framing of the film and specifically references *The Blair Witch Project* (1990); that film's co-writer/director, Eduardo Sánchez, has a cameo as himself, offering ironic skeptical commentary about the validity of the found footage central to *Butterfly Kisses*.

In an interview Myers (2018) explained the genesis of Peeping Tom and *Butterfly Kisses*: "I'm a fan of cryptozoology, urban legends, conspiracy theories, and the paranormal, all from the skeptical perspective. I've long wanted to do a film that mashed these ideas together and said something about belief systems: Where do they begin? How do we feed them? How do they become social constructs? I think there is some important question that primitive man has asked, and without answers forthcoming, we draw from archetypes in order to find a solution. This approach has led to folklore and legends, and emerge as modern mythology following an inciting incident—a sighting or an encounter [with something unknown] that is then reported."

The setting is significant, as Myers notes: "*Butterfly Kisses* is set in Ellicott City, Maryland, which has a long-standing paranormal tradition. Nearly every shop, tavern, or hotel in the historic district is supposedly home to a ghost or two. The steep cliffs and roaring river that frame this scenic area adds credibility to these claims, and ghost tours are a part of the culture. Just outside of town, if one follows the river and accompanying train tracks, one will find Ilchester Tunnel a few miles away. It's a B&O thruway cut into the sheer face of a rocky land mass, and is only accessible by walking the trestle that spans the Patapsco River beneath it. Ilchester Tunnel is a popular late night hangout for teenagers going back decades, and like the rest of Ellicott City, is reputedly haunted—though no official boogeyman has been identified."

To help make the "documentary" film realistic Myers described an element of cinema-suited ostensive gaslighting: "In creating the backstory for *Butterfly Kisses*, and out of a desire to experiment with

False Memory Syndrome (while also addressing the malleability of urban legends), I decided to manufacture the inciting incident in my narrative. I created the character of Peeping Tom, a ‘flimmern-geist’ who can only be summoned by staring down the length of Ilchester Tunnel between the stroke of midnight and 1 am without blinking; when he appears, he comes one step closer every time you blink until he’s nose to nose with you; then he quite literally scares you to death upon the final blink. My goal was to create a plausible bit of mythology that audiences—and Maryland natives in particular—might suddenly recall having heard on playgrounds or during the late-night sleepovers of their adolescence.”

Boogeyman Metanarratives

All of the characters considered here are eclectic. As Michael Dylan Foster notes, “a folkloresque product is rarely based on any single vernacular item or tradition; usually it has been consciously cobbled together from a range of folkloric elements, often mixed with newly created elements, to appear as if it emerged organically from a specific source... it is imbued with a sense of ‘authenticity’ (as perceived by the consumer and/or creator) derived from an association with ‘real’ folklore” (2016:5). Slender Man and Peeping Tom (and arguably the Bye Bye Man) were consciously and specifically created as fiction.

Slender Man’s creator, Victor Surge (AKA Eric Knudson), “demonstrates the tremendously reflexive, savvy, and volitional nature of this meme, and the general awareness of its relationship to more conventional folklore genres” (Tolbert 2018: 36). Surge drew on a variety of popular media sources for Slender Man and the character’s physicality specifically, including *The Tall Man* from the horror film *Phantasm* (1979) and the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. As Kitta notes, “Victor Surge... and other early participants [in developing the Slender Man Mythos]... have never admitted any real experience with Slender Man themselves; however they have certainly tapped into something that *feels real* to their audience” (Kitta 2018: 80-81). The same holds true for those who brought the Bye Bye Man and Peeping Tom to the public’s eye; they are not presenting, or representing, experiences of their own but mediating the memorates of others to frighten and entertain.

Soon after its creation the Slender Man Mythos included video depictions of the character, most prominently a YouTube series titled *Marble Hornets*. “Presented as ‘found footage,’ the introduction... features text captions inserted by protagonist Jay. Jay’s narration explains that the footage was shot by his college friend Alex as part of a film project, the eponymous *Marble Hornets*. During filming, Alex’s

behavior became strange and he abandoned the project, but eventually agreed to give the tapes to Jay, who explains to the audience through captions that he intends to go through the tapes to determine what may have caused Alex's unusual behavior" (Tolbert 2018: 38).

This blurring of the lines—who's *really* telling the story?—is also a feature of *Butterfly Kisses*; the film features a (found footage) film within a film by one of the characters within a (horror? documentary?) film. Whether the audience considers it clever or trite, the conceit is effective within its context. As Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi (1983) note, "The content, style, context, exterior shape, and way of transmission and reception of the legend sometimes suggest that not only can facts become narratives, but narratives can turn into facts as well" (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983: 5). Dégh and Vázsonyi offer four possible avenues of ostensive legend transmission: "These encounters represent a veritable sampler of the various modes of ostensive folklore communication. Theoretically, four possibilities exist: 1) the apparitions were real; 2) someone, playing a trick, deceived the observer; 3) the apparitions resulted from some sort of error on the part of the observer; 4) the person giving an account of the apparition willfully lied, or more politely and folkloristically expressed, presented an invented story as a memorate based on personal experience" (18).

In *Butterfly Kisses*, Myers structures the script to provide ambiguity—and consequent narrative tension—so that the audience is unable to decide between the choices offered by Dégh and Vázsonyi. The film-within-a-film structure provides multiple unreliable narrators, suggesting for example not only that the filmmaker who brought the supposed found footage to light, Gavin York, may be intentionally misrepresenting the footage, but also that those who created the original "found footage" central to the film (containing Peeping Tom) might themselves have been perpetrating a hoax on York (and by extension the audience). As Bennett and Smith note, "one of the things that helps to define a legend is *uncertainty* about whether it is true" (Bennett and Smith 2007: xx).

In some cases that uncertainty is used narratively in horror to cast the cinematic threat as bleeding out of the frame and into the real world, presumably exposing actors, producers, directors, and others to mortal danger. For example, articles in popular and film magazines have examined both "true" stories and curses surrounding popular horror films including *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Omen* (1976), and *Poltergeist* (1982), as well as other genres including *The Crow* (1994) and *Three Men and a Baby* (1987); see for example Taylor (2017), Kelley (1991), and Brunvand (2012).

The concept of Hollywood film curses breaks the fourth wall and allows the putative threat to spill off the silver (or television) screen and into the “real world,” providing the ambiguity Bennett and Smith described. The 1998 Japanese horror film *Ringu* (later remade and released theatrically in the United States as *The Ring* in 2002) played with this idea as well, featuring a cursed videotape and a scary, evil woman with long black hair who emerges from the television and into the protagonists’ world, providing a metanarrative threat. Another kaiju, or Japanese monster, with parallels to Peeping Tom and the Bye Bye Man is kuchisake-onna, the slit-mouthed woman. As Tolbert notes, this “quintessential rumor or contemporary legend of late industrial Japan” (2009: 184) was widely believed real, resulting in children being “afraid to walk home from school alone” (2009:186) despite clearly fictional treatments in popular culture.

Myers approached *Butterfly Kisses* “with a mission statement that can be summed up in one word: Verisimilitude. It had to play like a real documentary. Even if the ‘found footage’ was dismissed by audiences, the ‘documentary’ had to be completely believable. A considerable amount of misdirection was employed to gain audience trust, in that the documentary is constantly telling you that the man looking to capitalize on the discovered footage (Gavin York) is emotionally unbalanced, and by providing numerous [real-life] authorities on film, folklore, and psychology to tell you in numerous ways that his Peeping Tom ‘evidence’ is completely without merit. The film keeps saying, ‘We’re not trying to tell you this footage is real—we’re telling you it *isn’t*. *We’re on your side.*’ And the whole time, the fake documentary is laughing behind your back,” Myers explained.

To bolster this level of verisimilitude, the film’s cast includes many non-actors playing themselves, including authors and historians. “Everyone is Google-verifiable,” Myers notes, “including the crew and director (myself), who appear on-camera. Even the documentary’s subject, Gavin York (an actor), is misrepresented as being who he says he is through the creation of a Facebook page that showed his investigation in real-time, including comments from participants from *Butterfly Kisses* as the onscreen narrative was occurring.”

Contemporary legends are plausible in part because if, as asserted, they happened to a friend of a friend, they could presumably happen to us. Such legends are also localized, taking place at regional malls, abandoned homes, and other locations in our hometowns. This is a classic horror film trope: ordinary people who enter a new environment (a new house in *The Amityville Horror*, for example, or a road trip through rural Texas in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*) or break a taboo

(using a Ouija board in *The Exorcist* or *The Bye Bye Man*, for example) and thus encounter the dangerous and unexpected.

As Jeffrey Tolbert (2015) notes, “This playful (or cynical) manipulation of the boundaries of fiction and reality—akin to what historian Michael Saler (2012:14) has called the ‘ironic imagination’—is discursively powerful, and seems particularly easy to effect when the creators of popular media invoke the conventions of folklore” (2015:39). Tolbert notes that the Slender Man story “was tailored to resemble actual legendry,” a process he calls “reverse ostension, through which some users actually sought to generate narratives that would come to be regarded as real legends by people outside of the original digital community” (41).

By placing the legend locally in Maryland, Myers draws upon this theme with *Butterfly Kisses*; though the location of the ominous train trestle is a local landmark well known to the citizenry of Ellicott City, relatively few have likely personally engaged in a legend trip to the area (and certainly not staring, unblinking, on the tracks at midnight). Thus while the terrain itself may be *terra cognita* (to locals anyway), the specific circumstances under which the supernatural would emerge at that location is not.

We can find the same appeal to verisimilitude in the reality television and documentary genres, and by extension the pseudodocumentary and “found footage” genres. The “reality TV [genre] owes much of its format and techniques to the documentary genre, in particular the camera’s focus on ‘ordinary’ citizens and the drama and humor of their day-to-day lives” (Taddeo and Dvorak 2010: 1).

Mikel Koven, in discussing ghost-themed reality television shows such as *Most Haunted*, notes that the audience, “by watching *Most Haunted* [is] invited to question the veracity of any of the evidence presented, including that of the show’s psychics. Such is the very nature of legend storytelling. However, as ostension, we need to distinguish between representational and presentational evidence; that is, the evidence produced by [psychic] Acorah, or any of the psychic mediums, is representational, and we have only their word to go by. *Most Haunted* at its most compelling also occasionally offers more presentational evidence, when the show enters the realm of the ostensive” (Koven 2007: 189). *Butterfly Kisses* offers both types of evidence, along with an unreliable narrator.

In some cases folklore is “made real” through error or accident; for example Donald Holly Jr. and Casey Cordy (2007) discuss how the Rhode Island grave of Nellie Vaughn, who died of pneumonia in 1889 and was posthumously (and mistakenly) accused of witchcraft, became a destination for legend trippers. Indeed, they note, “at some point in the

midst of a performance and in the act of looking for a vampire's grave, Nellie Vaughn 'became' a vampire" (336). In the case of Mercy Brown, another reputed vampire in the same cemetery, "It is believed, for example, that one can summon the ghost of Mercy Brown by peering at her grave through an opening in a nearby gravestone while chanting three times, 'Mercy Brown, are you a vampire?'" (p. 345).⁵

Authenticity and the 'Ironic Imagination'

The Bye Bye Man and Peeping Tom share much in common with Slender Man, though the Bye Bye Man's ostensible origin predates Slendy by about a decade. Though an effort was made to portray both characters as real, this is not the case with Slender Man. As Andrea Kitta notes, "Victor Surge (Erik Knudsen), the original author of the Slender Man narrative, and the other early participants do not make any claims to the reality of their experience and have overtly stated that their intent was to create a fictional monster" (2015:65). Nevertheless, Kitta notes of Slender Man, "This narrative certainly shows [...] the knowledge that Slender Man is 'not real' but also the consideration that the stories written about Slender Man could be based on real experiences" (65).

This is essentially the position that Schneck adopts regarding the Bye Bye Man. He acknowledges—book blurbs to the contrary—that the Bye Bye Man may be (and in fact probably is) entirely fictional. Nonetheless the character has its origins in a story of a friend's—or a friend of a friend's friend's—(presumably genuine) experience with a Ouija board. If Eli and his friends say that the narrative fragments they assembled are what was told to them by spirits, no one can contradict them and it is certainly not in Schneck's interest to inquire too skeptically. As with contemporary legends, the creation of the Bye Bye Man story was presented to Schneck as a memorate—regardless of whether or not the story itself is true.

Like the eyes and tongues that the Bye Bye Man sewed together to create his monster Gloom Singer, Eli and his friends assembled scraps of names, characters, and admittedly folklore-imbued motifs and storylines from Ouija board specters into the Bye Bye Man story.⁶ The Bye Bye Man is essentially a FOAFtale at least twice over; The Spirit of the Board acts as a friend relating a story from another spirit via the Ouija board to Eli and his friends, who years later related it to his friend Robert Damon Schneck. As with the ghost-themed "reality" television show *Most Haunted*, "such 'evidence' for spirit communication is still ultimately representational, as we only have hearsay that such possession is actually happening" (Koven 2007, 192). Assuming that the trio did not consciously create the story out of whole cloth, the information was

provided by one or more spirits whose truthfulness and reliability as eyewitnesses is, at best, unknown.

If as Mikel Koven has argued, “a legend dramatized through film is a type of ostension since the legend is shown through actions rather than having the story retold in narration” (qtd. in de Vos 2012: 37), *Butterfly Kisses* would be representative, presentationally depicting as it does the ritual by which Peeping Tom appears. Both the Bye Bye Man and Peeping Tom characters thrive on the fallibility of normal human physiology. Peeping Tom can only be kept at bay by not blinking one’s eyes—a normal and automatic bodily activity both painful and impossible to refrain from doing for very long while awake. Indeed, part of what makes Peeping Tom a compelling character is what Myers calls “the ‘can’t/must factor’: ‘I can’t blink my eyes, but I *must* blink my eyes.’ Everyone has to eat; to sleep; to use the bathroom. There are physical demands placed upon us that we are beholden to. The idea of conquering a biological function is something we see in extreme cases such as eating contests or experiments with sleep deprivation. The difference with Peeping Tom is the notion that it’s a game. It’s a staring contest in two parts: conjuring him, and then keeping him at bay. It’s the ultimate game of chicken.” The parallels to Bloody Mary and other ostensive fear tests are clear. Slender Man, by contrast, is not similarly restrained; he need not be conjured to manifest and menace.

Like Peeping Tom, the Bye Bye Man is also drawn to his victims by largely involuntary processes (“Don’t think it. Don’t say it”). Not saying his name aloud is possible with careful self-monitoring, but not thinking about him or his name is about as effective as obeying the command to not think of a pink elephant (a psychological tendency known as *ironic process theory*). Horror filmmaker Wes Craven incorporated this theme into his popular *A Nightmare on Elm Street* mythos, in which villain Freddy Krueger attacked his teen victims in their sleep, thus making insomnia the only (temporarily viable) way to be safe.

Interviewed in March 2018 as *Butterfly Kisses* was opening at film festivals, Myers noted with obvious satisfaction that his efforts to “legitimize” the Peeping Tom legend have “already shown to be working, as I’ve done numerous interviews during the film festival tour, or listened to interviews with festival showrunners, during which the urban legend is being accepted as completely legitimate, due to the straight-faced onscreen treatment of the subject, as well as the existence of straight-faced online literature.”

Discussing the medium of films, Michael Dylan Foster notes that “As a commercially created product, it exists in a fixed form that neither exhibits variation through time and space nor changes with each performance. Like most commercial films, it was shared with people

through formal, institutional channels rather than the informal, person-to-person modes most commonly associated with folklore” (Foster 2016:3). This is true of *Butterfly Kisses*, which establishes a narrative basis for the legend both within the film and online. While *The Bye Bye Man* film is thus similarly fixed—as is the story in Schneck’s book of the same title—the story from which that chapter was created was performed by Eli for many years (in different iterations) on Devil’s Night.

In his bid for such an authenticity Myers did not do any specific research into folklore and urban legends when crafting the Peeping Tom character, though (like Schneck and Surge) he had been immersed in such topics for years through film, books, television shows, and podcasts. In constructing his screenplay Myers identified seven criteria he employed in crafting the narrative.

1. The location had to have a pre-existing reputation for the paranormal, but no specific legend.
2. The newly-created story had to have been reported prior to the film’s release. This was accomplished by seeding the internet with articles and accounts written under a variety of pseudonyms to establish the historical aspect. I began a year prior to filming, and the legend began to spread on its own, with accounts of Peeping Tom encounters appearing in a variety of places, most notably the Ellicott City tourism website.
3. The entity needed to be the focal point of grisly stories that in no way reflected the specific plot of *Butterfly Kisses*. This was tackled first by myself, and then began to take on a life of its own.
4. The flimmern-geist needed to be referred to by numerous titles that reflected the retelling of the myth throughout the past century—sometimes with the intent to scare, and sometimes as a bit of black comedy. “Flimmern-geist” was occasionally simplified to “flickergeist”; “Peeping Tom” was also referred to as “Blink Man,” “Ilchester the Molester,” “Winky,” or “The Tunnel Guy.”
5. The means by which Peeping Tom was summoned had to: a) be evocative of other popular urban legends (e.g., Bloody Mary), and b) demand rules so close to impossible that the story could not be quickly disproven. By creating rules that required superhuman strength of will (i.e., staring at a distant focal point without blinking for an hour), the “friend of a friend” element of these stories gained plausibility, as one couldn’t simply go to Ilchester Tunnel, take the

- challenge, and then say, “See? Not real!” But someone *else* might have be able to do it, right?
6. The film required an appearance by a folklorist or authority on Fortean topics [i.e., “unexplained” subjects collected and published by Charles Fort (1874-1932)] who would present the legend as being real, at least in terms of being created prior to the film that would showcase it. I recruited Matt Lake (author of *Weird U.S.* and other books) to play himself. His fame is highest in Maryland and Pennsylvania due to his books on legends of each respective state, and his regular appearances at festivals, events, and television programs on the subject of all things “weird.”
 7. Within the film, I needed an iconic image of Peeping Tom that would be argued by both skeptics and believers. I took my cues from the famous “Surgeon’s photograph” of the Loch Ness Monster, which, as a symbol, tells you all you need to know without saying anything at all. The footage of Peeping Tom in Ilchester Tunnel as shown in *Butterfly Kisses* summarizes the entire legend, while opening itself up to video and critical analysis. (Myers 2018)

Myers’s plan was “for audiences to perhaps buy into the (temporary) notion that *Butterfly Kisses*, via its casting of public figures playing themselves, might be a ‘real’ documentary about presumably fake ‘found footage.’ Just as important was for audiences to see the end credits and realize the ‘documentary’ was just a ruse...but to potentially believe that the urban legend itself was real. The manufacturing of the historical data would reinforce this belief.”

Bye Bye Man biographer Schneck is clearly familiar with the Slender Man story specifically as well, noting that “He has become a part of our folklore. You’ve got children attempting to commit murder over a figure that is known to be fictional. To my mind that’s just fascinating... This idea that a work of imagination could be that powerful is compelling. What does it mean? Why has it had that enormous effect?”

Conclusion

Whether these Bye Bye Man and Peeping Tom narratives can properly be described as fakelore is not at issue here, but the processes by which their creators assembled these folkloresque boogeymen is revealing. In Susan Stewart’s “The Epistemology of the Horror Story” she notes that “the horror story may be framed simultaneously as a true story and as a fiction, and within its field of possibilities the reversibility and irreversibility of events are tested” (Stewart 1982: 37). Furthermore “Contrary to this distinction between ‘true’ and ‘made up’ stories, the

horror story takes place in a peculiar place between the real and fictive; hence its proper assignment to 'legend' in oral form. Yet while the horror story is placed in historical time and told as if it were believed to be true, it often makes these claims ironically, 'in frame only'" (1982: 35).

Schneck told me, "I'll be honest with you, when I first wrote *The Bye Bye Man*, I hoped it would become part of American folklore—that was my dream. But then Hollywood came along and they optioned it, so I really couldn't do much with it. This was several years before Slender Man appeared, and I was so jealous when Slender Man came along because I'm thinking, 'Children should be attempting murder over something I wrote. But it didn't work out that way.'" If the Bye Bye Man and Peeping Tom haven't inspired such fervent public belief yet, it's not for lack of trying.

Slender Man and his cinematic siblings, whether properly considered authentic legends themselves, would seem to be part of the "number of films and television presentations that contain 'look alike' contemporary legends, in that they are conscious or otherwise simulations of narratives that appear to present legendary themes" (Smith 1999: 150). As Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi note, "Paradoxical as it sounds, there are...legends which do not exist but still have a similar effect as the existing ones. Dracula, the most popular among all monsters, has no real folklore. There is only the single, brief, trivialized story, taken in many cases directly from Bram Stoker's novel and its multifarious media adaptations, containing not much more than the fact that the Transylvanian count was a vampire. The public seems convinced, nonetheless, of the existence of a lush legend realm. The term *fictitious legend* best describes the case of Dracula. Fictitious, not because the story is untrue and the hero of the legend nonexistent, but because the legend itself does not exist" (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983: 25). Stories of Peeping Tom, Slender Man, and the Bye Bye Man might, either now or in the future, be considered just such "fictitious legends."

Notes

¹ For more on this genre see Campion-Vincent 2005; Donovan 2002; Radford 1999.

² *Slender Man* (2018) received generally negative reviews from both critics and audiences, due in part to the studio's request to re-edit the film fearing a public backlash due to the real-life crimes the figure inspired (Miska 2018); the father of Anissa Weier, one of the teens convicted in the Wisconsin stabbing, called the production "distasteful" and urged theaters not to screen the film (Associated Press 2018).

³ The original Bye Bye Man story is of course only one of many supposedly dictated by spirits through Ouija boards; perhaps the most famous was through Pearl Curran, who claimed to be in contact with a dead woman named Patience Worth.

⁴ The use of the whistle as a sign the Bye Bye Man is near is surely intended to evoke folklore about specific sounds signifying the presence of a supernatural, potentially dangerous creature, such as the shriek of the banshee, the clanking chains of the Jamaican rolling calf, and the wailing of La Llorona.

⁵There are differences in how the figures make an appearance; Slender Man, for example, seems to often appear unbidden, lurking in the background waiting to snatch children and do evil. Both the Bye Bye Man and Peeping Tom, on the other hand, follow more of a summoning motif characteristic of Bloody Mary or the ghost of Mercy Brown.

⁶The theme of metamorphosis or transformation through the use of assembling body parts also appears, for example, in horror films such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), in which serial killer Buffalo Bill sews the skins of his female victims together to make a “woman suit” for himself, thus trying to “become” his victims. Thomas Harris, the author of the novel upon which the film was based, has said the character was inspired in part by serial killers such as Ed Gein and Ted Bundy. For more on the role of body parts in legends see *Bodies: Sex Violence, Disease, and Death in Contemporary Legend* by Gillian Bennett and *Organ Theft Legends* by Veronique Campion-Vincent.

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